

# Participatory Forest Management in Mendha Lekha, India<sup>1</sup>

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This case study looks at ways to quantify the benefits accruing from traditional, participatory forest management as practiced in the small tribal village of Mendha Lekha, Maharashtra. Community initiatives such as the one seen in Mendha could become role models for implementation of government programmes such as the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme. The village is a microcosm of tribal life that has managed to preserve its 18km<sup>2</sup> forest over the years using an exemplary “self-rule” principle which is central to their existence. Mendha achieved this feat through three pivotal rules, self study, self governance and participatory democracy (a consensus approach).

*Key words: biomass economy, environmental sustainability, rural development, Gross Nature Product (vs. Gross National Product), well-being, GDP of the poor, funds and stocks, joint forest management, watershed management, social capital, property rights, self study (regulation), consensual democracy (v. majority democracy), community rights, inclusive institutions, non-monetary economy, livelihood security, needs, rights-based approach.*

## Introduction

The extent of poverty in India has not been dented after 60 years of targeted anti-poverty programmes. Most rural programmes fail as the schemes are uniform and ignore ecosystem differences across regions in India. What might work for one particular part of the country fails miserably in another due to huge ecological, social and cultural differences. A majority of India still depends heavily and directly on its natural resources for sustenance, and people still draw their livelihoods and food directly from nature, despite the economic boom. Rural India does not define everything in monetary terms, especially not well-being. The idea of well-being is closely related to land, natural resources and cultural ideal types. Ecology directly sustains more than 60% of the population with over 234 million dependent on agriculture, fisheries and forests. This dependence on the ecology and agriculture is neglected by National Accounts figures but it is increasing as the population grows. The ecology ‘indirectly’ also sustains all industry through the provision of biomass.

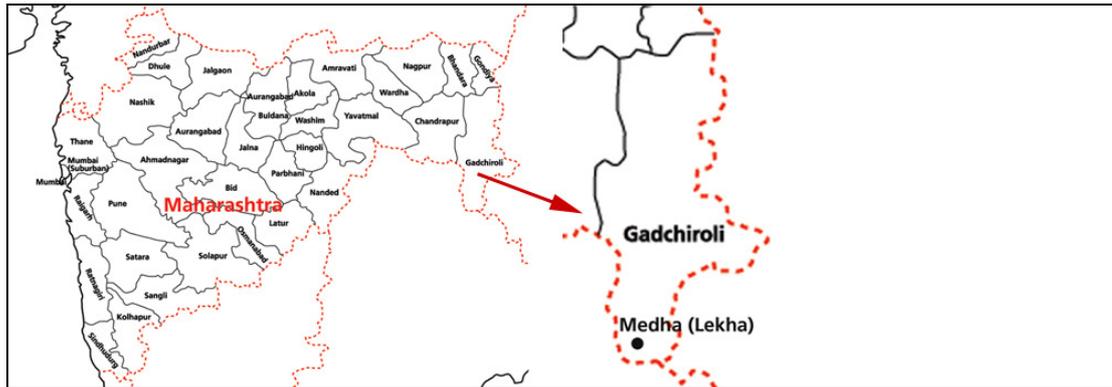
Around 240 million hectares (ha) of India’s 306 million ha of land is used for biomass production. Out of this, only on a very small fraction of agricultural lands has productivity improved due to irrigation. On the rest, productivity has decreased and is still on the decline. The economy is biomass-based thus dependent on ecology. Poverty is caused by ecological degradation as people lose out on their support system as soon as

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they lose hold over resources. This entails that we recognize rural poverty as ecological poverty (not income poverty) and redefine it as lack of access to resources. This concept of **Gross Nature Product**, proposed by Anil Argawal, is similar to the concept of “**GDP of the poor**” as defined by the TEEB report, “The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity” in 2008.

