



**FOREST RESOURCE RIGHTS, GRAM SABHA
EMPOWERMENT, AND ALTERNATIVE
TRANSFORMATION IN KORCHI TALUKA,
MAHARASHTRA**

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Dedication

We would like to acknowledge, thank and dedicate this report to the innumerable communities across the world, who continue to be an inspiration by resisting structural, social, political, environmental injustice and unsustainability and protecting, resurrecting and recreating just and equitable systems towards wellbeing of all. We do hope that the worldviews and ways of being of these peoples will be guiding human society in future for by bringing about a greater internal external harmony leading to a better world for all beings.

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Abbreviations

AAA	Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi
ATF	Alternatives Transformation Format
BILT	Ballarpur Industries Limited
CFR	Community Forests Resource Rights under the FRA
CFR-LA	Community Forests Resource Rights- Learning and Advocacy Process
CP Berar	Central Provinces and Berar
CR	Community Rights under the FRA
FD	Forest Department
FDCM	Forest Development Corporation
FPIC	Free Prior Informed Consent
FRA	Forests Rights Act
GS	Gram Sabha
IAF	Indian Forests Act
IAP	Integrated Action Plan
ISB	Indian School of Business
IFR	Individual Forest Rights
IPBES	United Nations Inter-government Science- Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services
MFP	Minor Forest Produce
MGS	Maha Gramsabha
MPS	Mahila Parisar Sangh
MSP	Minimum Support Price
MT	Million Tonnes
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NTFP	Non-Timber Forests Produce
OBC	Other Backward Classes
PESA	Panchayats (Extension to the Schedule Areas) Act
PF	Protected Forest
PRI	Panchayati Raj Institution
PRS	Panchayati Raj System
RF	Reserve Forest
RFO	Range Forest Officer
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SC	Scheduled Caste
SHG	Self-Help Groups
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TSP	Tribal Sub-plan
UAPA	Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act
VS	Vikalp Sangam

Glossary

Abhayas Ghat	Discussion Group
Adiguru	The original spiritual leader
Adivasi	A term for Indigenous peoples in Indian subcontinent
Ashudh	Impure
Bamboo	Bambusoideae
Beejbandun	A ceremony before sowing seeds
Begari	Forced labour without any payment
Bharat Jan Andolan	Peoples Movement of India
Bidi	A local cigarette made from the leaves of <i>Diospyros melanoxylon</i>
Chaprasi	Peon
Charoli	<i>Buchnanian lanzan</i>
Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini	A Youth and Student's Movement in the 1970s
Dharma	Spiritual law for human beings
Dharna	Sitting indefinitely in protest
Ghotul	A traditional system of education and transmission of knowledge amongst the Gond tribe
Gram Panchayat	Village council the first unit of decision making under the Panchayati Raj System
Gram sabha	A village assembly
Gram Samiti	Village Committee
Ilaka	Territory
Ilaka Sabha	Territory Assembly
Jagrit Adivasi Sangathana	Awakened Adivasi (Tribal) Struggle A political movement in the region
Jal	Water
Jamun	<i>Syzizium cumini</i>
Jat Panchayat	Assembly of all people of a specific caste or tribe
Jeevanshala	'School of Life' under <i>Naitalim</i> system of education
Jungle	Forests
Karkyakarta	Ground level activists
Karma	Action, work or deed. It relates to spiritual principles of cause and effect.
Koytur	Human
Maha Gramsabha	A federation of village assemblies
Mahila	Woman
Mahua or Moha	<i>Madhuca indica</i> (an important tree for the local people who collect flowers which are used to make local alcohol and is also an important source of nutrition when eaten in various forms)
Manav Bachao Jungle Bachao	Save Human Save Forests

Narak	Hell
Nistar Patrak	Record of rights
Paap	Non virtuous action (bad Karma)
Panchayat Gram Sabha	Village assembly under the Panchayati Raj System
Parisar Sangh	Regional Collective
Patwari	Local land record officer
Phud Munshi	Supervisor
Punya	Virtuous action (good Karma)
Sampoorna Kranti	Holistic and complete revolution
Sangathan	A collective
Sarpanch Sangathana	A collective of Sarpanches
Sarpanch	Chairperson of a Panchayat
Sashwat	Sustainable
Shudh	Pure
Swarg	Heaven
Taluka	An administrative sub division of a District
Tendu patta	Leaves of the tree <i>Diospyros melanoxylon</i> used for making bidi
Thakur Dev	An important Gond deity
Ulgana	The great rebellion
Vikas	Development
Yatra	Pilgrimage
Zameen	Land
Zamindar	Feudal landlord
Zilla Parishad	District Council- the third tier of the Panchayati Raj System



Chapter 1: Background and Summary

Section 1: Understanding Transformative Alternatives - Towards Equity, Justice, Sustainability¹

A report released at the 7th session of the United Nations Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) in May 2019 reveals that 1,000,000 species stand threatened with extinction. IPBES Chair, Sir Robert Watson said, 'The health of ecosystems on which we and all other species depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever. We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide.' The statement, 'Transformative changes' are needed to restore and protect nature² characterizes the times we live in, times of growing socio-ecological, economic and climate crisis. We have been warned multiple times by scientists that we have already overstepped several planetary boundaries³ for our safe existence and are about to reach others.⁴

We understand that there are underlying structural causes that are driving us to this crisis of ecological unsustainability, inequity and injustice, and loss of life and livelihoods. The extractivism based models of human development, centralised and hierarchical state systems, land and resource grab by capitalist corporations, representative based electoral democracy undermining direct democracy, patriarchy and masculinity, hegemony and other forms of social and cultural inequality (including gender, class and caste), human alienation from the rest of nature and from our own spiritual selves, are among these root causes.

Many individuals, rural and urban communities and indigenous peoples involved in resistances against patriarchy, capitalism, statism, casteism, racism, centralised governance, nature destruction have also been attempting to envision an alternative world within their context. Such alternatives are emerging from the individual and collective quest to understand and articulate

¹ This section has been paraphrased for this book largely based on the following:

The Search for Alternatives: Key Aspects and Principles. The document was first prepared in 2014 to stimulate dialogue in the Vikalp Sangam process. This has subsequently evolved as a Framework for Alternative Transformation through subsequent discussions during Vikalp Sangam meetings.

<http://www.vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles/>

Alternatives Transformation Format: A Process for Self-Assessment and Facilitation towards Radical Change (2017).

Prepared by Kalpavriksh for ACKnowl-EJ.

Singh N., Kulkarni S. and Pathak Broome N., 2018 (eds). *Ecologies of Hope and Transformation: Post-development Alternatives from India*. Kalpavriksh and SOPECOM, Pune, India.

² <https://www.ipbes.net/news/Media-Release-Global-Assessment> (last checked in March 2021)

Rockstrom et al. (2009) outline a set of nine planetary boundaries within which humanity can continue to thrive. They say that four of these boundaries have now been crossed. Of these four — climate change, loss of biosphere integrity, land-system change, altered biogeochemical cycles — two (climate change and biosphere integrity) are what the scientists call 'core boundaries'. Significantly altering any of these two core boundaries could drive the Earth System into a new state.

⁴ Rockstrom et al., 2009, Steffen et al., 2015

what kind of future visions society needs. What answers could there be for questions of poverty, hunger, inequity, energy insecurity, and other deprivations? Can the existing state sponsored processes seemingly aimed towards ‘development’ address these questions or in fact are the root causes of the above? Consequently, what started as movement towards ‘alternative development’⁵ within the existing systems, institutions and power structures have started moving towards well being as an alternative to ‘development’. There is greater questioning of models of development based on fossil fuel, extractivism and unlimited growth, and the search has started for transformative alternatives that lead to well-being, not just for humans but for the planet as a whole.⁶ There is no one definition of such well-being, it is defined by people in multiple ways but all encompassing some common underlying values such as equity, inclusivity, reflexivity, mutual respect, reciprocity, compassion, freedom, care and share, among others. The existence and acceptance of this very diversity of approaches to well being itself is among the greatest values (See box 1 for details).

Box 1: What is wellbeing? How do we define it?

There is no one definition of wellbeing. Yet there are many ways that the communities have articulated their notions of wellbeing which of course vary based on the territorial, ecological, social- cultural and spiritual contexts. The Ashaninkas of the Peruvian Amazon use the term, *Kametsa Asaïke*, which means ‘*living well together in a place*’ wherein individual wellbeing is subject to collective wellbeing which includes humans and non-humans i.e. forests, waters, mountains, animals, birds and everything that the mother earth nourishes⁷. Similar yet different in many ways, the native people of Amazonia believe that the *Kawsak Sacha*, the rain forest, is a living being with a spirit that gives them the energy, breadth of life, wisdom, vision, responsibility, solidarity, and commitment⁸. This helps them to guide and organise the life of humans in harmony with the Earth called the Allapamama.

Many South-American and indigenous scholars stress that the concept of wellbeing as described and conceptualised by the West fundamentally lacks the radical questioning of core concepts of modernity. *Buen Vivir* or Living well, an ensemble of South American perspective of a good life, however, express a deeper change in knowledge, affectivity, spirituality and give an ontological opening to other forms of understanding human and non-human relationships⁹. In Japan, *Kyosei*

⁵ <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/alternative-development/index.html?ref=menuside> (last checked in March 2021)

⁶ Singh N., Kulkarni S. and Pathak Broome N., 2018 (eds). *Ecologies of Hope and Transformation: Post-development Alternatives from India*. Kalpavriksh and SOPECOM, Pune. India.

⁷ Caruso, E. and Barletti J. 2019. ‘Kametsa Asaïke’. In *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*: edited by Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta. Tulika and Authors Upfront, Delhi.

⁸ Gualinga P., 2019. ‘Kawsak Sacha’. In *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*: edited by Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta. Tulika and Authors Upfront, Delhi.

⁹ Chuji M., Rengifo G, and Gudynas E., 2019. ‘Buen Vivir’. In *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*: edited by Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta. Tulika and Authors Upfront, Delhi.

meaning 'symbiosis' is a social ideal that describes the integral convivial relation between humans and non-humans to challenge the ecological and social evils¹⁰. A similar concept from South Africa, called *Ubuntu* meaning 'We are, therefore I am', strongly resting on the spirit that one can not realise one's true self by exploiting the others. It reflects the solidarity that binds all humans and non-humans together.

Clearly there are diverse expressions of wellbeing among different communities and people which cannot be limited or essentialised a single definition. Wellbeing from these concepts seems to be the fulfilment of basic human needs like food, shelter, clothing, Knowledge, learning, health; but most importantly harmonious living with the community and the rest of nature; collective responsibility, space of spiritual affinities; and justice for all. There are common threads that weaves them together, including that all of them see benefit of self in benefit of others including non human elements of nature; and they resist the idea of development that thrives on endless growth, commodification of human and natural lives, consumerism, all of which thrive on exploitation of others for self benefit. This also stands in contrast to the concept of 'progress or develop', a universal belief of stages of progress or externally designed parameters based on consumption levels that all humanity must enter to be called progressed or developed.

Source: Compiled by authors from various sources as indicated in the text

Work towards alternatives, whether on ground or through social and political action, is many decades old in India, but more recently, in 2014, Kalpavriksh initiated a brain storming meeting involving participants from grassroots movements, NGOs and others engaged in resistance against destructive models of development and working towards alternative ways of being. The group discussed possibilities of creating a common platform to collectively explore the abovementioned questions and a proposal was made to initiate what was called the Vikalp Sangam (VS) process¹¹ or the process towards Confluence of Alternatives.

So, what are these 'transformative changes' that Robert Watson mentions or the 'transformative alternatives' as we call them? How can these be defined? The VS process explored this question and has come up with the following evolving definition and a framework, called the Alternative Transformation Framework (ATF)ⁱ.

Initiatives practised, proposed or propogated by communities, governments, civil society organizations, individuals, and social enterprises, among others, to tackle the challenges of unsustainability, inequity and injustice. When these initiatives confront the structural, root causes for

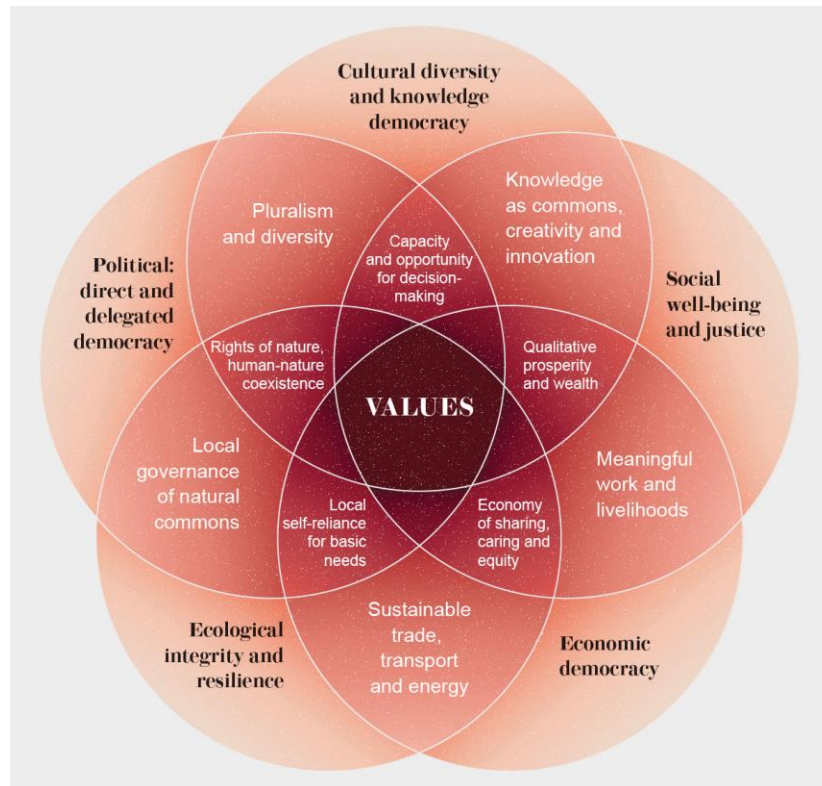
¹⁰ Fuse M., 2019. 'Kyosei'. In *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*: edited by Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta. Tulika and Authors Upfront, Delhi.

¹¹<http://kalpavriksh.org/index.php/alternatives/alternatives-knowledge-center/353-vikalpsangam-coverage>; Daga, Sweta. 2014. All the way to Timbaktu. Anveshan, 28 October, <http://projectanveshan.com/timbaktu/>

Kothari, A. 2014. Radical Ecological Democracy: A path forward for India and beyond, *Development*, 57(1), 36–45, <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/development/journal/v57/n1/full/dev201443a.html>.

Thekaekara, Mari Marcel. 2015. What an idea! *The Hindu Sunday Magazine*, 28 March, <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/what-an-idea/>

these, we call them transformative or radical alternatives. Alternatives could be in the form of direct action at addressing these root causes, laws and policies, processes, technologies, concepts or frameworks that lead us to equity, justice, and sustainability. These initiatives could be new or continuation of past activities or traditions re-asserted in or modified for current times. The ATF¹² proposes that alternatives are built on the following spheres (or overlapping spheres) seen as an integrated whole:



Ecological wisdom, integrity and resilience for maintaining the eco-regenerative processes that conserve ecosystems, species, functions, cycles; respect for ecological limits at various levels, local to global; the infusion of ecological wisdom and ethics in all human endeavour

Social well-being and justice, including lives that are fulfilling and satisfactory physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually; where there is equity between communities and individuals in socio-economic and political entitlements, benefits, rights and responsibilities; where there is communal and ethnic harmony; where hierarchies and divisions based on faith, gender, caste, class, ethnicity, ability, and other attributes are replaced by non-exploitative, non-oppressive, non-hierarchical, and non-discriminatory relations; and where collective and individual human rights are ensured.

¹² Kothari, A. (2021). These Alternative Economies Are Inspirations for a Sustainable World. Scientific American, 324, 6, 60-69. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/these-alternative-economies-are-inspirations-for-a-sustainable-world/>

Direct and delegated democracy, where decision-making starts at the smallest unit of human settlement, in which every human has the right, capacity and opportunity to take part, and builds up from this unit to larger levels of governance by delegates that are downwardly accountable to the units of direct democracy; and where decision-making is not simply on a 'one-person one-vote' basis but rather consensual, while being respectful and supportive of the needs and rights of those currently marginalised, e.g., some minorities.

Economic democracy, in which local communities and individuals (including producers and consumers, wherever possible combined into one as 'prosumers') have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, markets; where localization is a key principle, and larger trade and exchange is built on it on the principle of equal exchange; where private property gives way to the commons, removing the distinction between owner and worker.

Cultural diversity and knowledge democracy, in which pluralism of ways of living, ideas and ideologies is respected, where creativity and innovation are encouraged, where the generation, transmission and use of knowledge (traditional/modern, including science and technology) are accessible to all, and where spiritual and/or ethical learning and deepening are central to social life.

A crucial outcome of such an approach is that the centre of human activity is neither the state nor the corporation, but the community - a self-defined collection of people with a strong common or cohesive social interest. The community could be of various forms, from the ancient village to the urban neighbourhood to the student body of an institution to even the more 'virtual' networks of common interest. It is of course critical to acknowledge that many such communities would have internal inequities and conflicts, necessitating initiatives to tackle these. Also, that at times the community can be overbearing on the individual, the reverse of the situation where the individual ignores or undermines the community. A balance between these is necessary, as are struggles for equity within communities.

Many or most current initiatives which we call alternatives may not fulfil all the elements of the above five spheres. As a rough thumb-rule, perhaps we can consider something an alternative if it addresses at least two of the above spheres (i.e. is actually helping to achieve them, or is explicitly or implicitly oriented towards them), and is not violating but rather being open to and considering to adopt the other spheres.

Section 2: Motivation, Methodology, Objectives and Limitations of the study

This report is an outcome of collaborative knowledge generation process initiated by Kalpavriksh, in collaboration with members of Maha Gramsabha, members of Mahila Parisar Sangh, independent individuals, and a local NGO Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi (AAA). The study was carried out in the period between 2017 and 2019, as part of a global project, the Academic-Activist Co-generation of Knowledge on Environmental Justice or ACKnowl-EJ (www.acknowledgej.org), which is a network of scholars and activists engaged in action and collaborative research that aims to analyze the transformative potential of community responses to extractivism based development and alternative transformations emerging from such resistance movements. The project involves case studies, dialogues, and analysis on transformation towards greater justice, equity, and sustainability in several countries including Bolivia, Turkey, Belgium, and Venezuela. Apart from the Korchi case study, there are two more case studies from India.

The Kachchh case study focuses on looking at the multiple dimensions of transformation taking place in the livelihoods of Vankar (weaver) community in Kachchh, Gujarat and subsequent revival of handloom weaving.

The Rajasthan case study focuses on documenting the articulations of Raika women around Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary on Pastoralism.

This study was undertaken as part of this larger initiative and was motivated by a number of factors.

Motivation

The motivation behind this study has been that the documentation of articulation of such transformative alternatives, where they exist, is crucial in defining, living, supporting and propagating the paradigms of well-being that are just, equitable and ecologically wise, resulting in a coherent alternative narrative to a seductive development discourse.

Gadchiroli region has for long attracted those interested in understanding and supporting adivasi societies, their relationship with nature, and issues of environmental justice. It has been a land of adivasi struggles for self-determination, resistances against destructive forces, transformative processes, mobilization efforts, support movements, and significant influences in the national forest related laws and policies. The authors of this report have been witness to, and occasionally part of, some of these processes in various capacities. In the course of these processes, the local

leaders have often expressed an interest towards documenting the history of the origin of their movements, sharpening their own understanding of the roots of their own socio-cultural practices and traditions. They also felt a need to articulate their own conceptions of well-being to the larger society while also generating material to connect better with the youth within their community that has been increasingly aspiring towards the dominant narrative of development and feeling disconnected with the local processes.

An opportunity presented itself when Kalpavriksh got involved with the ACKnowl-EJ project. The project provided a platform to combine Kalpavriksh's interest in documenting transformative processes that offer an alternative paradigm of well-being, and challenge the mainstream development model and discourse with the above-mentioned interest of the local adivasi leaders and those associated with them. The core team discussed this possibility with villagers in different regions of Gadchiroli. In all areas where the idea was discussed, there was keen interest in engaging with the study, but for various practical reasons, it was finally possible to carry out the study only in Korchi taluka.

We believe that this documentation would be useful for those involved in the processes in Korchi. As Malika Viridi, involved with a women's collective in Uttarakhand, says, documentation 'helps us visualise our lives as others perceive them; this helps us reflect better, also important for us as it helps us to be politically put up on the map, it helps us in our struggles and helps us connect with other communities.'¹³ We hope that this report would be meaningful for others who wish to be part of processes that support, lead to the emergence of and proliferation of similar alternatives in other areas, sphere and/or sectors.

We also hope that this documentation helps those of us not part of a community like Korchi, living in consumptive urban societies to question our own lifestyles and the role that we play in ecological degradation and deepening social injustices.

Methodology

Once Korchi emerged as a possible study site, Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi (AAA) was approached to be one of the collaborators in the study. AAA, a local organisation, has long worked in Gadchiroli district on issues of health, education, women's empowerment, local livelihoods, and forest regeneration. AAA expressed immediate interest to participate and also to support the study in various other ways.

Subsequently, more detailed conversations on the study were held in individual villages and all members of the Maha Gramsabha. All those involved collectively felt that a documentation of this process and various outputs could help create a counter narrative to the seductive, dominant development discourse faced not only by the rest of the society but that also created internal

¹³ Singh N., Kulkarni S. and Pathak Broome N., 2018 (eds). *Ecologies of Hope and Transformation: Post-development Alternatives from India*. Kalpavriksh and SOPECOM, Pune. India.

struggles within the gram sabhas in Korchi.

Objectives

As this short case study could not have fulfilled all the expressed aspirations and objectives, the following focus areas were collectively identified to understand and document:

- factors and motivations behind the gram sabhas' self-empowerment movement and processes in Korchi taluka
- emergence and evolution of this process and aspects of life that it has impacted, such as justice, equity, economy, polity and ecology the visions of development and/ or well-being (including principles and values) inherent in these processes and critical actors and factors catalysing and/ or supporting them as well as hurdles that are faced conceptions of well-being among the actors involved.

We have attempted to do the above by looking more closely at: historical and current factors/ agents (including individuals) that have contributed towards their emergence and evolution the process of emergence and evolution of a federation of 90 gram sabhas (village assemblies) the process of emergence and evolution of women collectives and their federation, although at a smaller scale and the interface of these two individual and collective narratives about this process of change and conceptions of well-being emerging from these alliances that are being forged in current times at various levels; opportunities and constraints being faced elements, principles and values inherent in the processes to understand the transformative elements of the process we have used the five spheres of transformation of the Alternative Transformation Framework

Limitations

The study has several limitations as well. There were various challenges foreseen and unforeseen. The case study sites had to be changed twice due to the volatile local situation.

Due to the limited available time, the study could focus only on three villages for a detailed analysis though we came across other villages that were also interested in a similar process and could have been involved.

The team that we were working with and the idea that we were exploring was a clear indication of our ideological slant, such as supporting mining resistance, questioning current models of development, etc. Our obvious bias restricted our ability to get the perspectives of those within the community who believed in the mainstream model of development and didn't resist mining. This may also have affected the responses from the people we were speaking with.

Conversations with women in the villages were limited as we didn't have enough time to build the kind of relationship with them that would encourage them to open up to us. Language was also a concern as most women were not comfortable in Hindi or Marathi. So, while we did have some warm interactions with women in the meetings, during the ceremonies, in informal conversations,

or during walks into the forests, formal and structured interviews and conversations were limited.

Till this point in our research, although we have been able to gain some understanding of the political, social, and economic aspects, we have not been able to explore well the ecological and cultural/ spiritual aspects well. This has been both because of limitation of time as well as existing knowledge and skills of the team.

During the study, it was also evident that changes were beginning to impact other spheres of life such as health and education, among others. However, since these were at a preliminary stage, we were not able to capture them in this phase of our work.

During the project period, as this initiative began to gain visibility, more participants such as external actors and research organisations started developing collaborative relationship with the gram sabha federation, the full extent of which and its impact we have not been able to capture in this case study.

The most disappointing limitation has been our inability to analyse the results of this report collectively with the local actors, something we had originally planned to do. This was due to our inability to spend adequate time at the site to identify a time of mutual convenience and to organise a workshop with the local actors due to external circumstances.

Summary

Mainstream development models have failed to fulfil their promise of achieving minimum well-being of a very large part of humanity, and severely compromised the long-term security of both humans and nonhuman beings. The world over, indigenous peoples and other traditional communities and their habitats are being obliterated due to the current demand for industrial growth and development. The communities nevertheless are not only resisting the ongoing onslaught of 'accumulation by dispossession', but are also voicing the urgency of looking for fundamental alternatives. Korchi taluka in Gadchiroli district is one such region.

Along with resisting state-sponsored mining, the gram sabhas (village councils) in Korchi taluka in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra, India, are actively engaging in reimagining and reconstructing local governance institutions by employing traditional and modern knowledge systems and by forming *taluka* level federations. 90 out of 133 gram sabhas have come together to form a collective that they call Maha Gramsabha (larger gram sabha or a federation of gram sabhas). Simultaneously, women's collectives have also federated as Mahila Parisar Sangh to assert their voice not only for resisting mining but also in the newly emerging village and taluka level decision making institutions, including the gram sabhas and their federation, the Maha Gramsabha. These collectives are emerging as platforms to resist mining, localizing economy, restoring ecological balance through biodiversity conservation, reviving cultural identity, raising social and equity concerns, to assert direct and engendered democracy, question existing models of development, including conventional systems of health and education, among others. With little support from outside, the evolution of these processes is largely based on learning by doing, people-to-people exchanges, experience sharing, regular and open consultations, debates and dialogues at all levels (village, cluster of villages, taluka and district), and establishing peer support groups.

It is important to understand that these processes are emerging in the context of social and environmental injustice faced by the adivasi communities in Gadchiroli district as in other parts of the country inhabited by tribal communities. These injustices are deeply linked to the political economy of the region during pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times. In post- independence India, **at the root of this injustice has been the continuation of colonial, centralized and top down decision making processes; privatization of common pool resources; and extractive, commercially motivated economic policies.** Local people's worldviews and association with the forests have come in direct conflict with the state's practice and policies leading to a long history of rebellions and resistance movements sometimes clearly visible and at others, quiet and invisible. These have included the armed Maoist movement claiming to seek social justice through greater self-determination or autonomy for the local people by directly challenging the State and its policies and motivating the people to rebel (including by using violence as a strategy). Other

local movements have sought to achieve the same objectives by forcing the state to bring about reformative changes using both collaboration when possible and resistance when needed through non-violent means. On the other hand, the struggles of the women have been as part of their communities against external imperial and colonial forces and within their societies against the oppressive and exclusionary systems of gender discrimination.

Neither of the conflicting groups is homogenous in its ideological approaches but broadly represents a diversity of views– one represents the end of the spectrum, aiming for political decentralization and viewing nature as integral to the human cycle of life and well-being, while the other represents the other end, believing in greater centralization and viewing nature as a resource for fuelling consumptive and unending economic growth. The resistance movements have led to various transformative processes across the district at different points in time, Mendha-Lekha village in the district being a classic example of one such process of transformation which emerged out of the Manav Bachao Jungle Bachao Movement in the 1980s.

Within this larger context and history, this case study looks at a more recent conflict in Korchi taluka beginning in the late 1990s, when some parts of the forests were proposed to be leased out for mining. This led to the unfolding of a strong resistance movement questioning the model of development based on destruction of nature and cultures. Simultaneously, processes towards envisioning alternatives began which received a huge boost with the enactment of two radical legislations, **the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Recognition of Forest Rights Act 2006 (FRA) and Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Maharashtra Rules 2014 (PESA)**. The provisions of these laws and the manner in which they were implemented provided an opportunity to practice local conceptions of well-being, leading to political and economic decentralisation and engendering; social caste, class and gender adjustments; decentralised learning and exchange opportunities; and newer practices towards forest management and conservation. Although the struggle and resistance of villages in Korchi has been (and in some ways continues to be) against exploitative models of development and centralized forest laws and policies and towards gaining greater control over *jal, jungal aur jameen* (water, forest and land), it has significantly impacted nearly all spheres of social organisation including economic, political, cultural and social. In this case study, while we describe in detail all spheres of transformation in Korchi, using the Alternative Transformation Framework we analyse in particular the three mentioned below:

Political decentralization moving towards an engendered direct democracy aiming to achieve greater autonomy for the local *gram sabhas* (village assemblies) and greater accountability for the State institutions, particularly, the local and administrative institutions; especially, how these processes were catalysed and precipitated by the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and Maharashtra state Rules under the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA).

Localized, equitable and transparent economy through assertion of rights over traditional forests and forest produce, particularly from the extraction and sale of two commercially

important non-timber forest products (NTFPs) - tendu patta and bamboo, along with hundreds of other forest produce which is not a significant part of the monetary economy but plays a significant role in sustaining the village societies in multiple ways.

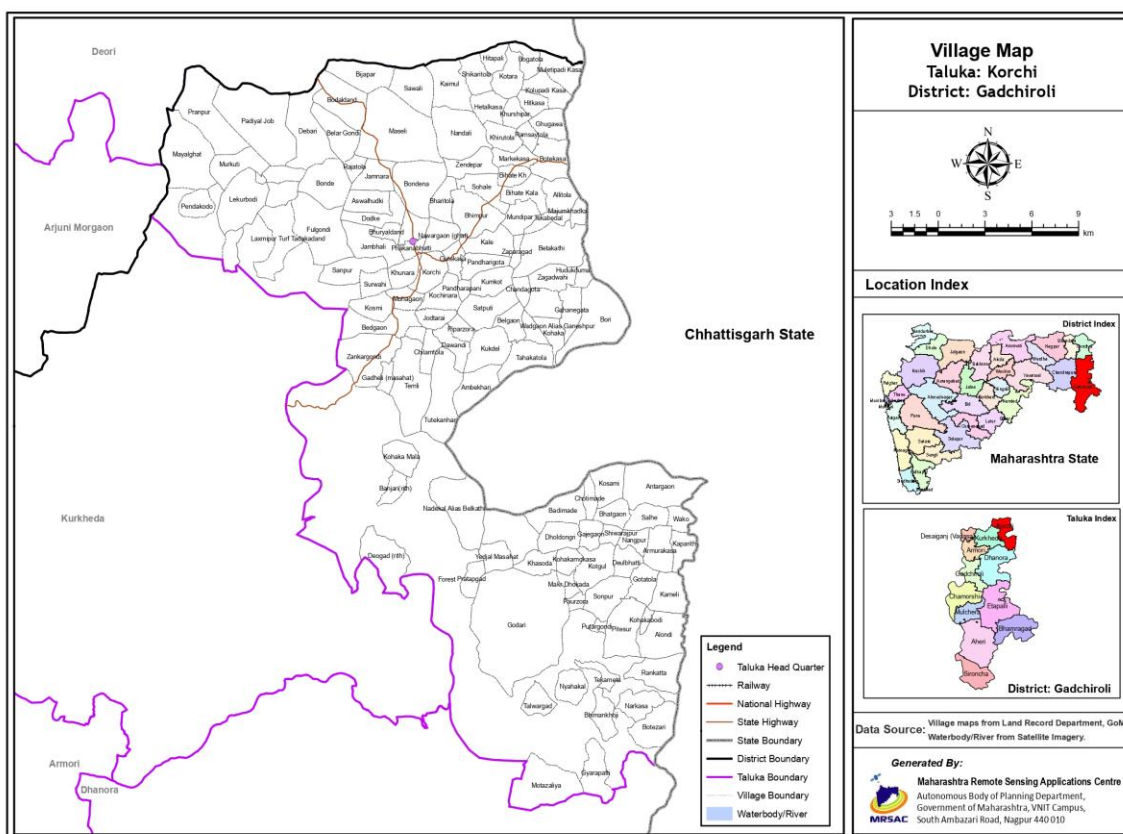
Well-being of people and forests, by understanding positive impacts these processes have had and hurdles that they are facing and addressing; the perceptions of well being among the people who are more centrally involved in bringing about the above mentioned changes; finally, actions taken towards ensuring well-being of the forests themselves.

We attempt to see how the Korchi initiative is addressing the different spheres specified by the ATF as mentioned above. The case study also attempts to distil the major elements, values and principles that operated behind the processes of transformation in Korchi.

Chapter 2: Gadchiroli and Korchi- An Introduction to land and people



Section 1: Description of the Gadchiroli District and Korchi Taluka



This study is located in Gadchiroli district in the Central Indian region, under the administrative jurisdiction of Maharashtra State. The total geographical area of the district is 16517.590 sq.km (1651759 ha), of which forest area constitutes 12576.202 sq.km. (1257620.2 ha).¹⁴ Unlike the national average of 20% of the total geographic area, in 2010-11 Gadchiroli had nearly 75.96 %¹⁵ of the total area under forest cover. Total population of the district as per the 2011 census of India¹⁶ was 10,72,942, with over 38.71% of the population in the district belonging to Scheduled Tribes (STs),¹⁷ mainly Gond, Pardhan, Halba, Kanwar, Orao and other adivasi (indigenous/ tribal)

¹⁴ http://www.mahaforest.nic.in/fieldoffice/internal.php?lang_eng_mar=Mar&oid=34&MID=1

¹⁵ <https://gadchiroli.gov.in/about-district/>

¹⁶ <https://www.censusindia2011.com/maharashtra/gadchiroli-population.html>

¹⁷ The government of India does not accept the term Indigenous People. Tribal groups have been enlisted in one of the schedules of the Constitution of India and given a special status. All the listed tribes are called Scheduled Tribes (although many tribal groups have also been erroneously left out of the schedule). For convenience we will be using the term STs or adivasis for the indigenous peoples in this report as these terms are used in common parlance, official documents and laws being discussed in the report.

groups. Korchi is an administrative sub division or *taluka* of Gadchiroli located 92 km north from district headquarter. Korchi is inhabited by 133 villages or gram sabhas (village assemblies), which were traditionally divided into three *Ilakas* (feudal territories),¹⁸ namely, Kumkot *Ilaka* including 60 gram sabhas, Padyal Job *Ilaka* including 30 gram sabhas, and Kotgul *Ilaka* including 40 gram sabhas. Although officially the *taluka* is administered by Gadchiroli District Administration, informally and independently the *Ilakas* continue to have their traditional village level to supra village level self-governance structures.

As per 2011 census, the total population of Korchi was 42,844, 73% belonging to STs, largest populations being of Gond and Kanwar adivasis. 8% of the total population is Scheduled Caste (SC).¹⁹ Only 58.5% of the population in the district was employed in work which could earn for more than 6 months in a year. 41.5% were involved in marginal activities providing employment for less than 6 months.²⁰ Of the main workers, 9,432 were cultivators (owner or co-owner) while 3,065 were Agricultural labourer. Almost the entire population in the district depends heavily on forest/forest resources for cash based and also subsistence livelihood. Collection for self consumption and sale of non timber forest produce (NTFP) such as bamboo, tendu leaves or bidi leaf (*Diospyros melanoxylon*)²¹, mahua flowers (*Madhuca indica*),²² honey, wild fruits, wild vegetables, medicinal plants, tubers, meat, among others is important for economy, subsistence and community health. This is supplemented by goatry, piggery, and daily wage labour on other farms or in cities as marginal activities. For the majority of the population, food is obtained from agriculture, forests and sometimes from the local markets, but the dependence on outside markets for food is minimal. In addition to forests being important for economy and livelihoods, they are integral to the adivasi socio-cultural system, practices and identity. Within the adivasi worldview, humans are an inseparable element of nature as other living beings, spirits, and non-living beings.

The three villages which were surveyed in greater detail to understand the process of resistance, transformation and well being are relatively small. Given below is a quick profile:

¹⁸ Administrative unit under the control of one traditional feudal lord or *Zamindar*

¹⁹ Marginalised and discriminated against castes under the Hindu caste system, which have also been provided special status under a schedule in the Constitution of India also referred to as dalit (oppressed) communities.

²⁰ <https://www.censusindia.co.in/subdistrict/korchi-taluka-gadchiroli-maharashtra-4055>

²¹ One of the important Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) in the district. These leaves are used for making bidis (Indian cigarettes). Fruits are an important source of nutrition.

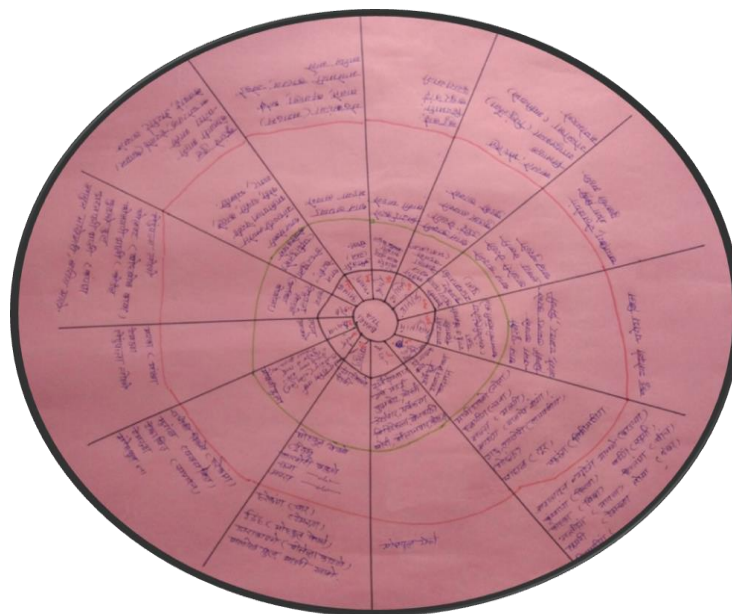
²² Important NTFP flowers are an important source of nutrition and are also collected and sold for making local liquor.

