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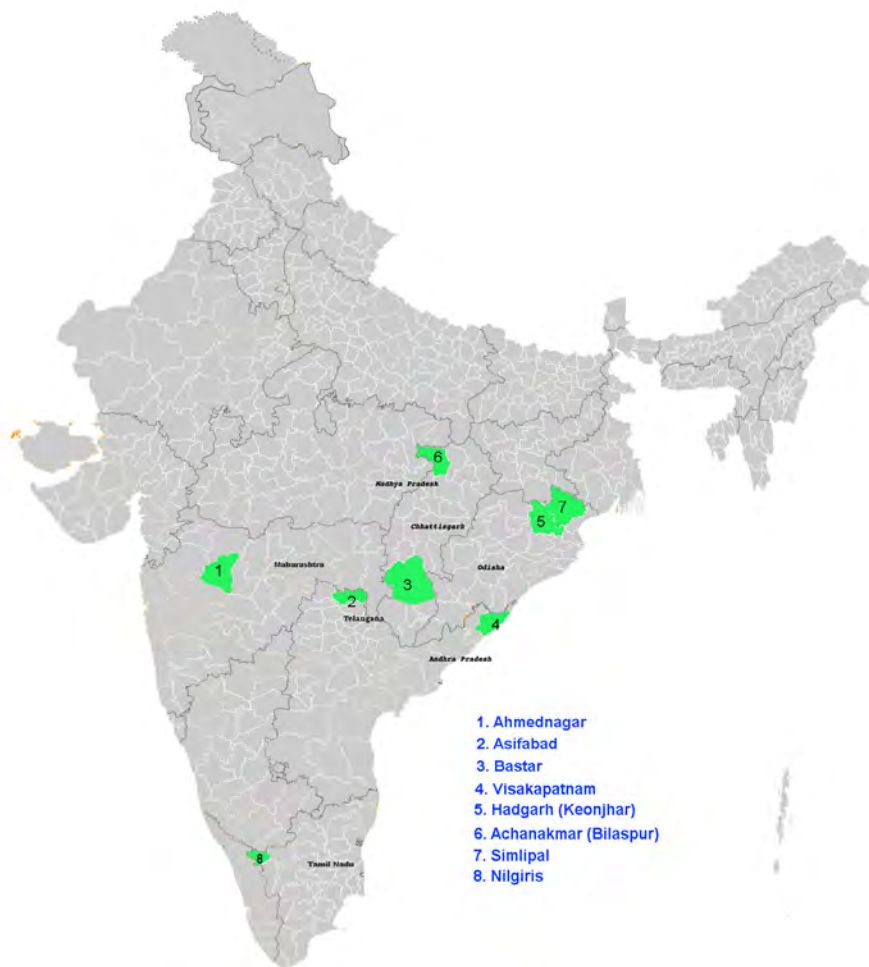


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Editorial

In these times of “the twenty-four-hour news cycle and the need to constantly churn out imagery without much reflection”¹ it is essential to practice Slow Journalism, in the lines of the Slow Food movement. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether all relevant news makes the mainstream nowadays, with the corporate sector and the state dictating what may be published. We may question the idea of relevance. Fortunately, with the mobile-phone camera, almost everyone can be a citizen journalist, and bring to us news from the ground. In fact, many photo-journalists have switched from their professional cameras and equipment to phone-cameras to experience, and mimic, ‘journalism from the ground’. This issue is covers ground news about the insecurity of land tenure among adivasi peoples.

India’s forest peoples face regular threats of relocation from their ancestral lands as they live in regions deemed Tiger Reserves or wildlife sanctuaries. This is a serious and unfortunate circumstance, as such places are the habitats where tigers and other wild life thrive. And there is no denying that such landscapes are shrinking. For instance, vast areas of Asifabad district are prime tiger habitats and have been cleared for cotton cultivation. These are “tribal lands” where the Forest Rights Act may be evoked to claim Community Forest Resource Rights for the people. But there is little evidence here of that adivasi sensitivity (to the forest) that can justify such a claim. But there is more to it than meets the eye. The present state of affairs among the adivasi

communities here is the result of decades of land alienation, colonial and post-colonial neglect, of benami land holdings and the cultivation of cash crops, of middlemen and exploitation. Today these realities are exploited by local politicians to pit the people against the administration.

There are also adivasi communities, as in Bastar and in Hadgarh, that are proactive in protecting what they see as their forest, even at the cost of antagonizing the state administration. In these areas as well as in Mayurbhanj and Achanakmar, the state has not addressed the claims of the tribal people according to the FRA. In fact, often-times the forest department (and conservation groups) have looked away while the people have fought for their forests! As when a coal company seeks to mine in a proposed elephant reserve in Surguja; when the river-linking project submerges more than 600 sq kms of forests in Panna Tiger Reserve; or when thousands of hectares of forests – including in protected areas – are being felled to implement the Bharatmala Pariyojana, a vanity-project that prefers economic corridors to tiger corridors. The last will also destroy hundreds of water bodies, including rivers, and displaces thousands of homes in its wake.

The updates in this issue show how difficult it is to have a fair opinion about how the FRA has been implemented, as adivasi people in different circumstances behave and relate differently to the forest. One needs to be extremely sensitive and patient to work out conservation plans

that help the adivasi, the forests and the wild life. It is necessary to break free from stereotypes, and of using past mistakes in colonial forestry to justify an action today: supporting the clearance of forest tracts for cotton farming, as an inherent adivasi ‘right’ falls in this category. One hopes for more of such ground-level news that inform us about the nuances that influence forest conservation and adivasi rights. It is the time of the citizen-journalist.

Madhu Ramnath
March, 2021

¹Ritchin, Fred: *Bending the Frame; Photojournalism, Documentary and the Citizen*. Aperture, N.Y, 2013

Bringing the millet's back!

Ritwick Charles¹



“Loss of livelihoods” was a phrase that echoed across urban centers in the country during the pandemic-induced lock-downs. Ill-planned as it was, the lockdown largely affected daily wage and casual workers. Despite the devastating consequences, many people managed to overcome the impediments through sheer perseverance; aid from compassionate citizens and NGO's also helped.

