

Dangejheri: Women Power Protects Forests

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The road from Bubhaneshwar to Ranapur in Nayagarh District of Orissa bears testimony to Orissa's desperate efforts to join the list of so-called 'developed' states. The road winds along barren and quarried hillocks, trees either felled or covered in dust and struggling to breath. Burning *bhattis* (brick clines) making it difficult to remember that we were on our way to visit some of Orissa's well-protected forests. It was not long however before the barren hillocks began to give way to green ones, some lush with thick standing forests, others not quite there but definitely on their way. Ranapur range is known for two completely conflicting traits: on the one hand, hundreds of households deriving their income from sale of illegally collected timber from the forests, and on the other, hundreds of villages successfully regenerating once-barren lands or protecting still-standing natural forests.

The story of the people's conservation movement in Ranapur began sometime in mid 1970s. As more and more forests were crumbling under smuggling of timber, heavy industrialisation and increasing biomass requirements of the local people. Sources of water were drying up, women had to walk as far as 12 km daily to collect firewood for their hearths, and villagers began migrating for employment. Faced with an impending ecological disaster many villages in Ranapur initiated forest protection and regulated use of resources within and around their villages. By 1990s, almost all the forests in the area were under protection by one village or another. There were few open access forests left, leading to consequent clashes between the protecting communities and the illegal users. The need for a conflict resolution body and a support structure to fight against external pressures resulted in an organic grouping together of neighbouring villages into small clusters. Gradually, various clusters came together to form a federation (Parishad) facilitated by some NGOs, including Vasundhara. Today, Maa Maninag Jungle Surakhya Parisad (MMJSP) stands strong as a composite body of 190 member villages. The federation helps villages with forest related inter-village conflicts; interface with the forest department, other government agencies, NGOs and politicians; struggles against strong external pressures; and assessment of the ecological status of the protected forests. For example recently, adivasi and dalit women of the area have pressured the federation into taking up with the State Government their demand for opening Kendu (*bidi patta phadis*). Together these villages are conserving a contiguous patch stretching over many hill ranges. No scientific assessment has so far been made of the actual area under such protection.

The villages that constitute the federation vary in their character and composition, some being multi-caste, while others predominantly occupied by a single tribe. Some were once dependent on timber smuggling completely, some still remain so while others have now gone on to other sources of income. Yet their stories are similar. Stories of forest destruction, realisation of the loss, community mobilisation, and finally success, in some cases, on the face of life threatening clashes with the timber mafia.

Dangejheri is one such village where the able support and intervention of the federation resulted in successfully thwarting external pressures. With that emerged a unique and powerful initiative by the women to become the caretakers of their forests. Dangejheri consists of 30 households dominated by Kand tribe. The success that

women here have achieved in regenerating and protecting their forests has come after a long struggle.

Like in the rest of Ranapur block, the once well-forested hillocks around Dangejheri had become barren by mid 1970s. Degraded forests for local villagers meant walking much longer distances to meet their requirements, and constant harassment by other villagers or Forest Department. It was then that the villagers decided to regenerate and protect their forests. Two neighbouring villages, Lonisai and Madakot joined in the effort. The three villages organised regular patrols to the forests and their efforts paid off as the forests started regenerating well. This lasted for about a decade, after which internal conflicts resulted in the breach of trust amongst the three villages. Each village then decided to protect its own forests independent of the others. Lonisai and Madakot being politically stronger and larger in size could sustain their protection efforts. However pressure started mounting on Dangejheri which was a small and politically weak village. Patrolling parties, all men, began to face serious threats from the timber mafia and villagers were demotivated and discouraged.

In the mean time Ranapur Federation, with the help of an NGO named Vasundhara, started convening monthly meetings of the women from the member villages. The objective was to elicit better participation of women in the decisions related to forest protection. Women from Dangejheri regularly participated in such meetings. It was in one such monthly women's meeting in 1999 that women from Dangejheri expressed their disappointment at the situation in their village. They were also concerned for the safety of their men involved with forest protection. After some deliberations, the women decided to take on the responsibility of forest protection. Around the same time on October 26, 1999, 200 people with 70 carts were seen entering the forest. The village men rushed to the Forest Department but received no help from them. All the village women gathered at the village temple, divided themselves into two groups, waited at the paths leading to the forest and besieged the offenders with spades and sharp weapons. The offenders, all men, were scared of retaliating because of social reasons. They feared that they could get charged with violence against women, that too, tribal women, which was a serious offence in law! The men ran off. Women then sent for members of the Federation and forest officials. The felled timber was confiscated and sold by the villagers, and the money was deposited in the village fund.

After this incident, women started patrolling the forests regularly. Maa Ghodadei Mahila Samiti, a committee comprising exclusively of women was constituted with help from Vasundhara. Although all meetings about village protection are open to all villagers women are the main decision-makers. In a state like Orissa where women's participation in decision making is negligible, Dangejheri is among the few villages where even the monthly general body meetings of the Ranapur Federation are attended by women. The Federation has been a constant source of support and inspiration for these women.

The women have adopted the *thengapalli* practice for forest vigilance. Every day four women would patrol the forest and by the evening the *thengas* or batons would be placed in front of the houses that should take over patrolling the next day. The women's committee has also laid down certain rules for collection of forest resources. The small population of the village, which makes for a high amount of transparency

and visibility of each other's activities, ensures that people abide by the rules. Timber is extracted only when it is required for agricultural or building purposes. A few other forest products such as date palm leaves, bamboo, etc. are extracted for crafting small articles, such as baskets, mats, grain stores, and so on. Commercial extraction of timber is strictly prohibited. For fuelwood, villagers are allowed to collect dry and fallen wood only. Poor families, dependent on firewood sale for survival are also allowed to collect dry, fallen wood for sale. Hunting is strictly forbidden.

Dangejheri women realised that the timber mafia often operates through local people of other villages. Therefore, those caught felling wood are tied to a tree in the village, and the president and secretary of their respective forest protection committee (considering that most villages have one) are called to bail them out. Fines for stealing wood often depend on who the offender is. For examples, habitual offenders are charged much more than someone caught the first time; poorer offenders are let off with smaller fines.

As a result of the protection by the villagers the forests have regenerated and fulfil all the biomass requirements of the villagers. Dangejheri itself protected about 80 ha. of lush green forest and if seen in association with protected forests of adjoining villages, the green patch is considerably large, and possibly contains significant wildlife populations. Villagers report, leopards, sloth bear, mouse deer, even wild Buffalo (which needs to be confirmed), and a rich bird and insect life. In fact the villagers proudly claim that they now have elephants in their forests. It is indeed possible that the regeneration of the entire Ranapur range by hundreds of villages has created a corridor for species like the elephants to re-establish their migration, though this would require a scientific study to establish.

The regeneration of forests has had many other non tangible benefits, such as, securing catchments for the water sources in the village. Probably among the greatest benefits has been the surging confidence among the women. This confidence is evident in the eyes of the women when they are recounting their experiences to the visitors. This confidence is infectious too, women from many smaller villages in the range, facing similar problems as Dangejheri did, are now in the process of organising themselves for forest protection.

Much can be learnt from an assessment of what drives these villages to start a conservation movement and move towards a district level federation without much external input. Or by understanding how women can be empowered enough to take on the threats that men cannot. These community initiatives can be supported by helping the villagers assess the biodiversity value of their protected forests. A range level mapping exercise could also help in understanding the extent of area under such conservation and its value as an effective corridor for larger species like elephants. A strong encouragement would also come by recognising their efforts and ensuring a long-term custodianship over the forests that they are conserving and generating innovative livelihood options.

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