Table 1: Socio-economic data on Zende par, Bharitola and Salhe villages and Korchi taluka as a whole

Name	Total household	Total population	Total geographical area in hectares	Total traditional forest area in hectares	Forest area recognised as CFR
Zende par	50 (Gond)	218	356.14	314.98	117.1
Bharitola	49 (Gond)	222	289.16	309.18	116.58
Salhe	47 (Gond)	250	242.47	483.99	110.16
Korchi	9277	42844	68044		

Source: The CFR data was collected from the district collector office Gadchiroli in 2016

The process of preparing a livelihood seasonality chart (see below) and various interviews carried out during this study indicated an important role being played by the forests for sustaining life in the villages throughout the year – through food, medicines, employment, fruit and cultural and ritualistic purposes. As we would understand later in the report, the forest, and in more recent times, gaining legal control and ownership of these forests, has meant that well-being is ensured even when the government indicators do not fare well. Although basic facilities such as road, public transport, health and education are an urgent need for the local people, their presence or absence is not the **only** indicator for defining well-being as far as people are concerned.



Section 2: The People, Their Culture and Their Relationship with Nature and Biodiversity

Given the above context of the role of forests in the lives of the forest dependent communities, particularly the adivasis, it is not surprising that ancient texts and anthropological scholarship²³ clearly illustrate that adivasi cultures and worldviews have an inseparable, symbiotic relationship with their lands, waters, forests and the biodiversity within. This is true of indigenous cultures across the globe. This inseparable relationship is what is leading to indigenous people's resistance movements against extractivism and their effort to conserve biodiversity²⁴. Adivasi social, cultural, and livelihood activities and ceremonies are carried out with a certain underlying sensitivity towards and in sync with nature and natural processes. In their worldview, nature is not merely a means by which material gains are to be achieved; rather, they view themselves as inextricable components of nature. Although with time and changing situations in a globalised world adivasi societies are also undergoing many changes, in many ways their nature-based and animistic practices continue to this day.

Among the adivasi groups residing in Gadchiroli district, the sub-tribes of Gond adivasis are the majority. Although in general the influence of the mainstream Hindu religion is evident among all adivasi groups here, it is more evident in Kanwar and other groups and less among the Gonds. It would be useful to mention here that even the Government of India census data does not recognize animism as one of the religions and all the adivasi population in Korchi is shown to be Hindu by religion.²⁵ However, considering their majority and consequently a strong influence of their culture in the dominant culture of the District and the Korchi taluka, it would be relevant for the sake of this case study to understand Gond culture in slightly greater detail.²⁶

2.2. Culture revolving around nature and community

Through their story of origin, the Gonds believe that the world has always been occupied by the Koyatur (born of the koya or womb, meaning human beings). All humans have a common identity as Koyatur. Gonds believe their religion or Koya-Punem to be amongst the oldest religions, established by Pari Kupar Lingo - the first teacher (adi guru) of the Gond tribe. Lingo organised the social order for the Gonds and rules and regulations to live. These rules and regulations are based on the principle of causing no harm, interdependence, respect and reciprocation within humans and with the rest of nature. Through all the push and pull of globalised, monitorised, and

²³ Elwin, V. (1939). *The Baiga*. AMS Press.

²⁴ www.iccaconsortium.org

²⁵ <https://www.censusindia.co.in/subdistrict/korchi-taluka-gadchiroli-maharashtra-4055>

²⁶ Koreti, S. 2016. Socio-Cultural History of the Gond Tribes of Middle India. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, Vol 6, No 4, April 1, 2016.

individualistic modern world (from which the adivasis are not untouched) the nature and community oriented world view continues to guide Gond social order even today. The socio-cultural and religious practices including community ceremonies, social organization and decision-making processes of the adivasis in this region continue to be heavily dependent on various aspects of nature and natural cycles, Elements of local biodiversity are intricately linked with spiritual and cultural practices; for example, no forest or agricultural produce is harvested or consumed unless the head priest of the community has performed a ceremony, including the ceremony before sowing or *Beej Pandum* and the ceremony before picking Mahua (*Madhuca indica*) flowers or *Moha Pandum*. Till then the wild fruits are meant for the wildlife. This relationship also echoes through several other similar folk practices found in the adivasi regions in central India. ²⁷

Nature and natural cycles are at the centre of this social organization and life is largely community oriented. Some of these elements have been deified while others are part of the 'totems' of different clans. Each clan identified with the second or clan name has

its own totems, often constituting of a combination of an animal, a bird or/and a plant. The clan members would never harm the species which are their totem as they are believed to be the members of the clan. Gonds will not built temples for these deities or house them within their houses as these spirits and deities are much superior to humans and cannot be bound in human constructed structures. They are free and reside in nature, Pari Kupar Lingo is believed to have laid down clear and strict guidelines for worshipping these elements of nature (thereby ensuring conservation and protection of these elements) like rivers, stones, mountains, valleys, ponds, streams and various plants, where the spirits and deities or *pen* reside.

"We adivasis don't go to a temple. Our deities and spirits of our ancestors reside everywhere in the stones, leaves, trees, animals, fruits, mountains... spread across the forest... all of this is sacred for us."

Sunil Hodi, Zendepar village

2.3. Deities, sacred sites and loss of their relevance in current times

Gonds have many goddesses and gods; however, till recently, it was difficult to find any representation of Gond gods. Devotees offer statues of horses to their deities and these are kept at the place of worship. Deities are, however, spread across their landscape, from agricultural fields to forests. These deities include Bhagvan (the creator), Bara-Pen, Budhal Pen, Phersapen (The

²⁷ Koreti, Shamrao I. 2015. Religion of the Gond Tribes of Middle India. 3rd Biennial Conference of the International Association for Asian Heritage, 27th - 28th December 2015, Centre for Asian Studies, University of Kelaniya & International Association for Asian Heritage (IAAH). p. 27.

Pal, Anuradha, 2013 The Gonds: Genesis, History & Culture, National Book Trust India, p.viii, 5, 59

Kumar, Ajit, 2011 The Clan-Caste Gond society and its Religion: Past and Present, Sandhan, Journal of centre for studies in civilizations, Vol. XI, No.1, January-June 2011, p.20

Great God), Mahadeo, Dulhapen (Bride-Groom God), Ghansam or Bagroom Pen (Tiger God), Hardul Pen, Matiya Pen, Narayan Pen (Sun God), Koya Pen, Maswasi Pen, Kanya (water spirit), Marai Mata, and Dharti Mata (Mother Earth Goddess). As a result of a long association with the dominant Hindu religion, many Hindu deities, ceremonies, rituals and religious concepts have been integrated into the Gond religion. For example, it is now common to find the Hindu concepts of Dharma and Karma, Pap and Punya (wrong and right actions), shudh and ashudh (pure and impure), swarg and narak (heaven and hell), among others. In addition to the deities, the Gonds also worship the spirits of the dead. Once humans die, they pass on to the world of spirits but these spirits are believed to take a keen interest in and often participate in human affairs and matters.²⁸

The animist deities and customs are, still prevalent and ceremonies and festivities are around these deities and the natural and agricultural cycles. Unrecognised in the government records as places of socio-cultural and spiritual significance and labelled as Reserved Forests (RF)²⁹, Gadchiroli district still has many sites sacred to the local adivasis. These include, *Raopat Gangaram Ghat*, the sacred mountain in *Zhendepar* village of *Korchi* taluka (currently proposed to be leased for iron ore mining); *Tipagarh*, the sacred mountain and caves in Dhanora taluka (currently part of a tiger corridor and proposed to be wildlife sanctuary by the government); *Ghodazari* sacred mountain range in *Chamoshi* taluka (propose iron ore mines); *Puser* sacred mountains in Etapally taluka (proposed iron ore mines); *Surjagarh* sacred mountains also in Etapally taluka (sanctioned and operational iron ore mine an area currently under serious conflict with the resisting local adivasi population facing state militarization); the Mountain of *Min-Pen*, in Bhamragarh taluka; and the Mountain of *Bablai Devi* also in Bhamragarh; among others. Hundreds of adivasis gather at these sites annually, called the *yatra*, to celebrate, perform penance for past actions, and seek blessings and guidance for the year ahead. For example, Surjagarh hills are sacred for 70 villages, which gather for the Thakur Dev *Yatra* (*procession*) near Surjagarh every year in the month of January; similarly, about 33 villages come together for the Raopat Gangaram Ghat *Yatra* and about 40 villages congregate for the Tipagarh *Yatra*. The people believe that during the *yatras*, the deities speak to them during the sacrificial and other ceremonies and poojas. Often, the goddesses, gods and spirits also speak through people in a trance, possessed by the deities and spirits.

In addition to these sites which are sacred to adivasis in the entire region or to a cluster of villages, every village also has its own sacred natural sites. The local people believe that all these sacred sites are inhabited by the deities which protect the human and non-human inhabitants of the land. These belief systems, customs and traditions are transmitted from generation to generation through fables, songs, folk stories, dances and dance dramas.

²⁸ Koreti, S. 2016. Socio-Cultural History of the Gond Tribes of Middle India. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, Vol 6, No 4, April 1, 2016.

²⁹ A legal category of forest under the Indian Forest Act of 1927 and administered by the state forest department

Box 2: Thakur Dev and his mountain at Surjagarh

In the ancient times, a few hunters went into the Surjagarh forests. Here, a gigantic bear blocked their path and began chasing them, trying to scare them away and drive them out. In their bid to hunt it down, the hunters fired arrows at this bear. Grievously wounded, the bear began to retreat. The hunters began tracking it through the blood trail it left behind. The bear began ascending the mountain, a tough climb, but the hunters were persistent in their chase. When the hunters finally reached the mountain, they realized, to their horror, that the tracks left by the bear bore an uncanny resemblance to that of a human. Soon after, they sighted the arrow-ridden, bloodied body of a human-like figure.

This human-like figure is the embodiment of *Thakur Dev* for the adivasis in this area. *Thakur Dev* gave his life to protect the flora and fauna in and around *Surjagarh*. It is believed that *Thakur Dev's* benevolent gaze permeates these forests and keeps watch over his beloved subjects. To honour him, 70 villages in the area come together for a traditional *Yatra* every year and strengthen their resolve to safeguard and protect their *jal, jungle and jameen* (water, jungles and land within their territory).

Source: Personal conversations with elders during Surjagarh Yatra in January 2017

Historically, these deities, sacred sites and ceremonies have been extremely important for the Gond adivasis as they believe that their strong spiritual connection with these forest deities has protected them against various misfortunes, disasters, and has also helped them hold on their own during various battles including during the revolt against the British by Baburao Shedmaket. This bond in the current times however varies from place to place within the Gond inhabited lands. Their worldview of natural deities and their own integral link with them does not resonate with the worldview that they are increasingly exposed to through schools, employment, associations, trade, and other interactions with the non adivasis. Youth have increasingly been attached towards dominant ideology of globalisation and religious Hindu ideology. In addition to external factors this loss of connection with their own ideology has been aided by disappearance of traditional systems of knowledge transmission through which stories were passed on from generation to generation ceating pride and confidence among the youth. The system of traditional bards has been eroded. Increasingly there is also a dearth of genuine knowledge holders who could interpret and contextualise the traditional sacred text of the Gond in a meaningful manner. Where they exist they have lost the old respect and command as they traditionally held. Consequently, youth finding no connection with these ceremonies and traditions and considering them inferior to those of the dominant religions like Hinduism are drawn towards them³⁰

³⁰ Furer-Haimendorf, C.V. (1982). *Tribes of India: The Struggle for Survival*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

2.4. Ghotul – Traditional system of education and transmission of knowledge

An important aspect of Gond culture has been their traditional system of education and transmission and sharing of knowledge within a generation and between generations – the system of the *ghotul*. *Ghotul* was (and in some small pockets still is) a unique system of learning and transference of traditional wisdom and knowledge, culture and worldviews. In a general sense, *Ghotul* is a hut where young unmarried girls and boys would assemble, dance, sing, discuss, learn, and sleep. Renowned anthropologist Verrier Elwin³¹ explains that, “The Gonds believe that Lingo, the supreme deity and the heroic ancestor of the Gond tribe, was the founder of the first *ghotul*, and is at the centre of the *ghotul*'s culture.” Traditionally, a *ghotul* would have an elder facilitator with young, unmarried boys and girls as its members. The members of a *ghotul* would learn about the Gond way of being including, cleanliness, discipline, hard work, taking pride in their appearance, respecting themselves, and their elders, and value community service. No major social activity could happen in a community without the *ghotul* members, who would participate actively in all village functions from birth, marriage to death ceremonies. “With boys telling stories, asking riddles, reporting daily affairs, planning expeditions and allotment of duties, the *ghotul* is a place embedded in and nurtured by the larger socio-religious landscape of the Gond society — a sacred place where no wrongs can be committed” according to Elwin . A *ghotul* was also a space for all major and important village meetings and gatherings. *Ghotuls* were particularly targeted by the British colonial rulers who thought them to be the spaces where rebellion was born. Post Independence, free intermingling of women and men in *ghotuls* was looked down upon and actively discouraged by reformers, state institutions and members of dominant religions. As a result, *ghotuls* were largely destroyed and their cultural relevance lost in these parts. Decline of *ghotuls* also meant decline in cultural, moral and spiritual education of Gond youth, a vacuum which could never be filled by the formal educational institutes. Some elders connected this loss directly to the changing worldviews, perceptions and aspirations in the tribal youth in these regions. To the extent that revival of *ghotuls*, even though symbolically has become the starting point for many adivasi struggles in the region. An iconic example of this is the struggle to construct the *ghotul* hut in Mendha-Lekha village in the mid 1980s³², among similar efforts by many villages across Gadchiroli as an assertion of their identity, resistance against forest destruction and injustice caused by denial of access to and use of their traditional *jal, jangal aur zamin* (lands, waters and forests).

³¹ Elwin, V. (1992). *The Muria and Their Ghotul*. Oxford University Press, U.S.A.

³² Tofa, D. and Mohan, H., H. (2006). *Mendha (Lekha) - The village that declared that “we have our government in Delhi and Mumbai, but in our village we ourselves are the government”*. Vrikshamitra, Chandrapur/Gadchiroli.

"You cannot build non-violence on a factory civilization, but it can be built on self-contained villages. Rural economy as I have conceived it, eschews exploitation altogether, and exploitation is the essence of violence."

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi



Chapter 3: Historical Context to Conflict and Resistance in Gadchiroli and Korchi

This chapter delineates the systemic restrictions and curtailment of use, access and management rights of the forest dependent communities over their traditional forests in Gadchiroli by the colonial and subsequently the independent Indian state, wherein lie the roots of injustice, inequality and unsustainability. We also look at the larger conflicts that have emerged over the centuries between the adivasi way of being and the state's vision of development and governance. These conflicts have resulted in numerous resistance movements in the form of tribal rebellion, anti-dam movements, Maoist movements, and movements towards self rule and self determination, among others. Each such resistance movements also led to various transformative processes. Mendha-Lekha village in the district being one of the classic examples, which emerged out of the Manav Bachao Jungle Bachao Movement in the 1980s.

Section 1: Colonial Take-over of Forests and Centralized Governance – Roots of Structural Violence

Across India, forests were taken over by the Colonial British government in 1865 by enacting the Indian Forest Act and constituting an elaborate forest bureaucracy to manage the forests. Colonial interests in these forests were extractive and commercial, local customary governance and use of forests was considered a hindrance in maximizing benefits for the colonial state. Therefore, these customary uses were either extinguished completely or allowed not as rights but as privileges, subject to payment of specified fees and/or whims and fancies of the forest bureaucracy.³³

The forests of Gadchiroli district (which was part of the province of Central Provinces and Berar or C.P. and Berar under the British administrative division), were taken over by the British in 1854. British takeover across the tribal areas meant kinds of incursions that the adivasis had not encountered in their previous interactions with non-tribal invaders and rulers. Under British patronage, these areas were encroached by many outsiders, including money lenders and traders, leading to large scale exploitation of the adivasis. The British also co-opted and encouraged the feudal system of land management arguably creating inequalities in an otherwise class wise equal adivasi society, which were started during the Maratha regime prior to them. Even after taking control over the forests, a number of factors prevented the British from directly administrating the forests in the present day Gadchiroli district. Adivasi areas were divided among various *zamindars* (feudal land lords), some of whom were adivasis while others were non-adivasis³⁴, who

³³ Guha, R. (1994). Colonialism and Conflict in the Himalayan Forest. In R. Guha (Ed.), *Social Ecology* (pp. 275-302). Delhi: Oxford University Press.

³⁴ Vidyarthi, L.P. and Rai, B.K. (1976). *The Tribal Culture of India*. Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi.

worked under the British patronage. These forests continued to be managed by these *zamindars* till 1950.

Much like the tribal populations across India, in Gadchiroli district also tribal communities were and continue to be heavily dependent on the forests for their identity, subsistence and cultural survival. Considering that most *zamindars* in this region were tribal themselves, there were few restrictions on subsistence resource extraction, barring species prohibited by the government because of their commercial value for the state. Though the local people were allowed customary use and access rights, these were dependent on the whims and fancies of individual zamindars. In exchange of access to forests, the local villagers were required to work for the *zamindar* without payment (*begari*)³⁵ as and when he/ she so desired.

Section 2: From Feudal Lords to Forest Department and Rights of the Local People

After the *zamindari* or feudal system was abolished in Independent India, the forests in Gadchiroli came to be vested with the Indian state and suitable areas were handed over to the Forest Department (FD) in 1951. Soon, these forests were declared Protected Forests (PF) under the Colonial Indian Forest Act of 1927 (IFA). PF meant that the forests would be controlled and managed by centralized forest bureaucracy although local people could continue to access resources for subsistence. At the time of handing over the forest to the FD, the government of India had also set up a committee to enquire into the existing rights of the local people. The committee carried out a detailed and intense village to village enquiry between 1951 and 56. Based on the report of this committee, in 1955-56 *nistar patrak* (record of rights) was prepared for each village in C.P and Berar. These *nistar patraks* were unique and detailed records of collective rights of each village over their common property resources. *Nistar patraks*, however, were not kept with the concerned villages but were kept at the nearest government land revenue office under the supervision of the *patwari* (local land record officer). After Maharashtra became an independent state in 1960, these rights were included in the state's Land Revenue Code and hence were legally accepted by the state. As Gadchiroli became part of Maharashtra state, the local people's rights over forests as per the *nistar patraks* remained legally recognised. However, in 1959, the government of India declared their intention to designate a large part of the forests in C.P and Berar, including those in Gadchiroli, as Reserved Forests (RF). The RFs mandate restricted resource use by the local people. Declaration of RFs as per the Indian Forest Act requires a process of settlement of rights, few if any rights are allowed to continue, that too on payment of specified

³⁵ Pathak, N. and Gour-Broome, V. (2001). *Tribal Self-rule and Natural Resource Management: Community Based Conservation at Mendha-Lekha, Maharashtra, India*. Kalpavriksh, Pune, India and International Institute for Environment and Development, London.

taxes.³⁶

The existing *nistar patraks* were ignored in this process and were slowly forced out of the memory of the local people. Without following the specified legal processes or carrying out settlement and/or acceptance of rights, the FD began to gradually treat these forests as RF with the people having restricted rights. Hundreds of villages in Gadchiroli district were affected by these top down and oppressive policies and practices of the forest department. FD was just another form of *zamindari* (feudalism), and as far as the people were concerned, the local Range Forest Officer (RFO) was the new *zamindar*. Corruption became the norm, such as the practice of giving a portion of the very first harvest straight from the farmer's fields to the forest office. Yet, whenever people would be caught in the forest for subsistence gathering, they would face physical violence followed by demands for chicken, liquor and local forest produce that they would pay seasonally throughout the year. Sexual harassment of women and demands for sexual favours to release family members caught for 'forest offences' was also common. What the colonial government could not do in these tribal dominated forests was accomplished by the Independent Indian State – complete alienation of people from their life sustaining resources, attack on their cultural roots and identity and break down of customary systems of forest governance and management.³⁷

In addition to deeply impacting people in this region, these policies also had an impact on the forests. Commercial exploitation continued to be the priority of the forest department over the needs of the local people, much like the colonial government. The forests slowly changed from local and biologically diverse to commercial plantations of a few species, especially teak (*Tectona grandis*) and bamboo, despite opposition from the local people. As we will see in later sections, this history continues to repeat itself in the district – the policies continue to be practiced by the state and resisted by the people.

Section 3: Tribal Rebellion, Self-rule Movements, Their Leaders and Ideologies

Considering that forests are the material, spiritual and social life of the adivasi communities inhabiting the Central Indian forests, resistance to these alienating policies and practices of the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial imperialist practices and policies have been a parallel

³⁶Pathak, N. and Gour-Broome, V. (2001). *Tribal Self-rule and Natural Resource Management: Community Based Conservation at Mendha-Lekha, Maharashtra, India*. Kalpavriksh, Pune, India and International Institute for Environment and Development, London.
Pathak Broome, N. 2018. Mendha-Lekha- Forest Rights and Self-Empowerment. In Lang, M., Konig, C. and Regelmann, A. (eds.). 2018. *Alternatives in a World of Crisis*. Global Working Group Beyond Development. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Brussels Office and Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar, Ecuador.

Narratives shared by the local people from across Gadchiroli with the core research team members during their various interactions with the local people over the years. Further substantiated by local social activists such as Devaji Tofa, Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, Satish Gogulwar, Shubhada Deshmukh, and others in various conversations between 1999 and 2018

³⁷ same as footnote 35

running thread throughout their history. Among the tribal uprisings, rebellions, sacrifices and martyrdoms, few have found their way into the written histories of this region; most of them seem to have been after the British take-over of forests, which brought with it money lenders who exploited the local adivasis. Forest occupation and encroachments by non-ativasis and the government impacted the sole control of the adivasis over these lands; forest contractors began to extract and trade forest produce; land settlement policy of the British affected the adivasi land tenure system; rent to be paid to the zamindars or the local rulers was exploitative. These factors ultimately led to a number of rebellions and uprisings,³⁸ the earliest of which was the uprising of the Mal Paharias (of present time West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand regions) in 1772. This was followed by many such uprisings in different parts of adivasi inhabited forests of Central India.³⁹ One of them was the rebellion led by Tantya Bheel (from the Bheel tribe), who waged an armed struggle against the British policies and endeared himself to the masses with his courage and bravery. He was hanged by the British on 4th December, 1874 and has become immortal in tribal folk songs and folklore.⁴⁰ Responding to the gross exploitation of his people, Birsa Munda from the present state of Jharkhand started his “Ulgulan” (The Great rebellion) against the British rule and the local feudal lords in 1894, at the young age of 21. The movement asserted the rights of the Adivasis as the real owners of the land and forests, including the forest produce. He struggled against the British with a small tribal army using guerilla tactics. His struggle, however, was not just against the British, but also the ignorance within his community. He sought to rid the Munda community of superstition, animal sacrifice and alcoholism and came to be their revolutionary and spiritual leader. The rebellion was brutally crushed by the British and Birsa Munda died in prison following physical torture at the age of 25.⁴¹

Among the most dominant tribes in Gadchiroli region are the Gonds. Gond rulers once controlled large parts of the Central Indian Forests (including present time Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh). Till the beginning of the 15th century, Gond rule was firmly established with its centre in Garha (Madhya Pradesh). By 1564, they were conquered by the Mughals and came under their rule. By 1780, the Maratha rulers captured the last of the Moghaldynasties and the Moghal rule came to a near end. Some of the older Gond dynasties became the zamindars under the new Maratha regime and later, under the British rulers.⁴²

The first recorded adivasi rebellion in Gadchiroli region was in 1854, by Baburao Puleshwar Shedmake, the eldest son of the tribal zamindar of Molampalli of Ghot Zamindari in South Gadchiroli. His initial education was from the traditional Ghotul where he learnt Hindi, Gondi and Telugu along with music and dance; he was also sent by his father to learn English. When the British took over Chandrapur in 1854 (of which then Gadchiroli was a part), he started a guerrilla

³⁸ Vidyarthi, L.P. and Rai, B.K. (1976). *The Tribal Culture of India*. Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi.

³⁹ Chakraborty, A. (2017). Examining Subalternity in Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar’s “The Adivasi Will Not Dance”. *Postcolonial Text*, Vol 12, No 1 (2017). <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9473/b851e38e22b173d9833e0cfbb38209508049.pdf> (last checked in March 2021)

⁴⁰ https://wikivisually.com/wiki/Tantya_Bh%C4%ABl (last checked in March 2021)

⁴¹ <https://www.thebetterindia.com/146164/birsa-munda-tribal-hero-british-freedom-struggle-parliament/> (last checked in March 2021)

⁴² Vidyarthi, L.P. and Rai, B.K. (1976). *The Tribal Culture of India*. Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi. Pp 34.

rebellion against them. By 1857, with a small army of 500 tribal youth, he managed to defeat the British in all his encounters with them. He was finally captured in 1858 when the British got his sister Rani Laxmi Bai, Zamindarini of Aheri, to betray him. On 21st October, 1858, at the young age of 23, this brave adivasi was hanged at an open ground in Chanda. Baburao Shedmake remains an icon of bravery and a leader of his tribe, who did everything to protect his homeland from outsiders.⁴³ This was followed by a few other tribal revolts, all of which were brutally crushed. According to the adivasi elders, the British banned even the mention of such tribal resistance leaders from the local folk songs and folklore, thereby attempting to eliminate them from social memory.

Since the policies didn't change significantly for the adivasis even after the Independence of India in 1947, resistance movements continued in various forms. In the mid-1980s, tribal communities already reeling under the oppressive and alienating forest policies and atrocities were in for another shock when the government announced a number of "development" activities for the region. In addition to continuation of commercial exploitation of forests by the FD, the plan included an extensive network of 17-18 hydro-electric dams over River Indravati flowing through the southern region of the district. The plan, if accomplished, would have resulted in the relocation of large populations of mostly tribal communities from Southern Gadchiroli and Bastar District in Madhya Pradesh.

In 1984, the development activities, particularly the proposed dams on Indravati River, led to a tribal uprising and a Movement raising many questions about the kind of development that was being proposed. This Movement was called "*Jungle Bachao Manav Bachao Andolan*" (Save Forest Save Humanity Movement). Soon many local activists joined the Movement, which slowly spread to different parts of Gadchiroli district and beyond. A massive rally was organised in Gadchiroli in 1984, and hundreds of tribal villages participated in this rally. The Gadchiroli rally was followed by a series of village level meetings organised by the villagers using their own resources. These meetings led to more meetings being organized at the *Ilaka* (feudal administrative division for a cluster of villages) level. The major slogans emerging from these meetings were, "*Jungle jeene ka adhaar*" (Forests are the basis of life); "*Jungle katenge ham katenge, jungle bachenge ham bachenge*" (If forests are cut our lifeline will be cut, if forests are saved we are saved); "*Pani chahiye baandh nahin, kuaan chahiye mruthyu nahi*" (we want water not dams, we want wells not death – the slogan was to say that building dams will kill people and to sustain life smaller water harvesting structures and wells are needed). Most significant among them was "*Mawa Nate Mate Sarkar – hamare gaon main ham hi sarkar*" (Our village our rule). This remains a strong motivation and slogan for many villages in the district till date, particularly in Dhanora taluka, where it was subsequently modified and adopted as *Mumbai Dilli hamari sarkar, hamare gaon main ham hi sarkar* (our representatives govern from Mumbai and Delhi but we are the government in our village) in villages such as Mendha-Lekha, which has also led a strong movement within the village

⁴³ <http://www.adivasiresurgence.com/remembering-veer-baburao-puleshwar-shedmake/>

towards village self-rule, inspiring many other villages in the district.⁴⁴ Both slogans come with their underlying politics and long-term aspirations. The most significant feature of the Gadchiroli meetings was that people participating in them were not only those directly impacted by the dams and leases but thousands of others who came in solidarity to resist this alienating and oppressive model of development. These meetings revealed the power of people to the government and finally the dam projects were shelved.⁴⁵

Post-Independence, the district has also seen other movements inspired by social leaders, some of whom attempted to bring these issues more centrally to the electoral party politics. For example, between 1952 and 1972, among the most vocal proponents against the extractive state policies was Narainsingh Uikey, a local tribal and socialist leader, who represented the constituency (Armori Vidhan Sabha) including areas in present time Korchi, and was elected to the Parliament four times in consecutive succession. He travelled extensively within his constituency to mobilise and organise people on issues concerning the adivasi community, including rights over land, water and forests. His ideology inspired a number of subsequent leaders and was later taken forward by Sukhadeo Babu Uikey (1977- 2015). Another influential socialist leader in the district was Lalsham Shah Maharaj, who came from the Gond royal family, but was deeply influenced by socialist ideology. As a Member of Parliament from this region he was known to have stood for the cultural and ecological uniqueness of this region and for opposing policies contradicting local culture and ecology. His effort was to consolidate tribal self determination and self empowerment and restore tribal culture rooted in decentralised resource governance and equitable sharing of benefits. Influence of these ideologies and leaders led to the emergence of many people's *sangathan* and movements including Jagrit Adivasi Sangathana by Sukhadeo Babu Uikey, *Manav Bachao Jungle Bachao Andolan* (Save Humans, Save Forest Movement) which started in Madhya Pradesh and spread to Gadchiroli by mid 1980s.⁴⁶

It is important to mention here that some of these leaders and many young people in the district were also inspired by the Movement for "*Sampurna Kranti*" (holistic and complete Revolution) started by Jai Prakash Narayan in the mid-1970s.⁴⁷ Some of the prominent social actors of the current times in the district such as Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, Dr. Satish Gogulwar, Subhada Tai Deshmukh were also members of the *Chhatra Yuva Sangharsha Vahini* (a youth struggle and movement against social and political corruption) started by J. P. (as he was popularly known) in 1977.⁴⁸ In the mid-1980s and 90s, the movements and villages in the region were also influenced

⁴⁴ Pathak Broome, N. 2018. Mendha-Lekha- Forest Rights and Self-Empowerment. In Lang, M., Konig, C. and Regelman, A. (eds.). 2018. *Alternatives in a World of Crisis*. Global Working Group Beyond Development. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Brussels Office and Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar, Ecuador.

⁴⁵ Personal conversations with Mohan Hirabai Hiralal in 1999 and 2017

⁴⁶ Personal conversations with Dr. Satish Gogulwar in April 2018

Deogaonkar, S.G. 1994. *Tribal Administration and Development: With ethnographic profiles for selected tribes*. Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi.

Ghate, R. 2004, *Uncommon in Commons: Community Initiated Forest Resource Management* Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi

⁴⁷ <http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/193179/5/08%20chapter-%203.pdf> (last checked in March 2021)

⁴⁸ <http://sangharshvahini.blogspot.com/p/blog-page.html> (last checked in March 2021)

by Dr B. D. Sharma, who was one of India's foremost non-tribal knowledge holders on tribal issues. Starting as a government official, he served as a District Collector of undivided Bastar district in Chhattisgarh - a predominantly tribal district. In 1981, he resigned on principle against government development policies for the region. He was appointed Commissioner of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India and was instrumental in a number of reports and policies towards tribal well-being including the Bhuria report of 1995⁴⁹ and the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act of 1996. He was also one of the major inspirations behind the *Jungle Bachao Manav Bachao Andolan*. After his retirement he started a network of grassroots organisations called *Bharat Jan Andolan*. In the late 1990s, following the enactment of PESA, under the aegis of Dr B.D. Sharma, many gram sabhas in Gadchiroli and Chandrapur began elaborating upon and asserting village self-rule through inscriptions. The concepts of *Mava nate*, *mava raj* (village self-rule) became an important political campaign led by Dr B. D. Sharma, Gitacharya Tukaram Dada, Hiranman Warkhade and others.

These Movements and ideologies have emerged at different points in time or simultaneously, sometimes collaborating and on other times diverging from each other's points of view, often reaching a peak before subsiding due to multiple causes and conditions. Some movements were broken by political and state co-option while others were subdued by state repression and crackdown by branding activists as Maoists. One significant political co-option in the memory of local leaders is that of Sukhadeo Uikey who joined a political party with the hope of bringing about fundamental transformation, but to the disappointment of the local people, was gradually subsumed and co-opted within the electoral party politics. This has been among the reasons for some organizations, such as AAA, to refuse the path of electoral party politics but support local processes to become a political pressure group, particularly to work towards village development by being attentive towards collective power and action of people.⁵⁰

Section 4: Emergence and Spread of Armed Maoist Movement and Consequent Militarization in the District

In the 1960s, growing discontent among the peasants and adivasis because of exploitation and oppression by the landlords and due to the government's forest policies fuelled the emergence of an armed revolutionary movement in the state of West Bengal. This movement had started in the Naxalbari area, was deeply influenced by the political ideology of Mao Zedong and came to be popularly known as the Naxalite or Maoist Movement. By the 1980s, the movement had spread to

⁴⁹ <https://tribal.nic.in/writereaddata/AnnualReport/BhuriaReportFinal.pdf>

⁵⁰ Personal conversations with Dr. Satish Gogulwar in April 2018

the states of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, among others.⁵¹ Gadchiroli district has also been under the strong influence of this armed revolution since the 1980s. The Communist Party of India (Maoist), as they call themselves formally, has a political manifesto about agrarian and land reforms, elimination of unemployment, gender equity in wages and employment opportunities for all, among others. They also support the vision of tribal self-determination and self-rule. Claiming their resistance to be against feudalist, fascist, capitalist, imperialist and corrupt forces leading to injustice towards local tribal and non-tribal communities, they see the current form of government as the highest manifestations of these.⁵² Frustrated with oppressive, top down and alienating state policies on natural resources and development, many adivasi women, men and children have, over the years, chosen to join the Maoists to strengthen their resistance.

Considering that these forests also contain some of India's richest forest and mineral resources, extraction of which is often resisted by the adivasi people, the Maoist movement has been seen by state and central governments as one of the strongest hurdles they face. In 2006, the then Prime Minister referred to the Naxalites as "the single biggest internal security challenge" for India. He also said that the "deprived and alienated sections of the population" form the backbone of the Maoist movement in India. A government website of Gadchiroli describes, "Naxalism is highly prevalent in Gadchiroli district and subsequently has been highlighted as part of the Red Corridor, used to describe areas in India that are plagued by Naxalites. They took shelter in the dense forest and hills of this district."⁵³

Box 3: Development and Maoism in Central India Forests - Excerpts from Dr B.D. Sharma's interview in March 2010

"...the current notions of development are at the root of the Maoist insurgency. When sanctions (mining) started being given, discontent grew, and in the 1980s, the Maoists came. They are now seen as the biggest problem. When I was working as SC-ST commissioner, I asked Bastar's tribals about the Maoists. They said, 'Dadas (Maoist) are very good. They've released us from the tyranny of the patwaris' (government land revenue officer)...' God has given the tribals everything. Seated on the banks of the Indravati (River), they would tell me, 'We have three moneylenders who look after us throughout the year: the forest, the river and the land. We live off them for four months each.' They have never seen drought or famine. When rainfall is low, the forest produces more kandh-mool (tubers and roots) to compensate. In Gondri, there is no future tense. They are content living in the present. You can't presume to give them development; they have enough. For them, development means exploitation. A representative of the state, be it a patwari or a forest guard, is someone powerful, to be feared. Just stop their exploitation and

⁵¹ Singh, P. (1996). *The Naxalite Movement in India*, South Asia Books.

⁵² Jawaid, S., (1978). *The Naxalite Movement in India: Origin and Failure of the Maoist Revolutionary Strategy in West Bengal 1967 – 1971*. A thesis submitted to Brock University by in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

⁵³ <https://gadchiroli.gov.in/about-district/> (last checked in March 2021)

provide them health and education. The doctrine of Eminent Domain, which allows the state to capture anyone's property without their consent, clashes with the tribals' view. For them (the tribals and forest dwellers), those who live in the forests are the maalik (owners). You want to turn them into labourers. If this alternate pattern of development is not pursued, the Adivasis will perish."⁵⁴

Source: <http://www.im4change.org/latest-news-updates/for-tribals-development-means-exploitation-by-jyoti-punwani-1445.html> (last checked in March 2021)

In February 2009, the Indian central government announced a new nationwide initiative called the Integrated Action Plan (IAP) to deal with naxalism in all affected states. This plan included funding for grass-roots economic development projects in Naxalite-affected areas as well as increased special police funding for better containment and reduction of Naxalite influence. This has led to heavy state crackdown in various schemes and plans to wipe out Naxalism.⁵⁵ Adivasi people in these areas have paid and continue to pay a huge price by just being there, caught in the battle between the government and the Naxalites. Across Central Indian forests thousands have lost family members, personal dignity, land and resources and remain internally displaced.⁵⁶

In Gadchiroli district, including in Korchi, the state has used the presence of Maoists as a reason to heavily militarize the area (in some areas one military camp every 15 kms) leading to further marginalization and constant police presence, enquiries and oversight. As the states' commercial interests in these forests increased, so did the militarization of the district, resulting in imprisonment and regular harassment of those resisting mining, labelled as Maoist.

Three public hearings have been held so far in 2009, 2011 and 2016. Under strong opposition, the hearing was deferred in all cases and the proposals remain pending. The status of mining proposals was unclear at the time of writing this report.

⁵⁴ <http://www.im4change.org/latest-news-updates/for-tribals-development-means-exploitation-by-jyoti-punwani-1445.html> (last checked in March 2021)

⁵⁵ <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/Green-Hunt-the-anatomy-of-an-operation/article16812797.ece>
https://www.business-standard.com/article/elections-2014/nda-to-draft-action-plan-to-end-naxalism-rajnath-singh-114040200817_1.html

⁵⁶ Miklian, J. 2009. The purification hunt: the Salwa Judum counterinsurgency in Chhattisgarh, India. *Dialectical Anthropology*. Vol. 33, No. 3/4, Windows into a Revolution: Ethnographies of Maoism in South Asia (December 2009), pp. 441-459. Published by: [Springer](https://www.springer.com)
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/29790898>



Chapter 4: History of Political Decentralisation

"The end to be sought is human happiness combined with full mental and moral growth. I use the adjective moral as synonymous with spiritual.

This end can be achieved under decentralization. Centralization as a system is inconsistent with a non-violent structure of society."

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi



In this chapter we describe how the above context of historic injustice, social movements and ideological influences also pressurized the Indian state towards some form of political decentralization and eventually a combination of factors also forced the government to implement two significant legislative enactments, namely, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act 2006 and Rules 2008 and the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act 1996 and Maharashtra Rules 2014. We explain what led to the implementation of these laws, how they were implemented in the country in general and how their implementation was different in Gachiroli. In the subsequent chapters we will be describing what consequences these had for the local process of social, political, ecological, economic and cultural transformation.