In the Nilgiris the indigenous and marginalized communities were no exception. Lack of access to essential services, food availability, and surging prices adversely

affected the communities Keystone Foundation works with. Fortunately, there were donors whose acquiescence allowed the use funds solicited for other interventions for Covid relief work. But it was necessary that the interventions were not transient.

Keystone tried to address this issue of access by reviving the production of millet's in these landscapes, going by the households who have access to farmland. Keystone envisaged two outcomes: livelihood-security through the production and sales of millet's, and food and nutritional-security through

consumption of millet's.

Though millets have been part of the peoples' culture, over time, this has fallen by the wayside and most communities are highly dependent on the PDS.

Before Keystone revived it millets had not been grown at this scale. The younger generation, with ample time at hand, were eagerly involved in the cultivation along with their elders. And there were stories. We heard how they became engrossed in traditional agriculture, which they had not paid much heed to.

“They watched parents leave early in the

morning to go to their fields. Then, gradually, they began observing the what their parents do in their field, and in a week or so they gave their parents a hand started learning from their parents” says Kannan. Kannan is a young Irula man and he was elated to witness people his age finding their way back to community life, a life deeply and richly interwoven with their lands.

By late March, close to 1200 farmers received seed and other agri-related support, across five regions (Aracode, Konavakarai, Hasanur, Pillur and Sigur). Lands were cleared, spiritual traditions were carried out, parani's were built, and seeds sown. Small kitchen gardens were set up around the parani, as many of them preferred staying. Acres of fallow lands were utilized and a new normal emerged.

After four months, green millet plants stood tall, shimmering with beautiful brown clusters of grain. Juxtaposing this scenario with the grim situation at the beginning of the lock-downs was truly reassuring, for us and for the community. We realized how regional food supply can be encouraged when communities are allowed to use their lands.

By July, 6-8 tons of Foxtail, Ragi & little millet's were harvested across the five regions. Indigenous families stocked up half of their harvests for self consumption, some were traded among themselves and the remaining was procured by Aadhimalai Farmer Producer Company. The erratic weather post-July slightly affected the second harvest in Aracode and Konvakarai.

While in the millet fields families also reported extensive use of wild foods. Greens, tubers and fruits were added to their diets. Honey and bee larvae, and fish from fresh water streams were also included. Many families spent nights singing songs while roasting corn over open fires. Sharing stories, food and getting time to spend together brought the community closer.

The adivasi ship has been steered in the right direction but the challenge remains whether this will last, whether the new-found idea of self-sufficiency will remain. Perhaps, the production of millet's can

be ensured through the establishment of community seed banks. But it seems most important that empowering communities to pursue the Forest Rights Act for tenure security will pave an easier path towards promoting resilient future food systems.



¹ Ritwick works with the Keystone Foundation, Tamil Nadu.

The travails of a Baiga village in Achanakmar Tiger Reserve

Ajikya Ukey¹

Talaidabra is a village in the core area of the Achanakmar Tiger Reserve and falls under the Chhapra Gram Panchayat. The village has a total population of 208 (110 male and 98 female) of which 77 families have ration cards. 90% of the population are Baiga.

In 2009-10, 249 families from 6 villages were displaced from the Tiger Reserve; even today these people have not received all the facilities they are due and were promised from the forest department. However, on paper, all the schemes and provisions are shown to have been provided!

Talaidabra is located quite far from any town or health centre; there is nothing for a radius of about 50 kms. Not only this but the people are also unable to meet their own relatives as the main path within the Tiger Reserve has manned checkpoints. Even people who travel to visit their relatives during festivals or other events, such as marriages or death, are stopped and questioned by the forest department. These hurdles have become so much that many people have stopped visiting their relatives in Talaidabra. This state of affairs has also affected commerce. As their main source of livelihood is the collection and sale of NTFPs they face the problem of transporting these to the market. Big traders too are unable to reach their village due to the barrier in the Reserve, all resulting in them getting much less for their produce than what it is worth.

The people of Talaidabra have received lands claimed under the Individual Forest Rights of the Forest Rights Act,



though not as much as they had applied for. In these lands farming is difficult as they face the problem of wild animals damaging their crops. Along with this the forest department continues to pressurize them to relocate, making the offer of Rs 10 lakhs as a compensation package for all adults above 18 years of age. The Baiga resist this offer as they have seen the state of their people from the 6 villages mentioned above: these people are not allowed to gather and sell any NTFPs from the forest, and forced to migrate elsewhere for work. According to the people, each year since 2009 they are made to sign a No Objection Certificate by the forest department, apparently to be used for a future relocation.

Though no proper gram sabha has been held the sarpanch and the panchayat secretary, along with some forest department officials conduct meetings

of which little is known to the people. These are usually about relocation and the new sites where the people will be shifted to. However, according to a recently published document (October 2020) of the Chhattisgarh government, no relocation may take place unless it is accepted by the Gram Sabha. The 77 families of the Baiga – known as the adopted sons’ of the President of India – are now in a dilemma: will they be relocated or given habitat rights according to the Forest Rights Act?

Is the habitat of the tiger more important than the habitat of the Baiga?



¹ Ajikya Ukey works with PRERAK in Chhattisgarh

Conversion of forest villages into revenue villages

Pravat Kumar Mishra¹

Odisha has more than 1000 “forest villages”, unsurveyed villages and villages within the forest, and these villages are not recorded anywhere. No government development plans or programmes happen in these places. However, the people in these villages vote in the elections, and avail of the PDS from the nearby Gram Panchayats. But they live a life removed from the rest of the country as they cannot exercise some fundamental rights.

For the first time, the Forest Rights Act, 2006, made a provision for converting ‘forest villages’ into ‘revenue villages’. These villages would then be able to plan their development goals, and could avail relevant facilities, schemes and programmes. They can also actively take part in forest protection, conservation and management, as it is their life and livelihood. As this conversion of forest villages into revenue villages is a legal process, RCDC decided to facilitate at the community level, and mediate between the administration and the respective Gramsabha.

