

The Mendha-Lekha Village Model of Sustainable Development Involving Sharing of Common Resources for Rural Transformation - A Case Study of The Experiences of a Tribal Village in India

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1. Background

Mendha (Lekha) is a group of three villages falling under the administration of a single Gram Sabha (village assembly), situated in the predominantly tribal district of Gadchiroli in Maharashtra. Mendha-Lekha is located 30 km from the district headquarters and is spread over two small and closely situated *tolas* (hamlets). The total area of the village is estimated at 1900 hectares. 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 time 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. 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. About two decades ago, the village was facing problems of unemployment, drunkenness, corruption by government officials and exploitation by traders and moneylenders. Approximately 80 per cent is under forest cover, a figure that is the highest in the state and is among the highest in India.

2. Towards Community Conservation

The story goes back to the late 1970s when the State Government of Madhya Pradesh state of India proposed a major hydroelectric project in Bastar district of the state. The proposed project would have displaced tribals of not only Bastar district but some tribal areas of adjoining areas of Maharashtra state.

The tribals of these areas came together under the banner of Jungle Bachao, Manav Bachao Andolan (Save Forests, Save Humans Movement). This movement spread to the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra also. Faced with stiff resistance, the project was finally abandoned. The movement for 'self-rule' in Mendha (Lekha) was initiated by Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, a prominent activist of the Jungle Bachao, Manav Bachao Andolan, and Devaji Topa, the then Sarpanch (Village Head). They realized the importance of information and transparency in their movement towards 'self-rule'. And, therefore, as a first step, they got hold of all official documents relating to the village. They gave the slogan: Dilli Mumbait Amche Sarkar, Amchya Gawat Amhich Sarkar (Our representatives are the government in Delhi and Bombay and we are the government in our village).

In the early 1980s, the villagers started movement towards 'self-rule'. Production, sale and consumption of liquor was banned and equal status for women and revival of traditional village institutions were emphasized. Through protracted struggle against unnecessary government interference and assiduous efforts, Mendha (Lekha) has been able to attain self-reliance in terms of primary education, forest protection, etc. Mendha (Lekha) has a gram sabha (village assembly) consisting of all adult members of the village (a male and a female from each family). All decisions are unanimously taken by the gram sabha. All outside agencies (government officials, independent researchers and NGOs) intending to carry out activities in the village have to seek permission of the gram sabha. The villagers also constituted the 'Van Suraksha Samiti' (VSS) or Forest

Protection Committee comprising the Gram Sabha and some forest officials. The VSS frames rules and regulations for the use and protection of forest, punishments for violators and grants permission to outside agencies to carry out their activities in the forest, etc. Mendha (Lekha) is also the first village with standing natural forest to have come under the Joint Forest Management (JFM) in Maharashtra. About 1,800 hectares were brought under the JFM in Mendha (Lekha). They have also formed a Mahila Mandal (women's council) which mainly deals with saving schemes and improving the status of women in the village. The Mahila Mandal is also responsible for the implementation of liquor prohibition and any other responsibility that the gram sabha may entrust it with. With the help of outside agencies, the villagers have also formed abhyas gats (study circles) which act as informal forums for free and frank discussions on various issues ranging from immediate village problems to forest and wildlife conservation. These study circles are informal groups which assemble whenever need arises and help the gram sabha and the VSS in the process of informed decision-making.

Thus, Mendha (Lekha) has scored enormous successes on many fronts. Today the villagers have unhindered access to the forests subject to certain regulations and permission of the gram sabha; the Forest Department is allowed to extract only non-timber forest produce (NTFP) and bamboo under the JFM. The villagers draw up their own schemes and seek government help only in their implementation; for example, the villagers decided to dig three community wells for which the government provided grant. The village charges a fee for all outside and commercial activities allowed inside the village by the gram sabha; and the funds raised in this way go into a village bank account. The village fund is used for carrying out developmental activities in the village and for providing loans to needy people. The village has also built up a well-stocked granary which provides security against hunger. It is interesting to note that the villagers have successfully laid claim to preferential treatment in all daily wage works created by the government agencies in the village and adjoining forests. They have also been able to start some cottage industry in the village. The village has 15 cow dung based gas plants (All disputes are amicably settled in the gram sabha and they have succeeded in implementing total prohibition in the village. Women have power of veto on the decisions taken by the gram sabha; this testifies to improvement in the status of women.