Section 1: Panchayati Raj System (PRS) in India

Panchayats are among the oldest system of local governance in the Indian subcontinent. The word literally means an ‘assembly of five wise and respected elders’ chosen and accepted by the community. The traditional panchayats could also be called Jat Panchayats - a panchayat of a specific caste or tribe or any other self-defined group of people. Traditionally, panchayats were for dispute settlement between individuals, individuals and the community, or between villages. The first attempt to formalize this system was made by the British in 1869 when they established the District local Fund and constituted District Local Boards for self-governance of this Fund. The members of the board were selected by nomination. Under the Bombay Village Panchayat Act of 1920, Panchayats were constituted as elected bodies in the villages. Panchayat members were elected by adult male villagers and were responsible for various activities, including some socio-economic functions and power to levy taxes to increase their income.

Box 4: Gandhi’s idea of a Panchayat

The government of the village will be conducted by the Panchayat of five persons, annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. Since there will be no system of punishments in the accepted sense, this Panchayat will be the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office. Every Panchayat of five adult men or women being villagers or village-minded shall form a unit. Two such contiguous Panchayats shall form a working party under a leader elected from among themselves. When there are one hundred such Panchayats, the fifty first-grade leaders shall elect from among themselves a second-grade leader and so on, the first-grade leaders meanwhile working under the second-grade leader. Parallel groups of two hundred Panchayats shall continue to be formed till they cover the whole of India, each succeeding group of Panchayats electing second-grade leader after the manner of the first. All second-grade leaders shall serve jointly for the whole of India and severally for their respective areas. The second-grade leaders may elect, whenever they deem necessary, from among themselves, a chief who will regulate and command all the groups.

Source: Gandhi, M. (1962). Village Swaraj. Ahmedabad 380014: Navjivan Mudralaya.

During the reorganization of the states in 1956, under the federal system of India, many states decided to enact laws to incorporate the Panchayat system. In 1957, the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, constituted by the Government of India, recommended 'democratic decentralisation' in the form of a 3-tier Panchayati Raj System (PRS). This meant that the first level of decentralized decision making would be the Gram Panchayat at the village level, followed by the Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and Zila Parishad at the district level. This system was adopted by the state governments during the 1950s and 60s. With the 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India in 1992, this system was constitutionally backed. The powers and responsibilities devolved to the panchayats under this system include preparation of economic development plans and social justice along with implementation of 29 subjects listed in the Constitution. Panchayati Raj System was extended to the Scheduled V areas after the 73rd Amendment in the Constitution and subsequent enactment of PESA in 1996 (see below for details).

It is argued that PRS worked well till the mid-sixties, but a number of reasons led to its decline in subsequent years, primarily, the otherwise centralized tendencies of functioning in the political and administrative system in the country. Panchayats were often constituted at the level of village clusters, making it difficult for villagers to participate. Additionally, this meant that only one or two representatives from each village are elected to the Panchayat. If the Panchayat has many small villages, representatives from some villages may not be part of the Panchayat and hence may not be represented. Unaccountability, lack of transparency, inefficiency, corruption, favouritism, uncertainty and irregularity led to their decline. Most of the development programmes were kept out of their preview and were administered by the parallel administrative bodies⁵⁷.

Panchayats have been largely male dominated (with few exceptions where women have asserted their rightful claims); gram sabhas organised by them saw little if any presence of women. This was more so in group gram panchayats (one panchayat for a cluster of villages). In many states, panchayat elections were not held; where they are held, they are informally influenced by the national and regional political parties. Although participation and election of women has been specifically provided for, in most panchayats across the country voices of women and marginalized communities are non-existent.

Envisioned to achieve direct democracy, most panchayats have been reduced to being an extension of representative electoral democracy, fuelled by nepotism, patriarchy, and hunger for power, the far end of the national and regional political parties.

⁵⁷ Banerjee, R. (2013). What Ails Panchayati Raj? *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48 (30).

Box 5: Structure of a Gram Panchayat

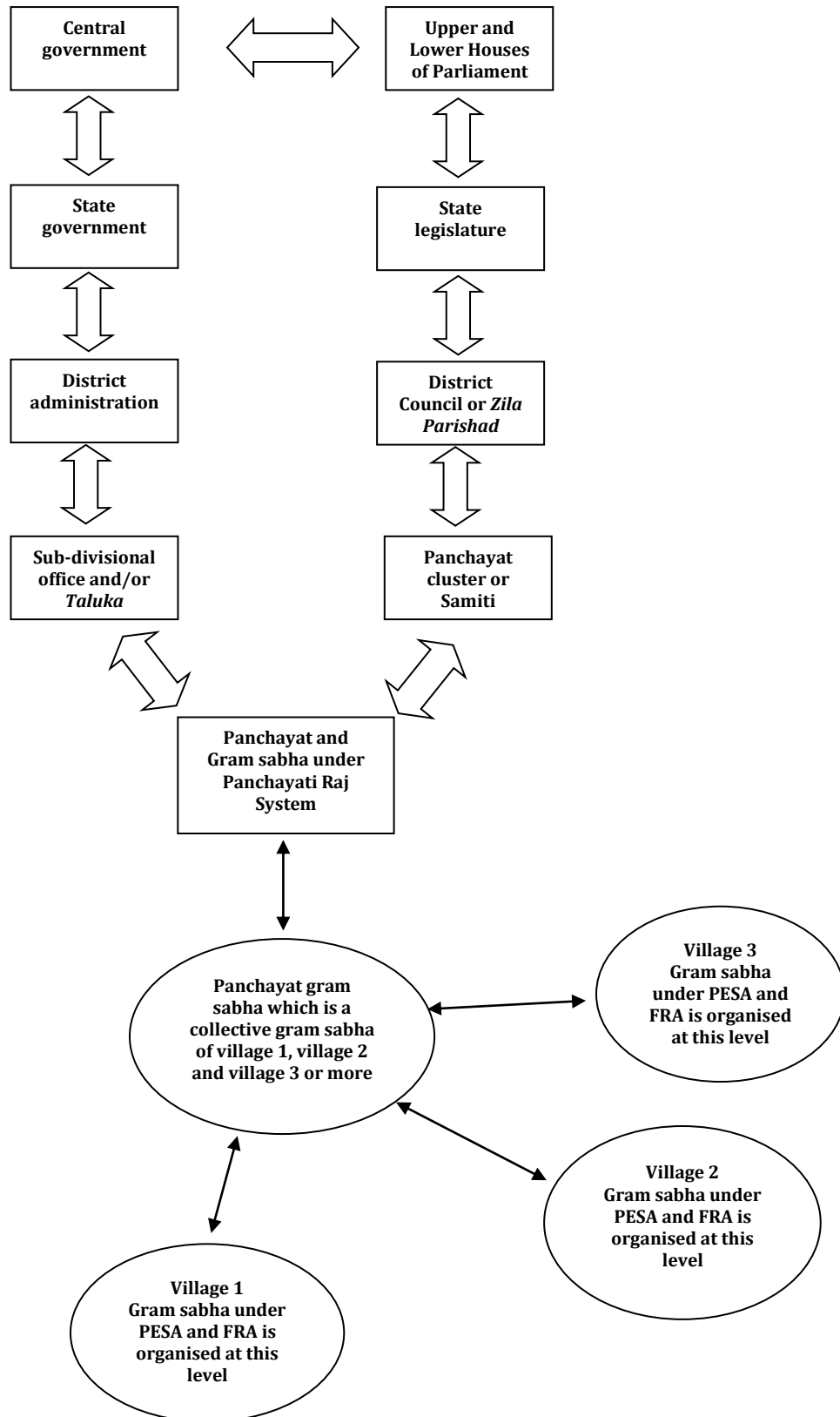
Gram panchayat is a body of 7-10 members directly elected by the adult citizens of the village or villages that come under the Panchayat. A *Panchayat* can be at the level of one village or a cluster of villages, depending on the population of the villages. The chairperson of this unit is called a Sarpanch. The members of the Gram Panchayat have a tenure of five years and are directly elected by the villagers. The sarpanch, on the other hand, is selected/elected by the members from among themselves (This system however has recently been changed and as per the new guidelines all sarpanches are to be directly elected by the villagers). There are special provisions for reservation of seats for women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. The government appoints a government functionary as a secretary to the *Panchayat*. Eight times a year, all the adult members of the villages which are part of the *Panchayat* are expected to meet. This is officially called the general body of the *Panchayat* or the *gram sabha*. Members of the Panchayat are also expected to meet at least once a month.

Source: Compiled by authors from general readings and self experience

This system of governance has often been criticized for being an extension of representative governance and not direct democracy, and, consequently, for not being truly empowering for the village communities. The *Panchayat gram sabha* meetings are rarely attended by the villagers, particularly women, as their villages are far and issues concerning them are rarely discussed in depth. *Panchayats* have therefore become another corrupt extension of the government establishment, with little financial or administrative power. One of the unfortunate realities across India is the heavy politicization of the *Panchayats*. It is common practice for national and regional political parties to establish roots at the village level and candidates standing for *Panchayat* elections often have party affiliations. This has created political divisions and factions within the villages and *Panchayats*, often leading to murky politics of power rather than elections based on issues of local significance. In many ways, panchayats failed to achieve the conception of village self-rule that Mahatma Gandhi had.

Administrative system

Political System



Section 2: Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act in 1996

As per the Ministry of Tribal Affairs Annual Report There are over 705 Scheduled Tribes⁵⁸ in India, occupying about 15% of India's landmass and constituting roughly 8.6% of India's population.⁵⁹ Their unique socio-cultural practices, worldviews and self-governing social and political organization is now well documented through anthropological works.⁶⁰ Throughout history these adivasi communities have resisted intrusion of pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence governments. Difficult terrain, limited economic outcomes, continuous revolts and uprisings of the people, along with efforts of the sympathetic British officials and anthropologists forced the colonial administration to recognize the unique socio-cultural, spiritual and political organization of the adivasis. This recognition led to the policies of isolation and enactment of special laws for the tribal dominated areas. These included the Scheduled District Act of 1874, which provided special protection to the tribal areas during colonial times. Post Independence, the policy of isolation was replaced by the policy to integrate the tribal population with the rest of the population in the country, even though adivasis and areas dominated by adivasis continued to have special status under Clause (1) of article 244 of the Constitution of India. Article 244 provides for creation of schedule V and VI areas in regions of higher tribal populations. The Constitution also provided for the term Scheduled Tribes to provide certain privileges, benefits and protection to the tribal communities listed under the Schedule⁶¹. Despite these legal and administrative provisions for protection, both in the colonial times and more so in post-colonial times, oppression and land and resource alienation of the adivasis (including by conflicting state and central government's resource alienating policies and practices) continued.

The 73rd amendment Act 1992 had made constitutional provisions for the Panchayati Raj System all over the country. However, this amendment was not extended immediately to the States and Areas within states which had special constitutional status. These included the Scheduled V and other tribal Areas. In 1994, the government instituted a 22-member committee headed by Dr Dilip Singh Bhuria (hence popularly known as the Bhuria Committee), which recommended a number of steps for extension of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment to adivasi areas⁶². However, these recommendations were not implemented immediately. Sustained pressure from the ground and

⁵⁸ Tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as mentioned in the Article 342 of the Constitution of India

⁵⁹ MoTA. (2013). *Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India*. Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Government of India. 2013

⁶⁰ Von Fürer-Haimendorf. C. *Tribes of India: The Struggle for Survival*. Berkeley: University of California Press, c1982.

Elwin, V. 1964. *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin: An autobiography*. Oxford University Press. India.

<https://www.clearias.com/major-tribes-in-india/> (last checked in March 2021)

⁶¹ Bijoy, C. (2012). Panchayat Raj (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 2006- Policy Brief. UNDP.

⁶² Bhuria, D. (2004). *Report of the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission Vol -I*. Government of India, Scheduled Tribes Commission. Government of India.

efforts of Dr B.D. Sharma⁶³ in his official capacity as Commissioner, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, led to the Parliament of India finally implementing these recommendations by enacting the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act in 1996.⁶⁴ PESA, as it is popularly called, was enacted to extend the Panchayati Raj System to the Scheduled Areas, with certain exceptions and modifications. PESA sought to enable the Panchayats at appropriate levels and village assemblies (*gram sabhas*) to implement a system of self-governance with respect to a number of issues such as customary resources, minor forest produce, minor minerals, minor water bodies, selection of beneficiaries, sanction of projects, and control over local institutions. The Act empowered the *gram sabhas* to safeguard and preserve the traditions and customs of people, their cultural identity, community resources and customary mode of dispute resolution. Additionally, *gram sabhas* in scheduled V areas were empowered to enforce prohibition or to regulate or restrict the sale and consumption of any intoxicant; to regulate the ownership of minor forest produce; to prevent alienation of land; to manage village markets; to exercise control over money lending; to exercise control over institutions and functionaries in all social sectors; to exercise control over government plans for the local area and resources for such plans including tribal sub-plans; planning and management of minor water bodies, among others. *Gram sabhas* were also to be consulted if the land from these areas was to be diverted or acquired for any other purpose and the recommendation of the *gram sabhas* or the Gram Panchayats would be mandatory for grant of prospecting license or mining lease for minor minerals in that area. The Act envisioned state legislations making rules to endow *gram sabhas* with appropriate powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as Institutions of Self Governance in keeping with their customary systems.

Under the Indian federal system, the drafting of Rules under the law (without which it could practically not be implemented) was left to the states. Not surprisingly, most states didn't immediately draft the rules and those which did, did so by ensuring that the rules took away or heavily diluted most of the empowering provisions of the Act. Soon after the enactment of PESA, the Supreme Court of India passed a brave judgement in a case filed by an organization called Samatha. The Samatha case was against the state of Andhra Pradesh challenging the state's right to allow private mining companies in schedule V areas. The Judgement declared that 'person' would include both natural persons as well as juristic person and constitutional government and that all lands leased by the government or its agencies to private mining companies apart from its instrumentalities in the scheduled areas are null and void". This led to a covert attempt by many state governments as well as ministries, such as Ministry of Mines, to dilute, scuttle and underplay implementation of PESA.

⁶³ <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/when-peace-falls-prey-to-politics/296076?scroll> (last checked in March 2021)

⁶⁴ <https://tribal.nic.in/actRules/PESA.pdf> (last checked in March 2021)

Section 3: The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act 2006 or FRA

In 2006, after a long-standing grassroots struggle of the tribal communities across India ⁶⁵against alienating, oppressive, top down forest and conservation policies, the Parliament of India enacted a landmark legislation – The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act 2006, also called Forest Rights Act of India (herein referred to as FRA). For the first time in the history of Independent India, the FRA acknowledged the historic injustice that has been carried out on forest dwelling communities in colonial and post colonial times and provided for recording of their rights over their traditional forests, which the Act emphasizes, are “already vested”.

FRA is currently the only legal mechanism in the country for determining local forest rights and recognizes 14 pre-existing rights. These include Individual Forest Rights (IFRs) over land being cultivated by the forest dwelling communities without legal documents; Community Rights (CRs) of use and access to forest land and resources; most importantly, it provides for the ***gram sabhas to claim rights to use, manage, and conserve their traditional forests (here on Community Forest Resource or CFRs) and protect them from internal and external threats.*** The Act also provides for free prior informed consent of the *gram sabhas* before their CR or CFR forests are diverted for non-forestry purposes.

PESA (in scheduled V Areas) and the FRA are seen by many as having the potential to transform and radically democratize forest governance and conservation regimes in India. ***Among the many radical provisions of these laws, the most significant and different from any other law in the country, is the powerful envisioning of subsidiarity – these laws envision the basic unit of governance to be the gram sabha (village assembly), NOT the panchayat.*** They also provide for the ‘village’ to be self-determined by a group of people residing in a settlement which may or may not have been described as a village thus far. While FRA recognizes and establishes rights of such villages on their traditional forests, collectively, both FRA and PESA (applicable only in Scheduled V Areas) empower these gram sabhas such that no activity can take place in these forests without seeking the *gram sabha’s* consent. FRA alone would impact the lives of over 200 million forest dependent people across the country.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Sarin, M. (2014). Undoing Historic Injustice: Reclaiming Citizenship Rights and Democratic Forest Governance through the Forest Rights Act 2006. In Lele, S. and Menon, A. (eds.). *Democratizing Forest Governance in India*. Oxford University Press, India, 2014

⁶⁶ CFR-LA, 2016. Promise and Performance: Ten Years of the Forest Rights Act in India. Citizens’ Report on Promise and Performance of The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, after 10 years of its Enactment. December 2016. Produced as part of Community Forest Rights-Learning and Advocacy Process (CFR-LA), India, 2016 (www.cfrla.org.in).

However, the implementation of the Act has remained an uphill task with only 3% of its potential being nationally realized in 2016 – over one decade after its enactment. One of the reasons for this nationally poor implementation of the Act has been a lack of political and administrative will to support its radically transformative provisions. The only regions where the Act has been better implemented are those where forest dwelling communities are mobilized, local people’s movements or civil society actors are active and individuals within the administration sensitive and supportive.⁶⁷ One such region is the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra.

A report on ten years of FRA implementation (particularly, governance and management rights) in Maharashtra, published in March 2017,⁶⁸ indicated that Maharashtra is a leading state in the implementation of FRA, having recognized 20% of the minimum potential of the CFR rights. Significantly, over 60% of these rights have been recognized only in Gadchiroli district which is one of the 36 districts in the state. This translates to mean that by December 2018, forest governance and management rights had been transferred to 1388 villages (gram sabhas) over an area of 1165316.17 acres or 4,33,995 ha of forests in the district. Considering that the District has a total forest area of 12,57,620.2 ha, this still constitutes only about 37.5% of the total forest area in the District. For Korchi taluka, this figure as on December 2018 was 87 gram sabhas had the CFR rights over total forest area of 14489.34 ha (which does not include many hundred ha of forests under 5 villages, figures for which could not be accessed), covering over 20% of the Taluka’s total geographical area.

Section 4: Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, 1996 – Maharashtra Rules 2014 and other Notifications by the Governor of Maharashtra in 2014

In 2014, the Government of Maharashtra also decided to draft the Rules under PESA which had been pending since 1996. The rules were mandatory for ensuring implementation of PESA in the state but had also become important in the light of reconciling provisions of the FRA with other state laws. The Rules brought about some significant changes, which, along with FRA, had a significant bearing in the processes that were to unfold towards forest governance and

⁶⁷ CFR-LA, 2016. Promise and Performance: Ten Years of the Forest Rights Act in India. Citizens’ Report on Promise and Performance of The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, after 10 years of its Enactment. December 2016. Produced as part of Community Forest Rights-Learning and Advocacy Process (CFR-LA), India, 2016 (www.cfirla.org.in).

⁶⁸ Maharashtra CFR-LA, 2017. Promise and Performance: Ten Years of the Forest Rights Act in Maharashtra. Citizens’ Report on Promise and Performance of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. Produced by CFR Learning and Advocacy Group Maharashtra, as part of National Community Forest Rights-Learning and Advocacy Process (CFR-LA). March 2017. (www.fra.org.in)

management in Gadchiroli district. To ensure effective implementation of the provisions of PESA, the Governor's office also issued a number of other notifications and changes in the state laws. Some of the most significant ones include:

Sharpening the definition of a 'village' and gram sabha (village assembly)

Among the most significant changes, was a much-needed change in the definition of 'village' under the Maharashtra Village Panchayats Act. Under the Panchayat Act of India, a Panchayat could be constituted at the level of one or of a cluster of villages, but not at the level of smaller settlements and hamlets. Since the hamlets and habitations in Scheduled Areas are dispersed and far from each other, section 4 (b) of PESA recognised the right of such habitations to become a 'village' and to have their own Gram Sabhas. Accordingly, the Maharashtra Village Panchayats Act was modified to include the following:

"54-1A. Notwithstanding anything contained in sections 4, 5 or any other provisions of this Act, in the Scheduled Areas, - (a) a habitation or a group of habitations or a hamlet or a group of hamlets comprising a community and managing its affairs in accordance with traditions and customs, and which is declared as a village in the prescribed manner shall be the village for the purposes of this chapter;

"(b) every village, so declared under clause (a), shall have a 'Gram Sabha' consisting of persons whose names are included in the electoral rolls for the Panchayat at the Village level and a Panchayat may be constituted of one or more than one of such villages."

This is a very significant change in devolution of power to the smallest unit of people's collective and a significant enabler for women's participation in decision making.

Notifications ensuring ownership of minor forest produce, including bamboo and tendu

Although PESA in 1996 vested the ownership of Minor Forest Produce (or Non-Timber Forest Produce) (NTFP), other state laws ensured that NTFPs of commercial value such as Tendu and bamboo were kept out of its purview.⁶⁹ Since the state list only allowed Gram sabhas access to 33 low value NTFPs, they were denied livelihood opportunities. By Notification dated 19/08/2014, the Governor of Maharashtra made modifications to the Maharashtra Transfer of Ownership of Minor Forest Produce in the Scheduled Areas and the Maharashtra Minor Forest Produce (Regulation of trade) (Amendment) Act, 1997 and modifications to the Indian Forest Act, 1927, in its application to the State of Maharashtra. Because of these changes, many gram sabhas in Scheduled Areas have been able to exercise their rights over minor forest produce, including high value products, such as bamboo and tendu (see Chapter 5, Section 4 for details).

⁶⁹ The definition of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) under the *Maharashtra Transfer of Ownership of Minor Forest Produce in the Scheduled Areas and the Maharashtra Minor Forest Produce (Recognition of Trade) (Amendment) Act, 1997* did not include many commercially important species and over which FRA provided rights.

Modification of the Maharashtra Land Revenue Code, 1966 towards empowering gram sabhas to prevent land alienation of its members

In addition to Adivasi lands being acquired by the government for development projects, the adivasi communities, including in the Scheduled Areas, often face land alienation because of other reasons such as threat, coercion, fraud, forgery, and the general indebtedness to money-lenders. Consequently, the tribal communities have been steadily losing land ownership to non-tribal persons. To prevent such land alienation, the Governor of Maharashtra issued a Notification stating that no land can be alienated in Scheduled Areas without the prior consent of the gram sabhas.⁷⁰

Direct devolution of 5% of Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) fund to gram panchayats in Scheduled Areas

By Notification dated 30/10/2014 issued by the Governor's office in Maharashtra, the Maharashtra Village Panchayats Act (III of 1959) has been modified. A new clause (o) in section 54 B is inserted that gram panchayats and gram sabhas shall *"be competent to exercise control over local plans and resources for such plan including the Tribal Sub Plan, provided that not less than 5% of the total Tribal Sub Plan funds of the respective annual plan shall be devolved to the Gram Panchayats in Scheduled Areas in proportion to their population."* In keeping with this Notification, the Tribal Development Department issued a Government Resolution on 21 April 2015 and then on 21 August 2015, directly devolving 5% of Tribal Sub Plan funds to Gram Panchayats in Scheduled Areas in Maharashtra. This step is significant as it ensures a greater degree of democratic and financial decentralization in such areas.

It is important to keep in mind that while these policy changes are being made, simultaneous policy and legal changes are made at the level of the central government and the state government which aim to take away the devolution of power by these above-mentioned provisions⁷¹. For example, through a special power for acquisition of land, land can be alienated from people without the gram sabha consent.

⁷⁰ In order to bring the state revenue laws in line with section 4(m)(iii) of PESA, 1996 (in exercise of powers conferred by sub paragraph (1) of paragraph 5 of the Fifth Schedule to the Constitution to the Governor), the Governor of Maharashtra issued a Notification dt.14/06/2016, to bring about an amendment in section 36A of the Maharashtra Land Revenue Code, 1966, in its application to the Scheduled Areas of the State of Maharashtra

⁷¹ Ghosh, S. (2019). Attempt to Re-Colonize Forests in India The new Draft Amendments to Indian Forest Act. World Rain Forest Movement Bulletin 243 <https://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/attempt-to-re-colonize-forests-in-india-the-new-draft-amendments-to-indian-forest-act-2/> . May 14, 2019. (last checked in March 2021)



"If you want to lead a good or a happy life in the village then it is important that every individual is aware of her/his responsibility and commit to their duty"

**Izam sai Katengey, Sale village,
Korchi**

Chapter 5: Current Context of Conflict

"Every man has an equal right to the necessities of life even as birds and beasts have. And since every right carries with it a corresponding duty and the corresponding remedy for resisting any attack upon it, it is merely a matter of finding out the corresponding duties and remedies to vindicate the elementary fundamental equality. The corresponding duty is to labour with my limbs and the corresponding remedy is to non-co-operate with him who deprives me of the fruit of my labour."

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi



In this chapter, we attempt to understand the current conflicts in Korchi taluka, which began in the late 1990s when a part of the forests was to be leased out for mining. We attempt to understand the mining proposals in the district as a whole and in Korchi, and the reasons for people's resistance against these.

Section 1: Continued Extractivism-based Model of Development

Despite the above-mentioned history of various resistance movements in the district and legal and policy efforts towards decentralization of governance, the control over forests has continued to remain with the forest department, and forest leases continue to be given for commercial extraction. The forests in Gadchiroli have historically been important for the colonial state and subsequently for the Independent Indian state for their commercial value. Most of these forests are dense and rich in timber, bamboo and other forest produce important for local people. These forest resources contribute significantly to the economy of the state, e.g., 85% of Maharashtra's bamboo comes from Gadchiroli district. The other commercially important forest resources include Tendu leaves (leaves with which *bidi* is made), Mahua Flower, Lac and silk. Forests of Gadchiroli have therefore been extensively exploited by the FD. Most of these commercial forest extractions have been carried out through leases to industries or through large scale extractions by the state-controlled Forest Development Corporation of Maharashtra (FDCM). For example, in 1968, the Maharashtra government had leased most of its bamboo forests to Ballarpur Industries Limited (BILT). The paper mill, which has over the years become amongst the biggest economic powers in this region, was given leases in all bamboo dominated forests. Large patches of biologically diverse forests which sustain local livelihoods continue to be handed over for clear felling to the FDCM,⁷² despite strong opposition from the local people.⁷³ As per the data from the forest department of Gadchiroli district, currently 518.231sq.km. (51823.1 ha) of forests have been leased to the FDCM, most of which fall within the traditional boundaries of the surrounding gram sabhas.⁷⁴ In 2019, a group of villages in Kurkheda taluka took this case to the Supreme Court of India against the FDCM, the case is currently being heard. The State's extractivist model of 'development' is now being pushed, if anything, with greater vigour than ever before. The State's policy for the district clearly identifies "development" as one of the important policies, in addition to militarization to pull the "adivasis away from the Maoist". Interestingly, while on the one hand the district becomes one of the leading districts in the country for reinstating rights of the tribal communities in forests and forests resources (see the section below for details), on the other, more and more forests are being leased out for mining and clear felling.

⁷² <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/Forest-Development-Corporation-of-Maharashtra-seeks-630-sq-km-new-forest-area-for-operations/articleshow/21945126.cms>

⁷³ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/Chanda-villagers-refuse-to-withdraw-Chipko-movement/articleshow/52544294.cms>

⁷⁴ http://www.mahaforest.nic.in/fieldoffice/internal.php?lang_eng_mar=Mar&oid=34&MID=1

Section 2: Mining in Gadchiroli district

Since the mid 1990s, the mineral rich forests of Gadchiroli have been gradually leased out for mining; as in 2017, there were 25 sanctioned and proposed mines in the district. According to the Directorate of Geology and Mining under the government of Maharashtra, Gadchiroli is a mineral-rich district with total reserves of 178.61 million tonnes (MT) of iron ore, and 172 MT of limestone, among other minerals. So far, only Lloyd's Metal and Energy Limited has started its mining activities at Surjagarh village (Wooria Hills) in Etapalli Taluka. The company was granted a mining lease on 348.09 hectares in 2007, initially for 20 years, later extended for another 30 years. This is reportedly the biggest operating iron ore mine in the state which started operating in 2016. Gopani Iron, Corporate Ispat Alloys, and Jindal Steel Works Ispat are the other companies which have been granted permission for mining by the government, although they had not started work on the ground till the time of finalising this report in 2019.

Collectively, these proposed and sanctioned projects are and will destroy approximately 15,946 acres of dense forest directly while an additional 40,000 acres and more would be impacted by mining related allied activities. These mining leases are being given to smaller and larger corporations sometimes in clear violation of the country's legal provisions related to forest diversion, particularly the clause of Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) provided under the Forest Rights Act of 2006.⁷⁵ All the leases are within the traditional boundaries of the local villages, many have already been legally claimed under the Forest Rights Act as their customary forests (pl see Chapter 4, section 3), while other villages are in the process of making such claims under the FRA. The currently operating and proposed mines in Surjagarh and Zendepar are in fact on the traditional sacred sites of hundreds of villages. Mining leases have faced continuous resistance from the local villages.

Mining in Korchi Taluka

In Korchi itself around 12 mining projects are proposed in the forests of Zendepar, Agari Maseli, Nandli, Sohale and Bharritola villages, covering a total forest area of about 1032.66 ha. No free prior informed consent was ever sought for these proposals (pl see Annexure 1 for detailed chronology of events). People in the area found out about the proposals accidentally in 2007, when Zendepar village, which had been protecting their forests under the Joint Forest Management scheme of the forest department and hence was associated with AAA, started

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- Pathak Broome, N. and Raut, N. 2017. *Mining in Gadchiroli - Building a castle of injustices on the foundation of one.* <http://www.countercurrents.org/2017/06/17/mining-in-gadchiroli-building-a-castle-of-injustices/>. June 17, 2017.
 - <http://www.mediavigil.com/morcha/massive-protest-in-gadchiroli-to-protect-tribal-rights/>
 - <https://www.newsclick.in/mining-operations-gadchiroli-face-stiff-resistance-villagers>

noticing regular visits of complete strangers into their forests. They sought help from AAA to seek information about the identity of these people. Soon it emerged that they were surveyors for various mining companies surveying forests. The forests being surveyed included the sacred forest of *Raopat Gangaram Ghat*, the site where village deities were worshipped in a ceremony and where an annual gathering of the villages in their *Ilaka* took place.

It was discovered that in 2003, the *Nistar* forest area (area over which individual and collective usufruct rights of the local villagers are officially recorded) of Zendepar *gramsabha* in Korchi taluka was diverted and reserved for iron-ore mining by the District Collector of Gadchiroli district without the *gramsabha*'s consent or even informing them. On 12th December 2008, Ministry of Mines had already released a letter approving the granting of mining lease for the iron-ore over the area of 65 hectares in the neighbouring village Sohale, for a period of 20 years. However, as indicated in the grant letters this approval was subject to the consent letters from the surface land owners, permission to use forest land for mining from the Forest Department, necessary clearance of land owned by adivasis and site clearance from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF).

A public hearing was organised on 6th September 2011 in Gadchiroli, despite repeated requests for it to be held in Korchi to facilitate better local participation. The local Newspapers reported on 10th September 2011, that based on the presentations of the company officials and information of the government officials, the local social activists and villagers raised a number of questions for which the company representatives had no answers. Newspapers also reported that villagers rejected the mining proposals and quoted villagers as saying that "the forests that give us livelihood generation after generation, we will not give it to the company". The public hearing was held in Gadchiroli, despite a demand from the local villagers that it should be organised in Korchi to ensure effective public participation. Large number of villagers participated in the public hearing by pooling community resources despite the distance and raised their concerns regarding the impact of mining. Apart from political, ecological, and economic objections, communities cited strong spiritual reasons to reject mining. In words of **Samaru Kallo** from Zendepar village –

"We will never let our forests mined, not just our village forests but we stand with all adivasis who are resisting destruction of their forests. All our Gods live in the forests. We adivasis do not have temples. These stones, trees, twigs, forests, they are our Gods. The spirits of our ancestors live in these forests. If they forcefully relocate us, we will go, and we will even take our family Gods but what about the community Gods and the spiritswhere will they go? They cannot leave these forests?"

Villager's opposition was registered and the public hearing was dismissed. On the contrary the, the officials of the mining company started distributing letters to the villagers stating that they have received permission for mining, simultaneously they also started tree felling and fencing of the proposed mining site. By January 2012, this leads to a massive public opposition and all

villages supported by the Sarpanch Sangathana (sarpanch collective) decide to boycott the upcoming zila parishad (district level) and panchayat samiti (taluka level) elections dur that year. This was one of the many strategies that they adopted towards resisting mining. They demanded that permissions granted be withdrawn. This strategy proved successful; the government had to respond and assure that the leases had not been granted yet, that the villagers opposition to the mining as expressed in the public hearing had been recorded by the government to be conveyed to the concerned authorities and that a committee was set up to enquire about what kind of surveys were being conducted and by whom.

Meanwhile, in 2010, 90 villages from Korchi had filed their individual and community forest rights claims under the FRA. By 2011, most villages including Zendepar and Nandali villages received the titles for their CFRs. The titles of the villages where mining was proposed did not include the forest area proposed under the mining. Villagers immediately registered their complaint against this which had not yet been resolved till the time of writing this report.

In 2016, the villagers got another notice about a public hearing. The event was announced by publishing in the local newspapers. The taluka level women's federation (Mahila Parisar Sangh) organised a meeting in Temli village on Gender Empowerment through FRA in which the newspaper news about mining was discussed in detail and women took a strong position against mining in the area.

Box 6: Forests proposed for mining are not recognized as Community Forest Resource Rights (CFR) under the Forest Rights Act in Zendepar village

As per the village elders, the traditional forests of Zendepar village area spread over 395 ha. The village had filed a legal claim, under the Forest Rights Act 2006, over this forest that is legally recorded in the *nistar patrak* as the traditional forest of the village. However, in 2011, when the village received the title over this forest, it recognised only 99 ha, which was corrected to 117 ha in 2017; the remaining forest has been earmarked for mining despite constant complaints from the village. The village has filed a written appeal against this reduction but has not yet received any response from the state. Similarly, rights have not been granted in Agar Maseli, Nadli, Sohale and Bharitola villages where mining is proposed.

Source: Conversations with gram sabha members of Zendepar village

"The forests are most essential to us. For adivasi's, development is access to basic health and education. People get food, fruits, leaves and flowers from the forest. Our development will happen here. If this forest is given to a mining company then we will lose our independence. We will be like slaves. Mining won't lead to development"

- a collective stand by the Mahila Parisar Sangh in Korchi.

On 27th July 2017, a plea from the gram sabha members for a change in the venue of the public hearing from Gadchiroli to Korchi was again refused. On 6th August 2017 the public hearing was

held in Gadchiroli more than 100 km away from Korchi. Mobilised by the Mahila parisar sangh (see chapter 6, Section 2) and Maha Gramsabha (see chapter 6, Section 1.5) Korchi, a large number of villagers mobilised resources to reach Gadchiroli and once again vehemently opposed mining. Many other gram sabha representatives came for the public hearing in solidarity with their neighbours and also fearing that their forests may also be eventually mined. Some gram sabha members were also brought by the company to support mining (these were all gram sabhas where there was no mining proposed).

We oppose mining in our forests. These forests are important for our sustenance. These forests give us medicines, fruits, food... we get more from the forests than we get from our agricultural lands. We do not have drought like in other areas... the forest gives us enough water but even if it doesn't rain for a year we have enough to eat in the forests... all kinds of tubers, mahua flowers, tendu fruit, charoli... we sell some of these to earn income. How can we let them mine and desroy these forests?

Narobai Hodi, Zendepar village

In the public hearing, women were particularly vocal about the importance of forests in adivasi culture and livelihood.

Forest provides for us throughout the year. As much as we get from our fields, we get from the forests. When there is drought, the crops may fail but the forests will still sustain us. We can collect flowers, fruits, leaves and sell them... get some cash income. It is because of the forests that we have clean water, even when there is drought in other areas in Maharashtra, we have enough water. We have clean air, few illnesses, we feel safe. If mining comes, our water and air will be polluted. We worry for the safety of women and children.

Babita Naitam, Sarpanch, Nandli Panchayat 2018

5th November 2017, Zendepar gram sabha passed a resolution to file an RTI on the proposed mining in Zendepar forest. On the 10th of November 2017, RTI application filed by Samaru Kallo, asking for information about all mining leases proposed and granted within Zendepar forest area and their current status; copy of the proposals by the company; Details of all the meetings that have taken place for proposing and accepting the mines; Order granting the permission to mine; copy of gram sabha resolutions under the FRA if villagers have given consent or not; topo sheets and maps of the village and mining area; All the studies that have been carried out to make mining proposals and people who were present in these studies. Status of the mining lease proposal remains uncertain. The minutes of the public hearing have not been shared with the concerned gram sabhas so they remain unclear on whether their opposition was recorded or not. Despite the strong local opposition, the proposals have continued to be considered, although the authorities have not been able to grant the leases yet.

We will never let our forests be mined; not just our village forests, but we stand with all adivasis who are resisting destruction of their forests. These forests are important for all of us whether we are adivasis or not. All our gods live in the forests... we are adivasis; we do not have temples. These stones, trees, twigs, forests,

these are our gods. The spirit of our ancestors lives in these forests. If they forcefully relocate us, we will go, we will even take our family gods, but what about the community gods, the spirits ... where will they go? They cannot leave these forests.

Chamaru Kallo, gram sabha, Zendepar.

People in general and women in particular remain extremely critical of mining companies propaganda that mining in the region will bring development in the form of good, roads, hospitals, schools and other facilities. In her response to the mining companies' contention that mining will bring 'development' in the area, **Amita Madavi** of Zendepar village says

We already have a good life, development for us is access to good education and good health facilities. This is the responsibility of the government, why do we need a mining company for that?

Many local villagers believe that apart from what they already have what they need is access to good health and education. It is the responsibility of the government to help them meet these needs and they do not need the company to destroy their forests for these basic human needs in the name of 'development'.

In the meanwhile, strategies to mount pressure on the local people to agree to mining also continue in many ways. These include, publication of propaganda papers by the proponent companies listing out 'benefits of development' that would be brought about in the taluka if mining was to go ahead; organizing events with the youth including through educational institutions; co-opting members of the grams sabhas, particularly in villages which are opposing mining; and targeting leaders who may be spearheading the resistance, among many other ways.

In 2021, as the country is trying to deal with the covid 19 pandemic, the proposals for mining in Korchi have been revived. At the time of going to press with this report, gramsabhas had once more passed resolutions to oppose mining in their forests. These resolutions were being given to district and state administration through their larger collectives the Mahagramsabha as well as the Sarpanch sangathana.



