VILLAGERS ASSERT THEIR RIGHT OVER NATURAL RESOURCES: TO COLLECT AND SELL TENDU LEAVES IN MAHARASHTRA

Community rights over tendu leaves established under the Forest Rights Act

In the first-of-its-kind example of establishing community rights over tendu leaves in India, Gram Sabhas of 18 villages from eastern Vidarbha Region of Maharashtra have created history as under the Community Forest Rights (CFR) they have decided to collect and dispose (sell) the tendu leaves themselves.

The processing was facilitated by Vidarbha Nature Conservation Society (VNCS) in 12 villages of Gadchiroli district and five villages of Gondia district and by KHOJ in two villages of Amravati district with support from Oxfam India, State Department of Forests and Tribal Development and Tribal Development Corporation of Maharashtra. The two NGOs—VNCS and KHOJ—are part of a wider forum of Civil Society Organisations—Vidarbha Livelihood Forum—supported by Oxfam India.

With technical and legal support of the facilitating agencies, the Gram Sabhas floated their tender. However, no bids were received from the tendu leaves traders as an attempt to sabotage the initiative. The Gram Sabhas still went ahead with the collection of tendu leaves and opened their Collection Centers. With the traders refusing to bid, the Gram Sabhas decided to enter the open market and invite offers from all the traders and government agencies interested in purchasing the tendu leaves.

The State Department of Tribal Development, Maharashtra agreed to procure 3000 standard bags at Rs. 3,500 per bag as offered by the steering committee of the Group of Gram Sabhas.

The Tribal Development Corporation of Maharashtra (TDC) resolved strongly to stand by the rights of the communities and prevent the people from suffering losses under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006. This whole process would now fetch a revenue of Rs. 1.10 crore a month to the Gram Sabhas through the sale of tendu leaves alone.

The collection and sale of tendu leaves was undertaken by the Gram Sabhas as part of the FRA, which recognises the right of Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers to Minor Forest Produce (MFP). The Act states that the Gram Sabha (a general body of a village/hamlet) has the legal right of ownership, access to collect, use, sale and dispose of MFP.

MFPs have a very critical role to play in the social, economic and cultural life of the tribals, not only for food security and medicines but also as a source of livelihood. But many important MFPs like Tendu, Mahua, Sal, Bamboo etc are nationalized by the state governments and only traded by the state agencies. As a result, the tribals were only getting paid for manual labour for collecting tendu leaves and had no share in the profit earned through its sale.

Though FRA legally gives the ownership rights on MFPs to the forest dwellers but in the absence of any support price to tribals, breaking the existing nexus of

IN THIS ISSUE

Villagers assert their right over natural resources: To collect and sell tendu leaves in Maharashtra 01
Youth Ki Awaaz: Mouthpiece for the youth 02
All that glitters - at the Awards Night! 03
Donor Speaks 04

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private traders and state agencies in the role of buyer and seller is not so easy. After the first lot of Gram Sabhas showed the way, Gram Sabhas spread across three districts have now organized themselves to establish their rights and collectively move forward in the process of regeneration, conservation management and sustainable use of their natural resources.

Community Forest Rights under FRA has been a pivotal instrument in mobilizing the members of the village communities through their Gram Sabhas and creating them as legal entities who will go on to manage the future development not only of their forest areas but also the villages.

Chandrakant Deokar
Chandrakant is a Member, Vidarbha Livelihood Forum. cdeokar@gmail.com

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**YOUTH KI AWAAAZ: MOUTHPIECE FOR THE YOUTH**

As part of the CLOSETHEGAP campaign, we ran a competition with Youth Ki Awaaz: Mouthpiece for the Youth to seek feedback on how young people can CLOSETHEGAP. Ishita Trivedi from Delhi University won the competition. Here is her prize winning entry.

Currently, women representation in the Indian Parliament stands at around 11%. While this is a good indicator of the bias against women in our system, it may misrepresent the true extent of misogynistic elements. People’s views on gender issues are not dictated by their sexual anatomy alone, but also the system they are products of. Their beliefs are the result of a certain cultural and social ethos. Global social organizations more or less conform to patriarchy and this is the case with India too. Therefore, all women are not necessarily true to the cause of gender empowerment. What has been agreed by most people in the discussion is that the Women Reservation Bill is likely to make 33% the new 11% i.e. it will recalibrate the system rather than change it. The Bill may simply entrench women from political families and thus not impact gender discourse because it will reboot the same chauvinistic outlook of the old political structure.

But the afore-mentioned point is not argument enough against the bill especially when the situation in state assemblies is evaluated. In the previous comments, people have made out education to be a cure-all for all female-empowerment issues, and I would like to disagree strongly with them on this regard. Without a doubt education is a great enabler, and educated woman can positively affect family health, sanitation, education for offspring etc. but also the system they are products of. Their beliefs are the result of a certain cultural and social ethos. Global social organizations more or less conform to patriarchy and this is the case with India too. Therefore, all women are not necessarily true to the cause of gender empowerment. What has been agreed by most people in the discussion is that the Women Reservation Bill is likely to make 33% the new 11% i.e. it will recalibrate the system rather than change it. The Bill may simply entrench women from political families and thus not impact gender discourse because it will reboot the same chauvinistic outlook of the old political structure.

But the afore-mentioned point is not argument enough against the bill especially when the situation in state assemblies is evaluated. In the previous comments, people have made out education to be a cure-all for all female-empowerment issues, and I would like to disagree strongly with them on this regard. Without a doubt education is a great enabler, and educated woman can positively affect family health, sanitation, education for offspring etc. but as pointed by the very same people, this is a matter of mindsets and education unfortunately does not reflect on how liberal and progressive one outlook and thinking is. Anyway, political activism and representation in India is hardly co-related with education levels. Here I would like to point out that 88.7% of women in Kerala are literate, yet we observe this abysmal performance of women in the Kerala State Assembly—only 5 women MLAs out of a House of 224!