Twenty villages, including nine ‘forest villages’ in Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj constituted CFR Management Committees as per section 4.1(e) of the FRA Rule 2019. These committees all have 15 members as in the case of Forest Rights Committees (FRCs). The Gramsabhas have prepared Village Rules for the Protection, Regeneration, Conservation and the Management of the CFR areas.

These communities mentioned above have a very interesting and traditional

method of protecting the forest produce. Sumitra Poida said that when they go to the forest to collect NTFP and see any outsider either cutting trees or collecting NTFP, they immediately inform our community. The first step is stopping and confiscating whatever was being illegally taken, and bringing the culprit to the village, and warned. If the same mistake is repeated, then these persons are fined or handed over to the forest department or the police. There are also some changes in practices and rules, made at the village level to protect and conserve the forest, attested by all the villagers. Sumitra Poida continued, “Forest fire is very common from December to May. So, we are extra vigilant around that time. We have also stopped clearing weeds and leaves by burning under the mahua trees before collecting the flowers. Instead, we clean the ground for easy collection of mahua flowers. We have made regulations in our village prohibiting other villagers from entering our forest without our permission.”

Indiscriminate grazing is strictly prohibited. Cattle are grazed together (in Gotha) to a particular patch for grazing. Green felling is also banned and only dried, wind fallen trees are used for fuel wood. Fuel wood selling is banned. Women can collect climbers and creepers that are harmful for trees. Animal hunting is strictly banned and in this respect the villagers are supporting and informing the forest department as they live within a tiger reserve. According to Chandramani, the villagers are getting meat at least twice a month thanks to the tiger;

the leftovers of the animal killed by the tiger is collected and distributed by the villagers.

Besides all this, community nurseries have been established in two locations and plants distributed among the people. Each family got at least 5-10 plants which they planted in their backyards. These nascent initiatives of the community are steps towards conserving biodiversity and the communities should be rewarded instead of being harassed and threatened with relocation.

¹ Pravat Kumar Mishra is with the Regional Centre for Development Cooperation, Odisha

The uncertain path of community forest rights: conservation prevails despite official apathy

Deepak Pani¹

Mayurbhanj is one of the forested districts of Odisha located at the northern end of the state, and borders Jharkhand and West Bengal. The Adivasi population constitutes 57% of 2.5 million people; and 44% of the total geographical area (10624 sqkms) of the district is forested. This includes the Similipal Biosphere Reserve, the Similipal Tiger Reserve, and areas designated as wildlife sanctuary and Elephant Reserve. The lives and livelihoods of a significant part of the population depend on the forest for food, income, medicine and culture.

As in other tribal areas of India, the Adivasis and other forest dwelling communities aspired to secure their forest rights through the Forest Rights Act.

Gram Swaraj facilitated this process with the forest dwelling communities and their institutions. The journey began in 2009 with the spreading of the message of Forest Rights Act, to bring about the Act to the facilitators within communities. Gram Swaraj supported the Gram Sabha members in making the claims for securing the rights envisaged in Forest Rights Act. Emphasis was given to the Community Forest Rights (CFR).

By 2013, 70 CFR claims were submitted by 69 Gram Sabhas, of which 22 claims are recognised by the DLC (District Level Committee); in 2016 the rest of the claims (47) are still pending at the level of SDLC (Sub-Divisional level Committee). In 2014, management plans of 20

CFRs were prepared, including both short and long term management plans of the forest, taking into account the communities requirement and ecological restoration. The people used their traditional knowledge in preparing these plans. The plans included the conservation and consumption of wild foods, the collection of NTFPs for consumption and trade, restoration of water bodies for humans and wildlife, the conservation and propagation of endangered species, and wildlife management. In addition, the conservation of native agricultural crops, and the rejuvenation of rituals, music, and local health traditions, are the important components were also included. The focus was on holistic development of the village and



the conservation of biodiversity.

In 2015, Gram Swaraj was a part of an initiative for claiming Habitat Rights for the Mankdia communities. The Mankdia, Khadia and the Lodha communities are classified as Primitive and Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), living in Mayurbhanj district. Such communities have been suffering from the deprivation of their entitlements. They lack the confidence to claim their rights; in addition, most Khadia and Mankdia people are psychologically unable to deal with mainstream society. The Lodha community, on the other hand, suffer from social stigma since historical times, though some of them are gradually practicing agriculture. However, for a majority of the PVTGs, the forest is their mainstay and they choose to live close to them in the Similipal Biosphere Reserve. During mid-2016 the Habitat Rights claim was submitted but the rights are yet to be recognised by DLC, Mayurbhanj. In 2017, another 424 villages were covered to implement Forest Rights Act, with a focus on facilitating claim submissions for the CFR areas. Over the last three years 216 CFR claims were submitted for recognition: none of these claims have been recognized by the DLC. In 2019, the process was initiated for the Habitat Rights claim of the Lodha communities, another PVTG living in Mayurbhanj district. These too have been futile with none of the Gram Sabhas receiving their entitlements, despite the approval of DLC.

However, one feels that the processes of last eight years has created many positive impacts. A major result is the conservation of huge tracts of forest by the communities, strengthened during preparations for claim submission. A rough estimate of the CFR areas claimed is one lakh hectares; these forests have been rejuvenated, resulting in the restoration of water and biodiversity.

One hopes that sooner or later the peoples forest will be handed over to the

communities, heralding a radical departure from the centralised management to democratic forest governance.

¹ Deepak Pani is with Gram Swaraj, Odisha

Pravat Kumar Mishra¹

voluntary relocation. But the villagers have refused to leave the place of their ancestors.

As these are not revenue villages, the people do not have any development facilities. These villages are “Forest Villages” and are in the process of applying to the administration for conversion of these forest villages into revenue villages. However, this process can only be initiated after a proclamation letter by the District Collector. Despite repeated requests and meetings with the Collector twice in the grievance cell, no initiative has been taken to initiate this process.

