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# Women come out of the woods: collectivisation in rural Maharashtra



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Gram Sabhas in Zendepear, Korchi taluka, are actively engaged in reimagining and reconstructing local governance institutions. | Photo Credit: S. Sudarshan

## Gadchiroli's women first came together to protest mining in their forests. Now, they're calling the shots

Two years ago, when 87 villages from Korchi in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district came together to form a Maha Gramsabha to better represent villagers' issues, something historic happened. Women from the Mahila Parishad, a collective of self-help groups, insisted on at least 50% women being represented in the Sabha. The villagers agreed, and now the Maha Sabha consists of two women and two men from each Gram Sabha. The executive committee has women office-bearers, such as a treasurer and a facilitator.

“We insisted on 50%,” recalls Kumari Bai Jamkata, as we chat in a blue-ceilinged office room. She monitors 40 self-help groups in Korchi, and she and some others are now training Gram Sabha members in accounting and auditing.

The larger fight against oppressive forest policies began decades ago, when the first **mining** companies came to this region. And it’s the women who have always been at the forefront of the resistance movement. Now, however, they have begun to widen their sphere of influence.

Traditionally, the only forum that addressed justice for women who faced harassment from the family or society was a Jat Panchayat, where male elders would deliberate and pronounce verdict. But the Mahila Parishad began to slowly assert a voice to change a tradition that excluded and crushed women.

“Our journey has not been easy, and is often strongly resisted by men,” says Jamkata. “But there is a gradual realisation that women’s issues are community issues.”

The Mahila Parishad women have made demands like the rights of women to inherit land, equal benefits from non-timber forest produce sales, and a ban on alcohol consumption in the villages, demands that are slowly being accepted.

## **Flower power**

Women in the region began to collectivise over two decades ago, with the limited objective of gaining a modicum of financial independence. Soon, the Mahila Parishad became a space where women could talk about their everyday lives: domestic violence, health, education. “The Parishad has always been working for the legal empowerment of women, monitoring government health schemes, the condition of girls in local boarding schools, and other social issues,” says Shubhada Deshmukh of Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi, an NGO that works with women in Gadchiroli.

It’s a public hearing in Gadchiroli. Village elders, government officers and corporate representatives are gathered together. Naro Bai Hodi, a Mahila Parishad member, is speaking. “The forest is where we get our food, fruits, leaves and flowers. This is where our development will happen. If this forest is given to a mining company, we will become slaves. Mining won’t bring development.”

That was a decade ago. The fight is not yet over: Today, there are 24 proposed and sanctioned mining leases impacting approximately 15,000 hectares of forests and hundreds of families. About 12 of these leases are in Korchi, impacting over 1,000 hectares of forest.

By 2011, 87 Gram Sabhas had won the right to use, manage, and conserve their traditional forests or community forest resources, among other rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. In 2014, they were given ownership rights over non-timber forest produce such as tendu leaves and bamboo. The Gram Sabha

slowly became the first unit of decision-making overtaking the panchayat. It's these progressive Gram Sabhas that came together to create the Maha Sabha, making each Gram Sabha more inclusive, transparent, and accountable.

"We now conduct Gram Sabha meetings at a time convenient for women," says Izam Katengey, a male community leader from Salhe village who has passionately supported the Parishad's efforts.

Korchi taluka today is one of the few in the country where a few forest families have received individual land titles under the Forest Rights Act, given jointly to a couple or exclusively to the woman. In at least one village all the profits from the sale of non-timber forest produce have been transferred to the women's account – a powerful and unique decision.

"I want my daughter to have a better life, and for her dreams to come true. She should get her rights to *jal*, *jangal*, and *zameen* (water, forest and land)," says Kalpana Naitam, the feisty young sarpanch of Bori village, newly elected to her post.

*Additional inputs from Neema Pathak Broome (Kalpavriksh, Pune) and Mukesh Shende (Amhi Amchya Arogyasath, Korchi)*

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