

VANASAMAKHYA

State Level Federation of VSS Networks



The Alliance of the **Forest Guardians**



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Contact : Centre for People's Forestry
12-13-483/39, Street No.14, Lane 6
Nagarjunanagar Colony, Tarnaka
Secunderabad - 500017, A.P., India
Tel./Fax: +91 - 40 - 27154484
www.cpf.in | info@cpf.in

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Acronyms

APFP	Andhra Pradesh Forestry Project
APNGO	Andhra Pradesh Non Government Organisations
CFM	Community Forest Management
CWS	Centre for World Solidarity
DFO	Divisional Forest Officer
FPC	Forest Protection Committee
GHG	Green House Gases
JFM	Joint Forest Management
MACTS	Mutually Aided Cooperative Thrift Societies
NGO	Non Government Organisation
MNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
NTFP	Non Timber Forest Produce
NWFP	Non-Wood Forest Produce
PESA Act	Panchayats Extension to the Schedule Areas Act
PFM	Participatory Forest Management
PFPC	Primary Forest Produce Collectors
FRO	Forest Range Officer
VFC	Village Forest Committee
VIKSAT	Vikram Sarabhai Centre For Development Interaction
VO	Voluntary Organisation
VSS	Vana Samarakshana Samithi



I. Forests and Forest Communities - The Evolution of Community Forest Management

Estranged Forest Communities

The lives of communities living amidst the forests of Andhra Pradesh (AP) are centred on the forests they live in. Traditionally the forests have provided all that they needed — whether it was materials required for their dwellings or for daily use, or the food required by the community, which was obtained either by hunting or gathering forest produce. This dependence continues and today, like other forest communities in India, they depend on the collection and sales of forest produce (Non-Timber Forest Produce), or on agriculture, for their livelihood.

Despite living in lush forested regions, with fertile soil and many water sources, many of them live in abject poverty and deprivation. They have no schools, medical services, transport, or other infrastructural or essential services, yet they continue living, retaining their strong cultural and emotional ties with the forests. However, due to gradual degradation of forest cover, over-exploitation and allocation of land for developmental projects, these communities have been gradually losing their forest-based livelihood support.

Many people living in the forests largely practice either settled or shifting cultivation. In Andhra Pradesh, shifting cultivation (locally known as “*podu*”) is followed. Here, they cultivate a piece of land for around three consecutive years and then let it remain fallow for some years so that it regenerates, and move on to another parcel of land. They return to the earlier plot after approximately five years. Thus, they are not attached permanently to any piece of land and are nomads within the forests.

Shifting cultivation activity by itself does not sustain these families. Hence they depend on the collection and sale of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) such as *Beedi* leaves, gum *karaya*, adda leaves and tamarind, and also seek employment as labourers during the non-agricultural months. Some families frequently migrate to other areas in search of jobs.

The National Forest Programme- India (NFP) from the Ministry of Environment and Forests to conserve degraded forests evolved programmes in accordance with the provisions of the National forest policy 1988, and integrated the proposed forestry development programmes in the country within the framework of the five-year plans. The Ministry formulated a comprehensive plan for the next 20 years by integrating proposals of various states. It is a comprehensive work programme that aims to bring 33 % of the nation's land area under forest/tree cover in a phased manner, by 2020 A.D. The scheme involves assisting the states to set up forest protection forces as well as to assist the JFM cell and involve people in eco-generation activities.



In recent years the dependence on NTFPs as a source of livelihood and household income has increased manifold. This increased demand of NTFPs has led to over-exploitation of resources without any measures taken to ensure the sustainability of the supporting resource-base. The Government too has not helped by bringing in legislation and other measures, which have alienated the forest dwellers and impaired their traditional links with the forests.

Policies that Benefit Forest Dependent Communities

It has been established that the livelihood of millions of tribal people worldwide is dependent in varying degrees on the access to forest resources. The cultural survival of forest communities is linked to their involvement in NTFP production and ultimately to their role in forest management.

Two factors determine livelihood security of forest dependent communities: availability of forest resources, and state policies that ensure they can access and use these resources in a meaningful way, while taking care of environmental and other concerns.

PESA Act

The Parliament of India passed the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 to extend the provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment 1993 to the Schedule V Areas of the country. This Act is quite significant as it accords statutory status to the gram sabhas in Schedule V areas with wide ranging powers and authority. This vital aspect was missing from the provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

The Indian Forest Act as well as the Forest Conservation Act, 1980 curtailed the rights of these communities to collect and sell minor forest produce¹, causing them many hardships.

During the 1990s, activists and human rights movements campaigned for the rights of the tribals over local resources. These rights were considered sacrosanct and non-negotiable and they organised to secure Constitutional recognition for these rights. The sustained campaign led first to the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution to give recognition to decentralised governance in rural areas and

¹ The Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, National Forum of Forest People & Forest Workers, Voices from Forests, Nagpur, 2002

then led to the constitution of the Bhuria Committee to look at tribal rights over resources through extension of the provisions of this Amendment to the Schedule V areas. Based on the recommendations of the committee, Parliament passed a separate legislation in 1996 as an annexure to the 73rd Amendment specifying special provisions for Panchayats (village councils) in Schedule V areas². The Panchayats Extension to Schedule Areas (PESA), 1996, decentralised existing approaches to forest governance and made the Gram Sabha³ the focal point in this work, and recognised the traditional rights of tribals over “community resources”— land, water and forests. The Act was expected to empower people in these areas and usher in a new phase of self governance. All the states were given a year to amend their respective Panchayat Acts to conform to the letter and spirit of PESA. Unfortunately, very few have taken steps to adhere to the provisions of PESA when creating laws affecting tribals and forest dwellers.

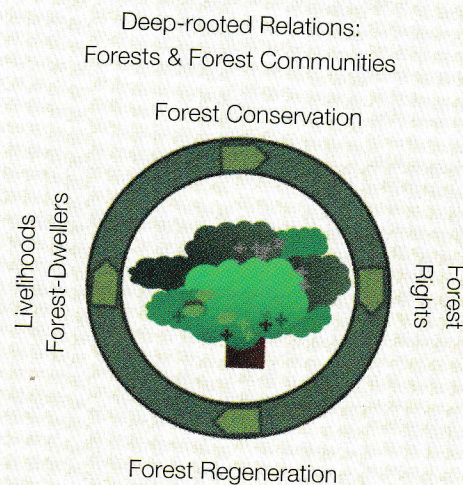
In India a major problem faced by forest communities was that the traditional homelands of these communities had been classified; during colonial times and subsequently in Independent India, as forest lands with control vested in the state. In the absence of clearly defined property rights, millions of families living in or around forest land were labelled encroachers or illegal occupants. Not surprisingly, these areas have witnessed serious conflicts over land rights, often resulting in loss of lives. In 2006, the Government of India therefore promulgated the Scheduled Tribes and other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act and Rules. The Rule (2007) for the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights)

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006

The Act defines forest land as land, of any description, falling within any forest area, and includes most types of forests. The law provides for recognition and vesting of forest rights to Scheduled Tribes in occupation of forest land prior to 13th December 2005 and to other traditional forest dwellers who are in occupation of forest land for at least three generations, i.e. 75 years, up to a maximum of 4 hectares. These rights are heritable but not alienable or transferable.

Forest rights include among other things, right to hold and live in the forest land under individual or common occupation for habitation, self-cultivation for livelihood, etc. Besides, the Act recognises the rights over ‘community forest resource.’ One of the crucial aspects of the Forest Rights Act is the realisation of forest rights within a protected area through declaration and demarcation of the “critical wildlife habitat” (CWLH).

Fig 1.1: The Symbiotic Relationship between Forests and Forest Communities



² Scheduled areas are tribal-dominated areas, mentioned in the Schedule V of the Indian Constitution.

³ The Gram Sabha is a body of persons registered in the electoral rolls of a village, or a group of villages, which elect a Panchayat. Each Gram Sabha works to safeguard and preserve the traditions and customs of the people, the community resources and helps resolve local disputes.

Act 2006, popularly referred to as Forest Rights Act (FRA) was notified on January 1, 2008 and the implementation process began later.

The implementation process is going on every where at different levels, but awareness about the FRA among communities varies. Some are in the dark, while others claim to have a thorough understanding. Government orders related to the FRA need to be widely disseminated in local languages and mass awareness campaigns need to be conducted in all districts. Inter- departmental coordination also needs to be enhanced.

In some areas, the forest dependent communities are levelling lands afresh and often smugglers in their own interest are encouraging the local community to clear the forest and submit claims.

In spite of some of the initial hiccups faced with the new Act, the Forest Rights Act is an important legislation that will help India's isolated forest communities achieve some parity with other communities in rural India.

These developments are in tune with the developments across the globe, over the past two decades that support NTFP development as a means to achieve the twin goals of forest conservation and development of forest-dependent people. Taking into consideration the symbiotic relationship between communities and the forests, the government is ensuring that the one of the major tasks of all agencies responsible for forest management is to involve the forest dwellers in protection, regeneration and development of forests, as well as making certain that they get a share of the benefits accrued from the forests.

People Oriented Forestry- Joint Forest Management

As a result of the change in outlook, a number of changes have taken place, in recent years, in forest management. There has been a perceptible shift towards a more decentralised, people oriented forestry and biodiversity conservation with involvement of local communities to establish sustainable forest management systems. The realisation that the active and willing participation of the forest fringe communities is necessary for the success of any forest regeneration programme, led to Joint Forest Management or JFM, as it is popularly known.

In India, Joint Forest Management (JFM) emerged as an important intervention in management of forest resources and in many parts, small village groups protect and reclaim degraded forestlands through collective action. The primary objective of JFM is to ensure sustainable use of forests to meet local needs equitably while ensuring environmental sustainability. The central premise of JFM is that the local people, who are dependent on forests, have the greatest stake in sustainable forest management.

The official ground for JFM was prepared by the National Forest Policy of 1988, which envisaged people's involvement, particularly of women, in meeting their basic forest related needs and in managing local resources. This was followed in 1990 by a circular from Ministry of Environment and Forests providing guidelines for involvement of village communities and voluntary agencies in regeneration of degraded forests.

The National Forest Policy of 1988 and the JFM guidelines of 1990 combined with state level resolutions acknowledged the need to give greater rights and authority to community groups. Under

JFM, village communities are entrusted with the protection and management of nearby forests. These communities are required to organise forest protection committees, village forest committees, village forest conservation and development societies. The guidelines provide for rights to usufruct non-wood forest products and detail the percentage share of final harvest accrued by organised communities willing to protect and help regenerate depleted forest and waste lands. Around 22 states have issued enabling orders for implementation of JFM.

JFM in Andhra Pradesh and Vana Samrakshana Samithis (VSS)

Realising the importance of people's participation in forest management, the Andhra Pradesh Forest Policy took into account the 'Joint Forest Management' approach in 1993. People living on the fringes of the forests were encouraged to form Vana Samrakshana Samithis (VSS), or 'Forest Protection Committees,' to protect and rejuvenate degraded forest areas under the Andhra Pradesh Forestry Project.

The latest GO no.173 on JFM gives 100% usufruct rights to the VSS villagers on usufructs from the forest with a condition that the village community should set aside money required for regeneration and management of the forest on a sustainable basis.

Special Features of JFM in Andhra Pradesh ^α

- VSS members are given 100% rights over forest produce (NTFP).
- VSS gets 50% of the net revenue realised from the beedi leaves collected by members.
- 25% of the fine collected from offenders by the VSS for forest offences, is given to VSS members when forest resources are outside. Other VSS are only entitled, according to the Compounding Fee involved.
- Transparency in VSS operations is ensured by channelling the funds through Joint Account System
- Investments are based on micro plans prepared in consultation with VSS members.
- There is 50% compulsory enrolment for women in the general body and minimum 30% in the Managing Committee. Women have formed thrift groups to save the income earned through the Samithis.
- All sections of people including SCs, STs are involved and made active participants.
- NGOs are involved in strengthening VSS through motivation, extension, training and other support activities.
- Medicinal plants in forest areas have been identified and VSS members are encouraged to cultivate and conserve medicinal plants in VSS areas.
- Resources are mobilised from Employment Assurance Scheme, centrally sponsored schemes, NABARD, World Bank to ensure requisite funds are available for all activities.
- In order to ensure development of VSS villages as 'Model villages,' effective inter-departmental coordination takes place.
- Comparison of satellite imagery between 1996 and 1998 has shown that the forest cover under the management of VSS improved appreciably within two years.
- The World Bank has rated JFM programme in Andhra Pradesh as the best in the country.*

^α Source: GO 173 of 1996

* Source: Extension Digest, 'Forest Management'

Impact of JFM

- Increased availability of fuel and fodder within two years of taking up JFM.
- Reduction in incidences of smuggling, fire and grazing
- Generation of adequate employment in the village itself has reduced migration.
- Improvement in natural regeneration of forests
- Increase in water table due to execution of soil and moisture conservation works.
- Increase in non timber forest produce (NTFP) in VSS areas resulting in villagers getting more income from collection of soap nut, custard apples etc.
- In addition, as part of support activities, smokeless chulhas (stoves) have been provided to VSS members, which have cut down consumption of firewood by more than 50%. The provision of biogas plants to families for generation of gas for fuel has discouraged the practice of storing huge stocks of firewood, aiding the efforts to minimise felling of trees for fuel.