While the process of getting their rights under the Forest Rights Act is being stone walled the forest department has

development work.

Such restrictions for entry into the sanctuary is seriously affecting community life. Their livelihood is affected without the traders; this area is well known for jackfruit, yam, mangoes and green vegetables, as well as fish caught from the Hadgarh reservoir. The people now have to carry these produce to markets outside the sanctuary and have less bargaining power. No developmental activities have been undertaken in these villages since last six months.

The forest department staff are luring the villagers to apply for voluntary relocation. The department was able to motivate 35 families of Pitanaou to relocate to Jhanjhana, near Dhenka; apparently, each of the adults have got a deposit

of the village and letters were sent to all relevant officials by registered post. That is why they boycotted this meeting whose main purpose was to discuss their relocation.

The carrot and the stick has, between them, left the villagers with no option but to petition the Governor of the State to come to their rescue. They have complained about the violation of their human and constitutional rights posed by impending displacement. The residents of these four villages have demanded development facilities for their villages and the right to stay in the land of their ancestors. They were first displaced for the Hadgarh reservoir and, as they were not properly rehabilitated, they moved into the forests. Now the effort is to displace them for the second time to make space for the elephants and other wild life. But the people say that the coexistence between them and wild animals is possible without conflict. Why should the forest department displace them?



Gram sabha against relocation

been using all possible means to displace the villagers and make the sanctuary inviolate. The villagers are being lured with a compensation of Rs 10 lakhs per individual adults. Other tactics employed by the department are preventing the entry of traders, relatives of the villagers, trucks and tractors carrying materials for house construction from entering the sanctuary. No explanation for such action is forthcoming from the department, and even the Block Development Officer (BDO) is helpless in carrying forward any infrastructure

on Rs 10 lakhs in their bank accounts, as fixed deposits. The department also been able to convince another 16 families, with the BDO calling for a special Gram Sabha on 1st December, 2020, to know how many more people would like to relocate. The people outside these 16 families boycotted the Gram Sabha; it was their response to the BDO's call. No official came to the Gram Sabha called by the community on the 27th December, 2020. This was to discuss the development challenges

¹ Pravat Kumar Mishra is with the Regional Centre for Development Cooperation, Odisha

Updates from the Sahayadri

Vijay Sambare¹

Since the pandemic began Lokpanchayat focused their work around the communities, taking up all kinds of work that were immediately relevant as well some with a long-term vision.

VAN DHAN VIKAS KENDRA

This is a new opportunity with TRIFED and Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Lokpanchayat is initiating the formation of Van Dhan Vikas Kendras in their working areas with 300 NTFP harvesting (including value addition) families. The main NTFPs are like Harda, Honey, Bamboo, Jamun, etc. This is a part of Van Dhan Vikas Kendra's capacity building process, happening in 13 Adivasi districts in Maharashtra. The Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) has appointed Sarang Pande and Vijay Sambare (Lokpanchayat) as Master Trainers. In three months more than 12 workshops were organized on 'Enterprise Development and Skill' for the associated groups. There are more opportunities and challenges in the process in the Konkan region, the Sahyadri landscape and also in typical central Indian forest terrain in Gondia and Gadchiroli districts neighboring Bastar district of Chhattisgarh.

INCORPORATION OF DANGI CATTLE BREEDERS ASSOCIATION

Lokpanchayat is working on indigenous crop and livestock diversity conservation as a core initiative in the northern Sahyadris. The Dangi is an indigenous cattle breed spread across the 13 blocks of 7 districts in Maharashtra and Gujarat. Over the last two decades the Dangi breed declined rapidly from the Kalasubai and Harishchandragad landscapes. Lokpanchayat has started a community-centric action research, survey and mapping, documentation and demonstrations for reviving the Dangi Cattle System.

As part of conservation work, the Dangi Breeders association was incorporated with the leadership of Adivasi cattle keepers, with the objective of developing and strengthening livelihood and enterprise of such Adivasi families in the northern Sahyadri.

BAHINA PROJECT FOR DESTITUTE AND SINGLE WOMEN

The BAHINA began the core objective of creating social safeguards for destitute women, with the support of Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiative. The women are provided legal and livelihood support through the Mahila Adhar Kendra formed by Lokpanchayat. A Livelihood Resource Centre has also been initiated to develop multiple skills among single women.

SHORT STAY HOME

Most women and children who returned home during the Covid 19 pandemic faced domestic violence. Lokpanchayat took it as a priority to make them feel safe and at home by giving them emotional and mental support. Counseling played a big part in achieving this. Once they feel stable, they were given a daily schedule that included exercise, voluntary work, livelihood training, play sessions, day care and, most importantly, healthy meals.

LIVELIHOOD RESOURCE CENTER

The women who show interest in livelihood training are trained by professionals in sewing, handicrafts, and computers. The Livelihood Resource Center has been making and distributing masks during the Covid-19 pandemic. The women have sold 2031 masks and 760 cotton bags between July and December 2020; they are now manufacturing petticoats as well. In November, 2020 a few women got financial support by



Van Dhan Kendra workshop

making and selling Diwali snacks. In the near future, we plan to work in the food processing and catering business. Some of the women got jobs in the organization itself; however they still face the lack of a decent living environment at their workplace.

BALIRAJA FPO AND NIRMITI WOMEN COOPERATIVE FOR EXPLORING NICHE MARKETING

Both these organizations promote niche marketing and develop entrepreneurship among forest and farming communities. The Baliraja Krushak Producer Company works with farmers groups and NTFP harvesting groups to get market linkages for value-added products.

VISIT TO PRERAK, RAJIM (C.G.)

PRERAK is a nonprofit organization and works with Adivasi people in Gariyaband district in Chhattisgarh, and is a network partner of NTFP-EP India. During January 2021 Sarang and Vijay of Lokpanchayat visited PRERAK's SAKSHAM campus in Rajim, and also some villages and hamlets where PRERAK works. Other activities taken up by PRERAK that Lokpanchayat was exposed to were the residential school for disabled children and the Indigenous Seed Bank and Exchange Centre.



