

From Lantana Weeds to Kodo Kutki: A Tale of Agricultural Revival

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1. Overview

In the year 2009-2010, the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) embarked on a transformative journey in Batwar village, Madhya Pradesh. This journey, rooted in community empowerment and sustainable agricultural practices, through the formation of a committee within the village known as the Gram Paryavaran Samiti, the community started working together to bring about positive changes. One of the major challenges faced by the community was the proliferation of Lantana, an invasive species that had disrupted the local ecosystem and made agricultural endeavors a daunting task. In response, a comprehensive plan was put forth within the Gram Paryavaran Samiti to eradicate Lantana from the village's landscape. In 2019-2020, with collective determination, the community successfully cleared the land of Lantana, paving the way for the restoration of native flora and fauna.



However, the journey towards revitalizing agriculture didn't end there. The community, in collaboration with FES, set its sights on a new goal—the revival of Kodo Kutki (*Paspalum scrobiculatum*) cultivation. This climate-resilient millet held the promise of diversifying agriculture, enhancing food security, and conserving traditional farming practices. The path towards Kodo Kutki cultivation was not without its challenges, as the reluctance of other farmers to adopt this crop hindered progress for a time. Nevertheless, unity prevailed, and in the year 2022, the entire village came together to embrace Kodo Kutki farming. It was the year when Anita Marawi, a dedicated member of the community, planted Kodo Kutki seeds on her one-acre land—a momentous step towards agricultural rejuvenation.

One remarkable aspect of this journey is the unwavering spirit of the community. To protect their crops from wildlife interference, particularly from the nearby Kanha Tiger Reserve, the villagers organized night patrols and erected protective enclosures. Their commitment to safeguarding their fields exemplifies their resilience and dedication. The story of Batwar village is a testament to the power of community-led initiatives, driven by a shared vision of ecological restoration and sustainable agriculture. It demonstrates how, with collective effort, determination, and a focus on both environmental and agricultural aspects, a community can overcome challenges, revive their lands, and embrace resilient practices that promise a brighter future. This report sheds light on the remarkable journey of Batwar village, where the seeds of change were sown in unity, nurtured by dedication, and now stand tall as a symbol of hope and sustainable progress.



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"From Lantana Weeds to Kodo Kutki: A Tale of Agricultural Revival".

2. Background



Batwar village is located in the buffer zone area adjoining the core zone of Kanha National Park. It is home to a total of 209 families, with one family belonging to the Scheduled Caste (SC) category, four families belonging to the Other Backward Classes (OBC), and the majority of 205 families representing the Scheduled Tribe (ST) community.

The village is situated at a distance of 11 kilometers from the nearest town. The primary livelihood of the residents revolves around farming and the collection of minor forest produce. The village is surrounded by the dense forests of the Buffer Zone of Kanha National Park, which play a significant role in the lives of the local people. The Gram Paryavaran Samiti, an environmental committee, was formed in this village in the year 2009-2010. Additionally, the Women's Council was established in 2015 to promote gender inclusivity and community participation. Batwar village is located approximately 25 kilometers from the subdivisional headquarters of Anjaniya. It is a place where the community's way of life harmonizes with the natural environment, creating a unique and tranquil setting.

3. Intervention

About two decades ago in Batwar village, nearly every family was engaged in the cultivation of Kodo Kutki, a type of millet. However, as the encroachments of wild animals increased over time, most farmers gradually abandoned Kodo Kutki cultivation. This led to the unchecked growth of invasive Lantana weeds, particularly on fallow lands, which posed challenges such as reducing grazing areas for livestock, wildlife intrusion, and the collection of minor forest produce, including Mahua flowers. Recognizing the importance of Kodo Kutki as a staple, nutritious, and naturally resilient crop, the village community deliberated upon this issue during a meeting of the Gram Paryavaran Samiti (Village Environmental Committee) in 2019. It was a moment of realization that Kodo Kutki not only played a vital role in the local diet but also represented a sustainable source of nutrition, requiring minimal external inputs.



As a result of these discussions, a plan was formulated to eradicate the invasive Lantana weeds from the individual lands of 50 farmers and to cultivate Kodo Kutki on 42 hectares of their personal lands. The presence of Lantana had not only deterred farming activities but also deprived the community of essential fodder resources. With the facilitation of the Gram Paryavaran Samiti, 29 farmers successfully removed Lantana from their 42-hectare lands, making way for Kodo Kutki cultivation. However, the journey towards reviving Kodo Kutki cultivation faced challenges. In 2020, only 4 farmers ventured into Kodo Kutki cultivation, followed by 10 in 2021. Nevertheless, in 2022, 40 farmers took a substantial leap, collectively cultivating Kodo Kutki on 60 hectares of land, signifying a significant expansion in Kodo Kutki cultivation. Apart from reclaiming their lands from invasive Lantana, the removal of this aggressive shrub proved to be beneficial in terms of Mahua bean collection as well. Since the elimination of Lantana, the collection of Mahua beans has become more accessible, reducing the risk of encounters with wild animals.

