



Tata Institute
of
Social Sciences

THE INDIAN JOURNAL
OF
SOCIAL WORK

Volume 80, Issue 4
October 2019

DOI:

<https://journals.tiss.edu/ijsw/index.php/ijsw>

Collective Action for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods

The Case of Korchi Mahagrame Sabha

DIVYA GUPTA

Community Forest Resource Rights (CFR rights) under The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 give forest-dwelling communities a unique opportunity to extract, manage, and sell non-timber forest products (NTFPs) from their forests. This recognition of CFR rights has enabled forest dwelling communities to develop diverse mechanisms for transparent, equitable, and sustainable processes of NTFP procurement and marketing. The Korchi Mahagrame Sabha, a coalition of local-level institutions, is an example of one such mechanism that emerged in the post-CFR recognition phase in 'Gadchiroli', Maharashtra. The study details the mechanisms for collective action and also the factors that facilitate and impede the functioning of such mechanisms. Given the immediate positive socioeconomic impact, such coalitions/collective action mechanisms and their activities need to be supported in order to make them fully functional and empowered.

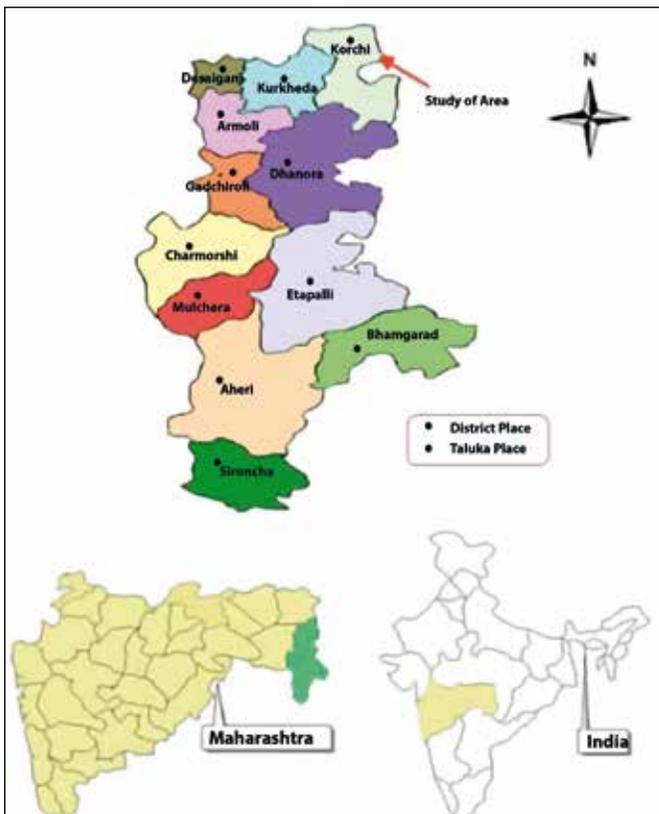
Divya Gupta is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, Bengaluru.

INTRODUCTION

Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) form a major part of the subsistence economy of the forest dwelling community in India. Estimates show that nearly 275 million people are dependent on NTFPs and the revenue generated by the NTFP trade is over Rs. 6,000/- crores per annum (Planning Commission, 2013). With the increasing NTFP diversification and growing popularity of forest products in the market, it is believed that its contribution to the rural economy is going to increase in the near future (Sahu, 2018).

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (hereafter FRA), is an important piece of legislation that creates the opportunity for the emergence of democratic decentralised models for NTFP governance. Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights is a provision of the FRA that explicitly confers the rights of extraction and sale of minor NTFPs to Gram Sabhas. Once recognised, CFR rights allow the Gram Sabhas to replace the age-old exclusionary practice of NTFP management by the Forest Department with a model that is democratic and representative of the collective interests of the community (CFR-LA, 2016). One such example of a collective action model that emerged post CFR rights recognition is that of Korchi Mahagrame Sabha (KMGS). KMGS is a coalition of Gram Sabhas of 87 villages in the Korchi block in Maharashtra (Figure 1). The objective of the coalition is to enable Gram Sabhas to procure and sell *tendu* leaves (*diospyros melanoxylon*) on their own.

Figure 1: Study Area at Gadchiroli District of Maharashtra, India



This study investigates the emergence of the KMGS and examines the procedures followed for NTFP procurement and sales. In the proceeding sections, the background for the emergence of KMGS and mode of operations are discussed. Furthermore, the tangible and intangible outcomes and the various challenges/uncertainties that KMGS faces in its operations are also discussed. The study recommends promoting such democratic mechanisms and increasing proliferation of the knowledge of their operation in sustainable NTFP governance.

KORCHI MAHAGRAMSABHA

Korchi is the northeastern block¹ of Gadchiroli district in Maharashtra. It has a population of 42,811, out of which, 21,087 are males and 21,724 are females (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011). Approximately 73 percent of the population is tribal. The Korchi administrative division is a backward region, which in addition to left-wing extremism, is also affected by poverty, unemployment, agrarian crisis and migration. A large proportion of the population is dependent on natural resources for their subsistence.

