



TOWARDS SELF-RULE AND FOREST CONSERVATION IN MENDHA-LEKHA VILLAGE, GADCHIROLI



Mendha gram sabha (Vivek Gour-Broome)

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Executive Summary

Mendha village is a perfect example of what a socially unprivileged but strongly united, and motivated community can achieve following the path of non violence (*ahimsa*), learning to be informed (*adhyayan*), and self-rule (*swaraj*). This is an example of a village where villagers would escape into the forest when any outsiders came to visit them about four decades back. Today no government schemes, including those related to natural resources, can be implemented without the permission of the village. As a matter of fact, no one can even visit them without their explicit permission. This has been achieved through a long journey with many ups and downs. At the centre of the journey has been the understanding that the crux of what a community achieves depends on the strength of its governance system and local institutions. In order to make these conditions most effective the village has followed the following principles, among others:

1. Open and transparent discussions in the village on any relevant issue
2. Developing a clear and informed understanding before taking any decisions
3. Taking decisions only after reaching a consensus
4. Not allowing any external intervention in village decisions (external intervention could be at the level of developing understanding during the study group meetings but not while actually taking a decision)
5. All conflicts within or with outsiders to be resolve through dialogues and discussions following non-violent means

In addition to the above, two other factors that have played an important role in the success of the village have been:

1. Unselfish and inspirational leadership by a group of elders led by Devaji Tofa
2. Timely and need-based help by civil society groups such as Mohan Hirabai Hiralal of Vrikshamitra,

The village very strongly believes that no external support can help a community if the village itself is not willing and united.

In last few years, the major achievements of the village because of following the above principles include:

1. Establishing fair and just management systems for the forests around the village, which are legally under the jurisdiction of the state government.
2. Resolving conflicts with neighbors not keen to follow the established rules, through continuous dialogues
3. Helping to reach a political stage within their taluka (administrative unit constituting a cluster of a few villages), where governance by elected representatives has been replaced by selection of a deserving candidate based on their achievements.
4. Ensuring year round livelihood options for themselves

An important lesson that could be learnt from Mendha is the concept of study circles. The villagers strongly believe that decision making powers can only be effective if the mechanism to make informed decisions are in place. Uninformed decisions can be irresponsible and dangerous. Regular informal discussions are therefore a way of life in the village. As the youth now prepare to take on the work from their elders the same concept of *abhayas* (continuous learning) has been ingrained in them.

Background

In last decade or so Mendha (Lekha) (hereon Mendha) has arguably become among the villages most written about, in India, regarding their Community Conserved Area (CCA).. Ten years ago Kalpavriksh conducted a study in the village seeking to understand why and how the village was protecting a patch of forest that legally did not belong to it and how a small group of seemingly powerless tribal people were able to thwart all administrative efforts to stop them from doing so. Subsequently, much was written about Mendha in popular media, many researchers conducted studies with them and many government schemes were implemented there (as they were estimated to become a sure success). In 2003, Devaji Tofa of Mendha (one of the village leaders behind the movement) made a presentation at the World Parks Congress in Durban (South Africa). Many independent consultants, social activists, some government officials and NGOs have claimed orally and in their writings that Medha village has taught them many lessons and helped them revise many of their prior opinions and beliefs.

Objectives of the study

This consultation was conducted with the following main objective:

1. To revisit Mendha after ten years to learn from the course of action that the village has taken since the early study by Kalpavriksh.
2. To understand the elements of its sustainability, and major threats, challenges and opportunities that the village faces today.
3. To understand villagers view on how national and international recognition has helped them, if at all.
4. To understand their views about international recognition and the processes by which such recognition should happen.
5. To understand how the village has adopted various laws, which provide space for CCAs. This includes, in particular, the implementation and impacts of the newly adopted Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (hereon FRA). This landmark act attempts to undo the historical injustice to scheduled tribes and other forest dependent communities in India by giving them ownership rights over lands occupied by them and community rights over the forests traditionally being used by them. For the first time in India, this act also gives the communities a right to protect a patch of forests, and to constitute a committee for its management. This could be an important provision for providing legal backing to many forest based CCAs in India.

Methodology

A team of Kalpavriksh members visited Mendha Lekha on the 11th and 12th of June 2008. Consultations were held with individual members of the village during a walk to the forest, detailed conversations were held with Devaji Tofa and Mohan Hirabai Hiralal (who has supported the movement in the village at various points in time) from time to time during the visit.

This was also the time when a few grassroots activists (mostly local youth involved with a local group called Vrikshmitra) had gathered to have a discussion on various laws and policies related to CCAs and their impact on the forest dependent communities in this region. Some of these

