



PATHS BEYOND THE FOREST:

Empowering Assam's Forest-Fringe Communities for Sustainable Livelihoods through Assam Project on Forest and Biodiversity Conservation

(A compendium of success stories from the field)

Submitted to:

The Project Director, PMU, APFBC Society
3rd Floor, Aranya Bhawan,
Near Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra,
Panjabari, Guwahati – 781037, Assam

Submitted by:

*Joint Venture of
Arihant Advertising Agency,
13B, Ground Floor, Bee Gee Market,
S.R.C.B. Road, Fancy Bazar, Guwahati-781001 (Assam)
&
North East Yellow Pages,
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This compendium brings together the inspiring success stories of beneficiaries who have received training through the Assam Project on Forest & Biodiversity Conservation in various trades, including weaving, water hyacinth products, bamboo crafts and candle making, among others.

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1.

INTRODUCTION AND

BACKGROUND ON ASSAM'S

BIODIVERSITY

Assam, a biodiversity hub nestled in the verdant landscapes of Northeast India, stands as a testimony to nature's unparalleled richness. With its lush forests, sprawling wetlands, and diverse ecosystems, Assam is a haven for an astonishing array of plant and animal life. As a constituent unit of the Eastern Himalayan Biodiversity Region, Assam is particularly renowned for its ecological significance. Its strategic location at the crossroads of Indian, Indo-Malayan, and Indio-Chinese bio-geographical regions has earned it the title of the "Biological Gateway" of the North East.

India, as a whole, boasts a remarkable level of biodiversity, accounting for 7-8% of the world's recorded species. Within its borders lie over 45,000 plant species and 91,000 animal species, each contributing to the country's ecological wealth¹.

According to the Census of 2011, Assam's population stood at 3.12 crores, making it the largest state in Northeast India. Comprising 35 districts², Assam encompasses approximately 2.4% of India's total geographical area, with a recorded forest cover of 26,832 square kilometers, representing 34.21% of its landmass. These forests, categorized as Reserved Forests and Unclassed Forests, constitute vital habitats for a diverse range of flora and fauna. According to their legal status, Reserved Forests constitute 66.58% and Unclassed Forests 33.42% of the total forest area. With 18 forest types spread across the state, including Tropical Wet Evergreen, Tropical Semi Evergreen, and Subtropical Pine Forests, Assam's forests are a cornerstone of its ecological heritage.

1.1 Challenges Faced by Forest Dependent Communities

Assam's forest-dependent communities face multiple challenges that threaten their way of life and the sustainability of the region's ecosystems.

Pressure on Forest Resources

Agriculture and related activities play a significant role in the livelihoods of many people in Assam. As a predominantly rural state, the demand for agricultural land leads to increasing pressure on forest areas, resulting in deforestation and habitat loss. Poverty and unemployment among forest-dependent communities further contribute to the overexploitation of forest resources, as they rely heavily on forests for food, fuelwood, fodder, and medicinal plants. This unsustainable harvesting degrades the forest and diminishes biodiversity.

Illegal Encroachments and Conflicts

Illegal encroachments, driven by demographic pressure and developmental projects, intensify deforestation and habitat destruction. This results in competition among communities for limited resources, leading to conflicts. The encroachment of forest lands not only threatens biodiversity but also creates friction between various stakeholders.

¹<https://www.iucn.org/our-work/region/asia/countries/india>

² <https://assam.gov.in/about-us/396#:~:text=The%20State%20of%20Assam%20is,%2C%20hills%2C%20forests%2C%20etc>

Climate Change Vulnerability

Climate change further intensifies the vulnerability of forest-dependent communities in Assam. The region's unique topography and dense network of rivers make it particularly prone to the adverse impacts of climate change. Extreme weather events like droughts and floods significantly impact agriculture and livelihoods, adding to the socio-economic challenges faced by these communities.

Limited Market Access and Entrepreneurship Skills

Apart from resource dependency and climate vulnerability, these communities also face challenges due to their limited capacity in market-led trades, restricted knowledge of entrepreneurship, and inadequate market linkages. These limitations hinder their ability to transition to more sustainable sources of income. Without sufficient training or access to markets, many are unable to diversify their livelihoods, reinforcing their dependence on forest resources.

Overview of the Assam Project on Forest and Biodiversity Conservation (APFBC)

Assam, renowned for its diverse ecosystems and rich biodiversity, faces numerous challenges in conserving its natural heritage while addressing the socio-economic needs of its forest-dependent communities. In response to these challenges, the Assam Forest Department, in collaboration with the French Development Agency – Agence Française de Développement (AFD), initiated APFBC in 2012. This comprehensive project aims to protect and improve the environment, safeguard forests and wildlife, preserve cultural heritage, and promote sustainable livelihoods among forest-dependent communities.

The APFBC was launched to address the pressing need for the conservation and sustainable management of Assam's forests and biodiversity. Phase I of the project, spanning from February 2012 to May 2019, focused on restoring forest ecosystems and enhancing the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities. Currently, Phase II of the APFBC is underway, building upon the successes and lessons learned from Phase I. The project continues to prioritize participatory sustainable forest and biodiversity management, improving the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities, and strengthening the Forest Department's capacity to fulfill its mission.

The overarching goal is to improve the well-being of these communities while minimizing ecological footprints. The project's vision is to enable sustainable forest management in Assam through multi-scale integrative planning involving the participation of local populations. Its specific objectives include restoring forest ecosystems, enhancing livelihoods, and ensuring the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.

Vision

The overall vision of the project is to “contribute through the Forest Department towards the conservation of nature for healthier ecosystems and happier communities”.

