Taking Ownership : Democratic Changes in Community Forest Rights in Maharashtra

Taking Ownership : A collection of lived experiences, resilience, and voices from forests of Vidarbha, Maharashtra

The ever-challenging, untiring and impactful work of three organisations; Akshay Seva Sanstha, Lavari Gram Sabha, and Navi Ummed, in the realm of 'Community Forest Rights' is the foundation of this knowledge-resource. Their respective team members have contributed immensely to this book.

Special Thanks to the **gram sabha members, elders, women and youth of Kajipod Lavari, and Vasala Makta villages** who underscored community forest rights as expression of their symbiotic relationship with Nature. Community forest rights are about their freedom, livelihood, identity and thriving.

Mridula Chari, an independent environment-focused journalist has brought this book to life by careful listening, capturing people's insightful storytelling with honesty and respect, and lucidly writing them to build this knowledge-resource.

The CORO India team members have facilitated the processes of claiming forest rights along with these three partner organisations, and also facilitated all the documentation, meetings, workshops, and other processes that were crucial to making of this book.

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Setting the stage: What is CFR and why is it important?

Mendha Lekha was the first village in India to receive community forest rights in 2011 under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006. Mendha Lekha is a Gond village in Dhanora taluka of Gadchiroli district in Maharashtra, which has become famous for its pioneering work in the conservation, harvesting and sales of non-timber forest products, particularly of bamboo. Mendha Lekha had a gram sabha as early as 1985 and built on its long history of engagement with its rights to seek recognition under the Act. This has paid off. In Maharashtra and indeed

across India, Mendha Lekha is well known as an "adarshgaon" or "ideal village", one which has worked hard to be recognised as a pathbreaker for the Forest Rights Act, as the act is more commonly known.

Learning from the experience of Mendha Lekha and Pachgav, another early recipient of community forest rights, gram sabhas across Vidarbha have asserted themselves and taken ownership of the forest resources in and around their village. This book is an attempt to document the process by which, using grassroots leadership techniques, communities can use the Forest Rights Act to empower and chart their own course of development. In the next three chapters, this book will look at three villages in the Vidarbha region, which can lead the way in bringing the full possibilities dreamed of in the Forest Rights Act to reality.

By executing and implementing the Forest Rights Act to its fullest extent, these three villages, all from very diverse origins, have not only transformed entire economies, but have also brought profound changes to social, cultural and ecological norms. In the process, women and youth are becoming empowered and taking on leadership roles; gruelling daily wage work has been replaced by ownership of resources; and villages have acted together on the idea that collective growth is the most sustainable path of growth.

These changes have been led by grassroots leaders from within the three villages, working against opposition and indifference from government officials and nearby gram panchayats, all with limited resources. The journeys of these three villages have also been very different. One hamlet, Kajipod in Nanded district, has a history of being distanced from the participatory political processes of democracy, because of the alienation and socioeconomic exclusion dealt to it by virtue of being populated by Kolams, a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG). As grassroots leaders began to take the initiative, the people of Kajipod have asserted themselves to the point where they feel confident making requests of even the Governor of Maharashtra. Another village, in Gadchiroli district, is Lavari, which is inhabited solely by Adivasi Gonds. People in this village went from not knowing that they had received community forest rights under the Forest Rights Act in 2014 to demanding – and receiving – fair compensation for deforestation due to a power line in 2018. The final

village is Vasala Makta in Chandrapur district, which is a mixed village of multiple castes. In 2018, it joined a federation of gram sabhas that has a history of activism dating from the early 1990s. In just a few years, women in the village no longer have to work to pluck chillies from other people's fields and can instead rely on forest resources.