PRERAK C.G. field visit

The Nirmiti Women Industrial Cooperative is engaged with women farmers and facilitates enterprise development; a bakery unit also a part of the Nirmiti cooperative, where millet and grain cookies are produced. All these products are selling the brand names FOREST FIRST and FARM FIRST.

The Maharashtra state government has sanctioned a SMART project (funded by World Bank) to strengthen backward and forward linkages of Baliraja FPO and Nirmiti cooperative.

¹ Vijay Sambare is with Lokpanchayat, Maharashtra

Mission in Telengana: field noted

Madhu Ramnath



Forest landscape in Asifabad.

The NTFP Forum was invited to the district by the Forest Department to visit some selected villages in both Asifabad and Kaghaznagar Divisions to suggest solutions to some of the issues mentioned below. The team which represented the Forum comprised of Navi Umed, Kovel Foundation, LEAF, Elly Oenema, Ashish and myself.

1. Vast areas have come under cotton cultivation around villages, much of it an encroachment into reserve forests and even outside the areas that may be claimed through the FRA. These monoculture landscape has brought about a kind “monoculture” of lifestyle, with the communities having few activities outside the world of cotton. Very few other crops are cultivated and almost all other necessities are brought in from the outside to supplement what is available from the PDS.

2. Improve the livelihood options of the people and to see whether lands where cotton is cultivated can be converted

into forests and the CFR claimed by the people. This would also help with preserving the landscape of the Kawal Tiger Reserve and the tiger corridor; over the last 4 months there have been two tiger kills in the region, possibly due to shrinking habitats or disturbance of their territory.

3. Find ways for the Forest Department to make appropriate interventions that will improve relations with the local communities of tribal people (Kollams, Gonds, Lambada, Nayakpod and other castes). These may involve education programmes, joint efforts on nurseries and planting, or assistance in NTFP marketing. The NTFP Forum has begun with a skill development programme based on bamboo; it was agreed that the administration will support the travel and stay of a group of youth from a village in Kaghaznagar Division (Manikpatar) to adjacent Maharashtra, where Navi Umed will train them in making bamboo furniture.

A detailed report has been written and sent off to the Forest Department. It will also be available on our website.



Discussing the water problem in Manikpatar village

Exploring Traditional Knowledge: what is it?

Madhu Ramnath

The term 'traditional knowledge' has become a part of the all levels of development-speak, receiving attention from the international/United Nations as well as the national policy-makers. It is now understood that traditional knowledge (of indigenous peoples) is a valuable asset, and that it may contribute to a better understanding and conservation of our environment. This makes traditional knowledge something to be promoted; while working with indigenous and rural communities it may be more fruitful if we listen to how these communities observe and understand their environs, rather than impose our modern-science derived views and answers to their problems.

Taking this a little further, in most cases, traditional knowledge is treated as only contextually valid, without much relevance at a wider level. That is to say that the various skills that are necessary to go about the business of life in a forest setting, such as making leaf-cups, constructing a shelter, chopping wood, identifying natural fish-poisons, working on bamboo, fashioning a flute, laws that govern the harvest of a fruit, or making a rat-trap, are not universally sought-after skills. Instead, these skills are by and large perceived to be of marginal utility and, for the most part, treated as such. Such knowledge and skills are at best documented, usually with a camera, by people who work with such communities (or by film-makers). However, such documentation seldom crosses over into the actual learning of such skills by people outside these communities or enhancing the transfer of such knowled-

ge within communities, which is the true act of valuing such skills and knowledge.

The Convention for Biological Diversity (CBD) defines traditional knowledge as:

Knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities around the world. Developed from experience gained over the centuries and adapted to the local culture and environment, traditional knowledge is transmitted orally from generation to generation. It tends to be collectively owned and takes the form of stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language and agricultural practices, including the development of plant species and animal breeds. Traditional knowledge is mainly of a practical nature, particularly in such fields as agriculture, fisheries, health, horticulture, forestry and environmental management in general.

I have emphasized 'practical nature', a concept I would like to go further into in this note. In the same document of the CBD, embodied in Article 8 (j), we have suggestions for a future direction to establish mechanisms to ensure the effective participation of indigenous and local communities in decision-making and policy planning;

- to respect, preserve and maintain traditional knowledge relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity;
- to promote its wider application with the approval and involvement of the

indigenous and local communities concerned; and

- to encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of such traditional knowledge.

Two issues stand out in the way traditional knowledge is being approached: a) how does one use this knowledge in our present crisis situation (global warming, food and water insecurity, species loss, increasing strains of malevolent virus strains, habitat loss) to find ways out of the problems (drought resilient crops, new medicine, food supplements, carbon sequestration) and b) how can we ensure that this knowledge, held by a small population of indigenous and rural communities, is kept alive and passed on, within these communities and (with their consent) wider on. A crucial gap in the above definition of traditional knowledge is the absence of proscribed behaviour: when one may not harvest certain plants, when one may not hunt or fish, spaces one may not violate at any cost. Proscription is a very important part of all such traditional knowledge and behaviour which, if read carefully, is a recognition of the ecological precipices that human society has been faced with, and has learned to back off from. Unfortunately, the definition we have from the CBD is more a list of skills and techniques that may be capitalized upon and paid for 'equitably'. It comes from a society where prescriptions rule (what I may do, not may not do), which is the crux of the problem. Also, how will

we decide what is meant by 'equitable' is in such a historical-contemporary context?

Without meaning to be sceptical, it is worth asking why indigenous communities should oblige 'us'; and why should they consider their habitats as 'world heritage' sites?

One of the questions that needs to be answered when dealing with traditional knowledge is the context within which it is valid. At present, it is treated as if its value is limited to certain people and their habitats (even though the communities concerned seldom discuss this); there is, for instance, no attempt by anyone to extend a traditional law beyond the boundary of the community. As an example, it would mean that wherever the wild mango is found in Chhattisgarh (or India) it is harvested only after its seeds are mature for regeneration. And that, in a nutshell, we follow the principles of regeneration, which traditional communities point out.