Figure 1: Mendha Lekha, Gadchiroli district



#### Mendha : A snapshot

Total Area:	1930 ha
Forest Area:	1806.49 ha (98.73%)
Total population:	430
Total number of households:	82
Caste/Ethnic group Composition:	100% Maria Gond (a Scheduled Tribe)
Economic Activities:	Rainfed Agriculture is the mainstay followed by collection of non-timber forest produce
Distance from nearest Town/Market/	
Administrative centre:	3 km
Literacy:	30%
Assertion of village ownership	
over its forest:	1989
Main Institutions:	Gram Sabha (stronger than the Gram Panchayat) takes all decisions pertaining to the village by consensus only (participative and inclusive democracy as against representative democracy). The village also has a “Study Circle” comprising all adult villagers which holds meetings nightly in the village square to discuss and assess all matters related to the village.
Financial Institutions:	A village fund created by contribution from all households in the village & project support by PRIA, an non-government organisation based in New Delhi
Forest Committee:	Every household is a member. The committee guards the forest and is vested with the right to levy fines on offenders in conjunction with the Gram Sabha.
Assertion of rights:	Nistar rights or the right to use the village forest. Outside (government/forest department) interference in their forest stopped.

It is but natural to highlight solutions as well when one is looking at problems. It is this perspective that drives the need to study the case of Mendha Lekha (See Figure 1), a small tribal village that sought to turn its fortunes around by investing more in its natural resources than anything else. The possibilities for scaling-up such a model of development are also an incentive to study the case. While this case resembles that of Hiware Bazar in many ways, it differs in that Mendha is a tribal forest community, not an agricultural caste village, and thus links to the market are not one of the keys of success.

### The Microcosm

Mendha is a small tribal (Maria Gond) village in the Lekha Panchayat. It is situated in the Gadchiroli district in the eastern end of the central Indian state of Maharashtra. The village is well known for its declaration of self-rule, its biomass-based subsistence economy and its self sufficiency. Gadchiroli district is situated at the tail end of the Satpura range of mountains and is largely forested. It is predominantly tribal and poor, with high dependency on its natural resource base. However, with appropriation of community forests by the State and the dwindling of forest cover due to increased population and extraction pressures, the rights of these tribals over their land have withered, deepening their level of poverty.

Freeing itself from the clutches of poverty and wrestling back its right to resources, Mendha has been an exception to the rule. Mendha rose against the Government's policy of taking over community forest rights back in the 1930s when it initiated the struggle to assert control over its 18 km<sup>2</sup> forest. The village worked its way around the official policies and has invested its **social capital** in **watershed development** and protection of the forest as well as its judicious use. The State has over the years realized the folly of separating tribals from the forests which leads to problems in conserving them, thus introducing the **Joint Forest Management (JFM)** programme in the late 1980s. These programmes, due to their top-down approach have little community say/ stake in the preservation and use of forest and fail to address issues of land ownership and use.

The case of Mendha provides key insights into the nature of governance and judicious use of resources at the community level. It shows ways of making programmes work. Hence, evaluation of the benefits and costs of community initiatives (overleaf) provides a platform to show the potential of community managed schemes in tandem with the government that do not sacrifice livelihood, cultural and environmental values. An application of **multi-criteria evaluation** to the social, economic and cultural gains and processes in the village would go a long way in future research and for understanding such societal processes. The village level implementation of self-rule for the maintenance of its forest and its continued success and scaling-up requires building confidence in the positive impacts of these initiatives.

## *Village Initiatives*

**A. Transparency & Participation:** All decisions concerning the village are taken by consensus (strictly) in gram sabha (village assembly).

**B. Self Study:** A village level Study Circle for self-study has been organized and is functioning since 1987. It has reached a cyclical process: knowledge -> decision -> action -> knowledge.

**C. Self Governance:** Their slogan is: In our village we are the Government! At Delhi-Mumbai is our government! Certain self-governance principles are always followed:

- **Participatory Forest Management:** The Village Forest Protection Committee looks after the 18 km<sup>2</sup> forest. Even government agencies are not allowed to work within village boundary without prior permission from the Gram sabha
- **Ban on tree felling:** A fine of Rs 101 is levied on illegal cutting of trees from the forest. All uses of the forest are to be cleared by the gram sabha.
- **Self Correction:** Decided to prohibit the sale and purchase of liquor within the village allowing for brewing of traditional liquor only for ceremonial occasions like marriages, religious ceremonies, etc. after taking permission from the gram sabha.
- **No Subsidy:** The village does not take any subsidy or grants and takes only loans.
- **Water Equity:** Every individual in the village gets equal share of water be it surface water or underground water, in private or government land.
- **Build Tank By Eating Fish:** Completed the remaining work of their community forest tank by implementing their own innovative program - "Eat Fish & Build Tank" i.e. catch fish and put in equivalent work for the tank construction.
- **Corruption Control:** The gram sabha decreed that if one is to bribe government officials to get his/her work done, it is necessary to take receipt of the same. If not, then he/she must give the same in cash or kind to the Gram sabha.
- **Village Court:** All internal disputes are settled within the village by the village court. No one goes to the police or court and accepts the decision of the Nyaya Panchayat i.e. gramsabha.
- **Change from Labour to Owner:** Gram sabha acquired the exclusive rights over a stone quarry through a government scheme DWACRA innovatively.
- **Livelihood Rights:** Fought successfully to gain back their Nistar Rights i.e. livelihood rights over natural resources surrounding the village.

### **D. Ecology conservation:**

- Eco friendly methodology for honey collection without destroying honeycomb or killing rock bees is followed strictly.
- Soil & Water Conservation encouraged with village level watershed technician training camps and constructed more than 1000 gully-plugs in the forest to arrest erosion.
- Integrated Approach: There is a ban on hunting and collection of timber from the forest.
- Struggle against harmful ecological practices: The village opposed the wrong method of bamboo cutting by the local paper mills that involved rooting out the bamboo. They compelled the government contractors to take villagers along with their labourers so as to oversee and get the cutting right.
- A nursery was set up by the women of the village for supplying plantation saplings.
- People's Biodiversity Register: Decided to use P.B.R. as a tool for sustainable developmental planning.

### **E. Economic Activity:**

- **Grain Bank:** The gram sabha set up a grain bank in the village to allow for droughts and crop failures. Any villagers can borrow grains from the bank. Each family is expected to contribute a share.
- **Village Fund :** All the fines collected by the Nyaya Panchayat (village court) and 10% of the wages earned from the employment other than agriculture is deposited as a village fund .This is used for village work as decided in the Gram Sabha.

**F. Self Help Group (SHG):** There are 8 self-help (saving) groups in the village, four groups each for women and men.

### **G. Poverty Reduction & well-being:**

The village asserted its right to collect resources from the forest hence allowing for people to take the necessary resources for daily use. Activities like tendu patta collection and honey collection also provide people with employment. Today, no one goes out of the village for employment. The landed people help out the landless and those with small land holdings in time of need by providing them employment on their farms.

There has also been a sustained effort to include women in all activities in the village. SHGs have also helped people achieve self-sufficiency.

### **Biodiversity Impacts :**

Protection accorded to the forest has helped increase the tree cover and hunting prohibition has helped maintain wildlife numbers.

*(modified from Kalpavriksh study on Mendha)*

## The Context

The present village boundary was demarcated in the early 1920s by a British settlement survey team. The Gonds traditionally depend on the forest for food, grazing, timber, water and other resources. This dependence has continued even after independence. The village is one of the few remaining villages in the Gadchiroli district that control and manage a village forest. Since the village depends heavily on its forest, all decisions pertaining to the management and extraction of resources are taken collectively. As a result the resource base is still very good and the village seldom suffers from shortages of water or food or fodder. Far from being a “**tragedy of the commons**”, the village is a success in **community resource management**. The economy is self sustaining and unaffected by the vagaries of the market economy as the Gonds have managed to keep their economy relatively free of **monetization**.

Management of the forest in Mendha is interlinked with the struggle for tribal self-rule. Gonds, being forest dwellers, have always enjoyed unhindered use of the forest. In the pre-British era, the local caste landlords used to levy a tax on the use of the forest in exchange for which the collection rights were extended to the community. There was however, little interference in the forest itself by the caste communities. This system continued for a while under the British till they decided to consolidate all the forests in India as government property and centralized tax collection. The rights of the forest dwellers began to be severely curtailed as the commercial exploitation of forests began under the British rule. Modern India inherited this mindset and way of governance, further marginalizing communities and depleting forests for commercial gain.

