

## **Satara Tukum: Joint Forest Management with a Difference?**

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“Sometimes I wonder whether we are part of the same system. We are protecting forests on one side, jointly with the government, and on the other side the government itself is felling forests” These agitated words by Pravin Chichdhare, a village youth from Satara Tukum village in Vidarbha, Maharashtra, conveyed the collective sense of despair of his whole community. We were on our way to see the forests being protected by the village under the Joint Forest Management scheme. To our left was lush green vegetation that had regenerated and flourished under this arrangement; to our right, the Forest Development Corporation was busy shaving off existing natural forest!

Villagers accompanying us were obviously upset about this felling by the FDC (a wing of FD which fells tree on a rotational basis for revenue generation). “You can’t protect forests and wildlife in small patches when areas around are fast degrading” was Pravin’s explanation. “Destruction of forests in the surrounding areas adds pressure on our forests from both human and wildlife populations dependent on that forest”.

Disillusionment with the double standards of the government is, however, more than made up by the excited enthusiasm with which the villagers show us their protected forest. Parts of it are just regenerating, but others are dense with a diversity of trees and bushes, some so thick that walking through is difficult. At any time, we expect to come across a wild animal or two; a number of birds can be heard around us, and it is obvious that the area has rich biodiversity. As we walk along a stream, the forest’s water harvesting value also becomes obvious. Residents point us to a number of fruiting trees, and plants with medicinal properties. Clearly, the forest is a lifeline for the local people and many plant and animal species.

### **The Beginnings**

Satara Tukum is a small tribal hamlet in Pombhurna Tahsil, about 25kms from Chandrapur District Headquarters in eastern Maharashtra. The forests around the village stretch to the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve. These forests were rich in wild animals till the 1970s. Subsequently, extensive disturbance from various sources caused habitat degradation and loss of wildlife. In 1997, Satara Tukum was brought under the World Bank sponsored forestry programme. Mr. Chaphekar, the then Divisional Forest Officer and Ms. Imtiena Ao (Assistant Conservator Forests), persuaded the villagers to join the Joint Forest Management (JFM) scheme. 285ha of reserve forests were allotted to the village community for regeneration, plantation and protection. The villagers saw the benefit in the scheme as it would mean greater availability of resources as also a share from the harvests of planted trees. For the Department, this was an interesting departure from the usual practice of allotting only degraded lands to villages for JFM; to place standing Reserve Forests into the hands of a community is a rare phenomenon in most parts of India. As the Range Officer told us: “we were failing in protecting the forests from outside forces, and saw in this arrangement a potential to strengthen our own hands”.

At village meeting, a committee was formed to carry out protection activities. The committee currently includes 96 members, one representative each from the village's households, including 84 men and 12 women. The executive committee consists of 12 members, 3 of which are women. The committee has undertaken several steps for forest protection, including daily patrolling in rotational groups of seven people each. The patrolling teams used persuasion rather than force, to check those involved with hunting, felling of trees for sale as timber or firewood, and other illegal activities. They appointed a forest guard, and prohibited indiscriminate grazing, allowing it only in certain zones. A number of income generating activities were also carried out, including plantations of useful trees, and soil and moisture conservation programmes. The committee started an account in the local bank, which is used to give loans to farmers in the lean period. The Nagpur based NGO, Vidharbha Nature Conservation Society, helped to form a Nature Club with the village youth.

### **Impacts of Community Initiative**

Effective patrolling and protection resulted in quick natural regeneration and villagers began to notice return of wild animals such as tigers and leopards. Formation of the nature club, regular patrolling, and involvement of the youth in patrolling has reduced the incidents of hunting to a negligible number. Encroachment of forest land, which was one of the major problems, has completely stopped. Animals like wild dogs, leopards, sloth bears, spotted deer, and barking deer are sighted regularly. About four to five incidents of wild animal attacks on human beings are reported every year, an increase from the past.

Regulated grazing has resulted in availability of abundant grass since 1998. The grass extracted from the forests has even been supplied to the flood hit areas of Orissa, and other institutions, after meeting the village requirements. Prior to JFM, farmers were exploited by money-lenders from whom they were compelled to borrow money in the lean periods. The Forest Protection Committee now has its own revolving fund which is used to help farmers out in the times of need. The interest thus generated is ploughed back into the fund. Availability of daily wage labour, even though irregular, is also seen as a benefit by the villagers. The forest department is trying a unique experiment under which funds available for fire extinguishing come to the village fund. The Range Forest Officer explained that "since villagers are protecting the forests against fire, this money therefore rightfully belongs to the village".

