

Interview with Siddappa Shetty [SS] taken by Krishnendu Bose [KB]

KB: Please tell me about your association with this sanctuary.

SS: Yeah, I've been working for – this is the 13th year I am working in this wildlife sanctuary [Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Sanctuary]. I started working in this forest area in 1994. Now it's almost 12–13 years.

KB: So what is your understanding of the Soligas and their interface with the forests?

SS: Soligas have very good relations with the forest and also earn their livelihood from the forest. They've been harvesting non-timber produce of the forest for their livelihood. Before this area was declared as a wildlife sanctuary they used to do shifting cultivation and hunting. This was before 1972. After[wards] they stopped shifting cultivation and hunting and started harvesting non-timber forest produce. 50–60% of their income is from non-timber yielding forest products. ...some of the villages are situated in the core area of the forest, they're completely depending on the non-timber yielding forest products. Like they harvest gooseberries, the main non-timber yielding forest product, honey, lichen, soapnut, soapberry and things like that. At least gooseberries are the main thing. We have two species of gooseberries – one is *Philanthes amrika* [PA henceforth] and one is *Philanthes endofestry* [PE henceforth]. They harvest 250–400 tonnes per year. The highest harvest was during 2001–2 when they harvested 1,400 tonnes from this forest area.

KB: The common belief is when people are inside the forest and when they harvest or use the forest then the forest kind of degenerates. That's a common layperson's belief. People should be moved out of the forest and this whole debate about coexistence and relocation and things like that. So you've been studying this model for the last 13 years, what do you feel? Specifically about the Soligas? Is it sustainable use? Is it not sustainable use? Where is it standing now?

SS: Actually they've been harvesting the resources sustainably because you know I've been monitoring – I've been collecting data for the past 11 years for apiaries...the bee colonies. So they harvest 25 tonnes of honey from this forest area. I've got data on population of bee colonies for the past 11 years. The population is not declining. My data says that...

KB: I didn't understand that. Population...

SS: Is not declining. Yeah.

KB: Over 10 years?

SS: 11 years. That's one of the indications that the Soligas are harvesting the resources sustainably. At least in the case of honey. Coming back to gooseberries, which is the main non-timber yielding forest product being harvested in this wildlife sanctuary – there are two species, the PA and the PE. The PE is the bigger gooseberry, so the traders and the markets – there is more demand for that. 60% of the fruits are being harvested in this wildlife sanctuary and population is doing good. You know, the sowing, the regeneration...it's being harvested sustainably. Another species, *Philanthra simlica*,

[with] a smaller fruit, doesn't have good demand... People harvest only 30% of the fruit at the forest level. The other species they harvest 60% and this fruit only 30%. The fruit which is harvested 60% is doing good, and the fruit which is harvested 30% is not doing good. Because there are other reasons – the harvest levels have declined here but still the population is not doing so good because of other problems like the *Lantana camara*. So 13 years back there was not much lantana in this wildlife sanctuary. Now you cannot enter this wildlife sanctuary [without seeing it] – it's everywhere. ... I think it's disturbing the regeneration. There is not much regeneration...

KB: What I understand is that the collection of gooseberry is still dependent on the market demand. The small gooseberry doesn't have much of market demand, the big one has. ... So it's still connected with the market. What if the market changes? How would the Soligas respond to extraction?

SS: I got data for many years. In case of gooseberry, generally, you know, they harvest only if the tree has more fruits. Then only they go and harvest. For example, if the tree has 1 or 2 kilos they don't harvest at all. They don't touch. And another tree, for example, up to 80–85 % they harvest. They don't harvest completely. In that sense the fruits will be left on the tree for the regeneration. Also when they harvest fruits, the fruit will be on the ground. They don't collect 100% of the fruits from the ground.

KB: This, you would say, is the traditional wisdom they have?