The Gonds in Mendha faced similar exclusion and exploitation by neighbouring caste Hindus as well as the government. According to the elderly in Mendha, Nistar passes had been freely available to them from the village head, but after the forest act came into being in independent India the forest department started distributing such passes at concessional rates. This resulted in bribery of forest officials for granting of permits to collect grasses and other non-timber forest produce. Later when the villagers protested, the department marked a 2 km<sup>2</sup> zone in the forest for collection of produce. Corruption in the forestry department forced the people of Mendha to bribe officials for small favours. Their village forest was being exploited for bamboo to supply the paper mills. The Gonds bore all these injustices till things came to a tipping point.

Discontentment had been brewing since the 1950s as the tribals faced increasing oppression and discrimination from the forest department. There was a sustained effort to isolate the forest from the people. Traditional institutions like the Ghotul, a communal building for boys and girls, were discouraged strongly on grounds that the building is made from teak and the cutting of trees harms the forest. By the late 1970s, the tribals found a common cause to unite and fight against. The Maharashtra government proposed two **dams** in the Gadchiroli region. For the land-dependent tribals of the region, the project not only meant displacement from their traditional homes and possible social disruption but also the destruction of large stretches of forests on which their livelihood and culture heavily depended. Thus this project faced strong tribal opposition and was

finally shelved by the government. Alternative ideas were to be born from resistance, as is often the case.

*Figure 2: Banner on the Panchayat building declaring, “In Delhi and Mumbai is our Government, in our village, we ourselves are the Government”*



Mendha participated in the **anti-dam movement** as well as other movements. Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, a social worker closely associated with Mendha and Devaji Tofa, the dynamic leader of Mendha, teamed up to launch the *Jungle Bachao, Manav Bachao* (Save Forest, Save Humanity) movement. This movement laid the foundation for the tribal self-rule principle that Mendha went on to imbibe and symbolize. Mendha soon realized that the only way to ensure the safety of their forest was to take its governance into their own hands and reduce dependency on the government. In order to gather strength to reclaim their rights over the forest the village decided to revive its traditional governance structure. It pushed for all decisions to be taken at the village level hence strengthening the Gram Sabha.

The traditional system of Gram Sabha was reactivated in 1988 through the process of Adhyan Mandal (discussion group). Through regular discussions with researchers and NGOs, villagers came to know about their traditional Nistar (collection) rights granted in the Nistar Patrak (collection rights written in a document under the British era). The Gram Sabha started by acquiring all the legal, revenue and political documents about the village. The famous slogan “*Dilli Mumbai Amcha Sarkar, Amache Ganavat Amhich Sarkar*” (In Delhi and Mumbai is our Government, In our village we ourselves are the Government) was raised in Mendha and still holds a central place in the village square (see Figure 2).

The village also decided to revive its fledgling Ghotul, a cultural institution meant to teach adolescents the ways of tribal life and pass on traditional knowledge. The village constructed a new Ghotul using teakwood from the forest. The forest department destroyed the structure and seized the wood. Angered, the village called a 32 village Gram Maha Sabha (large assembly) and garnered support from other Gond villages.

*Figure 3: Training of village youth in the main square*



Twelve villages constructed Ghotuls along with Mendha and the defiant villagers threatened to resurrect a new structure every time the old one was destroyed. The Forest Department had to concede defeat thus handing Mendha a significant victory.

In order to facilitate discussion at the village level, the elders decided to hold daily meetings in the village square (Figure 3) to discuss all matters important to the village. They soon realized the importance of taking informed decisions based on detailed discussions. Initial discussions centered on self-improvement of the community and the first target was alcohol. Recognizing the need to reduce and possibly abolish alcoholism in the village prohibition was made a rule in the village. A blanket ban was imposed on procuring liquor from the market and it was decided that the Gram Sabha would control the production of traditional liquor in the village. Traditional liquor has certain ceremonial importance in tribal culture.

The success with the ban on liquor gave the village impetus to consolidate their efforts towards ownership and management of their forest. In 1987 the Gram Sabha, after several years of discussions, decided to stake a claim to the ownership of the forest. It passed a resolution stating that the village shall fulfill all its domestic requirements from the forest without paying a fee to the government. Rules of extraction were also set so as to make the use sustainable. All major extraction from the village was to be supervised by the Gram Sabha and each family was to take only what was needed. The village put a ban on the use of the forest by outside agencies- forest department or contractors without the explicit permission of the Gram Sabha. Commercial exploitation of the forest was banned. The Van Suraksha Samiti (Forest Protection Committee) was formed and patrol parties comprising two members of a household each guard the forest daily. The Gram Sabha levied fines on all illegal extraction, disallowed encroachment of forest land and aided in fire fighting whenever the need arose.

