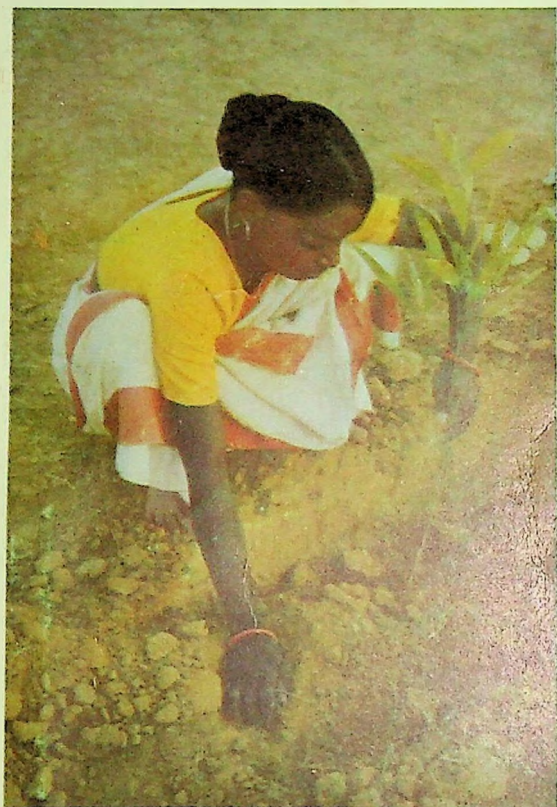


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SOCIAL FORESTRY GAINING GROUND



**DEPARTMENT OF FORESTS
GOVT. OF WEST BENGAL**

Waste lands!—unutilised resources in Purulia district.



The need for an appropriate Social Forestry Programme in West Bengal becomes apparent if one examines the forestry situation and its contribution to the State economy or rural uplift. The State of West Bengal with a high density of population has only 13.5% of the total geographical area under forest cover. Per capita forest area of about 0.02 ha. is one of the lowest in the country. The forest area is not only small in extent but its distribution is also lop-sided. The forest areas are in fact concentrated in three well-defined pockets viz., in the northern montane and sub-montane tracts, in the coastal areas and in the south-western uplands. The rest of the State which is generally an alluvial flat extending for about 800 k.m. from the coastal areas to the sub-montane tracts has practically no forest cover. Additionally, the forest area is not only small in extent but its quality and productivity is also not uniform; in fact the total productive forest area would hardly exceed 5% of the total geographical area of the State.

Contribution of forestry and forest based-industries to the State income was estimated around 2% in 1977. However, it is to be appreciated that the authorities were so long concerned with net revenue, financial rate of return and such other indices of productivity and management efficiency. In this process, forestry activities became inevitably linked with the consumption pattern of the relatively affluent urban society. Rural people were benefited by wage income and concessional sale of low grade forest produce and similar 'fringe benefits'. Untapped potential of the forest as a tool for rural development, especially by meeting the daily needs of the



*How to plant? What to plant? A lady Motivator engaged in extension—
Jalpaiguri district.*

A bid to reconstruct the future—rural people digging planting pits in Midnapur district.



rural people, generating income and improvement of their life-style, was never explored in the past.

The deterioration of the forest evoked a less responsible concern for the forests by the local communities, who live near the forests and suffer. This may be in the form of repeated cutting of an already impoverished forest, uncontrolled grazing, influx of population in search of cultivable lands etc.

Such reaction of the people to forests, though unfortunate, is not unpredictable as they have little stake in a system which restricts their narrow range of options merely in redistribution of penury.

The spatial pattern of development within the regions of

West Bengal more or less mirrors that of national space economy. Service facilities and productive activities are highly concentrated in a few urban centres. Large disparities exist in the levels of development and standards of living between urban population and those in the hinterlands. Linkages between the peripheral rural areas and town centres are weak. The limited access of rural people to productive resources, social services and public facilities perpetuate rural poverty. The frail linkage among settlements within the region makes the spread of growth from urbanised centres slow and uncertain.

In-depth study of agriculture and allied activities in the rural areas of West Bengal reveals their high degree of dependence on forests and forest products.

In particular, the dwellers around the forest fringe areas depend much on the forest for their subsistence and



Planting pits in Burdwan district.