Interestingly, Korchi has approximately 65 percent of its geographical area under forests, which is predominantly good quality moist deciduous tropical forest. *Tendu* leaves from this region are of high quality and have a huge demand in the national market. In the post-CFR recognition phase, upon gaining full access to NTFPs, the villages in the region have decided to procure and sell their leaves *suo moto*.

The Gram Sabhas decision to exercise their rights over NTFPs² minimized the forest department's control on *tendu* leaf procurement and sale. Also, as the Gram Sabhas were fairly new to *tendu* marketing and trade, they were struggling to navigate the market for a fair price. The KMGS thus serves as a platform to collectively address issues faced in the process of *tendu* procuring and marketing, starting right from plucking, packaging and storage. In addition, Gram Sabhas can be directly involved in the processes of releasing tenders, conducting auctions and transportation of *tendu* leaves. They also have the opportunities to deal directly with contractors.

KMGS has its own executive and advisory committee comprised exclusively of members from the Gram Sabhas; there is no representation from NGOs, political parties, or government agencies. KMGS can only implement decisions based on the Gram Sabhas' consensus and does not have power to take decisions on behalf of the Gram Sabhas. Furthermore, decisions at the federation level are taken only after receiving approval

from the Gram Sabhas. This entire process makes the Gram Sabhas more empowered, transparent, and accountable.

In 2017, the Gram Sabhas harvested and sold the *tendu* leaves collectively for the first time in history. They organised the auctions and negotiated with contractors to get fair wages for all women and men collectors. This generated a total revenue of over Rs. 110/- million for the Gram Sabhas, of which, 80 percent was distributed to the individual collectors, and 20 percent was retained for administrative purposes (including future auctioning and forest protection) (Sahu, 2018). Records of all harvests, sales, and financial transactions were meticulously maintained, and copies were kept in the offices of the individual Gram Sabhas and the Mahagrame Sabha; copies were also given to the District Collector and Forest Department. This revealed the efficacy and highly developed skills and capacities of the Gram Sabhas.

SOCIOECONOMIC OUTCOMES

Decentralisation and devolution of NTFP harvesting rights have been reported to improve the following: (a) increase in rural employment opportunities and income; (b) reduction in dependence on middlemen/moneylenders; (c) neutralised power in the community; (d) investment in ecosystem services; and (e) women's participation.

Increase in Rural Employment Opportunities and Income

As soon as the communities took control over *tendu* procurement and marketing processes, the perceived economic benefits brought about some positive shifts. First, as the incomes from the NTFP almost doubled, out-migration of men reduced. "Now that we can earn decent income in our own village, we prefer staying here, rather than going to urban areas and working in low-paying jobs," shared a villager from Temli in Korchi. Another community member from Bedgaon village added, "Jobs in the cities, in addition to being low-paying and exploitative, are also riddled with uncertainty. There are times when our employers deny paying the amount they promised or tell us they'll pay later and then end up never paying. Given such circumstances, if the sources of income in our village improve, why would we go to the cities?" A women farmer in the Temli village also shared, "My husband moved to the city to earn more money, which increased my responsibility, as I was not only taking care of the family but also working on our farm. With incomes in the village

improving, my husband is going to the city less often, as he is able to make enough money working here”.

Reduction in Dependence on Middlemen

One of the conditions laid down by the KMGS before entering into an agreement with the contractor is regarding the upfront payment for NTFP. Since the auctioning is mostly completed by the end of May, the payment for NTFP is made before June. This provides crucial cash income to the community (which is mostly agrarian) during the lean season and helps them to get their lands ready for farming. In the absence of reliable cash income during the lean season, the farmers had earlier depended on moneylenders for loans, the interest of which accumulated until the farmers were able to return the entire amount. But having income stability during the lean season has reduced the dependency of the community on moneylenders.

Neutralised Power Structures in the Community

One of the risks associated with decentralised marketing of NTFP is the capture and control of income by the elites. This risk is mitigated by KMGS, because of convergence of Gram Sabhas from different villages. Additionally, the meetings of KMGS are widely attended by the community members and the records of the *tendu* collection and sale are accessible to all the members. This transparency and accountability in the system addresses inequitable resource distribution and exploitation by elites.

Increased Investment in Ecosystems and the Social Sector

With the income of the Gram Sabhas increasing, the villages are improving their ecosystems and taking measures for soil erosion control and afforestation. Simultaneously, Gram Sabhas are improving the water supply, education, health, and sanitation of villages.

Increase in Women's Participation

With increased participation in socioeconomic activities, the women across the villages are empowered. The villages in Korchi have an almost three decade-long successful history of women's self-help groups. There are special FRA workshops conducted exclusively for women in forest-related activities and women empowerment.

These are remarkable developments, wherein recognition of rights over forests and forest products seems to have kick-started a process of

economic development and empowerment in one of the poorest districts of India.

