

Women in Punjab make a living from their backyard forest and also conserve it

31 March 2021

Pathankot, Punjab: Sudarshna Devi has changed. “Changed for good,” the 72-year-old says, in Punjabi, with a chuckle. Until 2003, the Class 8 dropout used to cover her face in ghoonghat and would barely step out of her home without a male company. Cooking, fetching water, raising children, rearing the cattle, her time was spent performing these household chores.



But today, Sudarshna walks with an air of confidence – minus the ghoonghat and an entourage of men. She owes this confidence to the scrub forest in her ‘backyard’ in Dhar Kalan block of Punjab’s Pathankot district, where she stays. She collects medicinal plants from the forest and sells them to local traders. “Last year, I made Rs1.5 lakh,” she tells us proudly. Like Sudarshna, the lives of close to 300 women in this block have transformed since they started making a livelihood from agro-forestry. The forest they go to has also benefited in return.

PLPA restricted forest use

The forest stands on the border of Punjab and Himachal Pradesh and falls in the Lower Shivaliks range of hills. It is 10 to 15 minutes of walk from most of the 31 villages that fall under the Dhar Kalan block. But despite the proximity, the residents could not make a living from this forest for close to a century. This stems from the complicated history of this forest land. Dhar Kalan block is governed under The Punjab Land Preservation Act, which the British had introduced in 1905. Called PLPA in short, the Act banned all commercial and livelihood activities to arrest soil erosion and flash floods. Villagers could collect firewood and timber for personal use with the permission of forest officials but they could not plough this land.

Dhar Kalan has some parcel of panchayat land for farming but the majority is PLPA forest land, spread across 15,771 hectares. As a result, most men in Dhar Kalan work as daily-wage labourers while women manage homes. It was only in 2010 when the Punjab government started withdrawing the land under PLPA so as to relax a few restrictions earlier imposed by the forest department and make it eligible for common use. This step opened up livelihood opportunities for the communities living close to the forest. As a result, 8,599.72 hectares of forest land in Dhar Kalan was withdrawn. This patch is now jointly managed by the villagers and the forest department.

‘It gives us income’

The women of Dhar Kalan started to make a living from the withdrawn forest patch in 2017. Thanks to a project started by the Punjab Forest Department under the aegis of the National Medicinal Plant Board (NMPB). The project aims to employ women in the processing and sale of herbs collected from the local forest.

It was Sunita, a social development facilitator with the state forest department who goes only by her first name, who mobilised these women to come out and work. Most of these women did face resistance from the men and elders in their family initially. But when extra income started trickling in, these families saw value in this initiative. Sunita’s intervention in Dhar Kalan started in 2003 when she organised women into self-help groups to sell locally-grown fruits and products like aam papad. This was part of the Punjab Afforestation Project.

Later, when the project to harvest medicinal plants was announced, she trained these women to pick plants like giloe, amla, neem, amaltas, gandla, basuti and bhabbar and operate machines to make juices and powders.

Krishna Devi, a 36-year-old from Mothwan village, admits that she joined the project “after seeing the kind of money it brought (sic).” Today, Krishna and her farmer-husband have been able to build a home of their own, partly because of her income, she shares happily.

The intervention has not only brought them money but also given them social mobility and agency. The practice of ghonghat is on the decline because they have to go to the market and interact with traders in the city of Amritsar on a frequent basis. Women such as Sudarshna and Krishna have gone from being members of the self-help groups to taking on the role of a mentor.

Since this is a part-time vocation and women have household chores to do as well, they take on the tasks as and when they are free. However, tasks are cut out between different age-groups. “Older women are responsible for boiling berries such as amla and extracting juice, younger ones head out to the forest to collect them,” Krishna says.

‘They help conserve the forest’

The project has given the forest department more reasons to cheer about. Pathankot Divisional Forest Officer Sanjeev Tewari informs 101Reporters, “They [these women] inform us about fires breaking out in the forest. They have also alerted us about poachers a few times and individuals encroaching the land. Their participation has helped us in conserving the forest.”

Their vigilance is significant because “the number of unemployed youths in this area [Lower Shivaliks] is very high and they are likely to be easily lured in unlawful activities like poaching, illicit felling,” cites a forest management plan prepared for the Pathankot forest division in 2015. The

forests in Punjab need to be protected on a priority basis also because their cover is low in the first place, spanning only six per cent, Tewari informs.

These women don't go into the forest with the prime motive of patrolling but when they do see any suspicious activity, they call up "Sunita ma'am" as soon as possible, Krishna tells us. Since these women have taken up this vocation to generate income, could it lead to greed and over-exploitation of the forest? The Dhar Kalan patch is a thriving habitat of the wolf, clawless otter, leopard, panther, blackbuck, Indian gazelle, pangolin and other wildlife species.

No, says Sunita. She explains, "The NMPB scheme not only aims to generate livelihood but also promote in-situ conservation of medicinal plants. So we have trained them to survey and document important medicinal plants in their natural habitat. This way we make sure we don't harvest certain plants excessively. They have also been told to identify and report the invasive species."

As a parting question, we ask Sunita why women were chosen for this project and not men. "Because they wore ghoonghat and stayed in," says Sunita, implying that a little incentive right in the 'backyard' can boost the self-confidence and social standing of the women.

Source: <https://www.news18.com/news/india/women-in-punjab-make-a-living-from-their-backyard-forest-and-also- conserve-it-3592196.html>