

January 2015

## **‘Forest Foods and Ecology’**

**An appeal for empathy and wise governance –  
to protect our natural heritage, culture, and collective future**

We, from numerous *Adivasi* and forest-dependent communities in India, along with people from different streams of society, gathered at the “Forest Foods & Ecology” Festival, December 12 to 14, 2014 at Sri Aurobindo Society, New Delhi. About 1200 varieties of forest/uncultivated foods from various parts of the country were displayed, sharing our rich heritage of Nature’s gifts.

The forests run deep in our life-blood; and we feel anguish seeing the grave threats they face. As an outcome of our joint discussions, we – forest-dependent communities, supported by others – declare:

- 1) The natural forests are a nurturing mother to us. Our very identities, cultures and world-views are closely linked to the forests that provide our primary needs.
- 2) Our forests and other common lands bless us with many invaluable gifts – abundant, diverse, nutritious foods, medicinal plants, and numerous other useful products – vital to our daily life and livelihoods for generations beyond count, particularly in times of scarcity, like droughts.
- 3) Our rich traditional knowledge and understanding of our bio-diverse forests, evolved over millennia, is passed on from generation to generation, along with a spirit of respect and gratitude. Our cultures discourage greed, the root of scarcity, harm and sorrow.
- 4) The natural forests regenerate our life-sustaining environment, essential for the well-being of all on earth. They harvest the sun’s energy, produce biomass, create fertile topsoil and guard against its erosion. They moderate the climate, mitigate global warming, provide oxygen, bring rain, recharge groundwater, buffer against floods, and provide habitats for rich biodiversity.
- 5) Any attempt to cut down the forests, threatens grave environmental damage. It also violates our fundamental right to life and livelihood. We pledge to do our utmost to safeguard our forests and the rich life it harbours – for the well-being and joy of all!
- 6) The *sarkari* laws and their implementation – to safeguard our community forest rights, life cultures and livelihoods – need further strengthening, not weakening, so that Mother Forest continues to remain healthy to nurture us and future generations.
- 7) We cannot understand how anyone can claim to possess any kind of proprietary right, including ‘Intellectual Property Right’ (IPR), over any part of our ancient wealth or traditional knowledge, violating our ethos and our age-old collective rights. This is neither reasonable nor acceptable.
- 8) Today’s education system ignores our cultures and local natural resources, alienating the young from our former healthy and ecologically-sustainable lifestyles. This needs to change urgently.
- 9) Our traditional wholesome foods are part of our culture. The government food schemes should respect this, and not pollute our young with inferior, alien foods and tastes.

- 10) Our forests and traditional commons, our peoples and our cultures, are all under grave threat from misconceived “development” projects, grabbing by outsiders, and by modern agricultural methods and mono-cultural plantations. These do grave harm, and must stop now. We further call for an immediate end to our displacement and dispossession by such short-sighted, destructive projects that devastate our life-culture and threaten our very survival.
- 11) We seek a rethinking of money-centric ‘development policies’, and urge a holistic approach that respects our cultures and sustainable lifestyles; and which enables us to live and thrive on our ancestral lands, safeguarding the country’s rich ecological and cultural heritage.
- 12) We declare that we will do our very best to keep alive our rich heritage resources and traditions. Welcoming a new era, we urge the support of all – to safeguard and regenerate the health of our Mother Earth and forests. Our warm greetings and heartfelt wishes are extended to all; and we humbly ask you to support us!

This declaration is collectively endorsed by numerous representatives of adivasi and forest-dependent communities, supported by other civil society representatives, public health experts, nutrition scientists, ecologists, educators, sociologists, senior State functionaries and concerned citizens.

**Your endorsement** in support would be much appreciated! This may be emailed to the following, stating your name, and (optional) occupation/organization:

- 1) Debjeet Sarangi (livingfarms@gmail.com), and
- 2) Rashi Mishra (rashi.mish@gmail.com)

The ‘Forest Foods and Ecology’ Conference and Exhibition were jointly organised by Living Farms, Kalpavriksh, SADED, Gandhi Peace Foundation and Vividhara.

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