



Editorial

Rural Women and Environment in *Thar* Desert

We celebrated international women day on 8th March and the month of March, 2014 was designated as international women month. I thought that I should pen down some things regarding rural women and environment, especially in context of agroforestry in *Thar* desert. The image of desert one has of the vegetation less, dense unbroken mantle of sand and inaccessible terrain condition, however, shattered upon entering the *Thar* desert in most of the parts barring extreme western fringes. Sparsely distributed trees and other woody taxa within underneath growth of arable crops (especially during *Kharif* season, as agriculture is pre-dominantly rained) and / or grasses in long stretches interspersed with distantly distributed village settlements and *Dhanis* (a unique settlement pattern characterises of *Thar* desert, meant for living of agriculturists families during active cropping period away from the villages but, nearby their crop fields) are actual features of the region. Perhaps no other group is affected by environmental degradation than poor village women in the beautiful *Thar* desert, which is otherwise more natural resource rich than any desert in the world. As more people are competing for continuously diminishing resources in *Thar* desert, women folk find that, each day they must walk far from their *Dhanis* in search of water, fuel wood, leaf fodder and other minor tree produce for the fulfilment of their livelihood needs. These extra distances not only adds to their physical burden, but also leave less time for looking after the families and farm production activities, which is the primary source of food supply to households. Due to ever increasing human and livestock population and associated demands, the long march becomes even much longer and highly tiresome. Availability of fodder and fuel wood is closely linked with quality of life of rural women in this part of the country. A publication in *Journal of Tropical Forest Products* in vol. 9(1&2): 2003 on fuel wood demand and supply in a rural landscape in *Thar* desert indicated a deficit of 26.9% which was supposed to reach 50% by 2010. In such scenario restoring tree component in traditional agroforestry systems of *Thar* desert is not only crucial for any lasting improvement in women's development but it will be fundamental in the move towards sustainable development.

The traditional agroforestry systems of *Thar* desert were very rich in tree component some four to five decades back. Rapid growth in population has led to heavy degradation of tree component in these systems and moreover, ups and down in subsistent agricultural activity of the region in recent climate change scenario added fuel to the fire. Women are more close to natural resources and thus, are more knowledgeable than men in this respect. Knowledge of feed value of different fodder tree species, the fuel value of fire wood types, and of food products and species is essential to agroforestry practices in which women are predominantly active. However, this knowledge bank can remain idle if women are not completely involved in planning and implementation of agroforestry programmes in *Thar* desert. I have strong feeling with my 29 years experience in the field of hot arid zone agroforestry R&D that in a specific situation women's initiative may leave to an improvement in the environment as well as their empowerment, and therefore, women's participation may not be underestimated in any agroforestry related programme.

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