The other questions are more contentious. Is traditional knowledge only confined to indigenous and rural societies in the global south and a few communities in the north? Where does one place the economically powerful societies of northern Europe, North America, Australia, etc., in the way they presently deal with traditional knowledge? Has any Sami, Maori, Native American, or Australian Aborigine knowledge been acknowledged and incorporated in their larger (national) society? Or, has such knowledge been validated but deemed feasible only in select habitats and communities, while the greater population continues as before? As we speak, indigenous and forest-based communities are being edged out of their homelands and territories; many are forced to leave and seek out a future elsewhere, as cheap wage-labour, usually in urban settings far removed from environments familiar to them. And such people carry away the knowledge that could be useful to

their people as well as to the rest of humanity.

What is imperative to acknowledge is that traditional knowledge is another way of seeing and understanding the world, that reality can be experienced in different ways, and that no one way is correct at the expense of others. A new way of understanding the same reality might offer solutions to problems we thought did not exist. However, what do we do when traditional knowledge contradicts or goes against modern norms, especially in the realm of the intangible, like sacred groves and certain belief systems? In particular, one needs to save traditional knowledge falling into the trap of 'fuzzy logic', where everything 'traditional' is correct and admirable, which would put it in the wrong light in the long run. Simultaneously, we need to encourage all challenges to traditional knowledge, especially with scientific views, as that will enhance a healthy respect for indigenous peoples as a whole, and create circumstances for a better world that engages with multiple ways of understanding reality.

As mentioned in the earlier notes on this subject, traditional knowledge is something quite 'popular' as well as something recognized as necessary and needing promotion. The Convention on Biological Diversity gives it a prominent place as do many other institutions which include donors, civil society groups, state governments, and even international banks. This is quite unfortunate. Because very few of these bodies have the ability or the will to delve into such a subtle but profound area though they have the influence to dominate the discussion, as is shown by the CBD definition. In short, the 'material' content is isolated from the whole (of knowledge) in these deliberations. For instance, ethno-botany, the study of the use of plants, is not embedded in the larger scope and scheme of the indi-

genous culture that it belongs to but becomes a field in its own right, generating everything from plant lists to heads of departments but, sadly, having little in common with the traditional knowledge we seek. An approximate analogy would be the isolation (and use) of cocaine in place of chewing the entire coca leaf, something which the indigenous people in the Peruvian Amazon did to overcome fatigue, when they walked long distances, in a pleasant state of mind!

Over the years many traditional practices, like shifting cultivation, were shown to be ecologically sound, and that when fallows are given sufficient time to recover, there was little danger of soil degradation and biodiversity loss. As with hunting traditions, especially honey hunting, which made clear that indigenous communities knew exactly the stages in the process that led from bee-forage to the mature honey that they looked for. Such traditions were not simple livelihood practices but embedded in a cosmology in which the land and the bee and humans and earth-cycles all played a part, and which linked every small aspect of these activities to each other, through time. In fact, the kinship traditions and the landscapes mentioned earlier are a part of these world views. We find that other indigenous traditions and cosmologies, about the human body, foods, medicine, and so on, are all intricately woven together as a way of life.

In contemporary times, conservation itself is undergoing a positive change and people working among indigenous peoples are advocating "community-based conservation" as an alternative to mainstream conservation. This is an 'inclusive' model, where habitats are viewed along with the people living there, as is the case in many forest landscapes, and have the inhabitant people themselves work out a long-term strategy that can sustain both their livelihood as well as the landscape. However, with the present scenario of

increased populations, modern aspirations, degraded forests and soils, and the non-cooperation of the authorities, these strategies are not easy to come by. To fix such a problem, with an eroding indigenous/traditional knowledge-base, is a further challenge.

The way much of our engagement with traditional knowledge unfolds on the ground is through our pursuit of various subjects. There has been work done on indigenous medicine, and their advantages over mainstream health care; about indigenous food ways, their nutritive values, and their role in present-day health problems; and indigenous languages, their grammars and the intricacies of expressions that are rooted in earthy metaphors. Music, folklore and dance traditions have all been analysed and documented. Sacred sites have been plotted and their uniqueness understood, in terms of biodiversity, and how they play a part in the larger ecology of the landscape. However, these engagements with indigenous knowledge view most of these aspects by themselves – which is the culture of modern science – which permits only glimpses of the whole. What we need now is not only the pursuit of these individual fields but also a consciousness that sees that they are all linked. Even a moderately capable forest dweller is in some senses a ‘polymath’, adept in several fields ranging from botany and biology to agriculture and carpentry. This is quite the opposite of what conventional modern education trains us to be: specialists in any field of thought or profession!

To conclude: we need to welcome all interest, involvement and studies in the various aspects of traditional/indigenous knowledge but also be alert to it being isolated and susceptible to misinterpretation. In the circumstances we face – where not much of traditional knowledge is alive and working due to external (environmental) or inherent (societal) conditions – this will be the prime challenge. Another trap we need

to avoid, which has been mentioned earlier, is ‘fuzzy logic’, which is usually the acceptance of traditional practices without adequate scrutiny, something that is bound to backfire on them in the long run. The latter mistake will not only put these traditions in bad light but also the people who practice them, which would be most unfortunate.

The empowerment of a community

Hemalatha Nalla¹

M. Nittaputtu is a small habitation located in a remote tribal pocket of Visakhapatnam District in Andhra Pradesh. Here, 24 households make their living cultivating the very small land-holdings they own, along with the collection and trade of NTFP and wage labor. Another income generating opportunity is the cultivation of commercial crops, like coffee, pepper, Piper longum (a medicinal plant), turmeric, rajmah, etc.

Unlike regular crops, growing, harvesting and post-harvest management of these commercial crops are laborious and require different techniques. Besides, like many of the tribal communities, the villagers also face challenges while marketing the produce as exploitation by middlemen and traders is very high.