In Andhra Pradesh*, around 6580 Vana Samarakshana Samithis (VSS) have brought 16.58 lakh hectares of degraded forest area under JFM, of which 5.38 lakh hectares has been treated by taking up regeneration work, including soil and moisture conservation and gap planting. 13.05 lakh VSS members, including 6 lakh women actively participate in JFM. 24000 hectares of forestland, originally under encroachment has been rejuvenated through VSS.

* Source: Case Studies of JFM in Andhra Pradesh, Forest Management, Extension Digest.

Involvement of NGOs in VSS

The Forest Department in Andhra Pradesh initiated the VSS programme primarily because of the rapid depletion of the forest cover within the state. They understood that without people's participation their projects would fail. In the initial stages the Department tried to implement the VSS activities on their own, but the rural people having experienced the bitter side of dealing with the Forest Department in the past, were unwilling to trust them. The officials too could not build a rapport with the people since their main duties gave them little time to interact and build trust with the community. Nevertheless, this attempt failed.

On the other side, experts also felt that the challenge for forest departments is one of facilitating, which implies adapting the official JFM frameworks to enable forest departments to participate in villager's initiatives of forest protection. As a result, 'mechanisms need to be evolved for meeting immediate essential needs of the most dependent members through appropriate forest management interventions⁴.'

The Forest Department therefore identified NGOs experienced in working with grassroots organisations to initiate and strengthen VSS activities. With the entry of the NGOs the situation changed and soon the community began participating in the activities. The NGOs wanted to bring in a democratic process of decision-making and hence commenced work by organising the target communities into groups. Earlier these communities had traditional leaders who arbitrarily took decisions. But with the formation of groups and with responsibilities assigned to individual members the situation changed, ending the hegemony of traditional leaders.

The Vana Samrakshana Samithis have been playing an important role in enlisting forest-dwellers and bringing them into the mainstream, while protecting and regenerating forests. The

⁴ Sarin, M. Joint Forest Management: Achievements and Unaddressed Challenges, Unasylva, Vol 46 (1) 1995).

samithi members collectively work for forest and soil moisture conservation with the help of micro-plans that they develop, and are thereby addressing the issue of livelihood enhancement. Village development is another thrust area of VSS and the focus is on improving drinking water, roads, building community halls, improving women's economic status by contributing to women's groups and so on.

Community Forest Management in Andhra Pradesh (APCFM)

To meet the challenges in the Forest sector, the Andhra Pradesh State Forest Policy (JFM) had been announced in 1993. However, under JFM, the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department (APFD) took the lead in both forest planning and forest-related decision making, while the communities acted under the directions given and so the decision-making process was not completely participatory. The JFM policy statement was revised coinciding with the initiation of the Phase II project with the support of World Bank during 2002⁵ providing support for; among other things, Community Forest Management (CFM). The adoption of CFM under the project represents an advance over the concept of JFM followed in the Andhra Pradesh forest department (APFD). Under CFM, the Forest Department act more as a facilitator, regulator, and provider of technical support, while the community takes the lead in forest planning and decision making.

The CFM policy is based on the Vision 2020 of the State of Andhra Pradesh and is in tune with the National Forest Policy and the National Forestry Action Plan. The development objective for the APCFM is *'to reduce rural poverty through improved forest management with community participation.'*

The core principle behind CFM is the empowerment of forest-fringe communities and improving their livelihood capacity so that they can carry out enhanced management and protection of forests in collaboration with the APFD, but with a fair degree of independence.

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NGOs in AP, especially the Centre for People's Forestry and the AP NGO Committee on JFM, took the initiative in organising consultations with the VSS communities and communicating their aspirations and concerns to the Forest Department. As such the CFM GO (No. 13 of February 2002) included, to a large extent, some pro people measures.

This was further revised in May 2004, when Vanasamakhyas representatives actively participated in a consultation to clearly spell out the benefit sharing mechanism pertaining to bamboo, plantations and timber. In recognition of the work done by the Vanasamakhyas the Forest Department entrusted the State Vanasamakhyas the responsibility of participating in Divisional-level consultations and submitting their observations. It was the first recognition of their work by the FD. These changes in benefit-sharing were made in response to the demand by the NGOs and VSS and after a series of consultations organised by the FD and facilitated by NGOs.

⁵ G.O. No.13, dated 12-2-2002



The APCFM project aims to promote local ownership and management of various forest-based livelihood opportunities involving the local communities, whose benefits would bring social and economic change in the lives of the poor.

Additionally, in line with the suggestions and advice given by the World Bank Supervisory Mission, and as a result of series of consultation meetings with stakeholders, on 7th January, 2004, the Environment Forests Science and Technology Department issued orders to enhance the financial

powers of the VSS at various levels. There are two accounts, one managed jointly by the VSS and the Government, and the other managed solely by the VSS. (See Box Item 'G.O.Ms. No. 2 and G.O. Ms. No. 4,' which provides some information on the VSS Account).

The APCFM project was implemented in fourteen selected districts in 5000 VSS. The selected districts represent the most forested and the most backward areas of Andhra Pradesh— Medak, Adilabad, Khammam, Nizamabad, Warangal, Karimnagar, Mahaboobnagar, East Godavari, Visakhapatnam, Vizianagaram, Srikakulam, Nellore, Chittoor and Kadapa

G.O.Ms. No. 2

- The process of funds releases to VSS government account from DFO/CFO has been specifically mentioned.
- The works carried out in VSS, 25% of the works check measurement to be done by FRO, and 75% by FSO.
- After the approval of vouchers the same amount is withdrawn from VSS joint account (Government account) and the amount is distributed by Chair-persons.

G.O. Ms.No.4

On 12th January 2004, Addendum was issued to the G.O.Ms.No.13, EFS&T (For.III) Dept., dt.12.02.2002. In Para XII-1 of the said G.O the following shall be substituted:-

- Vana Samarakshana Samithi shall be entitled to forest produce obtained from forests managed by them:
 - o all Non-timber Forest Produce;
 - o All intermediate yields obtained from silvicultural operations in natural forests.
 - o All timber and bamboo (including yield from bamboo plantations) harvested from the forest managed by them, except in case of plantations;

In case, period of management of other plantations by the Vana Samarakshana Samithi is more than 50% of rotation period of the plantation, they are entitled for 100% of the harvest.

- o All the timber obtained from second and subsequent rotations of all plantations.
- o Expenditure necessary to sustain the productivity of the forests as per the micro-plan shall be deposited in the VSS Joint Account. This amount shall not be less than 50% of the net income

Balance income shall be deposited in the VSS account and utilized equitably by all eligible members of the Vana Samarakshana Samithi.

Distinguishing Features of APCFM

The APCFM is an evolution in the rights given to forest communities and ensures that the community takes the lead in planning, decision making, when managing forest and livelihood-related issues, which are interlinked for these communities.

- All households of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and those headed by women in the village are automatically enrolled as members.
- The Managing Committee comprises of 15 elected representatives from the VSS, of which at least 8 must be women members.
- The chair-person of the VSS convenes the General Body and Managing Committee meetings. (Photo/s from Folder-3 can be used here)
- Secretary of the management committee can only be from VSS managing committee
- In VSS, the management committee elects a Chairperson and a Vice-Chairperson amongst them. Either one, or both, of the Chair-person and Vice-Chairperson must be a woman.
- For managing funds received from Government a joint account needs to be opened, which is operated jointly by the Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson and the concerned Forest Section Officer/ Forest Beat Officer/Assistant Beat Officer as nominated by the concerned Forest Range Officer. This account is called the 'Government Account'
- A VSS Account is opened for funds received from other Non-Governmental sources and for internally generated funds. Such VSS account is held and operated jointly by the Chairperson, and Vice-Chairperson. This account is called the 'VSS Account'



- The withdrawal of funds from VSS account is immediately reported to the Managing Committee either on the same day or the next day along with the pass book
- The NGOs facilitate the functioning of the VSS and impart training to VSS on marketing and value addition of the forest produce, accounting procedures, micro-credit, conflict resolution and other activities.
- With help of the Forest department, the VSS prepare micro-plans, annual plans, and estimations for implementing works or activities under the VSS
- For minor offences the VSS are authorised to collect advance compounding fees not exceeding Rs. 100/- (Rupees One Hundred only). The amount so collected is remitted by the VSS to the Joint Account (VSS account).
- All records including Cheque Books, Joint Account, Book of Minutes, Managing Committee Resolution Book, Annual Plan, Micro-plan, Estimates for Works and all other records deemed necessary, are kept in the custody of Chairperson/ Vice Chairperson.



II. Genesis and Evolution of the 'Federation of Forest Guardians' -Vanasamakhya

Role of CPF-CWS in JFM

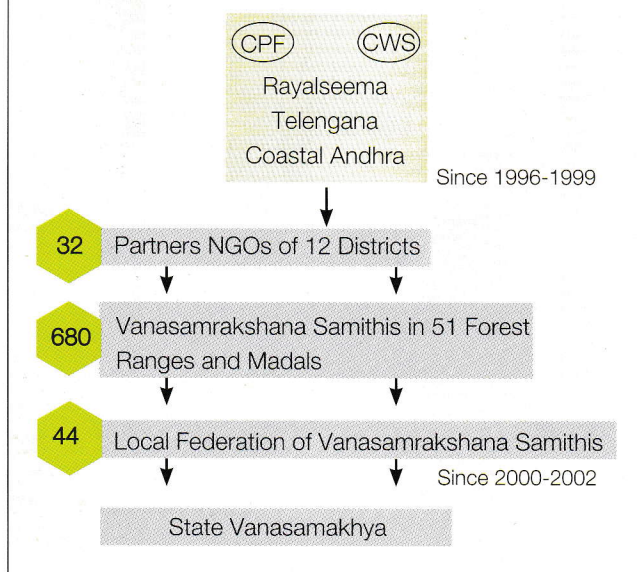
The Centre for World Solidarity (CWS) has been involved in the Joint Forest Management Programme of Andhra Pradesh since 1992. It has been promoting JFM activities in 12 districts of AP with 32 NGO Partners since September 1996. Its activities have provided communities the space needed to access and control natural resources. This has been especially true for the marginalised sections (women, dalits, tribals and other vulnerable groups) who needed to take this important step for social and economic empowerment.

The sustained efforts of Centre for People's Forestry (CPF) and the partner NGOs during 1998- 2000 led to the formation of strong VSS chairpersons' networks at the local range or mandal and section levels. However gradually the networks became ineffective because of the following reasons:

- Not enough time and priority was given by the local forest officials to solve or address the issues faced by the VSS because works under JFM were an additional responsibility to the forest department.

CPF-CWS, who had been promoting JFM activities across 12 districts of AP, noted the gradual weakening of the VSS Chairpersons networks in the state and felt it was important to strengthen them. The idea of having a state-level federation that would represent all the state VSS, took shape over the course of a number of meetings organized by CPF with partner NGOs and VSS representatives in 2000.

Fig 2.1: Vanasamakhyas Genesis- The Timeline



- Too many responsibilities were shouldered by the chairperson making it very difficult for the chairperson to deal with all the mandates.
- VSS faced several problems in its functioning with respect to release of funds by the FD, management problems, lack of information sharing by the chairpersons among the members of the General Body and Executive Committee.
- In the process some vested interested groups and local political leaders started interfering in its activities, thereby working to the detriment of the VSS.

The Genesis of Vanasamakhyas

The CPF observed the weakening of the VSS networks and recognised the need for preventing this erosion in the capability and influence of the networks. To strengthen the VSS networks, CPF organised a state level meeting on 5th and 6th December 2000, with its partner NGOs and VSS representatives from 34 ranges to review the status of VSS and VSS networks and the means of strengthening them. The idea of having a State level federation that would represent all the VSS in the state took shape during these meetings. A series of discussions took place among the VSS representatives at different levels to evolve the criteria of membership and other such norms for this federation. The outcome of these discussions of December 2000 was that an ad-hoc committee for a state-level VSS federation was formed with 20 representatives from the 12 districts. This state-level conference suggested the following guidelines for the functioning of the ad-hoc committee:

- Ad-hoc committee meetings to be organised once in six months to discuss the process of formation of the federation and its activities.
- All the activities taken up by the ad-hoc committee to be presented at the General body meeting that was scheduled to be held in 2002

The First Ad-hoc Committee meeting was held from 23rd to 27th February 2001 wherein Committee members from each district and range were assigned responsibilities. The Second Ad-hoc Committee Meeting was held from 19th to 21st June 2001. In this meeting the work carried out by members was reviewed and ways of strengthening the VSS network were discussed. The meeting resulted in the formation of a Core Committee of eight members to look into the membership criteria, and to work on other aspects with CPF-CWS.