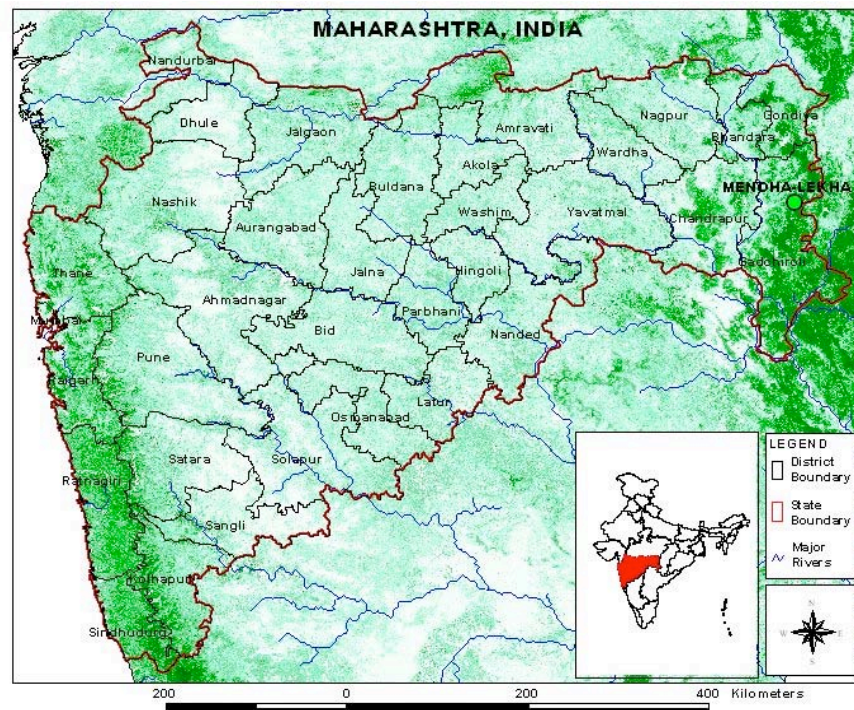
youth were also involved in a review of the National Employment Guarantee Scheme of the government.

The background information on the village is based on the original study of the village by Kalpavriksh in 1998, which was further updated in 2004 and then after this visit.

Background

Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra state in India, along with areas in the surrounding districts and states, is a region famous both for its biodiverse, dry deciduous forests as well as for its tribal communities. The district is more than 700,000 hectares in area. Approximately 80 per cent is under forest cover, a figure that is the highest in the state and is among the highest in India.

Map showing the location of Mendha-Lekha in Maharashtra state



Mendha-Lekha is located 30 km from the district headquarters and is spread over two small *tolas* (hamlets). The total area of the village is estimated at 1900 hectares, and nearly 80 per cent of this area is forested. There are approximately 400 people in the village, largely without any class and caste hierarchies. The entire population is composed of the Gond tribe, which has ruled and inhabited the surrounding forests since times immemorial. The livelihood of the villagers is heavily dependent on subsistence farming and on the forests, which provide a range of food, fuel, timber and fodder. The average landholding is five acres (approx. 2 ha). The major source of income is from the collection of non-timber forest produce (NTFP) and daily wages from labour work with government and private agencies.

The forests are dry deciduous forests, with patches dominated by teak and bamboo. The local sub-types of forests found here include teak forests with dense bamboo, teak forests with scanty or no bamboo, mixed forests with dense bamboo, and mixed forests with scanty or no bamboo. A total of 125 species of plants, 25 of mammals, 82 of birds, and 20 of reptiles have been recorded from the forests so far. Wolf (*Canis lupus*), leopard (*Panthera pardus*), sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus*), tiger (*Panthera tigris*) and Indian peafowl (*Pavo Cristatus*) are the endangered wild

animal species in the forests of Gadchiroli district at large. Another highly endangered species found in these forests is the central Indian giant squirrel (*Ratufa indica centralis*). The range of the sub-species found here is restricted only to certain parts of central India. Leopards are common, while tiger sightings are few and far between.

In the late 1970s the Indian government proposed an ambitious hydroelectric project in the adjoining state of Madhya Pradesh. For the poor tribals of the region, the project not only meant displacement from their traditional homes and possible social disruption but also destruction of large stretches of forests on which their livelihood and culture heavily depended. It was also claimed that the majority of the benefits to be derived from the power generated would go to industry and other elite sectors of society. This awareness led to a strong tribal opposition to the project, and many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) helped the local people mobilize and organize public rallies and agitations against the dams. In 1985, after prolonged and determined tribal resistance, the government shelved the project.

The anti-dam struggle emphasized and strengthened the determination of the tribal people to take decisions at local level for activities directly affecting their lives. It gave rise to a strong movement towards self-rule in the region, based on the revival of tribal cultural identity and greater control over land and resources. Mendha was one of the villages where this process gained momentum. Upon their return to Mendha, individuals who had been engaged in the anti-dam movement continued to advocate for greater village self-rule and collective responsibility. Discussions ensued over a period of 4-5 years centred on key village issues such as creating equal status for women, reducing alcoholism, creating greater personal responsibility, and establishing means to protect and regulate the use of the surrounding forests. The discussions led to many positive social, cultural and environmental changes, including the development of a forest protection and management system in the village.

Prior to 1950 the forests in the region were controlled and managed by local tribals as common property, and their overall charge rested with the tribal landlords. A strong system of community management governing the use of the common lands existed. However, it is not clear what was the health of these forests or the status of forest management in the area surrounding the village of Mendha. In 1950, following independence, the Indian government abolished the tribal system and all lands were vested with the government and subject to the Indian Forest Act (IFA) of 1927. Forest areas occupied by settlements continued to be privately owned, whereas all other wasteland, common property land, etc. came under state ownership. The Forest Department assumed management responsibilities for the forested land. The customary rights over common property that people had enjoyed for generations were not accepted, and the region was declared Protected Forests (PF).¹ Under pressure from the local population, an inquiry into local people's rights was undertaken in 1953 and completed two years later. The report recommended that the customary rights be legalized in the form of an act. There was also a recommendation to form customary zones for villages to meet their daily requirements, which was subsequently accepted and implemented.

Because of the inaccessibility of the forests in the district, however, officials did not visit many villages. Many questions and criticism were raised about how the customary zones were assessed and demarcated. Demarcation was not made physically on the ground, and villagers were not informed about the zones. Management and use of the government forests was then established with detailed instructions and rules. These instructions envisaged that the forests would be managed on a scientific basis by the Forest Department, and communicated to village governing bodies that would then regulate the supply of customary requirements—using a quota system—as per the established rules. The Forest Department was also critical of many aspects of this

programme which granted large areas of forests for customary needs. In the 1960s, the Forestry Department, looking to regain control of more forest land, took control of the quota system. As quotas were not sufficient to meet people's basic needs, and paying more money for further concessions was not feasible, paying bribes to the local forest officers became a common practice.