### Towards Community Forest Management

The forest department did not recognize the efforts of the villagers in protecting their forest. In 1991 the Mendha forest was declared a Reserve Forest, an official category of protection that disallowed any community use of forest resources. The villagers were not even consulted. They continued to patrol the forest however, and use its resources in defiance of the law. They even got their Gram Sabha registered as a non-profit organization by the name of '*Gaon Niyojan Va Viakas Parishad*' (village planning and development organisation). The newly christened body decided to target the corruption in government offices first. It issued a decree that for every bribe given to Government officials for any work the villagers would have to get a receipt, failing which he/she would have to give an equivalent (to the bribe) amount to the Gram Sabha. This ended the corruption completely as all villagers demanded a receipt every time they were asked to pay a bribe.

In 1992, the State of Maharashtra adopted a Joint Forest Management Resolution. Under JFM, degraded forests could be handed over to villagers for regeneration activities, managed jointly by the villagers and the Forest Department. This directive was however, not applicable to Gadchiroli district with a majority of its forests classified as natural canopy forests. These could not be categorized as degraded and hence JFM was not applicable. Mendha, however, persistently demanded inclusion in the scheme only to be rejected. In 1996 the forest department finally conceded to the demand and an official forest protection committee was formed in Mendha. Mendha Lekha became the first village with standing forests in the state of Maharashtra to be brought under JFM.

### Teamwork and Watershed Management

Once the Gram Sabha had established itself and the self-study circle had become active in 1987, the village took a series of different measures to maintain and sustainably use its resources. Extensive **watershed management** work was planned and executed inside the forest with over 1000 gully plugs made across the landscape. Forest streams and small ponds were cleaned up of debris and their maintenance began on a cyclical basis. Interestingly, the village approached the government and the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) to fund their watershed development activities. Both the agencies rejected their demands repeatedly. Mendha decided to go ahead nevertheless and completed the work using voluntary labour.

In the year 1993, facing a shortage of water in the dry months, the people decided to construct a large pond on the outskirts of the forest in an area with suitable drainage and geography. The forest department opposed the construction saying it was technically forest land and hence a pond could not be constructed on it. The villagers fought for the construction and to cope with the lack of funds used the Employment Guarantee Fund (EGS) money to make the pond. In order to pacify the forest department, the villagers contended that this pond was a '*van taalab*' (forest pond) being constructed for the animals. The EGS money was however, only sufficient for the construction of half of the

pond and construction stalled after the funds ran out. The following year, more funds were not forthcoming.

Several self-study group meetings later the village decided not to take any help from the government and came up with a unique solution. Following the monsoon in 1994, the half pond was filled with water. The village introduced fish in it. Now, anyone from the village could come and help in digging the other half of the pond and in return could catch fish from the completed half. If a person or a household dug around a third of a metre deep and  $3\text{m}^2$ , he/they could catch one kilogram of fish for their use. This unique payment system ensured the completion of the pond the same year. The effort led to increased percolation and the fields around the pond benefitted immensely. Nanja Tofa, a 26-year-old resident of the village commented that this pond secured at least one crop for the surrounding fields even if the rains were poor. Even now, the pond is used for fishing but the fish are sold only to the villagers. Those who are unable to pay for the fish can simply undertake a proportionate amount of labour in cleaning and upkeep of the pond. The labour is decided by the Gram Sabha.

Following the success of this effort of making a pond, the village decided in 1997-98 to further reduce its dependence on forest streams by planning to make *baodi* or small irrigation ponds/wells next to the agricultural fields themselves. Once again, the village approached NABARD for funding. NABARD was funding similar schemes in different parts of the country at the time. Citing a lack of technical expertise, the bank refused funding once again. Devaji Tofa, the village head, continued his efforts to persuade the bank and even approached the bank executives in Mumbai. The bank finally relented and gave the money to the village for the construction of 17 *baodis*. Today, almost all the fields in Mendha are irrigated using these *baodis*. Those fields that lie close to streams and village ponds use their water.

