

**Protected area name:** Village Mendha-Lekha, Maharashtra, India. Albeit legally, these forests are demarcated as Reserved Forests and are not recognized as a Protected Area. Villagers do not have any legal mandate or right to manage and/or protect these forests.

**Geographical location, ecological and social main features:** Village Mendha-Lekha is situated in Gadchiroli District of Maharashtra State in India. This region is famous for both its bio-diverse, dry deciduous forests as well as for its tribal communities. The District is more than 700,000 hectares in area. Approximately 80% is under forest cover, a figure that is the highest in the state and is among the highest in India.

The total area of the village is 1900 hectares. Nearly 80% of this area is forested, legally under the control of the Forest Department. There are approximately 400 people, largely without any class and caste hierarchies. The entire population is composed of the Gond tribe, which had ruled and inhabited the surrounding forests since time immemorial until the take over of large stretches of forests in this region by the government in 1950s. The livelihood of the villagers is heavily dependent on subsistence farming and on the forests, which provides a range of food, fuel, timber and fodder. The major source of income is from the collection of Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP), and daily wages from work as labour with government and private agencies.

**Historical background:** The movement towards self rule and forest conservation in Mendha and many other villages in Gadchiroli was started after a strong tribal struggle against a Hydroelectric dam, proposed by the government in late 1980s. The dam would have submerged large stretch of dense forests and tribal lands, displacing thousands of tribals in this region. In 1985, after prolonged and determined tribal resistance, the government shelved the project. The anti-dam struggle emphasized and strengthened the determination of tribal people to take decisions at a local level for activities directly affecting their lives. Individuals who had been engaged in the anti-dam movement, upon their return to Mendha Lekha continued to advocate for greater village self-rule and collective responsibility. Discussions ensued over a period of four to five years centered 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.

**IUCN protected area management category:** category II

**Protected area governance, effectiveness and management:** After many discussions in the village, it was decided that the key decision-making institution for self-governance and management of surrounding forests in Mendha would be the *Gram Sabha* (GS) or the village assembly. The GS was constituted in late 1980s. The GS is composed of all adult members of the village and presence of at least two adult members (one male and one female) from each household is mandatory for a meeting. Inclusion of all adult members and the fact that all decisions are taken on consensus ensures greater transparency in the process of decision-making. GS meets once a month and issues are discussed and revisited, if necessary until a consensus is reached.<sup>1</sup> Decisions taken by the GS prevail over any other decisions, including those of the government agencies. Minutes of the GS are recorded by the villagers. If need be, outsiders (including government, industry, NGO representatives, etc) are invited to discuss their plans and programmes with the villagers. The main functions of the GS include, conflict resolution and formulation and implementation of rules and regulations for village administration as well as forest management. Based on interests, responsibilities and capacities, the GS may constitute

---

<sup>1</sup> Consensus does not necessarily mean complete agreement of all villagers on a particular issue. In some cases all villagers may not agree on a particular issue or are not able to make up their mind but may still decide to support a decision taken by the other villagers. However, such decisions are never under any pressure.

sub-groups within the village or assign responsibilities to other village institutions (women's group, youth group, forest protection committee, and so on.) for implementation of various programmes and activities. The GS ensures equitable distribution of the costs and benefits of development projects and programmes amongst the villagers.

Box 1: Rules for forest use and management

- 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 NTFP, would be allowed;
- 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.

To implement these and other minor decisions regulating extraction, Van Suraksha Samiti (forest protection committee) was formulated, including at least two members from each household in the village. Peer pressure, causing family shame and social ostracism keep people from breaching the rules.

The most important institution, which has helped the villagers take informed decisions at the GS, is what they call the *abhyas gat* (AG) or 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. In turn outsiders have gained insight 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 forestland and annual forest fires, among many other things.

**Results achieved:**

1. ***Negotiated management, planning agreements and benefit sharing with local communities:*** The efforts of the villagers at forest protection were not initially recognized in official circles. In 1992, Maharashtra state adopted the Joint Forest Management (JFM) Resolution<sup>2</sup>. The scheme, however, was not applicable for districts like Gadchiroli where most of the forests were still close canopy natural forests. After many persistent requests and with help from some supportive government officers JFM was finally extended to Mendha. Subsequently, an official Van Suraksha Samiti (VSS) or the Forest Protection Committee was formed and Mendha became the first village in the state of Maharashtra – and one of the few in India - to be brought under the JFM scheme.

---

<sup>2</sup> Under the Joint Forest Management scheme commercial plantations are raised on degraded lands, jointly by the local villagers and state forest departments. Revenue generated after harvesting this plantation is shared between the people and the department. The scheme till very recently was not applicable for good standing forest but a recent amendment has now made it possible. Although in good forest sharing is benefits is from non-timber forest produce rather than commercial timber plantations.