SS: Also, they have very good relations with the forest. Because when they go and harvest the fruit, they will worship the tree and then collect the fruit from that particular tree and throw to the forest for regeneration. We asked many people. ... We had lots of interactions. The forest has to grow and then only can we live and earn money. The forest is not doing good, we cannot live, we are very concerned about that. That's what they say. Also there's a little bit [of a] problem with the harvest techniques and all. So ATREE came in and we taught them and discussed with them what is the sustainable harvest like. Better harvest techniques. Say, in the case of PA and PE, the people have stopped cutting branches. Earlier they used to cut branches. Now the level of cutting branches [has] declined after our intervention. We have been doing participatory socio-monitoring technique involving them and estimating productivity, extraction and regeneration levels.

KB: You had said earlier...that essentially, over the years, their relationship with the forest was getting kind of wobbly, because of the market pressures and things like that. The extraction techniques were becoming less friendly. That was the time when ATREE [Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment] came in, and VGKK [Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra] came in and kind of scaffolded the model. And it's working fine now. Would you explain that?

SS: Actually, 8–9 years back we got a project from BCN. That was an implementation project for three years and in that particular project we had three components – like biological monitoring and socio-economic component and enterprise component. And we were working on the biological monitoring and the socio-economic aspects of the project and enterprise component was taken care of by BGKK. This was like adding value to the non-timber yielding forest products. Our idea was that they should harvest less from the forest and previously their resource used to go to the land society and other people used

to buy and they used to make money. To avoid this and to add more value to it we started the processing unit. After that we have started purchasing honey and gooseberry through the land society. We cannot bypass the land society, and our processing unit started working. The processing unit may profit. Three times we have distributed incentive to harvesters to conserve the forest, three times we have distributed Rs 4–5 lakhs to the harvesters in the form of incentive. ... Also we have conducted a lot of capacity building training for the harvesters. Like how to harvest *amla*, how to harvest honey.

KB: What do you think? Suppose ATREE and VGKK were not there in this model? Suppose Soligas were just dependent on the market in their interface with forest?

SS: Traditionally they have some system adopted to conserve the forest. And apart from that because of the market demand and all, there was some problem with the harvest techniques and that has been solved, addressed, now.

KB: Problems meaning...?

SS: Overusing and also harvest techniques. Say, for example, in the case of honey there are better harvest techniques. Very eco-friendly techniques are there. Say, for example, when they harvest honey, they used to harvest the entire comb, the bee colony. There are techniques that required that they don't harvest the entire comb. There will be larvae, pollen and honey there. They can go and harvest only the honey portion without disturbing the larvae portion. In that sense you'll not be killing any larvae. The bee population will not be affected with that. This technique is very eco-friendly. Earlier they used to harvest only one time, harvesting the entire bee colony. Now when they adopt harvesting the honey-portion-only technique, they can harvest honey 2–3 times from the same bee colony. A lot of people are following this. This can be adopted in only slanted bee colonies. In slanted bee colonies, honey will be stored only on the top. One can go and harvest the honey portion from the bee colony. And the rock bees are very fast and very good. Within 2–3 days they fill this gap and within 15 days if the flora is very good they store the honey again and they harvest 2–3 times. ... The negative impact is being [reduced].

KB: I have a different question for you now. The fourth player, apart from ATREE, Soligas and VGKK, is the Forest Department. They manage the land. Legally they own the land. How do they come in? What has been their role in the last so many years?

SS: From the last so many years we have very good relations with them. They are very cooperative. We've also conducted one capacity-building training for the Forest Department people. Not for the higher level, but for the guards and watchers – 25 guards and watchers participated in this course. This was telling them about conservation of forest. Effect of forest fire and lantana and other things. It went down very fine. Also what I feel – this is my feeling – ...they've been using their traditional technique for protecting the forest. Like guarding the forest. Making the trench. Making bunds, weeding, pruning. Also protecting [from] the forest fires, things like that. What I feel, apart from their traditional ways of protecting the forest, they should also start thinking of scientific ways of protecting the forest. This is 21st century. The world is moving very fast – computer, internet and things like that [are there], and they should have a lot of information about the forest area, information about the species that need to be protected.

They should take traditional ways of doing things and also use scientific method. Create more space for scientists to work in the forest and use that data being collected to protect the forest. Then it may give more strength to the staff and to the forest.