### Minding their Business

Preservation and judicious use of resources was not restricted to the forest. Activities spread to the institutional, financial and personal level. Mendha's village committees - the forest committee, its grain bank, the self-study circle, etc. have had to fight for their existence. The village is a part of Lekha Panchayat, a council of several villages in the Lekha region. The Panchayat is a strong 'official' institution that looks after all affairs of the village. It was natural for it to not recognize these village institutions that it considered as threats to its power. Lekha has from time to time tried to arrest control of Mendha's resources and management but the tribals' hold is strong and cohesive.

The Mendha forest is one of the sources of bamboo for the Ballarpur paper factory located 120 km from the village. The forest department leased out the right to collect bamboo every second year to contractors. These people cut all the bamboo shoots in the forest to maximize profits leaving nothing for the domestic use of the villagers. Mendha fought to stop the practice and after its JFM committee was formed in 1996, the village took total charge of bamboo collection. The Gram Sabha decided to cut only mature bamboo from the forest, collect in the village and allow the people to take whatever they

needed. The remaining bamboo shoots were sold to the mill at Rs 600 per metric ton, the price fixed by the Forest Department. The earnings in this case however were taken by the Forest Department. Under the JFM agreement the village was to get its share of 50% earnings but is still awaiting the money. The contractors treated the bamboo resource as a **stock** to be depleted while the villagers saw the bamboo stands as a permanent **fund** that could provide a **flow** of regular sustainable resources.

The village moved on to take complete control of all commercial activities on its land and formed self-help groups (SHG) to manage these. Mendha had several granite stone mines. The stone was used for construction and the mining was leased to contractors by the forest department and the district administration. The Gram Sabha passed a resolution to mine responsibly and not to allow outsiders to manage the mines. The village approached the district administration to not renew the mining permit for the contractors and persuaded them to lease the mines to two women SHGs from Mendha. The Development of Women and Children In Rural Areas scheme (DWACRA) allowed for the SHGs to apply and get the mining permits. It was also decided that only two big mines would be allowed to operate in the village and the rest of the small mines would be closed as they caused severe degradation. The SHGs took control of the mines and allowed only two truckloads of stone to be mined a day. The profits went to the Gram Sabha and into the SHG account. The SHG earned enough money to buy its own tractors which are now used to transport the stone to the market, cutting out the contractors completely and increasing profits. Members of the SHG can now borrow money from the group for any activity at a minimal interest rate of 2 % per annum.

With increased prosperity in agriculture, the village decided to further reduce its dependence on the forest for fuelwood and brought the gobar manure gas plants (bio-gas plants) to the village. The initiative began in the year of 2000-2001 and today there are 80 bio-gas plants installed in the village. This leaves out only two poor households, but the village plans to help these two acquire their bio-gas plants in the near future. The money for the installation of these plants came from the bio-gas plant scheme of the district administration and some from the forest department. It takes about Rs. 7000 to make a single unit. The Gram Sabha decided to fund Rs. 500 from its account, each family put in labour worth Rs. 1500 and the rest of the money was funded by the government. The structure for the bio-gas plants was modified by the villagers to suit their needs and each household is responsible for its plant's maintenance. Technical guidance was sought from the government and local NGOs that work on the construction of these plants.

Another activity that the Gram Sabha fought to control is tendu patta (tobacco leaf) collection. The collection of tobacco leaf was controlled by the forest department and leased to the contractors. These contractors hired cheap labour from outside the village and ravaged trees by stripping them naked in the collection season. Other trees also suffered damages due to the labourers indiscriminately cutting out all vegetation to get to the tobacco plants. Mendha formed a cooperative and fought to get it registered in 2002. It went on to stake claim to the collection of tendu leaves through the cooperative so that the people get employment within the village and do not have to venture out. The Forest Department however sold the rights to collection to the highest bidder (invariably a

contractor). In response the village put its foot down and forced the contractor to hire only labour from Mendha. The practice still continues.

