



My dear Ritvi -

15th March 2012

1. You will recall that we had been to Mendha (Lekha) village in Gadchiroli district on April 27th, 2011 together and had handed over the transit passbooks for bamboo to the Gram Sabha. You will also recall that you had agreed that similar initiatives would be taken in all the villages where the community forest rights (CFRs) have been recognized under FRA, 2006. Since then, there are **some 400 such villages in Gadchiroli district where community forest rights under Section 3.1 of FRA 2006, have been recognized.** This is a very important development and I believe needs to be recognized nationally as it has the potential of meeting the real objective of the Forest Rights Act – to empower tribal communities with livelihood and economic options.
2. The initiative taken at Mendha (Lekha) has proved very successful. In 2011/12, thanks to the bold leadership you demonstrated, the **gram sabha has earned almost Rs. 1 crore from the sustainable harvesting of bamboo in the community forest.** Clearly, the move to transfer control of the transit passbooks from the state forest department to the Gram Sabha has powerful implications for economic development.
3. Today, I met with Devaji Tofa and the NGOs who are active at Mendha (Lekha). I am informed that after Mendha (Lekha), there are 10-15 villages in Gadchiroli district where the control of the transit passbooks has been transferred from the forest department to the Gram Sabha. This is a welcome step forward, although the number of such villages is a tiny fraction of those where CFRs have been recognized. **Clearly, the process of replicating Menda (Lekha)'s success needs to very significantly accelerated.**
4. There are also seems to be a practical problem that is being encountered by these Gram Sabhas which was not so in the case of Mendha (Lekha). In the 10-15 villages where transit passbook control has recently been transferred from the forest department to the Gram Sabha, the state forest department had already issued a transit passbook along with work orders for felling of trees to a private company (BILT) few months back. **Thus, an odd situation seems to have been created where both the Gram Sabha and a private company, namely BILT have the transit passbook. This problem was not encountered in the case of Mendha (Lekha) because BILT had been denied the transit passbook and the work order for bamboo felling much prior to handing over transit passbook to the Gram Sabha there.**
5. I have also learnt that paper mills continue to want access to large forests and not move to farmer-community harvested bamboo. For instance, BILT controls some 70 per cent of the bamboo area in Maharashtra – this is as large as 841,000 ha. It is important to note that these bamboo areas as in the tribal districts of the state. Gadchiroli and Chandrapur together account for 66 per cent of the state's bamboo. As much as 84 per cent of the bamboo area in these two districts has been leased to BILT.

6. The cost of bamboo supplied through government contracts is much lower and this also distorts the market for community-grown bamboo. The paper industry pays the state a royalty of Rs 650 (raised to 1500 per tonne of bamboo, but as I understand, this has been challenged in court by BILT). This is when private contractors pay Rs 2500 per tonne. The same bamboo is sold at Rs 6-7 per metre in the open market. The forest department earns Rs 5000 per tonne of bamboo – ironically that it sells to artisans and other users of bamboo.

7. Based on my conversations with the NGOs working at Mendha (Lekha), I would now like to make a few suggestions for your consideration:

- Any contracts or leases of the forest areas where CFRs are recognised should be cancelled immediately;
- Gram Sabhas who are willing to exercise the ownership right over NTFPs as in the case of Mendha (Lekha), should be given working capital as well as technical support from the forest department in selling, marketing of NTFPs such as bamboo;
- Appropriate compensation should be paid to the Gram Sabha for bamboo harvested and taken away by private companies/contractors/forest department after recognition of CFRs ;
- Existing working plan operations should be suspended in areas where CFRs are recognised. A new working plan development process should be started by the Gram Sabha with appropriate technical support from the forest department and others;
- The Gram Sabha should be enabled to print the transit passbook on its own or charge any fee to the purchaser;
- In areas where CFRs are recognised, the Gram Sabha should be the primary implementing agency for all interventions of government (including MGNREGA). It can dissolve existing JFMCs or other committees and constitute new ones.

8. Taking the Gadchiroli bamboo initiative forward will have major implications for forest administration and management in the LWE-districts where it is perceived to be part of the problem. I am copying this letter to Shri V. Kishore Chandra Deo, Minister of Tribal Affairs and Panchayati Raj and Smt. Jayanthi Natarajan, Minister of State (I/C) Environment & Forests.

was personal
With regards,

Yours sincerely,

Jairam Ramesh
(Jairam Ramesh)

Shri Prithviraj Chavan
Chief Minister of Maharashtra

Copy to :

1. Shri V. Kishore Chandra Deo, Minister of Tribal Affairs & Panchayati Raj
2. Smt. Jayanthi Natarajan, Minister of State (I/C) Environment & Forests

(Jairam Ramesh)