Through study circle discussions the villagers managed to bring in many provisions that were not usually within the mandate of the JFM resolution to adopt JFM to the Mendha context. These included meeting the actual needs of the villagers and not interfering with the rules set out by the villagers for controlling the extraction of resources from the forest. Thus, the rules (some written, but most unwritten) followed by the villagers are a mixture of what the official resolution states and what the villagers have decided. Villagers also ensured that commercial extraction of timber was not included in the Micro-plan for JFM as they preferred a more biologically diverse forests as against monocultures. However, regulated harvesting of bamboo was allowed as these forests are rich in bamboo.\*\*\*

The structure and functions of the VSS were also specially adopted for Mendha's JFM programme. The VSS in Mendha meets far more often than it is officially obligated, and the meetings are open to all members of the GS, not just the executive committee as required by the government resolution on JFM. The official VSS supports the authority and role of the GS regarding its forest protection activities. The JFM in Mendha village is viewed as among the very few successful cases of JFM in Gadchiroli District. However, the government has not yet accepted the villagers demand to share 50% of benefit incurred from the sale of bamboo (as has been mentioned in the government resolution). Neither have the demands of a legal category which gives rights to the people to regulate and manage the forests been accepted.

2. **Food Security/ Poverty alleviation:** One of the rules in Mendha is that Mendha villagers have the first right to employment for any forestry and development work undertaken within the village boundaries. This has created an option for paid employment through out the year. In addition, unity among villagers has ensured a higher price for the NTFP from the contractors (who are no more in a position to exploit the villagers). Most villagers are a part of one or the other self-help groups within the village, thus saving small amounts of money every month, which also loans them money in the lean period at low interest rate. This has entirely eliminated the exploitative money-lenders from the village economy. Villagers have a grain bank which loans grain to the needy families in the lean period, this loan is paid back after harvest. In addition, loans are also given to the needy families by the GS. Most importantly the villagers now have a regulated but secure access to forests, which provides food, bamboo, fodder, medicines, and so on throughout the year.
3. **Biodiversity conservation:** Visual impressions, conversations with the local villagers and a few limited ecological studies have indicated that, quality of forests has improved as the unregulated use of forest resources by commercial interests has been controlled. Mendha villagers claim that the quality of the forests in general has improved, but they qualify this by 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 increased human and cattle population within the village and in the adjoining areas. A comparative study of villages around Mendha and forests in Mendha, showed that while there was little difference between the quality of forests closer to the village in both cases, the quality of the forests in Mendha substantially improves as the distance from the village increases.

Specific, positive ecological impacts include, improved availability of water and controlled soil run off because of soil and water conservation activities; Reduction in the number and extent of forest fires; Control on unregulated use and commercial use of forest; and so on

Forests of Mendha support a good population of large animals such as Leopards, Hyena, Ratel, Sloth Bear, Hare, Sambhar, Barking Deer, Wild Boars, Spotted Deer and others. Tigers have also been spotted occasionally. Central Indian Giant Squirrel, now a threatened species is also found in these forests. Villager effort at forest protection provide protection to the habitat of these animals. Although hunting of wild animals for food is still prevalent in the community. According to the villagers this is much less harmful for the wild animals as compared to constant and large human presence in the forest during commercial extractions. Exact status of these animals, however, is still to be studied.

4. **Community capacity building:** The following are some important social impacts of the village initiative towards self-rule and forest protection:
- 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, sit with them and converse with them on equal grounds and often in their language;
  - The village has established informal yet strong institutional bodies which follow informed, democratic and transparent process of decision-making;
  - They have devised systems for equitable sharing of costs and benefits;
  - They have gained confidence in handling their money matters in transparent and effective manner. Even the local banks see them as a valuable client.
  - They have improved their capacity of the villagers to earn their livelihood through employment or forest based activities.
  - Through their confidence the villagers have been able to strengthen inter-departmental coordination which in turn has led to pooling together of otherwise segregated resources for certain developmental activities in the village.
- Discussions in the study circles have been the most effective means of capacity building in the village.
5. **Financial management of the protected area:** 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% of her or his wages to the GS corpus fund from their employment generated through the GS. Any money leftover from GS projects or programmes also goes into the fund. In addition, any donations or payments made by visitors also 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 at a time on rotational basis. Accounts are regularly disclosed to the village assembly. The accounts are audited annually with the help of a local NGO, Vrikshamitra.