The state also exerted greater control over the forests in 1959, declaring its intention to constitute some of the PFs as Reserved Forests (RFs). In accordance with the Indian Forest Act 127, a study was carried out on the rights of the local people in the forest (the IFA states that the rights of the local people must either be legally accepted or acquired before any forests are converted to RFs). In 1992, based on the study's recommendations, 84 per cent of the total PFs and unmanaged forests in the Gadchiroli Forest Division were declared RFs (1697.27 sq km out of a total of 2019.65 sq km). The remaining 16 per cent was assigned as PFs to meet people's customary requirements. This decision affected a substantial part of the forests traditionally falling within the boundaries of Mendha village. It also meant that approximately 1900 hectares of the customary zone of the village was to be Reserve Forests. This left only about 350 hectares as Protected Forests for the villages to meet their customary needs. The criteria used by the Forest Department for determining and assigning areas that would fulfil people's customary needs were not clear.

Between 1950 and the late 1980s a number of state-sponsored commercial extraction activities were initiated in the forests surrounding Mendha village. These activities, such as the indiscriminate felling by charcoal contractors, Forest Department timber and bamboo extraction, and activities of a paper mill (private bamboo extraction), along with the increased human and cattle population within the village and in the surrounding areas, had a negative impact on the quality of the forest.

Village institutions managing forest-related issues

In Mendha, the movement towards self-rule and protection of the surrounding forests in the late 1980s led to the creation of three key village institutions.

The Gram Sabha (GS)

The village council is called the Gram Sabha (GS). In the past, village elders took most decisions. However, through the village discussions a decision was reached to constitute a village-level, all inclusive decision-making body. It was agreed that the GS would use a consensus process for decision-making, and that village decisions would supersede any government or other outside decisions. The GS started by acquiring factual, legal and political information about the village including various revenue and customary use documents.

The GS is composed of at least two adult members (one male and one female) from each household. However, all villagers can attend the meetings irrespective of age or gender. The GS has its own office and an office administrator maintains the records of all meetings organized in the village. It meets once a month and issues are discussed and revisited, if necessary until a consensus is reached.² On average, about 75 per cent of the members attend GS meetings, with equal participation from men and women. In 1999, a decision was taken to declare a traditional village holiday on days when the GS is convening to make it possible for the maximum number of people to participate. Outsiders (including government, industry, NGO representatives, etc.) are occasionally invited to discuss their plans and programmes with the villagers. The GS also functions as a dispute resolution body for small village-level disputes. For larger conflicts, a meeting of elders from 32 surrounding tribal villages is called. The GS also decides what activities will be assigned to other sub-committees within the village based on interests,

responsibilities and capacities. In carrying out forest related responsibilities, the GS works with Forest Department staff. Most often, such staff are the local forester and two guards directly responsible for the forests falling within Mendha village boundaries.

The GS has also registered itself as an NGO, the Village Management and Development Organization. In this role, the GS carries out a number of village development and welfare activities. It focuses on equitably distributing the costs and benefits of development projects and programmes amongst the villagers. The GS has also been a strong force in coordinating the efforts of many government departments and NGOs wanting to offer various forestry protection or development programmes.

So far, the GS has deliberately avoided receiving major external funds, unless originating from government programmes targeted for the region. Each member of the GS donates 10 per cent of her or his wages to the GS corpus fund from their employment generated through the GS. Any money left over from GS projects or programmes also goes into the fund. In addition, any donations or payments made by visitors go into the fund. The GS now has its own account in a local bank, and uses a unique accounting system that spreads the responsibility and accountability for withdrawing and spending money among many villagers.

The Mahila Mandal (MM)

All women in the village (of all ages and classes) are members. The President of the MM is chosen at every meeting for that meeting. Often the GS meetings also work as MM meetings. Forest-related activities carried out by the MM include regular monitoring of the forests, and punishing those who breach forest protection rules.

The Abhyas Gats (AG)

This is a study circle which operates as an informal gathering of people. Meetings are convened as and when desired for discussions on any issue. Outsiders are sometimes specially invited if the village wants some specific information or desires debate on a certain issue. These dialogues have helped the villagers develop their conversation skills, increase their awareness of the outside world, learn about their rights and responsibilities, and obtain important inputs and information which help them take informed decisions at GS meetings. In turn, outsiders have gained insights into village life and the process of village self-rule. For example, discussions initiated by outsiders at the AG significantly helped the village overcome the problem of encroachments on forest land. Discussions in the AG have also been focusing about the negative impacts of fire and hunting on the ecosystem.

In the recent times two important study groups have been formed, which include villagers from Mendha and three other neighbouring villages. These have been formed to:

- study the laws and policies that affect these villages and their natural resources,
- bring together local political leaders to meet and discuss the issues of governance.

These study groups are attended by members and leaders of different political affiliations keeping aside their political rivalry. These meetings have ensured that party politics which fragments many Indian villages does not affect these villages.

The Gram Sabha often interacts with the official key village-level administrative structure, the village panchayat. The panchayat is an executive council of elected representatives from one village or a group of villages. It works with the government administration and the judiciary. In most government schemes and programmes the elected panchayat is responsible for receiving

funds and implementing projects. The panchayat for Mendha is composed of the elected members from Mendha and two other adjoining villages. In 1999, a decision was taken by the villagers to choose their representatives based on local consensus rather than electing them (which, according to them, breeds corruption).