The greatest impact of JFM has been the greater stake villagers have developed in conserving the forest, and the sea change in the relationship between the forest department and the villagers. The fear and antagonism that the villagers once felt vis-à-vis the department, is not felt anymore.

### **The Flip Side**

Unfortunately, Satara Tukum's success story is marred with a number of problems. The village received much attention from national and international community till the programme was running under World Bank funds. Once the funds have ended, various employment generating schemes could not be supported anymore. The level of Forest Department's involvement with the village and its protection activities has also gone down substantially. The local Ranger Forest Officer confesses "this is the

best village in my range, but I don't have funds to encourage them". For a village, where land holdings are very small and daily wage does not come along regularly, it has become difficult for villagers to forego a day's wage to go for forest patrolling.

Villagers also fear that they may not get the benefits from harvesting the forests. There is still no written Memorandum of Understanding signed between the villagers and the department. Of great concern are the constant policy changes in the JFM resolution that the state government makes, without any consultations with participating villages. For example, while the earlier JFM Resolution allowed for a government-community agreement for 30 years, an amendment in 2004 reduced this to only ten years. Villagers are at a loss as to what happens to their efforts after ten years!

Another major issue is that of institution building. In 1997, when the JFM committee was formed, only one member per household was included in the committee. This immediately excluded women from the decision-making process. Over the years the constitution of the committee has remained the same. However, since 2004 some young people have become quite active, and want to be members of the FPC. But older members are reluctant to admit them, concerned that this may reduce the per capita share of benefits from harvested forest produce. There are also concerns in the village about the lack of transparency in the functioning of the Forest Protection Committee.

Clearly, not enough attention has been paid towards building institutional capacity and systems of conflict resolution. Experiences with community initiatives elsewhere have shown that transparent functioning, availability of impartial information, and regular open discussions within the community, as also social movements against vices such as alcoholism, constitute the back bone of a strong decision-making process.

### **The Future?**

Given the current status of the forest conservation initiative at Satara Tukum, villagers and forest officials feel that some major steps will be needed to sustain the effort. Clearly, dependence on outside sources of funding such as the World Bank is unsustainable; community-based forest conservation needs to become an integral part of the government's own programmes. One possibility is to bring the village under the Forest Development Authority (FDA), by which Central Government funds for development activities are pooled together at the District level and can be allocated directly to the village institutions for implementation. An additional boost in putting together developmental funds could be obtained from a circular, recently issued by the Chief Secretary of Maharashtra, asking all line agencies to give priority to JFM villages. Another suggestion is to deposit a substantial portion of the revenue earned from illegally extracted forest produce that is confiscated, into the village fund. If timber felling is not to be the major source of earning from forests, development of non-timber forest produce (in which the area has considerable potential) is urgently needed. The village also has its own fisheries tank, benefits from which could be enhanced with some help in marketing.

The local RFO brought up another interesting issue. In Maharashtra, 10% of sales

from forest produce is deposited by the forest department to the state government. The state government then distributes this money to *zilla prishads* (District Council) . The *zilla parishads* are expected to use this money for development of forests under their jurisdiction. This however, often doesn't happen. The Maharashtra Range Forest Officer's Association has made an intervention in the High Court, arguing for this money to be returned to the forest department. Through this tax the state government earns about Rs. 500 million per annum. The RFO felt if this money could be returned to the department, it would be possible to sustain programmes like JFM in villages like Satara Tukum.

Finally, as our own visit demonstrated, regular dialogues are critical. In an evening discussion with many of the men and women, we realised that information about recent laws and policies was critically lacking. Villagers themselves stated that information on government schemes relating to employment, etc. is often very late to reach. A forum of discussion in which outside governmental and non-governmental persons could participate, would help greatly to strengthen the village initiative.

The residents of Satara Tukum are providing a critical service to larger society, by conserving precious forests, water resources, and wildlife. Their forests are even an important corridor for the wildlife of the nearby Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve. Yet, most outside agencies have ignored the effort. With some imaginative development-related intervention, and the continued commitment of the villagers, this could be a long-term success story that would be worth emulating across the country.

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