KB: How do they respond to the harvest and collection of NTFP [Non timber forest produce] by people living inside the forest?

SS: Initially there was not much problem, and they were encouraging. ...some Forest Department people like the DCF... – they were also encouraging harvesting NTFP and things like that. Recently, because of the whole Wildlife Act the ban was imposed. There's a ban on NTFP harvest. ... [The ban] has been there for the past two years. The first one and half years, it was loose and people would still go in and collect NTFPs. But for the past 4–5 months, the DCF also said that you people should not go to the forest to collect NTFPs. It's very difficult for them. Also we have been doing participatory resource monitoring. People know how to harvest NTFP sustainably and they've been doing it. It's a livelihood for them. It's been very difficult for them.

KB: Why has this ban been in place?

SS: They say that it's a wildlife sanctuary and other sanctuary people don't harvest NTFPs and it was [an] exception that people were harvesting NTFPs in BRT wildlife sanctuary. Now they want it to stop. Also they might be thinking to declare this wildlife sanctuary as tiger reserve to conserve tigers. That's what I feel.

KB: [What] you're saying is very interesting – that people help in conserving tigers and the tiger population increases, and the people are stopped from collecting NTFP.

SS: It's strange actually. I've been observing this forest for the past 13 years. First 5–6 years when I started working here I never sighted tiger. Not even a single tiger I sighted in the first 5 years. After that I started sighting tigers. Now I have seen a lot of tigers in this forest. Many times. Two tigers in one sight. Things like that. ... The last 7–8 years, the population has been pretty good.

KB: How many days in a month would you spend in the forest?

SS: Initially, first 5 years I was full-time in the forest. 8 o'clock in the morning I used to go to the forest and I used to come back at 5–6 o'clock. And now I go weekly – twice, three times, something like that. Sometimes one time. Still I am...

KB: In that you are sighting tigers?

SS: Sighting more tigers now. Population is pretty good. It's been increasing in this wildlife sanctuary.

KB: Why do you think that is happening?

SS: It's interesting that people should say that they [the Soligas] should stop harvesting NTFPs. They were harvesting NTFPs and the population of tigers was increasing. And now they wanted to stop NTFP harvest – I don't know....

KB: I'll tell you an interesting story. I wrote a letter to the Chief Wildlife Warden for permission [to shoot] this film. So I gave a synopsis of my film. In that synopsis I talked

about the BRT story, that ATREE, VGKK, Soligas and Forest Department are involved in protection and Soligas are sustainably extracting resources out of the forest. The CWW wrote on paper – I got it in writing – [that] essentially it is the Forest Deptt protects all national parks and sanctuaries including the BRT, so your film should concentrate on the Forest Department and not on any other agency. That's what he said. Your comments on that?

SS: I think the socio-economic aspect – we are collaborating with the VGKK, and they are taking care of education and health of the tribal people, and we are addressing the biological monitoring aspect and the ecological monitoring aspects and conservation aspects. The Forest Department is protecting the forest. I think we should be together and then only can we [give a] good life to the community and also conserve the forest. Because all of a sudden it is difficult to put them out of their forest because they have a lot of burial grounds and they have sacred trees inside the forest and they worship the lord of the forest areas. And they have burial grounds and *kalligudis* and it's very difficult – they have a very good, big attachment with the forest. And also all of a sudden it's difficult to put them out. If you start giving education to them and once they start getting into jobs and all, I don't think they will want to go back and harvest honey from the tree. It's a very difficult job. Nobody wants to do such a difficult job. They don't have opportunity, that's why they're doing it. If they get better opportunity...

KB: If you want to wean them off the forest then you should economically develop them [with] jobs, etc, rather than have bans. What do you think are the repercussions of this? Apart from livelihood loss and apart from people, the Soligas, feeling the pinch of this, what else are the larger repercussions of this ban?