Project Objectives

- Developing participatory Sustainable Forest and Biodiversity management under changing climatic conditions.
- Improving the livelihoods of Forest dependent communities through inclusive (collective and individual) support.
- Strengthening the Forest department to better fulfill its mission.

APFBC, supported by the French Development Agency – Agence Française de Développement (AFD), was launched with a bold vision: to protect Assam's natural ecosystems while fostering sustainable livelihoods for the forest-fringe communities that live alongside them.

APFBC represents a unique approach, one that intertwines environmental conservation with economic opportunity. Through a series of strategic initiatives, the project aims to improve the wellbeing of forest-dependent communities, offering them access to basic amenities and diverse income-generating activities—all while minimizing ecological footprints. The scope of the project is extensive, encompassing the entire state of Assam with its 33 territorial divisions, 7 wildlife divisions, and 13 social forestry divisions.

APFBC has a simple yet profound mission: to restore forest ecosystems in partnership with forest-dependent communities while enhancing their livelihoods and promoting sustainable use of biodiversity. This strategy, with its dual focus on conservation and community engagement, forms the backbone of APFBC's approach.

A key aspect of APFBC's community engagement is its comprehensive training programs, aimed at reducing dependency on forest resources and fostering sustainable practices. Through these programs, beneficiaries learn trades that offer alternative income sources, such as vermicompost production, weaving, water hyacinth crafts, bamboo crafts, candle making, mushroom cultivation, pickle production, and nursery management.

To further support these communities, APFBC also provides essential assets for developing sustainable livelihoods. This includes sewing machines, piglets, weaving machines, veterinary medicine kits, and apiary boxes, among other resources. By equipping beneficiaries with both skills and tools, the project ensures that they have the means to establish sustainable ventures. Besides, Entrepreneurship Development Programmes and Financial Literacy training are also provided to beneficiaries to equip them with the skills and knowledge necessary for managing their businesses effectively and making informed financial decisions.

Moreover, APFBC's strategy goes beyond training and asset distribution. The project promotes cluster formation to foster collaboration among beneficiaries and facilitate knowledge sharing. To help these new enterprises succeed, APFBC has also established market linkages under the Banashristi brand, enabling communities to sell their products to a broader market.



A large wooden textile loom is set up in a workshop. The loom is made of dark wood and has many threads stretched across it. The threads are arranged in a way that they are being woven into a fabric. The workshop has a corrugated metal roof and blue corrugated metal walls. The floor is concrete. The overall scene is one of traditional textile production.

2.

SUCCESS STORIES

NIRMALA ENTERPRISE

UDYAM-AS-21-0010035

(Weaving Production Centre)

Ouguri, Mayong, Morigaon, Assam,

Pin - 782411

Cont. No.- 69106 08990 / 93654 81830

2.1

Weaving for livelihood



Weaving Dreams: Nirmala Bora's Journey to Empowerment

Nirmala Bora, a determined 43-year-old woman from Ouguri village within the Guwahati Wildlife Division, once faced economic challenges that burdened her family. Her husband's modest grocery shop couldn't suffice, compelling her to seek alternative livelihoods for a sustainable future. She recalls, "We used to run a grocery shop in front of my house, so when I went for the weaving training provided under the project from 10 am to 4 pm, the shop had to be closed for the day. Moreover, the shop could be a hindrance for my kids to focus on their studies due to the customers all around it all the time." Recognizing weaving as a potential avenue for empowerment, Nirmala eagerly joined the training provided under APFBC to hone her skills.

With comprehensive training in weaving techniques during both Phase I and Phase II of the APFBC initiative, Nirmala received Jacquard Looms, Threads, and Drums to kick start her journey. Even though she had initial knowledge about weaving, the training taught her the intricacies of machine weaving. The training, covering everything from setting up looms to mastering machine intricacies, equipped her to weave a variety of products, from gamusas to table clothes to cushion covers.

Balancing household chores with training sessions posed challenges, but Nirmala remained resolute in her pursuit of success, driven by her genuine interest in weaving and the desire to secure better opportunities for her children. Investing time and effort, she envisioned a brighter future for her family. Putting her newfound skills into practice, Nirmala wasted no time. Investing in her own loom machine, she began weaving products for various clients, selling approximately 500 Gamusas over the years, steadily increasing her income.


But Nirmala's aspirations didn't end there. Registering her enterprise and expanding her business to two handloom machines, she envisions further growth, aspiring to transform her weaving enterprise into a full-fledged industry.

Beyond personal success, Nirmala emerged as a beacon of hope for other women in her community, motivating many to start their own weaving businesses. Through her guidance, numerous women accessed microfinance loans and collaborated to expand their market reach. With the support of their JFMC they registered themselves under the government's 'Swanirbhar Naari' scheme and are now expanding more and more. They sell their products not only at Banashristi and government textile handloom stores but also in markets across Guwahati, Sonapur, and Morigaon.

Nirmala sells her gamusas at different ranges from Rs. 300 to Rs. 1400 each depending on the design. Nirmala's journey showcases the transformative power of the APFBC project. Through hard work, determination, and APFBC support, she secured a sustainable livelihood, inspiring countless others to do the same.





A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a person's arm and hand working on a traditional wooden loom. The loom is strung with many threads in various colors, including white, yellow, and pink. The person's arm is visible on the left side of the frame, wearing a pink sleeve. The background is out of focus, showing more of the loom structure.

“It was through the earnings of my weaving enterprise I could enroll my kids in a reputed private institute and boost their educational career. I also envision my weaving enterprise to become an industry, continually expanding to provide more opportunities for my family and community.”