"If we are moving towards justice in one sphere then others like economic, social, and ecological spheres also need to be addressed. Whether women, men, children...all must then have equal right to live, speak and think. This is what we women are striving to achieve"

Kumari Bai Jamkata, Korchi



Chapter 6: Transformation in Korchi – A Journey towards direct democracy leading to political and social transformation

In the various sections of this chapter we describe in quite detail the transformative processes in Korchi taluka. We believe reformative changes in state forest laws (which themselves were a result of grassroots struggles) led to local transformative processes as various actors, causes and conditions came together. The struggle and resistance has been (and continues to be) against extractivist development and exploitative and centralized forest laws and policies towards gaining rights and control over *jal, jungal aur jameen* (water, forest and land). However it has significantly impacted nearly all spheres of social organisation including economic, political, cultural and social, and is inextricably linked to the political economy of the region. We start by looking at the processes towards political decentralization i.e moving towards direct democracy with gender sensitivity aiming to achieve greater autonomy for the local *gram sabhas* (village assemblies). We then look at the simultaneous and mutually supportive emergence of a taluka level collective of *gram sabhas* called the Maha Gramsabha. We look at how these self empowering governance processes along with strengthening of rights, led to localized, equitable and transparent forest based livelihoods and economy, particularly the extraction and sale of two commercially important NTFPs - tendu patta and bamboo. We also explore the positive impacts these processes have had towards seeking greater accountability for the State institutions, access to state welfare programmes, educational institutions, gender empowerment and inclusion, impacting state health system, among others. We also look at the hurdles that these processes are facing and ways in which they are being addressed. Since alternative transformations are expected to lead to greater well being we also explore in this chapter the perceptions of well-being which guide these processes and what it means for the well-being of the forests themselves.

Section 1: Towards direct democracy through empowered gram sabhas and emergence of their federation the Maha gramsabha

The villages in Korchi taluka being predominantly adivasi, have had their traditional social organisation and governance structures both at the village and supra village levels. The traditional institutions, their names and structure vary from area to area in Gadchiroli. In these sections, we describe the traditional socio-political organization and names specific to Korchi taluka. Formally, decisions related to all government, administrative and political functions were taken at the level of the panchayats. As a formal institution at the level of a cluster of villages, the Panchayat office gets low participation from people in general and women in particular. For most, village level day to day decision making (mainly related to agriculture or socio-cultural activities) happened at informal gatherings of elders at the village level. These gatherings were not formal and usually had

no name. Both the formal panchayats and informal meetings, however, were largely not inclusive of a large section of society (pl see sections below). Panchayats are the smallest unit of the representative electoral democratic institutions; they are often far away, at multi village level, and influenced by party politics. These factors made politically voiceless sections of the society - particularly women and the poor - difficult to access. The traditional institutions, on the other hand, were exclusively dominated by male village elders.

The term *gram sabha* caught the imagination of the villagers post the implementation of the FRA and PESA (Chapter 4, Sections 2 and 3). As explained earlier, under FRA and PESA, instead of the Panchayats, the gram sabhas at the level of a single village or a settlement or a hamlet became the first level of decision making in the governance system.

Gram Sabha, as per the FRA, is the village assembly of all adult members in the village. The 'village' includes all areas referred to as village in any State law related to Panchayats, as well as habitations, settlements, forest villages, traditional villages such as padas, tolas, etc. The Gram Sabha has been empowered to use, access, manage and govern forests within the traditional village boundaries. It is responsible for the conservation and protection of biodiversity and their natural and cultural heritage. Gram Sabha in Scheduled Areas or the PESA Gram Sabha, according to the Maharashtra Village Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Rules, 2014, is the village assembly comprising all persons whose names are included in the electoral rolls for the Panchayat at the village level.⁷⁶ Village is defined as "a habitation or a group of habitations or a hamlet or a group of hamlets comprising a community and managing its affairs in accordance with traditions and customs, and which is declared as a village in the prescribed manner..."

As the sections below describe, this change and discussions and debate around what a gram sabha meant led to village level formal and informal decision-making processes slowly becoming stronger and more inclusive, representing a strong element of direct democracy.

1.1. Village elders, *Jat Panchayats* and *ilaka sabhas* - The traditional but discriminatory institutions

At the village level, the traditional institution includes the village elders and the poojaris (traditional priests for a specific family, for a clan and for the village as a whole). This institution has been responsible for deciding the time for the worship of the village deity, deciding on and presiding over cultural ceremonies, functions and events, conflict resolutions, and time of harvest for various forest and agricultural produce. Traditionally, led exclusively by the male elders, these traditional decision-making bodies also organise village discussions for internal and external issues, threats, and requests faced by the village, and , issues concerning the tribe as a whole. This traditional system is called the *jat panchayats*. The *jat panchayats* are specific to each

⁷⁶ C No. RB/DB/11019(15) (2014) *Compendium of Instructions, Notifications and GRs effective implementation of PESA*. Accessed at: <http://ahmednagar.nic.in/Pesa-Act-1996.pdf> (last checked in March 2021)

community, e.g., Kanwars have their own *jat panchayat* and Gonds have their own. These *jat panchayats* function at the level of their *ilakas* and parallelly and independently of the government administrative units and functionaries or the electoral political system. Since the establishment of the current administrative system by the colonial and post colonial governments, the *jat panchayats* have not had any direct role in the taluka or district administration. They however do have substantial influence in electoral politics and sometimes function as a political and social influence and pressure group. Often, local social and political leadership emerges from the *jat panchayats*. Traditionally, women, had no role in any decision making or conflict resolution related processes of the *jat panchayats*; neither were there opportunities for women leaders to emerge. This is now slowly changing (as described in the sections below) and succumbing to the demands by women's collectives, *jat panchayats* are now open to women in their decision-making meetings. While other Scheduled Castes (SC)⁷⁷ and Other Backward Castes (OBC)⁷⁸ and minority communities follow their own socio-cultural practices, they often adhere to the *jat panchayat's* decisions on larger socio-cultural issues. They could participate in the *jat panchayat* meetings and events but are not in the leadership positions. Inter community marriages are also highly discouraged, sometimes inviting severe penalties by the *jat panchayat*.

Sarpanch sangathana as first step towards official political decentralisation within the Panchayati Raj Institution

While *jat panchayats* were traditional institutions, formal political and administrative issues remained the concern of the official gram panchayats, which were the local representative bodies. Some powerful and influential leaders of the *jat panchayats* were often also elected as sarpanch (head of a panchayat). Although across India panchayats are considered not truly representing decentralized governance and are criticized for being highly politicized and corrupt, in Korchi they functioned differently because of a long history of political mobilization and the presence of local leaders from *jat panchayats*.

The first steps towards meaningful political decentralization in Korchi were taken in 2008-9 by the Panchayat leaders themselves, when some socially conscious sarpanches in the taluka (the taluka has 29 panchayats) decided to form a collective. This was because they realized that many welfare schemes were not reaching the people effectively and individual panchayats were being ineffective hence they decided to form a collective or 'sarpanch sangathana'. The sarpanch sangathana formulated a charter of 90 demands that included reaching basic amenities such as electricity, road access, water, health and education facilities to the villages which had not received them. As a collective, they sat on *dharnas* (sitting indefinitely outside an office), rallies and road blocks, but none of this moved the administration and their demands were not met.

⁷⁷ Castes, races or tribes or parts of or groups within castes, races and tribes which are identified by the President of India and included in the Constitution of India to be corresponding with historically disadvantaged castes, races or tribes. Often these are also referred to as 'dalit' or oppressed communities.

⁷⁸ Described as "socially and educationally backward classes" in the Constitution of India, mainly to facilitate positive incentives for such communities.

Consequently, all sarpanches came together and decided to submit mass resignations since they were not able to serve the villages as promised before their election. This shocked the administration, which began to take the demands of the sarpanch sangathana more seriously. Consequently, monthly meetings of the administration and panchayats were held and the local villages benefited from numerous schemes. In fact, in 2012, the sarpanch sangathana decided to boycott the elections if the mining proposals were not withdrawn. Once again, they were successful and proposals were kept on hold. Their collective power, however, became visible and a threat to the political parties; soon after the elections, political parties began to influence the sarpanches. Bowing under pressure and lured by power some sarpanches began to promise their allegiance to one political party or the other and use the influence of the sangathana for the benefit of the concerned party. The party bosses began to instruct their sarpanches to not associate with the sangathana, leading to the eventual downfall of the collective if its original objective was to be considered, although it continues to exist as a collective till date.

Emergence of empowered gram sabhas and a move towards inclusive direct democracy

In the meantime, under the Forest Rights Act, Community Forest Rights (CFRs) were granted to 87 *gram sabhas* in Korchi taluka in 2009-2010. Many local leaders, particularly those associated with *jat panchayats*, began to initiate processes within their villages to understand what it meant to have received these rights. This was of particular significance to villages such as Salhe, Zendepear, and Bharitola which were also going to be directly and indirectly impacted by the proposed mining leases. AAA had had a long association with some of these villages and consequently they had a longer history of collective village decision making. A group of villagers including these leaders decided to visit Mendha and Marda villages in the district, which had received rights and were now managing their forests. In 2014, the government of Maharashtra drafted rules for PESA, conferring ownership rights over non timber forest produce (NTFP) and also issued government resolutions regarding the collection and sale of *bamboo* and *tendu* by gram sabhas.⁷⁹

The local social leaders and activists used this opportunity to initiate discussions on what was meant by governance and gram sabha. What would an empowered gram sabha under the FRA and PESA mean? And what role could the acts like FRA and PESA play in strengthening the gram sabhas? The local leaders and activists began discussing strategies towards empowering gram sabhas as a first unit of decision making instead of the panchayats and gaining control over the natural resources. A taluka level meeting was called to discuss these issues collectively. Leaders from sarpanch sangathana, jat panchayats, political parties, and all prominent citizens of the taluka was specially called for this meeting. At the meeting, there were intense discussions on rights, powers and duties of a gram sabha. Even as these discussions were going on and people were beginning to understand the collective power of their gram sabhas and their role in

⁷⁹ Can be accessed at http://rajbhavan-maharashtra.gov.in/rajbhavan/Pages/frm_governer_resposibilities.aspx

enhancing direct democracy as the first level of decision making as against representative democracy through sarpanches. Such discussions and realisation began to threaten the existing institutions of decision making, particularly the sarpanches who headed the local panchayats (pl see chapter 4, Section 1 for details on panchayats).⁸⁰

In 2016, the sarpanch sangathana began discussions on management and governance of forests by the panchayats, in particular extraction and sale of non-timber forest produce (NTFP) (please see the section below for the context). As more and more gram sabhas began to strengthen themselves and understand their rights and power of direct democracy, the sarpanch sangathana's effort to try and consolidate their power did not go down very well with the gram sabhas. On the other hand, having organised themselves at the village level, put systems in place, and having gained legal recognition under the law, many active gram sabhas started writing directly to the government offices on their own letterheads, thereby bypassing the panchayats.⁸¹

The word 'gram sabha' and its meaning slowly became part of the local vocabulary, entrenched in the collective imagination and mindset, including of government officials. Local village level activists as well as outside activists like members of AAA, individual activists such as Mahesh Raut,⁸² and others had a crucial role to play in creating this awareness. They helped research the concept of gram sabha and its legal powers, published and distributed fliers across the villages, and put up posters at various public places on the legal powers of the gram sabhas. By the end of 2016, the traditional *Ilaka sabhas*⁸³ began to emerge as gram sabha collectives. Encouraged by the above mentioned actors, the *Ilaka Sabhas* began to include within their programmes and ceremonies, political discourses and conversations, e.g., on gram sabha empowerment, direct democracy, self-determinations, FRA, PESA, mining and its impacts, growth and development, colonization and imperialism, among others. Efforts were made towards re-visiting the meaning of the word 'adivasi', adivasi cultures and histories. 2015 onwards, World Indigenous Day on the 9th of August began to be celebrated at a larger scale. Special efforts were made during the celebration and other events to revive and re-tell the stories of tribal revolutionary heroes (usually invisible in mainstream historical narratives) like Birsa Munda and Baburao Shedmake⁸⁴ and to understand adivasi co-option by dominant religions, mainly Hinduism in this region.

⁸⁰ The executive committee or a Panchayat is elected from a cluster of villages.

The decisions are taken at the level of the cluster gram sabhas where only a handful of people from constituent gram sabhas are able to attend and invariably few women can attend. Often decisions are therefore taken by 5-7 member executive committee or the Panchayat itself. Gram sabhas as envisioned under the FRA and PESA, however, are village assemblies of each village, hamlet or settlement, which can be held at regular intervals within the village and at times most conveniently for the villages, and provide better opportunities for all, including women and youth, to participate.

⁸¹ These were activities which were earlier performed by the panchayats

⁸² Independent activist and a core member of this study, working on mobilising local communities towards *gram sabha* strengthening, facilitating local processes towards understanding FRA and PESA, facilitating people to people exchange and learning towards collection and sale of non-timber forest produce and supporting local resistance against mining proposals. At the time of writing this report, Mahesh was in prison arrested under Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, labelled as being a Maoist supporter, as part of state's agenda of harassment of vocal anti-mining activists.

⁸³ These were meetings at the level of an *ilaka*, represented by the poojaris of all villages in the *ilaka*.

⁸⁴ Tribal revolutionary leaders who fought against the oppressive policies of the colonial British government and to secure self-determination for their people and other adivasis. Shedmake was arrested by the British in 1890 and died within a year in the jail, under suspicious circumstances, at the young age of 25.

Transforming conflicts emerging from caste and class issues

Even as the processes towards gram sabha strengthening were gaining momentum, conversations around empowerment of gram sabhas and empowerment of Scheduled Tribes under PESA and FRA began to brew discontent among the minority non-tribal population in the taluka, particularly the SC and the OBCs. *Ilaka sabhas*, predominantly tribal institutions that had restricted themselves to socio-cultural issues, were now emerging as the most important political pressure group at the taluka level. The non-advasis began to see this as well as laws like PESA and FRA as a threat to their existence, rights and interests. Although these laws themselves were not discriminatory to non-advasis, a number of factors contributed to this conflict, including the government of Maharashtra's announcement regarding certain government jobs to be reserved for advasis in scheduled V areas in 2014. More importantly, 2014 being the state assembly elections, this issue was used by the then opposition parties to create social divisions within a society which was emerging as a strong cohesive collective. The other established social and political powers also felt threatened by this collective force and hence added to the discontent. Some political parties began spreading pamphlets against PESA, FRA and grams sabhas, brewing a taluka level conflict between advasi and non-advasi communities.

The above situation was delicate, could lead to a serious conflict and required deep socio-political understanding and careful handling. The local activists therefore decided to not go ahead with collective NTFP harvesting and trade in 2016 as it would have escalated the conflict. In an effort to address this issue, a meeting of all three *Ilakas* was called. People from different castes and communities and different ideologies and backgrounds were invited, including members of panchayat sangathana, mahila parisar sangh (see below for details) and political organisations. After much discussion and clarifications on confusions and misconceptions, all participants agreed that empowerment of gram sabhas was needed for real transformation. However, gram sabhas must be inclusive of caste, class and gender. It was also recognized that gram sabhas, in fact, did represent all and were not restricted to a specific community. Also, it was much more possible for most, including women, to attend gram sabha meetings than to attend panchayat meetings. Having agreed upon the importance of empowering gram sabhas, it was also discussed that all gram sabhas were not equally empowered and needed support and guidance. Also, if the gram sabhas were to exercise their rights to harvest and market NTFP, they would face many issues, some of which would be beyond the scope of individual gram sabhas and hence a supra gram sabha level support group was needed. None of the existing taluka level institutions however were found to be adequate to perform this role. *Ilaka Sabhas* were not seen as truly inclusive of all sections of the society as they were traditional tribal institutions, and had no non-tribal or women in their decision-making positions. Similarly, the sarpanch sangathana was seen to be coming from the representative electoral democracy where power lay in the hands of a few who often had political party affiliations.

Emergence of the gram sabha federation or the Maha Gram Sabha (MGS)

It was then decided to constitute a new institution which would be inclusive of all. This led to the idea of the Maha Gram Sabha (MGS) or a federation of gram sabhas, which would include representatives of all 87 villages in the two *Ilakas* where forest rights under the FRA had been recognised. Unlike the *Ilaka sabha*, MGS would include representatives from all castes, communities and gender.

Within a short span of time, by 2017, MGS had emerged as a political, economic, social and cultural space that aimed to obtain the recognition of local people's normative regulations and direct democracy for governance. In the initial months, the leadership was taken by those who played a key role in its creation; soon, discussions on structure and functioning began and it was decided that the MGS would meet on the 1st of every month and at a specific place allocated for the meeting.

All gram sabhas wanting to join the MGS would pass a resolution to this effect after a detailed discussion within the village; they would select two women and two men to represent them in the MGS and agree to pay a membership fee of ₹ 5,000 per annum towards MGS functioning from their earning from the sale of the NTFP. All the designated representatives would be obliged to report back to their gram sabhas the proceedings of the MGS. They would also take to the MGS issues and concerns of their gram sabha. Letters to this effect were drafted in the local language (Gond and Marathi) and sent to all gram sabhas of the taluka. Existing members shared the responsibility of ensuring that letters reached all villages. These letters were to help facilitate detailed discussions on this issue within the individual gram sabhas in the presence of all villagers (women and men).

Structure of the MGS as of 2019⁸⁵

The general body of the MGS is represented by four members of each constituent gram sabha – two women and two men. The GB selects a 15-member executive committee, including six office bearers for day-to-day functioning. The executive committee is selected for two years. The executive committee office bearers as selected in 2019 included, Jhaduram Halami (President), Rajaram Naitam (Vice President), Narendra Salame (Secretary), Kumaribai Jamkatan (Additional Secretary), Kalpana Naitam (Treasurer), Sheetal Naitam (Additional Treasurer). The MGS also includes senior advisors – those who have been involved with the process from the beginning, Siyaram Halami, Ijamsai Katenge, Nandkishore Varagade, and Hirabhau Raut. The Treasurer of the MGS is a woman.

The executive committee changes every two year on the first day of the solar calendar (1st of January). Transparent and open functioning was ensured at the outset by ensuring that monthly

⁸⁵ Please see Annexure 4 for detailed structure, procedures, functions, rules and regulations of the MGS

meetings are held regularly on a designated day and place, where issues, concerns and updates would be shared by the gram sabha representatives. In these meetings all proposals of the MGS are presented to the gram sabha representatives; various new policy prescriptions and their implications are discussed; information about developments in the district which may have a bearing on the people and forests is shared; updates on the implementation of FRA & PESA are shared; conflicts emerging within or among the gram sabhas are discussed and strategy to address them formulated; most importantly, details of the expenses incurred and proposals for expenses for the coming months are placed in front of all and discussed in detail.

MGS has hired an office space from Mahila Parisar Sangh (see section 2 below) in Korchi, which houses documents related to FRA and PESA. Village-wise records are also maintained here for the benefit of the gram sabhas. It also has computers and photocopying facilities for the gram sabha members. An office assistant has been appointed to provide administrative help to the MGS and/or gram sabha members as and when needed. MGS office has become a meeting space for all gram sabhas when they come to Korchi.

In the initial months, both the structure and functioning of the MGS, its rules and regulations remained informal, oral and open to experimentation and change. On January 1st 2019, based on the experience of the past three years, a written set of rules, regulations, structure and functioning were proposed by the MGS to all its constituent gram sabhas for discussion and acceptance, which was subsequently adopted by the MGS. By 2019 it was also felt that fewer gram sabha members were attending the monthly meetings and despite women from each gram sabha being members of the MGS, few were attending the meetings. To address this issue the Mahila Parisar Sangh called for a joint meeting of its own members and that of the MGS in January 2019, as the women leaders felt that a lack of awareness about the MGS was keeping women away from the meetings. In order to facilitate greater participation of all member gram sabhas, particularly those which are far from Korchi and may find difficult to attend monthly meetings, MGS decided to hold monthly meetings on rotation in different village clusters. Additionally, it has also been decided to hold regular meetings at the cluster level where members other than the MGS members could participate to facilitate local and more frequent discussions. The 90 gram sabha members of MGS have divided themselves into seven clusters: 1) Bodesera Padyal Job 2) Raopat Gangaram Ghat 3) Peko Pen Saoli 4) Jabragat 5) Kuwarpat Kohka 6) Shamshergat Kohka 7) Dantashero Jambadi.

Section 2: Role of women

2.1. Emergence of women's collective in Gadchiroli

Although current adivasi societies have greater freedom for women in some ways than non adivasi societies, they remain predominantly patriarchal. This leads to many discriminatory practices and injustices against women common to other patriarchal societies, including exclusion

from community decision-making and lack of control or rights over land and resources. Like in other societies, their role continues to be seen mainly for reproduction and looking after the home, kitchen and children.

Box7: Legend of Jango: Why a Gond woman is never widowed?

Pari Kubar Lingo's sister Raitad was a young married woman. Her husband died suddenly from snake bite. The widowed Raitad was asked to follow the community custom and take on the title of 'Kankali', meaning inauspicious, and face ostracism. Raitad, unwilling to be thus ostracised, declared that she was not responsible for her husband's death. She called a meeting of the elders and demanded that either they change the custom of branding widowed women as inauspicious, or to ask Gond men to acquire immortality so that women are not widowed. Seeing the justice of her arguments, the elders formed new rules, allowing widowed women to remarry. Women were allowed to marry both within their deceased husband's clan, and outside it. However, if a woman married outside the clan, the right to perform her last rites was reserved for the clan of her first marriage, of which she was deemed a permanent member. In case a widowed woman was not interested in marrying again, she was allowed to stay on in the husband's family as a member. In such a case, she had the option of declaring a symbolic marriage with a small male child – mostly a grandchild – of the husband's family, thus earning the right to continue living with the family and being supported by it. Either way, a widowed woman was not to be branded Kankali or made to undergo restrictions connected with widowhood. She was allowed to lead a normal life. Due to these new rules, it is said that a Gond woman is never widowed. Raitad, who had rebelled against the customs of the community, came to be called Jango (rebel) after this change in tradition.

Source: Reproduced verbatim from Down to Earth, Saturday 1st October 2014, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/legend-of-kachchargadh> (as accessed on 20.01.2021)

While Raitad's story represents earlier rebellions against discrimination against women, the more recent efforts towards addressing women's issues started in this area as early as in 1975 under a government scheme called Integrated Child Development Scheme. Women's groups or Mahila Mandals (MM's) were constituted in all villages and raised the issue of alcoholism among men that plagued their society and led to oppression of women and domestic violence. In 1986, the women's anti-alcohol Movement became a district level campaign and eventually led to Gadchiroli being declared a dry district (ban on sale of alcohol). By 1990s, the importance of economic empowerment of women was gaining momentum in the country, leading to formation of women Self-Help Groups (SHG) or *bachat gats*. AAA worked closely with the government's programme and was successful in creating 1500 SHGs across Gadchiroli. The programme also provided for creating federations of these SHGs called the Samuhik Mahila Bachat Gat Parisar Sangh (women's SHG area collective) or Parisar Sangh here on. These SHGs and the Parisar Sangh worked towards legal empowerment of women, monitoring the implementation of laws and schemes that would

empower women, monitoring the condition of girls in *ashram shalas* (local residential schools for tribal children), among other socio-cultural issues that women faced.

“When we look at the adivasi society as a whole, their struggle is with the system, the state and its policies that are oppressive and exclusionary. But when we look at the women within the adivasi societies their struggle is both with the external system, state and its policies but also their own society and its discriminatory customs and practices.”

Shubhada Deshmukh

Over a period of time, the SHGs and Parisar Sangh became a support group for women facing injustice, oppression, violence or any other issue within the family or in the larger society. These collectives were coordinated by the adivasi women, supported by AAA and the platform was used to voice the day to day struggles of adivasi women. Women began to feel a sense of belonging and ownership towards their SHGs and the Parisar Sangh. For the first time, they also had economic independence because of the SHG bank accounts which were in their name.

“It was very important for the women to have the money in their own bank accounts in their own name. They felt that there was nothing that they owned, not even the children that they gave birth to, who were called by their father’s name, not the property, not the forests but this small amount in their account was in their name! So were the SHG and the Parisar Sangh, they felt these were their own forums where their voices were heard. That meant a lot to the women.”

Kumaribai Jamkatan

In the 1990s, the Parisar Sangh meetings identified lack of awareness and information among the important reasons for oppression of women. Parisar Sangh began to organize discussion forums for women – *Swayam Siksha Prayog* (women self-education experiment). In one such discussion in 1991, one adivasi woman raised the concern that women’s SHGs need to go beyond women specific issues to work towards forest protection. She said adivasi well-being, particularly the well-being of women, was dependent on the well-being of the forests. This led to the Parisar Sangh’s more central involvement in the issues related to forests. So much so that AAA, which had not worked so closely on forests, had to shift their focus to forest management and started working closely with the forest department on Joint Forest Management⁸⁶ Scheme in this region.

2.2. Women and resistance against mining

As mentioned in Chapter 5, section 2, people from Zendepar village accidentally discovered that their forests were to be mined. Women from Zendepar brought the issue of mining through their SHGs to the Parisar Sangh meetings. Mining was proposed in five villages. A large stretch of forests

⁸⁶ Joint Forest Management (JFM) is a partnership in forest management among state forest departments and local communities. The policies and guidelines of the JFM were enunciated in the Indian National Forest Policy of 1988 and JFM guidelines of 1990.

would be impacted by mining. There were detailed discussions on this in the meeting. Women discussed what mining would mean. What impact it would have on them, their families and lands? What would be the benefits and losses? After much discussion, they were unanimous in their opposition to mining in the forests. They also discussed that although the proposal was for only five villages, this was an issue for all and everyone must collectively oppose.

Soon, resistance movements began emerging from these villages and village resolutions were passed to reject mining proposals. This marks the starting point of mining resistance in the Korchi taluka, with women at the forefront of this resistance. The Parisar Sangh has since had numerous discussions around the impact of mining on the lives of women, their families and forests, and continued to resist mining.

2.3. Women's economic empowerment and role in decision-making

Traditionally, the only forum for justice for a woman facing harassment within the family or society at large has been the *jat panchayat* (traditional institution), where male elders deliberate and pronounce judgment. "In one of our meetings on women's empowerment, a woman - who had not found justice in *jat panchayat* - asked us what was the point of empowerment trainings when women had no role in any decision making!" says Kumari tai, who is currently in charge of mentoring, facilitating and monitoring 40 Women's Self Help Groups (SHG) in Korchi as part of AAA, and in her personal capacity she is the Secretary and finance advisor/trainee of the MGS. This was followed by many discussions in the Parisar Sangh on this issue and a demand was raised for inclusion of women in the *jat panchayats*. Their demand was accepted and women now participate in the *jat panchayat* meetings. Inclusion of women has led to changes in some cultural practices among both the Gonds and the Kanwar communities. Parisar Sangh also pushed for inclusion of women in all local decision-making bodies, traditional or new.

Our journey has not been easy and has been often strongly resisted by men, but our consistent efforts are gradually bringing about a social realization that women's issues are the community's issues.

Kumaribai Jamkatan

2.4. Towards inclusion in jaat panchayat

Among the most significant achievements of the Parisar Sangh led by Kumari Bai Jamkatan has been to influence the *jaat panchayat* of the Kanwar tribe to include women in their body. This seemingly small issue was in fact of great significance as it undid generations of discrimination against women in traditional decision-making bodies. It also had a huge influence in paving the way for women's participation in all local processes. Their systematic work towards achieving this began with the 73rd Constitutional amendment in 1996, which gave birth to the rural Panchayati Raj System and its extension to Scheduled Areas as PESA (see Chapter 4, Section 2). This

amendment empowered the gram sabhas in many ways. Simultaneously, it also provided women with 33% reservation in the Panchayats and to gain representation in all relevant sectors and local formal and informal institutions.

A meeting was organised at Nashik in the year 2000 to discuss the PESA and its relevance for women. I got an opportunity to attend this meeting because of my involvement with AAA. In this meeting, tribal and non-tribal women discussed PESA and the role of women in decision-making. Other important issues for women that were discussed included women's right to property, NTFP, minor minerals, women's rights in local governance bodies, education and health rights, the public resources of the village, rural markets, etc. AAA and Parisar Sangh chose two specific issues from these for more detailed study, understanding and action, i.e., property rights for women and women's participation in jaat panchayats in Korchi taluka. We learnt and move and our demands were gradually accepted by the elders.

Kumari Bai Jamkaatan

The next step in this process was to ensure women's entitlements over family assets, including right over the house in which she was living, inclusion of her name on agricultural land titles and recognition of women's rights over the village common property resources. Due to a multitude of social and legal barriers, this process could not be taken to its logical conclusion. However, much success was achieved in ensuring women's participation in *jaat panchayats*. At the cluster level, which constitutes 9 villages, 10 women per village have been included as members, which would mean that the cluster level *jaat panchayats* now have 90 women members each. At the level of the entire community, which constitutes of 60 villages, 2 women members have been included in the body. The opinions of the women representatives are being treated with respect by other members of the *jaat panchayat*.

Women's inclusion in the *jaat panchayat* has led to a number of significant community decisions. For example, tribal weddings lasted for four to five days and involved huge expenses. A decision was taken to reduce the number of days, expense and do away with dowry. This has been a relief for a number of families with limited income. One of the traditional community systems for both Gond and Kanwar tribes is that of *chikat*, a system in which people help each other with gifts during various social events, including marriages. The *jaat panchayats* of both the communities decided to take this traditional system one step ahead and organize collective marriages, if families agreed. This would mean that the entire community would come together once in a year to contribute towards organizing weddings for any couple who wished to be married during this community event. Each couple would also be given a small amount towards starting a new life.

In 2007, Kumari bai was felicitated by the Kanwar *jaat panchayat*. She raised a number of issues pertinent to women, such as violence against women, reasons for decreasing sex ratio and the falling levels of women in education. Since then the situation has changed and women are now invited to speak at the forum as chief guests and are given a chance to put forward their views. Women's involvement also led to the decision that *Jaat Panchayat* should undertake annual social audits to ensure that justice was reaching all members of the community. Over a period of time,

the *jaat panchayat* has taken a number of decisions towards women's empowerment and currently efforts are on to implement them. These include:

- Ensuring that the names of the husband and wife appear on the household property documents
- To ensure effective implementation of the 'Forest Rights Act' 2006, through women's involvement and leadership
- To ensure that all official documents mention the mother's name prominently in front her child's name
- To ensure that tribal communities exercise their legal rights under PESA and FRA to collect and market the NTFP and benefits are shared equally between women and men.

As the tribal community is now continuously engaged in studying, understanding and talking about enabling legal provisions (including in women's Self-Help Groups), according to Kumari Bai, the changes are now visible, particularly concerning women's property rights, increase in enrolment of girls for education and an overall positive attitudinal shift towards the need for education.

2.5. Women in gram sabhas and maha gramsabha

By 2015, as the discussions on gram sabhas as units of governance were gaining ground, the issues of woman's inclusion and women's rights under FRA and PESA were still not being discussed in these forums. Some leaders began participating in the meetings and in one of the first meetings of the MGS, they insisted on equal women's representation of men and women from each gram sabha. This was accepted and led to the decision of 50% membership of the MGS and its executive body to be women.

"I used to work with women SHG's and so my initial contact was only with women. But, now I am aprt of a process where the entire planning as well as its execution is done together by men and women, not separately. If all hands come together against a common cause and raise their voice collectively, then the impact of that effort is immense."

Kumaribai Jamkaatan

Parisar Sangh has been crucial in bringing up women leaders and as a platform to narrate their struggles and opinions. The Parisar Sangh's efforts are directed towards not just strengthening women leadership but also articulating the world-view of adivasi women for their future. This came out strongly in the Parisar Sangh's meeting organised on 29th January 2018. In a four-hour long meeting, attended by over 100 women and over 100 men from 10 gram sabhas, there were discussions on impacts of mining on cultural identity of adivasis, women and their families. There were crucial exchanges between men and women about internal injustices and fear that do not

allow women to speak up in public. “If we are at the forefront of resisting mining in our villages then why not in decision-making?” asked Kumari tai. Many other women also spoke about economic benefits from the sale of forest produce that should be shared equally with women and the funds transferred to their bank accounts to ensure economic empowerment. Why are women not consulted in the process of tendu-patta sale? Why was the royalty amount transferred only to the male head’s account? They also discussed how money coming to men and women was used differently. Women often use their money for the benefit of the entire family, while money coming to men is spent in drinking and buying motorized vehicles, among others. During the meeting, women said that doing away with the traditional inequalities is as crucial as fighting against inequalities created by top down bureaucracies and corporations.

Parisar Sangh efforts have now ensured that Korchi taluka is one of the few talukas with a focus on the rights of women under FRA and PESA. FRA provides for joint land title for a wife and husband. Going a step beyond, a decision was taken that women would get the daily wage labour as well as the royalty amount being distributed by the gram sabhas directly in their own bank accounts. In fact, one of the villages, Sahle, had decided that the entire family income from the sale of tendu-patta would go to the account of the woman head of the family, a revolutionary decision considering the context.

Under PESA, special efforts have also been made to increase the participation of women in village and other meetings, including by appointing volunteers to work towards this.

I have been appointed as volunteer by the panchayat to work towards strengthening gram sabhas, particularly to ensure greater participation of women in all gram sabha discussions and activities. I am also a member of the SHG and Parisar Sangh and we have used this opportunity to demand for inclusion of women in all local institutions, particularly in the positions of office bearers and not just as members.

Amita Madavi

The various activities for which the gram sabhas use the funds that they have collected from NTFP sale include supporting women to travel for training programmes for them outside the village.

Siyaram Halami

2.6. Impacting other spheres of life to achieve well-being

Members of the Parisar Sangh regularly visit the health department’s Public Health Centre to monitor whether health facilities are effectively being extended to women and children. They also regularly monitor the government ashram shala (government residential schools for tribal children), particularly girls’ dorms to ensure that the welfare facilities and services are being provided to them and also to assess their needs. They are particularly watchful of the behaviour of government employees towards young girls and women to address issues of sexual harassment. While minor issues are addressed through discussions within the SHG members and the concerned parties the bigger issues and questions including the ones related to the government

employees are taken to the district administration and elected representatives.

Box 8: Women SHG's struggle for a PDS shop in their village

In a unique example one of the villages in Korchi taluka of Gadchiroli district, Pandarigota in 2016 started its own ration shop as part of the Public Distribution System (PDS). The government PDS was located at Korchi town. Villages could be 50 to 80 kms way from Korchi and people often walk through the shortcuts in the forest. Women from Pandarigota also often had to walk long distances for PDS ration, spend their entire day without being of sure of getting the needed grains in case it got over. Since women were the most impacted in the process, the women's SHG members came together to demand for a ration shop in their village. When the demand was not met they sought help from AAA and setup a PDS shop in the village and simultaneously filled applications to get the necessary licenses. They also received training on running a ration shop from AAA. It was only after a long struggle though that they finally received the licence and first shop was officially setup in Pandarigota run by Sant Krupa Mahila Bachatghat (SHG).

Source:<http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/maharashtra-village-women-take-charge-of-ration-shops-ensure-fair-prices-food-for-all/#.XoHctXLhXIU>

Section 3: Conflicts, issues, hurdles and opportunities for gram sabhas and MGS in Korchi

3.1. Using internal conflicts as an opportunity

Converting a potentially damaging conflict situation to an opportunity for creating dialogue towards a more open and inclusive institutional arrangement indicates the maturity, adaptability and wisdom in the society and processes. This is wisdom was reflected in the manner the community leaders in Korchi addressed the conflict that arose between different ethnic groups (adivasis and non-adivasis) soon after the implementation of PESA and FRA began in the taluka. In this delicate situation, while it was critical to take into account the concerns of the minority ethnic groups, equally important was to take into account the fears of the traditional leaders of falling into insignificance. Complex issues needed to be addressed as the minority groups were economically and politically more powerful in some situations than the majority adivasis. Ensuring equity yet a balance in power and privileges was very important to prevent the social harmony from getting derailed. The wisdom lay in doing away with the limitations of both the traditional and non-traditional existing institutions, without creating fears and ill will. In the creation of the MGS, it was ensured that adivasi leaders get the traditional respect and are

included in various capacities but without being the only voice of or for the community.⁸⁷ Similarly, it was important to keep the sarpanch sangathana members involved, as their skills and resourcefulness would be useful for the process while ensuring that they do not bring in the party politics into the equation. This was a delicate balance between challenging traditional or conventional hierarchies and power relations within and between the communities, while minimizing isolation, exclusion and antagonism of those who have been in power. The MSG has been successful to a certain extent in achieving this balance thus far, with the realization that this is a continuous process and challenges will need to be addressed as they arise.

3.2. Opportunities and constraints in women's participation

Similarly, inclusion of women and their concerns has been a unique feature of this process, which has largely been possible because of a fairly long history of women's mobilisation in Gadchiroli in general and in Korchi in particular. In view of Kumaribai's long years at mobilizing and training SHG members and in accounting procedures, when the need arose for 90 villages to maintain their account books, the MGS asked her to train gram sabha members to keep account books. These gram sabhas are currently handling millions of rupees and maintaining the most transparent accounts (as also acknowledged by the local government agencies). Being a woman from this area and training gram sabha members in accounting is seen as a great achievement, making Kumari bai an inspiration for the local women. In fact, because of her long experience, Kumari bai has also been appointed as advisor and finance consultant for the MGS. This is in addition to other SHG members being in executive positions of the MGS.

However, establishing external systems is not always the same as being able to achieve results. Despite the Mahila Parisar Sangh's (MPS) efforts, it has been a constant struggle at every stage to ensure that women find space in actual processes as well as in benefit sharing. There are few gram sabhas, if at all, who have women secretaries and presidents. The MPS therefore continues its efforts.

