

A forest that is untouched by human activity is home to numerous species of trees, vines and bushes, as well as birds and animals. However, when trees and plants are chopped down not only does the earth lose its natural forest cover, but these animals lose their natural habitats and gradually begin to become extinct. There are numerous examples of human intrusion in the natural environment that disrupt its balance and eventually cause it to deteriorate. Most students are aware of these issues to some degree, but a constant dialogue is required to reiterate facts and create awareness about our ecosystem and what we can do to maintain the balance in nature so that it does not turn back on us to cause natural disasters, like floods and rising temperatures.

### Nature camp

Exploration of nature, by way of visits to rivers, mountains and forests etc. is more effective than studying about these in books. This is cited in the

book, *Totto-Chan: The Little Girl at the Window* by Tetsuko Kuroyanagi, in which the headmaster takes the students for a walk in the forest and listens to their views about trees and other things found in forests. He clearly understands the value of knowledge of nature for his students.

Taking inspiration from the story, some of us, the teacher and resource persons, planned a visit to a forest nearby with some children of a government school. We planned this activity during the summer camp. We began by getting to know everyone through activities like drawing, painting and reciting poems, etc. Once rapport with the children was built, we decided to go for the nature walk.

During the walk, we found that the children knew a lot about different trees, water resources, and rituals related to these that are performed in their village. They spoke about the special attributes of different trees that we came across. They knew the fruit from each tree and how it could be used and if it was a fruit or a vegetable.



Figure 1. Students setting out on the nature walk.

Their village was very close to the forest and many resources, such as water, were abundant. Almost every house had a well which was functional. The children had named every well according to the usage of its water, for example, a well used for irrigation was named *sinchan kuan* (irrigation well). After this walk in the forest and through their village, we discussed the usefulness of trees with the children. Their replies took us completely by surprise; they knew so much! They were aware of the fact that their livelihoods depended on the forest from which they got fruit to eat and picked mahua, which is a major source of their income. Another source of income is the *tendu patta*, the leaves of which are used for *bidi*-making. The children knew the entire process from picking the leaves from the forest to bundling and drying. The children also spoke about the different parts of the lotus plant that are used in their cuisine, such as the stem, which is used for making a delicious curry and the small, sweet seeds inside the lotus flower.



Figure 2. The lotus fruit.

The discussion then moved to the check dam in their village. Its usage and utility were discussed in a detailed manner – how it is used for irrigation and water harvesting etc. In the initial discussions, the children had shared how they are dependent on river water for their irrigation, when probed further, it came out that in one or the other ways, they are dependent on the rains for irrigation.

After these discussions, we went for a picnic near the check dam. They cooked food on an open fire, the wood for which was gathered from the area. The children did not litter the place as they did all this. They used vegetables that were grown in their *bari* (kitchen garden). We used the leaves of trees to make plates by folding them and punching them with twigs. Observing them doing all this made me realise that children living in villages are already living their lives in a sustainable way.

#### Exposure to government schemes

When the Chhattisgarh Chief Minister assumed office, he gave the state four symbols that they should all protect, *narva* (waterworks), *garwa* (animal wealth), *ghurva* (pit for cattle dung to make into manure) and *bari* (kitchen garden).

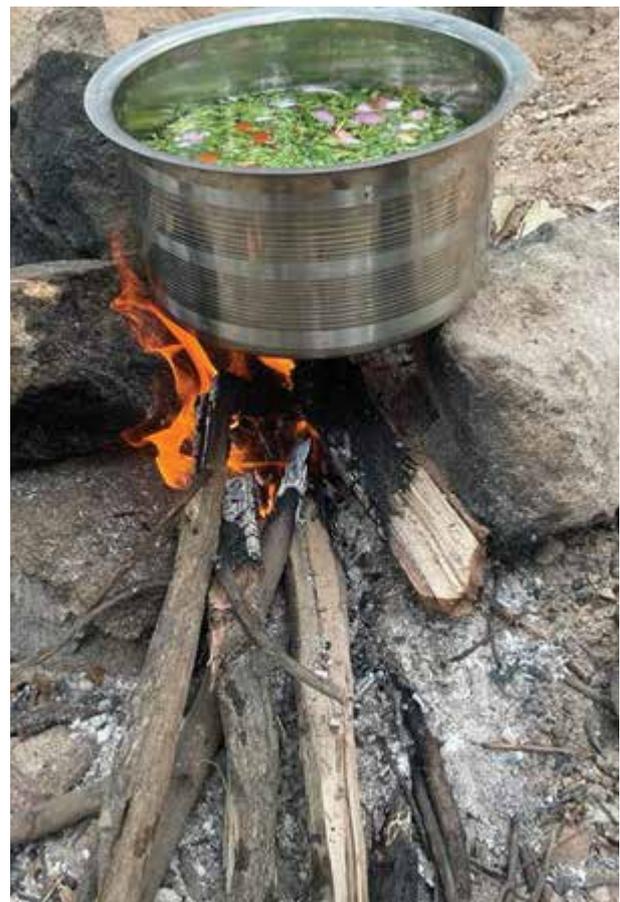


Figure 3. Food being prepared for the picnic.

The state government believes that through this scheme of groundwater recharge, irrigation, and organic farming, it will be easy for the farmer to take up double cropping, proper care of animals will be ensured, traditional kitchen gardens and rural economy will be strengthened, and the nutritional level of all will improve.

Students should also be made aware of initiatives such as these which directly impact their villages and quality of life. One of the schools we work with planned an educational visit to a nearby *gothan* (cow shelter) for the children to actually see this initiative so that they will be able to relate to it when they read about it in their textbooks The

children took a tour and were very curious about small details, such as how manure can be made so easily or how cows do much more than give milk.

After these interactions, I would say that the children living in villages are quite aware of the different aspects of nature. They live in a way that ensures that nature does not get exploited. It is the main source of their income or their whole livelihood is dependent on nature. Whether it be trees or rivers, they try to preserve and sustain them so that they get a continuous supply of natural wealth and at the same time, the natural world does not deteriorate.



Figure 4. Children on a visit to the cow shelter.

#### Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank his colleagues, Sneha and Neeraj, for including him in this summer camp and for this experience.

#### References

IGNOU Document (Unit 1: स्वयं के पर्यावरण को समझना)

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**Ankit Shukla** did his MBA and BTech from Uttar Pradesh Technical University, Lucknow and joined the Fellowship Programme of Azim Premji Foundation in March 2017. After completing his fellowship, he was posted to Raigarh district and now works in the field of maths pedagogy. A major part of his engagement includes the capacity enhancement of government school mathematics teachers with a focus on content, perspectives and pedagogy of maths. He also interacts with the children in government schools. He may be contacted at [ankit.shukla@azimpremjifoundation.org](mailto:ankit.shukla@azimpremjifoundation.org)