

## **Incense sticks fill fragrance in lives of Gadchiroli tribals**

NAGPUR: Gun battles and arms seizures in the farflung Naxal heartland make breaking news but how many of us know that a model project launched by the state forest department and district administration is empowering Gadchiroli's tribal women to be self-reliant. In a bid to reduce tribals' biotic pressure on forests, the Gadchiroli forest circle and district administration with active help from joint forest management committee (JFMC) has set up an incense stick (agarbatti) unit in Deulgaon under Chatgaon forest range. Chief secretary Jayantkumar Banthia will visit Gadchiroli on Saturday to review the success story himself.

The unique project has filled fragrance in the lives of at least 200 women from nine villages in the Naxal-affected Allapalli, Bhamrargarh and Sironcha districts. The unit manufactures seven tonnes of agarbattis daily. Women are getting assured employment with `180-200 as daily wages.

This is one of the major success stories in Gadchiroli after granting community forest rights (CFRs) under the Forest Rights Act ( FRA) 2006 to over 750 villages. Gadchiroli forest officials initiated the project by selecting a team of youths from 10 villages including Deulgaon. The team was sent to Ahmedabad in Gujarat for capacity building. Around 10 agarbatti machines were procured for every village from the funds worth `7 crore provided by district planning committee and Human Development Mission.

"Villagers from even most extremist-infested villages like Ghot Parola, Tadgaon, Romanpalli, Maroda, and Kurkheda have been engaged in manufacturing agarbattis. The activity here is managed by the forest department," says PJ Gadekar, district information officer (DIO). However, in Deulgaon, the entire management wrests with JFMC. The profit is ploughed back to the development of the village. "Moving gradually towards self-sufficiency, the locals, for whom the Naxals claim to be fighting, are now more inclined to participate in government development schemes. They realize that violence for over two decades has worsened the situation," adds Gadekar.

Consider the example of Deulgaon, having a population of 196 tribals including 96 women. The JFMC has formed five groups of 10 women each. Each group is given alternative employment while remaining women are given forestry work. One woman worker prepares at least 18-20 kg of agarbattis.

"Tribals are reaping benefits from agarbattis for the past four months. The raw material like bamboo sticks are provided by foresters to the villagers. The finished product is marketed in Nagpur. Through JFMC, we also plan to open saving accounts in post offices and banks so that women become self-sustained," claimed Marotrao Gedam, chief of the JFMC.

"At present the project is being run in 10 villages. We plan to implement it in another 45 villages. The forest department is planning to set up an independent mechanism to market the finished products. An action plan has been prepared to see that the project works systematically," said TSK Reddy, chief conservator of forests (CCF) for Gadchiroli Circle.