-Nirmala Bora
Ouguri, Guwahati WL

Threads of Empowerment: The Inspiring Tale of Nirupama Mushahari's Weaving Journey

Nirupama Mushahari, a resident of Panbari, a small village in Bokakhat, Eastern Assam WL, has always been intrigued by weaving. But when APFBC offered basic weaving training along with essential equipment like Jacquard looms, Threads, and Drums, it was a game changer for her and many others in the village.

Enrolling among the 40 participants, Nirupama found the training transformative. "It wasn't just about learning weaving techniques; it taught us how to run a business," she reflects. Post-training, ongoing project support catalysed positive changes in Nirupama's life.

Nirupama emerged as a dedicated artisan. The Forest Department's sustained assistance, especially during the project's initial phase, played a pivotal role in Nirupama's journey. The project provided her with a jacquard loom which helped her to set up her enterprise. With these resources, she crafts diverse products like Gamusas, Mekhela Sadors, and Panels, catering to both other businesses and customers, often trading from her home. She further expanded her business by purchasing 2 more looms with her own earnings. Previously earning around Rs. 10,000 monthly, her income now surpasses Rs. 25,000, significantly enhancing her family's standard of living. "It's a significant change for me and my family," she says. "We can afford more things, and our quality of life has improved."

Nirupama's success has brought more than just financial benefits—it has also elevated her social status within the community. "People respect me more now," she explains. "They see me as someone who has worked hard and made something of myself." This transformation has inspired others in her village, especially women who see Nirupama as a role model. Despite her achievements, Nirupama has bigger plans. She wants to expand her operations by acquiring more looms. "I have three looms now, but I want to increase that to six or seven," she says. "If I can do that, I can make more products and maybe even train other women in the village." By creating a successful business, Nirupama has not only improved her own life but has also paved the way for others to follow in her footsteps.

Nirupama Mushahari's story is one of resilience, determination, and the power of community support. With her newfound skills and confidence, she's well on her way to creating a legacy that will inspire future generations in Panbari and beyond. "I'm grateful for the opportunities I've had," she says. "But this is just the beginning. There's so much more I want to do."



"I have three looms now, but I want to increase that to six or seven. If I can do that, I can make more products and maybe even train other women in the village."

-Nirupama Mushahari
Panbari, Eastern Assam WL

Maipi Inti Senapati, Archana Das, and Group: Unraveling Success in the World of Weaving

Maipi Inti Senapati and Archana Das, residents of Burharajagaon, Nagaon, were once solely dependent on farming for their livelihood. However, their life took a transformative turn when they and four other women from their village received training from APFBC and ventured into textile weaving.

Joining the training programme alongside their companions, they found the experience to be eye-opening. As an artisan, Archana's dedication to her craft became evident. The sustained assistance from the Forest Department, especially in the initial phase of the project, was instrumental in their success. Equipped with essential equipment provided by the project, such as looms and raw materials, they established their weaving enterprise, producing items like gamusas, mufflers, and handkerchieves.

The women, after receiving the training, saw great potential in this trade, prompting them to procure raw materials independently and diversify their product range. They now cater to both local demand and receive orders from Banashrishti. Workload division and income sharing among the women are done based on demand, availability, and mutual agreement. The women came together to form a Self Help Group, aiming to enhance their business venture, exchange knowledge and collaborate effectively to meet economies of scale.

Looking ahead, Archana has ambitious plans for her business. She aims to further expand her operations by acquiring more looms, enabling her to produce a wider range of products. "We make Assamese Gamusa, Tiwa Gamusa, etc. The money that we receive by selling our handmade clothes by weaving has helped us a lot. Now we have only 3 handloom machines, but we envision it to expand more and grow along it."





A man with dark hair and a light-colored shirt is standing in a forest, holding two large black plastic bags of Vermicompost. The bags have labels that read 'VERMI COMPOST' and '1KG'. The background is a dense forest with many trees and green foliage.

2.2

Vermicompost: Turning Waste into Wealth

Amalendu Patgiri, Rohit Chandra Rai, Tirtholochan Rai, and Group: Cultivating Success Through Vermicompost

Hailing from Dahikata - a JFMC under Goalpara division, Amalendu Patgiri, Rohit Chandra Rai, Trilochan Rai and seven others opted to pursue a new means of livelihood by venturing into vermicomposting. Having practiced farming for long, these beneficiaries knew the struggles of traditional agriculture. Their journey changed when they received training in vermicomposting under the project.

"Namaskar, I'm Amalendu Patgiri," he says with a broad smile. "As farmers familiar with the hardships of traditional agriculture, my fellow beneficiaries and I embarked on a journey of change after receiving training in vermicomposting. Our experiences in conventional farming laid bare the challenges and uncertainties we faced daily. This underscores our transition to embracing alternative livelihood options."

"The training was transformative. It opened my eyes to a new way of doing things. I learned about the benefits of vermicompost, and with the support provided under the project, I was able to start my own production," said Amalendu. He quickly realized the potential in this new venture. Not only could he produce high-quality compost, but he could also earn a decent income. "My profit margin is around 25-30%, and that's not something I would have imagined before," he shares.

Rohit Chandra Rai, another beneficiary of the training, found creative ways to get started. "Although I got vermibeds under the project, I needed more. The cost of a traditional vermibed was about Rs. 2000, and I didn't have that kind of money," he explains. "So, I used vegetable baskets instead. It worked!" Despite his resourcefulness, Rohit has bigger dreams. "I want to expand and create a larger vermibed setup. There's a high demand for vermicompost, especially with the trend toward organic farming. Tea planters and even the Department of Agriculture & Horticulture are interested, but we need to increase our production."