Preparation for planting in Bankura district.



day to day living. Such dependence has been there from time immemorial. Unfortunately, because of a variety of reasons, this intimate relationship has of late, warped. Adverse conditions have, in fact, created a situation where agricultural activities, the main-stay of rural West Bengal are in jeopardy. The existing dilapidated forests are incapable of bearing the burden of the growing population

and their ever increasing demands on forests, particularly in the south-western parts of the State. This is manifested by the existence of large depressed areas around the forests in this region. Destructive pressure on the forest areas can hardly be expected to abate in the present condition unless the people around the forests are provided with alternate means of living. The current social forestry programme should, therefore, be viewed from the angle of its being an exercise in local community development rather than merely as one of tree plantation and management.

Fortunately, the State administration and the policy makers appreciated the deteriorating trend in forestry sector and have embarked upon a community forestry programme on an appreciable scale. The immediate operational part of the programme consists of raising plantations on a variety of lands which are mostly unused,



Trees of future—Forest nursery in Kalyani, Nadia district.



under-used and mis-used. The ultimate objective is, however, to integrate forestry as a tool for local community development, beginning at the micro level, with active participation of the local communities.

The operative part of the project consists of creation of the following types of plantations—

- A. Establishment of 6,000 ha. village woodlots
- B. Reforestation of 15,000 ha. of degraded forests
- C. Creation of 20,000 ha. of strip plantation along roads, irrigation canals, embankments, railway side lands, tank fore-shores, etc.
- D. Establishment of 52,000 ha. of farm forestry on individual holdings in rural areas.

It is expected that the above activities when promoted, protected and diversified, would stimulate conditions for local community development in the rural areas. Afforestation of barren lands is also expected to have a favourable impact on the land and environment especially on recovering productivity of critical land areas outside forest reserves. The underlying strategies adopted are mainly—

- (i) To reach a maximum number of small and marginal farmers and landless farm labourers.
- (ii) To create community motive and increase organisational and operational efficiency of the



Salvation lies in the group approach.



target population through a well scheduled extension and communication system so that apart from maintaining their woodlots they can also assume control and management of village woodlots, strip plantations and reforested govt. forest lands, in due course (estimated at 7th-8th year after establishment).

- (iii) To utilise a variety of lands which are now lying unutilised, under-utilised and mis-utilised, to meet economic and environmental needs of the rural people.
- (iv) To develop a viable production and management system which would offer a better economic and ecological option in land management in rural areas.

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- (v) To endeavour to achieve reorientation of the attitude of the forestry professionals from purely technical issues to those of sociological nature to reach the stated objectives conceptually as well as physically.

Tree planting to meet economic and environmental needs is by itself a simple concept but its implementation is not. There are various constraints which sometimes make tree planting on an appreciable scale difficult. These constraints



An asset for the Gram Panchayat—Village Woodlot in Midnapur district.

are of various types—physical, financial, institutional and sociological. The biggest physical constraint is obviously lack of suitable land for tree planting. In a densely populated State like West Bengal with acute land hunger it is clearly unrealistic to expect availability of large chunks of land for tree planting and far less to divert agricultural land even of marginal quality for tree planting. Accordingly, we endeavour to select only such areas

Another canal bank plantation—Midnapur district.



Subabul plantation—a new hope for the village community—24 Parganas

where appreciable quantities of waste lands or marginal lands are available and also to encourage tree planting in a diffused manner in the intensively cultivated areas. In the south-western uplands there are considerable tracts of waste lands which are almost exclusively rain-fed, sheet eroded and generally degraded where agriculture is not possible at least with the resources available with their owners. These areas have been our prime target area. In addition, attempts have been made to plant up available lands off road side, irrigation canal sides and such other lands in narrow linear strips. It is on record and one of some satisfaction that we have been able to overcome these constraints as would appear from our actual achievements against appraised targets as indicated below:



A roadside plantation provides shade to the travellers.

Mixed woodlot on tank fore-shore in 24-Parganas district.



