

## FROM BARREN FIELDS TO GRAPE VINEYARDS

K.S. NEELAKANTAN\*

### Introduction

Fantasy it may seem! The land use change taking place in the foothills of the Western Ghats of Megamalai Reserve Land in Uthamapalayam Taluk (Theni Dist.) has to be seen to be believed. The sleepy village of Seepalakottai is teeming with agricultural activity, in tilling the land, erecting stone pandals, growing grapevines etc.

### Background

This target village and the adjacent watershed area were selected under the Tamil Nadu Afforestation Programme during 1997. As per the bench mark survey undertaken before starting the works, there were 3,777 people living in this village belonging to 1,125 households. There were 210 borewells out of which water was present in only 25 numbers and the rest 185 did not have water. This area gets an annual average of about 693 mm of rainfall. It is situated in the Vaigai river basin.

### Scenario before undertaking the Project

Megamalai Reserve Land areas were Ex-Zamin lands, handed over to the Tamil Nadu Forest Deptt. and are in the process of being constituted as a Reserved Forest. Due to the past forest management of harvesting fuel coupes, the natural vegetation in this area has been lost. The

harvesting of fuel coupes was stopped in the late 1970s and the secondary succession started coming back from root-stocks. But it was not able to attain tree form or a dense cover due to biotic disturbance by the local people. The local people were depending on this forest habitat for their fuelwood needs, cattle grazing and green manure. Due to these adverse factors, the area became degraded with less than .4% density.

### Strategy Adopted

Though afforestation of these degraded areas were undertaken under the Plan Schemes by the Forest Deptt. in the 1980s, since the involvement of the local people was not there, afforestation was not upto the expected levels. In the early 1990s the strategy of involving local people in the conservation and regeneration of forest areas was recommended and Joint Forest Management was adopted. Tamil Nadu Afforestation Programme launched in 1997 by the T.N.F.D., with funding from the J.B.I.C. has been able to enlist the full co-operation of the local forest dependents by adopting a variety of practices.

### Improvements Noticed

The density of the forest habitat has increased marginally due to the gap planting over 350 ha during 1997 and 1998 done by the Forest Department under this project and also due to the restriction of

---

\*Conservator of Forests, Dindigul Circle, Dindigul (Tamil Nadu).

biotic activities in this watershed. The open ground has been covered by the herbs and grasses and the other indigenous species have started covering up the previously degraded area. For soil and moisture conservation rough stone dry packing 235 nos. have been done across various gullies and small streams within the watershed (Plate 1). These have trapped the soil *in-situ*, thereby helping in soil improvement. Due to the surface run-off being stopped by the semi-circular bunds, terraces and the checkdams undertaken in the watershed, the water has been made to stagnate, percolate into the ground, thereby recharging the underground water table.

#### Present situation in the village

The land use change in the village agriculture lands is brought out by the recent survey undertaken. Before the project, 41.71 ha land has under current fallows and out of it 10 ha has become wet lands in the last 2 years. There was 1,052.4 ha of dry lands, out of which, in 100 ha, the area is being converted into grape

vineyards. The accompanying photographs taken in March 2000 reveal the activity in the agricultural lands (Plates 2 and 3).

#### Increase of Horticulture

In addition to grape vineyards, horticulture cash crops like Cashew are also being planted in the lands which were fallow till recently (Plate 4).

#### Improving Rural Economy

This benefit will continue to the people living in this area in the years to come and an improvement in the rural economy and individual income enhancement will result. Thus the objective of rural upliftment for the prosperity of our country, will be resulting due to this programme. Since already 600 villages have been covered in the last three years all over the State and 400 more are proposed to be covered in the next two years, there is tremendous potential for empowerment and improvement of rural population under the Tamil Nadu Afforestation Programme.

### SUMMARY

The land use change taking place in the foothills of the Western Ghats of Megamalai Reserve Land in Theni District of Tamil Nadu, has to be seen to be believed. This watershed was treated under the Tamil Nadu Afforestation Programme in 1997-1998. Due to the soil and moisture conservation structures undertaken in the watershed, the ground water potential has improved. Abandoned borewells are being used now and grape cultivation in about 100 acres which was fallow till recently is in progress. This has been documented and presented.

उजाड़ खेतों से चल अंगूर लताओं के प्रांगनों तक

के.एस. नीलकान्तन

सारांश

मेघमलै संरक्षित क्षेत्र के पश्चिमी घाट पहाड़ियों की तलहटी में तमिलनाडु के थाणी जिले में संरक्षित भूमि में हो रहे परिवर्तन पर विश्वास करने के लिए उन्हें देखना आवश्यक है। इस जल विभाजक का उपचार 1997-98 में तमिलनाडु वनीकरण कार्यक्रम के अन्तर्गत किया गया। जल विभाजक में किए गए मृदा और नमी संरचनाओं के कारण भूमि जल की क्षमता में सुधार हुआ है। परित्यक्त खुदे कुएँ फिर से व्यवहार किए जाने लगे हैं और लगभग 100 ऐकड़ क्षेत्र जो थोड़ा समय पहले परती पड़ा था अब अंगूर लताओं की खेती करने में काफी प्रगति पर है। इसे प्रलेखित करते हुए यहाँ प्रस्तुत किया गया है।

**Plate 1**



Watershed with the soil and moisture conservation structure

**Plate 2**



Landuse change in Pattalands - Grape vineyard being formed (March 2000)

**Plate 3**



Grape vineyard being formed adjacent to the Reserve Land

**Plate 4**



Recent cultivation of Cashew in Pattalands adjacent to forest area