For Tirtholochan Rai, the journey was equally challenging but filled with potential. "We received a lot of support during the training," he says. "It lasted about a month, and APFBC even provided us with two vermibeds to get started." Despite the initial boost, Tirtholochan knows there are obstacles ahead. "Financial constraints are a real issue. Many of us can't afford the equipment we need, and finding cow dung locally is also a problem because many use jersey cows," he explains.

However, the group doesn't let these challenges deter them. "The market is strong, and there's a lot of demand," Tirtholochan says. "If we sell in bags instead of small packets, we can increase our profit. Plus, we're thinking of involving local youth to help with production." Their perseverance is starting to pay off. The group has established connections with local markets and Banashrishti stores, resulting in Rs. 18,291 in sales so far. They also secured orders from the Goalpara Forest Division after showing them samples of their vermicompost. Besides, orders for 50 kgs were received from Ma Mina Nursery, 100 kgs from Mongri Nursery and 50 kgs to another local shop and were made available to the buyers. Now, the community has decided to set up a sales point for all beneficiaries producing vermicompost, at JFMC level.

Beyond the financial gains, the shift to vermicompost has had a profound impact on their lives. “We used to rely solely on traditional farming,” Rohit reflects. “But that came with risks, like wild elephants damaging our crops. With vermicompost, we have a stable source of income.” Amalendu agrees, adding, “This new venture has given us hope. We can save money, support our families, and even inspire others to join us.”

Limited production began from November to December 2023 post-skill training. Sales until March 2024 amounted to 1215 kgs, earning Rs. 18,291. It is expected to grow further, with the anticipated sales of earthworms at Rs. 4000-5000 per kg, potentially increasing the income of each beneficiary by Rs. 2000 per month.

The road ahead is filled with challenges. But ingenious ways are being implemented to address those. Lower production capacity resulting in increased costs, which is being addressed with the introduction of new beds. Moreover, the high costs of labeling, constituting over 30% of production costs, were mitigated by identifying alternative labeling sources. While the vermicompost's cost is nearly double that of competitors, its superior quality and positive consumer feedback justify the price. Additionally, sourcing earthworms posed a challenge, but connections with suppliers have alleviated this issue. Logistical challenges in reaching key markets like Guwahati necessitated careful evaluation of available options on a case-by-case basis.

Packaging and labeling costs are being reduced through several strategic measures. Firstly, changing the pack size from ½ kg to 1 kg helped decrease the overall cost of packaging, as smaller packages were more expensive to produce. Secondly, cost-effective sources of packaging materials and labels were identified, contributing to overall savings. Additionally, customizing packaging, particularly by eliminating inner 1 kg packaging for supplies to nurseries, further optimized costs while maintaining quality standards. These initiatives collectively contributed to cost savings and efficiency improvements in packaging and labeling processes.

The group is determined to overcome the challenges being faced. “We’re committed to expanding and supporting our community,” Amalendu says. “Together, we believe we can create a sustainable source of income for many families in Dahikata and beyond.” Their story is a testament to the power of learning, adaptation, and community spirit.

It is heartening to note that due to high demand and future business potentiality for Vermicompost, 18 new women have shown interest in vermicompost production. Currently total 28 beneficiaries are currently engaged with Vermicompost production.



"I want to expand and create a larger vermibed setup. There's a high demand for vermicompost, especially with the trend toward organic farming. Tea planters and even the Department of Agriculture & Horticulture are interested, but we need to increase our production."

- Rohit Chandra Rai
Dohitoka, Goalpara



Harnessing Nature's Bounty: Water Hyacinth Craftsmanship

Craftsmanship



Anupama Bordoloi and Group: Crafting Prosperity from Water Hyacinth

In Sutirpar Bongaon, part of the Nagaon Wildlife Division, a remarkable change is taking place. Once considered a nuisance, water hyacinth is now the source of economic empowerment for a group of enterprising women, led by Anupama Bordoloi. This group of seven women, aged between 25-40 years, embarked on a journey to turn the invasive water plant into a sustainable source of income. They are a part of a SHG named "Bornali". Before the training, they were mostly associated with agricultural activities and did not have sufficient income to meet the rising costs of living. On account of the training received, the group found a great opportunity in creating a new source of income to meet their needs. After the training, they started creating products by collecting raw water hyacinth from a local pond named Rowmari Beel.

APFBC played a crucial role in this transformation. Anupama Bordoloi, a local resident, recalls the turning point: "Previously, our livelihood relied on farming, fishing, collecting firewood, and selling various items. Income was low and inconsistent, with few opportunities to improve our circumstances."

That changed when the project launched a comprehensive training program in water hyacinth crafting. The program provided essential skills and resources, including water hyacinth, flattening machines, jute, and pins. The group also received Business Development, Entrepreneurship Development Programmes, and Financial Literacy training to help them manage and grow their business.

Anupama and her group began to see water hyacinth in a whole new light. "We learned how to turn this plant into beautiful products," Anupama explains. "Now, we make purses, table mats, yoga mats, hats, and baskets. It's amazing how something we used to consider waste is now the source of our livelihoods."

The group's efforts soon began to pay off. They started selling their products to other businesses and customers as well, with orders coming in from Banashrishti stores. "Participating in the Nagaon Mela was a significant milestone for us," Anupama says. "We could showcase our products to a wider audience and gain valuable exposure." The orders from Banashrishti stores provided a steady stream of income, giving the group greater financial security and flexibility.

The change hasn't just been economic. The women now have a sense of pride in their work and the knowledge that they are contributing to a more sustainable environment. "Water hyacinth was a problem for many, but with this initiative, we are helping clean the environment while earning a living," Anupama reflects.