CHALLENGES IN EXERCISING HARVESTING RIGHTS AND MARKETING

Impressive as the model of KMGS might appear, it is associated with various challenges, some of them stemming from systemic issues such as the Goods and Services Tax, 2016, demonetisation, and lack of adequate administrative support; and also other mostly context-based issues such as mining, contractors' monopoly, armed conflict, and political dynamics. Some of these challenges are because of unaddressed issues at the time of conceptualisation and teething problems associated with the implementation of new models. For example, after experiencing success in the collection and sale of *tendu* leaves in 2017, the Gram Sabhas spent Rs. 60,000/- inserting advertisements in popular dailies in 2018 regarding the auctioning of *tendu* leaves. On the auctioning day, however, not a single contractor turned up. This complete boycott by the contractors threw up some critical questions: Why were the same contractors who were so eager to buy *tendu* leaves last year completely absent this year? Is the market really weak? Is this because GST of 18 percent has been imposed on *tendu* leaves? Is it because of demonetisation? Or are there some other deeper underlying causes? Does this smell of a larger conspiracy to undermine the political and economic power of the Gram Sabhas? Some members were aware of similar boycotts by contractors in other *talukas* as well. When representatives of those Gram Sabhas went to the district administration for advise, they were informed "these are your rights you figure out how to sell your *tendu*, we cannot do anything in this".

As the area has rich iron ore deposits, the villages experience constant pressure from mining companies. Villages like Sahlegaon and Zendhepar are still dealing with legal notices and public hearings. Villages are apprehensive about receiving legal notices from the State giving clearances for mining activity. The KMGS offers a channel/platform to discuss ways to prevent mining and seek solidarity from the other member villages. The presence of Naxalites in the region has also posed challenges for the villagers as they face identity issues from the State. Political pressure is also experienced from those who wish to use forums like the KMGS to fulfill their party agenda; such processes are perceived to be disruptive and impose huge risks in the operation of the Mahagramsabha.

CONCLUSION

KMGS is a striking example of how collective action with statutory powers can bring material benefits to forest dwellers and also lead to empowerment of marginalised groups and social transformation in rural areas. The case study shows how when communities are increasingly faced with situations that require concerted and coordinated responses on a larger geographic scale come together to build supportive alliances. However, such processes are undermined with political pressure, armed conflict, gender and caste discrimination, and challenges of economic growth.

It is too early to predict the future direction and growth of the KMGS. Uncertainties abound regarding the community's ability to manage resources sustainably, the continuity of democratic functioning of the Gram Sabhas, achievement of FRA goals, that is, justice and equity for all forest dwelling communities. At this point, however, it is necessary to identify and support collective action mechanisms which promote democracy and equity.

NOTES

1. For administrative purposes, Maharashtra is divided into 36 districts. Each district is further divided into sub-divisions. Each of these sub-divisions are then divided into sub-districts. Gadchiroli is the northeastern district of Maharashtra. It is divided into three sub-divisions. Each of these sub-divisions has four sub-districts/blocks, totalling to 12 sub-districts/blocks (called *taluka* in the local language).
2. The Maharashtra government's notification on 19 January 2015 gave two options to Gram Sabhas regarding the Panchayat's Extension to Scheduled Areas to harvest and sell their NTFPs. Option 1: Continuation of the traditional NTFP management regime where the NTFP harvest, collection, and marketing is controlled by the Maharashtra Forest Department. Option 2: Initiative to be taken by Gram Sabhas in harvesting, collecting, and marketing of NTFPs.

REFERENCES

- Agarwal, S. : Tendu Finds No Takers; No Contractor Turns Up for Auction in Maharashtra, *DownToEarth*, 12 April 2018. Available online at <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/forests/tendu-finds-no-takers-no-contractor-turns-up-for-auction-in-maharashtra-60093> (Accessed on 10 December 2018).

- 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. Available online at <https://www.fra.org.in/document/Promise%20and%20Performance%20Report.pdf> (Accessed on 6 February 2017).
- India: Ministry of Home Affairs
2011 : *Census of India*, New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner.
- Planning Commission
2013 : *12th Five Year Plan*, New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
- Kohli, K.
2015 : *Post-CFR Scenarios in Central Indian Landscape: Prioritising Issues and Developing Support Mechanisms: A Scoping Study*, Anand: Foundation For Ecological Security. Available online at <http://fes.org.in/studies/post-cfr-scenarios-central-indian-landscape.pdf> (Accessed on 10 January 2019).
- Lele, S., Venkat Ramanujam, R. and Rai, J.
2015 : Co-operative Procurement and Marketing of Tendu Leaves in Madhya Pradesh: Image and Reality, *Environment and Development Discussion Paper No. 3*, Bengaluru: Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment. Available online at https://www.atree.org/sites/default/files/discussion_papers/tendu_patta_web.pdf (Accessed on 10 December 2018).
- Ostrom, E.
1990 : *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sahu, G.
2018 : Minor Forest Produce, Major Returns, *The Indian Express*, 11 June 2018. Available online at <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/maharashtra-tribal-land-claims-rejected-land-acquisition-devendra-fadnavis-scheduled-tribes-forest-rights-act-5212140/> (Accessed on 10 December 2018).