Establishment of forest protection activities

Efforts towards forest protection started in 1987 through various discussions in the Gram Sabha. Several decisions were taken, including:

- All domestic requirements of the village would be met from the surrounding forests without paying any fee to the government or bribes to the local staff.
- Approval of a set of rules for sustainable extraction.
- No outsider, including governmental, would be allowed to carry out any forest use activities without the permission of the Gram Sabha. If someone was caught doing so, the material would be seized by the village and the offender would have to accept any punishment decided by the village.
- No commercial exploitation of the forests, except for non timber forest produce that has traditionally been collected.
- The villagers would regularly patrol the forest.
- The villagers would regulate the amount of resources they could extract and the times during which they could extract resources from the forests.



Photo: Vivek Gour-Broome. A panoramic view of forests of Mendha from Saheb Donger, the highest point

To implement these and other minor decisions regulating extraction, an unofficial Van Suraksha Samiti (forest protection committee, see below) was formulated, including at least two members from each household in the village. Originally, a procedure for collecting fines from those who did not adhere to the village forest protection rules was established, but this failed to work because people did not want the responsibility of collecting fines and, most often, fines were not paid. As a result, the system for applying sanctions to Mendha village members became one of peer pressure, creating family shame and social ostracism. The Gram Sabha—representing a

strong and united village—succeeded in stopping the timber industry’s bamboo and teak extraction from the entire 1800ha of the forest. Mendha villagers speak proudly of the fact that the forests now ‘belong’ to them, and that they have implemented effective forest protection activities.

The efforts of the villagers at forest protection were not initially recognized in official circles. However, in 1992 the first opportunity to do so arrived in the form of the Joint Forest Management (JFM) scheme (not a legal category) of the government. In general, the JFM scheme envisages the handing over of degraded lands and forests to villagers for raising valuable timber species. Plantations are created and valuable forests regenerated, with the Forest Department and villagers jointly responsible for forest management. After 5–10 years, valuable timber is harvested and local villagers involved in forest protection are entitled to receive up to 50 percent of the revenue generated. The scheme, however, was not applicable for districts like Gadchiroli where most of the forests were still close canopy natural forests. Since Mendha’s forests were healthy standing forests, the government did not plan on creating plantations for revenue generation, and there were no guidelines for benefit sharing for standing forests. The villagers, however, persistently demanded that they be included in the JFM scheme. With the help of some supportive forest officials, the villagers succeeded, and they entered into a JFM agreement in 1992. Subsequently, an official Van Suraksha Samiti (VSS)³ was formed and Mendha became the first village with standing forests in the state—and one of the few in India—to be brought under the JFM scheme. The rules that the villagers worked out for implementing JFM in their village included:

- All decisions regarding the forests will be taken in a joint meeting between the Forest Department and the villagers.
- Mendha villagers will have the first right to employment in any official forest-related activity in the village.
- To carry out any work in the forests, permission will have to be sought from the Gram Sabha.
- Labourers from the outside will have to take a letter of permission from the VSS.
- Villagers will extract forest produce for their real requirement as per the existing village rules.
- Villagers will have the power to punish offenders both from within the village and outside.
- Details of the joint meetings will be recorded both by the Forest Department and the villagers.
- The functions of the VSS were also adopted for Mendha’s JFM programme. The VSS in Mendha meets far more often than it is officially obligated to, and the meetings are open to all members of the GS, not just the executive committee. The creation of the official VSS has not affected the functioning of the unofficial Mendha VSS, and official decisions found unacceptable to the villagers are not carried out.

Under the JFM, the bamboo harvest in the village started again in the year 1999. Villagers were allowed to take what they needed for personal consumption and rest was sold by the forest department to the paper mill. Villagers were also paid for harvesting bamboo and they were supposed to get 50% benefit from the sale of the remaining bamboo. In recent time, the villagers have felt demoralised *vis a vis* JFM to a certain extent. While they admitted that the JFM had helped them gain an official acceptance of the fact that they were using and protecting the forests, they were disgruntled and disillusioned by the fact that in spite of their full hearted participation for more than 15 years – the state had shown no signs of sharing the 50% profits with them, which should have been released with 5 years of the first harvest. This gives rise to a very strong feeling in the village that the government is not to be trusted as they do not fulfil their promises.



Photo: Vivek Gour-Broome Bamboo patches with Mendha harvested under JFM

Passing of the FRA has provided a new legal opportunity to the village to claim the forests without having to depend on the government machinery to fulfill their promises. Under this Act the villagers will have full right to protect, manage and use the forests. The villagers are currently trying to understand how this could be done and what would be the implications.

When the villagers were asked what would be the new relationship with the forest department? The expressed happiness that now there is a law to reinforce their right to manage and protect and hoped that the FD would play a facilitative role than that of an in-charge. Although given their past experiences they were not sure that under the Act also the government would eventually grant them all rights.

Present forest-based employment and livelihood opportunities

After the village initiative towards forest protection started in the late 1980s, all outside commercial activities in the forest were stopped. Beginning in 1994, the Forest Department designed a Forest Working Micro-plan for Mendha village. Despite limited involvement of the villagers, the *gram sabha* did discuss and accept joint bamboo extraction by the Forest Department and the villagers. The micro-plan has been in operation since 1997-8, ending an almost decade-long ban on commercial extraction from forests (except for NTFP). The following are some of the present-day forest-based employment and livelihood opportunities for Mendha villagers:

- There is substantial dependence on the forest for food, including honey, roots, fruits, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, fresh leaves, and hunting for wild meat.