APFBC's support went beyond technical training. The Business Development, Entrepreneurship Development Programme, and Financial Literacy training helped the group make informed decisions and plan for the future. "We feel more confident about our business," Anupama says. "We know how to manage our finances, set prices, and connect with customers."

They started receiving orders from Banashrishti and they created customised products for the same. They began production early this year and thus far, they were able to earn around Rs. 20,000. This has encouraged the beneficiaries to produce and create more designs to cater to new markets and customers. Further, their zeal is expected to enthuse other women in the area to consider producing water hyacinth products. Initiatives are also being undertaken so that the beneficiaries receive support from NRLM and other bodies.

Today, the group continues to grow and evolve. The success of Anupama Bordoloi and her team is a shining example of how APFBC's interventions can empower forest-dependent communities to thrive sustainably while contributing to conservation efforts. Anupama and her group are not just crafting products; they are crafting a brighter future for themselves and their community.



Anjuma Begum: Turning Water Hyacinth into Artistic Treasures

Anjuma Begum, a 35-year-old female beneficiary from Paschim Singimari, Nagaon Wildlife Division, experienced remarkable advancements in her livelihood through the water hyacinth trade.

Anjuma embarked on her journey of skill enhancement during both Phase I and Phase II of APFBC, where she underwent comprehensive training in working with water hyacinth. With vital resources like a flattening machine, jute, pins, and other equipment supplied by the project, along with Soft Skill Training in Business Development, Entrepreneurship Development Programme, and Financial Literacy, Anjuma acquired the skills and assurance needed to embark on her entrepreneurial journey.

While Anjuma initially possessed basic skills, the training provided by the project significantly enhanced her abilities, enabling her to effectively utilize the equipment provided. Following the conclusion of the project's training phases, Anjuma wasted no time in commencing her production and successfully selling her products locally.

In Phase II of the project, Anjuma took on the role of a Master Trainer for water hyacinth and tailoring, further expanding her skill set and increasing her average monthly income to Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 12,000. She has given training to 7 batches in water hyacinth and the number of trainees was approximately 150. For tailoring she has given training to 7 batches with the number of trainees being approximately 170.

Anjuma has also extended the project's impact by engaging two more beneficiaries in water hyacinth production, collectively earning approximately Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 10,000 per month. This not only contributes to the economic upliftment of the community but also showcases the sustainable livelihood opportunities facilitated by the APFBC project.

Reflecting on her journey, Anjuma shared, "My products are sent to distant places like Arunachal Pradesh. They place orders, and I deliver the products. Initially, when I did tailoring, it was within the village, but now my water hyacinth products reach far and wide. Even the forest department has placed orders and supported me. My income has also increased, and I get orders from different places now. In the coming days, I want to progress further. Now, I'm planning to involve the SHG members and EDC members by training them in this. Then I can take more orders, deliver more, and expand further."

Anjuma Begum's story serves as a compelling testament to the transformative impact of the APFBC project, empowering individuals like her to thrive economically while fostering community development and sustainable livelihoods.



"I was determined to be financially independent, so in 2018, I took tailoring training during Phase I of the project. Now I take orders and make mekhela, sador, and other women's clothing. I bought a machine on my own, and now this is my source of income. In order to further diversify my livelihood portfolio, I took water hyacinth training as well, and now I'm selling various items made from it. This has led to enhancing my income further. My husband, family, and everyone has supported me. Even the forest department has supported a lot, and it's because of them I have come this far."

- Anjuma Begum

Paschim Singimari, Nagaon WL





2.4

***Bamboo Craft Revival:
Preserving Tradition,
Generating Income***

Bamboo Craft Empowerment: Swntwk Rabha and Group's Inspiring Journey

*I*n North Hatibandha, part of the Parbatjhora division, a group of five resilient women found a new source of empowerment through bamboo craft. Led by Swntwk Rabha, this group, with ages ranging from 21 to 35 years, was initially involved in agricultural activities but sought new opportunities for economic growth.

During Phase II of the project, Swntwk Rabha and her companions underwent comprehensive training in bamboo craft. They were provided with essential tools, including drills, hammers, and saws, enabling them to create a variety of intricate bamboo products like Bamboo Earrings, Bamboo Jewellery Stand, Bamboo Pen Stand, Wall Mounted Bamboo Hooks, etc. Beyond the technical skills, the project facilitated connections with various markets through Banashristi, opening doors for these enterprising women to showcase and sell their creations.

Before the training, their livelihoods depended largely on agriculture, which could be uncertain due to weather conditions and market fluctuations. However, bamboo craft emerged as a stable and sustainable source of income. The women began sourcing raw materials independently, crafting various items like baskets, lampshades, and decorative pieces, and catering to both local and broader markets.

Swntwk Rabha shared, "In July, we received bamboo craft training under the project. Today, we take pride in creating a wide variety of bamboo products. With the unwavering support of our village and family, we have successfully supplied our creations to markets in Guwahati, securing a steady and sustainable income for ourselves."

The training included various techniques such as product design, bamboo dye, preservation techniques, and seasoning techniques. The process involved selecting mature bamboo, cutting and harvesting it at the right time, curing and treating it to prevent decay, splitting and shaping it according to design requirements, joining and weaving strips together using traditional techniques, and adding finishing touches like sanding, painting, varnishing, or applying protective coatings.

The group's journey is a testament to the impact of APFBC's interventions, demonstrating how training and market access can lead to economic empowerment and reduced dependency on forest resources. The women have not only improved their livelihoods but also inspired others in their community to explore new opportunities.



"In July, we received bamboo craft training under the project. Today, we take pride in creating a wide variety of bamboo products.