3.3. Opportunities and constraints in participation of youth

The emergence of the MGS, local control over means of production and the resultant opportunities for employment and livelihoods have indeed inspired the local youth. Many of them actively engage in the social, cultural, economic and political (through their gram sabhas) activities in the taluka as a consequence. Many young people are involved in the harvest of the forest produce, forest management and conservation, resistance against mining, administrative activities of the gram sabhas, which require accounts keeping, record maintenance, networking and alliance

⁸⁷ At the same time the *jat panchayats* also continue to exist parallelly. They have not remained untouched by the social debates and discussions. Also, many of the critical actors involved in the process are also members of the *jat panchayats* and have carried the discussions with them. *Jat panchayats* have therefore made significant changes in the oppressive socio-cultural practices, including the excessive expense in cash and kind the families had to bear during marriage and other ceremonies.

building, among others. Distress out migration of the youth which the taluka faced has been controlled to a large extent as opportunities of employment are locally available. However, simultaneously, there are also young people who are caught in a tussle between these unfolding local processes – the adivasi way of being (which propagates contentment) on the one hand and the lure of the market, the glamour of the dominant outside society’s consumptive model of development, and the pull of right-wing religious elements on the other hand. This is observed particularly among those who have been through higher education outside the villages. These young people are often seen in the fringes of village and MGS meetings and events, closely observing and sometimes creating conflicts. In our study, we were not able to get the perspective of this section of youth in detail.

3.4. Conflicts within gram sabhas and with MGS

Neither the process leading up to the formation of MGS nor subsequent processes have been free of internal conflicts. In fact, as explained above, MGS itself emerged out of a near social unrest and a situation of conflict between the adivasi communities and non-advasi minorities in the villages and at the taluka level. Conflicts have played and continue to play an important role in learning and evolution of processes in Korchi. Conflicts have been faced at various levels and among various actors. At the village level, as the gram sabhas have strengthened both in political and economic power, there have faced struggles among members in some cases for being office bearers. There have been a few cases of corruption and when the issues could not be resolved at the level of the gram sabha, they were brought to the MGS. MGS members and other elders of the community mediated in the process. There are also gram sabhas which have chosen not to be the member of the MGS and go individually with the auctioning process.

The gram sabha secretary and president have been working voluntarily till 2018. However, the amount of time, effort and resources required for fulfilling these responsibilities made it difficult for them to continue voluntary work. The issue was discussed in the MGS and it was proposed towards the end of 2018 that the posts of president and secretary with a gram sabha and for the MGS should be paid an honorarium as the level of responsibilities and time required leave them with no scope to engage in livelihood activities. While some gram sabhas have agreed to this proposal, many others are in disagreement.

Some gram sabhas, although members of the MGS, are unwilling to contribute ₹ 5,000 annually for the MGS, and some have also decided not to keep any percentage from the sale of the forest produce for their own functioning or village development but to distribute the entire amount to the collectors (please see section below on economic benefits). As of now, there has been sufficient contribution for the MGS to maintain an office, office staff, and conduct meetings, but over a period of time, it could escalate to a situation where other gram sabhas may also not want to contribute.

3.5. Engaging with party politics and its implications

Among various attempts to move towards greater empowerment and autonomy for the gram sabhas and greater political and administrative accountability for the state, in 2017 the MGS decided to engage with electoral democratic process. Gram sabha representatives felt that their elected representatives had failed them in their struggles and were instead representing the corporate-politician interests in the political economy of the region. Therefore, the local gram sabhas decided to participate in Panchayat Samiti (taluka level) and Zilla Parishad (district level) elections in early 2017. They felt this would help them gain political control over the three tiers of the Panchayati Raj System. The gram sabhas fielded independent candidates against all political parties. These representatives stood for elections under an oath to follow certain ethical principles including an oath to represent only the gram sabhas' interests and not that of any political party or outfit; to respect people's mandate against mining in their forests; to secure rights of local people over their forests and natural resources; to protect the environment and the ecosystem; to facilitate village-based conservation and development planning; to work against all forms of communal and divisive politics, among others. Although in some parts of Gadchiroli the gram sabha candidates won elections, in Korchi they did not.

We couldn't win the elections, although on all seats our candidates took 2nd or 3rd positions. We lost because we can't play the kind of dirty games political parties play. They play with money, and also with minds of people, they play divisive games...dividing people on caste and tribal lines. Our effort is to unite people and empower them. Their effort is to create fear and divide, which helps them keep their power. Our people are simple and get influenced, their fears take over.

Siyaram Halami

This was a learning experience for the MGS members. The results of the election and events during the time were discussed in great detail in the subsequent MGS meetings. After much analysis, members felt that they should not participate in the current form of electoral process as they had neither the financial power nor the wherewithal to deal with the dirty strategies adopted during elections. Elections and events leading up to the elections were also exceedingly divisive and took a heavy toll on the unity of the *sangathan* (collective) and hence its effectiveness and power. They felt that it would be better to work as a pressure group from outside rather than try to get into the system.

Some of the leaders who are currently involved with the MGS process have also been in positions of power as panchayat members in the past and recollect the negative experiences they faced because of party politics when the entire collective was destroyed by party politics.

An assessment of the historical events in the district also showed that the local leaders who emerged from the region and successfully got into electoral politics through political parties were in the end co-opted by party politics and were not able to achieve the objectives for which they

engaged with this system. MGS members continue to face pressure from political parties in various forms as its increasing power continues to be a long-term threat.

3.6. Efforts at weakening the Collective from formal and informal centres of power

MGS continues to face ideological opposition from parallel taluka level political or non-political organisations. Most government welfare and development schemes continue to be handled through Panchayats and empowerment of gram sabhas has by no means rendered panchayats irrelevant. However, gram sabha empowerment has meant weakening of powers for panchayats to a certain extent, particularly on the matters related to sale of forest produce, diversion of forest lands, and expenditure of funding coming directly to the gram sabhas under PESA. There are also demands that most government development schemes should be handled directly by the gram sabhas instead of the Panchayats.

MGS also faces opposition from some of the other federations in the district where functioning is not very transparent and accountable. These are often facilitated by politically and socially powerful leaders who would like to keep the control of power in the hands of a few. Genuine processes towards empowerment of gram sabhas threaten these informal centres of power as much as state and political systems. These groups often fuel the misconceptions and misinformation about MGS being corrupt and taking money from the gram sabhas for their own benefit. The attempt often is to ensure that gram sabhas do not join the MGS. Considering the remoteness of some villages, it is difficult for the gram sabhas to verify the facts. In the fringe villages therefore, many misconceptions and misinformation about the MGSs was observed. MGS members have sometimes tried to hold meetings to dispel these opinions but given the limitation of financial and human resources and time, it has not been very frequent.

The MGS also faces opposition from the religious right wing (Hindu in this case) and cultural right wing tribal outfits using identity politics for mainstream benefits. Both these groups have made deeper inroads in the villages and have been inciting people to take extreme positions.

There are also groups (often aligning with the right wing and vested interest groups mentioned above) who are strong supporters of mining in the area. Some of these are supported by the mining companies and often create hurdles for the MGS and gram sabhas which are opposing mining in various ways.

3.7. Maha Gramsabha at the district level

Constraints and hurdles mentioned above are by no means unusual or unique to Korchi. Whenever there is an effort to change status quo and impact existing power dynamics, resistance at all levels is but expected. Neither are these hurdles time bound; they are an integral part of any process of transformation and hence mechanism to deal with any continuing or emerging hurdles

needs to be part of the process itself. This understanding seems to be intrinsic to the transformative processes in Korchi. However, the MGS members feel that if a collective like the MGS remains restricted to the taluka, its impact would be limited and over a period of time it may weaken under the sustained pressure from the established powers. To be more effective and to sustain in the long run, therefore, it is important that similar collectives emerge in other areas too.

Gram sabha collective is not unique to Korchi; in fact, such collectivization began in other talukas of the district simultaneously. For example, there is one in Dhanora, there is one in Bhamragad, there is one emerging currently in Kurkheda. They are all unique in their functioning and they call themselves by different names but the effort is the same.

Jhaduram Halami

In many talukas, the collectivization of gram sabha has been an organic process in response to the empowering provisions of PESA and FRA and experiences associated with harvest and sale of NTFP. While in some talukas NGOs played a role in bringing gram sabhas together, in others they self-organised through local leadership and by learning from collectives in other talukas. Different taluka level collectives, however, are yet to come together at the level of the district. In 2018, about 70 gram sabhas in different parts of the district, which are associated with different NGOs, have received funding from the state Tribal Development Department to formulate management plans for their gram sabhas. This has been facilitated by a group of NGOs. The effort is currently on to organize these 70 villages at the district level as a district level gram sabha collective. This is to ensure that the funding received from the government is used effectively. The MGS members in Korchi, however, expressed dissatisfaction with this process. They believe that a district level collective should be an organic and self-organised process and not facilitated by NGOs; it needs to be a collective of all gram sabhas and not just the gram sabhas that have received government funding and also that it cannot exist for the limited purposes of spending funds. It has to be more representative of their membership and issues.

It is necessary that a district level collective of the gram sabhas comes up, we definitely need a representation at the district level. Unless there is a strong collective and representation from village to taluka to the district level, our struggle and efforts will remain limited. In fact, we need to start thinking about how some of our karyakartas (volunteers) can find spaces at the state level also to represent our views and issues.

Siyaram Halami

3.8. MSG as a center of learning and inspiration for others

Korchi taluka has emerged as a unique center of learning and seeking inspiration since 2018. A number of research organisations, students and scholars are collaborating with MGS or AAA to study various dimensions of this process, including the democratic structure of the MGS, extent and nature of economic benefits that the gram sabhas are receiving, women's participation in democratic processes, ecological implications of the forests being governed and managed by the

gram sabhas, among others.

In addition to exciting the imagination of the researchers, Korchi has also become a destination for a number of villages, NGOs and government officials who visit Korchi to learn from their experience of implementation of FRA and PESA, marketing NTFP, women's participation and other dimensions of MGS's work. Members of the MGS are now also being invited to other regions of the state and to other states in the country for workshops, meetings and training programmes on gram sabha empowerment and implementation of FRA and PESA among others.

Section 4: Forest Based Local, Decentralised, and Equitable Economy

The FRA and PESA Rules conferred ownership of NTFP on the concerned gram sabhas. This included the right to collect and sell NTFP, which thus far had been the domain of the state forest department. Among a large number of NTFP on which local subsistence and livelihoods depend, two most important for cash economy are leaves of tendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*) which are used for making beedi (local cigarette) and bamboo. Under the Maharashtra Forest Produce (Regulation of Trade) Act 1969, the government had complete monopoly over the trade of tendu leaves and bamboo. Working as labour under the government processes to extract these resources from the forests has been among major sources of cash income for the local people since colonial times. However, till 2014, the earning of individual families from these NTFPs was restricted to the daily wage and in case of tendu patta an additional bonus amount which was subsequently received.

2017 onwards the 87 gram sabhas (whose CFR rights under the FRA had been recognized), supported by the MGS, took charge of collection, sale and resultant benefit sharing system. A transparent, democratic and decentralized system for village governance as well as forest based economy evolved through various open discussions of the MGS. These discussions were taken back to their respective villages by the delegates who attended these discussions on behalf of their villages. As this system was evolving a special focus was given to the disadvantaged groups such as women, disabled and minority castes. The MGS has framed NTFP harvesting rules, regulations and benefit sharing mechanism and also has advisory to the gram sabhas on how the collective funds of the gram sabha could be used for village development activities (see Box 11 for details).

The MGS has also devised a meticulous system of data collection, maintenance, and sharing of information within the gram sabhas as well as with the appropriate government and non government agencies. They are occasionally helped by different NGOs and research organizations in developing these systems and formats for maintaining data. As per the data collected by the MGS for the years 2017-18, 18-19, and 19-20, it is clear that their collective efforts supported by legal provisions and defined tenure security has empowered and produced substantial tangible

economic benefits to over 70% of the population in the taluka, 50% of which are women.

This is in addition to the daily needs of subsistence, medicines, and other intangible benefits such as a sense of ownership and confidence about being able to handle markets, trade, finances, documentation, networking and communications.

4.1. The tendu economy

As mentioned above till 2014, the tendu patta trade was exclusively controlled by the forest department. Just as the FRA was being enacted and its implementation was beginning, in 2007-08, after much negotiation, the forest department began to share part of the profit from tendu patta sale with the local collectors as a bonus amount. This was in addition to the daily wage that they were paid.⁸⁸ For collection and sale of tendu, the forest department would divide the tendu dominated forests into units and auction them to private contractors based on estimated collection of leaves. The contractor paid the labour charges for those collecting the leaves in addition to a royalty to the forest department, which was an amount never publicly disclosed. From the royalty the forest department deducted the administrative costs of 15 to 20% and distributed the remaining back to the collectors as bonus. As per local people's narratives the actual production of leaves was much higher than what was estimated for auctioning. This additional amount never found its way in the record books, consequently depriving people of the profits from its sale.

On the contrary in 2017, the very first year when the gram sabhas took charge of trading tendu leaves, the tendu leaf collectors (10927 men and 10500 women from 6634 households) from 87 gram sabhas earned much higher collection wages and royalty. The royalty was paid to the gram sabhas instead of the forest department. Each individual collector earned ₹ 1250/100 bundles. This meant that if a family of four could make 300 bundles in a day, they could earn $1250 \times 3 \times 8 = ₹ 30,000$ during eight days of collection. The total income (wages plus royalty) of the 87 gram sabhas in 2017 was at ₹ 114,775,388. This was made possible because the MGS negotiated a good rate with the contractors. In 2018 however, the government imposed 28% Goods and Services Tax (GST) on finished beedi (cigarette made with tendu patta) citing health concerns related to tobacco consumption. An additional 18% GST was imposed on the tendu leaf. 2018 therefore MGS found it extremely difficult to auction the leaves, most contractors either refused to bid or offered abysmally low rates. Consequently, after much struggle, the MGS managed to find buyers but at a substantially reduced rate leading to a much lower income. As one assessment has shown,⁸⁹ beedi manufacturers have not increased the prices of beedi in the market. It is obvious that the increased tax has been absorbed by the payment made to the resource producers, in this case the leaf collectors and their gram sabhas. The above-mentioned study showed that this taxation has

⁸⁸ http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/8377412.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

⁸⁹ ISB, 2018. Study on the Tendu Leaves Business in Maharashtra. Experiential Learning Programme. Indian School of Business. An unpublished student's report. Available at Amhi Amchi Arogya Saathi

impacted tendu leaf price to the extent of 61%. This was also seen as a conspiracy to affect the gram sabhas' financial and political empowerment. The MGS and the gram sabhas although disappointed were not dissuaded and continued their efforts in other dimensions of socio-cultural-political life of the society. In 2019, they managed to regain their confidence and negotiated a much better deal in the subsequent years. The trade however, has continued to be impacted by the external factors since then, including the nation wide lock down due to COVID-19 pandemic.

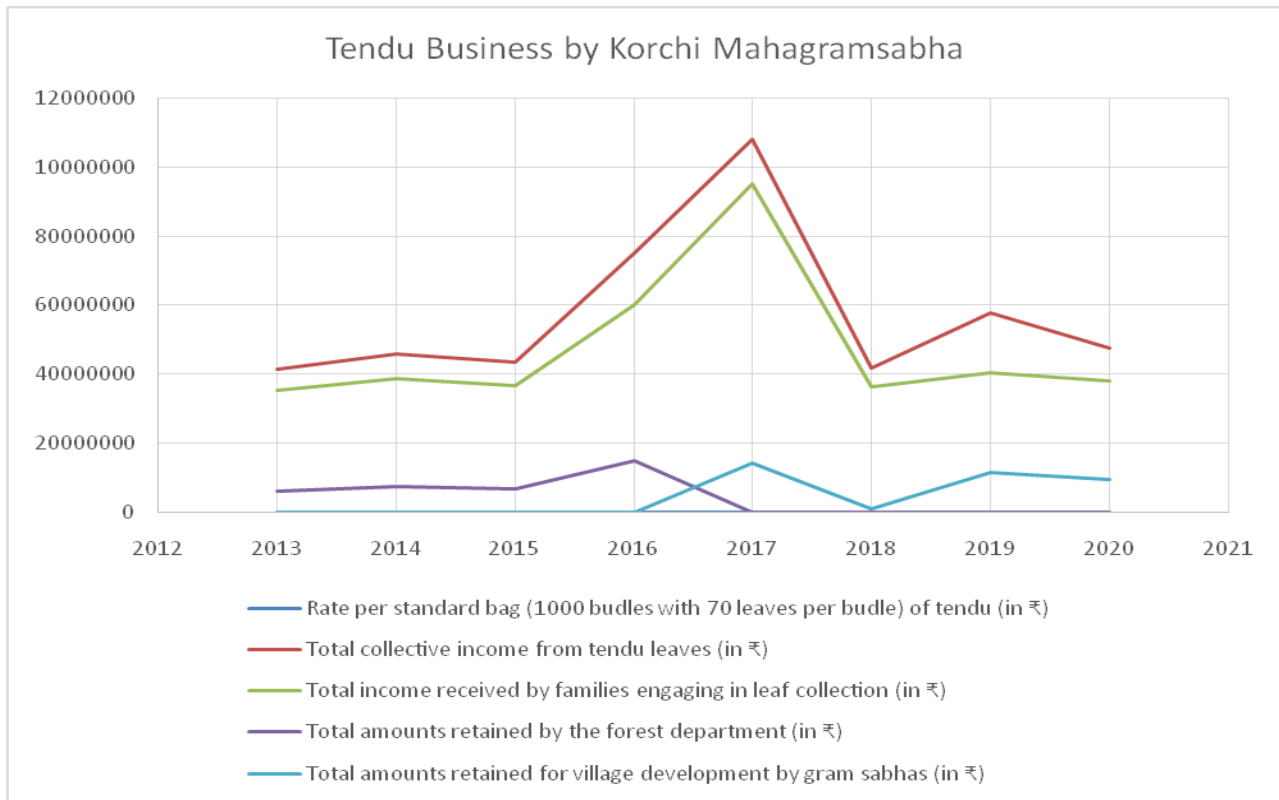
Despite these constraints, market fluctuations, and dependence on contractors, the villagers see gram sabhas taking over tendu trade as a much better situation than when it was being traded by the forest department. Villagers recall that when the forest department harvested tendu, gram sabhas didn't benefit from the trade at all. Although for the collectors wages increased consistently over a period of time even then, there was no transparency on how much tendu was actually being harvested so benefits from royalty was non transparent, additionally, payments were delayed for months and sometimes for years. On the other hand as per the detailed records maintained by the MGS, in 2017, 67% of the total population of the taluka benefitted from tendu patta trade alone, of which 49% were women who earned equal wages to men counterparts. The gram sabhas who had no source of income till then collectively earned ₹14,394,849 in 2017. On an average a family of four would have earned ₹ 21,000 in 15 days of collection period. 2018 shows an increase in the number of people participating in tendu collection to 67% of the population, 50% being women and gram sabhas earned a collective income of ₹1,106,504 much less at 7.6% of the previous year. Per family income was also reduced to an average 7200 over 15 days. In 2019, 69% of the total population in the taluka entered tendu patta collection of which 50% were women. Gram sabhas earned better at 11,548,309 almost 80% of the earning of 2017. While average per family income rose to 10,000.

Table 2: Comparative income of families and 87 gram sabhas from sale of tendu patta in Korchi taluka for years 2013 to 2020

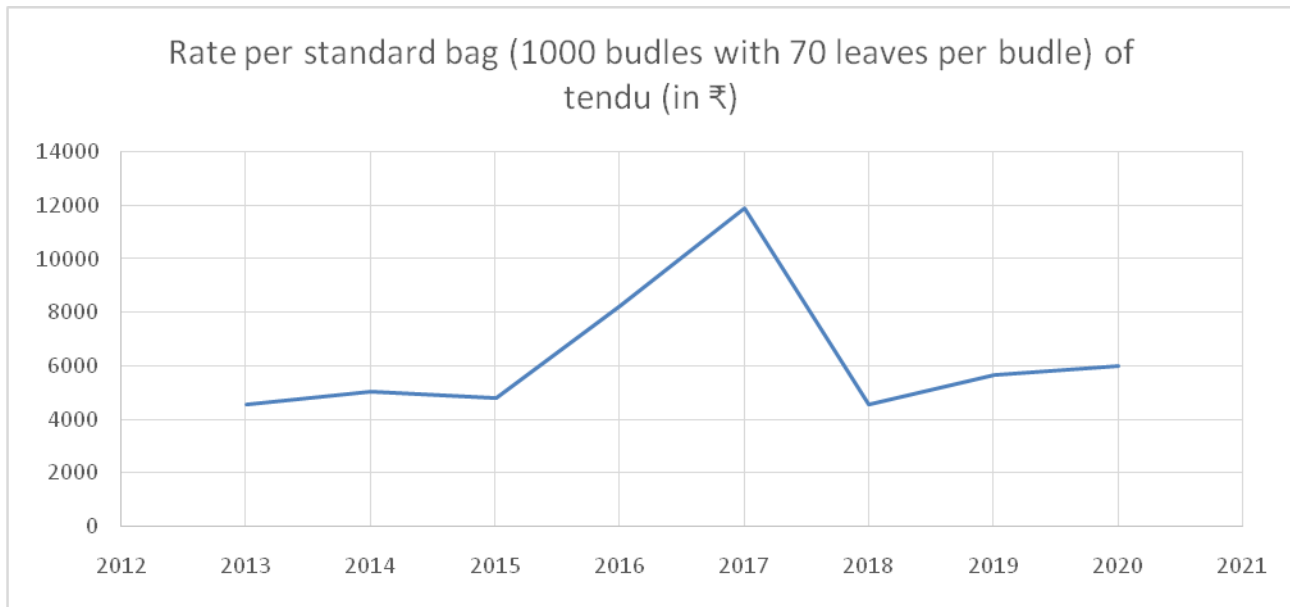
Years	Rate per standard bag (1000 budles with 70 leaves per budle) of tendu (in ₹)	Total collective income from tendu leaves (in ₹)	Total income received by families engaging in leaf collection (in ₹)	Total amounts retained by the forest department (in ₹)	Total amounts retained for village development by gram sabhas (in ₹)
2013	4577.37	41503013	35277561	6225452	0
2014	5071.09	45978757	38622156	7356601	0
2015	4796.17	43485332	36527679	6957653	0

2016	8272.37	75005850	60004680	15001170	0
2017	11910.39	107987970	95029414	0	14,394,849
2018	4600	41708200	36286134	0	1,106,504
2019	5700	57741542	40520380	0	11,548,309
2020	6000	47472990	37978392	0	9494598

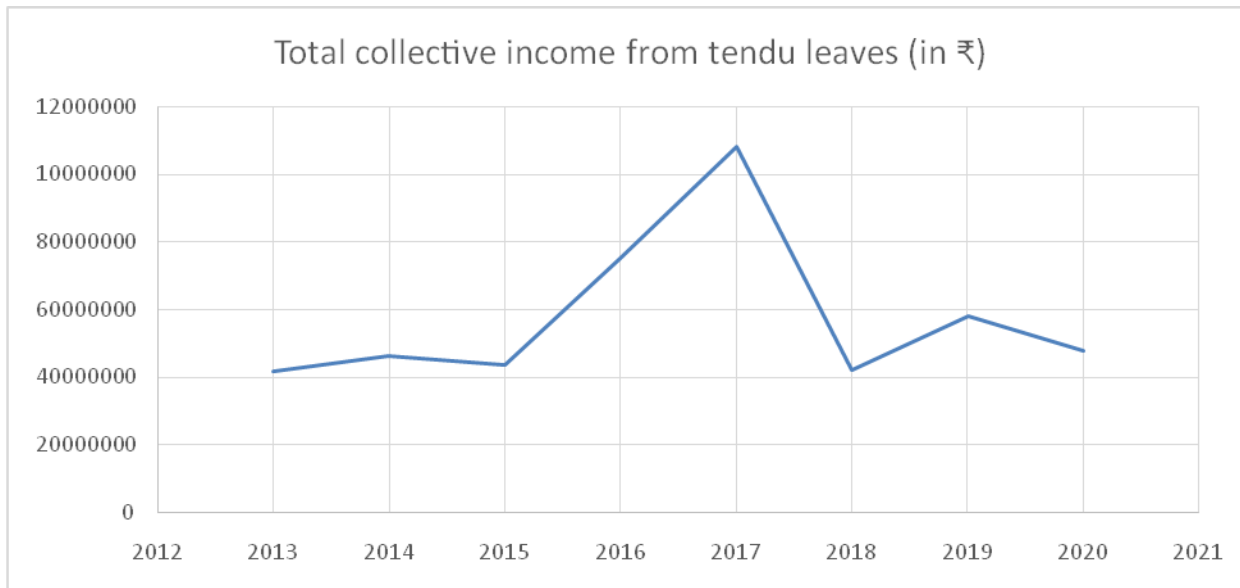
Source: Maha Gramsabha Korchi taluka



Graph 1: Tendu Business by Korchi MGS



Graph 2: Rate per Standard Bag(1000 Bundles with 70 leaves per bundle) of Tendu



Graph 3: Total Collective income from Tendu Leaves

Box 9: Bharitola gram sabha - Forest economics and tendu patta auction in 2017

Bharitola village claimed Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) over their traditional *nistar* forests of 300.60 ha but they received the title for only 116 ha. The remaining they suspect is the forest which is part of the proposed lease for mining. Village has filed an appeal against this and continues to manage the entire 300.60 ha. Although bamboo

was found in these forests in the past currently the forest has only a few clumps of bamboo. Villagers have carried out mixed plantations in past few years, which include bamboo with the hope that bamboo will contribute to village economy in future. Lack of employment in the non-agricultural season has been one of the major issues for the village in the past years leading to distress out migration. Out migration has however substantially reduced after the gram sabha took charge of tendu harvesting and sale. Villagers claim that this has nearly doubled the income of some of the families, while others who were under poverty line have now come above poverty line. An example was shared in the meeting of one of the families' income from the forest in 2017, this included:

Tendu leaves collection – ₹. 24,000 (in 8 days). This is significant contribution for the lean summer season.

Mahua flower collection and sale – ₹. 20,000

Jamun fruit - ₹. 2,500

Charoli fruit - ₹. 5,000

Total – ₹. 51,500 (over a period of one month)

Agriculture contributed to ₹. 15,000 from sale (plus food requirements of the family for the entire year)

Villagers felt that the gram sabha taking control over collection and sale of tendu patta was not only economically beneficial but it was also immensely informative, a learning and empowering process. They learnt about the tendering process, paper work, accounting, gram sabha and its roles and responsibilities, and role of women and other disprevidleged sections, among others.

Villagers shared that Bharitola gram sabha along with 86 other villages in Korchi carried out collection and sale for tendu leaves for the first time in 2017. The MGS helped them with the process of auctioning and also monitored the collection, sale and benefit sharing processes. All the 87 gram sabhas were divided into village clusters instead of using the units in which the forest department had divided the villages in the past for tendu sale. "This made it much easier for us to coordinate with each other as we chose our own clusters" explained Govind Hodi. "We gave these clusters our own local names". "For the tender we estimated the production of tendu based on the actual production in the past, we didn't use the forest department's estimates as they were always less than the actual production" he added. After all clusters decided their rates and estimates MGS placed an advertisement in the newspapers for auction. "Contractors bid based on rates for those units in the earlier years. We negotiated a very good deal in 2017":

Royalty paid to the gram sabha ₹ 8121/1000 bundles

Wages paid to the collectors ₹ 450/100 bundles (70 leaves/bundle) (each family of four would usually manage to make 300-400 bundles.

Together with wages and royalty each collector earned ₹ 1250/100 bundles in 8 days. Which means that if a family of four could make 300 bundles in a day, it could earn ₹ 30,000 during 8 days of collection.

In addition to these the contractor paid for all other expenses such as:

₹ 2000 was paid to the landowner whose land was used for storing tendu
₹ 2000 was paid for the water that was taken from the well
Phud Munshi (Supervisor) was paid ₹ 10,000
Chaprasis (who looked after the leaves were paid) was paid ₹ 9000
Those helping with turning the leaves (for drying, the leaves have to be regularly turned) were paid for ₹ 10/two turnings/1000 bundles.
Payment was made in instalments of 15%, 25%, 75%, 100%. All payments were made to the gram sabha by August by the contractor. Villagers received their bonus from the gram sabha by November of the year. Total Royalty to the GS was ₹. 6,30,300. Of this amount, 20% was retained with the gram sabha and remaining was distributed back to the collectors. Inspired by the success of this process, the village is currently considering a similar collective process for sale of other commercially important NTFP such as Mahua flowers, which otherwise were traded individually.

Source: Conversation with various members of gram sabha Bharitola on 13th and 14th of January 2018 and detailed conversations with Govind Singh Hodi; Dashrath Madavi and Suresh Madavi

4.2. The Bamboo Economy

Bamboo is another important NTFP for villages that have bamboo in their forests. Since 1968, the state had leased most of its bamboo to Ballarpur Industries (BILT), which controlled about 70 per cent of the bamboo area in Maharashtra, including about 84 per cent of the bamboo area in Gadchiroli and Chandrapur districts. In Gadchiroli, of the revenue that the forest department earned from all forest produce, i.e., ₹ 1,25,000,000 per annum, bamboo fetched only about ₹. 10,000,000 to ₹. 30, 000,000. This was mainly because the cost of bamboo supplied through government contracts to BILT was much lower. While the other private contractors paid a royalty of ₹. 2,500 per tonne, BILT paid only ₹ 650 per tonne and any hike was strongly resisted. The same bamboo was sold at ₹ 6-7/m in the open market, which is what the local artisans would pay the forest department for the bamboo harvested from their own traditional forest. The forest department earned ₹ 5,000/tonne for bamboo it sold to artisans and other users.⁹⁰

In 2010, Mendha-Lekha gram sabha (Dhanora taluka, Gadchiroli district), whose CFR rights had just been recognized, sought to exercise its right of collection and sale of bamboo. After a long struggle with the forest department, which was unwilling to relinquish its power, they were able to harvest and sell their bamboo in 2011. This small village of 500 households became the first village in the country to earn a massive ₹ 10,000,000 revenue from bamboo sales.⁹¹ The revenue, according to the gram sabha of Mendha-Lekha village, was nearly 150 per cent more than what the forest department raised in a neighbouring village in the same year, and where the local

⁹⁰ <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/policy/community-forest-rights-mendha-lekha/story/23577.html>

⁹¹ Maharashtra CFR-LA, 2017. Promise and Performance: Ten Years of the Forest Rights Act in Maharashtra. Citizens' Report on Promise and Performance of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. Produced by CFR Learning and Advocacy Group Maharashtra, as part of National Community Forest Rights-Learning and Advocacy Process (CFR-LA). March 2017. (www.fra.org.in)

villagers earned only a meagre daily wage.⁹²

Mendha Lekha's bamboo bonanza
It is the only village in Gadchiroli that harvests its own bamboo. By early March, it had felled bamboo in one of its two CFR areas. To ensure fair wage, gram sabha has a rule that no worker will fell more than 50 bamboos a day, long or short. Each worker earned between ₹450 and ₹650 a day for 22 days of felling period. Village residents were engaged in transporting and cleaning of clumps and paid accordingly. The village earned ₹67,09,845

Bamboo	Quantity	Price	Total income	Wage	Residents' share in terms of wage	Gram sabha's share
Long	1,73,931	₹33 each	₹57,39,723	₹13	₹22,61,103	₹34,78,620
Medium	52,450	₹15each	₹7,86,750	₹9	₹4,72,050	₹3,14,700
Bundle (20 small pieces)	13,098	to be decided	₹1,83,372* (estimated)	₹14	₹25,67,208	To be calculated

Source: Mendha Lekha gram sabha

In 2012, other villages wanted to harvest bamboo like Mendha-Lekha but initially faced tough opposition from BILT⁹³ in addition to other transport related challenges from the forest department. A supportive role taken by the then rural development Minister led to issuing of supportive government order; subsequent Maharashtra PESA rules of 2014, and consequent amendments in the laws related to trade of non-timber forest produce has changed the scenario over the years. In 2015-16, the revenue from bamboo in CFRs in Gadchiroli ranged from ₹76,000 (Bhimanpayli) to ₹ 11,400,000 (Mayalghat)⁹⁴ per gram sabha. Most of these gram sabhas have met the operational costs of harvesting bamboo, including wages to its members from the turnover generated. The wages for bamboo are decided by the Gram Sabha and have been much higher than those provided under government employment guarantee schemes for rural areas. Panchgaon village in Chandrapur district, for instance, decided to pay ₹ 385 to its members in 2016 when the employment guarantee scheme wages stood at ₹ 192.

In Korchi, fewer villages have bamboo; those that do, have negotiated rates with BILT (after initial opposition from it) at par with the highest being paid in the district. Being part of the MGS process helped in the negotiations. Most gram sabhas decided to keep the harvesting cycle the same as the forest department under which the forest was divided into compartments and each compartment was harvested every three years on rotation.

⁹² <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/selling-bamboo-gadchiroli-village-becomes-crorepati/851672/>

⁹³ Pallavi, A. (2014). *Village bullied for using its forest*. Down to Earth. Can be accessed at: <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/village-bullied-for-using-its-forest-44365>

⁹⁴ Personal communication with Keshav Gurnule in February 2016, and Ajit, S. & Pathak Broome, N. (2016). Field notes collected during on-site research in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra.

Box 10: Employment from the sale of bamboo in Phoolgondi gram sabha

Phoolgondi gram sabha has 17 households and a CFR area of about 3900 ha, which were divided into three bamboo compartments of 1300ha each by the forest department. The gram sabha harvested their bamboo for the first time in 2018, following the same cycle as the forest department. In fact they sought help from the department for on ground demarcation of the forest compartments. The compartments from which bamboo was harvested in 2018 will be opened for harvesting only after three years. According to the villagers when the forest department was harvesting, daily wage was at ₹17-18/bundle of bamboo. One person could collect up to 10 bundles per day, i.e., ₹170-180 per day. No profits were shared with the gram sabhas. In 2018, the gram sabha harvested for the first time and negotiated a deal with BILT under which the gram sabha was paid ₹95/bundle of bamboo. Of this amount the harvesters received ₹70/bundle as daily wage and ₹25/bundle was retained by the gram sabha for collective expenses and forest and village development. Each person (or family) could harvest up to ten bundles in a day earning up to ₹700/day. In addition, supervisors (one person from each family in the village) received ₹700/day. The president and the secretary of the gram sabha were also paid ₹1000/day for maintaining the register, monitoring the process, keeping accounts, making payments, etc. In addition to providing enough employment to all those needed employment in the village, 400 to 500 people from the neighbouring villages were also employed by the village at the same wage.

Source: Conversations with the gram sabha members Phulgondi in April 2018

4.3. Economic benefits from other forest and non forest sources

As shown in Table 3, self organisation and empowerment has also helped gram sabhas organise themselves better for harvesting, use and sale of other forest produce. As the table below says, forest based income is in a good year equivalent or higher than income from other sources except farming. Collectively, farming and forest produce secure the livelihoods of the local villagers, which are further substantiated by taking up daily wage employment in lean periods.

Table 3: Total income from tendu, bamboo and other forest produce for zendepar, Salhe and Bharritola

Village name	Number of families	Income from farming	Income from other sources	Income from Tendu, Mahua and Tarota 2016	Income from Tendu in 2016	Income from Tendu, Mahua and Tarota 2017	Income from Tendu in 2017	Total income in 2016	Total income in 2017
Zendepar	46	8,21,000	8,34,600	3,48,200	2,23,800	7,42,200	6,28,400	24,17,300	28,11,300
Bharitola	56	10,70,800	8,34,600	12,31,760	6,50,700	17,71,718	10,18,600	31,37,160	36,77,118

Salhe	53	9,27,000	2,05,700	2,10,000	1,41,000	5,50,630	4,26,830	13,42,700	16,82,630
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Village name	Number of families	Income from farming	Income from other sources (wages+ Wages from outside)	Income from Tendu, Mahua, Tarota and other NTFP 2018	Income from Tendu in 2018	Income from Tendu, Mahua, Tarota and other NTFP 2019	Income from Tendu in 2019	Total income in 2018	Total income in 2019
Zendepar	46								
Bharitola	56	18,25,000	5,23,720	4,14,230	2,47,260	4,82,975	2,70,500	27,62,950	28,31,695
Salhe	53	978000	121000	484700	349500	481800	338400	1583700	1580800

In addition to NTFP trade, gaining control over forests has led to a number of other possibilities of earning revenue by the villagers and the gram sabhas. Among many such examples, one is gram sabhas earning revenue from the wetlands in their area over which their legal control was established either under the FRA or PESA. These wetlands were earlier leased out to outside contractors by the concerned government agencies for fishing. Gram sabha members are now themselves organising and carrying out fishing activities. In doing so the food requirement of the village is met while the excess is sold to earn revenue for those who participated in the fishing exercise and also as a collective development fund for the gram sabha.

Even more significantly, this has led to economic empowerment of the gram sabhas themselves, which earlier had no source of income and hence no financial power. Gram sabhas retain 5-20% as village development fund from the royalty that is earned from NTFP sale.

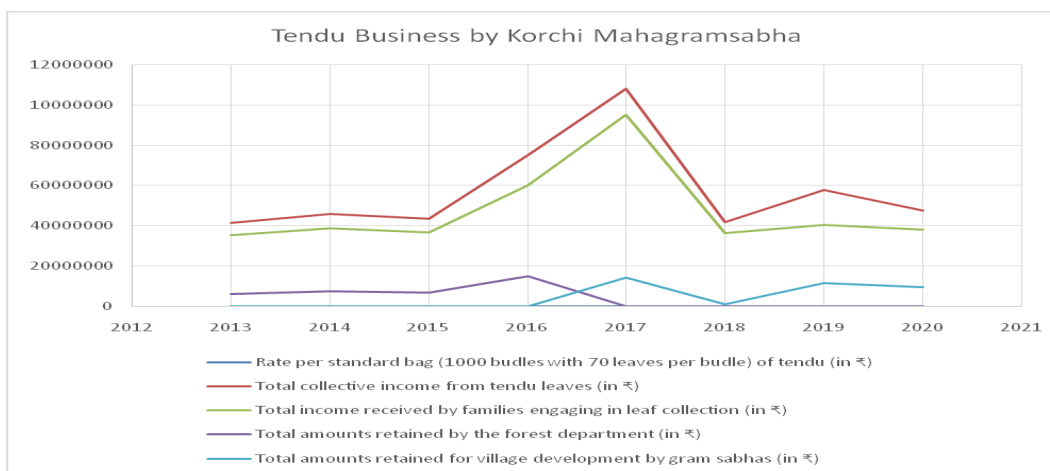
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2019	5700	57741542	40520380	0	11,548,309

2020	6000	47472990	37978392	0	9494598
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Source: Maha Gramsabha Korchi taluka

Some gram sabhas have also earned from compensation paid as Net Present Value (NPV) for diversion of forests in a situation where trees had already been felled by the concerned agency. Although the latter is not a preferred option for the gram sabhas but is an outcome of a sustained struggle by some gram sabhas led by Lavari from whose CFR forests thousands of trees were felled despite their opposition for a transmission line.