- Under the JFM agreement with the Forest Department, the villagers have the first right to any daily wage employment for forestry operations in their forests. These activities include bamboo extraction and plantation of forest species.
- Non-violent honey extraction and specialized marketing.
- Each family owns about 5-6 heads of livestock on an average. Rearing of livestock is for both consumption and sale. Cattle depend entirely on the forests for fodder. Cattle dung, as manure for the fields, is an important added incentive to maintain livestock.
- Collection for domestic consumption and for sale of non timber forest produce makes for the dominant share of villagers annual earnings.
- The government of India has initiated the Employment Guarantee Scheme for rural areas to ensure some earning to rural households throughout the year. Vrikshamitra, an NGO that has been involved with Mendha village from the beginning has tried to link this scheme with the Biological Diversity Act of 2002. Under the latter village committees are required to carry out a biodiversity and natural resources assessment of their villages. Villages that Vrikshmitra works with (including Mendha) have selected a few youth to carry out such assessments with the objective that these assessments will lead to a village planning. All the activities that would be carried out under this plan will be paid for by the Employment Guarantee Scheme.



- Photo: Vivek Gour-Broome and Ashish Kothari Villagers are dependent on agriculture and forests for livelihood

IMPACTS OF COMMUNITY EFFORT

Ecological Impacts

Like many other CCAs in the country only limited ecological studies have taken place to try to measure the impact of Mendha's conservation initiative. A major finding is that, since the introduction of forest protection activities, the unregulated use of forest resources by commercial interests, the adjoining villagers and Mendha villagers has been controlled to a great extent. Mendha villagers claim that the quality of the forests in general has improved during this period, but they qualify this, saying that availability of certain resources, especially closer to the village, has gone down, including fuelwood and some palatable grass species. They attribute this to the



Photo: Vivek Gour-Broome Construction of an earthen dam by the villagers

increased human and cattle population within the village and in the adjoining areas. Thus, the forests have receded further away from the village leading to a decrease in forest resources in the vicinity. However, the quality of the forests in Mendha improves as the distance from the village increases. Villages in adjoining areas have the same, or worse, amount of degradation in nearby forests, and all have greater degradation than Mendha in forests further away from the villages (possibly due to the continuation of commercial extraction activities) and encroachment or forestland for agricultural expansion.

Specific, positive ecological impacts include:

- Soil and water conservation programmes: in the last seven years the villagers have taken up a number of soil and water conservation programmes, including building an earthen dam to retain water for longer periods. This has been especially critical in summers when water is a scarce commodity.
- The decision not to set fires in the forests and to the extent possible help in fire extinction.
- A vigilant watch is now kept in the forests against illegal activities. However, villagers express inability in being able to control hunting of wild animals which is quite prevalent in these areas. According to them the boundaries of the forest are porous and hunters have no specified timings, so while it is easier to control other illegal activities is very difficult to control hunting.
- The forests were protected from commercial activities, such as extraction of bamboo by the paper mill till 1998. Since 1998-99, bamboo has been extracted under the JFM every year. In 2004, when the Kalpavriksh team visited the forests it was felt that the extraction was adversely affecting the density of forests. Although this observation was based purely on visual impressions and was conveyed to the villagers. In 2008, villagers themselves mentioned that there has been some discussion in the village to stop bamboo extraction for a few years as they feel that the annual extractions are affecting the quality of forests. Villagers are seriously considering implementing the ban from the next harvest season onwards and exploring the possibility of bamboo harvesting every five years. They are also considering various possibilities to generate some other sources of income for the villagers if the new system was to be implemented.
- Along with a team of people under the guidance of Dr. Madhav Gadgil from the Indian Institute of Science, the village youth have also compiled a People's Biodiversity Register for the village. The information has been uploaded on the village computer for the use of the villagers, if need be. The participation of the youth in the preparation of the registers has made them aware of their rich and biologically diverse natural heritage. This according to Devaji has been crucial in involving youth in the village movement, many of whom are now taking active interest in various activities including biodiversity conservation.
- 10 years of discussion amongst the villagers has led to a consensus amongst the community to becoming a *gram daan* (literally meaning donate your village to the community) village. *Gram daan* was a movement promoted by the famous Gandhian leader Vinoba Bhave. This movement encourages a village to be more community oriented rather than individual oriented. The movement became a law in 1964 called the *Gram Daan Act of India*. Under the Act if a village agrees to be a *gram daan* village then individual members donate 20% of their landholdings to the village to meet the requirements of the poor and the landless. 80% of the land remains with the landholder for use and inheritance but the community as a whole is the owner of this land.
- Through village discussions the village has also been able to stop encroachment for agriculture of forest land in their village, which is a general trend in other villages in this region. In some areas the encroachment is to the extent that there are nearly no forests left.