With the unwavering support of our village and family, we have successfully supplied our creations to markets in Guwahati, securing a steady and sustainable income for ourselves."

- Swntwk Rabha

North Hatibandha, Parbatjhora





Juran Ali's Journey to Sustainable Bamboo Craft Production

In the Kokrajhar Wildlife Division, Chakrashila EDC, Giricharan Basumatary, aged 66, and Juran Ali, aged 88, faced the challenge of dwindling returns from agriculture. However, they got the opportunity to diversify their income through bamboo craft, thanks to APFBC's training initiative. Juran says that even though he received very basic idea about bamboo craft from some other trainings previously, it was the training under the project that helped him enhance his skills in this craft.

Joining the training programme, Giricharan and Juran found the experience transformative. With the assistance of the Forest Department, especially in the project's initial phase, they acquired essential skills and tools like chisels and hammers to begin their bamboo craft venture.

Juran Ali reflected on the journey, "The bamboo craft has not only enhanced my livelihood but has also inspired me to share this valuable skill with others in my community. I am committed to teaching bamboo craft to nearby people and contributing to the economic empowerment of our community."

The project's support included basic training and equipment provision, allowing Giricharan and Juran to produce bamboo crafts efficiently.

As per Juran Ali, the training provided detailed guidance and significantly enhanced his skills, unlike previous experiences. Looking ahead, Giricharan and Juran envision further expanding their bamboo craft enterprise, continuing to contribute to their community's economic empowerment with determination and support from APFBC initiatives.





“The bamboo craft has not only enhanced my livelihood but has also inspired me to share this valuable skill with others in my community. I am committed to teaching bamboo craft to nearby people and contributing to the economic empowerment of our community.”

- Juran Ali

Chakrashila EDC, Kokrajhar WL



2.5

Candle Making:

Illuminating Lives

Illuminating Paths: Sonowara Begum's Voyage into Candle Crafting

*I*n Hajo Fakirtola, a small village in the North Kamrup division, a group of women found a new path to economic empowerment through candle making. This journey, led by Sonowara Begum and supported by APFBC, became a beacon of hope for sustainable livelihoods in a region with limited income opportunities.

Before the APFBC initiative, these women, aged between 35 and 45, had very few income generating opportunities to meet their day-to-day expenses. Sonowara Begum realised the need to increase her income to meet rising costs of living. Due to limited sources of income in the location, it became pertinent that she identified a means that was less capital intensive and could offer benefits to her. She also saw that other women were also affected by similar predicaments. Now, Sonowara Begum felt that she had to begin work in a way that was beneficial for her as well as the community.

Sonowara Begum, reflecting on her journey, shared, "We were already familiar with candle making, but the training introduced us to new techniques, particularly in making decorative candles. The trainer was excellent, guiding us through the intricacies of the craft. Additionally, we gained knowledge about obtaining licenses and learned about the importance of conservation efforts."

At this juncture, she also saw that candles were in high demand in the local areas, especially at temples and Poa Mecca. Thus began her quest to learn the craft and she involved other women in her mission. Soon technical training along with a machine and basic raw materials were provided to her group where various aspects of making candles, including ingredients to be used, processes to be adopted and other critical knowledge was disseminated to them. Thereafter, soft skill training on the various facets of conducting business was provided to them.

With the support of APFBC, these enterprising women received basic materials like wax, colour, aroma, cutters, and saucepans, allowing them to explore the art of decorative candle making. The guidance on minimising costs and the introduction of new design variants further enhanced their creativity and marketability. The group's initial production of 100 decorative candles marked the beginning of a promising venture.

Although they were inclined to produce plain candles, they were convinced to produce decorative candles under the project. This is because commonly used candles are priced at about Rs. 2-3 per piece in the market, but owing to their limited capacity, the cost of making such candles would be close to Rs. 11 per piece. Hence, it was explained to them that making value-added decorative candles was viable.

Later, beneficiaries were explained the benefits of using bamboo as a base for the candles. Bamboo is locally available whereas wax costs about Rs. 550 per kg. Thus, the decorative candles made now look more appealing, are less susceptible to breakage and damages and cost less because a lesser quantity of wax is used.

Another USP of the product is that the bamboo base could be used as a pen stand, etc.

Initial orders have been placed from Banashrishti and for the Production Cluster at Guwahati for 150 pieces amounting to Rs. 17,000. This has encouraged the beneficiaries to produce and create more designs so that they can cater more markets.

The impact was immediate. With their newfound skills and marketable products, Sonowara and her companions witnessed a change in their lives. The consistent revenue stream from candle sales provided financial stability, allowing them to meet their families' needs with ease. Sonowara's husband, recognizing her efforts, became a pillar of support, encouraging her to pursue her entrepreneurial dreams.

Moreover, the project's intervention extended beyond skill development. Through linkages with customers under the Guwahati production cluster, Sonowara and her group gained access to broader markets, enhancing their sales potential and boosting their confidence.

Looking ahead, Sonowara envisions expanding their candle-making enterprise, reaching more customers and empowering additional women in their village. She dreams of a future where every woman in Hajo Fakirtola has the opportunity to achieve economic independence and contribute to their community's prosperity.





“We were already familiar with candle making, but the training introduced us to new techniques, particularly in making decorative candles. The trainer was excellent, guiding us through the intricacies of the craft. Additionally, we gained knowledge about obtaining licenses and learned about the importance of conservation efforts.”

- Sonowara Begum

Hajo Fakirtola, North Kamrup

A photograph of five women standing in a room, likely a mushroom cultivation facility. The room has light green walls and a wooden door in the background. Numerous large, round, brownish bags, presumably containing mushroom spawn, are hanging from the ceiling by yellow strings. The women are dressed in traditional Indian attire, including sarees and blouses. The floor is made of light-colored tiles.