Graph 4: Tendu Business by Korchi MGS

This started in the year 2018 and 2019, when a tower line project was passing through the CFR areas of some gramsabhas of Korchi and Kurkheda talukas. Since this area comes under the Scheduled V of the Constitution and PESA, the gramsabhas objected on the ground that no permission had been sought from them and also that the felling of trees would have significant impact on the income of the current generation as well as on the income of the next generations. The gramsabhas⁹⁵ therefore asked to be compensated for this loss. This situation pushed gram sabha members to decision of the government and they asked for the compensation. The then district collector of the Gadchiroli district approved the proposal of the gram sabha and agreed to the compensation amount to above gram sabha. On October 28, 2016, the District Level Committee (DLC), Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, constituted under the Forest Rights Act 2006 of India, took a landmark decision to compensate gram sabhas for tree species from which they collected Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP). This was arguably the first case in the country where communities affected by diversion of forests for non-forestry projects would be compensated for loss of livelihoods from the felling of trees valued by them.

⁹⁵ Namely Murkuti, Mayalghat, Lekurbodi, Padiyaljob, Bodaldand, Bijepar, Belargondi, Ambekhari, Dabri, Kukdel, Gahanegatta, Jhankargondi, Temli, Davandi, Gadeli and Chilamtola of Korchi block and Sonpur, Andhali (Sonpur) and Yedapur of Kurkheda block.

Box 11: Gram sabhas receive compensation for trees felled for transmission lines passing through their CFRs and subsequently face obstruction from the administration

Lavari was one of the impacted villages from where the 765 KV transmission line of Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd (PGCIL) from Raipur to Wardha was passing through. The project required felling of thousands of NTFP trees including species such as *Mahua*, *Amla*, *Behera*, *Tendu*, *Hirda*, among others. The trees were to be felled from the traditional forests of multiple villages which had received Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights over these forests in 2013. Despite the gram sabhas having CFR titles, forest department in violation of the FRA, gave permission to PGCIL to fell the trees. Forest department and PGCIL also carried out a joint survey and estimated the loss and associated compensation to be ₹ 3,950,000 for these forests to be paid to the forest department. This was opposed by the villagers who refused the trees from their forests to be felled.

Lavari gram sabha led the movement in 2015. On June 13, 2016, Lavari villagers carried out their own survey and found that 1,675 trees would be felled from their CFR. They calculated the loss of income from these trees for one year and multiplied it for 20 years for inter generational loss of benefits. The figure amounted to ₹ 11,126,000 for 20 years, which is how long it would take for the felled trees to grow back to the size, to be able to harvest their produce once again. Since under the FRA felling of trees would require the consent of the gram sabha, the gram sabha refused to give its consent unless the compensation amount was deposited into their bank account. The amount was finally credited to their account. The village has decided to use the compensation amount for planting bamboo and other NTFP trees 563 hectares of its CFR.

Inspired by Lavari, other affected gram sabhas also demanded compensation. Consequently, 9 gram sabhas, namely, Mayalghat, Murkuti, Lekurbodi, Ambekhari, Padiyaljob, Dabri, Belargondi, Bodaldand, Bijapur received a collective compensation of ₹39,572,464/- (765 K.V./D.C. Transmission Line Raipur-Rajnandgaon-Warora). In the second phase 7 Gram sabhas, 4 from Korchi taluka (Gahanegatta, Kukdel, Zankargondi, Gadeli) and 3 from Kurkheda (Yedapur, Sonpur, Andhali (Sonpur)) applied for compensation and received ₹ 29,277,780/-. The villages which have not received CFRs yet have not received the compensation for the trees felled from their forests.

In March 2020, the new District Collector joined office in Gadchiroli and sealed the bank accounts of all these gramsabhas (letter Non. 3/Vahka/Kavi/158/2020 dated March 18, 2020) stating that he had received a verbal complaint on 29th May, 2019 from the residents of Bijepar village against these gramsabhas for misuse of money. The order to seal bank accounts was given without informing the gramsabhas.

In April 2020, during the covid 19 related lockdown to overcome the difficulties being faced by the villagers, the gramsabhas decided to use these funds to provide basic rations and grocery to the village members. When they deposited the check in the bank they were informed that their accounts had been sealed. When villagers opposed, they were asked to visit the office over 100km away during the lockdown. Considering the dire situation of ration shortage in the

villages, the gramsabha functionaries traveled to the district headquarters at their own expense and with the risk of contracting covid 19. Their concerns were not heard or headed to but after much resistance and advocacy the administration allowed the accounts to be opened but under various conditions. The gramsabhas see this as a direct impingement of the rights being recognized under the FRA and on the autonomy of their decision making process in the garb of ensuring transparency. They also see this as an effort by the administration to ensure that a government functionary is made part of the decisions related to their funds to ensure state control. At the time of writing this report the gramsabhas had decided to take the issue to the High Court of the state.

4.4. Use of collective funds by the gram sabhas and MSG

Most villages in the taluka now have a bank balance that can be used for various village welfare activities and to benefit the needy and marginalised. While in some villages these funds have not yet been used at all in others, they are being used in multiple ways. All gram sabhas which are members of the MGS use this fund to pay the membership fees and travel for their delegates to attend the MGS meetings. These funds are also used to cover expenses for the villagers on other gram sabha work, for scholarships to deserving students from the village, to buy books and uniforms for students in some villages, to cover medical expenses for those who may not be able to afford such treatment, some villages have also used these funds towards women's empowerment by ensuring that they can participate in relevant meetings and training programmes.

Apart from helping their own citizens the gram sabhas in Korchi have also used these funds to express solidarity by donating funds for other villages reeling under floods or drought conditions.

In an interesting case Lavari village in Korchi helped out a village in Dhanora taluka in 2017 when the tendu patta prices nose dived (see Box 12 for details). Lavari had received compensation for the trees that were felled in their CFR for tower lines. In the mean while a few villages in Dhanora decided to not sell their tendu leaves at abysmally low rates that were being offered in 2017. Lavari gramsabha helped one such gram sabha by giving a loan so they could go ahead with their plan to collect and sell tendu leaves on their own at the right time and yet the people could be paid their deserved wages. Some gram sabhas have also used the funds to construct godowns to store NTFP if need be.

The MGS uses the funds collected from it's members for organising meetings, paying the rent for the office in Korchi, photo copying and computer facilities which they extend also to the gram sabhas, maintaining paper work, covering the expense of office bearers for official work, organising training programmes on laws relevant for the local people particularly PESA and FRA, helping facilitate claiming of rights for those gram sabhas which have not done so thus far, among others. Considering that the youth need to be better informed about a diversity of issues and knowledge systems as well as culturally connected, the MGS is establishing a library in Korchi

where various activities could be conducted for the youth.

Box 12: Empowered gram sabhas first to step out to address the crisis situation due to Covid-19 related nation wide lock down in 2020

Arrival of 2020 saw a global pandemic spread by Covid-19 virus, this led to unprecedented national actions to control the spread of the virus. Among the most drastic of these actions were months long complete lockdown in different countries. India went into a nation-wide lockdown on 23rd of March 2020. This lock down was very sudden, with no prior warning leaving people no time to prepare. Among the greatest impact bearers of this lock down were migrant labour in different states, and daily wage earners including forest dwelling communities. Like in thousands of villages across the country the weekly markets were not held, regular shops too remained closed for lack of supplies. After initial few weeks as the system began to comprehend the extent of impact of the lockdown individuals, non- government and government agencies came forward to help villages in remote areas, and migrant labour desperately finding ways to head back to far away homes, sometimes walking hundreds of kms.

Forest dwelling communities in these times fared generally better than those which had no natural resources to fall back on. Korchi taluka was one such example where since there was little dependence on external systems for basic sustenance and livelihoods initial impact was low.

Opportunities created due to NTFP trade being handled by the gram sabhas and the MSG had ensure local employment for over 70% of the population substantially reducing the need for distress outmigration for employment. A small population that had migrated out could be accommodated locally in the subsequent months.

The most path breaking initiative of the MGS and the gram sabhas was that within days of the national lockdown and much before the government and non government agencies could react, grams sabhas self organised and decided to use the collective gram sabha funds to provide basic house hold needs to the individual families. The local *haat* (weekly market where villagers sell and buy items of daily requirement) could not take place and people could not buy essentials, gram sabhas organised for packages and delivered house to house, volunteers risking their lives in doing so. This significant action would not have been possible before 2017, even if the gram sabha wanted to as they would not have had the financial or political power to do so.

Source: Information shared by Maha Gramsabha members Korchi

4.5. Comparison of economic, subsistence, social and cultural benefits from standing forests as against benefits from mining

The MGS is in the process of documenting economic and non-economic gains from the forests to help demystify the job and development promises being made by mining companies. Since the implementation of PESA and FRA began more and more gram sabhas have started asserting their

rights over the NTFP, mainly bamboo and tendu patta. The collective income of gram sabhas through the sale of these two products in Gadchiroli has run in millions of rupees, creating immense economic security for the local people. In Korchi alone, the total turnover of bamboo and tendu trade is over ₹ 160 million annually as has been explained in the sections above. Local control over forest has empowered and benefitted people in a number of significant ways:

High and equitable employment opportunities: Opportunities of employment are now available to almost all in the community. MGS's data currently shows that over 70% of the population is finding employment for some period in the year within their villages, 50% of which are women (see sections 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 in this Chapter).

Enhanced income: The income of households from has more than doubled for tendu and increase many fold in case of bamboo in comparison to the times when trade was under the control of the forest department;

Risk cushioning: Insurance coverage for tendu leaf collectors in case of any accident is covered by the contractors; Additionally, under the memorandum of understanding signed with the contractor, once the tendu leaves have been picked and deposited in the depot the leaf pickers are not responsible for any damage to due to any natural calamity like fire or rain, contractor remains responsible for packing, transporting and selling in the market;

Instant payments: Daily wage by the contractor for tendu and by gram sabhas for bamboo is made upfront and is not delayed for years as was the case in the earlier arrangement; those without bank accounts are paid cash directly on the day of sale and are not required to depend on middlemen outside the gram sabha; Gram sabhas do not issue transit permits (required for transport of the forest produce, particularly at the inter-state boundaries) unless the full payment has been received from the contractor.

Equitable and gender sensitive benefit sharing mechanism: The gram sabha wages are equal for men and women. Some villages have taken a decision to transfer wages to the bank accounts of the women instead of men head of the family leading to economic empowerment of women (see section 2 in this Chapter).

Income security during the lean and difficult time of the year: The wages are higher and come during the pre harvest lean period, while the royalty from tendu is received when money is desperately needed for preparing agricultural fields for the next season;

Reduced distress outmigration: Outmigration which was rampant till a few years back has been significantly reduced. With nearly 70% of the population engaged in forest based livelihood and livelihoods being ensured as shown above compulsion to find employment elsewhere has significantly diminished. This was also the reason why the taluka faced little impact of reverse migration during the 2020 Covind 19 pandemic related lockdown.

Reduced dependence on exploitative money lenders and lending systems: Before gram sabhas took over NTFP trade people in the taluka were excessively dependent on middlemen for credit with high interest for various purposes, particularly during the pre harvest lean period. An immediate result of assured employment, increased and on time payment has been the decline of their dependence on the money lenders.

Increase social capital, time and security for the community and collective actions: Reduced outmigration has meant increased social benefits as more youth are now in the villages and actively involved in the village level economic, social, and political processes. Need based employment within the village leaves enough time for people to be engaged in socio-cultural and community activities.

Empowerment and skill enhancement for marginalised in the community: The gram sabha members (including women) are now participating in activities such as fixing the market rates for their NTFP, facilitating the auctioning process, placing advertisements in the newspapers, liaising with contractors, facilitating the collection of NTFP and storage, disbursement of wages and royalties. This has led to much greater awareness and skill enhancement among the *gram sabha* members.

Empowerment through exchange visit and sharing experiences: Gram sabhas are being visited by people from other regions and they are also visiting other areas for knowledge exchange, which has further enhanced their awareness and experience.

Increased negotiation power: There is a much greater confidence among women and men for negotiating with government and non government agencies, agencies responsible for state welfare schemes, staff and employees of government schools and hospitals, among others. There is an apparent increase in the confidence about being able to take care of their economic and political affairs.

Financial and political empowerment for gram sabhas: In addition to individuals and families NTFP trade from the forests by the gram sabhas has ensured economic empowerment of the gram sabhas themselves. Empowered gram sabhas also mean better quality of life as the gram sabhas are able to help individuals when in need including financial help. Instead of depending on the money lenders the individuals can borrow money or avail grants from the gram sabhas.

Ecological resilience and hence food security: Each gram sabha has also framed stringent rules to regulate harvest and use of forest resources, leading to restoration and rejuvenation which itself is leading to better food security for people, particularly uncultivated food that people depend on in lean period and for additional nutrition.

In addition to the above mentioned economy related benefits, forests are most important for meeting subsistence needs of food, medicine, firewood, fodder, and maintaining spiritual and cultural connection and harmony. Local Gods and deities are in various trees, pebbles, stones, and streams as is often expressed by the local villagers (see Chapter 5, Section 2). According to villagers forests provide more than the agriculture to them throughout the year and are their safety net in the times of drought and other natural calamity, as is illustrated in the seasonality chart prepared in Bharitola village.

Assessments carried out by the MGS have shown that local food, livelihoods and social security is best insured with a combination of options that villagers currently have. Food needs are largely met with the agriculture substantiated from the forests, and cash requirements are being met with NTFP trade from the forests and other allied activities. This still leaves the villagers with ample

time to participate in community and collective cultural and political activities. These benefits are for the present generation and will be sustained for the generations to come.

These benefits heavily outweigh the incomes and benefits that the mining companies have been verbally promising to the people, particularly the youth. An analysis of proposed benefits based on the propaganda material circulated by the mining companies, shows that mining will employ about 78 unskilled labour. They would most likely earn a minimum daily wage, as specified by the government, not exceeding ₹ 350/day. Additionally, as the experience on the ground says, it would be different for women and men, with women earning less than men. In addition to this, the companies claim they would be paying ₹ 500,000 per annum towards environmental damages, it is unclear at this point who this amount will be paid to.

Table 5: Comparative benefit from standing forests vis a vis mining in Korchi

	No of people employed	Earning	Advantages	Disadvantages
Mining	Estimated 78 people	Minimum wage ₹ 350 (max per annum that can be earned if no breaks are taken ₹1,26,000)	Available throughout the year Companies promise ₹50,000 per year for environmental damage	Only to a small fraction of the population Mainly male focused employment Unequal wages for women and men No benefit to the gram sabhas Will bring in a lot of outside labour adding pressure on the existing resources Unsafe environment for women Pollution of water and soil impacting forests and Agriculture
Gram sabha	Currently	Approximately	Opportunities	

managing forests	employing over 70% of the population in the taluka, over 21000 people.	50,000 from all produce in two months per family. This would be in addition to agriculture which along with forests provides for most of the food needs.	available for all gram sabha members – men and women Employment available during the lean period in the year. Leaves enough time for agricultural and other community activities Freedom of choice and expression and dignity Gram sabhas have financial power for village development	
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The economic and livelihoods insurance, food and water security, social and cultural vibrancy, spiritual strength and individual and collective freedom and dignity that these communities receive from standing forests can never compare with daily wage labour in risky, polluting and imperial mines. This is in addition to the environmental cost to be incurred from the mines in terms of pollution of air and local water sources as well as dust that would cover fields and forests (as has been seen in other areas in Gadchiroli where mining has started). The MGS is preparing a more detailed and quantitative calculation of these benefits accruing from the forests at the time when this report was being finalised. They had also entered into an alliance with Indian School of Business (ISB), facilitated by AAA to carry out detailed analysis of this data.

Section 5: Perceptions of well-being and indicators of development

The primary objective of the MGS is to collectivise the local people around the political economy of the taluka towards gaining control over resources and their fair, accountable, equitable and transparent governance and benefit sharing. Ultimate goal of their effort is to achieve greater well-being for all people in the taluka. The prominent community leaders and advisors of the MGS believe that such well-being can only be achieved through empowered and well informed gram sabhas. Ijamsai Katenge explains an old Gondi proverb, *Changla Jeevan Jage Mayan Saathi Sapalorukoon Apu Apuna Jababdarita Jaaniv Ata Pahe*: To achieve well-being everyone needs to know what their responsibility is. Interestingly, there is no word or expression for 'entitlement' or 'rights' in their language, emphasis is on 'responsibility'. "The tradition emphasizes," he says, "our responsibilities towards each other and towards all beings." It is this sense of responsibility that guides the perceptions of well-being and 'development' among those local actors involved with the processes of gram sabha empowerment, gender, class, caste equity, forest management and transparent and equitable sharing of benefits.

Government of India assesses human development based on indicators such as, availability of primary health centres, public schools with mid-day meals supply, electricity, toilet facility, transport and water connections. A review of district data indicates that these facilities are non-existent in most villages and are accessible to only a negligible fraction of the population.⁹⁶

Connectivity of various villages by road is poor either because of lack of/ quality of roads or lack of/ quality of public transport available. People often walk to local markets, administrative units or from village to village through the forests using short cuts or on cycles and motor cycles. In people's own perception, being low on the above-mentioned parameters is indeed a matter of concern but definitely not something that describes them as 'backward'.

In its new approach the United Nations Human Development Index refers to human development as "advancing human wellbeing or expanding the richness of human life, rather than simply the richness of the economy in which human beings live. It is an approach that is focused on people and their opportunities and choices. Human development focuses on improving the lives people lead rather than assuming that economic growth will lead, automatically, to greater wellbeing for all. Income growth is seen as a means to development, rather than an end in itself. Human development is about giving people more freedom to live lives they value. In effect this means developing people's abilities and giving them a chance to use them. Three foundations for human development are to live a long, healthy and creative life, to be knowledgeable, and to have access

⁹⁶ <https://gadchiroli.gov.in/document/korchi-taluka-profile-census-2011/>
<https://www.censusindia.co.in/subdistrict/korchi-taluka-gadchiroli-maharashtra-4055>

to resources needed for a decent standard of living. The process of human development should create an environment for people, individually and collectively, to develop to their full potential and to have a reasonable chance of leading productive and creative lives that they value.”⁹⁷

Conversations with some gram sabha members and MGS members indicate that their perceptions and parameters of their well-being and development although include the once mentioned in table 5 but also in line with the spirit of the UN statement on human development mentioned above, in particular, “The process of human development should create an environment for people, individually and collectively, to develop to their full potential and to have a reasonable chance of leading productive and creative lives that they value”. Good life as the local people in Korchi value, seems to resonate very closely with the Gross Happiness Index adopted by the Government of Bhutan for decision making. This index uses the following parameter to assess well being Psychological wellbeing; Health; Education; Time use; Cultural diversity and resilience; Good governance; Community vitality; Ecological diversity and resilience; Living standards.⁹⁸

In Korchi people use the convention parameters such as health, education, electricity, water and transport but are quick to add many intangible parameters as given below:

Need based sustainable development and ecological resilience: As explained by **Siyaram Halami**, member Kukdel gram sabha and advisor MGS,

We need vikas (development). But what is vikas? What kind of vikas do we want? We want sasvat vikas (sustainable development). For our vikas we need long term and sustainable livelihoods, food security, shelter, clothes, available and equal access to good education and good health facilities and we need peaceful and safe environment. Vikas cannot be at the cost of cutting down forests, mining mountains, damning rivers. This will bring in money for sure but influx of money does not necessarily translate into vikas. This may bring in roads, agreed, but do roads alone mean vikas? Yes, we all need iron or other metal, but why don't we question our needs, 'jitna lagta hai utna hi lagna chahiye' (we reduce our needs and take as much as we need). Our development should be based on our need, not our greed. We do not need or want 'vikas' which comes by destroying our forests and mountains. We do not think vikas will come without our mountain and forests. We already have food security, we have social security, we are slowly working towards livelihoods... can definitely do something more towards that, maybe two or three basic roads and good bus service... we need to differentiate between need and greed.

Livelihoods and food security: Forests are the greatest source of food and livelihood security for the people. They produce as much as agriculture does, ensure good productive soil, regular rains and water, and have something to offer throughout the year –food, medicines, cash income, liquor.

⁹⁷ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/humandev> (accessed on 15.03.2020)

⁹⁸ <https://ophi.org.uk/policy/national-policy/gross-national-happiness-index/> (last accessed on 15.03.2010)

“Even when there is drought in the rest of the state, we do not have drought, our famers do not commit suicide like elsewhere in the country. Even when the rain is less there is enough in the forests to sustain us.”

Narobai Hodi, Zendepar village

“We will never stay hungry if the forest is alive. The forest provides us with various flowers, fruits, vegetables. It also gives us tendu leaves, bamboo. The jungle ensures our livelihoods, it gives us cash income, it is a bank and food source that is not dependent on market fluctuations.”

Chamaru Kallo, Zendepar village

Cultural and social security: The cultural and social security that nature and community life built around it provides is an important indicator for well-being and development for people. For women, it is particularly so now that forest based economy and gram sabha empowerment is providing greater and equal economic and political opportunities for them.

“Our lives have been organically attached with jal-jungle-jameen (water-forests-land). Our traditions, our culture, our rituals, our livelihoods, our well-being and our very existence is deeply connected to the forests. The lives of the women in particular are intricately woven with the forests. Just because in the present times we have better houses, ample food to eat, and good clothes to wear... we cannot claim to have been developed. It is only when change occurs in all spheres – economic, social, cultural – and everyone gets their due share... whether man or woman, girl or boy... that is when we are developed.”

Kumari Bai Jamkaatan

Freedom, dignity and self-reliance: Self-reliance and freedom are important components of well-being for people. They have known lack of access to resources and faced numerous kinds of oppression. Control over forests was gained after much struggle thanks to the laws such as the FRA and PESA.

Our forests will be leased to the companies for mining. They will start owning these resources and make us dependent on them. We are swavalambi (self-reliant) now, we produce our own food from agriculture or from the forests and are generating livelihoods. Once mining comes, we would be totally dependent on the companies for basic services like education, food, health. Our culture, forests and agriculture will be totally destroyed.

Ijamsai Katenge, Sahle village

Our development will happen here. We have our forest here. Our cattle graze there. People get flowers, leaves and fruits from the forest. Our development is in this freedom and independence. If this forest is given to others, we will lose our independence. We will have to ask permission to do anything, which will make us servants or slaves. We will be dependent on them for jobs, whereas here we can create our own livelihoods, work when we want and need.

Babita Naitam, Zendepar village

At the end of the day, this is our home, this is where our land is. Even when our children go out in search of employment, they have to come back here... they will want to come back here. We are from nature. We survive in and because of it. We are born free and have always lived in free environment.

Sundar bai, Bharitola village

Equal opportunities: This is what has been the effort of the gram sabhas, Mahila Parisar Sangh and Maha Gramsabha – to ensure equity and equal opportunities for all in decision making as well as in access to forests, livelihood options and economic benefits. This is an important indicator for well being for the local people.

“If everyone gets equal treatment and equal opportunities... girls, boys, women, men and even forests... only then can we say that we have achieved development.”

Kumaribai Jamkatan

“Now more women attend gram sabha meetings. Earlier there were very few. My own confidence has increased. I can now talk in public and I can see other women doing so too. We are also making sure more women participate and speak up in the gram sabha and all other meetings”

Kalpana Naitam, Bori village

Transparency and accountability towards citizens: One of the ways of ensuring equity is to be transparent in decision-making and finances and MGS Gramsabha has made particular efforts at ensuring transparency. This would ensure accountability to all and prevent local spaces from elite capture leading to greater well being for all involved irrespective of class, caste, gender and physical and mental abilities or lack of them. An important indicator for well being for the people is also to have the power to hold state service-providing agencies accountable. As and when needed, meetings are organised with the taluka or district administration on implementation of welfare or other schemes and programmes.

“Another change that we see in Korchi is that the women are now looking to create assets of their own so that they can live their lives with dignity. Beyond the basic requirements of food, water and shelter, the women have begun demanding assets such as good roads, good schools and good healthcare facilities. Parisar sangh members also go and see that these services are coming to the villages better than before and hence making government service providers and welfare schemes more accountable.”

Shubhada Deshmukh

Maha Gramsabha and gram sabha members also conduct visits to the education and health institutes to ensure that these services are being effectively provided to the community.

Empowered and aware gram sabhas: Perhaps for most people an empowered and aware gram sabha is a very strong factor leading towards ‘well-being and good life’ and a strong indicator of ‘development’. The community leaders have therefore placed a lot of importance on ensuring that gram sabhas are empowered and correct information reaches them. These are through the

discussions in the Maha Gramsabha meetings but also by regularly organizing training programmes on laws, policies, schemes and programmes which lead towards gram sabha empowerment. An important component of this is also to continue the tradition of peer to peer learning in this district. Consequently, Maha Gramsabha members (and gram sabha members) also visit other talukas where similar processes are now beginning or where they may be in advanced stages. These learning exchanges are both self-organised or sometimes facilitated by government or non-government agencies. They stay connected with each other through WhatsApp groups and continuously write articles about local efforts and issues in the local news papers. Efforts are always made to be part of the *yatras* (community level gatherings around sacred mountains and forests to venerate deities) in each other's *Ilakas*.

Education system based on traditional systems but also inclusive of modern knowledge systems: A meaningful education system which does not alienate the local children from the local culture and knowledge systems but builds up these to include other knowledge systems is an important indicator of well being for the local people.

"In the earlier times we didn't have government schools. Whatever we learnt, we learnt in the village and through jeevan shalas⁹⁹ which ran in our village for a few years. We learnt a lot about nature around us and life skills. Many of the people involved in the movement were influenced by jeevan shala. Our elders, however, had no external school at all, they were taught in the village ghotul (see chapter 2, Section 2.4). People would gather in the ghotul and a learned person would teach whoever wanted to learn any skills or knowledge. People learnt and became craftsmen, some became carpenters, some became sculptors, all the needs of the community were met by people in the village itself. There was no dependence on the outside market; each one would exchange their produce with others and help each other. We led that kind of a life. Now this link is broken. Everything comes from outside, including our education system and knowledge. We need to recreate a system of learning and education based on what we had as ghotuls."

Ijasmsai Katenge

These indicators of development and well-being often expressed by the local people have also inspired many others in this region. There are now many who believe that these indicators hold the key to addressing the crises that the world faces today because of the 'unlimited growth' based model of development.

If I was asked about what my notion of an ideal lifestyle is, I would say that I am inspired by the adivasi community-centric lifestyle. Whether it is their spirit of celebrating their happiness together, or sharing their sorrows with each other or their community-based work culture, I see great hope in it. Such a community-based society, which does not discriminate between man and woman, which carries humanitarian values at its core, and which believes in sustainable development, is an ideal society for me. Today many of us complain that we are breathing polluted air, that our water resources are being polluted and that our food is unsafe. If

⁹⁹ A school which was run in Sahle village under the *nai taleem* system of education (<http://shikshantar.org/articles/thoughts-resurrecting-nai-talim>)

we have to address these environmental problems, then I feel that the larger human society and the world must look towards, emulate and follow the tribal lifestyle.

Satish Gogulwar

Section 6: Ecological restoration, resilience and well-being

As is now being globally recognized and has been strongly emphasized in its 2019 report by the United Nations Inter-governmental Science-policy Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), that “Recognition of the knowledge, innovations, practices, institutions and values of indigenous peoples and local communities and their inclusion and participation in environmental governance often enhances their quality of life, as well as nature conservation, restoration and sustainable use. Their positive contributions to sustainability can be facilitated through national recognition of land tenure, access and resource rights in accordance with national legislation, the application of free, prior and informed consent, and improved collaboration, fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use, and co-management arrangements with local communities.”¹⁰⁰ This statement finds a strong resonance in multiple ways in Korchi.

During the period of this documentation, primary scientific and ecological data could not be collected to understand the impact of people forest management systems including extraction of tendu, bamboo and other forest produce on the ecosystem, specific species and their evolutionary potential. We were not able to study the extent to which these processes and decisions of the gram sabha and NTFP extraction from the forests have impacted the forest ecosystems and species therein. However, what we did try to understand was if ecological concerns and needs of other species were part of the gram sabha and MGS discourses and any specific actions that had been included in the management strategies towards biodiversity conservation.

Conversations with people in the community (particularly the three villages) revealed that gram sabha empowerment and laws like FRA and PESA have helped in reversing the process of alienation from the forests. People recalled that while they knew these forests were their traditional lands and their lifeline, they never believed that they belonged to them or could ever belong to them. “*They were sarkari (government) forests as far as we were concerned,*” one of the village elders from Bharitola explained. Local elders remembered that these forests were rich, dense and supported many wildlife species (including mega fauna) till three decades ago. Slowly, forests began to degrade because of unregulated extraction for self-consumption, increasing populations, growing towns and their fuel needs. Local people recall large scale extraction of

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.ipbes.net/news/Media-Release-Global-Assessment>

resources by outsiders was allowed by corrupt forest officials. In the absence of any legal ways of earning from the forests (other than the daily wage that was paid by the forest department), many villagers also engaged in extraction of timber, bamboo and other forest produce for sale on the quiet in an unsystematic and unregulated manner. Some level of degradation was community control was attempted under the Joint Forest Management scheme of the forest department in the 1990s. In the villages where AAA was working with the scheme, a number of plantations of local species were carried out and protected.

“Although the forest department constituted a forest protection committee and some of us were members, no one completely understood what it was for. The committee received some funds about which we knew little, we had little role in decision making,” recalled some of the elders.

“After recognition of rights under FRA, for the first time we felt that the forest is ours. But that also didn’t happen overnight, it took some time to realize, particularly after PESA when we started discussing what a gram sabha was that we began to realise that the forests are ours now,” recalled some of the elders.

After gaining ownership over the forests, people felt a sense of belonging – these were their own resources and they needed to conserve them for themselves and future generations. This was particularly expressed by the women in conversation. Consequently, some gram sabhas have started making rules and regulations for management and protection of forests. Zendepear, Bharitola and Sahle have also put in place a system of regular patrolling of their forests, a system also being followed in many other villages now.

FRA requires all gram sabhas to formulate management plans and strategies for the forests over which their rights have been recognized. In any case, such a planning would be required for sustainable harvest and sale of major NTFP like bamboo and tendu. Formal management plans have not been formulated in any of the villages yet, but many villages have adapted their forest management strategies based on management plans being used in their forests by the forest department. In 2017, the tribal department of Maharashtra sanctioned funds for management plans for the gram sabhas, to be facilitated by NGOs such as AAA. The gram sabhas, AAA and Indian School of Business will draft the management plans. In addition, some of the gram sabhas have been funded by the government to compile their Community Biodiversity Registers to safeguard and record local biodiversity and associated traditional knowledge.

Box 13: Forest management and protection systems by different gram sabhas in Korchi
Forest management and protection system – Bharitola gram sabha

We have been protecting our forests for many years now, as we were part of the government’s Joint Forest Management (JFM) scheme. However, since our rights have been recognized and we have formed a gram sabha, we are collecting and selling our own tendu leaves. The situation is

different now. The tendu patta collection process in particular has brought people together, they are collectivizing and interest in the forest is reviving. Earlier, we felt that the forest was “sarkari” (belonging to the government); now we have a sense that it is “our” forest.

We had claimed rights over an area of 300.60 ha but we received titles for only 116 ha. The remaining we suspect is the forest which is part of the proposed leased for mining. For management we have divided our entire forests into plots, people are currently involved in biodiversity assessment of these plots. We have received some funds to prepare a Biodiversity Register, which is what we are preparing currently. We have a system of patrolling the forests for protection against resource extraction and hunting by others. Four people go for patrolling every day. They also carry a register with them and note down what they see, including fauna and flora. With help from AAA, we have carried out plantation on 10 ha of forests, which were open degraded patches earlier. This is now like our core area and supports good wildlife population. Leopards are regularly sighted along with sambhar, a diversity of snakes, wild boar, peafowl, hare, occasionally tiger is also seen.

Conversation with gram sabha members Bharitola village February 2018

Forest management and conservation system – Bodena village

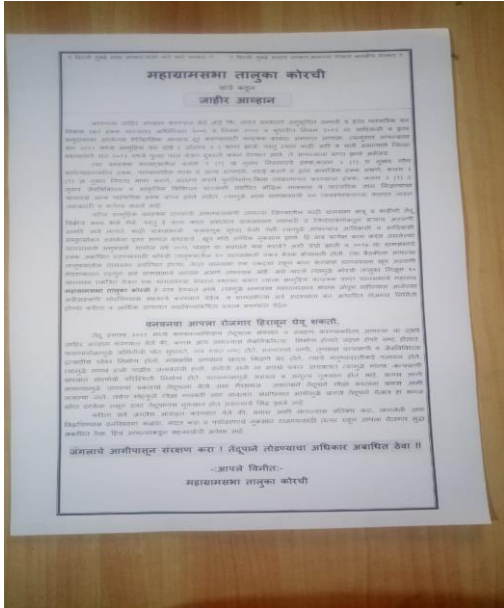
We have been slow at being part of the MGS process; we started going for the meetings from this year only (2018). Earlier, selling wood from the forest was one of the main sources of “illegal” income. Three years ago, we formed our gram sabha and this year we participated in tendu extraction and sale with the MGS. Each household earned a good income as we sold 148,000 standard bags of tendu leaves. Our forest has a lot of wildlife – we have sambar, chital, nilgai, sloth bear, leopard, hare, flying squirrels, ratel, pangoline, porcupine, and occasionally also see wild buffaloes. We have now made some rules and regulations and also started patrolling our forests. Patrolling is mainly to stop outsiders from stealing our resources, felling trees or hunting in our forests. We collect from the forests only for self needs, not for sale (except some NTFP). We make all efforts to prevent fires; we have a fine of ₹500 for anyone found guilty of causing fire.

Conversation with gram sabha members Bodena village, January 2018

Forest protection and management – Zendepar village

Our forest is rich in wildlife, our deities are all over this mountain. We had claimed rights over 395 ha but our rights were recognized only over 117ha, remaining forest is for proposed mining. We have been resisting and will continue to resist mining in our forests. We have been protecting our forests for more than two decades, earlier because we had a Joint Forest Management (JFM) Committee. Now we have our gram sabha and every day a group of people go for patrolling. Each household has to be part of patrolling. We have carried out plantations in our forests. There has been very little fire in our forests for last two decades; whenever fires start, the entire village goes to put it out.

Conversation with members of the women self-help group in Zendepar village, March 2019



MGS has also played an important role in bringing ecological concerns in gram sabha discourses. Some of the unwritten rules for the gram sabhas which are part of the MGS include:

Forest protection through regular patrolling by both women and men, in most cases all households have been divided into groups which take turns for patrolling;

Controlling forest fires, which the forests in this area are prone to. As per the data collected by the MGS with help from AAA and research organisations such as ISB. The currently unpublished report shows that there has been no or limited fires in the CFR forests in Korchi. Efforts taken by the MGS towards ensure that there are no fires are reflected in regular announcements that are made towards

encouraging people to keep fires under control.

Based on the advisories from the Maha Gramsabha, some gram sabhas have taken their own initiative to formulate additional rules about seeking gram sabha permission before felling trees for domestic needs.

Many gram sabhas are using the funds that they have accumulated through NTFP trade to carry out plantations in the degraded parts of the forests of local species commercially important as well as those important for fruits and food. Since their community forest resource (CFR) rights were recognized in 2011, Zendepar, Kale, Salhe, Bharritola and Nandli gram sabhas have planted over 70,000 saplings of bamboo, amla, custard apple, mango, guava, among others on 100 hectares of their forest land.



**Chapter 7: Lessons and
Conclusions: Analysis of Enablers,
Characteristics, Elements,
Principles and Lessons**

In this concluding section we focus on broad lessons that can be learnt from the transformative processes in Korchi. We do so by analysing and understanding the major actors and enablers that catalyse transformative actions and processes (Section 1); using ATF we analyse characteristics and elements that make the Korchi processes holistic and transformative; and principles and values that are at the core of these transformative processes (Section 2). Finally, we also draw some broad lessons from Korchi towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a more meaningful and transformative manner (Section 3). We will not be repeating the facts which have been described in great detail in the preceding chapters but will be referencing to the specific sections where needed.

Section 1: Enablers for Resistance and Transformative Processes in Korchi

One distinct feature and significant contributor towards the current process in Korchi is supportive legal environment because of implementation of the FRA and PESA rules for Maharashtra. However, Gadchiroli district and Korchi, if compared with the rest of the country, also clearly show that mere enactment of a law or legal empowerment by itself cannot bring about socio-cultural, political, ecological and economic transformation. This is particularly so with radical laws such as FRA and PESA for which the state's political and administrative will towards implementation remains abysmally low, resulting in limited or tardy implementation, if at all.

It is a combination of enabling factors, causes and conditions coming together which led to the kind of transformative processes unfolding in Gadchiroli and Korchi. It is therefore important to understand influencing agents and factors in a continuum – those that led to the emergence of the transformative process, those that are currently guiding it, and those which may take precedence in the future, based on current trends. Given below is an analysis of these factors in a chronological order starting with prevailing conditions because of culture and historic factors; conditions created by recent processes and events; and finally specific actors or agents which catalysed the processes.

Prevailing conditions because of culture and historic factors

Social capital embedded in adivasi culture - collective action and celebrations

The culture of seeing the benefit of others intricately linked with the benefit of the self and hence setting aside time for the commons and community activities including community celebrations and festivities and collective engagement in community welfare activities is an integral part of the tribal culture. This community-oriented culture of the adivasis helped in multiple ways in moving

towards transformative alternatives in Korchi, particularly in mobilising people's resistance against mining and also towards federating the gram sabhas to form the MSG.

The second important and supportive aspect of the culture is respect for community elders, which helped local leadership to mobilize people towards collective action and organization. This respect within the community helped community leaders to use existing cultural institutions such as *jat panchayats* to move towards strengthening and empowering gram sabhas.