Component	Appraised Targets 1981 to 1983 ha.	Achievement 1981 to 1983 in ha.	Likely achievement 1984 in ha.
Strip Plantation	5,300	5,700	4,447
Village Woodlot	1,960	1,149	489
Farm Forestry	14,780	20,704	15,157
Reforestation of Degraded Forests	4,500	10,835	3,595
Total	26,540	38,388	23,688

The tree planting activities under the project started rather hesitantly in 1981 ; but after two years of constant interaction with the rural communities it appears that this concept is fast catching up the ideas of the rural people. Emergence of social forestry as a viable option in land management has been the greatest success apart from physical achievements. It appears that the untapped potential of tree planting as a tool in rural development particularly in areas where physical and social conditions preclude other development activities have at last been exploited and if the current achievements are any indication, this may ultimately enable one to come out from the blind alley of contemporary resource growth.



Peaceful co-existence—groundnut for food, Subabul for fodder.

Site-specific choice of species—coconut trees for community benefit in Howrah district.



It is true that compared to the demand of forestry related resources, current achievements can only touch the fringe of the problem but small and exciting as these success stories are, these may open up hope for a better environment both physical and social in the depressed countryside of this State, in not too remote a future.

There are clear signs of identification of the community with the aims and objectives of the Social Forestry Project and their spontaneous response and adoption, in many areas, is the biggest achievement apart from the achievement in physical terms. Hopefully this is a resurrection of

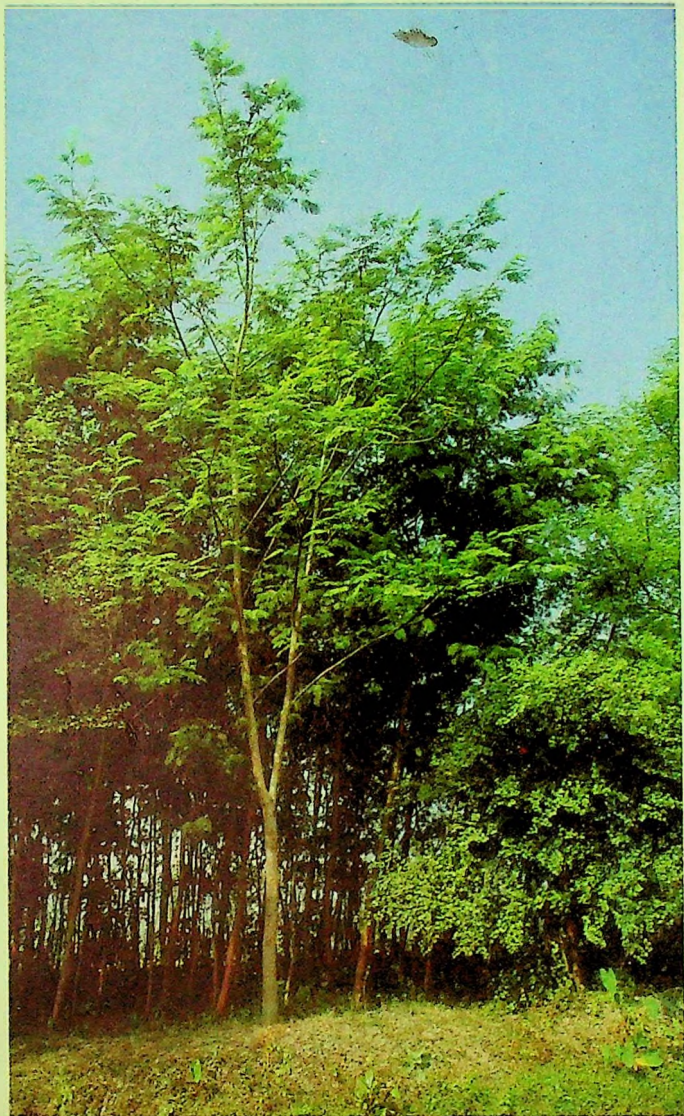
tree consciousness and this has to be sustained with further efforts and investments. Such efforts can only be successful through continuous persuasion and motivation. It has to be realised that the efforts can wane out if the slogan of social forestry is muffled by indifference and inaction. Much of the motive force may die out and the effectiveness of the institution may not last long, unless constant endeavour is made to sustain the present favourable community response, by securing the current gain and promoting and expanding the activities so that the concept of social forestry as an institution could be built into the societal fabric of rural West Bengal.



After the day's toil! Women head-loaders returning home in Bankura district.



The fruits of labour.



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