2.6

***Mushroom Cultivation:
Nurturing Health and
Generating Income***

Mushroom Maven: Kunjabati Singha and Group

*H*ailing from the quaint Jarultola Forest Village in Silchar Division, Kunjabati Singha stands as a testament to tenacity. Balancing her duties as a homemaker and an Anganwadi Worker, she has committed her life to nurturing her family and serving her community. However, the limited economic prospects within the village presented significant hurdles in securing financial stability for the residents.

However, everything started to shift when Kunjabati and fellow villagers underwent training in mushroom cultivation through the project. “The training presented us with new opportunities,” Kunjabati reflects. Despite initial obstacles, such as acquiring enough seeds for cultivation, the training kindled hope for a brighter future.

With newfound knowledge and support, Kunjabati and her fellow villagers began cultivating mushrooms. The training had a significant impact on their livelihoods. “Thanks to the mushroom cultivation training, our efforts in this have been successful. The regular harvest of mushrooms has not only provided additional income but has also become a source of pride for us,” says Kunjabati with a smile.

However, scaling up their mushroom production poses a challenge. “We are struggling to increase our production,” explains Kunjabati. The primary obstacles include the lack of infrastructure and difficulty in acquiring high-quality mushroom seeds. “Our village faces barriers in obtaining the necessary resources,” she adds. With adequate support, the villagers believe they could significantly expand their production.

Despite these challenges, Kunjabati’s efforts have yielded tangible results. With just 1 kg of mushroom seeds, she can cultivate up to 12 kgs of mushrooms. The income generated has made a notable difference in her life, boosting her confidence and providing financial stability.

Kunjabati’s journey showcases the potential of communities to thrive with the right opportunities. However, to reach their full potential, the beneficiaries need ongoing support in terms of infrastructure and resources. “With proper support, we can make our mushroom cultivation project even bigger,” Kunjabati states with optimism.

Her story is a beacon of hope for other communities facing similar struggles. With the right training, resources, and support, even the most isolated villages can cultivate their own success stories.



“Thanks to the mushroom cultivation training, our efforts in this have been successful. The regular harvest of mushrooms has not only provided additional income but has also become a source of pride for us,”

- Kunjabati Singha
Jarultola, Cachar



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Pickle

2.7

A Flavorful Journey:

Pickle Preparation

Pickle Prodigy: Bishwanath Das's Flavorful Journey

Bishwanath Das, a 55-year-old resident of Murabasti in Nagaon South Division, has become a symbol of transformation, showcasing how skills and training can pave the way for sustainable livelihoods. Thanks to APFBC, Bishwanath transitioned from conventional agriculture to pickle making, demonstrating the profound impact that targeted support and market linkages can have on economic empowerment and forest conservation.

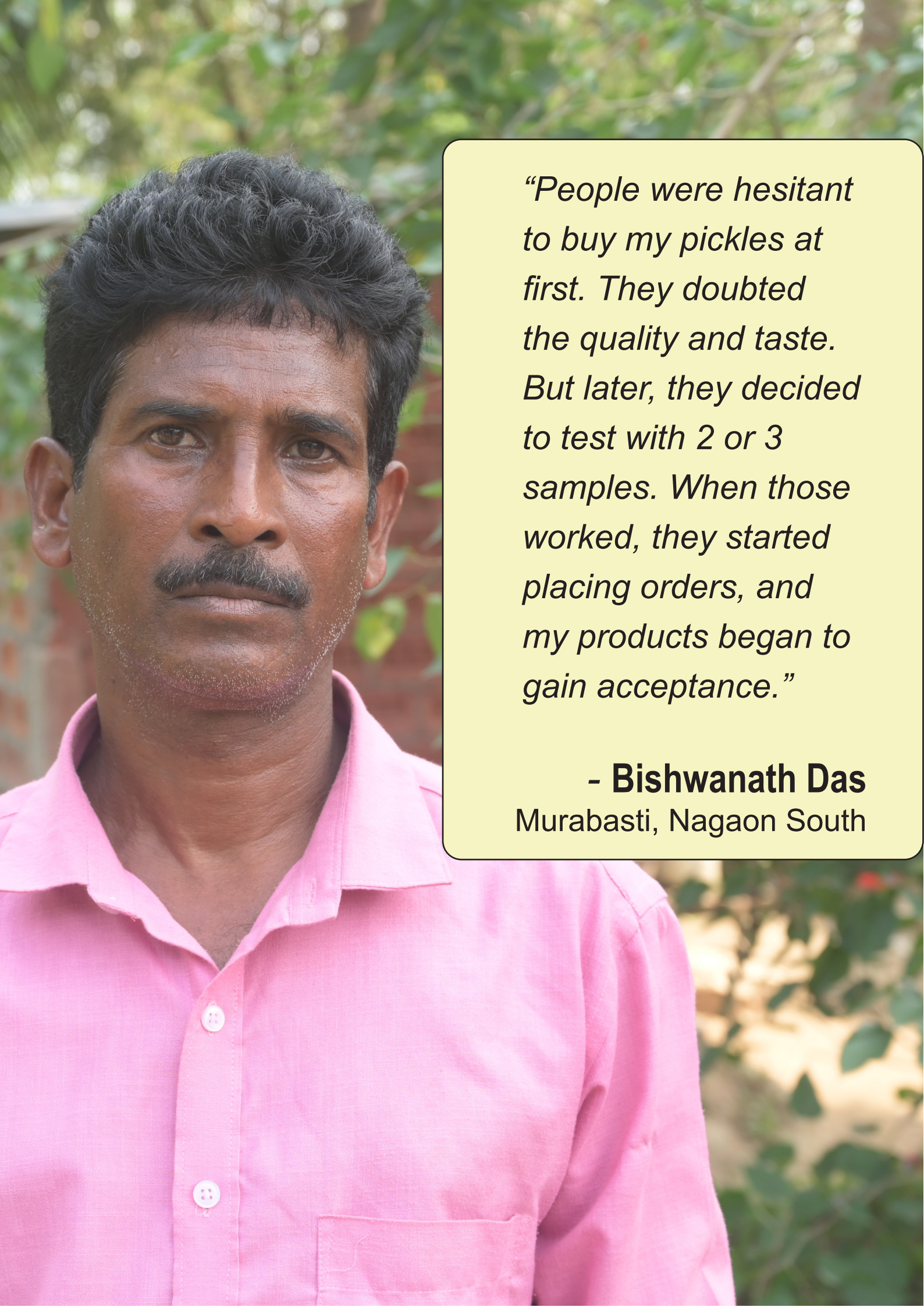
Before the intervention of APFBC, Bishwanath relied solely on vegetable cultivation for income, facing the challenges of fluctuating market prices and limited opportunities for expansion. He explains, "Life was tough, with little room for financial stability. The market for vegetables was unpredictable, making it difficult to plan for the future."