Social impacts

- Increased empowerment by striving and achieving the capacity and confidence to assert their rights and reaching a stage where the village is respected even in official circles. Today all government and non-government people come to the village (if they need to), instead of calling the villagers to their offices. They sit with them and converse with them on equal terms and often in their language. The area also falls within the Naxalite belt (an extremist outfit fighting for social equality), but the village has not been bothered by the members of this group either. This is probably because of the history of the community's non violent struggle for self rule. The respect from both officials and Naxalites may stem from the fact that the community has maintained a healthy independent position of its own – that of a non violent, knowledge based struggle to achieve self determination and conservation.
- An all inclusive, transparent and open governance system based on discussions, dialogues and consensus has ensured that there are few (if any) internal conflicts. Conflicts with other villages (which arise often because of the village trying to enforce its rules) are also resolved amicably with open discussions with the concerned villages.
- Established a reliable reputation as effective partners in development and forest protection. Through a non-violent strategy Mendha has established strong and good relationships with many government officials and non government agencies, who in turn have helped them at many crucial points.
- The village effort has set an example for many villages in this region. Villages like Markhagaon, Lekhagaon and others have begun to work towards the same model of fostering self-reliance and a better quality of life. In the meeting organised for this study, village level workers from some of the neighbouring villages made it a point to come and share their views. The Virur Station village though a multi caste group had come together to '*work by day and study by night*' and '*Study like Ambedkar and fight like Gandhi*' on the problems that they faced during the day. It is due to the efforts of their study group (consisting of 100 workers) that the members of this neighbouring village have managed to make the Irrigation Department change the location of a dam which was being built right in the middle of the village farms. The studies have also helped them to get more jobs under the NREG Scheme and get the right payment from it whereas earlier they were being cheated of both jobs and just wages. This they claim they have learnt from Mendha village.
- The GS has its own bank account and manages it well and transparently where accounts are read out to the entire village on a regular basis.
- The GS has tried to ensure basic economic security to all villagers through access to forest resources or other employment opportunities, including forest-based industry like honey and other NTFP collection. This will be further strengthened by the 2008 studies of Mendha-Lekha and the surrounding villages on the Biological Diversity Assessments as mentioned above.
- Villagers have achieved inter-agency coordination and cooperation among all line agencies functional in their area. For example, the Gram Sabha organized joint meetings of representatives of all the government functionaries in the area with the villagers. These meetings facilitated a face-to-face dialogue among these agencies and resulted in a pooling together of otherwise segregated resources for certain developmental activities in the village.
- As already mentioned due to the participation of the youth in the formation of the people's biodiversity register (PBR), a number of youth have become interested in the issues of the community and the chances of a second line of community leaders emerging looked brighter in the 2008 meeting.

Some challenges and way forward

While Mendha village has made significant progress with their process of self-rule and forest protection, many challenges remain. The following are some of the main ones:

- Even though Mendha villagers have *de facto* control of the ecological and developmental processes in the village, their initiative is not yet recognized by the law. In the Forest Act of 1927, along with the RF and PF categories (both government-owned and -managed) there is a third lesser-known and highly underutilized category of Village Forests (VF). In this category, the forests are owned by the state but the management powers rest with the surrounding local community. Mendha is an excellent candidate and has requested to be declared a VF, but a demand that has not been accepted by the government. In the recent times, the FRA 2006 appears to be one of the best options to grant villagers initiative a legal backing. In July 2008, the village arguably became the first village in the state (if not in the country) to claim the 1800ha area as community forest under the FRA 2006. How this unfolds is however, yet to be seen. The village is in constant discussions with members of Vrikshamitra and Kalpavriksh on the legal and policy issues.
- Villagers themselves have little trust on the government system. They do not believe that any amount of law making will make the government give communities the power to use and protect. This belief has been reinforced by their experiences with JFM (as mentioned above about benefit sharing arrangement) and their demand of being declared a VF.
- Conflicts with neighbouring villages is a regular challenge. These conflicts are an outcome of reducing natural resources in general, increasing human and cattle populations, and increasing development needs such as urban expansion, industrial units and raw material. For decades Mendha villagers have tried to include the neighbours in their conservation effort with little successes. With an increase in the pressure from the neighbours and them trying to implement rules the conflicts over the year have only increased. However, after years of patient and peaceful discussions with them, Mendha villagers have now been able to clarify boundaries and have also managed to convince the neighbours to be part of study circles to understand the processes of degradations, political agendas and legal provisions. Villagers hope that this will lead to a greater participation in conservation efforts by the neighbours. In the recent years surrounding villagers have also seen the positive outcomes of Mendha's efforts they so are now more amenable to co-operating and learning from each other.
- As has been mentioned above villagers feel that the shorter cycles of commercial bamboo extraction is affecting the regeneration of bamboo. There is no process of ecological monitoring and evaluation at the village level. There are also no studies being done to evaluate the impact of forest-use activities such as hunting and bamboo extraction on the long-term viability and sustainability of the forest and its resources. At the 2008 meet, the villagers confirmed that no such studies had been conducted. The general opinion of the community was that overall the forests and the state of wildlife had improved. When asked how they had come to this conclusion – they stated that they were in constant and close touch with the forests and they had seen many patches that were earlier bare get covered with greenery. The other reason for their opinion was that a comparison with the forests of the surrounding villages would clearly prove that their forests were in better shape than the others. However, bamboo regeneration and availability of some palatable grass remains issues to be resolved from their point of view. There is however a possibility that some of these concerns will be taken care of once the community initiates biodiversity assessment and management as mentioned above.
- Some concerns were raised by the Kalpavriksh team about the low wildlife sightings in the village. Devaji felt that constant movement in the village for various livelihood activities and traditional hunting by local villagers and outsiders could be affecting wildlife populations. The villagers on the whole, however, did not feel that the populations were going down. They felt that animals move across large ranges and it was not just the village but what is

happening in the surrounding areas also affects animal populations. The villagers are not as motivated and do not feel as empowered to conserve wildlife currently as they are for the forests. They feel that this is a difficult thing to do as the poachers come stealthily at odd hours through the forest, besides there was the feeling that wild animals were not pets or cattle that they needed looking after “Its not like we have to take them out to graze” – all that was needed according to them was to keep the forest cover and the wild animals would take care of themselves.