Local traders who were the only ones who gave credit or loans to these farmers also tricked them and monopolized the market, resulting in very low returns for the farmers. The farmers have to sell their produce to these traders for prices significantly less than the market prices because of the advances the tribals take from them either in the form of inputs or cash for their needs. The interest rates being charged by these traders / lenders are unbelievably high that leave the household in an endless cycle of debt, especially if the crop fails in a season. As there are very few families which can afford the cost of inputs without taking a loan (and then sell their produce in the open market), they have to spend a king's ransom to take the produce to the nearest weekly market place and face similar exploitation.

As mentioned above, the tribal peoples collect NTFPs such as tamarind, adda

leaves, vayu vidangalu, etc. There is no organized trade in these products and, compared to the agricultural and horticultural produce, the tribal people are more vulnerable. This group of farmers from M. Nittaputtu were aware about the value of their agricultural produce and wanted to improve their livelihood by seeking better prices for their naturally-grown, high-value crops like coffee, turmeric and black pepper. They also wished to add more value to their produce and engage in business with buyers who can offer them better returns.

Some of the community leaders and members made an effort to see the existing Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) in other areas; these had been formed with the objective of collective aggregation and sale of agricultural products and this inspired the farmers. Considering the given challenges, the villagers who were formed into a Primary Producers Group approached similar groups in neighbouring villages

to discuss the extreme exploitation of the markets. They joined hands to promote a Farmer Producer Organization covering about 500 such families from a cluster of villages.

With monetary and advisory support from Kovel the FPOs registered the collective under Mutually Aided Cooperative Societies Act, 1995, in 2017. As reaching out to big buyers required larger quantity and capital, they soon enrolled 284 shareholders. Each shareholder contributed a sum of INR 500 which helped MNMACS to accumulate a share capital of INR 142,000. Further, with the infrastructure support of INR 50,000 from NABARD, they set up an office and appointed a manager, consequently organizing themselves into a functional FPO.

The primary purpose of these farmers coming together was to get better prices for their naturally produced crops and improving their family incomes. The FPO also decided to improve productivity





and quality of their produce by the way of providing required agri-inputs, agronomy and post-harvest management support to their members and in exploring opportunities of value-addition. In 2018-19, the FPO managed to aggregate and undertake their maiden business of INR 1.8 lakhs for turmeric, coffee, millets etc. In the same year, Kovel facilitated a partnership between the FPO and RySS for Community Managed Natural Farming, thus successfully training the member farmers on best organic farming practices. With additional support from a few external agencies, Kovel Foundation has been able to support them broadly in four areas – institutional strengthening, market linkage, access to finance, besides agronomy and post-harvest management support to their members.

After an initial struggle for investment, the FPOs are now well connected and have secured a working capital from financial institutions like Samunnati, NABKISAN, etc., that has enabled them to initiate marketing activities, beginning with coffee. Simultaneously, formal market linkages with bigger companies such as Tata Coffee Ltd., Subbu Beverages & Aceworks Agrobusiness, besides local

traders have been ensured before they started buying the produce. This is the 2nd year after the FPO started collective marketing and they are able to do a turnover of Rs 60 lakhs so far benefitting around 500 tribal families with 10 to 15% additional price, compared to local prices.

As a consequence of this financial growth over the two years, the FPO has been able to benefit all their shareholders. It has also expanded its reach to more farmers in the area. In addition, due to regular training and handholding support provided to the Board, the Management Committee and the FPO Manager, on institutional strengthening and compliance-related nuances, MNMACS is learning about running their FPO through the nitty-gritties of accounting, internal audit and GST filing. The gender-equity aspect of institutional strengthening support has also demonstrated its impact on the functioning of the society, whose 46% of the shareholders are women, which is effectively led by a board whose 5 of 11 directors are women and is chaired by Mrs. P Vijaya as its Chairwoman.

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New challenges with the Forest Rights Act, Bastar, Chhattisgarh

Madhu Ramnath

Work around the Forest Rights Act, specifically the CFR claims, has been ongoing. Not only in Bastar but in all the districts where the Forum is working. In Kakalgur, a village in central Bastar, the people marked their territory with signboards in October 2017 – as they received no response from the authorities despite the governor's order – and began to manage the area. This meant, among other things, preventing the over-exploitation of bamboo shoots, prohibiting chemicals while fishing and monitoring the Kanger river, putting out forest fires, etc. More recently, the people of the village prevented the felling of a vast number of trees that were apparently meant for the “rath yatra” in Jagdalpur. This felling has been happening for many years but this year the youth decided to put an end to it and successfully did so.

However, when very soon officials came to Kakalgur to pursue the CFR claim the Gram Sabha had filed, the neighbouring village of Darba claimed the area which had been saved from felling! The people of Darba claimed it as theirs. This dispute is ongoing, despite five meetings between the people of both villages, as well as other villages in their boundaries. It has also made other villages about the Forest Rights Act, the details within the Act, etc., none of which had been explained to them all these years. The youth of Kakalgur have been travelling to Elubnad, Kotanad, Majhipal and other villages to make people aware of the Forest Rights Act.

Disputes over precise village boundaries is (and perhaps should) be a common affair. The traditional boundaries, as agreed upon by the neighbouring



Stones marking boundary point in the forest.

communities in the past, has often been written over by various departments of the administration, and complicated the matter. However, the disputes do serve the purpose of making the people conscious of the landscape, its past and present uses and “ownerships”, and now the potential of management that comes with it. It would be best for the communities themselves to resolve any differences of opinion – without official interference – as it is they who have to live with each other in the years to come.



