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Painting the village

Jaideep Hardikar / DNA

Even as climate change negotiators squabble over the final draft of REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), Mendha, a village in Gadchiroli district, is demonstrating on a daily basis that the best way to conserve forests is to give its management to local tribal communities.

Earlier this week, Mendha, 40 km from Gadchiroli in Dhanora tehsil, inhabited by 480 Gond adivasis, became the country's first village to get a legal record of rights to manage its forest, water and forest produce as per the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Right) Act, 2006. The adivasis will guard their forests like they did for ages, but now they will get revenue for the minor forest produce.

"We don't believe in individual property rights, only in community rights," says Devaji Tophia, former sarpanch of the village. It was Tophia who mobilised the village to establish a participatory assembly for self-rule and claiming forest rights back from the government.

The law gives land ownership rights to individual dwellers and bestows upon the village community virtual ownership of surrounding forests, including nistar or utilisation rights for cattle grazing, collection and storage of minor forest produce, and management and disposal of resources.

"It's a major responsibility," says the bespectacled Tophia, who never went to school, but is a walking encyclopedia on the surrounding forests.

Mendha's 1,800 hectares of forest is replete with a variety of bamboo, teak, herbs, mahua flowers and at least 20 different varieties of produce. Tophia says the village is evolving plans to collect this produce (like amla and chironji), process it, and market it. "It will generate income and employment."

What Copenhagen can learn from Mendha

While the world has been closeted this past week in a chaotic give-and-take to strike a political deal on climate change, this small community in Mendha says nature doesn't have any scope for manipulation. You either preserve it or perish, says Tophia.

"The world over, science is showing that natural resources management is a complex process," says Mohan Hirabai Hiralal of Vrikshamitra (friends of trees), a green group in Chandrapur. "And it's now established beyond doubt that only the communities closest to the forests can effectively manage them."

Mendha's model, Mohan says, is in line with the Copenhagen concerns: the only way to conserve forests is to give its management to local tribal communities.

It was in the 1980s that he first discovered Mendha's collective wisdom while doing a research study. "The village took every decision collectively in its Gram Sabha and stood by that decision," he remembers. Be it prohibition, or ban on tree felling, or commercial exploitation of forests — it would be a collective call.

'We're the government'

The villagers first protested against the felling of forests for commercial purposes in the mid-eighties. It said "no" to the outsiders coming into its territory. Then, it laid down do's and don'ts for its own people in order to conserve the forests.

Acting collectively, about a decade ago, the villagers managed to resurrect the dried up Kathari river that flows along their village. It became an example for scholars and researchers from all over the world to study. Mendha had, in fact, realised the Gandhian ideal of a village republic with participatory democracy.

Three decades ago, Tophia remembers, the villagers questioned the government's logic: "How can we have no right on the forest, which we managed and conserved for generations?" The uneducated adivasis then locked horns with the government in Mumbai and New Delhi. "No law can be enforced on us from above — those who make the laws don't face them," he says. "Here we decide what is good or bad for us and once a decision is taken, we face it."

Mendha first hit the headlines with its slogan, 'Mawa nate, mata raj' (we are the government in our village). "Gram Sabha," says Tophia, "is the authority." A signboard with that slogan still hangs on the Sabha's office wall.

When the Biodiversity Act came into being, Mendha became the first village to get in place a biodiversity register (record of the biodiversity in its forest). Every household in the village has biogas — its first step toward energy self-sufficiency. The village laws, among other things, make it mandatory for everyone to seek the Gram Sabha's permission before commencing any work on the community land, and all decisions are taken by consensus.

Putting nature first

"Today's problems emerge from the outsider's lack of understanding of a tribal way of life, of the tribal's idea of development," says Tophu. "We call ourselves Koitur, which means human beings. Outsiders call us Gond, Madia Gond, tribal, adivasi or vanvasi or other such names. Pumping in money in a village won't work, give us our forests and rights over natural resources, and see the results."

The enlightened adivasi population of this village can consensually achieve what the world leaders can't: putting nature first.

Mendha was already managing its resources under the joint forest management (JFM) scheme, but since 1992, the government hasn't given to the Gram Sabha its legitimate share of 50 per cent of the revenue from the sale of minor produce and bamboo. But at no time did the village say it wouldn't guard the forest because it was not getting its share of the revenue. "It's not about money," say villagers. "The forest is our life."

Having won the legal right, Mendha has to decide what needs to be done with the minor forest produce, such as tendu leaves, amla, and honey. "We are thinking of setting up self-help-groups and cottage processing units in households," Tophu says. That way everyone would get income and participate in managing the resources. The village, he adds, could offer employment to people from other villages. "We can achieve self-reliance."

Tophu's elder daughter Manda works with her husband Nitin Barshinge in Marda, which, along with Mendha, also got record of rights over its 800 hectares of forest. His second daughter Nanda works for Vrikshamitra (friends of trees) in Chandrapur and youngest son Charandas helps him in his work.

Mendha, he says, got support from researchers in understanding government procedures and law. The answer to paper work could only be paperwork, he chuckles. "But when it comes to decisions, it is always our call. No outsider can influence our decisions — nature guides us."

Indeed, nature's guidance has turned Mendha into an example for the world of how development of tribal communities as well as conservation of forests are best achieved by letting them manage their natural resources.

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