- Transparent and democratic functioning of all decision-making processes has achieved greater participation and investment from all villagers, and thus a more sustainable initiative. Until recently youth participation was seriously lacking, which have could created a vacuum in terms of a second line of leadership. However the 2008 visit revealed a much greater involvement of the youth (as explained earlier). Many of these young people are taking leads in various initiatives thus the possibility of the emergence of second line of leadership looked brighter.
- Some concerns have been raised in the village after the 2006 Act. Some villagers feel that this act focuses on individual land ownerships which undermines the concept of community holdings that the village has been trying to move towards, under the *gram daan* Act.

On the issue of formal recognition of their CCA (as discussed at the 2008 meeting)

The community agreed that formal recognition would definitely strengthen their efforts. They have not called themselves a CCA – this is a name that has been attributed to them by outsiders. The members shared that they have found a way in which they intend to get the required legal backing. The strategy was through the twin approach of applying to be recognized as a *gram daan* village under the Gram Daan Act 1964 and claiming community rights to protect and manage 1800 hectares of forest land under the Tribal Rights Act 2006.

On the issue of being part of a federation and network of CCAs (as discussed at the 2008 meeting)

When asked whether a federation of CCAs would be useful to their efforts – this is what they had to say, ‘Just a federation of villages where we go and tell others what we do will not work. Also if one expects the federation/network of communities which are not active, to help individual villages in their struggle this too will not work. Every village/community has to strengthen itself through non violent struggle against injustice (*ahimsa*), learning (*Adhyayan*), and self-rule (*swaraj*). A federation of such strong communities will definitely help – where we can learn and draw strength from each other.’

They expressed that they were happy to hear that their CCA is now internationally known. They also communicated that a strong network of supportive NGOs would help the communities’ link up with each other and with the government agencies. Such a network would also bring in perspectives and understanding of the outer world as well as help in making their voice heard in the outside world. However, in the end no amount of networks will work if the community itself is not ready and strong. “At the end of the day we still have to fight our own battles... we must understand this”. They explained this by sighting the example of JFM where NGO involvement and the state level JFM federation have also not been able to help the community get their deserved share.

On the issue of being made part of an international database of CCAs

This bit of information was received by the members of the community as a continuation of the network and federation issue. They said that they saw no threat from such an inclusion as long as

the community stood united and strong in their efforts to gain *Swaraj* through *Satyagraha* (the path of truth) and *Adhyayan*.

Contacts

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Annex 1: Format for the preliminary database of CCA sites being tested for UNEP/WCMC

Basic data (please provide all)

Site Name (in local language and in English)	Mendha-Lekha village
Country (include State and Province)	District : Gadchiroli State: Maharashtra Country: India
Area encompassed by the CCA (specify unit of measurement).	Total area of village is estimate to be 1900 hectares +350 hectares of village settlement area
GIS Coordinates (if available)	Lat 20 11 55 to 20 14 48 Long 80 15 55 to 80 19 26
Whether it includes sea areas (Yes or no)	No
Whether it includes freshwater (Yes or no)	Yes (small streams)
Marine (Y or N)	No
Concerned community (name and approx. number of persons)	The entire population is composed of the Gond tribe. There are approximately 400 people in the village, largely without any caste or class hierarchies.
Is the community considering itself an indigenous people? (Please note Yes or No; if yes note which people)	Yes – people from the Gond tribe consider themselves indigenous people. The State recognizes them as such and has given them the status of a Scheduled Tribe in the Constitution of India.
Is the community considering itself a minority? (Please note Yes or No, if yes on the basis of what, e.g. religion, ethnicity)	No
Is the community permanently settled? (Please note Yes or No; if the community is mobile, does it have a customary transhumance territory?)	Yes
Is the community local per capita income inferior, basically the same or superior to national value? (please note how confident you are about the information)	Per capita income is inferior (but this is not taking into account the availability of the resources which reduce the need

	for monetary income)
Is the CCA recognised as a protected area by governmental agencies? (Yes or no; if yes, how? If no, is it otherwise recognized?) If yes, legal document? Establishment date?	Yes – In 1992, the State declared major portion of the 1900 hectares as Reserve Forest (leaving only about 350 hectares for villagers to meet their needs)
Conflicts with land tenure, natural resource use?	Yes, but resolved through non violent resistance.
What is the main management objective (e.g. livelihood, cultural, spiritual...)	Self determination based on the revival of tribal cultural identity and regaining control over ones life, land and resources.
By definition, a CCA fulfils a management objective. To which IUCN management category ¹ do you consider it would best fit (this does not imply that the management objective is consciously pursued by the concerned community, but that it is actually achieved)	Category V or VI

Additional qualitative information

Main ecosystem type	The area falls in the bio-geographic zone of Central Plateau. The forest type is the sub group Southern Tropical Dry Deciduous Forests (5A/C3), with patches dominated by teak and bamboo.. The local sub types of forests found here include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teak forests with dense bamboo • Teak forests with no or scanty bamboo • Mixed forests with scanty bamboo • Mixed forests with thick bamboo.
Description of biodiversity & resources (ecosystems, species, functions) conserved by the CCA	Ecosystem already described above. With regards to biodiversity – a total of 125 species of plants, 25 mammals, 82 birds and 20 reptiles have been recorded. Villagers report the presence of the Indian Gaur (<i>Bos gaurus</i>), chital or spotted deer (<i>Axis axis</i>) and wild dogs or dhole (<i>Cuon alpinus</i>), monkeys (<i>Macaca sp.</i>), common langur (<i>Prebytis entellus</i>), wolf (<i>Canis lupus</i>), leopard (<i>Panthera pardus</i>), sloth bear (<i>Melursus ursinus</i>), tiger (<i>Panthera tigris</i>), Indian peafowl (<i>Pavo chrystatus</i>) and the Central Indian giant squirrel (<i>Ratufa indica centralis</i>) are some of the animals found in the area. Leopards are common while tiger sightings are few and far between. Some of the uses of the conserved forests to the CCA are as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forest foods and wild foods which include honey, roots, fruits mushrooms, bamboo shoots, fresh leaves and hunting for wild meat. • Under the JFM agreement with the FD the villagers have the first right to any forestry works in the surrounding area. These include bamboo extraction and planting of forest species. • Non violent honey extraction and marketing of this product. • Fuelwood – with the permission and under the rules of the VSS. • Timber and bamboo for household use. • Cattle fodder

