

**Surviving against all odds:
Community conservation initiatives in Orissa**
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If one were to look for a state that clearly symbolizes modern India's contradictions, Orissa would be high on the list. Very high ecological and social diversity and rich natural resources on the one hand, extreme poverty and a massively destructive process of industrialisation on the other. Efforts by the state agencies to conserve wildlife in national parks and sanctuaries on the one hand, but serious conflicts with local communities who reside in and around these areas on the other.

It is in the context of these contradictions that numerous initiatives by local communities at biodiversity and wildlife conservation, and generating sustainable livelihoods, emerge as a strong ray of hope. These initiatives exist on community owned lands, lands whose ownership is disputed, as well as government owned lands. They are found in forest ecosystems, grasslands, mangroves and marine. They follow a wide range of institutional mechanisms, rules and regulations. This article gives only a glimpse of the diversity of these efforts.

Forest Conservation

The history of community forest protection and management in the state dates back to pre-independence days. Lapanga village in Sambalpur district which began protection as early as 1936 is a marvellous example of this. These initiatives have been a result of spontaneous reaction to increasing resource scarcity, which was caused, among other reasons, by commercial exploitation of the forest by the State. These initiatives have existed in the backdrop of various struggles of the local people to assert control over natural resources. The Praja Mandal movement of 1930s and 1940s, for instance, which spread across the major parts of Garjat Orissa (Princely States), was regarding complete rights over the neighbouring forest, including the right to protect and manage.

Rough estimates indicate that in Districts like Nayagarh, Mayurbhanj, Sundergarh, Dhenkanal and others there are nearly 10,000 village groups protecting around 2 million hectares of forest. There range from a few years old to several generations old. Most are self-initiated, coming up spontaneously as a response to resource degradation. In the Ranpur block of Nayagarh district itself there are 180 villages protecting several sq km of contiguous patch of forests. Gadabanikilo, situated in Khairpalli Gram Panchayat of Ranpur block started protection in 1940. This village has today developed a scientific management system, including zoning to serve different purposes. Years of protection has resulted in well stocked forests and excellent diversity in terms of plant species. Protection efforts in Puljhar, situated in the Bisra Block/Range of Sundergarh district started in 1965. In Gundrubari and Degajheri villages in Ranpur, women have formed little patrolling groups to regularly check any illegal activities in their forests. Interestingly, many forest protecting villages in Ranpur are now reporting presence of elephants in their forests. There is a

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possibility that with disruption of elephant corridors in other parts of Orissa, elephants are now turning towards the regenerating or old growth community forestry sites. The Forest Survey of India (FSI) reports of 2001 and 2003 have recognised the achievement of these initiatives by clearly mentioning that due to community efforts, most of the open forests in the state have got converted into dense forest.

Coastal/Marine Conservation

Orissa's coastline of 480 Sq km supports amongst the world's largest turtle nesting and waterfowl wintering grounds, along with considerable other wildlife. Community efforts are visible at various points here too.

Mangalajodi village is one of the many villages located along the banks of the Chilika Lagoon. Thousands of migratory waterfowl visit or breed in the wetlands around this village. Till the year 1996-97, killing the birds and selling in nearby areas was one of the major sources of income for the villagers. A proficient poacher would earn around upto Rs 40,000 in a month! Members of an NGO called Wild Orissa got involved with village since the year 1996 and began to talk to the villagers about protection of birds. Initially they faced serious difficulties but eventually with the help of enthusiastic and knowledgeable individuals in the village Sri Mahavir Pakshi Suraksha Samiti (Bird Protection Committee) was constituted in 2000. Its efforts have almost completely eliminated bird poaching here, and some of the ex-hunters have become die-hard conservationists. The state government awarded the Pakshi Bandhu Award to the Committee.

Olive Ridley turtles nest in tens of thousands, on the Rushikulya, Gahirmatha, and Bitarkanika beaches. While the latter two are under official protection, Rushikulya is protected by the local community. This site was unknown to the scientific community before 1994. At that time, fisherfolk from Purunabandha, Palibandha, Gokharkuda and Nuagaon who are entirely dependent on the estuary and the offshore waters for their livelihood, used to collect and eat or sell the turtle eggs. It was through the involvement of researchers from Wildlife Institute of India during the early 90s, that some youth from Purunabandha became aware of the threatened status of the turtles and the need for their protection. In 1998-99 the youth formed a group of their own (Rushikulya Sea Turtle Conservation Committee) and started creating awareness about turtle conservation in the area. The Committee has made an interpretation centre with support from the Vasant Sheth Memorial Foundation, and are now trying to earn some livelihood through regulated tourism in the nesting/hatching season. Similar initiatives have now been taken up by the youth in Gokharkuda, Pallibandha and Nuagaon villages. Gokharkuda village has constituted the Matysyajivi Kaincha Suraksha Sanghathan (Fisherfolk Turtle Protection Committee). These villagers not only protect the turtles on land but have special fishing norms during the mating and nesting times to avoid turtle deaths in sea. These norms, about the kind of nets and fishing boats used, and fishing zones, have been developed with help of outside experts.