The efforts of the village community, supported by the Village Environmental Committee, highlight the resilience of traditional farming practices and the potential for restoring biodiversity-friendly crops like Kodo Kutki to enhance both livelihoods and the environment.

4. Impact

The intervention led by the Batwar village community, under the guidance of the Village Environmental

Committee, has yielded significant positive impacts. The revival of Kodo Kutki cultivation, facilitated by the removal of invasive Lantana weeds, has not only reinstated a crucial dietary component but also enhanced the livelihoods of local farmers.



With 40 farmers now cultivating Kodo Kutki on 60 hectares of land in 2022, the community has secured a sustainable source of nutrition while reducing their reliance on external inputs. Moreover, this initiative has contributed to biodiversity restoration by allowing native flora and fauna to thrive. It has also mitigated conflicts with wildlife, ensuring the safety of both the community and local wildlife. Overall, this grassroots effort showcases the resilience of traditional farming practices and underscores the potential for sustainable agriculture to benefit both the environment and livelihoods.

5. Challenges

In Batwar village, situated in close proximity to the core area of Kanha National Park, the farmers face the persistent challenge of safeguarding their crops from wild animal intrusions, such as tigers and bears. To protect their crops, they engage in nighttime vigilance and construct protective structures during the night, living in a constant state of alertness to mitigate the risk of encounters with these animals. Additionally, the cultivation of Kodo Kutki, a local millet variety, comes with its unique set of challenges, including the timing of harvesting, which often coincides with pest infestations during the rice harvest season. Moreover, selling agricultural produce in local markets presents difficulties in determining fair prices, and limited access to market-related information further compounds the challenges faced by the villagers. Despite these obstacles, the community's resilience and determination shine through as they strive to protect their crops, maintain traditional farming practices, and improve their livelihoods amidst the coexistence of wildlife and agriculture in their village.

Reviving Traditional Farming Practices: The Inspiring Journey of Anita Maravi and the Batwar Village Community"

Anita Maravi, a 48-year-old resident of Batwar village in the Bichhiya development block of Mandla district, Madhya

Pradesh, India, has played a pivotal role in transforming traditional farming practices. Her journey embodies the spirit of resilience and community-driven change, showcasing the successful revival of Kodo Kutki cultivation. Hailing from a family of eight members actively engaged in agricultural activities, they faced challenges two decades ago when wildlife intrusions disrupted Kodo Kutki farming, and invasive Lantana weeds overran their two-acre plot of land.



In 2009-2010, the Foundation for Ecological Security (F. E. S.) initiated developmental work in Batwar village. Under the guidance of the Gram Paryavaran Samiti, a comprehensive plan was formulated to eradicate Lantana weeds and promote Kodo Kutki cultivation. Despite initial resistance, by 2022, 40 farmers collectively cultivated Kodo Kutki on 60 hectares of land. The removal of Lantana not only revived Kodo Kutki farming but also had far-reaching positive effects on the local environment, wildlife intrusions, livestock grazing areas, and food security.

Anita Maravi's commitment, along with collaborative efforts, serves as an inspiring example of community-driven initiatives in restoring traditional farming practices, benefiting both the community and the environment. Her story is a testament to the power of collective action and community resilience in the face of adversity, showcasing the potential for sustainable rural development and environmental conservation. Anita Maravi's unwavering dedication has not only transformed her family's fortunes but has also paved the way for a brighter and more sustainable future for her entire village.

6. Way Forward

The inspirational journey of Anita Maravi and the Batwar Village Community showcases the remarkable potential of collective action and community-driven initiatives in revitalizing traditional farming practices while benefiting both the community and the environment. Moving forward, there are several key steps that can be taken based on their success. First and foremost, efforts should be made to expand Kodo Kutki cultivation within the community by

offering training, resources, and technical support to encourage more farmers to adopt this resilient millet, ultimately diversifying agriculture and improving food security. Additionally, it is crucial to address the persistent challenge of wildlife intrusions by developing and implementing more effective strategies in collaboration with wildlife conservation organizations. This will ensure the protection of crops while safeguarding both the community and local wildlife. To further enhance the community's prosperity, measures should be taken to improve market access and ensure fair pricing for agricultural produce. Establishing platforms or cooperatives for collective bargaining and providing market-related information will be instrumental in this regard. Promoting sustainable farming practices, including crop rotation, organic farming, and water-efficient techniques, will help maintain the delicate balance between tradition and innovation. Strengthening community engagement and empowering marginalized groups, particularly women, in decision-making processes will ensure that these initiatives are inclusive and sustainable over the long term.

Education and awareness campaigns should be conducted to emphasize the importance of ecological restoration, sustainable agriculture, and the benefits of Kodo Kutki cultivation, with a focus on involving the younger generation. Investing in research and innovation will help address region-specific challenges, ensuring continuous progress. Sharing the success story of Batwar village with neighboring communities and beyond will encourage the replication of such initiatives, creating a positive ripple effect. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of progress will allow for adjustments as needed, while advocating for supportive policies and partnerships at the governmental level will secure the sustainability of these efforts.