SS: ... It's going to be very big, I think. For example, we're working on a *podai* [Hamlet] called Monkaipodai, inside this wildlife sanctuary. In the core area. And [in] that particular *podai* they get an income upto 80% from harvesting NTFPs and also they are not growing much crops...grains from their agricultural land. Land is also a problem here. Whatever land they have is given by the Forest Department and many of them don't have *patta*, they don't have their own land. It's Forest Department land, and also it's not very big land. They have very small piece[s] of land and also they cultivate very small scale and there is a lot of wildlife problem to their crops. They're not getting crops from their agricultural land. At the same time they're not getting income from NTFPs – it's very difficult.

KB: You had said that there are other problems of non-Soligas coming in. Would you like to talk about that? In the last six months what has your experience been?

SS: Before the ban they had the ownership. ... When ban was imposed last year, you know what happened – they could not start harvest, when they're supposed to start harvesting the fruits. What happened was that others, non-Soligas, who live in the plains have started coming to the forest to harvest. They started coming to the forest and started harvesting the fruits, and one more problem was that Soligas know how to harvest *amla* sustainably. You should not cut big branches and things like that. ... They start cutting like that, there is more chance of trees drying up.

KB: Do you have some evidence of that?

SS: We've got some pictures. I can show these pictures to you. ... But these things may continue if the ban is imposed. Like you know, others may come. The fruit will be there on the trees...

KB: Why don't the Soligas go out and save the trees and stop the non-Soligas?

SS: Initially they had permission to harvest NTFPs and they used to protect their trees, and you know, there was an ownership. They were not allowing others to harvest. At least if they can't do anything they used to go and tell Forest Department people that please protect this area because non-Soligas have started coming and harvesting the fruits. Now they're not doing it. They're not bothered. Anyways we don't have the rights to harvest. If somebody is coming and harvesting, what we can do?

KB: The right and the duty go hand in hand. If you take the right then the duty also...

SS: They're pretty disappointed actually. I'll tell you one more example. People were enthusiastic and we were doing productivity estimation and extraction and regeneration study together. Like scientists, we've been studying to understand whether the species is being sustainably harvested or not. First level, we try and understand the productivity and second level, we try and understand the extraction levels and third, we do the regeneration study and compare all those things to understand whether the species is being harvested sustainably or not. We've been doing these three things for many years and at the same time the community is also doing estimation, extraction and regeneration study. The productivity estimation done by scientists and the productivity estimation done by the Soligas are comparable. I have the graph of that, I can show you.

KB: The Soligas are also monitoring their own harvesting techniques and the pressure that they are putting on the forest. That and your scientific methods are overlapping?

SS: also they were enthusiastically involved in estimating productivity and preparing the base map for the resources and things like that. After the ban they're not interested.

KB: So the relationship between them and the forest has been broken up by the ban.

SS: ... After the ban they stopped, they panicked. They were worried and they were not interested to do participatory socio-monitoring. ...

KB: There is an interesting thing here. Why has the ban come in[to] place? [In the case of] Soligas in BRT, the situation might be sustainable, but we've seen in many other forests, people living inside and outside, they've been unsustainably extracting resources and negatively impacting the forest. Maybe the ban is to look into this overall kind of relationship people may have with the forest.

SS: In some places the same model should be replicated. Also you've to see how the forest area is. How many people are living inside the forest and outside the forest? Say, for example, [at] BRT we have 540 sq km, a lot of people living inside the core area. They cannot do anything. Some people work with the Forest Department and they get wage, salary, from the Forest Department. That's not much actually. In that sense, what is the livelihood for them? That's all very important. Maybe the same method needs to be replicated and we have been collecting this information and I would say in India, only in

BRT do we have this kind of information. Like productivity estimation, extraction, regeneration done by scientists and community. And people are fully involved in monitoring it.

KB: What you are saying is that BRT is a special case in the Indian scenario. Why should a blanket ban be put on all the places in India? All the sanctuaries and wildlife areas of India?

SS: That's what I feel.

KB: One size may not fit all. Can you say that?

SS: It's a special case, BRT wildlife sanctuary. People have adopted sustainable harvest techniques and they have been involved in monitoring. Other sanctuaries, people may not be doing this. It's hard to see the ban imposed in all the wildlife sanctuaries. I think the govt should consider BRT as a special case and give permission to harvest NTFPs. And also we have proved that the harvest is sustainable and there are other problems, like the *Lantana camara* and other invasive species. Because of the invasive species the regeneration is not doing good.