The First Core Committee Meeting was held on 10th August 2001, wherein the following resolutions were passed:



- Membership Criteria: Ten or more than ten VSS can form a local federation at range, section or mandal level. These federations can take membership in the state-level federation
- Each VSS shall select two representatives (one woman and one man) to represent them at the local federation meetings. Similarly each local federation shall select two representatives to attend the state level federation meetings.
- Various other norms pertaining to membership fees, wages, priorities to be given to women, dalits and tribes, maintaining relationships between NGO and VSS networks, etc. were discussed.

CPF-CWS assisted the Core Committee in preparing a proposal for mobilising funds. Winrock International India extended support for a year from December 2001. CPF-CWS also appointed a manager to oversee the activities of the federation during the project duration and to organise exposure visits for the VSS representatives. Subsequently over meetings and discussions, the idea of a state federation, to serve as a forum for VSS, crystallised in 2002. The Third Ad-hoc Committee Meeting held on 8th January 2002 was significant, because major decisions were taken, based on the suggestions made by the Core Committee:

- A state-level VSS federation would be formed
- The federation must publish a newsletter to communicate its viewpoint to people in general and also to keep its members abreast of happenings.
- Regular exposure visits to be arranged for the ad-hoc committee to the neighbouring states
- Responsibilities would be shared by all members and would not be loaded only on the VSS presidents or vice-presidents.

Following this meeting and decision, the Ad-hoc Committee members submitted a Memorandum to the Chief Conservator of Forests in Hyderabad without the help of any NGOs. The memorandum listed out the problems faced by VSS in various districts and also the efforts that were being taken or required to solve the problems. This meeting with the Chief Conservator significantly boosted the confidence of the committee.

The second Core Committee Meeting held on 28th February 2002 helped finalise the agenda for the general body meeting to be held in June 2002. The First General Body Meeting of the federation was held on 18th and 19th June 2002. The participants included:

- VSS Local Federations representatives
- Representatives of Partner NGOs
- State Level Ad-hoc Committee members
- VSS members from the JFM Advisory Committee
- CWS/CPF team at Hyderabad

Vanasamakhya was registered under the Society Registration Act of 1860, on the 30th of July 2003.

The first Vanasamakhya General body meeting held in 18th and 19th June, 2002.

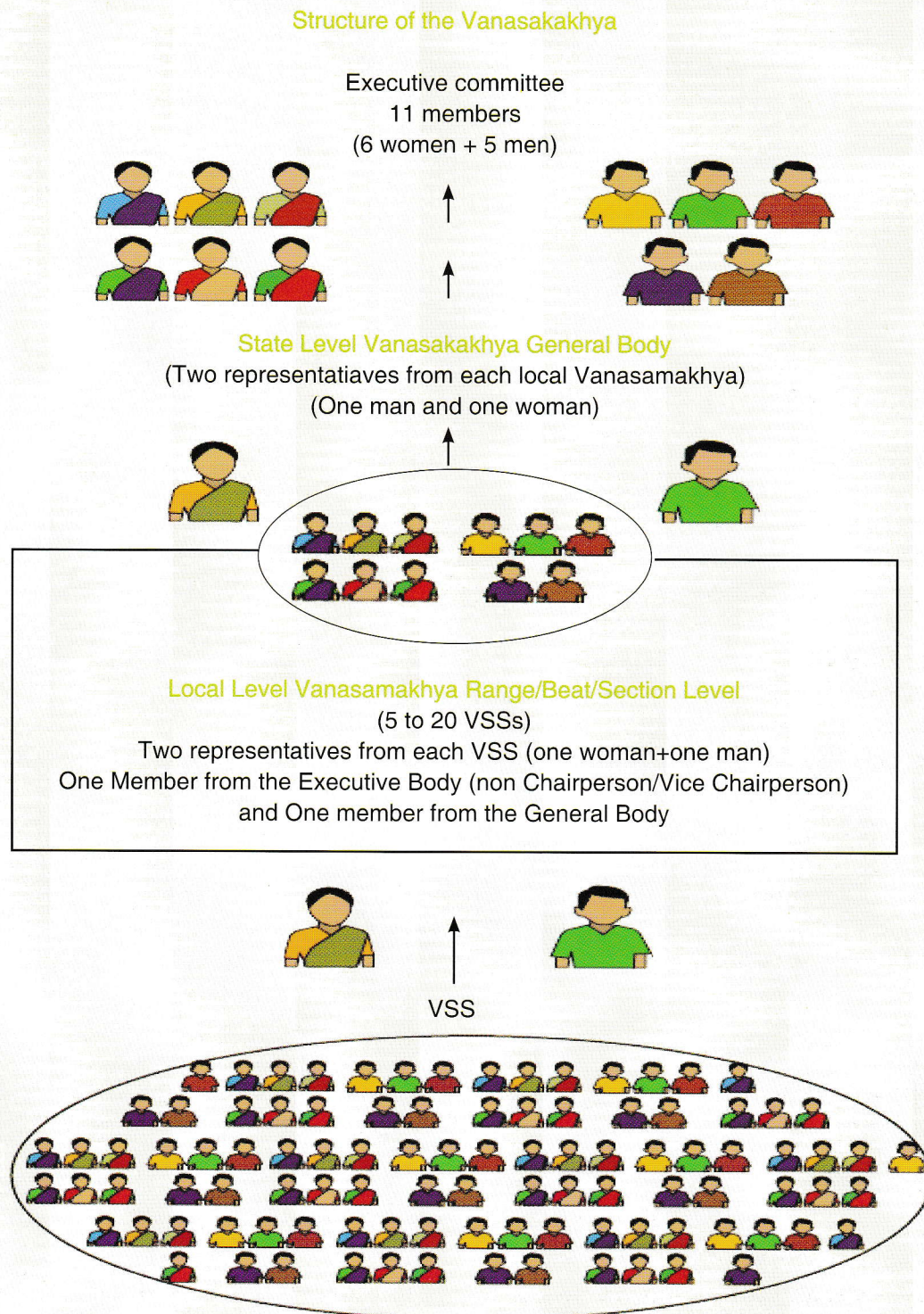
The major outcomes of this General Body meeting were:

- First membership finalisation for 16 local Vanasamakhya federations only.
- Fulfilled Vanasamakhya criteria from 16 local networks to seek state Vansamakhya membership, they only allowed to contest for Vansamakhya body. Remaining local network members also participated in election process as observers as well as from the active members nominated in other subcommittee members.
- Members of various committees —the Executive Committee, Advisory Committee, Campaign Committee, Resource Persons Panel, Awareness Building Committee and the Vanasamakhya Advisory Committee were elected.
- The name of the federation— Vanasamakhya, was finalised.
- The decision to publish the newsletter 'Maa Adavi' ('Our Forest') was approved
- A logo was chosen from various options for Vanasamakhya, which symbolised the principle that women and men shoulder equal responsibilities when protecting forests and conserving natural resources.

Based on the result of the General Body Meeting, the members of the Executive Committee were selected from the VSS local federation representatives. The Executive Committee has eleven members, three representatives from North Coastal region and four each from Rayalaseema, Nellore and Telangana region. The representatives who were not selected became members of the other committees.

Figure 2.2 shows the structure of the Vanasamakhyas and shows how members from the VSS can become members of the local Vanasamakhyas, the state-level Vanasamakhyas (General Body), or become members of the Executive Committee for two years.

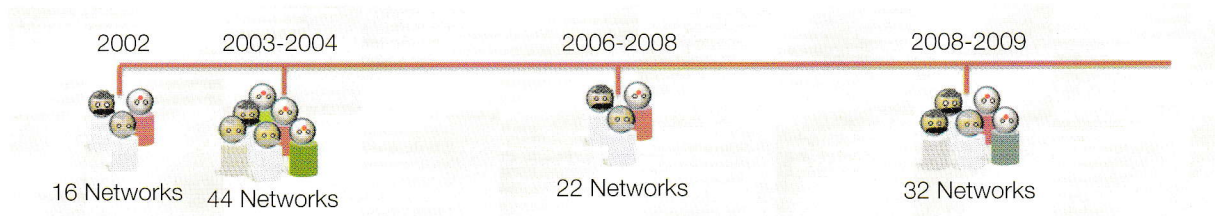
Fig 2.2: Vanasamakhyas Structure



Each local Vanasamakhya has to get the approval of the State Vanasamakhya Executive Body or General Body approval to become a member of the State Vanasamakhya. On approval, they have to pay the prescribed membership fees (Currently Rs.200/-) per annum to continue as members. If they fail to comply with this and other membership stipulations, they may be denied membership, or may lose their membership, if they are already members.

Vanasamakhya was registered under the Society Registration Act of 1860, on the 30th of July 2003. Currently thirty-two local Vanasamakhyas (VSS federations formed at range level) are members in the State Vanasamakhya. Although originally thirty-two local federations were promoted by CPF and Partner NGOs (See Figure 2.3), the numbers dipped to twenty-two⁶ between 2006 and 2009, and after 2009 the networks have been strengthened and around thirty-two are active.

Fig 2.3: Vanasamakhya Networks since 2002



The fluctuation in numbers of networks since 2002 is mostly due to two reasons:

1. **Renewal of membership:** The downward trend observed between 2006 and 2009 is mainly due to the fact that CPF/Vanasamakhya worked on project-mode, initially, in which local NGOs and their VSS networks were part of the project. Once the project concluded, few networks did not renew their membership. Only the networks that realised the importance of being part of the State level network continued as members.
2. **New drive to increase membership:** The upward trend in membership since 2009 is mainly due to new members joining the networks under rejuvenated programmes carried out to strengthen the networks by Vansamakhya executive body and Programme executives.

S. No	Name of the District	Name of the Division	Range	Name of the Networks	Local NGO's Name	No. of VSS
1	Srikakulam	SRIKAKULAM	Heeramandal	Injadri Vanasamakhya	Samyogitha	14
2	Srikakulam	SRIKAKULAM	Palakonda	Jamper kota Vanasamakhya	Samyogitha	9
3	Srikakulam	SRIKAKULAM	Kasibugga	Mahendragiri Vanasamakhya	Samyogitha	8
4	Visakhapatnam	VISAKHAPATNAM	Chodavaram	Modamamba Vanasamakhya	Gramabhyudaya	15
5	Visakhapatnam	PADERU	Paderu	Viswa Vanasamakhya	SMILE	13

⁶ Rekha Singhal, Yugandhar Mandavkar; Evaluation Report: Core Programme of Centre for People's Forestry, Supported by Oxfamnovib and Ford Foundation; CPF Secunderabad; August 2008

S. No	Name of the District	Name of the Division	Range	Name of the Networks	Local NGO's Name	No. of VSS
6	Visakhapatnam	VISAKHAPATNAM	Chodavaram	Kootikondamma Vanasamakhyia	Gramabhyudaya	9
7	Visakhapatnam	VISAKHAPATNAM	Ravikamatham	Sanjeevini Vanasamakhyia	Aakruthi Welfare Association	10
8	Visakhapatnam	VISAKHAPATNAM	Chodavaram	Sri Durga Vanasamakhyia	Kanakadurga Mahila Mandali	8
9	Vizianagaram	VIZIANAGARAM	Parvathipuram	Girijana Vanasamakhyia	ROSES	17
10	Nellore	NELLORE	Udayagiri	Udayadri Vanasamakhyia	FUDS	25
11	Nellore	NELLORE	Kavali	Kalugolamma Vanasamakhyia	NEEDS	24
12	Nellore	NELLORE	Venkatagiri	Velugonda Parirkshana Vanasamakhyia	RREDO	25
13	Nellore	NELLORE	Atmakur	Mallemkonda Vanasamakhyia	PVS	24
14	Nellore	NELLORE	Sullurupet Mandal	Uyyaalamma Vanasamakhyia	AREAL	9
15	Prakasam	PRAKASAM	Erragondapalem	Palnadu Vanasamakhyia	RDSWS	10
16	Kurnool	ATMAKURU	Velugodu	Nallamala Tiger Vanasamakhyia	Star Youth Association	12
17	Kurnool	NANDYAL	Rudravaram	Nallamala Vanasamakhyia	CHRD -R	13
18	Kurnool	KURNOOL	Kurnool	Kalvabugga Vanasamakhyia	CHRD - K	17
19	Ananthapur	ANANTAPUR	Bukkapatnam	Vanajyothei Vanasamakhyia	REDS	10
20	Ananthapur	ANANTAPUR	Kadiri	Vanalakshmi Vanasamakhyia	REDS	10
21	Chittoor	CHITTOOR	Puttur	Padmavathi Vanasamakhyia	IRDS	21
22	Kadapa	KADAPA	Proddutur	Veerabrahmendra Vanasamakhyia	CHRD	10
23	Medak	MEDAK	Narsapur	Manjeera Vanasamakhyia	SEED	10
24	Medak	MEDAK	Narsapur	Veerahanuman Vanasamakhyia	SEVA SANGAM	14
25	Medak	MEDAK	Ramayanpet	Sai baba Vanasamakhyia	DREAM	12
26	Medak	MEDAK	Narsapur	Veerabhadra Vanasamakhyia	SCOPE	10
27	Warangal	WARANGAL North	Pasra	Sammakka Sarakka Vanasamakhyia	MAARI	13
28	Warangal	WARANGAL North	Pasra	Aadarsa Vanasamakhyia	MAARI	13
29	Khammam	BHADRACHALAM South	V.R. Puram	V.R. Puram Vanasamakhyia	ASDS	10
30	Khammam	BHADRACHALAM North	Dummugudem	Parnasala Vanasamakhyia	HNRDA (Haritha)	15