Old 'rath' preserved near the palace in Jagdalpur

Mangru Kashyap¹

अंतर्राष्ट्रीय महिला दिवस – कार्यक्रम बैठक

स्थान : ग्राम आँवराभाटा, ग्राम पंचायत सौतपुर

संवाद-दाता : मंगरुराम कश्यप एवं नंदोराम बघेल कार्यकर्ता प्रेरक समिति राजिम

दिनांक : 08/03/2021

लक्षित समुह : क्षेत्र के महिला स्वसहायता समुह और आदिवासी एवं अन्य परम्परागत वन निवासी महिलाएं।

प्रशिक्षक : मंगरुराम कश्यप एवं नंदोराम बघेल

प्रस्तावना :

आज दिनांक 08/03/2021 को ग्राम पंचायत सौतपुर के ग्राम आँवराभाटा तहसील बकावण्ड, जिला-बरतार छ.ग. में अंतर्राष्ट्रीय महिला दिवस का आयोजन किया गया। और इस कार्यक्रम की अध्यक्षता श्रीमती शान्तिबाई निवासी बदलावण्ड ने की। मुख्य अतिथि के रूप में श्री दामोदर कश्यप जी उपस्थित रहे। इस कार्यक्रम का मुख्य उद्देश्य वन संरक्षण एवं रखरखाव में महिलाओं की भागीदारी बढ़ाना, उनके प्रति लागू किये गये मुख्य-मुख्य संवैधानिक शक्तों से अवगत कराना, नारी शिक्षा का महत्व, घरेलू कामकाज के साथ-साथ ग्राम स्तरीय समस्त विकास कार्य में महिलाओं की भागीदारी बढ़ाना आदि था। इस कार्यक्रम में 5 गांव के कुल 56 सदस्य 37 महिला एवं 23 पुरुष शामिल थे।

मुख्य प्रकरण :

इस कार्यक्रम का शुरुआत उपस्थित सभी प्रतिभागियों द्वारा गांव के माता मंदीर में पूजा अर्चना से हुआ और फिर मंगरुराम कश्यप द्वारा अपना परिचय देते हुए किया गया। और महिलाओं के मान सम्मान के लिए मुख्य अतिथि के बाद 05 गांव से आये महिला लिडरों एवं बुजुर्ग महिलाओं को आदर पूर्वक नाम पुकार कर आसन ग्रहण करवाया गया। और साथ में अन्य ग्राम मुखियाओं को भी आदर पूर्वक आसन ग्रहण करने के लिए संबोधन किया गया। फिर कार्यक्रम का प्रारम्भ किया गया।

- श्रीमती शान्तिबाई ने विश्व महिला दिवस के बारे में जानकारी देते हुए कहा कि आज का दिवस संसार में महिलाओं के प्रत्येक बिन्दुओं पर समान हक, अधिकार एवं सम्मान के रूप बनाया जाता है। इसलिए मैं उपस्थित सभी महिला साथियों से कहता हूँ हम मिलकर रहें और सभी विकास कार्य में आगे आये।



- श्रीमती दयामनी ने महिलाओं के साथ हो रहे उत्पीड़न, भेदभाव, दुसरे दर्जा का समझना आदि के बारे में बताया। और अगर महिलाएं चाहे तो विकास की सीढ़ियां चढ़ा सकती हैं। और गिरा भी सकती हैं। हम महिलाएं सामाजिक बैठको में नहीं जाने के कारण अपना विचार अपने तक रह जाता है। और शासकीय एवं गैर शासकीय अधिकारियों के पास बात करने में झिझकते हैं।
- श्री जोगीराम कश्यप ने महिलाओं के शक्ति के बारे अवगत कराया कि महिलाओं के अन्दर इतने शक्तियां हैं हम अंदाजा नहीं लगा सकते, हर एक स्तर, विभाग में महिलाओं के बात को सबसे पहले प्राथमिकता दिया जाता है। हर काम आसानी से हो जाता है। लेकिन गांव समाज में इनके बातों पर अड़ंगा डाला जाता है। इसलिए महिलाओं को घरेलू कार्य के साथ-साथ ग्राम विकास कार्य में भी आगे आना चाहिए।
- श्री दामोदर कश्यप जी ने उपस्थित सभी महिलाओं को साहसी स्त्री बनकर जीने की सलाह दिये। और उन्होंने कहा कि महिलाओं के अंदर पुरुषों से ज्यादा सहन, शक्ति है। उन पर कितनी भी कठिनाईयां क्यों न आये उन्हें जेलने की क्षमता रखते हैं। इसलिए अनजान पुरुष के साथ विवाह करने के बाद भी सफलता पूर्वक घर चलाते हैं। और प्रति दिन पुरुषों से ज्यादा काम महिलाएं ही करती हैं। बले ही गांव स्तर पर सामाजिक रिती रिवाज के मान्यता के आधार पर उन्हें निचले स्तर का दर्जा दिया गया है, हमें पता है यह गलत है, इसे बदलना होगा और इन्हें आगे लाना होगा। और वन हमारे जीवन यापन करने का आधार है। वनों से मिलने वाली सभी वस्तुओं जैसे – रोज उपयोगी वस्तुएं— दतुन, पत्ता, जलाऊ, झाड़ू, वनोंपज— साल, हर्रा, बेहड़ा, आंवला, तेन्दुपत्ता, धूप, कंद, मसरूम, पुटु आदि का महिलाओं के द्वारा ही संग्रहण किया जाता है। इसलिए पुरी तरह से पकने के बाद ही संग्रहण करना चाहिए और वन संरक्षण में महिलाओं को आगे आना चाहिए।

इस प्रकार उपस्थित सभी प्रतिभागियों को अपना-अपना विचार रखने का अवसर दिया गया।

निष्कर्ष :

- सामाजिक एवं ग्राम विकास से सम्बन्धित बैठको में महिलाओं को अधिक संख्या में उपस्थित होकर अपना विचार रखना।
- अपने जीवन यापन से जुड़ी वन के संरक्षण में महिलाओं को आगे आना।
- पुरी तरह परिपक्व होने के बाद वनोंपज का संतुलित दोहन करना।
- किसी भी मुद्दों पर अधिकारियों के पास निडर होकर बात करना।



¹ Mangru Kashyap is with the LEAF, Chhattisgarh

Nature Watch



Holarrhena antidysenterica



Sterculia villosa



Woodfordia floribunda



Cleistanthus collinus



Olea dioica



Hiptage madablota



Ficus glomerata



Butea monosperma