#### **Lessons learned :**

1. **Transparent and democratic institutions and process:** One of the important factors, which made the movement in Mendha a success, is the transparent and democratic process of decision making. The emphasis on equal representation of all sections of society in information sharing and subsequent decision-making is one of its unique features. Even where there is discontent regarding certain decisions, those who are not satisfied cannot cite lack of information or participation as a reason, and are often exposed as being simply jealous or critical for the sake of criticism. Such an open and transparent system of functioning at every level of governance, if adopted officially, could help avoid many conflicts arising from information being cornered by a few powerful sections.
2. **A community initiative is a social process,** social processes are time consuming and complicated. There may exist many contradictions difficult to understand for an outsider, especially if the interactions are short. Can the government policies be built around such a pace? If yes, how? If the pace is needed to be changed what are the factors that need to be looked at? Probably a greater role as an extension officer by the government agencies? Villagers often do not seem to have the time or the resources to carry it out on their own. Situations are often more complex than it may appear here. This is where possibly the state could effectively take on the above mentioned role of an extension

officer or a facilitator to discuss possibilities of regulating these activities and help them implement the decisions jointly arrived at.

3. **Need for joint management and controls:** Mendha villagers have demanded to be included in the formal Joint Forest Management scheme of the government, a demand that has also come from other such community efforts in the country. This indicates that communities often do realise the difficulty of managing natural resources on their own, especially given the internal and external social dynamics and political and commercial forces. An active role of the state as a partner in the management of resources is often envisaged by these communities, but on equal terms and in the capacity of a supporter and guide rather than a ruler or police.
4. **Inter-agency coordination and regional planning:** People in Mendha have acted as mediators between various government agencies active in the village to bring about a greater coordination in local developmental programmes. In many wildlife and forest areas of India, authorities can easily get over the problem of inadequate resources (which is often cited as an important management constraint), especially for the provision of ecologically-sensitive livelihood inputs to local communities, by pooling together resources by all the line departments in the area. It should also be kept in mind that a wildlife protected area does not exist in isolation of various social and political forces and land-use practices in the areas surrounding. Allowance of resource intensive activities in the surrounding area could put more pressure on the resources of the area to be protected or act in contradiction to conservation objectives. Thus conservation planning should be integrated with that of the regional planning for which coordination among various departments is crucial.
5. **Adequacy of conservation personnel:** When the entire village takes on the responsibility of protection, “inadequate staff” does not remain a cause for ineffective management. In Mendha, the official forest department staff does not need to look after the protection and conservation aspect any more. Poaching, timber smuggling, encroachment, etc. can thus be controlled with the involvement of the local people. An effective, dedicated and sensitive staff can be an added strength for the conservation effort. Mostly economically unprivileged villagers could also benefit if the financial sources come to them for their efforts rather than going to an ever increasing yet largely ineffective staff.
6. **Importance of information:** Mendha villagers have been able to provide answers to some very important questions (e.g fire, illegal use, poaching, smuggling of valuable timber and others), that conventional wildlife habitat management is still struggling with in other areas. To a large extent this has been possible because of the open and transparent discussions at the study circles. It strongly indicates that constant interaction with outsiders and regular discussions within the village make people more conscious and aware, which in turn helps in taking informed decisions. This clearly defines a need for a neutral discussion and information sharing forum for the effective management of an area.
7. **Role of a community leader:** One aspect which could not be brought out very effectively in sections above because of lack of space is the role played by Devaji Tofa (person involved with the initiative from its inception) along with a group of people. This group has played a very crucial role in shaping the village initiative through their vision and open discussions. Often they have done so at tremendous family and personal cost, these people are not necessarily the political leaders but are the moral and role models for the villagers. For the success of any participatory initiative it is important to identify

such people who would lead the initiative with out creating powerrifts within the community. At the same time community's own conviction and sense of responsibility is very important to sustain any such effort.

**Organisation responsible for the protected area:** Village Gram Sabha

***Contact person***

Name: Devaji Tofa and other members of village gram sabha

Address: Village Mendha-Lekha, P.O. and Taluka Dhanora, District Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, India.

OR

Mohan Hirabai Hiralal

Convenor, Vrikshmitra, Near Chiddarwar Hospital, In front of RTO Office, Ram Nagar, Chandrapur, 442401, Maharashtra, India

***Written by***

Neema Pathak Broome; Kalpavriksh, Apt no 5, Shri Dutta Krupa, 908 Deccan Gymkhana, Pune 411004, Maharashtra, India.

Ph: 91-20-25652359 ( R)

91-20-25654239 (o)

Fax: 91-20-25654239 (o)

E-mail: natrails@vsnl.com