¹ Please see http://www.iucn.org/themes/wcpa/wpc2003/pdfs/outputs/pascat/pascatrev_info3.pdf

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NTFP collection for domestic consumption and for sale. • Besides this there is the wider understanding that their welfare is linked to that of the forest and there is conservation because of this overarching understanding.
Description of local ethnic groups and languages spoken	The entire population is composed of the Gond tribe largely without any caste or class hierarchies and the language spoken internally is Gondi, besides most are also conversant with Marathi (the state language) and some with Hindi (the national language).
Broad historical context of the CCA	<p>A summary of the ongoing and varied forms of tussle for tenure and resource use since 1950.</p> <p>Prior to 1950 – the forests in the region were controlled by the Gond tribals.</p> <p>In 1950 – the State declared the region as Protected forests – and all common lands came under state ownership and the Forest Department assumed management responsibility for the forested land.</p> <p>In 1960, there were further restrictions on natural resource use as the Forest Department took over from the village governing bodies the regulation and supply of customary requirements.</p> <p>1970-1989 : Some members of the village had been part of an anti dam movement in the adjoining state Madhya Pradesh, that threatened to displace the local people and destroy large stretches of forests that the tribals of the area depended on. This movement acted as a catalyst in strengthening the determination of self rule in the region based on the revival of tribal cultural identity and greater control over land and resources. This determination led to a strengthening of the village governing structures and a non violent movement to gain control over natural resources. 1992 - The JFM scheme started by the state, envisages handing over degraded forests to local communities who are the asked to manage the forest according to Forest Department plans.</p> <p>2004 and 2006: Mendha Lekha and neighbouring villages have start studying the Biological Diversity Act and are trying to see how this Act can be used in conjunction with the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme to generate environmentally friendly/ biodiversity friendly livelihoods for the community.</p> <p>2007: Currently the Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, is being seen as another opportunity to establish their customary rights and tenure over their resources and protect them.</p>
Governance structure for the CCA (who takes management decisions, how?)	The <i>Gram Sabha</i> (GS) is the decision making body in Mendha-Lekha. It is responsible for all village-level decisions including those related to natural resource use and management. It was agreed that the GS would use a consensus process for decision-making, and that these decisions would prevail over any government or other decisions. The GS is composed of at least two adult members (one male and one female) from each Mendha household. All village members of the village can attend the meetings. The GS has its own office and an office administrator maintains the records of all meetings organized in the village. It meets once a month and issues are discussed and revisited, if necessary until a consensus is reached
Length of time the	The current model of governance was started around since 1989.

governance model has been in place	
Land and resource ownership in the CCA	In 1992, the state declared 1900 hectares of the customary zone of the village as Reserve Forests. Legally the state has been the land and resource owner since 1950. However starting from 1989, the community has established <i>de facto</i> control over natural resources available in the forests.
Type of land use in the CCA	Forest land - Managed by community as common resource, and household land – managed by household.
Existence of written or oral management plans and specific rules for the use of natural resources in the CCA	There are both written and oral rules in the <i>gram sabha</i> and the Van Suraksha Samiti (VSS) (forest protection committee)
Map and zoning of the CCA (please attach if available and relevant.)	
Relevant pictures with captions (please attach if available)	
Major threats to biodiversity and/or the CCA governance system	Lack of ecological monitoring and evaluation at the village level; No legal recognition of village process; No trust of the government agencies despite legal provisions.
Local CCA-relevant features, stories, names, rules and practices	See main write-up

Additional reading:

Pathak, N. and Gour-Broome, V. (2001). *Tribal Self-Rule and Natural Resource Management: Community Based Conservation at Mendha-Lekha, Maharashtra, India*. Kalpavriksh and International Institute of Environment and Development. Pune

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¹ The IFA identifies three categories of forests under state control: Protected Forests (PF), Reserved Forests (RF) and Village Forests (VF). The RFs are the strictest category where very few rights of the people are accepted and most rights are extinguished. PFs allow more rights in them. VFs are forests which are owned by the state but are handed over to the villagers for management and use, a category seldom used.

² However, if there is unanimity, a decision will go forward without consensus. For example, despite divided opinion on the value of controlled fires for maintaining forest health, the GS made a unanimous decision not to set forest fires, which the villagers follow to the extent possible. Consensus would mean all villagers are in complete agreement however there are times when not all are entirely in agreement, or may not have any opinion about the issue itself. However, they would agree with the village decision even if it is contrary to their own opinion. A typical statement in

this situation would be “I do not agree but I think we should go ahead with the decision and see what happens”. At any point in time if it was felt that the decision was wrong they can always revert. The understanding, trust and openness of the decision making process encourages such unanimous decisions.

³ The Van Suraksha Samiti (VSS) is the official forest protection committee established under the JFM resolution. The VSS needs to include at least one member of each family in the village and is expected to elect an executive committee composed of six village representatives, two NGO representatives, the head of the village executive, and the local government-appointed village liaison person.