Apart from tendu, the villagers also collect mahua (a flower used to brew local liquor), Amla (Indian gooseberry), chironji (Cudapah almond - a seed used to garnish sweets), gum and bamboo shoots, teak leaves, etc. The Gram Sabha decided that none of these would be sold in the market. Consequently, people only collect what they use at home, taking the commercial exploitation of forests out of the equation. One important product from the forest- honey is exempt from this rule. The Gonds have a special method to extract honey without killing the bees or harming the beehive. They cut out the middle portion of the beehive on moonless and first moon nights when the bees are believed to be relatively calm. Collection of honey provides livelihoods to the few landless families in the village. Of late, the Gram Sabha has decided to fund the training of one of the landless youths in Nagpur. The training entailed methods of processing honey with mahua and neem to enhance its medicinal properties. A honey-processing unit is being set up in the village and the product will be sold locally to cover the costs and generate an income for the landless family.

### Ecology and Economy

The impacts of the initiatives undertaken in Mendha cut across ecological, economic and social spheres. Given the **non-monetary** nature of tribal economy, it is hard to define the economic gains in figures. The people of Mendha see the economy and **well-being** in social-environmental terms. The dependence of the people on forest resources gives these resources a cultural rather than a commercial context. In other words, the people save the forest because they depend on it, not for economic gain. Also, the definition of rich is linked to how much land one owns. Well-being is defined as a state wherein one has enough to meet ones' **needs** and some saving to tide over the hard times. Everything is seen in terms of accessibility to natural resources as most of the daily requirements come from these.

Economic conditions in the village are poor by monetary standards, with many people living below the poverty line. However, the village does not recognize poverty as income poverty. One question that comes to mind is why does the village not change even after so much influence and exposure to other cultures over time? Devaji has a simple answer: people make no relationship between jungle and money, because if people do then they will destroy the jungle. The village never kept track of increases in groundwater levels and crop production and milk production in numbers. The watershed development work led to an increase in the groundwater table in that wells did not run dry during the lean season even after the water was used for irrigation.

### Sustainability

The story of Mendha is unique for many reasons. Firstly, the decision-making process is an informed one. In this, the study circles or the Abhyas Gats formed in the village play a crucial role. The villagers welcome all kinds of information from the outside world, yet

they retain the right to decide for themselves, and this helps in making the right kind of choices. Then comes the fact that no decision is taken merely by majority. Almost always, it is taken by a unanimous vote. Be it getting bio-gas for every family, making women equal representatives and even monitoring the effects of television - the **consensus process** prevails. It hasn't been easy. "Mendha also has its share of good and bad. People haven't always agreed to our plans, but through discussion they have been made to see the pros and cons like in the case of banning liquor shops in the village," says Tofa.

Finally the transparency that is strictly adhered to makes the entire effort of self-rule successful. There is a bit of discontent among the higher officials who feel threatened by the power enjoyed by the villagers because in a way it makes their position redundant. However, inherent traits of the community like its close-knittedness and cohesion have contributed to the successfulness of their efforts. And while this transition of Mendha from a helpless, uninformed and fear-ridden community into an informed and empowered community is remarkable, the struggle is by no means complete. Neither is the conservation process completely foolproof. Replication of the same process elsewhere may not always be possible.

#### The Lessons of Mendha: Is 'Scaling-up' Possible?

When site-specific and decentralised management of natural resources is the need of the hour, the process of self-determination, natural resource conservation, and **environmental investments** undertaken in Mendha can show the way to other villages in India. Comprehensive land and water management for livelihood security however will require planning and implementation at the settlement level. Village-level planning will require good technical inputs into land and water conservation but these inputs in turn require new (and old) knowledge.

Does the **National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)** allow for this capacity building and what kind of **knowledge systems** are needed? Village planning will need **institutional capacity** at the settlement level. There is a weakness in the current NREGA where the involvement of the Gram Sabha is recommended but not guaranteed. For instance, the priorities are set by the Gram Sabha but then when the plan is made by the sarpanch and the junior engineer or block development officer, this plan is not cleared with the Gram Sabha. Similarly, when the budget is made by the junior engineer and then sanctioned by the district collector, it is not discussed in the village.

The village plan will require integration of land and water, with the need for legal and institutional reform. The village implementation and its continued success and scaling-up requires data collection and building confidence in its impact. Climate coping strategies will call for risk management systems, which will need inputs from villagers and their strategies. In dryland areas, cropping systems are more risky and so traditionally people have depended on animal care systems, which maximize the value of each raindrop. Additional risk management strategies include a return to traditional cropping patterns, which are built on less water-intensive systems and which provide for fodder and other

multi-purpose crops as well as water management which optimizes on the little rain that is available by harvesting where it falls.