Thirdly, regular community gatherings, particularly the *yatras* (annual community gatherings) have been very significant and crucial forums to discuss and develop collective strategies. For example, traditionally, Rao Pat Gangaram Ghat yatra would be a two-day event of dancing, singing, pooja and ceremonies. Realizing that this *yatra* is attended by a large number of adivasi and non-*adivasi* population in the region, local leaders introduced a space during the *yatra* where local people and outside experts would come and talk about FRA, PESA, empowerment of gram sabhas, share experiences from elsewhere on mining and its impacts, among many others. People from other talukas (who traditionally would not necessarily attend every *yatra*) were especially called, particularly those who were also resisting mining and using laws like FRA and PESA towards gram sabha empowerment and harvest and sale of NTFPs. *Yatras* therefore also became spaces where experiences were shared for people-to-people learning. Mahila Parisar Sangha also used *yatra* as an opportunity for women to meet and discuss issues concerning them. *Yatra* has therefore emerged as a platform for asserting rights, spreading the idea of greater local autonomy and greater state accountability, retelling the local narratives on history, culture, political economy and local struggles. All towards recreating a local discourse on historically held notions of centralized governance and politics, patriarchal systems, social discrimination, definitions of 'being civilized vs being backward', definitions of 'development', electoral politics, among others.

Continuous frictional confluence of different ideologies

Continuous presence of different ideologies and actors strongly propagating them has led to an uncomfortable co-existence between the socialist, Gandhian, leftist, Maoist, and more recently Hindu right-wing ideologies represented by organizations such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)¹⁰¹. Along with these exist the ideology of centralized governance and control, ideology of politics based on representative electoral democracy, the capitalist ideology promoting corporate control of land and resources. The position of these ideologies vis-à-vis each other range from completely rejecting each other's approaches to agreeing with ideologies but disagreeing with means of achieving the goals (for example violence as a means to achieve goals). While some of these ideologies have helped in creating greater mobilization others have led to severe divisions with the community. A constant interplay and covert struggle for dominance amongst these ideologies has kept the political environment vibrant, thriving, dynamic and unpredictable, yet providing space for debates to be generated and resistance and transformation to emerge. The

¹⁰¹ <http://rss.org/>

upside of this has been a greater political conscientization, while the down side has been state repression of those with dissenting views and resisting mining by labeling them as Maoists, anti-state and anti nation and hence imprisoned or harassed.

Long history of political mobilization and debates on 'development'

The various ideologies mentioned above have directly or indirectly influenced the politics in this region, including in Korchi and historically have been at the root of numerous uprisings and movements. As described in Chapter 3, this has led to the emergence of movements such as *Adivasi Jagrut Sangathana* and *Bharat Jan Andolan*, among others. One of the strongest Movements was the Save Human Save Forests Movement in the 1980s, which led to the self-governance initiative in many villages, including Mendha-Lekha village. Through these movements this district has also had a long history of political debates including on the conceptions of 'development', 'sustainability', 'self-rule and autonomy', among others. In Korchi although the current context is different in having legal provisions to support local self-rule, the debates however are building upon the historical discourses.

Jeevanshala, a school with a difference

One important influence in Korchi has been a unique education programme called the *Jeevanshalas* (school of life) implemented for three years in some of the schools that AAA worked with. The concept of *jeevanshalas* was based on Nai Talim¹⁰² system of education. Nai Talim is Mahatma Gandhi's pedagogical principle that basic education must be available for all and 'knowledge' and 'work' are not separate from each other. It developed out of Gandhi's experience with colonialism and colonial English system of education. In that system, he envisioned that the Indian children would be alienated as the colonial system of education was geared towards preparing a work force for colonial administration and industry. This would have a series of negative outcomes for the society, such as considering manual work inferior to intellectual work, development of a new intellectual elite class, and increased problems associated with industrialisation and urbanisation. On the contrary, the three pillars of Gandhi ji's pedagogy were the *lifelong character* of education, its *social character* and its form as a *holistic process*.

By education I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man—body, mind and spirit. Literacy is not the end of education nor even the beginning. It is only one of the means whereby man and woman can be educated. Literacy in itself is no education. I would therefore begin the child's education by teaching it a useful handicraft and enabling it to produce from the moment it begins its training. If we want to impart education best suited to the needs of villagers, we should take the Vidyapith (university) to the villages. We should convert it into a training school in order that we might be able to give practical training to teachers in terms of the needs of villagers. You cannot instruct the teachers in the needs of villagers through a training school in a city. Nor can you so interest them in the condition of villages. To interest city-dwellers in villages and make them live in them is no easy task. Then as to primary education, my confirmed opinion is that the

¹⁰² Gandhi, M. K. 1962. *Village Swaraj*. Jitendra T. Desai Nayajivan Mudranalaya, Ahmedabad. India I.S.B.N. 81-7229-140-X. Excerpts available at <https://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/village-swaraj/nai-talim.php>

commencement of training by teaching the alphabet and reading and writing hampers their intellectual growth. I would not teach them the alphabet till they have had an elementary knowledge of history, geography, mental arithmetic and the art (say) of spinning. Through these three I should develop their intelligence.

Gandhi ji's assessment of the Indian education system based on colonial needs continues to be relevant for schooling system across India. Particularly, tribal children tuned into their forests often find the class room and alphabet-based education system of regular government schools constraining and uninspiring, resulting in huge drop outs. As Ijamsai Katenge and Jhaduram Halami, two of the local social leaders, said, *"We were able to be what we are because we didn't go to the formal school after the initial few years. School was oppressive, difficult to understand and nothing much to learn. On the contrary, when we roamed the forests, we learnt so much more. We also had time to be part of the collective community activities."*

Many children, including women, and some of the above leaders who were part of the *jeevanshala* as students or instructors were deeply influenced by its philosophy. Influence also filtered down to those who were not old enough then to be part of *jeevanshala* but had elder relatives who were. *"I often went to jeevanshala with my uncle, who was instructing there. I think as a child it had a deep influence on me to be in the forests, to learn about the birds and insects....."* says Babita Naitam currently sarpanch of Nandli panchayat where mining is proposed.

Recent processes and events

District level study circle, local co-production and co-learning towards successful implementation of the FRA

A combination of factors has contributed to the success of FRA implementation in Gadchiroli, including a strong mass movement, effective and timely support by civil society actors and an occasionally supportive district administration. ***A District Level Study Group (Abhyas Gat)*** set up by villages like Mendha Lekha, civil society groups such Vrikshamitra, Amhi Amchi Arogya Saathi (AAA), and members of various *gram sabhas* in Gadchiroli began discussing the implications of the Act and possibilities of its effective implementation soon after FRA was enacted. The district study circles became a platform to understand local situation, learn from each other and once broader and local implications have been discussed in detail and understood, organizations and individuals could work with that common understanding within their respecting areas. This helped create a district wide campaign towards implementation of FRA and led to Gadchiroli becoming the only district in the country where over 60% of the potential of FRA has been realized by 2016.

Discussions in the study group ensured that the much-forgotten existing record of rights in the form of *nistar patraks* were provided to all the villagers in the district to make their claims stronger, in addition to other relevant evidence. Mendha Lekha started the process of filing claims and became the first *gram sabha* in the country to have their rights recognized, paving the way for

hundreds of others in the district and in the country.¹⁰³ Mendha's various struggles throughout the process of filing their claims and asserting their rights after gaining recognition have inspired other villages in the district, including in Korchi. Many villages from across the district, including from Korchi, visited Mendha-Lekha to learn from their experience of asserting their rights under the Act. Local leaders from Korchi also participated in district study circles, consequently within a year of the implementation of the Act, 87 of 90 *gram sabhas* in two *Ilakas* of the taluka had their forest rights recognized. This was just the beginning, followed by many hurdles. For instance, wrong titles were issued, taken back for correction and not returned to the villages till a huge agitation by MGS in 2018; when the corrected titles reached, the villages where mining was proposed realized that the forest area under the proposed mining was not included in the title deed but collective action at local and district level continues to address these issues, a situation very different from most other parts of the country where individual villages are filing claims and struggling to get their rights recognised.

Peer learning processes and other taluka level gram sabha federations in Gadchiroli

In the recent time, another forum for mutual learning have also emerged which largely include the *gram sabha* members instead of civil society groups. Much like the federation of *gram sabhas* in Korchi, federations of *gram sabhas* have emerged in other talukas of Gadchiroli since 2016. These federations are important source of support for each other, particularly when faced with larger district level challenges, including exploitative markets and traders. The federation members consult, advice and support each other while also financially helping each other in difficult times by offering loans and disaster relief.

Specific actors

Presence of unique local social leaders

Unique socio-cultural organization of the tribal communities and emphasis on the collectives and collective actions provide an environment for emergence of social leaders. Such social leaders who have been directly involved in the resistance against mining have also played a critical role in the empowerment of *gram sabhas* and formation of MGS. Some of them have been part of the traditional institutions such as *jaat panchayats*, while others have been part of the local political institutions such as the *panchayats*. Although guiding the processes and movements they (at least some of them) often stay away from formal positions of power, material gains and party politics, while investing personal time and resources into the process. Even though the members (including the executive body) of the MGS changes at regular intervals, the local social leaders are expected and sometimes requested to stay associated in advisory capacity to guide the process. In

¹⁰³ Pathak Broome, N. (2018). Mendha-Lekha- Forest Rights and Self-Empowerment. In Lang, M., Konig, C. and Regelman, A. (eds.). *Alternatives in a World of Crisis*. 2018. Brussels and Ecuador: Global Working Group Beyond Development. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Brussels Office and Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar, Ecuador.

many ways they continue to shoulder various responsibilities, primarily the responsibility to ensure that the values and principles remain integral to the processes and systems.

Unique support role played by Amhi Amchi Arogyasaathi (AAA) as an NGO

Finally, the presence of an organisation such as AAA which has implemented health, education and other social welfare projects in the area has been one of the important and sometimes critical factors in the local processes. Members of AAA, including the founding members Satish Gogulwar and Shubhada Deshmukh and staff employed in these projects as project officers, sought inspiration from the local processes and chose to go beyond their responsibilities within the project to offer need based timely help, inspiration and guidance to the local resistance and transformation processes.

Another important role AAA has played is by recognising local social leaders and supporting them as *karyakarta* (village activists) under various projects. Although these *karyakartas* have had specific project-related responsibilities, unlike in most other similar situations, they also continued to play an important role in local processes as guides and mobilisers. The NGO left them with enough flexibility to fulfil this social responsibility while ensuring that they were provided basic livelihood support. Because of their involvement with the NGO, the *karyakartas* also got opportunities to travel outside the region, interact with actors at the district, state and national levels, and be part of various discussions and debates. These further enhanced their existing levels of awareness, information and leadership skills. This also helped them gain respect and acceptability within the larger community. Some of them were already part of the traditional *jat panchayats and ilaka sabhas*. Some of the women social leaders at the level of the village and taluka who have been playing an instrumental role in resistance against mining, mobilising women's collective, and processes engendering the local resistance and transformation processes have also been directly and indirectly supported by AAA.

Although AAA directly doesn't work in all the villages in Korchi taluka, the villages where AAA has worked on different projects are also among the villages taking leadership roles in the resistance and transformation processes such as Zendevar, Sahle and Bharitola. Although the projects work under the constraints of project duration based financial support in typical project mode, some of these have had spin-off with significant consequences for the local people. Among the most significant are women's SHGs and supporting women village health workers.

AAA and individuals associated with AAA have also played and continue to play an important role by helping in accessing information as and when needed. This includes getting information regarding mining leases in 2009 when sought by the local leaders. The resistance was strengthened by relevant information. AAA has also been organizing a number of training and awareness workshops on a diversity of issues related to community well-being, including health, forest, education, FRA, PESA and women's empowerment, among others and also helping the gram sabhas on technical aspects as and when required or sought. In the more recent times they are

also facilitating development of management plans in some of the villages supported by the Tribal Department of Maharashtra. Liaisoning between the gram sabhas and the government agencies has also been an important role played by AAA.

Unique role of individuals other than the local social leaders

While outlining the importance of AAA's presence as an NGO in this region, it is equally, important to mention the role played by specific individuals who enthused the movements with ideological politics at various points in time. Historically, at the district level there have been many such individuals including socialist leader Narayan Singh and Dr B. D. Sharma (as mentioned in Chapter 3), among many others. Similar role in Korchi has been played by some individuals employed at AAA and others who worked independently. While Kumari Bai, Ijasmsai, Zaduram Salame, Siyaram Halami, Hirabhau Raut are some such local individuals, Mukesh Shinde and Mahesh Raut are young men from this region but not from Korchi. Since they belong to this region, they have a deep understanding of the socio-cultural and political reality of the area and with a deep commitment to address the underlying causes of injustice in this society and help implement the FRA and PESA to empower local *gram sabhas*. While Mukesh worked with AAA, Mahesh chose to work independently. Both have been part of the district level study circles and have also been influenced by multiple ideologies. In Korchi, they have played an important role in compiling information about FRA and PESA for taluka level meetings, creating local debates and discussions about *gram sabha* empowerment and role of FRA and PESA in achieving it, and helped in the movement against mining. While being active on the ground, both have also been part of this study.

Section 2: Characteristics, Elements and Principles behind Alternative Transformations in Korchi

In this section we attempt to understand how the processes in Korchi are fundamentally transformative using the Alternative Transformation Format (ATF) explained in Chapter 1 in detail and which explains Transformation to be *“Initiatives... to tackle the challenges of unsustainability, inequity and injustice. When these initiatives confront the structural, root causes for these, we call them transformative or radical alternatives...”*. We analyse how these processes have addressed various spheres of the ATF to address the root causes and principles and values with which they operate. Using ATF we also try and understand whether emphasis on one sphere of life is severely compromising other spheres and hence shifting injustices elsewhere. Finally we try and see how processes in Korchi contribute towards global discourse on understanding the elements of alternative transformations.

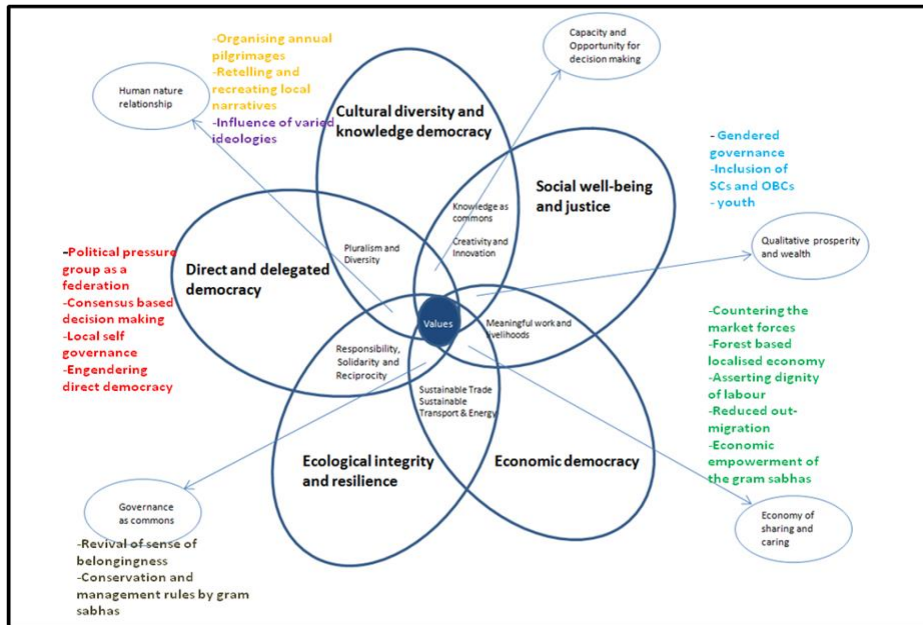
Alternative Transformative Format (ATF) and Processes in Korchi

From the previous sections on history and current context of the region we understand that long term dissatisfaction because of centralised decision making and forest management practices, indirect and representative democracy, capitalist and corporate interests leading to land and resource grabbing including through forest exploitation and mining, were understood by the local leaders as the root causes leading to human and environmental injustice, inequities and unsustainability. It was also realised that the local traditional systems and institutions were not free of elite capture, patriarchy, caste and class based discrimination, lack of understand and pride in local cultures and historic narratives, among others which fundamentally supported injustices being perpetuated by external institutions and systems.

Through open and inclusive debates and discussions in an environment created by enactment of FRA and PESA rules, and enables by actors and factors mentioned above the processes in Korchi have moved towards impacting these structural root causes in the following major ways, which as we see resonate well with the 5 spheres of the ATF:

- Bringing greater political autonomy by facilitating *gram sabhas* empowerment towards exercising direct democracy through self-rule at the village level and organising higher levels of delegated democracy at cluster and taluka levels. This instead of decisions being taken by elected representatives at panchayat, block and district levels.
- Strengthening autonomy by holding state and non state agencies and actors accountable to the decisions of the *gram sabhas*, and towards ensuring state welfare delivery system.
- Gaining control over means of production (the forests in this case) and localising forest based economy with ecological rejuvenation and resilience at the root.
- Addressing gender, caste, disability, age and class inequities, in traditional and contemporary decision making processes and systems. Ensuring equity and equitable benefit sharing in localised forest economy.
- Reviving and enhancing existing social and cultural vitality

The flower of ATF spheres below depicts the interweaving of the Korchi process towards protection, conservation, and reclaiming control over forest resources with that of reconstruction of local governance institutions, localising control over livelihoods, reviving cultural identity and raising social and equity concerns.



Addressing political decentralisation through direct, inclusive, transparent and delegated democracy

The formal political and administrative unit for a village has been a panchayat, where decisions are made through elected representatives. The traditional decision making bodies on the other hand were village elders, *jat panchayats* and *Ilaka panchayats*, but invariably included only male elders, excluding women, youth and non tribal castes and communities. Panchayats continue to perform all government administrative and political functions at their level in Korchi even now. However empowered by FRA and PESA the gram sabhas of each village and hamlet are now the first unit or primary decision making bodies where all adult villages directly participate in decision making, thus becoming a form of direct democracy. Here use Zografos' definition of direct democracy as a "form of popular self-rule where citizens participate directly, continuously, and without mediation in the tasks of government"¹⁰⁴. In order to prevent elite capture, and maintain, inclusive, equitable, open and transparent functioning of the gram sabhas and the MGS, at the outset it was ensured that monthly meetings are held regularly, issues, concerns and updates are shared at the gram sabhas and by their delegates at the MGS. The gram sabhas delegates coming to the MGS or to the cluster meetings cannot take decisions on behalf of the gram sabhas; their role is to convey the village concerns and carry back the message from the MGS to the gram sabhas. The financial details are shared and discussed in monthly *gram sabha* and MGS meetings. Past expenses are shared and future budgets are prepared during these meetings. Any proposed changes at MGS are taken back to the *gram sabhas* for discussion. In order for gram sabhas to be

¹⁰⁴ Zografos, C. (2019). Direct Democracy, in: Kothari, A./Salleh, A./Escobar, A./Demaria, F./Acosta, A. (eds.) (2019). Pluriverse - A Post-Development Dictionary. Delhi, India: Tulika Books, 154-157.

well informed regular training programmes and discussions on specific issues are organised. A downward accountability is maintained by the MGS to the gram sabhas and gram sabhas to all its members (see the Chapter 6, Section 1.4 for details).

Government's effort towards decentralization through panchayats is different from people's movement towards self rule and direct democracy in that the former remain fixated on governance through elected representatives (corrupted by party politics); externally prescribed institutional functioning, rules and regulations; economically weak institutions because of non financial and fiscal powers; and institutions not working with spirit of decentralisation, open debates and discussions. Korchi gram sabhas and MGS on the other hand are not stagnant they are constantly adapting and evolving strategies to avail opportunities and address challenges; structures, rules and functioning are adapted as per the need of the hour, while ensuring that the core principles of transparent dialogue, consensus based decisions making and equity, and ecological resilience are not compromised. These changes have brought opportunities for every voice and concern to be heard directly and considered in the process of decision making.

Social well-being and justice

The deliberation on one sphere of transformation (direct and delegated democracy) enabled the re-thinking on the inclusion of the marginalised and deliberation on the other spheres. The MGS process acknowledged the traditional injustice within the community towards women and other marginalised communities like SCs and OBCs. The women's SHG collective played an important role in bringing about this consciousness. Hence, it was decided in the MGS that the delegates from each gram sabha attending MGS meetings should include two women and two men and gram sabhas themselves should be organised in a manner to ensure that women feel more included (see the Chapter 6, Section 2). This was not a onetime decision but something that was constantly monitored. In the subsequent years when participation of women was still found to be low the women's collective discussed ways to facilitate better participation in consultation with the MGS. Likewise, the process of empowering gram sabhas reinforced that it is not about just one community's empowerment, but the inclusion of all sections of society within the village. The MGS itself was therefore envisioned as a collective based on gram sabha rather than a specific community like in case of traditional *Jat panchayats*, see Chapter 6, Section 1.1). MGS believes that to be democratic, inclusion of all sections is crucial. This is also reflected in their decision to not exclude the elders and traditional power holders within the community as also those associated with panchayats, panchayat sangathana, and other political parties. The condition being that when a part of MGS one is speaking and acting on behalf on the gram sabhas and not representing any political or traditional political formulations.

Financial and economic democracy

The democratic and social transformative process is closely linked with the economic process of ensuring forest-based localised economy and gaining control over local livelihoods. In many ways

in fact, the sustainability of the processes in Korchi depends on the capability of the gram sabhas and the MGS to ensure sustained local control over means of production and the economic well-being linked to it. The tendu-patta auctioning process primarily coordinated by MGS began in 2016 and the first auctioning happened in 2017. The increased income and other benefits from the forest produce reinforced the idea of collective action and gram sabha empowerment, subsequently leading to more gram sabhas joining the MGS which helped facilitate discussions on fair and equal distribution of wages: direct wages to women, a part of the profits to be contributed towards gram sabhas and MGS to increase their financial power as also for gram sabhas to have financial independence to address issue of village well-being which may not be addressed by government's welfare schemes. Though the dependence is still on the external market, the local distribution of wages and royalties is based on the principle of equal exchange. Hence, the economic democracy based on decentralised control, equal opportunities for livelihoods and economic gain, and economic reciprocity, i.e., rethinking the connections with the forest and land, influenced the social and political spheres (see Chapter 6, Sections 4).

Ecological wisdom, integrity and resilience

Recognition of rights has revived a sense of belonging towards the forests which had eroded over the generation because of alienating colonial policies. Since forest based livelihoods are now locally controlled ensuring ecological sustainability of the forests is also seen as a local responsibility. These once rich forests which had degraded over the years because of unregulated overuse and were being encroached for individual lands are now being viewed differently. After receiving right under the FRA, many *gram sabhas* have started making rules and regulations for management and protection of forests, including a system of regular forest patrolling. Such systems of protection and conservation are encouraged by the MGS. Controlling forest fires has resulted in greater regeneration and richness in the forest biodiversity. FRA requires all *gram sabha* to formulate management plans and strategies including for sustainable harvest and sale of the commercially important NTFP. Funded by Tribal Development Department some *gram sabhas* have initiated drafting formal management plans. With or without management plans, however, many villages have carried out successful plantations of diverse local species. In almost all cases, extraction of NTFP is carried out on rotation (ensuring that not all parts of the forest are extracted at one go) and following conventional regulations. Using the free prior informed consent clause of the FRA, villagers have already registered their rejection of the mining proposals. Mining threat however is not over but they have been able to re-articulate sustainable harvest of forest produce based development in contrast to the state-sponsored development through mining.

Cultural diversity vitality

The sense of belonging to the forest has also led to the process of re-articulation of cultural and historical connections with the forest. The annual yatras (pilgrimages) are used as a spiritual space and also as a space for resistance and retelling/re-narrating the history (political and ecological space, Chapter 7, Section 1.1).

The alternative transformations are built on five spheres that are inter-linked and interlocking and can be seen as an integrated whole. The transformation process could be harmonious among some spheres and might produce contradictions among others. In the case of Korchi, the forest-based economy is still dependent on the unpredictable external market which makes the existence of the federation precarious. Another contradiction is with the forest produce tendu leaf itself as this product (beedi) is not consumed locally and is also part of the tobacco products considered to be not good for human health. None of the contradictions however appear at this point to be causing violations of human and environmental justice. Although more work is needed to understand this aspect more clearly.

2.2. Understanding Elements of Transformative Processes through Korchi's Lens

The analysis below is specific to the context of Gadchiroli district in general and Korchi taluka in particular. It attempts to understand transformation based on the current processes as well as learning from historical processes in this district. We understand that resistance and transformation are contextual and dynamic processes and what is relevant in this case may not apply to other areas and situations. Yet we believe there would be many common underlying factors connecting resistance and transformation across situations.

Continuous yet episodic and spiral – keeping political consciousness active

Political, social, economic and ecological alternative transformative processes in Korchi indicate that resistance and transformation are continuous and yet episodic. Political economy and resultant conflicts are evidenced from the historical events in this district also indicating that **conflict is often an integral part** of the process of transformation. The tribal lands of the central Indian forests have been at the heart of conflicts through the history as the people have constantly resisted these ingressions of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial rulers. In this environment of continuous underlying and mostly invisible conflict, some events, policies or actions trigger stronger episodes of conflict and consequent resistance. The environment of resistance has kept the political awareness and consciousness alive, leading to emergence of collectives and strong collective actions at various points in time. Such autonomous, organic, inclusive and discussion-based collectives have been crucial in creating an inherent understanding that resistance alone is not enough to challenge the root causes of injustices. The local processes towards strengthening self-rule are critical to impact the political economy of the region. Alternative transformations have also emerged at various points in history, while some continued, sustained and inspired the new ones others were co-opted or were undermined by the established power structures. So, while the progression may appear to be circular as similar events arise over a period of time, come apart and reinvent themselves, they are in reality spirally progressive as they are continuously evolving according to the need and the context.

Scalar, temporal and evolutionary

We see that the transformation is an evolutionary process having both scalar and temporal

dimensions. Multiple factors emerging at various points in time through the history can be transformative at different levels, e.g. individuals within the community, individual villages, taluka as a whole and transformations at the level of an entire district, state or a nation. These transformations are subjective and do not impact the society uniformly at all points in time. Instead, they contribute to the overall evolution of the transformative processes particularly when these differently transforming processes and actors come together. Thus, transformative process is a result of evolution over a period of time as also coalition of or friction between various individuals, ideologies, civil society groups, deliberative process at different scales at any given point in time. District-level study circle and its influence in the process in Korchi, taluka-level federations and their interactions, individual villages like Mendha-Lekha located in other talukas but influencing processes in Korchi (and getting influenced by them) are the scalar dimensions of learning and evolution of the transformation process in Korchi.

Locally rooted but also addressing traditional and customary discriminatory practices

The transformation process in Korchi is definitely embedded in local socio-cultural and political values, conceptions of well-being, principles and histories. Simultaneously, these processes and practices have also incorporated many modern and contemporary ideas of political economy, human ecology, equity and social justice. For example, while the principle of consensus-based, inclusive decision-making and collective community action are integral to the adivasi traditions, greater emphasis on gender participation in decision-making, women being equal or primary beneficiaries of local economic activities, inclusion of non-advasis (particularly scheduled castes) in decision-making bodies are newer inclusions. Being contextual and changing accordingly and yet remaining rooted is an important element of transformative processes.

Within a transformation process conception of well-being can be internally diverse and conflicting

The conceptions of well-being or transformation are not universally accepted conceptions in all 90 villages in Korchi. There are several diverse and internally contradictory views influenced by different actors and factors. The capitalist and extractive economy and its propaganda have been effective in influencing a large part of the population, particularly the youth. The existing state education system further alienates the young population from their own culture (viewing it as uncivilised and inferior), creates consumptive and career-based aspirations, motivating them to support mining and the promised jobs. The right-wing religious groups have also influenced a large part of the population and their agenda aligns more closely with the growth-based consumptive model of development. Considering the presence of multiple ideologies and conceptions of well-being, which ideology will influence the dominant processes at any point in time would depend on multiple causes and conditions but most importantly the strength of the local principles, values and worldviews. In many ways, the transformative processes in Korchi are continuously impacted and evolve because of the dialectics of these multiple conceptions of well-being.

Non-static and no fixed recipes

Even though in this analysis we are making an attempt to theorise and articulate the characteristics of the process of resistance and transformation in Korchi, the process itself does not have a self-articulated 'theory of change'. All processes are dynamic and non-static, continuously changing and evolving towards the larger goal of greater local autonomy and greater systemic accountability to be able to achieve equity, justice and well-being. Gram sabha members, Parisar Sangh members, MGS members have to continuously deal with newer challenges and opportunities. The unarticulated theory of change as it appears to us is asking we walk, walking we learn, learning we change as the Zapatistas may say.¹⁰⁵

Ever-alert, agile, multi-dimensional and responding to threats

The processes of resistance and transformation in Korchi have been ever-alert, agile and responsive in real time. This is evident in the manner the local leaders responded to the social discontent on inclusion of other castes and women's participation. Strategies are decided based on the need of the hour and importance of the issue in the monthly meetings. These could include any social and political issue at any scale, i.e. village, cluster, taluka or district. The process of transformation constantly faces internal contradictions and external threats which the regular and transparent discussion in the monthly meetings attempt to address.

Located in and dependent on inherently contradictory context

Also, within the processes of resistance and transformation, there are many inherent internal contradictions. Among the most significant being heavy dependence on the state and its adopted exploitative capitalistic model of economy and representative electoral democracy. *Gram sabhas*, the institutions of direct democracy, remain dependent on state institutions which remain centralised in their spirit and disconnected from local issues. Similarly, NTFP trade such as tendu leaves and bamboo which are the main stay of the people in the region and have been crucial in causing a radical shift in the local economy are themselves dependent on the external capitalist markets. Market fluctuations and vagaries have serious impacts on their sustainability.

Rooted in values and principles

Processes of resistance and transformation are dependent on a number of factors, many of which have been mentioned in earlier sections, particularly in the section on enablers. Among the most important of these factors include wisdom of the local social mobilisers and leaders and the cultural ethical moral values and guiding principles. Like in case of Korchi, these values and principles are not necessarily written down. The mechanism for their intergenerational transmission is through their entrenchment local culture and functioning of the emerging institutions. Some of these values are clearly articulated in the rules and regulations of the gram

¹⁰⁵ Jeffries, F. (2010), "Asking We Walk": The Zapatista Revolution of Speaking and Listening. In Howley, K. (ed), *Understanding Community Media*. (2010). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452275017.n30>. Sage Knowledge.

sabhas, Mahila Parisar Sangh and Maha Gramsabha while others are inherent in their functioning. By observing the functioning of the local institutions and individuals we could sense that the following were the principles and embedded valued that were often in operation:

- Reverence for sacredness of all elements of nature including humans
- Dialogue, deliberation, and consensus-based decisions
- Openness to ideas, opinions, learning and changing
- Continuous process of learning - learning by doing and learning from others
- Transparency and accountability
- Inclusiveness
- Equity
- Respecting the collective as well as individuals
- Respecting Freedom thought, speech and action for self and others but with a sense of responsibility and mutual respect
- Acceptance of diversity in nature and diversity in views and personalities
- Right to information
- Sustainability
- Non violence
- Contentment
- Inter-connectedness and inter-dependence
- Responsibility being inherent in assertions of rights

Section 3: Sustainable Development goals and Alternative Transformative processes in Korchi

We believe the processes in Korchi hold important lessons for the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹⁰⁶. Two main goals that SDGs have set out to address are ***eliminating poverty*** and ***achieving ecological sustainability***. In their preamble the SDGs declare “***We envisage a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equity and non-discrimination....A world in which consumption and production patterns and use of all natural resources are sustainable, one in which humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other living species are protected***”.

Although these SDG goals and preamble have been much appreciated yet globally there have been doubts about their being truly realised. Ironically the mechanism envisioned for achieving the SDG goals, are in direct conflict with the goals themselves. This is because of three fundamental (among other) lacunae in the mechanism that has been envisioned to achieve SDGs,¹⁰⁷ these are:

¹⁰⁶ United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>)

¹⁰⁷ Kothair, A., Demaria, F. and Acota, A. (2014). Buen Vivir, Degrowth and EcologicalSwaraj: Alternatives to Sustainable Development and the Green Economy. Thematic Section. Society for International Development. Development (2014), 57 (3-4), 362-375

It is envisioned that the SDGs will be achieved through the existing economic order and prevalent model of economic growth, which are the very fundamental basis for the root causes leading to the very injustices and inequities that the SDGs intend to eliminate. The current economic model sustains itself on concentration of economic resources and political power in the hands of a few, mainly the state and private corporations. Such concentration of power and resources is supported by and in turn supports, at all levels, systems that support patriarchy, class and caste divides, and communal divisions.

The SDGs continue to depend on national governments and their centralised state agencies as the main drivers and decision-makers related to the goals, targets and activities. This again contradicts with another root cause of ecological degradation and social inequity, the top down and centralised decision making processes. Like many international targets, the SDGs have also ignored decentralised decision-making institutions and processes of direct democracy.

Last but not the least is the absence of clarity on what basic set of ethical values or principles would underlie the processes in place to achieve all goals, targets, and activities within the SDGs.

The alternative transformative processes in Korchi are among the many other alternative pathways across the globe¹⁰⁸ which could help achieve the main goals and the intention of the SDGs. By creating local institutions of direct democracy, which include social and ecological justice and equity, economic self-reliance and equity, and cultural and social vibrancy they help achieve SDGs meaningfully and effectively. The processes in Korchi have in fact emerged as a response to the ecological degradation and social injustices resulting from growth-led development, centralised and top-down decision-making. The above mentioned three fundamental lacunae in the SDGs Framework are addressed in many ways by the processes in Korchi as described in sections above.

Politically, the processes towards empowerment of *gram sabhas* and women's self-help groups and formation of their federations are towards achieving greater direct democracy with people in collectives having the power to take or significantly influence decisions impacting their lives. Through these collectives the local people are now better empowered to hold outsiders, including state agencies, more accountable. Economically, the *gram sabhas* have gained control over the means of production and localised forest-based economy, thus enhancing local livelihood opportunities and affecting distress outmigration. Ways have been devised for equitable benefit sharing, including the rights and benefits to women. Caring and sharing for each other, helping and learning from each other, and supporting each other as a community are at the core of these economic relations. While achieving better and equitable economic benefits, they have resisted and rejected models of ever increasing economic growth which come at the cost of destruction through mining and other extractive means. Not only have they used their political and economic empowerment to resist mining and other forms of ecological degradation but have also put in

(<https://kalpavriksh.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/BuenVivirDegrowthandEcologicalSwarajDevelopment2015.pdf>)

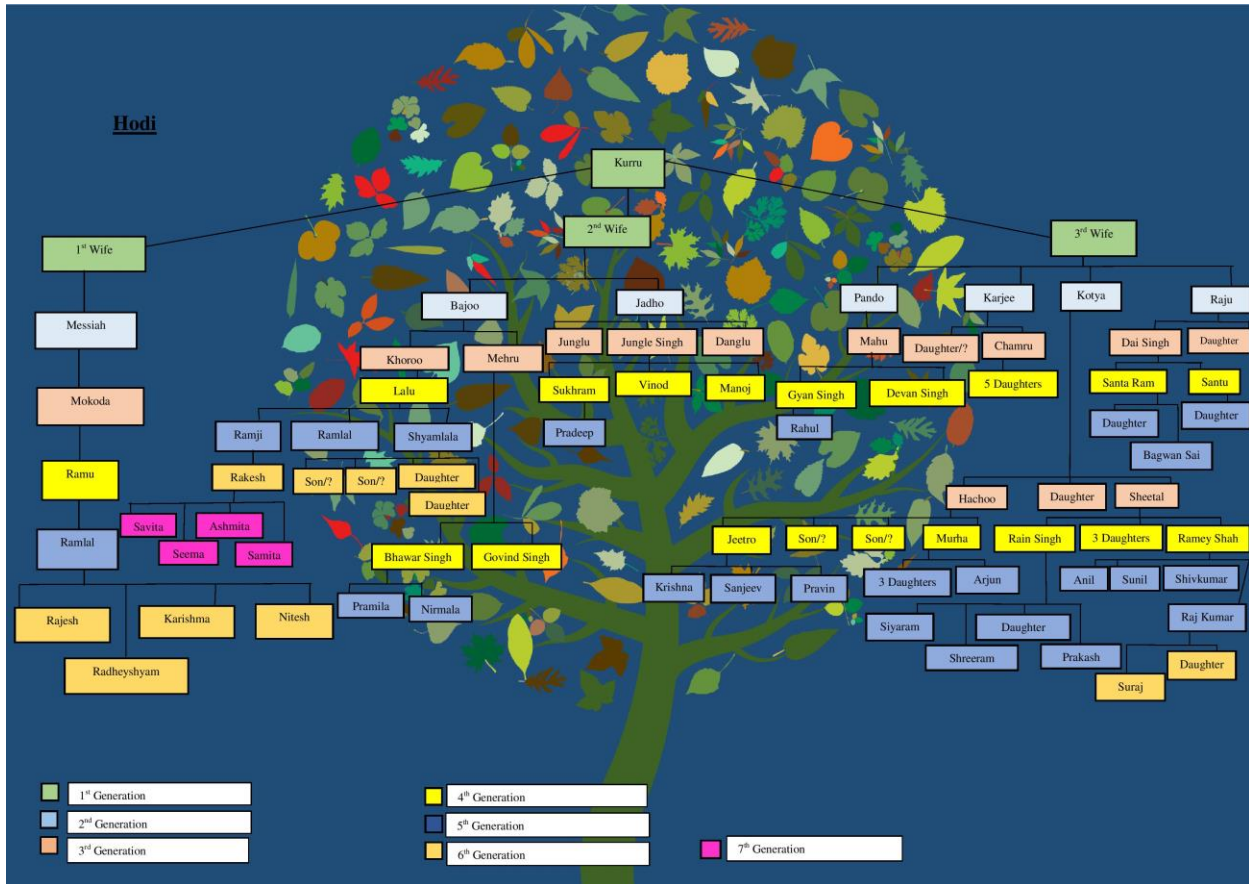
¹⁰⁸ <https://radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/>

place local systems of self regulation, ecological restoration, and forest patrolling to ensure ecological wellbeing and long term sustainability of the forest resources.