Species Conservation

Orissa's public came to learn the name Buguda, when it was awarded the first Biju Patnaik award for wildlife conservation. Located in Ganjam District, this village has been traditionally protecting a large population of Blackbuck. Documentary evidence trace this protection to at least as far back as 1918. However, in last fifty years the protection measures have been further strengthened as the population of this animal was dwindling because of poaching and other reasons. As a result, villagers report that the number has risen from about 100 to over 500. Reportedly about 60% of the village has been left fallow, due to lack of water, and crop damage by Blackbuck. Yet anyone found hunting the animals is apprehended by the villagers. The protecting villagers believe that these antelopes are devotees of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna and thus it is a sin to kill them.

What threats are being faced by CCAs in Orissa?

Despite occasional awards, a majority of community conservation efforts in the state remain unrecognised by the state government. They find no place in laws, policies, administrative programmes or budget allocations. Although many of the initiatives exist on government lands, villages often find it difficult to solicit support from the government while discharging their duties. For example, women in Dengajjheri village express disappointment that when culprits are apprehended, they keep waiting for forest officials to turn up to carry out the necessary procedures. Such lack of support dampens the spirit of the communities.

On the contrary, at times governmental intervention has disrupted community initiatives. There is no learning from the community forestry initiatives in the state run Joint Forest Management (JFM) scheme, which continues to be top down. JFM functions with pre-prescribed, straight jacketed and rigid institutional set up, and decision-making process. This conflicts with the self initiated adaptive management system. Institutions formed under JFM create new centres of political powers in the village which often have vested interest and clash with the traditional forest protection mechanisms in these villages. A number of NGOs in the state have been demanding that community forestry initiatives should be recognised as a system of forest governance, and financial and other support should be extended to them as and when required rather than them having to convert to JFM. There has been widespread protest against the government taking loans from donors like the JIBC (Japan Bank for International Cooperation), within the current institutional framework. Under such loans government is under greater pressure to show successful JFM sites, leading to more and more community forestry sites getting converted to JFM.

Often community conservation sites are threatened by 'development' projects imposed by the government. For example, the proposed Utkal Coal Project at Rajjharan for open cast coal mining is in an area densely covered with Sal forests, under protection of Rajjharan, Nandijhor, Goalgadia and Similisahi villages. In fact these villages were even brought under the official JFM programme. In a public hearing held in September 2005, more than 1500 people from 22 villages gathered and strongly opposed the project as it would destroy the forests that they have worked hard to save. Similar leases are currently under consideration in Sundergarh, Sambalpur, Jharsuguda, Koraput, Malkanagiri and Raygada districts.

In many instances internal politics and local dynamics itself threatens the initiatives. Some initiatives are quite resilient to such changes and keep switching from low protection phases to high protection phases. An appropriate external guidance and support in these cases can help. Such help can come in the form of self-evolved federations as exist in Ranpur Block, or sensitive governmental or NGO interventions.

Some sensitive interventions have indeed helped. The Chilika Development Authority, for instance, has built a walkway and watchtower at Mangalajodi, which would help in generating some tourism revenue for the village. NGOs like Vasundhara, Wildlife Society of Orissa, Wild Orissa, and forums like the Orissa Marine Resources Conservation Consortium initiated by ATREE and others, are providing critical support.

Conclusion

Clearly villagers are doing much for biodiversity conservation in Orissa, even if unrecognised. But they need urgent help, especially if they are to survive the current phase of destructive industrialisation that Orissa is going through. Many community initiatives are struggling trying to create livelihood options linked to their conservation efforts. For example, youth in Rushikulya region as also in Mangalajodi are hoping for ecotourism based livelihoods. In Buguda village villagers could do with some help towards water harvesting to irrigate the fields they still cultivate. In many community forestry initiatives villagers are seeking help in creating some natural resource based enterprises or increase in agricultural productivity. Appropriate help at the right time and in consultation with the local villagers will help create a long-term stake in conservation of biodiversity in the state.

The fact that many of these conservation efforts have held on for centuries against all odds is enough to indicate what they can achieve given an appropriate policy environment. Equally important, they could provide critical lessons for how to manage the official wildlife sanctuaries and national parks of the state, in a way that integrates the livelihood requirements and rights of local people with the needs of wildlife conservation.

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