KB: So what are the special lessons that one can learn from the BRT experience? Other park managers, other *adivasi* groups who are living inside the national parks, living on the national park resources – what are the special lessons we can learn from the BRT experience?

SS: For the Forest Department [especially], I would say, the way of collaboration. ... Basically, there is one more problem, I should say. Food productivity has been declining in the case of the gooseberry. It's also because of the parasite problem. ... Because of this parasite, the productivity has declined and a lot of trees have died... The reason why the population of this parasite has increased is because of control of forest fire. This is my observation. Some of the burnt areas I have seen, the tree will not get burnt, but the parasite will get burnt. This parasite is very sensitive to this forest fire. Earlier forest fires maybe...used to control the parasites.

KB: It was done by the Soligas earlier.

SS: Yeah, but it is completely controlled now by the Forest Department. Because of that reason, the parasite density has increased. Control of forest fire. That is causing more negative impact on the gooseberry tree. That's my observation.

KB: So you are saying that the forest fire that was done by the Soligas earlier was actually controlling the parasite and increasing the productivity...?

SS: People used to use fire as a tool to conserve the forest. That's what they say. One of my observations is because of this forest fire, this parasite used to get killed. And *amla* trees were not having so many parasites at that time. And they were producing a lot of fruits. And now population of the parasite has increased like anything. Not only has the productivity declined but also a lot of the trees are drying because of the impact of this parasite. So after sometime, we may lose all the other trees in the forest because of the impact of this parasite.

KB: So you as a scientist believe this argument?

SS: Yeah, I observed in the forest. This is my observation, because I have a knowledge of trees that I have been monitoring for the past 10 years. One year a part of the...trees got burnt because of the forest fires. That fire didn't damage the trees but it damaged the parasites and the parasites were completely dried after this fire. They didn't regenerate again... They are very sensitive to the forest fire. Once they get burnt, they don't regenerate.

KB: The second thing you said [about] the forest officials [looking at the] people's side.

SS: ...apart from using the traditional way of conserving the forest, and also [as] I previously said, they should also use the scientific knowledge to conserve the forest. Apart from both they have to see the livelihood of the community, try to address the problems of the tribal people who are living inside the forest area and try to see how they can improve the livelihood. So once they get enough food and enough earnings, I don't think that they'll go to the forest to cause more damage. I don't think so. The socio-economic part of the tribal community is very important.

KB: Do you think the forest officers understand this aspect?

SS: Of course they understand and I feel they have to concentrate more on this. Because in the BRT wildlife sanctuary there is a ban and also a lot of Soligas also do farming. But they do not have their own land. They have forestland and that too they have 1:1.5 acres: 2 acres maximum. And not everybody is having agricultural land, and nor is everybody having the opportunity to cultivate crops for the food. Also if some farmers cultivate there is a lot of wildlife problem – elephant, wild boar – they cannot really grow good crops. In that sense they have problem collecting NTFP for their livelihood and [on] this side they have problems [with] agriculture land – they cannot grow anything because most of them do not have land and some of them cannot cultivate because of wildlife problems. This needs to be addressed. They should get food security – I think that is important. And Forest Department can give some wage work to them. For example, Forest Department using the tribal people for weeding, doing fireline. And they are also earning from the Forest Department, but I feel that is not enough.

KB: What should be the lesson learnt from this BRT model for others?

SS: ... We have these four organisations working together. That's a very big advantage. The Forest Department, the VGKK, the ATREE. We are all working together, that's a very positive thing. I still think we need [a] more close relationship. We have good relationships but we need to strengthen it more. And we should also think about institutionalization – like more institutions taking care of all these activities. For example, ATREE, how long can we do participatory resource monitoring. We have to have institutions that can take care of their activities and communicate and also help conserve the forest. It can make a large difference, institutions.

KB: The coexistence debate which is now raging through the country – people living inside the forests and the forests – it can be addressed through this model.