S. No	Name of the District	Name of the Division	Range	Name of the Networks	Local NGO's Name	No. of VSS
31	Adilabad	ADILABAD	Utnoor	Utnoor Vanasamakhya	Pragathi Bharthi	10
32	Mahaboobnagar	ACHAMPETA	Achampet	Umamaheswara Vanasamakhya	CONERU	11
Total VSS						431

Objectives of Vanasamakhya

Specific Objectives of Vanasamakhya— Identity and Integration

- To promote people's participation in the functioning of VSS and local networks.
- To give prominence to tribal and SC communities; especially dalit women and the poor, impoverished people, in all forest related and developmental activities that promote livelihood.
- To strengthen local Vanasamakhyas and VSS by mutual cooperation.
- To discuss and find solutions to the problems of local Vanasamakhyas in consultation with the government and NGOs.
- To work towards solving problems of VSS/EDCs and non VSS.
- To facilitate mutual sharing of information among members and spreading awareness among other communities and people through Maa Adavi.
- Sharing experiences with similar organisations working for the regeneration of forests and improvement of livelihoods of forest dependent people.
- Carrying out activities that aid environmental conservation.
- Creating awareness about biodiversity of the areas in which the VSS work.
- To promote product based collection/marketing cooperatives within the Vanasamakhya.

Functioning of the Vanasamakhya

The following decisions were taken on the functioning of the Vanasamakhya

- The Vanasamakhya general body meeting would be held once a year
- Elections to the Executive Committee would be held once in two years.
- Executive Committee would be held once in four months or three times a year.

In addition, the roles and responsibilities of members, and the membership norms were fixed

- Membership norms to the local federation of the Vanasamakhya were detailed and finalised.
- Responsibilities of the Executive Committee includes mobilisation of funds, registration of Vanasamakhya, management of 'Maa Adavi', ensuring documentation of Vanasamakhya meetings, sharing all relevant information with local federations, carrying out campaigns, resolving issues related to forest management and most important of all— planning for the future and facilitating the growth of Vanasamakhya.

- The treasurer was deemed responsible for managing and maintaining all accounts related to Vanasamakhyas's funds.

For many members of the VSS, who stay in forest fringes and have no access to facilities that are available easily in cities and towns, or even in some villages, the VSS and Vanasamakhyas provided the opportunity to use and get acquainted to facilities like banking. (See Case Banking on a New Future). As a result, the Vanasamakhyas has opened new doors to these people.

Case Study - Banking on a New Future

Interaction with representatives of two Vanasamakhyas, one from the Kurnool range, the Kaaluvabugga Vanasamakhyas representing 40 VSS, and the other, the Nallamala Vanasamakhyas from the Rudravaram Range of the Nandyala Division with 26 VSS revealed that they have now learnt to operate bank accounts—a significant achievement for a people who have limited or no access at all to facilities that are taken for granted by most urban folk.



All the VSS have two bank accounts. The first one is operated by three persons — two elected representatives from the VSS, and the Beat Officer of the Forest Department. All funds from Government Departments are initially deposited into the first account, also known as the Government account. The second account can be operated jointly, but not singly, by the Chairperson or the Vice Chair person. The amount is transferred from first account to second account as per the circular, only after proper verification and passing of a resolution by the VSS. This procedure is followed to ensure that all the members know how much money is drawn and for what purpose.

Mr. Vadla Venkateswarlu, member of the Siddanagattu VSS said that every VSS pays a membership fee of Rs.200/- in accord with the General Body resolution of the Vanasamarakshana Samithi, which is deposited into the Local Vanasamakhyas bank account. The money is then used for organising Vanasamakhyas meetings and addressing issues. Every VSS has a VSS account, which is operated by the Chairperson and Vice Chairperson of the VSS. The VSS can mobilise funds through community or individual contributions.

Once Mr. Vadla Venkateswarlu arrested some red wood smugglers with the support of other VSS members and the Forest Department. In recognition of his work, Mr. Venkateswarlu was awarded Ten thousand Rupees by the DFO, Kurnool. Mr. Venkateswarlu deposited the amount in the VSS account. The VSS used this amount to purchase material for a tent house, to be used during social functions. Earlier the people from the villages used to cut trees from the forests nearby and used the wood to erect pandals (pandiri) for such functions. Now that the villagers have their own materials, they have stopped cutting trees and also save time in setting up the pandal.

The account of the Siddanagattu VSS is managed by the Ramalakota branch of the government-run Syndicate Bank, while the Rudravaram Vanasamakhyas has an account in the Rudravaram branch of the Syndicate Bank.

The Vanasamakhya Flag and Logo



The Executive Committee members and other members decided that it was important for Vanasamakhya to have its own flag and logo, which would represent the ideals of the federation. These were later designed and approved. The Vanasamakhya flag has three bands of different colours. Each colour is symbolic of some ideal and stands for some of the essential elements of nature. The blue band represents the sky, while green epitomises forests and white, water. When all of these elements of nature are pure and in their pristine

state, as nature intended, only then can the biosphere survive. This is also the objective for which the Vanasamakhya was formed

The green colour is also symbolic of forest dependent communities such as the Adivasis. Wherever these communities live, they live in harmony with their environment—the verdant, green forests.

The colour white is symbolic of the caring nature, the purity, the amity, honesty and the simple, transparent character of the forest communities.

The blue colour represents the forest dependent communities, who are primarily from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

The Vanasamakhya logo shows that in the march towards equity and when protecting forests and conserving natural resources, women and men should shoulder responsibilities equally.

People living in and around the forests of Andhra Pradesh have seen a difference in their lives—from the point of providing them sustainable livelihood options, as well as in the sense of protecting, nurturing and managing the forests around their homes—stemming from their decision to organise themselves in the form of Vana Samrakshana Samithis. The formation of a federation at the state-level has now increased the collective bargaining abilities of these fringe groups, who have been leading isolated lives at the very remote corners in the memories of an India that is more focused on industrial and technical growth. The formation of the Vanasamakhya marks a new beginning in the lives of these forest-dwellers, one that brings them the promise of a better future together.





III. Strengthening Collaborative Networks - Vanasamakhya Initiatives and Campaigns

The VSS, the local Vanasamakhya and the state level Vanasamakhya work together with the help of the Centre for People's Forestry (CPF) and its partner NGOs to ensure the forest-dwelling communities can benefit from forest-based livelihoods, while protecting the forests, without which these communities would be adrift.

However, considering the number of people under the federation who need help in finding solutions to their issues and fulfilling their livelihood related needs, is not an easy task. Currently 32 local Vanasamakhya (VSS federations formed at range level) or networks, are members in the State Vanasamakhya and together they carry out a number of activities that help its members across the state.

Across the VSS, there has been an increasing awareness about the contributions made by the Vanasamakhya in resolving issues related to forest-dependent communities through advocacy, lobbying, campaigns, PPA studies, and with Vanasamakhya representatives ensuring VSS members get benefits from various government schemes. As a result, VSS from areas other than the CPF project area are voluntarily forming new local Vanasamakhya and seeking membership in the State Vanasamakhya with the support of local NGOs.

To stream line its activities, the Vanasamakhya formed sub-committees focused on different topics to share responsibilities and to ensure that the activities get the required momentum:

- VSS Works Implementation Committee.



- Records & Registers Maintenance Committee.
- Gender Equality Committee.
- Medicinal Plants Committee.
- Committee to manage development activities such as clearing of undergrowth, singling, mounding, contour-trenching, stone-bunding, gully-plugging and construction of check-dams, which are carried out using funds received from the Forest Department.

Some of the enthusiastic youngsters from amongst the VSS members, who are committed to contribute to the development of Vanasamakhyas, and the VSS, are recruited as Programme Executives to support the State Executive body in achieving the objectives of Vanasamakhyas. The team is characterised by a deep sense of ownership, which has helped the Vanasamakhyas in building a highly professional pool of resource persons who contribute in areas such as Participatory Performance Studies, Microplan preparation, Biodiversity Register, Resource monitoring, facilitating sustainable Bamboo harvest practices, capacity building to natural resource based bodies or VSS. As a result of such expertise available within the Vanasamakhyas, it has become the partner of choice for the stakeholders that it engages with.

Spectrum of Vanasamakhyas Activities

The Vanasamakhyas work on issues affecting the VSS members and the federation and ensure that the objectives for which the federation of VSS was formed, are met.

Giving Counsel and Providing Access to Experts: The local Vanasamakhyas play a major role in sustaining the activities of the VSS in collaboration with NGOs, the Forest Department and other line departments. It brings various VSS-related issues to the notice of the state-level federation of the VSS. The state-level Vanasamakhyas federation tries to resolve issues by taking them to the Forest Department and other line departments. The Vanasamakhyas also provide guidance on successful forest management techniques to the VSS with the involvement and in collaboration with experts and specialists roped in by the CPF and its partner networks.

Lobbying and Campaigning: The local Vanasamakhyas identify issues or problems of the VSS and campaign on these issues at the State level. It lobbies with policy makers and carries advocacy work for the VSS (See Cases in Box-Item 'Meetings and Campaigns help VSS Members Secure their Rights').

Training & Capacity Building: The Vanasamakhyas train VSS members and equip them suitably with skills that give them the means to have sustainable livelihoods. Special training programmes are conducted to select representatives of Vanasamakhyas on leadership and management skills, concepts and strategies.

Meetings and Campaigns help VSS Members Secure their Rights

- In order to generate awareness on the Forest Rights Act in the VSS villages of the local Vanasamakhyas, awareness meetings were organised at Srikakulam-Injadri Vanasamakhyas, Jamparkota Vanasamakhyas- Palakonda Range of Srikakulam division, Girijana Vanasamakhyas of Vijayanagaram division and Udayadri Vanasamakhyas of Nellore division, Medak- Veerahanuman Vanasamakhyas, Warangal-Sammakka Sarakka Vanasamakhyas and at Khammam- V.R.Puram Vanasamakhyas.
- Around 300 VSS passed resolutions and sent them to the Prime Minister and Chief Minister for initiation of the work to and distribute titles under FRA. The Vanasamakhyas representatives supported this process by following up with the state departments and ensured that the VSS members got the title of the land that they had been cultivating.
- The members of the Injadri Vanasamakhyas of Srikakulam district observed that the land surveyed for title distribution was less (2 to 4 cents of land) than the actual land that the beneficiaries were cultivating in 54 villages of the Heeramandalam, Saravkota and Veeraghattam mandals. Potential title holders approached the Injadri and Jamparkota Vanasamakhyas, of which they were member VSS. Consequently, under the guidance of the CPF, the State Vanasamakhyas as well as Samyogitha and Adivasi Sangam (local NGOs), the Injadri and Jamparkota Vanasamakhyas generated awareness on the need for a survey and approval of the total land under cultivation by the villagers. The representative of the Vanasamakhyas submitted a memorandum to the Revenue Minister Mr. Dharmana Prasad Rao. The Minister responded positively and ordered the Project Officer of ITDA to conduct a survey again. Subsequently, these new surveys were carried out in the villages of the three Mandals and the members of the VSS could get the land.



Ensuring Cooperation: The Vanasamakhyas ensure that the VSS and the local federations appreciate issues, viewpoints and the constraints faced at various levels and facilitates cooperation between these bodies. Suitable Vanasamakhyas representatives who can be good resource persons and cultural ambassadors are identified at local and state-levels and are trained to promote a sense of belonging among the members.



Building Awareness: The Vanasamakhyas raise awareness among the VSS on important issues. Exposure visits, both within and outside the state, help promote understanding among the members of the larger issues arising out of the interplay of forest protection and enabling sustainable livelihood options.

Mobilising Funds: The Vanasamakhyas are responsible for mobilising funds from governments and other funding organisations.