This extent of warped gender representation calls for radical steps. Seeing is believing: if women do not assume leadership positions, associating leadership with women will become increasingly difficult. The 50% reservations for women in Panchayati Raj have made it increasingly acceptable to conceive of women as active participants in the public arena. Many studies have shown how female enrollment shot up in primary schools in villages; the recognition of women functioning outside traditional roles is a big push for feminism and has amazing positive spillover effects. Since India has 50% reservations for women in panchayats and municipalities, it is highly hypocritical of the government to not push for the same reforms in the higher tiers of the legislative assemblies, since there is certainly a need for the same. MPs like Renuka Chowdhary have spoken against the Bill by stating their faith in merit, but this argument is essentially flawed because the political structure of our country is oligarchical and riddled with instances of nepotism; thus the argument of merit in this case seems more an excuse for maintaining status-quo and less of an enshrined ideal. Probably this is the reason why reservations for SC, ST and OBCs are well-accepted across party lines but the very same parties are squeamish about supporting the Women Reservation Bill. This is because women are seen as an unreliable vote bank—too spatially diverse to bother about. The success of reservations are conditional to many imponderables and are not a panacea for the case of female empowerment, nor will they make the political system immediately more conducive for women. It will however serve to change mindsets in the long run, instead of waiting for mindsets to change which can then consequently reflect in representation in parliaments. Reservations serve as a more pro-active and a levelling measure and moreover, it will be short-sighted to not implement these reforms when we have had considerable success at the local governmental level. Reservations, if accompanied with a democratization of intra-party affairs, can be a game-changer.

– Ishita Trivedi, Student, Miranda House
Delhi University

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Ishita Trivedi, the winner of the Youth Ki Awaaz: Mouthpiece for the Youth competition under CLOSETHEGAP
“It has been a great opportunity to reach out to all of you and to familiarise you with Oxfam India’s work,” said Nisha Agrawal, CEO Oxfam India, welcoming the 51 fund raising award winning teams and the four speed award winners in various categories at the Awards Nights for Oxfam India Trailwalker 2013, Bengaluru.

“We are now a middle-income country, having crossed the threshold of $1000 per capita. Foreign funds are drying up and we have a huge poverty challenge. We now need to take up this challenge of fighting poverty and injustice ourselves”, she added.

Oxfam India Trailwalker 2013, Bengaluru has already raised INR 2.5 crores, an amount twice that of last year. Funds raised will go to 6 Oxfam India supported projects across 4 cities in India. Our Highest Fund raising Team, GS United, raised more than twice the amount of the highest team last year. V. Bunty Bohra, from GS United, who raised INR 56.5 lakhs this year said, “We called ourselves GS United so that Goldman Sachs employees from across the world could relate to us and pitch in for the cause.”

The Bengaluru Trailwalker was made possible this year with the help of 20 event partners and 10 volunteer support partners. The Awards Night was also an occasion to thank them and their efforts.

51 jubilant teams came on the dais to receive their souvenirs after qualifying for the Fundraising Awards by raising over INR 1 lakh.

Linsey Simpson from Thomson Reuters with the third highest participating teams this year said, “We participated last year with 5 teams and this year we wanted to double that. We ended up with 22 teams. See you in Mumbai.”

Nisha Agrawal summed up the growing buzz about Trailwalker in India and said, “After the huge success in Bengaluru, we are going to start Trailwalker in Mumbai now. We have picked up a really stunning trail. For those who think Bengaluru is too easy, the Mumbai trail is three times more challenging as Bengaluru. So now you have a choice and we hope that you will do both.”

joel@oxfamindia.org

Under Oxfam India’s CLOSETHEGAP campaign, an online Logo competition has been launched. The logo competition is open till June 30 2013. We need you to design a logo – it could be a painting, a design, or a graphic – that captures this spirit, and our push for equality. The winner will get an iPad Mini – and their logo will become the symbol of this national campaign! It’s a great chance to gain visibility and recognition.

Please send us the logo in JPEG format at closethegap@oxfamindia.org. Only one entry per person. Oxfam will post 10 best logos on our facebook wall before picking a winner.
DONOR SPEAKS

VIKAS AGGARWAL
Project Engineer, Desein Indure
New Delhi

I have been attached with Oxfam India for the last 3 years and I am satisfied with their work culture and their contribution towards the society. I urge people to come forward and help the marginalized children to get adequate education.

I thank Oxfam India for running this drive.

PRASHANT AGRAWAL
Business Specialist
HCL Technologies Ltd
New Delhi

It has been a great pleasure to be a part of Oxfam India, an esteemed organisation which is so diversified and making every effort to serve humanity. It gives people a chance to be a part of the change happening in society. I give my heartiest wishes to Oxfam India for the tremendous work they are doing.

BECOME A ‘FRIEND OF OXFAM’!

Donate Monthly to empower the lives of poor and marginalised and bring a lasting change. Your monthly contribution will help us continue in our mission to create a more equal, just, and sustainable world.

Enclosed is my first monthly donation of

- Rs. 500 Provide coaching support to lagging children
- Rs. 800 Create awareness to reduce acceptance of violence against women
- Rs 500 Create Awareness on health and hygiene in disaster prone areas.

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All donations are 50% tax deductible U/S 80G of IT Act, 1961. All donations in favour of Humanitarian Response and Disaster Risk Reduction are 100% tax deductible U/S 35AC of IT Act, 1961.