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CURRENT AFFAIRS

FOCUS

Communities



Communities can conserve forests and make a living out of it. Then why is the government playing spoilsport?

By **Ashish Kothari** and **Neema Pathak**



Photos: Neema Pathak

EARLIER THIS year, the tiny village of Mendha-Lekha in Maharashtra's Adivasi-dominated district of Gadchiroli made headlines when it reported sales of bamboo worth more than Rs 1 crore. The source of the bamboo? 1,800 hectares of dense forest that the village has been conserving for several decades and over which it obtained full governance control in 2010.

But while the sale revenue was what caught the media's attention, Mendha- Lekha's story is one of balancing the conservation of forests along with generating sustainable livelihoods. In this sense, its experience encapsulates the history, or potential future, of thousands of community conserved areas (CCAs) in India.

For every CCA documented, a few remain undocumented. Well over one lakh sacred sites across India; protected heronries in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu; turtle nesting sites in Goa, Kerala and Odisha; blackbuck protection in Odisha, Punjab and Haryana; migratory bird habitat conservation in Rajasthan and Odisha; Golden Langur habitat protection in Assam; more than 10,000 village forest protection committees in Odisha; and thousands of Van Panchayats in Uttarakhand, including about 1,439 sq km in Gori Ganga basin alone — they represent an incredible diversity of motivations, institutional arrangements, achievements, politics and ecology.

However, CCAs continue to face problems, the greatest being a lack of security of tenure, and the imposition of inappropriate government schemes and programmes. This exposes CCAs to mining, hydroelectricity and irrigation projects, urban expansion and industrialisation. Globalised economic policies and open market systems, an education system that alienates the youth, party politics and changing

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cultures are further threats.

Worldwide experience, encapsulated in the work of Nobel laureate Eleanor Ostrom, shows that where communities have legal rights of ownership or longterm lease, or where they have organised themselves strongly to gain de facto control, there are higher chances of long-term conservation and livelihood benefits. Other factors also have a bearing: whether government policies overall favour community-based governance, how communities are able to tackle political and commercial forces, and what kind of internal changes they are undergoing.

Experience in India bears this out. During colonial times and after Independence, most communities have been disinvested of management rights and responsibilities. But there are exceptions. Responding to widespread agitation, the British Raj conceded important governance powers to Kumaon's villages in the form of Van Panchayats in the 1920s.



Nature's bounty Community Forest resource Rights have benefited many villagers in Gadchiroli

Although some of these have degraded due to demographic and commercial pressures, many remain vibrant; but recent moves by the Forest Department to gain control have added to the problems rather than resolving them. In Nagaland, laws that give wide-ranging powers to village councils have allowed widespread hunting, but more recently they have been used to set up forest and wildlife reserves in at least 700 villages.

In this context, the Forest Rights Act, 2006, is vitally important. For the first time, lawmakers have reposed faith in community abilities to conserve forests (a previous half-hearted attempt through the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act never got off the ground).

Thousands of villages in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, etc. have claimed, or are claiming, Community Forest resource Rights (CFRs) under the Forest Rights Act. More than 3 lakh acres in Gadchiroli have already been vested with CFR titles; the potential is for nearly 50 million acres to be titled. But this will happen only if the government stops obstructing implementation and proactively facilitates it; thus far, progress has been abysmally slow and faulty. It is not only forests where this is needed but all ecosystems. A law like the Forest Rights Act is needed for coastal and marine areas, and freshwater areas, where lack of clarity regarding land/water rights has led to tremendous insecurity among traditional fishing communities, and encouragement to all kinds of unsustainable fishery practices.



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Communities also need access to sustainable livelihoods, capacity to deal with external markets and political forces, synergy between traditional and modern knowledge for managing ecosystems, appropriate educational inputs, and other forms of facilitation by government and civil society. The good news is that there are enough examples like Mendha-Lekha to demonstrate that this is eminently possible.

In Karnataka's Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Sanctuary and Tiger Reserve, Soliga Adivasis have got titles to over half the area, and are planning for enhanced wildlife conservation and livelihood generation with help from organisations like ATREE, VGKK and Kalpavriksh.

CCAs are not a panacea for all kinds of biodiversity and natural resource depletion. But they are a powerful option that could rival conservation by any other sector, particularly if located within a larger sustainable landscape rather than as isolated islands.

Across the world, there may be as many or more areas under CCAs as under government protected areas. With appropriate recognition and support, the same could become true for India.

Kothari and Pathak work with Pune-based NGO Kalpavriksh
letters@tehelka.com

CONFLICT

Triple whammy

If loss of habitat and tolerance was not enough, now hypocrisy is creating new fronts

By **Jay Mazoomdaar**

Unlike in the West where the bulk of potentially dangerous wildlife has been exterminated, India so far has lost only one major carnivore species, the cheetah, thanks to our traditional understanding of nature and its animals. We killed wildlife when they posed a threat but their mere presence around us never made us panic.

Our forefathers knew that, under normal circumstances, carnivores do not consider us food. In fact, wild animals fear us as much as we fear them. They crossed each other's path only accidentally and, even during such chance encounters, offering safe passage was the mutually understood protocol. Casualties did occur when one or both sides lost their nerves and launched pre-emptive strikes for perceived safety. But those were aberrations.

People who traditionally used the forests as free grazing grounds for their cattle did not resent the occasional loss of livestock to tigers and other carnivores. That was considered a reasonable trade-off. Herbivores had limited opportunity to raid croplands because farmers had the sense and option not to plough too close to the forests.

Today, the population boom and demands of growth have made land the most sought after resource in India. The wild habitats are rapidly disappearing or getting fragmented. Simultaneously, rapid urbanisation has made the new generations of Indians, even in semi-urban areas, unfamiliar with the wild.

Squeezed for space, wild animals are now frequently running into people who have little understanding of their ways. Even the so-called village wildlife that always shared space with its human neighbours now finds them increasingly hostile. Today, "kill at sight" seems to be the default response to any wildlife outside protected forests. Leopards and elephants are the biggest victims across the country. An increasingly fragile sense of safety and competition over fast-

depleting natural resources are fast changing the nature of human-wild interface from co-existence to conflict.

But since conservation has succeeded in pocket forests, wildlife, particularly herbivores, have become aplenty in those areas, threatening the livelihood of many poor farmers whose fields are routinely raided beyond recovery. In the absence of adequate compensation or effective mitigation, the survival of these farmers depends on lethal management of locally over-abundant wildlife within the legal framework. But such demands are vehemently opposed by a section of urban green activists who want the rural poor to bear the entire cost of conservation. Their resistance only encourages illegal and unchecked killings of wild herbivores across India.

Given our development rush, conflict is here to stay. Whether we rethink our defence mechanism or sacrifice the poor to the cause of conservation is the question.

Jay Mazoomdaar is an Independent Journalist.

jaymazoomdaar@gmail.com



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