Consultation Works: State Vanasamakhyas take up consultation works for the Forest department, or other departments and organisations. For this purpose it has professionally trained manpower, with expertise on various areas such as Participatory Performance Appraisal, PRA Techniques, Conflict Resolution, Natural Resource Management and so on.

Other responsibilities of the Vanasamakhyas are:

- Protection and development of the forests (See Case Study – *'The Determination of Pasra Range Local Vanasamakhyas Help Nab Encroachers'*).
- Ensuring proper or optimum procurement of NTFP during the season.
- Arbitration and conflict resolution within the member VSS, or between the VSS and outsiders (See Case Study – *'Changing Attitudes and Reinforcing the Message of Conservation'*).
- Helping VSS members understand the need to protect and develop forests and the importance of the Forest Rights Act in the context of their welfare. Capacity building and upgrading skills in techniques that help add value to NTFP and in animal husbandry, measures for resource conservation, fire management and land development through NPM. The members are also made aware of gender perspectives, and trained in record maintenance (See Box Item *'Records and Registers Maintained by the VSS and the Vanasamakhyas'*) and financial management and any other relevant topics.
- Liaison with Forest Department and other line departments to ensure availability of essential services in the tribal hamlets.
- Developing programmes that use cultural activities and events to generate awareness among members on important issues.
- Promoting livelihood groups and establishing forward and backward linkages for marketing.
- Promoting soil and moisture conservational activities through the NREGA programmes.

Records and Registers maintained by the VSS and the Vanasamakhyas

The VSS and Vanasamakhyas maintain 15 different types of books and records. The important books maintained are:

- Membership Register
- Book of Minutes
- Visitor's Book
- Bank Passbook and related records
- Cheque Book

Other Programmes and Initiatives

The Vanasamakhyas, being the state-level federation of local forest protection groups or Vana Samrakshana Samithis (VSS), carried out a number of campaigns on various issues, conducted social audits to ensure that the numerous programmes supported or carried out by them function as desired, instituted awards to motivate VSS members and taken various other initiatives. The State Vanasamakhyas get consultation assignments from the Forest Department and other departments, because of the expertise available with them. The following sections provide an overview of some of these activities made by these forest communities and the federations that are strengthening these collaborative networks.

Case Study – Changing Attitudes and Reinforcing the Message of Conservation

Sri Modhamaamba Vanasamakhyas was formed on 17th December 1998 representing 15 VSS from the Chodavaram Range, Visakhapatnam Division. Appa Rao the secretary says that the main aim of this federation was to address the issues of all the VSS at a wider level from a single platform. Most of the villages in this region were on the forest fringes and so the residents had easy access to the forest to collect timber, fuel wood and grass since many generations. Earlier they brought back the timber and other materials to meet their personal needs. But with growing demand for materials they began cutting down the forest on a large scale. 30—50 bullock carts would go in every day and return fully-laden with wood from the forests. This was possible because the forest guards and watchers were indifferent to the things around them.

Soon the Forest Department became alarmed at the rate of depletion and several issues between the FD and tribals cropped up. Subsequently, the FD initiated the project, where they entrusted the responsibility of forest protection to the tribals, the original forest dwellers.

The VSS federation with support from the local NGO (Gramabhudhaya) and the Forest Department officials, established check posts at three strategic points to arrest smuggling. Initially, when the VSS members along with the local communities tried to prevent the bullock carts from entering the forest there were violent confrontations.

Ms. Eswaramma, Garikabanda VSS, explains how gradually, over a period of time, the incidence of outsiders coming with bullock carts and cutting down the forests has stopped. "Occasionally some smugglers cut and steal timber, but we catch them and hand them over to the Assistant Forest Beat Officer who imposes a fine. As per the G.O. Ms. No.43., dated 07.04.2000, whenever the VSS members catch smuggled timber or any kind of forest resources of other VSS or forests, they are entitled to 50 percent of the compounding fee. This money is paid into the VSS account, and is meant to be used on village development activities".

Ms. Eswaramma also stated that with the formation of the VSS, 80 percent of the forest depletion has stopped. The Vanasamakhyas members are so involved in conservation and protection that they celebrate July 30th as their Foundation Day and hoist the Vanasamakhyas flag along with the Forest Department officials.

Communication and Information Dissemination - The Vanasamakhyas News Letter

The state-level VSS federation Vanasamakhyas brings out a Telugu newsletter 'Maa Adavi' (Our Forest). An Editorial Board was constituted from among the Executive Committee of Vanasamakhyas. The Editorial Board meets every quarter to identify and prioritise the issues to be published. Issues related to forestry, forest-dependent communities, dalits, tribal women, livelihood concerns, experiences on forest protection and management, interviews with eminent persons related to forestry are covered in the newsletter.

The newsletter covers all important issues related to the local VSS and is distributed to local Vanasamakhyas, NGOs, Forest Department, Research Institutes, libraries and all subscribers through the Vanasamakhyas.

Case Study - The Determination of Pasra Range Local Vanasamakhyas Help Nab Encroachers

The Raghavapatnam VSS, from the area popularly known as Kothanagaram, in Warangal Division, which is implementing the Joint Forest Management Programme, initiated an Eucalyptus plantation programme around three years ago. Around three acres of this plantation was felled down by four residents of Pasra Village, on July 23rd 2002. They intended to use the land for other agricultural purposes.

Responding to this incident, the local VSS Federation expressed its concern to the Divisional Forest Officials and to the State Vanasamakhyas. The members of the Kotha Nagaram VSS were united and expressed their concern over this incident to the forest officials (Sub DFO, Range officer).

No action was taken by the Forest Range Officers even three days after the incident was reported. The incident was tracked by almost all the local daily newspapers. Without losing their determination, the members of the local Vanasamakhyas and the VSS approached the DFO directly and demanded that stern action be taken against the culprits and where the plantation was destroyed, seedlings of fruit bearing varieties be planted.

Finally, the forest department booked a case against the culprits and started the enquiry. It was revealed that some parties with vested interests were responsible for the incident. They were interested in taking over the land. Later the Forest Department fenced the entire area. The VSS members now feel that due to the JFM project, they have now become united and can also count on the support of the FD. This incident has proven that by successfully involving the community, the VSS networks can play a significant role in forest conservation and in improving the livelihoods of the people.

In addition to the newsletter, the Vanasamakhyas have their own website that it uses to reach out to a wider audience. Visitors can access all information related to the Vanasamakhyas and its activities and they can also read the e-version of 'Maa Adavi,' here.

Lobbying and Campaigns

Beedi Leaf Campaign

The Vanasamakhyas work to promote the interests and sustainability of the local VSS in the state. One of the biggest achievements of this partnership is the benefit sharing provided to VSS members who receive 100% of the profits⁷ made through beedi leaf collection.

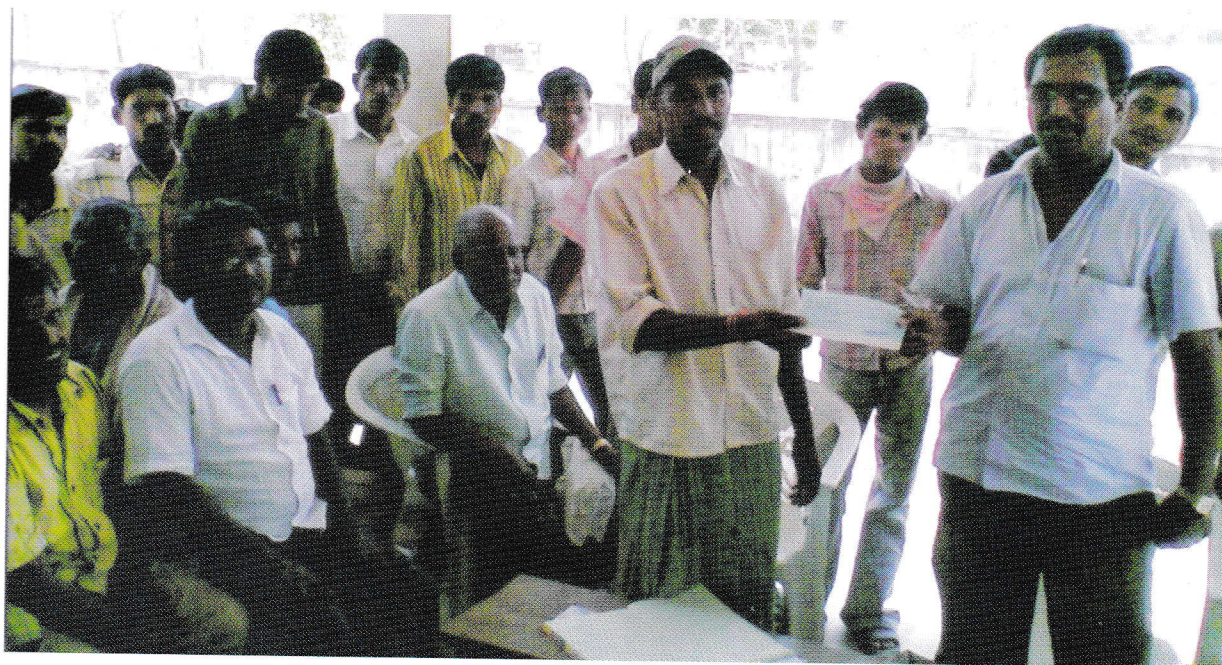
Since 2006, the Vanasamakhya, in collaboration with CPF and the Forest Department, has been organising awareness generation programmes (using wall posters, pamphlets) on G.O. No 43 in the Telangana region. The campaign pertains to securing 100 percent incentives to beedi leaf collectors and ensuring proper pruning of Beedi leaves, so as to increase their value and output. This campaign is organised regularly in the VSS villages of Warangal, Khammam, Medak, Nizamabad, Adilabad and Karimnagar districts where “Beedi leaf” is abundantly available. The Medak district DFO appreciated the campaign and sanctioned Rs.5, 000/- for conducting awareness programmes in the district.

As a result of the awareness created by these Beedi leaf programmes, the VSS members now demand that the contractors cut the branches instead of setting it afire, as per the old practice. The groups now get more output of beedi leaves, which are also of better quality. This has increased the income of the VSS members leading to conservation of forests since the people no longer have to depend on tree-felling and other practices that sustained them.

The increase in Naxalite activities and unfavourable conditions to take up beedi leaf collection between 2003 and 2005 reduced the number of bids for beedi leaves made by traders in the Telangana region. This adversely affected the livelihoods of the local people. The Pasra range local Sammakka Sarakka Vanasamakhya network in Warangal District approached the Forest department and appealed to them to allot beedi leaf collection units. The Forest Department responded positively and allotted Kodisala, Lavvala Beedi leaf units to the local Vanasamakhya and increased the support price. During the season 2005-2006, 1050 VSS members of Kodishala and Lavvala units got employment as beedi leaf collectors. Following the suggestion of the local Vanasamakhya, the FD divided the units into smaller ones, which has made it financially easy for contractors to bid for leaf collection in these areas and given them a hope of succeeding in bidding all the units there after.



⁷ The Government of Andhra Pradesh issued a Government Order for giving 100% benefit out of beedi leaf trade to the primary collectors in proportion to the leaves collected by them. The APFD came up with a mechanism whereby cards were issued in the name of individual collectors to record the number of bundles collected. This forms the basis for final benefit sharing after the department receives the sale proceeds from the traders.



Red-Sanders Campaign

The State Vanasamakhya is carrying out a study on the effects and extent of Red Sanders smuggling in Kadapa, Nellore and Chittoor districts of AP. This has helped raise awareness about the value of Red Sanders to the forests and to the communities and has led to a campaign for curbing smuggling of wood and other forest products.

Campaign on CFM

In the year 2005, the State Vanasamakhya with the support from the Forest Department, organised awareness programmes on CFM GO at the VSS. The State Vanasamakhya used the traditional, cultural form, the Kalajathas, in the VSS of Kamareddy and Nellore divisions to convey the reason and importance of adopting CFM, the formation and composition of the Executive Committee, VSS management, NTFP collection, arresting wood smuggling, and other aspects related to the work of the VSS.



On 7th June, 2006, the State Vanasamakhya Executive Committee members visited Visakhapatnam, Paderu, and Vizianagaram divisions. Pamphlets and resource materials on CFM were distributed to the VSS members in the region.