*Figure 4: Controlled grazing in Mendha Lekha*



#### Present Scenario

Mendha has a **self-sufficient economy**- negligible dependence on the market, extensive use of forest products in everyday life, organic farming, gohar (bio) gas plants, controlled grazing (See Figure 4), only necessary trading with ‘bazaar people’ (market people in the Gond terminology). As far as leadership is concerned, Devaji Tofa has led for the last 30 years by consensus and everyone has equal powers and rights. Institutional mechanisms have created a space of support for poor families, technical education for youth funded by the village, employment for all, and the revival of traditional institutions.

#### Replication Potential

Following Mendha, two more villages have treaded the path to self- rule. Markegaon, a village three kilometers from Mendha, is inhabited by 175 Gond tribals. Their fight started against the forest department when the department sent a notice of fine to the villagers regarding illegal cutting of the forests. “We replied that we have taken wood from god’s forest. We will pay the fine to him only”, says Chatruji Halami, President of the Markegaon Gram Sabha. Disillusioned with the five-village Gram Panchayat of Tukum under which Markegaon is a part, Halami participated in Mendha’s Gram Sabha way back in 1990. “It showed us the way. I talked to the people in my village”, he says. After a series of discussions the people of Markegaon decided to have their own Gram Sabha along the lines of Mendha’s. “Our objective is very clear. We want to see Delhi’s money trickling down to the village Gulli”, says Halami. One can’t call this replication as each situation is different but there are new beginnings everywhere, learning from each other people have started their own initiatives.

It is a majority vs. consensus situation in Mendha and all have to agree, not the majority if a decision is to be implemented. Today, the Gram Sabha's permission is mandatory before any development work begins in the village. All grants are treated as loans to be repaid from the village's contributory fund, to which each resident is required to pay 10% of his or her total annual earnings. All community work here is also the individual's work, to which each person has to contribute personal time and resources. "This makes the village a true republic and an effective participatory democracy," says Mendha resident Mohanbhai Hiralal.

### Forest Rights Act

In August 2009, Mendha joined the elite few communities in India that have managed to get community rights under the new Forest Rights Act. Managing forest resources came easily to the people of Mendha Lekha. The village has been managing 2 km<sup>2</sup> of forest for more than ten years. They applied for community rights over the entire village forest area of 18 km<sup>2</sup> under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. "The rights would help villagers bargain the price of important **minor forest products** (MFPs) like bamboo and tendu patta," contends Devaji Tofa, the head of the village. He adds, "In an absence of rights regime previously a lot of these resources were harvested unsustainably by private contractors under license from the forest department".

Under the present arrangement, the Forest Department does not give the village their share of the profits from the sale of bamboo and tendu leaves. The people of Mendha believe that with community control these funds will come directly to the people. "Given our dependence on the forest for leaves, grazing animals, fruits, firewood, and medicinal herbs, rights over 2 km<sup>2</sup> of forests were not enough to sustain the village", explains Tofa. Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, social activist and head of Vrikshamitra, an NGO working in the area, agrees. "The village depends largely on MFPs. So **community rights** hold more value for them". Hiralal feels that management of resources is more important than ownership. Taking a cue from Gandhi's philosophy he states "decision making power should lie with the people, only then will they benefit in the true sense and the process will become democratic and de-centralised".

### Lessons

Rainfed agriculture in India extends over an area of 97 million ha and constitutes nearly 67% of the net cultivated area. Most backward districts lie in these areas and account for 60% of the poor population in the country. These areas are also characterized by single crop agriculture but account for 42% of the total food grain production in India. They suffer from a degraded natural resource base, low soil fertility, soil erosion and have an unutilized irrigation potential of 65%. In the wake of this it becomes important to manage resources well and create more natural wealth. Villages like Mendha Lekha provide a view of the ecological opportunities that each village in India has. Every village has the resources to self-sustain and Mendha shows the way it can be done. **Water conservation**

emerges as the core of these models and **community governance** is the key to sustainability. What is required is to build strong **institutions** based on a **rights-based approach** in order to lay down the key principles of sustainable development.