Mendha (Lekha) is an outstanding example of experiment in ‘self-rule’ without undue interference from governmental institutions and without dependence upon outside funding to carry out developmental activities. Mendha had started witnessing the fruition of grass-roots democracy through ordinary people’s initiatives long before Panchayati Raj got a fillip with the 74th amendment in 1996. Besides these outstanding cases of alternative developmental initiatives which are well documented and thoroughly studied, there are numerous others which are underreported and not so thoroughly investigated. Below we briefly look at some such cases.

3. 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.

3.1 The *gram sabha* (GS)

The village council for Mendha is called the *gram sabha* (GS). In the past, village elders took most decisions. However, through the village discussions that took place during the late 1980s movement towards self-rule, a decision was reached to constitute a village-level decision-making body. The GS was

created, and 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 initiated the move towards self-rule by acquiring factual, legal and political information about the village including various revenue and customary use documents. The move initially faced strong opposition from officials but villagers eventually succeeded in acquiring every important document. The GS is composed of at least two adult members (one male and one female) from each Mendha household. All adult 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. 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 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 village institutions based on interests, responsibilities and capacities.

The GS is responsible for the following forest-related decisions and activities:

- Carrying out watershed development in the forest
- Holding discussions on forest use activities and other issues such as forest fires and soil erosion from the forests
- Formulating forest protection rules and ensuring adherence to these rules
- Selecting representatives for the official *van suraksha samiti* (see the Joint
- Forest Management programme below)
- Delegating responsibilities for forest protection
- Handling NTFP extraction and trade-related issues

In carrying out these decisions and activities, the GS works with forest department staff. Most often, these will be the local forester and two guards who are directly responsible for the forests falling within Mendha village boundaries. The GS can also interact with the four forestry officers who oversee these three functionaries. 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 *Gram sabha* meetings, Mendha Lekha 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. Mendha (Lekha) village is a pioneer in many ways. A look at certain decisions/ actions initiated by the Gram Sabha of Mendha village is necessary to get a proper insight into the high level of mobilization, commitment and awareness among the villagers. Some of the initiatives are as under:

- Gram Sabha of Mendha village has obtained a PAN (Permanent Index Number and TAN (Tax Deduction Number) of the Income Tax Department of Government of India) in its name and has got VAT (Value Added Tax) registration also of the Income Tax Department of the Government of India. All activities are taken up in the name of the Gram Sabha. It complies with all legal and statutory formalities including payment of taxes.
- Mendha Lekha is probably the first village implementing the Government of India scheme for employment guarantee called Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Assistance (MNREGA) through the Gram Sabha.
- The village has a rule wherein every villager contributes 10% of his/ her income to the village fund.
- The Gram Sabha comprises of every adult member of the village. Since all works are done in the name of the Gram Sabha, they have nominated a few individuals to shoulder the responsibility of implementing different works/ activities. These nominations are of temporary nature.
- The Village has opened different bank accounts for different programmes/works and each has a set of nominated persons to oversee the implementation and operate the bank accounts. The accounts maintained are: MGNREGA , Bamboo activity, Forest Protection Committee (Receipts from Forest Dep't towards plantation work, nursery, etc. Forest Rights A/c (Receipts from Forest Dep't, Nyay Samiti (For depositing fines levied by Tanta Mukti Samiti (Conflict Resolution Committee), Grain Bank, etc.
- The Nyay Samiti is for resolving fights/ quarrels between / among villagers.

Grain Bank (Dhanya kosh) – every villager/ farmer has to contribute 2.5 % of his agriculture produce to the grain bank. The grains are used for supply to poor, needy (including those affected by failed monsoon), during marriage in the family, etc as may be decided by the Gram Sabha. If the grains are returned within a year, no interest is levied. For time taken beyond one year, the villager has to return additional quantity of grains (around 3 to 4%).

- All villagers who are nominated to various committees do the work on voluntary basis.
- Only those who exclusively work for the Gram Sabha for more than 8 hours a day earn an honorarium of Rs. 150/- per day.

3.2 The Mahila Mandal (MM)

Mahila Mandal is an association of all women in the village (of all ages and classes) who are members. The MM meets periodically and 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 are:

- Regular monitoring of the forests;
- Punishing those who breach forest protection rules.

3.3 The Abhyas Gats (AG)

The AbhyasGat 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. Frequently, the AG members establish smaller, specialized study circles to pursue particular issues and research (e.g., bird and habitat inventories, honey extraction).