DET Funds Distribution

From 1989 onwards, as part of social forestry, the Forest

Department planted plantations, which were later handed over to VSS for protection as part of JFM from 1996 onwards. After the formation of VSS some additional plantations were carried out in addition to the ones mentioned above. In 1996, small timber plantations were taken up in 61 VSS in Nellore district. The plantations were harvested from 2004 and the net returns were deposited in VSS Second Account. As per the CFM GO, 50 percent of these funds



must be used for forest generation and the balance must be used to enhance livelihoods of VSS members. However, there was a delay in disbursing the funds and the apprehensive VSS members shared this issue with the local Vanasamakhyas & NGOs, the State Vanasamakhyas and the CPF. With the guidance of the CPF, the State Vanasamakhyas and local NGOs pushed and negotiated with the concerned officials starting right up from the Range to the Division, the Circle and finally at the state level. As a result on 28.1.2009, forest department initiated distribution of the funds to 36 VSS members. Rs.11, 15, 03,387/- was distributed to the VSS accounts through cheques to avoid any issues.

VSS Participatory Performance Assessment Study

Participatory Performance Assessment an important tool to ensure that any programme is on course to meet its objectives and to assess if any course-correction is required. As a result, the VSS members periodically assess to find out to whether the VSS have achieved the CFM goal; to identify issues affecting their working, gaps and areas that require strengthening and so on. Through Participatory Performance Assessment Studies VSSs members in a General body meeting evaluate their VSS performance in terms of Social, Institutional, Resource and Livelihood and Gender etc. aspects. The Forest Department gave consultation work on VSS Participatory Performance Assessment Study to the Vanasamakhyas as a special assignment. This has been a pioneering work done by the Vanasamakhyas in the field of VSS Participatory Performance Assessment Studies in Andhra Pradesh.

During the mid-term evolution of the APCFM project, the World Bank had a consultation meeting with stakeholders, where Vanasamakhyas representatives also participated. The World Bank team felt there was a need to evaluate the functioning of the VSS. During the meeting the WB representatives appreciated the conceptual clarity of the Vanasamakhyas representatives on JFM and CFM. The World Bank team suggested to the Forest department that they should have a PPA study of the VSS conducted, and that they should rope in the Vanasamakhyas in order to do the PPA study efficiently.

The State Vanasamakhyas organised trainings on 'PPA study' in collaboration with the Forest Department and the Andhra Pradesh Forest Academy. The State Vanasamakhyas received 319 applications from VSSs members of 13 districts. 233 VSS members were selected and trained. The trainings were organised in four batches, between 23rd March to April 24th 2007, at the AP Forest Academy at Dulapally. After the training, 152 bright candidates were selected as facilitators for



conducting PPA study of the VSS. The State Vanasamakhyas along with Forest Department, and AP Forest Academy jointly prepared a questionnaire for this PPA study.

The PPA study was conducted in 641 VSS covering eight divisions— Vizianagaram, Chittoor (East and West), Tirupathi, Bhadrachalam (North and South), Paloncha, Karimnagar West and the Raikal range, with support from the Forest Department staff. In March 2008, the PPA study report was submitted to the concerned authorities in the respective divisions.

Insuring Services for the Future

The State Vanasamakhyas signed a MOU with the Oriental Insurance Company for life insurance of VSS members and their families. For these poor people, who depend wholly on what nature and the forests provide, insurance was an unknown, alien concept. They are probably never on the list of most insurance companies considering their economic condition. By providing insurance Services to these indigent people, the Vanasamakhyas offered a ray of hope in the event of unforeseen circumstances or accidents debilitating any earning family member. The Vanasamakhyas ensured that the families were not left to fend for themselves and had some support during such testing times.

Distributing NTFP Products as a part of the Girijan Cooperative Corporation Network

The Girijan Cooperative Corporation (GCC) procures NTFP products collected by tribals and provides access to a wide market for these products. With a view to support VSS members financially, the Vanasamakhyas took the distribution of Girijan Cooperative Corporation (GCC) products. This initiative helped the Vanasamakhyas and the GCC mutually to network with and benefit from each other's activities and capabilities, for the Vanasamakhyas networks with organisations or departments working for the benefit of forest-dependent communities and the GCC works with community and community

based organisations. This distribution network of the Vanasamakhyas sold eight types of products but it has been wound up now.

To date, the Vanasamakhyas have participated and sold the products in seven organic bazaars with support from the Centre for People's Forestry and the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture. For a brief period, the State Vanasamakhyas also sold these products in its office on the 5th of every month. Eight local Vanasamakhyas (Narsapur division, Ramayampet division, Nellore division, Kurnool division, Beersraipet range, Nerdigonda range, Adilabad district, V. Madugula Visakhapatnam, and Devarapally) participated. They also opened outlets at their network offices.

However, as this initiative did not achieve its intended outcome, it was wound down. The main reasons for this lack of success were that the Local Vanasamakhyas could not take the venture farther into the community and the marketing strategy could not influence the community enough to capture the market. The facilitating NGO also lacked knowledge and skills on marketing and using a commercial approach. In addition, the products were locally available in the open markets and the community preferred them over the packaged products. The people were also habituated to other popular branded soaps and as a result acceptance of the GCC (Girijan Cooperative Corporation) products was low in the local markets.

Promoting the Spirit of Togetherness

DFO Venkaiah Memorial Awards

In the year 2004, an award was instituted in the name of the late Mr. Venkaiah, DFO Nellore, who strived hard for the welfare of VSS and its members. The best performing VSS from each region that take efforts to promote equity are chosen for these awards. These awards were given in the years 2004 and 2005.

Vanasamakhyas Foundation Day Celebrations

Since 2005, the State Vanasamakhyas Foundation Day 30th July is celebrated every year during July to August. The VSS members, across the State, congregate on this occasion. The Vanasamakhyas flag is hoisted and the Vanasamakhyas anthem is sung (See 'Vanasamakhyas Geetham,' in the Telugu script, in the Annexure). On this occasion cultural events and sports competitions are conducted to promote the competitive spirit and to motivate the VSS members to work for the development of their VSS.

In the year 2006, on the eve of Republic day, a sport meet was organised for VSS members in Nellore district. The Forest Department supported this event and sanctioned Rs. 15,000/-.



Spreading the word Internationally

Vanasamakhya Programme executives, Mr. K. Sanjeeva and Mr. D. Srinivasulu, participated in an international workshop at Bangkok on 'Poverty Alleviation and Forestry- Marketing and Policy,' organised by the Regional Community Forestry Training Centre for Asia and Pacific.

This opportunity gave the Vanasamakhya representatives a platform to share information on Vanasamakhya and the programmes of the State Vanasamakhya with representatives from other countries. The Vanasamakhya was well appreciated for its community based network. The posters developed by Vanasamakhya on beedi leaf campaign, forest conservation, fodder promotion and promotion of embroidery for livelihood, were exhibited during the workshop.

Other Initiatives

The VSS were also involved in flood relief activities. The State Vanasamakhya, in collaboration with CPF, took flood relief measures to alleviate the pain and grief of the flood victims of Khammam, Vizianagaram and Srikakulam districts. In the year 2006, 4130 households of 45 VSS in Khammam were provided with tarpaulin sheets, utensils for cooking, bed sheets, mosquito nets and lanterns. In Vizianagaram district 374 households of 9 VSS were provided financial support to repair damaged houses, and to construct bunds in agriculture fields. In Srikakulam district 138 household of 14

VSS received financial aid to construct bunds in agriculture fields as a means to tackle emergencies arising due to rising flood waters.



The *Green India Mission* is part of India's plan to fight climate change and proposes to bring 20 million hectares of forest and non-forest land under afforestation and eco-restoration by 2020. The Mission envisages a key role for local communities in this work (Please see Box Item 'Green Mission India') and it is possible that the Vanasamakhya and the VSS will play a key role in making this a success in the coming decades.

Green India Mission

The Green India Mission is part of India's plan to fight climate change. The Mission proposes to double the area being taken up for afforestation and eco-restoration over the next decade. The first draft of the Mission (Version 1.0, dated 24th May 2010) targets 20 million hectares to be covered by 2020, at a cost of Rs. 44,000 crores. Public consultations will be undertaken across the country from June 11th 2010, following which the draft will be finalised.

The National Mission for a Green India, as one of the eight Missions under the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), aims at addressing climate change by enhancing carbon sinks in sustainably managed forests and other ecosystems, enhancing the resilience and ability of vulnerable species and ecosystems to adapt to changing climate and enabling adaptation of forest-dependant local communities in the face of climatic change.

The objectives of the mission are three-fold:

- Double the area to be taken up for afforestation or eco-restoration in India in the next 10 years, taking the total area to 20 million ha. Here, in addition to the 10 million ha which is likely to be treated by Forest Department and other agencies through other interventions, another 10 million ha of additional forest or non-forest area would be treated by the Mission.
- Increase the potential of Green House Gas (GHG) removal by India's forests to 6.35% of India's annual total GHG emissions by the year 2020 (an increase of 1.5% over what it would be in the absence of the Mission). This would require an increase in above-ground and below-ground biomass in 10 million ha of forests or ecosystems, resulting in increased carbon sequestration of 43 million tons of CO₂ annually.
- Enhance the resilience of forests or ecosystems being treated under the Mission. Enhance infiltration, groundwater recharge, stream and spring flows, biodiversity value, provisioning of services (fuel wood, fodder, timber, NTFPs, etc.) to help local communities adapt to effects of climatic changes.

In this draft, the Mission target emphasises a holistic approach to greening, making it clear that the project will not just be limited to trees and plantations, but would focus on restoring diverse ecosystems. It would not only strive to restore degraded forests, but also protect and enhance relatively dense forests.

The nine sub-missions include, separate targets for moderately dense forests, degraded forests, degraded scrub and grasslands, mangroves, wetlands, urban forest lands and institutional areas with tree cover, degraded and fallow agricultural land and wildlife corridors. It considers use of more efficient stoves and alternative energy devices for better fuel wood use, and enhanced livelihoods for communities dependent on biomass and non-timber forest produce.

The Mission envisages a key role for local communities and includes a four-level monitoring framework. It aims to strengthen local community institutions by strengthening decentralised governance through Gram Sabhas and other thematic committees or groups, providing legal back up to JFMCs, building capacities of local institutions to help them effectively protect, regenerate and manage forests and build a cadre of community youth for ecosystem restoration. The mission also aims to incentivise local communities and other agencies to protect and manage forests sustainably through enhanced tenure security and benefit-sharing arrangements.



IV. Building the Momentum - Taking on Challenges of Growth

While the Vanasamakhyas have made considerable headway in ensuring that the forest dwellers get access to many sources of sustainable livelihoods and has empowered the people, there are many challenges up ahead for Vanasamakhyas. Since VSS people do not have access to managerial expertise, developing the planning and managerial capacities of the VSS and federation members, improving institutional mechanisms, improving the transparency in the functioning of the VSS, helping develop conflict resolution skills, developing a better grievance redressal system, delegating more responsibilities to the community and continuously making them aware of their rights and the changes in the legislative environment, are extremely crucial. Interactions with the VSS Committee members, NGOs and Forest Department personnel have revealed the following set of challenges that need to be addressed.

Challenges before the VSS

The formation of the VSS is playing a crucial role in the recovery of forests as well as the lives of the forest dwellers. While they are gradually opening up to the philosophy of joint forest management/CFM, several practical problems dog the functioning of the VSS. This section details out some challenges faced by the VSS.

Non-functional VSS

Many VSS have become non-functional or in many cases their activities are reduced. The ones that are functional face problems (See Case Study, 'Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained') when the period

of funding ends. The people appreciate that they have been given legal endorsement to protect the forests from the axe of outsiders. However, beyond this, livelihood benefits such as employment are dependent on the inflow of funds, and when this stops the motivation to be involved in VSS activities is reduced. But the regions that are rich in forest resources, the VSS are assured of forest returns and these VSS can contribute towards sustainable forest management practices.

Misuse of Funds

Funds are transferred to VSS to fund forest works and for employment generation activities. The system of transfer and utilisation of funds is not transparent, and irregularities in fund allocation are rampant. Groups with vested interests often waste money on non-forestry activities like publicity material, to camouflage the real intent and purpose of JFM/CFM. To make sure the fund management is transparent, a 2nd account was opened. CPF made efforts to release a Circular No 4/2004, dated 4-08-2004, from the FD (point no 11) "to transfer funds from 1st account to 2nd only after execution of works." This measure is helping and yielding good results in managing funds.

Paucity of Funds

Since the VSS structures have become operational only the past few years and are struggling to find their feet, many of them have still not achieved self-sufficiency. As a result, the activities of many VSS cease as soon as the funds dry up (See Box Item 'Lobbying with the Chief Minister and Officials for Fund Allocation'). This presents a tough challenge in keeping the people together and motivating them to carry on, so much so that the members do not attend meetings due to lack of funds and as a result some programmes do not meet their goals. Conflicts among VSS members add to the problem, leading to low cooperation even on matters of common interest, in some instances.

Differences with other Villagers

The imposition of fines on those who cut trees in the forests, or collect forest products or fodder without the permission of the VSS Chairperson, naturally produces a rift between the villagers and the VSS members. This places the VSS members in a tight spot as they otherwise interact or depend on these villagers in these close-knit settlements. Promoting fodder management may partially help, as at least those villagers who use the forests as grazing grounds for livestock would not do so, eliminating a potential source of conflict and of threat to the forests.