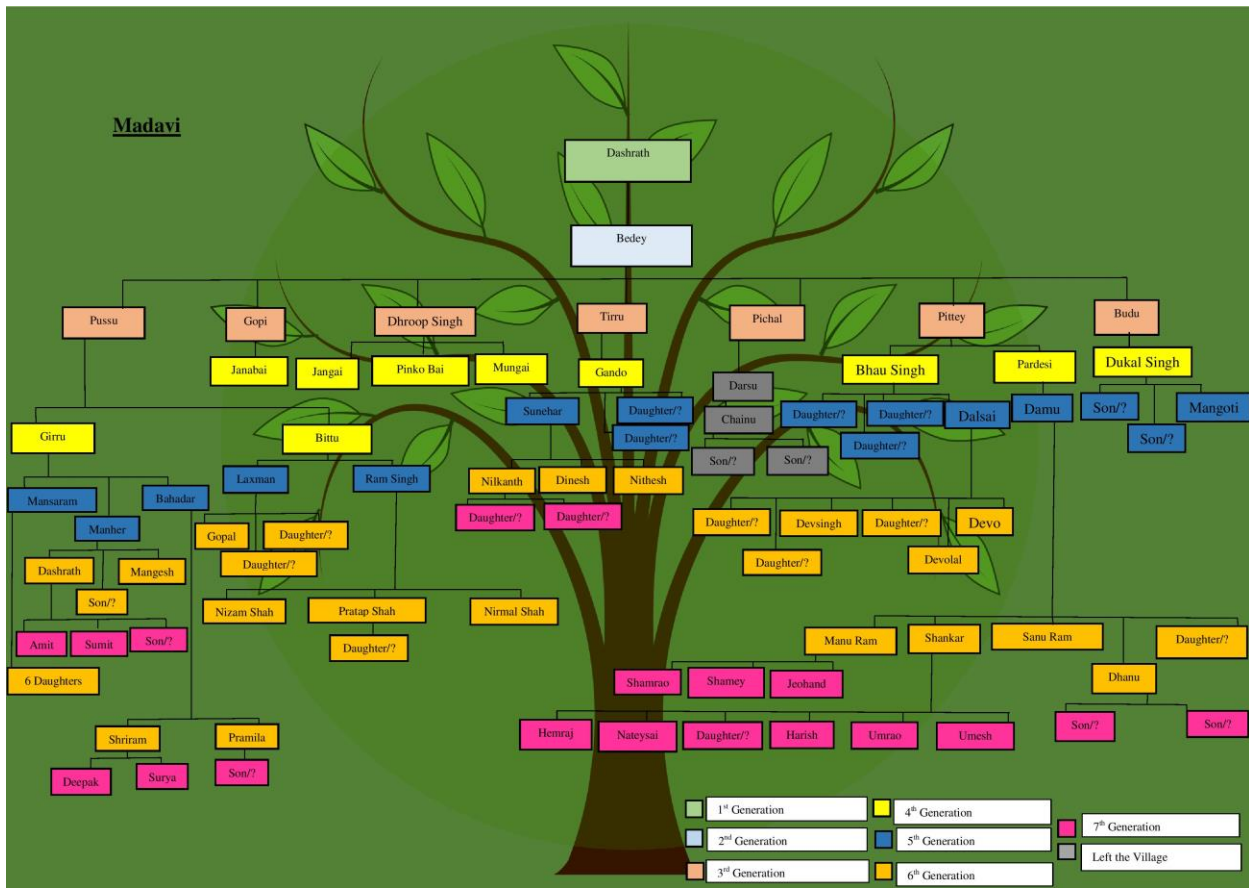
While building processes towards political decentralisation and direct democracy and strengthening local economy by gaining control over means of production, social relationships have been delicately addressed based on mutual compassion and respect, cooperation instead of competition and with a central focus on qualitative well-being for all. This has been achieved including by changing traditional patriarchal systems to include women in decision making and by taking into account the concerns of the non tribal STs and OBCs. While doing so respect for traditional elders has also been maintained.

Cultural spaces have been maintained and enhanced during the process, reflecting respect for cultural diversity and a stress on the knowledge commons. These achievements in five spheres or dimensions of life, including social, cultural, ecological, economic and political, themselves rest on a foundation of values and principles, such as subsidiarity, open and transparent dialogue, consensus based decisions making, openness to new and diverse ideas and opinions, openness to learning by doing, transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, equity, respect for freedom, mutual respect, right to information, sustainability, enoughness, non-violence, among others.

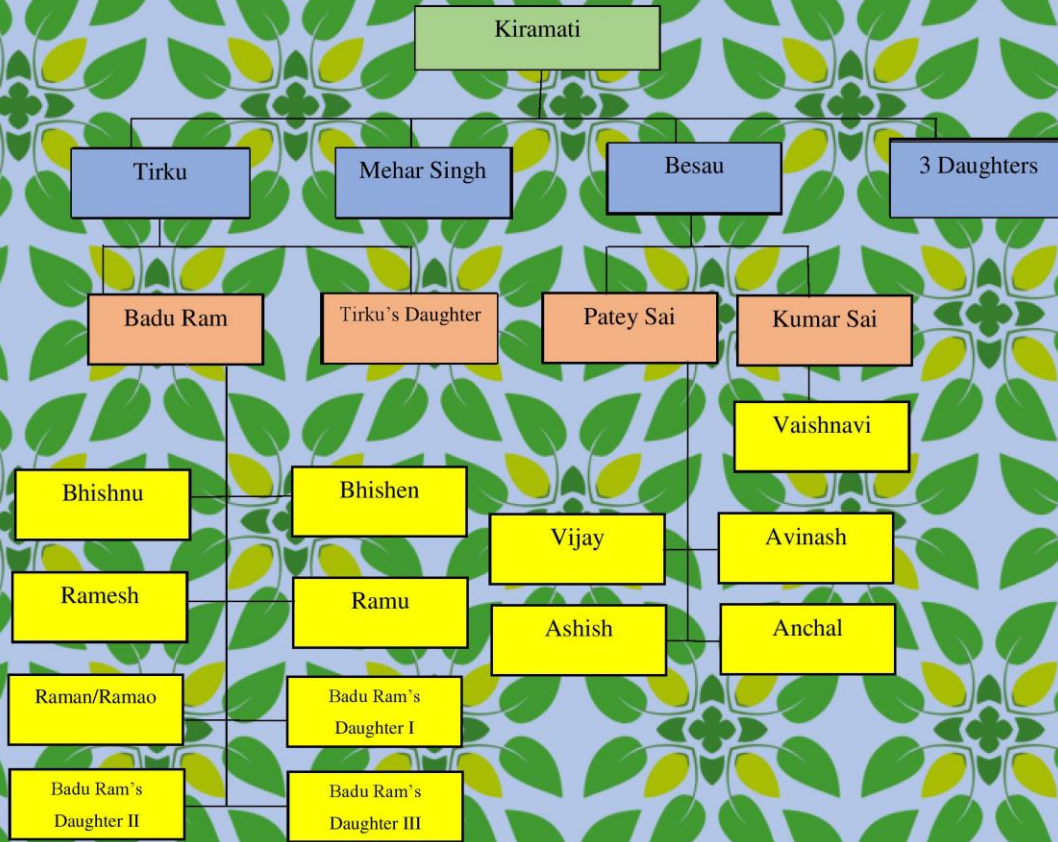
Annexure 1: Family Trees of Hodi, Halami and Madavi clans in Bharitola village



Madavi



Halami



- 1st Generation
- 2nd Generation
- 3rd Generation
- 4th Generation

Annexure 2: Chronology of events related to mining in Nadli and Zende par villages¹⁰⁹

All villages in the Korchi have detailed Nistar Patrak¹¹⁰ and the Village Settlement Documents which record the total forest area of the village (which was subsequently used as a basis to claim CFR rights under the FRA), along with grazing land; agriculture fields; a land for skinning and bury dead animals, fuel wood and timber collection areas, and other rights.

A survey document dated 3rd May 2005, suggests that Ramesh Mahadevrao Rajodkar had submitted a mining proposal on 8 ha of land in compartment No.62.9, which was leased out to him as per the order of Gadchiroli collector dated 13 April 2005. On 6th May 2005, an applicant named Anuj Aggarwal submitted a mining application attaching a survey document of a map of the mining area, measuring the land. Other applicants also have applied for mining, attaching other papers such as adesh patra (order) from the Land Records Department.

On 12th December 2008, Ministry of Mines in a letter conveyed approval of Grant of the Mining Lease for the iron-ore over the area of 65 hectares in Sohaley village in Korchi Taluka in favour of M/S Ajantha Minerals for a period of 20 years. Under the condition that before granting the mining lease all the compliances under forest Conservation Act of 1980 are to be fulfilled. On 19th January 2009 the department of Industry, Energy and Labour approved mining by Ajanta Minerals, over 65 hectares of area in Sohaley responding to the company's application dated 24.05.2006 asking for such permission. The letter contained approval from the central government for the mine. However it also said that to process the matter further the company would need to ***seek consent letters from the surface land owners, permission to use forest land for mining from the Forest Department, necessary clearance of land owned by tribals to be used for mining from the competent authority, site clearance from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF)***. In the meantime, a contract on an unspecified date was signed for a period of 2010-2014 for iron ore mining in Maseli and Nagalmetta villages in Korchi taluka.

In 2010, 90 villages from the Korchi Taluka filed their claims on individual and community forest rights claims under the FRA. On the 19th of January 2011, Zende par and Nandli villages receive the title for their CFR.

According to the minutes of the 40th meeting of state level expert appraisal committee held on 14th February 2011, a discussion on Zende par Iron-ore deposits (12 ha) at the village Zende par by Anuj iron-ore minerals was held and approved for carrying out Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) and conducting a public hearing . On 8th August 2011, Maharashtra Pollution Control Board wrote to gram sabha Nandi notifying them of a Public Hearing for the mining proposal by Ajanta minerals in Sohley village over 65 ha. (production capacity 40,000 tonnes per year). The notification conveyed that the public hearing would be held at the District collector's office on 9th September 2011. On 4th August 2011, a notice stating the above details of the Public Hearing is published in the Marathi local newspapers.

On 27th August 2011, local news papers report Nandli gram panchayat's opposition to mining by

¹⁰⁹ This chronology is based on official documents, minutes of the meetings, letter exchanged and Newspaper reports, all of which are available with the authors

¹¹⁰ Record of rights

Ajanta minerals and their demanding that the public hearing be held in Korchi instead of Gadchiroli. Responding to the public pressure the MLA of the region, Anand Rao Geydam writes a letter to the District Collector of Gadchiroli to hold a public hearing in Korchi instead of Gadchiroli. Local newspapers continue to cover news of the local resistance to mining, e.g. on 3rd September 2011, a Marathi newspapers reports that instead of recognising tribal rights, the forest department is giving the land to industries. On 7th September 2011, gram panchayat Nandli wrote a letter to the District collector Gadchiroli demanding the venue for the Public hearing be shifted to Korchi as “a public hearing held 130 km away from the village will hinder the ability of people to participate effectively”. The letter also responds to the summary EIA report and gives strong ecological and economical reasons for why mining should not be carried out in the area.

Rejecting all demands, the public hearing is held on 9th September 2011 in Gadchiroli.

On 10th September 2011, local Newspapers reported that based on the presentations of the company officials and information of the government officials, the local social activists and villagers raised a number of questions for which the company representatives had no answers. Newspapers also reported that villagers rejected the mining proposals and quoted villagers as saying that “the forests that give us livelihood generation after generation, we will not give it to the company”.

21st January 2012, a meeting was held at the sub-divisional office, Desai Ganj, presided by the district collector, to discuss proposed boycott of zila parishad and panchayat samiti elections of 2012 by the Sarpanch sangatha (sarpanch collective) and villagers in Korchi taluka. The minutes of the meeting state that the people of Korchi taluka demanded that permission granted to Ajanta Minerals and others for mining in the forests of Zendepar, Nandli, and Sohale be withdrawn. The villagers in their letter have mentioned that the company claiming that permission has been received from the district collector and the forest department, has started felling trees in the forest and demarcating/putting pillars around the land earmarked for mining.

The collector explained to the villagers that the public hearing was held at the collector’s office in Gadchiroli in which no resolution accepting the mining lease was passed nor any permission was granted for mining. Since no permission has been granted then there is no question of cancelling the permission. Hence, people should participate in elections. The collector also ordered the tahsildar of Korchi to explain, how and by whom were the pillars being erected in the absence of any permission. The Tahsildar, informed the meeting that no letter has been sent by their office granting any permission for mining. A decision was taken to set up a committee to investigate if the project proponents were involved in any tree felling, if yes, who had granted the permission and what was the current status of permission of the mining lease, among others.

On 19th of February 2012 the election officer and the tehsildar of Korchi write to the Chairperson of the Anti-Mining Project Farmers’ Struggle Committee, requesting them to participate in panchayat samiti and zila parishad elections of 2012. This letter refers to a petition that was filed on 13th January 2012, which proved that there have been no permissions granted for the construction work of the mine and yet, the pillars were erected by Ajanta Minerals in Zendepar, although no trees were felled. The same letter also states that on the 18th of January 2012, the resident assistant district collector had submitted the minutes of the public hearing which was held on 9th September 2011, to the collector’s office. This document records people’s opposition to the project. And a copy of MOM has been sent to and received by the Sarpanch of Nandli. The

collector has given an assurance that the public sentiments will be conveyed to the permission granting authority and has given instructions to assistant district collector to do the same.

On 19th February 2012, a letter from assistant election officer and tehsildar Korchi to Shri Shyamlal ji Madavi- President – Loh Prakalp Virodhi Kissan Samiti stating that they were happy to hear that no permission was granted to mining as no documents could be traced in the collector's, talathi's or the block development officers offices regarding any such permission. On the same day a reply letter was sent by the villagers to the election officer and sub-divisional officer, stating that since it has been confirmed that no permission has been granted for any sort of mining, the villagers will actively take part in the elections.

For the next four years no communications happen on this matter.

In 2016, the villagers got another intimation about a public hearing. The event was announced by publishing in the newspapers.

A meeting was held by the taluka level women's federation (Parisar Sangh) on Gender Empowerment through FRA in Korchi block, Gadchiroli. It was held in Temli village of Korchi block on women's rights and role in Gram Sabha and implementation of FRA provisions. This meeting discussed the mining issue and women took a strong position against mining in the area.

27th July 2017, a plea for a change in the venue of the public hearing to Korchi was again refused.

On 6th August 2017, a public hearing was held in Gadchiroli. Gram sabhas from across Korchi taluka. Mobilised by the Mahila parisar sangh and Maha gramsabha Korchi, a large number of villagers mobilised resources to reach Gadchiroli and once again vehemently opposed mining. Many other gram sabha representatives came for the public hearing in solidarity with their neighbours and also fearing that their forests may also be eventually mined. Some gram sabha members were also brought by the company to support mining (these were all gram sabhas where there was no mining proposed).

5th November 2017, Zendevar gram sabha passed a resolution to file an RTI on the proposed mining in Zendevar forest. On the 10th of November 2017, RTI application filed by Samaru Kallo, asking for information about all mining leases proposed and granted within Zendevar forest area and their current status; copy of the proposals by the company; Details of all the meetings that have taken place for proposing and accepting the mines; Order granting the permission to mine; copy of gram sabha resolutions under the FRA if villagers have given consent or not; topo sheets and maps of the village and mining area; All the studies that have been carried out to make mining proposals and people who were present in these studies. Status of the mining lease proposal remains uncertain. The minutes of the public hearing have not been shared with the concerned gram sabhas so they remain unclear on whether their opposition was recorded or not.

In 2021, the proposal was revived once again, which people noticed when surveyors began coming to their village. The Sarpanch Sangathana, Maha Gramsabha, Women's Parisar Sangh and others submitted resolutions against the mining to the district administration.

This resolution was supported by a number of national and international organisations who wrote letters to the District Administration as well as the state government supporting the demand for complete withdrawal of mining proposals from the forests in Korchi taluka. Since then there has been no further activity on mining till the time of publishing this report

Annexure 3: A note on the District Collector's decision to seal gram sabha accounts

In the year 2018 and 2019, a High tension tower line project was going through the community forest rights areas of a few gram sabhas of Korchi and Kurkheda Taluka of Gadchiroli district recognized under Forest Rights Act. This area also comes under scheduled 5th of the Constitution and Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, which provide for greater autonomy to the tribal gram sabhas. These gram sabhas were Murkuti, Mayalghat, Lekurbodi, Padiyaljob, Bodaldand, Bijepar, Belargondi, Ambekhari, Dabri, Kukdel, Gahanegatta, Jhankargondi, Temli, Davandi, Gadeli and Chilamtola of Korchi block and Sonpur, Andhali (Sonpur) and Yedapur of Kurkheda block. As a result of the tower line project, the trees of timber and non-timber forest products were marked for felling. This would have had a significant impact and livelihood of the scheduled tribes and traditional forest dweller families of these gram sabha in addition to being ecologically disastrous. This situation pushed gram sabha members to decide that, since their consent was not sought before felling the trees, nor were they informed, they would see a compensation against the felled trees. The then district collector of the Gadchiroli district approved the proposal of the gram sabha and agreed to the compensation amount.

In 2020, during the national lockdown with the onset of the Covid pandemic, the gram sabhas in Korchi decided to support the village families for ration and essential grocery. They passed a resolution to use their gram sabha funds. However, when they deposited the check in bank, they were informed that their accounts had been sealed by the district administration, without any intimation to them! They could not access their own funds.

On further enquiry they found out that a new District Collector has joined office in Gadchiroli and he had ordered to seal bank accounts of all these gram sabha (letter Non. 3/Vahka/Kavi/158/2020 dated March 18, 2020) stating that he has received a verbal complaint on 29th May, 2019 from Mr Mukundrao Pahadsingh Kumbhare and other residents of Bijepar gram sabha against these gram sabhas for misuse of money. The order to seal bank accounts was given by the District Collector without hearing the side of the concerned gram sabhas.

The gram sabha members opposed this decision of District Collector, following which they were asked to submit their views and an inquiry was summarily conducted. In complete disregard of the covid protocols being followed at the time and travel restrictions, the gram sabha members were asked to visit district and sub -divisional offices for inquiries, which despite all difficulties they did.

In essence, it emerged that the District Collector's contention was that the gram sabhas should not be spending their own funds without involving the Gram Panchayat Secretary (who is a government functionary).

As a result of the inquiry following order was given by the District Collector:

1. Mauja Andhali (So.) should convene a Gram Sabha and pass a resolution to set up a community forest rights management committee as per the FRA. After the establishment of the Community Forest Rights Management Committee, a bank account should be opened in the name of this

committee and the amount of compensation should be transferred to the same bank account. Also, all further expenses should be borne from this bank account.

2. The Secretary / Gram Sevak of the Gram Panchayat shall be the Secretary of the Gram Sabha to be constituted for the establishment of the Community Forest Rights Management Committee as well as every other time. It will be the responsibility of the secretary to take notice of these gram sabhas, check the quorum, record the minutes and perform all the other ancillary functions as the secretary.

3. The committee should prepare a plan of action as per the instructions and decision of the legal gram sabha before doing any work and spending the funds. It will be mandatory to get the permission of the legal Gram Sabha while spending the funds and after the funds are spent, if any changes are to be made in the plan, it should be done only by the resolution of the Gram Sabha.

4. While spending this fund, Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Residents (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006, Rules 2008 Amendment Rules 2012, Government of Maharashtra Resolution No. Vahka-2014 / S.No. 66 / Ka-14, Tribal Development Department dated 24th June, 2015 and the distribution of funds of this office should be done subject to the terms and conditions. While spending, priority should be given to public development, such as education, health, livelihood, public infrastructure, women and child development, development of backward classes, protection of forest and biological resources and others. Care should be taken not to spend on any form of personal work.

5. While carrying out the work as per the decision of the Gram Sabha from the funds received, the committee has all the necessary records related to the work such as, minutes of the committee, estimate sheet of the authorized technical officer, standards, evaluation, stock register, attendance register of the workers, Geotag photos (before, during and after work) of the work done. It will be the responsibility of the committee to maintain the cash book and other related records during and after the completion of the work. The said accounts should be kept at the Gram Sabha level.

6. After the end of the financial year of the account in this case, the audit should be done by the auditors of the local audit fund of the Zilla Parishad in that year.

7. Prior to this order, the expenditure incurred from the compensation amount should be forwarded to the nearest Gram Sabha and it should be approved by the Gram Sabha.

8. Permission is being granted to open a bank account by revoking the letter No. 3 / Vahka / Kavi / 206 and 207/2020 dated May 28, 2020 of this office.

At the time of publishing the report the gram sabhas had decided to challenge this order of the District Collector in the Court of Law.

Annexure 4 Mahagram sabha, Korchi: Structure, Functions, Procedures, Rules and Regulations

Objectives of Mahagram Sabha

- 1) To encourage wellbeing and development based on indigenous culture and available local resources.
- 2) To strengthen the democratic self-governance movement of Adivasi and non-advasi traditional forest dwellers.
- 3) Ensuring member gram sabhas are aware of laws and government schemes that they can use towards their own wellbeing and development through democratic self rule.
- 4) Understanding and working on basic and fundamental issues facing adivasi and non-advasi traditional forest dwellers through study, debates, discussions and research.

Composition of Mahagram Sabha

1. Structure

133 village gram sabhas in Korchi taluka are traditionally divided into three traditional Ilakas, 30 Gram Sabha in Padyaljob Ilakas, 60 Gram Sabha in Kumkot Ilakas, and 40 Gram Sabha in Kotgul Ilakas. The structure of the Maha gramsabha is designed keeping these socio-cultural landscapes. At the level of the taluka is Maha gramsabha; at the level of the Ilakas is the Ilakas sabha (assembly); within the Ilakas are the cluster sabhas and finally the gram sabha at the level of the individual village, i.e. one Maha gramsabha; 3 Ilaka sabhas; 7 cluster sabhas; and 133 gram sabhas.

- Mahagramsabha - Mahagramsabha is organized at taluka level. The Gram Sabhas which have submitted applications to become members of the Mahagram Sabha through a resolution duly passed by the Gram Sabha are the members of the Mahagram Sabha. It is mandatory for such gram sabhas to give annual fees to Mahagram Sabha funds, failing to do so will lead to cancellation of the membership. Similarly, it will be necessary to arrange in the village the decisions taken by the representatives of the Gram Sabha and to implement them.
- Ilaka – At the Ilaka level, there will be gram sabha members from that Ilakas and it will be mandatory for them to send representatives from their gram sabhas for the Ilaka sabha. Padiyaljob of 30 villages and Kumkot area of 60 villages are involved in this under Mahagram Sabha. The third Ilakas not affiliated with the Mahagram Sabha at present but if they are interested in joining the Gram Sabha in the future, they can be affiliated with the Mahagram Sabha by resolution of the Gram Sabhas.
- Cluster Gram Sabhas – Cluster Gram Sabhas are groups of 10 to 15 Gram Sabhas. Cluster gram sabhas are there to reach the gram sabhas in each area and to understand the issues, problems and suggestions of the gram sabhas. At present there are three cluster gram sabhas namely Jambli, Padiyaljob and Pekorpen Sawli in Padiyaljob area while there are four

cluster gram sabhas namely Gangaram Ghat, Shamsargarh Doligota, Kuwarpat Kohka, Japaragad in Kumkot area.

- Gram Sabha – The members of the Mahagram Sabha are not the gram sabha under the PRS but the gram sabhas as per the FRA and PESA i.e the sabhas of the individual villages, padas and settlements. At present there are total 89 Gram Sabha members in the Mahagram Sabha from two Ilakas. Subsequently, if other Gram Sabhas participate, this number may increase

2. Mahagramsabha working structure

I. Number of Members – The members of the Mahagram Sabha shall be 2 women and 2 men as per the resolution of the respective Gram Sabha. The 4 representatives elected by the Gram Sabha will be the consensual members of this Mahagram Sabha. The functionaries of the Mahagram Sabha will be appointed from among them. The meeting of these members will be held at the cluster level every month and at the taluka level every 3 months. The members of the Gram Sabhas affiliated to the Mahagram Sabha shall be the general body members of the Mahagram Sabha.

II. Maha gramsabha executive council - The number of members of the Maha gramsabha executive shall be at least 15. There can be increase in the number as per need. 50 percent of the total members of the executive will be women and there will also be participation of Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes and the Disabled on the basis of population. But the chairperson will always be from the scheduled tribe. An ex-officio member of the Mahagram sabha executive committee shall not be an ex-officio member of any political party. This executive will consist of President, Vice President, Secretary, Joint Secretary, Treasurer and other members.

III. Chairman and Secretary of Gram Sabha - The Chairman and Secretary of any Gram Sabha shall not be members of the executive committee of the Mahagram Sabha. The Chairman and the Secretary will carry out the work of the Gram Sabha in their own respective village and keep the accounts. The meeting of these presidents and members will be held every month on behalf of the Mahagram Sabha at the cluster level.

IV. Advisory – The Mahagram Sabha will have 5 advisory members. These members will be from the members of the Gram Sabha.

V. Tenure – The tenure of the Mahagram sabha executive committee shall be for 2 years. In case of misconduct in the work of any of the members of the committee, the other members of the committee may remove them from office by a 2/3rd vote.

VI. Procedure of Election – The 15 member executive committee of the Maha gramsabha must have one woman and a man from each of the 7 clusters and one person representing the disability group.

3. Powers and functions of the Mahagram Sabha Executive Council

I. The Executive Council of the Mahagram Sabha will assist the Gram Sabhas in various developmental activities at the village level.

II. It will guide the gram sabhas on legal matters and provide documentation training to the gram

sabhas to bring transparency in their work and accounts.

III. Procedure for implementation of decisions- The Mahagram Sabha Executive will be bound by the decisions taken by the general body of the MGS and will implement such decisions. The decision of the Mahagram Sabha shall not be in conflict with the autonomy and authority of the member Gram Sabhas. The Mahagram Sabha recognizes the autonomous status and independence of the Gram Sabhas. Therefore, any decision taken by the Mahagram Sabha will be indicative but not binding on the member Gram Sabhas. The Gram Sabhas will take decisions for themselves within the legal and constitutional framework and if feel appropriate could implement MGS decisions.

IV. The Mahagram Sabha will implement the decisions as per the resolution of the Gram Sabhas.

V. Mahagramsabha will continuously strive for Adivasi development at taluka level. From time to time they also send submissions to the government in this regard for the development of the gram sabhas in the taluka. However, any action taken by the Mahagram Sabha shall not be binding on the individual Gram Sabhas. Accepting or rejecting the suggestions of the MGS will be entirely within the jurisdiction of the Gram Sabha.

4. Financial Transactions

Each member Gram Sabha shall contribute Rs. 5000 per year to the MGS as financial assistance. It is through this that the Maha gramsabha will conduct its organizational affairs. The Maha gramsabha will not undertake any financial activities falling under the jurisdiction of the Gram sabhas, instead will guide and assist the Gramsabhas. The Maha gramsabha will accept the fees from the gram sabha through fee check instead of cash. Similarly, the Maha gramsabha can spend upto Rs. 2000 per month in cash rest can only be spent by check. The bank account of the Maha gramsabha will be opened in the name of the president, secretary and treasurer and signatures of all three will be needed to withdraw money. In exceptional situations, if due to unavoidable circumstances one of the three is not available then the bank work can be done with the signature of the two. Blank checks will not be signed in advance.

5. Mahagramsabha Office and Staff

I. Maha gramsabha has an independent office, taken on rent from mahila parisar sangh Korchi. An office administrator has been appointed at a monthly honorarium of Rs. 3500 (Three Thousand Five Hundred).

II. Remuneration to Mahagram sabha executive committee members – When the members of the Mahagram Sabha Executive Committee participate in the Mahagram Sabha meetings, cluster level meetings and outside study meetings, the Mahagram Sabha executive committee members will be paid Rs. 200 and traveling expenses of Rs.100 will be paid a total of Rs.300. This fund will be sanctioned only after the presentation of the report in the monthly meeting of the members. No member will be paid if they do not submit a report.

III. Audit of the Mahagram Sabha – After the end of the financial year from April to March, the Mahagram Sabha shall hold its accounts and present them to the members of the Gram Sabha in a general meeting. Similarly, the transaction will be audited by CA. The secretary of the Mahagram

Sabha will be responsible for this.

6. Cluster Gram Sabha

I. Number of Members – Consensus members at Cluster Gram Sabha level shall consist of 2 women and 2 men appointed by each Gram Sabha.

II. Position – These representatives of the Gram Sabhas falling under the cluster will be members of the cluster Gram Sabha. These 4 members will be required to attend the cluster meeting. But these gram sabhas coming under the cluster can also send other people from the gram sabha to the cluster sabha. The cluster sabha will appoint a chairperson for each meeting.

III. Functions and Responsibilities of the Cluster Executive Committee - The Executive Committee of the Taluka Mahagram Sabha will be selected from the cluster and the representative of the cluster shall be responsible for the work of the Cluster Gram Sabha. It will be mandatory for them to hold a meeting every month and submit the report of the meeting to the Mahagram Sabha.

7. Village Gram Sabha

I. Election of representative – Each Gram Sabha shall elect 2 men and 2 women as Mahagram Sabha members from their respective Gram Sabhas and inform the Mahagram Sabha through a resolution.

II. Decisions and Resolution – From time to time, any decisions of the gram sabhas as applicable to the Maha gramsabha, arrived through discussions within the gram sabha will be communicated to the Mahagram sabha through a resolution. The decision forwarded by the Gram Sabha through a resolution shall be acceptable and binding on the Maha Gram Sabha. Keeping in mind the importance of village gram sabha time, the village gram sabha must report its decision to the maha gram sabha within the stipulated time if not the maha gram sabha will be entitled to take the decisions and actions as per its own procedures.

III. Audit of Gram Sabhas – Some members of Gram Sabhas at taluk level will be trained to document financial transactions through the Mahagram Sabhas and they will help other Gram Sabhas in recording financial transactions, Gram Sabhas will pay them a fixed remuneration through cheques. After that, the organization will get audited by CA after the end of the year. The Mahagram Sabha will guide and help the Gram Sabhas in this.

8. Procedures and Rules of Mahagram Sabha Meeting

I. Mahagram Sabha Executive Meeting rules – Mahagram Sabha Executive Council Meeting shall be held atleast once every month. It will be attended by members of the executive committee of the Mahagram Sabha as well as the president and secretary of the Gram Sabhas as well as the appointed advisers. This Sabha will be held on the 1st day of every month in the premises of Mahagram Sabha office. In the said meeting, the Executive council will present the details of the mothly affairs. Gram Sabha president and secretary will also present their updates and issues. In addition, decisions will be taken on various issues as required. In this meeting, any person from outside (such as - non-governmental organizations, party representatives, academics, experts and

others) will not be allowed to sit. If any such agencies or persons want to attend the meeting then they will need to inform the Mahagram Sabha in writing at least 3 days in advance and take prior permission. A meeting of the Mahagram Sabha executive committee can also be called at any other time, for which the responsibility of making formal invitations and organizing the meeting will not be with the secretary of the Mahagram Sabha. It shall be compulsory for the executive members to be present in the Maha gramsabha executive meeting. If any member is absent from these meetings for three consecutive times, their membership will be canceled and another member will be appointed.

II. Study Group Meetings at Cluster Level – Study group meetings will be organized every month at the cluster level. The members of Maha gramsabha executive committee elected from that cluster will be obliged to attend the sabha of that cluster. These members will invite the meeting and submit the report of the meeting in the Mahagram Sabha. 4 members appointed by each Gram Sabhas as representatives at the taluka level will be required to be present in the cluster Gram Sabhas. It can also invite outsiders for Maha gramsabha and cluster gramsabha study meetings in the cluster meeting. Also, uninvited outsiders may participate in these study group meetings, but for that it will be necessary for them to inform the Mahagram Sabha in writing through the mentioned letter with the intention of being present at the meeting.

III. Gram Sabha Level Meetings – 4 members appointed by the Gram Sabha as well as Gram Sabha President and secretary will convene the Gram Sabhas in the village. It shall be compulsory to hold the Gram Sabha of the village at least once every month. Apart from this, villagers can organize Gram Sabha as often as they want. The important issues and problems arising will be reported to the Gram Sabha by the President and the Secretary to the Mahagram Sabha through a report.

IV. Study meetings outside the Taluk and participation in the same – Any one member of the Mahagram Sabha shall be appointed to attend any outside study group meeting or training programmes as per the needs and requirements. Mahagram Sabha will grant the allowance only to those selected for the purpose by the MGS.

9. Functions of Mahagram Sabha

I. Awareness about the legal and constitutional rights of Adivasi and Non-Traditional Indigenous Peoples –Gram Sabhas have constitutional rights and the same same laws like the 5th Schedule, Payroll Act, Forest Rights Act, Bio-Innovation Act, Employment Guarantee Act, Right to Human Rights, Atrocity Act as well as Education, Health and Home Affairs Acts and Government Scheme are applicable for them and can be used by them for their village development and wellbeing. Keeping this in mind MGS will conduct continuous training, study and meetings on these laws. Also, regular study meetings will be held on changes in government laws and government policy from time to time. At that time, the government officials of the relevant departments, representatives of non-governmental organizations, experts, academics, representatives of organizations and other important people will be invited for the discussions. The Maha gramsabha will always strive and fight for the protection of the rights of Adivasis as well as other traditional forest dwellers and will organize programmes accordingly from time to time.

II. Capacity Building Program of Gram Sabhas – From time to time the Mahagram Sabha will organize capacity building programmes for the office bearers of the Gram Sabhas to improve the

skills and capacities within the gram sabhas towards local governance. The Mahagram Sabha will select experts for such training programmes depending on the need. If the expert trainer is a member of any of the the Gram Sabhas, they shall be paid an allowance and traveling expenses as decided, by the Mahagram Sabha. Maha gramsabha may also invite other non-governmental and of government staff for training programmes. If these are salaried people, the Gram Sabha or Mahagram Sabha will provide certificate for having conducted the training programme but will not pay any remuneration.

III. Organizational and development Activities –

- The Mahagram Sabha shall continuously guide the Gram Sabhas and endeavor to protect the rights of Adavasi and other traditional forest dwellers over water, forest and land.
- The Mahagram Sabha shall direct the Gram Sabhas to collect and sell NTFP and assist the Gram Sabhas in doing so from time to time.
- Guide the Gram Sabhas for harvesting NTFP like bamboo and tendu and support the entire affairs of the Gram Sabhas for the same. For this, it will continuously help verify the relevant documents and organizational transactions of Gram Sabhas. The gram sabhas will submit their reports to the Mahagram Sabha within seven days after the approval of the Tendu Patta. Also, after the total amount of the sale is deposited in the account of the Gram Sabha, within 15 days, the collecting families in the Gram Sabha will be distributed their wages and bonus according to the fixed percentage. The report of this will be submitted to the Mahagram Sabha within 7 days. The Mahagram Sabha will submit this report to the District Collector. Similar will be the case with bamboo sale.
- If there is any problem in this regard, the Gram Sabha should inform the Mahagram Sabha in writing and the Mahagram Sabha will take action on it.
- Also, if the Gram Sabha sends a written letter to the Mahagram Sabha for issues arising at the Gram Sabha level, the Mahagram Sabha will be obliged to assist the Gram Sabha in resolving the matter.
- The Mahagram Sabha shall also assist and guide the Gram Sabhas in case of collection and disposal of the NTFP other than Tendu and Bamboo.
- The Mahagram Sabha will maintain coordination with the Govt.
- To guide the Gram Sabhas to get benefits from various government schemes for improvement of agriculture as well as better and fair market price for agricultural products. The MGS will organize meetings and discussions on these subjects from time to time and also coordinate with outside actors who may be able to help, including on setting up agricultural production centers to ensure fair market prices.

IV. Cultural activities

- Promotion of Adavasi culture and Gondi language, dissemination and importation of Gondi language knowledge.
- Organizing traditional activities by connecting Adavasi culture.
- To organize programs based on the adivasi worldviews as well as the thoughts of social

reformers.

- Adivasis worship nature traditionally, to bring this culture and its understanding back into the society.

V. Education: The Mahagram Sabha will strive to spread education among the Adavasi and other traditional forest dwellers of Korchi taluka and ensure that the students in the taluka get good education.

VI. Issues related to Health: The health system should run smoothly in core taluka. The Mahagram Sabha will strive to ensure that everyone has access to health facilities.

VII. The Mahagram Sabha will guide and help the disadvantaged women, single women, disabled people in the society to get equality in the society and to ensure that the schemes reach them.

VIII. Similarly, the Mahagram Sabha shall deliberate on the relevant issues raised from time to time for the welfare of the tribal and other traditional forest dwellers and act on the reasonable constitutional demands of the Gram Sabhas. Maha gramsabha is committed to and strives for the development of society based on constitutional values and rights as it accepts the democratic system of governance in India.

10. Mode of Communication of Mahagram Sabha

I. The Mahagram Sabha shall conduct its entire business in written form in the form of a letter or resolution and shall document the same.

II. E-mail – The Mahagram Sabha will create its own E-mail ID and deal with the administration and other departments through that.

III. Any member of the Gram Sabhas is eligible to seek any information about the Maha gramsabha and its functioning. However, such information will need to be sought in written form only after that, a decision will be taken in the Executive council on whether or not to give the information.

IV. The Maha gramsabha shall present its detailed annual report in the monthly meeting held on the 1st of January and shall put it in writing on the notice board. If it is important or sensitive, it will not be presented publicly.

The Gond adivasis and other traditional forest dwellers of Korchi (Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra, India) have protected their forests, lands, waters using their traditional knowledge generation after generation. Village assemblies in Korchi, along with resisting mining in their traditional territories, are actively engaged in reconstructing systems of direct democracy along with gaining control of local means of production. Simultaneously, the women's collective is asserting their dignified participation in these emerging decision making spaces.

This report details the participatory study process (2016-2019) examining the emergence of multi-dimensional transformative processes unfolding in Korchi. The report highlights: processes and history of direct democracy, localising control over their livelihoods, caste and gender equity concerns, management and conservation of forests and reviving cultural identity in the region. An analysis of the process contributes to the more general understanding of the nature and emergence of grassroots transformations along with articulating the grounded visions of wellbeing inherent in these processes.

This study is a collaboration among three partners: Kalpavriksh, Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi, and Mahagram sabha members. For Kalpavriksh, the study was part of a global activist research project, ACKnowl-EJ (www.acknowej.org).



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