The *gram sabha* often interacts with other 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 these three villages to select rather than elect their members to the *panchayat*. By doing so they hoped to eliminate the corruption involved in the election procedure. The selection has to be unanimous and the process takes place in an open meeting where Villagers trying to identify birds found in their forest the merits of each candidate are discussed freely.

4. 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 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, 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. In the commercial sector, the *gram sabha*—representing a strong and united village opposition to forest practices and revenue sharing—succeeded in stopping the timber industry’s bamboo and teak extraction from the late 1980s/early 90s. Mendha villagers speak proudly of the fact that the forests now ‘belong’ to them, and that they have implemented effective forest protection activities. Indeed, despite the state’s 1992 declaration of 1900 hectares of the customary zone of the village as Reserve Forests, the villagers continue to view the entire area as their forest and include it in their activities governing regulated use and protection.

4.1 Establishment of the Joint Forest Management Programme

The efforts of the villagers at forest protection were not initially recognized in official circles. However, in 1992 an opportunity arrived to remedy this when the Maharashtra state adopted the Joint Forest Management (JFM) resolution. 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, pointing out that they should not be punished for protecting their forests thus far. 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)⁴ 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. After the introduction of the JFM programme, the villagers discussed the scheme in greater detail with outside experts. Subsequently, the villagers managed to bring in many provisions that were not usually within the mandate of the JFM resolution. 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.

4.2 Forest Protection Committee (FPC)

Mendha was the first village to be brought under the JFM scheme. The villagers managed to bring in many provisions that were not usually within the mandate of the JFM resolution. 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. The villagers constituted a Forest Protection Committee (FPC) for carrying out the following forest-related activities:

- 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 regulate the amount of resources they should extract and the times during which they could extract resources from the forests.
- For ensuring adherence to the village forest protection rules, a system of peer pressure, creating family shame and social ostracism is adopted.
- Appointing an official firewatcher in the village

5. 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 the present-day forest based employment and livelihood opportunities for Mendha villagers:

- Food: 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 works in the surrounding forests. These activities include bamboo extraction and plantation of forest species.
- Non-violent honey extraction and specialized marketing.
- Fuelwood: Permission from the VSS is required for each cartload. As per the village rules collection Bamboo grove harvested under JFM, of only dry wood is allowed, with some exceptions for collecting green branches. Currently, biogas plants are being constructed in the village to reduce the dependence on firewood.

- Timber and bamboo: For household needs, collected from the surrounding forests as usufruct rights. Bamboo is a vital material in the villagers' lives.
- Fodder for livestock: 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.
- NTFP: Collection for domestic consumption and for sale. Food and commodities are sourced from various species' flowers, fruits and leaves.

Mendha Lekha has two major achievements in the form of implementing

MGNREGA and undertaking auction of Bamboo. Though the process was initiated much earlier, MGNREGA implementation was actually taken up (allowed to be taken up) for the first time in December 2012 while bamboo auctioning is being done since 2010-11. A total of six villages including Mendha, have taken up sale of bamboo through auction by the Gram Sabha. Mendha village is doing it since last two years. Besides for a livelihood the other activity is collection of Tendu leaves (an important Non Forest Timber produce) which are purchased by traders.

6. Social Impacts

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 nongovernment 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.
- Inclusion in decision-making processes.
- 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, who in turn have helped them at many crucial points.
- Established informal yet strong institutional bodies. The village has initiated a democratic and transparent process of informed decisionmaking and implementation, which creates clarity in understanding and collaboration in community effort.
- Stronger equity: They have created almost equal participation of all villagers in the process of decision-making, including women and the poor;

- Inspired others: The village effort has set an example for many surrounding villages, which have a lower economic status. Many villages have begun to work towards the same model of fostering self-reliance and a better quality of life.
- Managed financial transactions with confidence: The GS has its own bank account and manages it well.
- Strengthened livelihood security to all: The GS tries 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.
- Strengthened inter-departmental coordination and cooperation among various government agencies.

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.

While earlier there was a strong opposition to Mendha and its efforts at self-rule and forest protection in surrounding areas, a visit in 2004 found the situation quite transformed. Adjoining villages such as Lekha and Tukum are now trying to follow in the footsteps of Mendha. Despite a multi-community society, Lekha village now meets regularly and discusses issues related to village development as well as forest conservation.

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