Forest Boundary Conflicts

Some studies show that disputes between VSS over forest boundary have been due to the ignorance about the traditional village boundaries. In many areas the Department has not thought of maintaining the balance between population and extent of forest area, but made arbitrary boundaries, sometimes trespassing into villages. Artificial boundaries have taken over traditional village 'polimeru' causing many problems. As a result, in many cases the aggrieved villagers have cut down entire plantations (e.g. R. K. Nagar VSS - Araku Mandal, Visakhapatnam District burnt down an entire plantation). Issues of this nature are noticeable in the Paderu area. Experts in the field⁸ have found that boundary disputes and NTFP conflicts are demoralising the people and compelling them to give up joint management.

⁸ Sunder et al. (2001)

Nothing Ventured Nothing Gained

Injadri Vanasamakhyia in Pathapatnam range (Srikakulam district) consists of 14 VSSs. The Vanasamakhyia has had a positive influence on the lives of the villagers of the region since it was formed.

Five members of the Vanasamakhyia committee eagerly join in to discuss the impact of the Vanasamakhyia on their lives. Dasamaiah, the convenor of the Vanasamakhyia elaborates the election process and can proudly list the main responsibilities of the Vanasamakhyia. The Vanasamakhyia mobilised NREGA work for their villages, which helped them carry out soil and moisture conservation activities. They market dry wood used by their customers as fuel. Dasamaiah points out that because of the VSS they can refer sick persons to health care facilities through the ITDA. A facility that was not available to people of this region for a very long time.

Kamalamma, an executive member very proudly says, "The activities of the VSS have made the local communities aware of the rights of the tribals over the forest and its produce." Narayana the treasurer adds, "At present, Need based meetings only happening due to lack of funding support from either NGOs or Government. As a result, unable to extend their services at expected level".

Gowramma, the co-convenor narrates their initial experience which has taught them an invaluable lesson. The hills in which they live provide an abundance of raw material needed to manufacture hill brooms. Each broom has a retail price of Rs. 20/- . This seemed an attractive business proposition for the community to be carried out via the VSS. The community started manufacturing brooms with Rs. 50,000/- provided by CPF. However they soon realised that they had overestimated the raw material available in the plot of land. Only after they had harvested the grass did they figure out that it was much less than what they had estimated. To add to their problems, they did not store the raw material properly. It was stored in a shed without a proper roof. As a result, the material got drenched in a thunderstorm and was damaged. In spite of all these troubles they finally managed to take the brooms to the market only to discover that they had not studied the market well and were forced to sell their product for much less than what it cost them. They realise that they ought to have studied the market well and then taken steps accordingly. However, they appear to have learnt from their initial foray and while it may have not fetched them the returns they sought, they are better prepared for the future.

Forest Conservation versus Tribal Development

No fresh cases of encroachment of forests are reported under VSS jurisdiction because of people's participation. The most significant development in many of the VSS, especially in the districts of Visakhapatnam and Adilabad, has been the return of about 24,000 hectares of land⁹, which was under podu cultivation to the Forest Department. Whilst the FD views this as a success, it in fact indicates that land has been taken out of use for livelihood support of tribals. This is the main reason why in the predominantly tribal Paderu division, tribals and their organisations (e.g. the Adivasi Aikya Vedika) have rejected CFM out of fear of losing more podu land.

Growing Up Pains

As the entire network grows and the people mature from their experiences, it is important that the VSS members understand their role in forest management. They need to be aware of what it takes

⁹ Rangachari and Mukherji, 2000

to conserve and manage resources for their use. Currently, they have still not comprehended its implications and this happens because of a variety of reasons- lack of confidence, the inability to deal with multiple layers of bureaucracy, the level of education and so on. As a result, the VSS are still quite dependent on NGOs when problems arise. They need the NGOs to act as mediators with the Forest Department and other departments. It is important that over a period of time the Vanasamakhyas take over this role.

Lobbying with the Chief Minister and Officials for Fund Allocation

Since the World Bank project is coming to a close, the future and sustainability of VSS is uncertain, specifically due to lack of funds. Though the Central Government has allotted funds to overcome this situation, the State Vanasamakhyas have made the following appeal to the Chief Minister.

- The State Government should take the initiative of allotting Rs. 1, 00,000/-annually to each VSS to sustain the programme and the livelihoods of the VSS members.
- Need for a "Principal Secretary" for VSS development, who can be approached and be accessible to the community representatives.
- Fourteen legitimate requests were made for the development of the poorest of the poor. 329 VSS passed resolutions in their General Body Meetings appealing for the implementation of these fourteen requests, which were sent to the Chief Minister by post
- For the first time on 5th December 2008, the State Vanasamakhyas representatives met the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, the late Dr. Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy and appealed to him to implement these 14 requests. Subsequently they submitted the requests to the Forest minister, Forest Department officials, and officials from the Forest Academy and from the Rural Development Department. On 11.6.2009, the State Vanasamakhyas representatives met the Chief Minister again and submitted the resolutions and appealed to him to implement the same. On 5.6.2009, the representatives also met the Central Environment and Forest Minister Mr. Jairam Ramesh and shared their appeal with him.
- The Andhra Pradesh government responded positively to the take up works up to Rs.6, 00,000/- in each VSS by the FD with the works sanctioned under NREGA. At present, the planning process for the implementation of the works is underway. The Vanasamakhyas are conducting awareness campaigns among its members on this issue and on the present status of their appeal.



Concerns about VSS

- The VSS Executive Committees are gender-balanced, but this is true only in terms of numbers. The men handle all managerial functions like interacting with officials, operating bank accounts, framing protection norms and so on, while the women are confined to physical implementation, e.g. development, protection and harvesting works
- The role of the VSS in planning of development interventions is not visible. Plans are mostly prepared by the Forest Department (or by NGOs, wherever applicable) and implemented by the VSS. The VSS are yet to cut off the umbilical cord of dependence on the NGOs and the Forest Department.
- Many VSS are Chairman-centric. Other members of the Executive Committee do not know the finances, work plans or future strategies.

These observations reflect the reality of operations at the VSS on a broader scale.

Strengthening the Vanasamakhyas – Suggestions from Members

- To expand the reach of the programme more manpower is required. There is a need for full time workers to promote the concept among tribal communities that were not covered earlier by the NGOs. The workers would have to go regularly to every village and educate the community about the rationale behind the VSS and the need to conserve and protect the forests. The workers would have to be paid adequate monthly remuneration and compensated for their travel expenses. Such support would be required for a minimum of three years. Though formal centres for training and building capacities do not exist now, selected Local Vanasamakhyas representatives have been trained to share pertinent information with other members and communities, to raise awareness among the community.
- There is a need to develop skills and impart knowledge and training on entrepreneurial skills, basic marketing skills and value addition methods to the tribal community. The leaf plate making machines and the bamboo splitters provided by the Forest Department are lying unused at many sites because the Forest Department only provided some elementary machine-operation training. No marketing strategies were planned, no instructor provided on a long-term basis and the possibility of the need for repairs and replacement were not given a thought. A NGO would have handled the situation more holistically, so the NGOs are required to be around for some more time.
- At present the infrastructure is good only in some villages. There are many drop outs from schools, the Anganwadi services are only available in some places and some villages, and not just in the interior, still do not have proper transport facilities. If the Forest Department gives regular permission to harvest bamboo in the VSS areas as per the VSS micro-plan and the Forest Department's working plan, the VSS members would get a good source of income and they would be managing a self-sustaining VSS.

Vanasamakhyas have established 10 VSS information centers in five districts in collaboration with NGOs and their representatives for strengthening the VSS.

Strengthening the VSS through Capacity Building

The long journey of implementing various provisions of JFM and CFM will receive an impetus if the capabilities of the VSS members are improved and they are helped to understand the complex socio-legal environment around them in a simple way. They need to be prepared to meet the challenges posed by the market for their goods. A few suggestions in this direction are listed below:

- Providing orientation and training to the VSS members about the provisions of JFM and Community Forest Management (CFM), Government Orders (GOs) and Acts, roles and responsibilities of the VSS, methods of carrying out various works for development and protection of forests, and distribution of usufructs.
- To help with this objective some initial work has been done. The AP Forest academy conducted several trainings for the VSS members where representatives from Vanasamakhyas interacted as resource persons on social mobilisation, cultural performance, conflict resolution, fire management and participatory VSS assessment. There has been a good feedback on these trainings and it needs to be scaled up for wider and longer impact.
- Training members on appropriate monitoring mechanisms at different levels, including training on self-assessment of the VSS.
- Orientation and training for the Vanasamakhyas, both at state and local level, on themes like participatory monitoring and assessment, micro-planning, conflict resolution and participatory tools.
- Training the members of the various Executive Committees on maintaining and managing records and documents.
- Training members in NTFP harvesting, soil conservation and plantation methods.



Training Programmes by Vanasamakhya in Collaboration with the APFA

Trainings Imparted by Vanasamakhya Representatives

- Vanasamakhya representatives Mr. K. Saneeva and Mr. Chandrasekhar imparted training to VSS members on Conflict resolution, and Forest fire prevention and methods, in collaboration with the Andhra Pradesh Forest Academy at their Dulapally campus.
- Vanasamakhya representatives along with the Resource Centre for Folk Art Forms In Forestry Education (ReFFE) cultural troop, presented cultural programmes to VSS members to make them aware about sustainable NTFP collection methods and on the performance of the VSS.



Trainings taken by Vanasamakhya Representatives

- C-Fees, Agro Forestry, Community Forestry Management, NTFPs and Marketing, managing VSS accounts and reviewing Micro-plans
- Communication skills, preparation of natural dyes, appropriate use of colours and colour combinations for different types of cloth, precautions to be taken while preparing dyes and other aspects of dyeing.

Developing and Reinforcing the VSS Network Support Structure

It has been observed that the VSS play an active role in protecting forest areas and have developed their own methods of managing watch and ward activities and punishing delinquents. They play an active role in harvesting non-timber forest products, and use pretty meticulous calculation methods to figure out their share of usufruct. They are involved in soil and water conservation and plantation activities as well. They have also begun to temper their activities in tune with their rising awareness on social aspects such as equity in wages, giving women their proper share, understanding the importance of the workplace policy regarding HIV/AIDS¹⁰, and so on.

Recently, CPF conducted a Participatory performance assessment of VSS on Social, Institutional, Resource and Livelihood aspects. Resource persons and programme executives from Vanasamakhya participated in the study conducted at 55 VSS. Using a four point rating scale ranging from Very Good, Good, Average and Poor they evaluated these VSS. The study showed that 28 VSS (51%) could be categorised as 'Good' as per the parameters used, 22 (40%) were 'Average,' 3 were 'Very Good' and 2 fell in the 'Poor' category.

The assessment also revealed that the VSS face several challenges, ranging from the need for financial support to institutional support. Most importantly, the study discovered that the ideals signified by the VSS and the Vanasamakhya have gained acceptance among the communities and they believe the VSS can and must continue to play a significant role in improving their lives and that of the forests. The VSS are still at a nascent stage and require a considerable amount of effort to build capacities and skills needed to deal with the multiple challenges posed by the environment around them, as they move ahead.

¹⁰ Between 2006-09, under the programme 'Mainstreaming Concerns of HIV/AIDS,' supported by OxfamNovib, 175 VSS villages in Andhra Pradesh adopted the work-place policy with regard to HIV/AIDS, "CPF Annual Reports, 2007-08 & 2008-09"



V. Staying on Course - Building New Pathways

The formation and development of the Vanasamakhyas is a unique step in the national movements that involve people, and particularly those in the area of Joint Forest Management. It has provided a unique platform for the Forest Department and the forest communities to network among themselves and access the fruits of development even in isolated villages, deep in the forests (See Case 'VSS a Harbinger of Hope to the Inhabitants of Kothavalasa'). It has challenged the dominant ideas that have governed the relationship between the state and the people with respect to all natural resources, including forest resources. The Vanasamakhyas have accentuated the role of ordinary people and their knowledge in conservation and management of forest resources.

It is now for the country's political class to develop public policies that would establish the primacy of livelihood of forest dwellers and other dependents on forest resources for survival, whilst ensuring a healthy and sustainable environment. The continued success of Vanasamakhyas needs a tremendous level of political good-will for this movement and an equal level of transparency in its functioning to ensure that the good-will, from both the political class and the communities, continues and develops further.

The Vanasamakhyas also need to now look ahead and along with focusing on building capacities of VSS members, lobbying and advocating priority concerns of the VSS members, it needs to do a lot more in terms of ensuring that all their members reach a level of competence where they can plan and manage their programmes on their own.