However, with comprehensive training in pickle making during the training held under the project in 2016, his horizons broadened. The project provided him with essential tools, including a mixer grinder, spices, and a variety of fruits and vegetables, empowering him to embark on his new venture. Bishwanath recalls, "The training gave us the skills and resources we needed to start our own pickle-making business. It was a turning point for us." With this foundational support, Bishwanath began producing pickles, exploring local markets near the Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC) and expanding to Lumding and Lanka.

Initially, Bishwanath encountered resistance from customers unwilling to try his products. He says, "People were hesitant to buy my pickles at first. They doubted the quality and taste. But later, they decided to test with 2 or 3 samples. When those worked, they started placing orders, and my products began to gain acceptance." With each successful sale, his confidence grew, and soon, his products gained widespread acceptance. Today, his monthly sales average between Rs. 12,000 and Rs. 15,000, a substantial increase compared to his previous income from vegetable cultivation.

The pivotal role of market linkages facilitated by Banashristi cannot be overstated. These connections provided Bishwanath with a broader platform to sell his products, propelling his business to new heights. Under his brand "Isha Foods," he took charge of branding and packaging, adding a professional touch that resonated with customers. Obtaining FSSAI certification further enhanced his credibility, ensuring quality and trust in his products. The consistent sales have allowed Bishwanath to move beyond local markets, with ambitions to expand his business and explore exporting opportunities.

By diversifying his income sources and reducing reliance on forest resources, he has not only improved his own livelihood but also contributed to sustainable practices and forest conservation. Looking ahead, he envisions expanding his business and involving more people, creating a ripple effect of economic empowerment and sustainable development.



“People were hesitant to buy my pickles at first. They doubted the quality and taste. But later, they decided to test with 2 or 3 samples. When those worked, they started placing orders, and my products began to gain acceptance.”

- Bishwanath Das
Murabasti, Nagaon South





2.8

Sapling Success: Nursery Establishment and Maintenance

Monoj Hira's Journey into Nursery Entrepreneurship

Monoj Hira, a 30-year-old resident of the Gopeshwar Madan Kamdev area in the North Kamrup division of Assam, embodies resilience and adaptation in the face of challenges. Once engaged in agriculture and running a small clothing shop, Monoj's journey took an unexpected turn amidst economic uncertainty heightened by the rise of shopping malls and the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a member of the JFMC, Monoj was no stranger to community-driven initiatives aimed at sustainable forest management. It was through his involvement with the JFMC that he discovered the nursery training program under APFBC and embarked on a journey towards nursery entrepreneurship.

Through APFBC's nursery training, Monoj gained a holistic understanding of nursery management practices, from nurturing plant species to soil enrichment and pest control. The training enriched him with new techniques like air layering or grafting. "Despite skepticism from peers, I remained resolute in my determination to embrace change and explore new avenues for livelihood enhancement," he explains. With newfound knowledge, he established his own nursery near the Madan Kamdev Temple, cultivating a diverse array of plant species.

Despite initial hurdles, Monoj's perseverance paid off when he secured a significant order for 2500 saplings from the forest department. Over time, Monoj's nursery witnessed steady growth, with sales figures reaching Rs. 10,000 for every 1000 saplings sold. He now explores expansion opportunities, aiming to diversify his offerings and broaden his entrepreneurial horizons. With meticulous care and dedication, he commenced the cultivation of a diverse array of plant species, including Radhasura, Krishnasura, Bokul, Sunaru, Mango, Neem, Jamun, and more.

Reflecting on his journey, Monoj acknowledges the transformative impact of APFBC. "APFBC's support has been a game-changer for me, opening up new opportunities in nursery management and helping me find a fresh path in life."

Monoj Hira's inspiring journey exemplifies the potential for individuals to carve out a path to prosperity through resilience and community support. As he nurtures his nursery enterprise, Monoj stands as a beacon of hope, inspiring others to pursue their dreams amidst adversity.





“APFBC’s support has been a game-changer for me, opening up new opportunities in nursery management and helping me find a fresh path in life.”

- Monoj Hira

Gopeshwar Madan Kamdev,
North Kamrup

Paths Beyond the Forest:

Empowering Assam's Forest-Fringe Communities for Sustainable Livelihoods through Assam Project on Forest and Biodiversity Conservation



