ALTERNATIVE FORUM PUNE

Brief report of 5th Meeting
13th September 2013

Venue: Lokayat, Law College Road

Present: Dr Madhav Gadgil, Vishal Pipraiya, Neha Nandini, Suhas Kolhekar, Ashok Sreenivas, Sarita Bhagat, Dhananjay Datar, Sujit Patwardhan, Walter Mendoza, Rainer Horig, Jyotsna Tete, Ranjith Babu, KJ Joy, Seema Kulkarni, Nandini Oza, Shripad Dharmadhikary, Nikhil Sheth, Mithika D'cruz, Saili Palande Datar, Sanskriti Menon, Mukesh Choudhari, Sharmila Deo, Ashish Kothari, Meenal Tatpati, Neema Pathak

Key Points

The meeting began with a round of introductions and Ashish Kothari introduced the forum.

Dr. Madhav Gadgil shared his experience of field research in Goa that unearthed the illegal mining that was happening there. He shared his experience of speaking to villagers and mining contractors. He observed that illegal mining was carried out with the full support of several state and local level politicians. During the course of his research it was found that the ground water quality had degraded severely because of mining, leading to loss of agriculture-based livelihoods. It was also found that contrary to the common belief, many villagers were interested in carrying on with agriculture based livelihood options but could not do so because of various adverse conditions, including water scarcity and pollution.

When the Shah Commission report was put out, leading to ban on mining in Goa, the state government tried to link the ban to high unemployment and decreasing economic gains. However, this was false propaganda by the State because mining carried out was mechanised to a large extent and employed very few people.

He mentioned that if the Biodiversity Act (BDA) was implemented well (formation of Biodiversity Management Committees (BMC) in each Panchayat), there would be a good documentation of natural wealth, data regarding which is scant. This he believed would also lead to people's monitoring of conservation and development plans and projects. However, as expected the BDA in Maharashtra has become another tool for the government to assert its own power over local people and local biodiversity.

Dr Gadgil also spoke about the history leading to the drafting of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. There was a strong and prominent campaign against the Bill (through coercion of high-level foresters, industrialists and political heads) which continues even after the Act has been enforced.

The village Mendha-Lekha of Gadchiroli District was the first in the country to get a legal title over its community forests under this Act. Today, the district itself has close to 900 villages have received similar titles over about 6 lakh acres of forests. Mendha-Lekha and a few others villages have started auctioning bamboo from their forests, which has improved local economy and strengthened forest conservation. Thus the region can effectively shown the way to develop a prosperous and decentralised, green economy built on natural resources.

Dr. Gadgil shared his experience of working with Mendha-Lekha towards a comprehensive village-level planning process. Currently, the gram Sabha is involved in resource assessment in which they are documenting flora and fauna in their forests, forest productivity and possibilities for value addition.
They are also involved in a landscape-level ecological study, and the youth are engaged in distinguishing different types of habitats on maps. There are also studies being carried out to determine sustainable bamboo harvesting practices.

Next Meeting: 11th October 2013
Venue: Lokayat, Law College Road
Time : 4pm to 6 pm

Agenda: Rainer Horeig will be presenting alternatives from parts of Europe.