- As a functional and active social organisation, the VSS provides a ready ground (laboratory) for researchers and those interested in the welfare of forest-communities to conduct action research on forest-based livelihoods. The Vanasamakhyas should develop capacities to start local-level forest enterprises with technical support from NGOs and the Forest Department.
- Vanasamakhyas functionaries and VSS members must be familiarised with and trained on national and state-level policies, laws, acts and circulars in order to be more effective when lobbying for their rights, negotiating with the various departments involved, for rights of the VSS in CFM.
- Vanasamakhyas can be the interface between the VSS and several players involved in natural resource management, including Panchayati Raj institutions. To do so they may initially require the support of knowledgeable NGOs.
- Just as ICT has helped people from all walks of life, the VSS can benefit from IT and information centres and give their members access to information on assessing and ensuring quality of forest products, prices of NTFP at different markets, information on nearest value addition centres, the general facilities available for sellers and the effect of changes in government policies or benefits, the disposal network for NTFP and other technical inputs.
- The Vanasamakhyas are also in the process of positioning themselves in a more general political context so as to ensure that their activities are focused and they can bargain better collectively with the various stakeholders and policy makers.

Case study – VSS a Harbinger of Hope to the Inhabitants of Kothavalasa

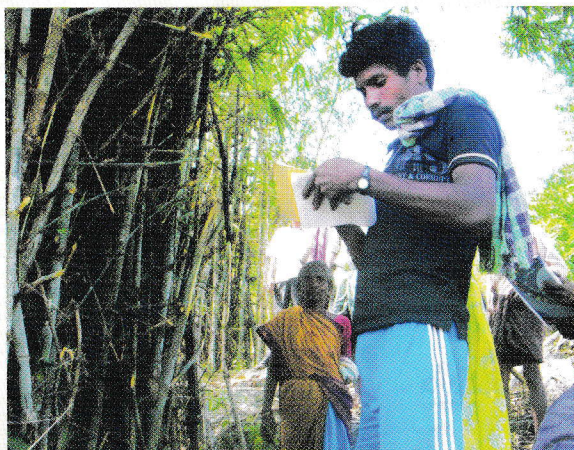
Goshamamba Vana Samarakshana Samithi is situated in a very remote village, Kothavalasa, situated on a small hilly-mound in a deep forest. This village can be reached only after crossing three swift streams and after negotiating a long, bone-jarring, boulder-strewn road. Yet in the midst of nowhere, this village has changed. Modern, similar-looking houses have replaced ramshackle rows of thatched houses.

When asked what the VSS has done for the village, Ms. Eswaramma remarks "The fact that the women of the village are talking to outsiders by itself a very great achievement. Earlier the tribal woman would rarely talk to any outsiders, and never to any men. Today they go to government offices, have no hesitation in sitting on chairs and talking to officers. Earlier, even the men-folk never ventured out of the village alone. At the most, the villagers would go to the weekly market in a group and return as quickly as possible.

Ms. Lakshmi, a young member, stated emphatically that the tribals had the rights over the forests. "We would fear that the forest mother would be killed by the smugglers and we would be orphans. Now no one can separate us and we have taken up the responsibility of looking after our mother. We have managed to increase our income by selling the forest produce, mainly tamarind and bamboo. We do not have much amla or other varieties of fruits. The jungle here is very thick and the main product here is bamboo and other expensive wood that is used in construction of houses."

When asked if they harvested the bamboo, Mr. Pothraju said, "The jungle here is very thick and crisscrossed by ravines and streams, so we cannot transport the bamboo out of the forest. The tribals go and bring a few lengths of bamboo occasionally and sell it to the basket weavers. The best way of ensuring we can earn

income from bamboo is by lobbying with the forest department and seeking support through General Body resolutions for getting harvesting and transit permits." According to the CFM GO (Amendment 4) VSS members are entitled to receive net returns from harvesting of bamboo/timber in VSS forests. The Vanasamakhyas are now helping the VSS engage with the Forest Department.



Mr. Pothraju also mentioned that the presence of VSS and the Regional Resource Centre of CPF has increased employment opportunities. "Earlier, the people were unemployed for a major part of the year, but now there is always some work.

The Forest Department carries out enumeration of the bamboo clumps. The villagers help in numbering the clumps and the poles that can be harvested. The next step is singling or clearing the undergrowth, which is followed by mounding to entrap the rainwater and facilitate the growth of fresh suckers. The Forest Department is considering laying a gravel road into the forest to transport the harvested bamboo. This will provide more work and income to the VSS with bamboo in their parts of the forest."

China Pothraju recollects happily, "The NREGA programme helped our community earn substantial money during summer and this came in handy when constructing our new houses." The NREGA funds and work facilitated construction of roads in the village and drains were dug to divert the rainwater. The Forest Department also constructed a community hall.

Mr. Sanyasi Rao said that of late he is very busy. He visits various government offices almost everyday and presents representations from the VSS or the village to the officers. Even in his dreams he never thought that he would be able to do this kind of work. Barely literate, he said "I am treated respectfully and this is only because of VSS and the NGO. By providing information to my community and helping them obtain funds to implement developmental activities in the village I have gained respect in my community."

While the Vanasamakhyas have created that platform needed to bring the forest communities together and organised them to assert their rights to the forests and to participation in economic development, eventually, sustainable development in general and sustainable forest management in particular, is only possible through alliances of committed CBOs, NGOs, academicians, researchers, concerned individuals and government officials.

A lot of work still lies ahead. We need to study and develop methodologies that will ensure equity to dalits, tribals and other neglected communities, and ensure equality of gender in all forestry initiatives. These ideals have to be woven carefully into specific programmes for implementation with full participation by the people. The Centre for People's Forestry hopes that this document has provided a glimpse to the reader of the potential of these people that the Vanasamakhyas have just begun to tap and present to the world outside these forests. We hope that at the very least, it leads people to appreciate the close inter-relationship between healthy forests and the well-being of the people who dwell in them. That would be an apt acknowledgement of the ideals and efforts of the Vanasamakhyas and the people involved.



VI. Annexures

[I] Vanasamakhyā Geetham (the Vanasamakhyā Anthem in Telugu)

వనసమాఖ్య గీతం

వనసమాఖ్య పిలుస్తోంది

పల్లవి : వనసమాఖ్య పిలుస్తోంది అదవి మనదనీ
వనసంరక్షణ సమితుల కలిసి రమ్మనీ

చరణం :

1. విఎస్ఎస్ఎల్ఎన్ఐంటినీ ఒక్కతాటిపై నిలిపి
సభ్యులందరిలోన సమభావం పెంచాలని
సమభావం పెంచాలని ||వన||
2. సమితుల్లో సగమున్న అతివలనుత్సాహపరచి
మగవారితో సమానంగా మహిళల నెలబెట్టాలని
మహిళల నిలబెట్టాలని ||వన||

3. అడవితల్లి సంపదపై అందరి హక్కుండాలని
ఆ తల్లిని రక్షించే బాధ్యత మన అందరిదని
బాధ్యత మన అందరిదని ||వన||
4. అటవీ ఆధారిత జనులందరికీ అండగుంటూ
అధికార గణాల నుండి హక్కులు సాధించుకొనగ
హక్కులు సాధించుకొనగ ||వన||
5. పర్యావరణమే ప్రాణులకు జీవాధారమని
పచ్చదనం హెచ్చుగుంటే బ్రతుకు బరువు కాబోదని
బ్రతుకు బరువు కాబోదని ||వన||
6. సహజ వనరులన్నిటికీ నిలయమే ఈ వనం
భుక్తినిచ్చే శక్తి గల భూతల స్వర్గం వనమని
భూతల స్వర్గం వనమని ||వన||



సంఘముల రిజిస్ట్రేషన్ వారి కార్యాలయము
హైదరాబాదు
OFFICE OF THE REGISTRAR OF SOCIETIES
HYDERABAD
Certificate of Registration
రిజిస్ట్రేషన్ ట్రైబ్యునల్

(200.....లోవ సంవత్సరం)
[NO..... 1015 OF 2003....]

ఇందువల్ల సంఘముల రిజిస్ట్రేషన్ చట్టము 2001 క్రింద
నేడు రిజిస్ట్రేషన్ అయినది యందు మూలముగా దృఢపరచబడుతుంది.

I hereby certify that VANASAMAKHYA, Tanaka, Secunderabad.

Is this day registered under the Andhra Pradesh (Society Registration Act. 2001.
నా పంజనము, మొదలుగా వ సంవత్సరం
మొదలు తేదీన మంజూరు చేయబడుతుంది.

Given under my hand and seal at Hyderabad this the 30th
day of July TWO THOUSAND AND Three



OFFICE OF THE REGISTRAR OF SOCIETIES
HYDERABAD



సంఘముల రిజిస్ట్రేషన్
REGISTRAR OF SOCIETIES
హైదరాబాదు



VII. Acknowledgements

State Vanasamakhya Representatives and Programme Executives who shared information and helped in the field

State Vanasamakhya Executive Committee (2008-2010)

K. Sanjeeva-President
 K. ChandraSekhar-Secretary
 M. Ramanmma- Vice-president
 T. Dasamaiah- Treasurer
 A. Srinivasulu and B. Nageswar Rao- EC
 Members

Programme Executives

D. Sreenivasulu
 R. Sambaiah
 K. Ramu
 S. Venkamma
 V. Venkateswarulu

Vanasamakhya

A Federation of VSS Networks

12-13-483/39, First Floor, Street 14, Lane 6,
 Nagarjuna Nagar Colony,
 Tarnaka, Secunderabad - 500017
 Phone: 040 - 27177381 / 91
 Fax: 040 - 27154484 / 94
 E-mail: info@vanasamakhya.in
 Website: www.vanasamakhya.in

Members of VSSs

Ms. Thurrae Bullemma
 Ms. Marla Eswaramma
 Mr. Janapareddi Sanyasi Rao
 Mr. Janapareddi Appa Rao
 Mr. Jaalamoori Nagaraju

Sri Modhamaamba Vanasamakhya

Mr. Pagae Pothuraju
Mr. Pagae Chinna Pothiraju
Mr. Regam Lakshmana Rao
Ms. Salugu Sanyasamma
Ms. Salugu Lakshmi
Ms. Eswaramma

Goshamamba Vana Samrakshana Samithi

Mr. Lakshmaiah Goud
Mr. Yadaiah Goud

**Gattuthummen Eco-development
committee**

Mr. Billukola Dhandasi,
Mr. Labba Musalaiah,
Ms. Singapuram Gowramma,
Mr. Thambooru Dasamaiah and
Mr. Rugada Ramaiah

Kittalapadu Vana Samrakshana Samithi

Mr. Dasamaiah
Ms. Gowramma
Mr. Ramu, Secretary
Mr. B. Surya Narayana
Ms. Kamalamma

Injadri Vanasamakhyia

Ms. Mallamma,
Mr. Sukari Bhattaiah

Veera Hanuman Vanasamakhyia

List of NGOs

Mr. V. Gandhibabu

Director,

Agricultural and Social Development Society,

Rekhapalli, V.R.Puram Mandal

Khammam - 507135

Andhra Pradesh, India

Mobile: 9440537588,

Phone: 08748 - 286863

Email: gandhibabuasds@yahoo.co.in

Mr. M. Putta Sivareddy

Director, Regional Resource Centre

Centre for Human Resource Development

2/287 Balaji Nagar, Chemmumuniyapet

Kadapa - 516 003

Andhra Pradesh, India

Phone: 08562 259246

Fax: 08562 300220

Email: centhrd@rediffmail.com

Nature through Rural Awakening (CONARE)

Regional Resource Centre, Telangana

H.No: 9-112, Tangapur

Achampet - 509375

Mahaboobnagar

Andhra Pradesh, India

Phone: 08541 - 274608

Mobile: 9440435896

Mr. Karnam Trinadha Rao

Executive Secretary

Gramabhyudaya,

M.K.Vallapuram Village,

Ghat Road Junction, Madugula Mandal,

Visakhapatnam - 531 003

Andhra Pradesh, India

Phone: 08934-224362

Mobile: 9989783089

Email: gramabhyudaya@yahoo.com

Mr. Jaya Raju

Secretary

Samyogita

Kallata Village, Via Korasavada

Srikakulam - 532 214

Andhra Pradesh, India

Phone: 08946 - 210040

Mobile: 9440548946

Email: samyogita@rediffmail.com

CPF Staff

Dr.D.Surykumari,

Director, CPF

Mr.K.Suresh

Sr.Programme officer

Mr.Bruslin Mento,

Sr.Programme officer

Mr.C.Nagraju

Programme officer

Ms.B.Jalaja

Project coordinator,

Vanasamakhyia

Centre for People's Forestry

12-13-483/39, First Floor, Street 14,

Nagarjuna Nagar Colony,

Tarnaka, Secunderabad - 500017

Phone: 040 - 27154484/94

E-mail: info@cpf.in

Website: www.cpf.in



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