Varied as these stories might be, they are united by region, purpose and impact. The grassroots leaders share another thing in common: they are all alumni of CORO India's grassroots leadership programme. The programme empowers emerging social leaders to bring about profound changes in their communities with the support of an organisation that provides practical and on-site training. Critically, CORO India seeks to support people who are willing to demonstrate leadership in their own communities. Unlike some other interventions, this process emphasises the need for any change to emerge from within the community, and not to be imposed from the outside. These grassroots leaders have particular knowledge of how to navigate systems and social changes within their context, earned through their experience of working with their own communities. CORO India's role is simply to unlock, enhance and support this already-existing knowledge.

In this introduction to the book, we will first set some context about the Forest Rights Act, then about Vidarbha in Maharashtra, and finally about the GLDP itself. The subsequent chapters delve into the process of change in the three selected villages, through the point of view of leaders and ordinary residents from Kajipod in Nanded district, Lavari in Gadchiroli district and Vasala Makta in Chandrapur district. At the end, CORO India's Vidarbha team presents a set of guidelines for how to make the best use of the Forest Rights Act, including which sections of the law are applicable and also how to make use of forest resources.

This book, written on behalf of CORO India, In collaboration with the three grassroot organisations and villages attempts to document this process of training and empowerment to show the way other villages in similar circumstances can use existing constitutional processes to bring about lasting change to their communities. This documentation is meant to centre the hard work of these remarkable individuals, who have risen through immense adversity to transform the lives of the communities

around them. None of these changes could have happened without their dedication and commitment to bringing development not just to themselves, but to the people around them.

This round of documentation took place at the end of May 2023, when a team including Pramod Walde and Deepak Margade who lead CORO India's work in Vidarbha, Anita Dhurve and Rani Yedaskar, who have recently joined the Vidarbha team, Supriya Jan and Rahul Gaware from CORO India's head office in Mumbai, and this writer, independent journalist Mridula Chari, visited the three villages and their grassroots leaders, for in-depth conversations about their work until now and hopes for the future. What emerged through hours of conversation with different sets of people in the village, including women, youth gram sabhas, and federations, were fascinating and compelling stories about the possibilities for constitutional empowerment in historically marginalised circumstances.

Let us begin with the Forest Rights Act.

Changing Governance Structures : Evolution of the Forest Rights Act

The Forest Rights Act (Forest Rights Act) is a watershed legislation that recognises and protects the rights of forest-dwelling communities while promoting sustainable forest management and biodiversity conservation. The history of the Forest Rights Act is a reflection of India's evolving approach to land rights, Adivasi empowerment, and environmental conservation.

Indian bureaucracy has for years perpetuated a worldview inherited from the British that forest lands belong to the state, are resources for the state and are exclusive to the state. Adivasi communities that had for generations traditionally inhabited land marked as forest land in state maps were not welcome. When the colonial government nationalised forests, Adivasi people were forcibly alienated from their customary and traditional rights over forest areas, leading to long-term marginalisation that extends to the present day. Adivasi and forest-dwelling communities have been dispossessed from their traditional lands due to various factors such as colonial policies, development projects, and forest conservation

efforts throughout the 20th century. Their struggles for land rights and recognition laid the foundation for the eventual enactment of the Forest Rights Act.

Even today, environmentalists within the state machinery and also without, regard Adivasi people as encroachers and poachers, who can only bring destruction to forests if uncontrolled. All-powerful Forest Departments across states enforce this strictly. Relocations and resettlements are common, as are court cases filed for encroachment and obstruction of government officials.

Prior to the Forest Right Act's enactment, forest conservation in India was primarily governed by the Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980. However, the focus on conservation often clashed with the rights and needs of local communities. While conservation efforts were essential, they often led to conflicts between government agencies and forest-dependent communities. This dichotomy highlighted the need for a more balanced approach that would recognize both ecological imperatives and community rights.

The Forest Rights Act replaced other prior interventions of the Forest Department to share the management of forest resources with people. One such intervention was Joint Forest Management, where a Forest Protection Committee at the village level joined hands with the state to protect and use the forest. Though the rules of joint forest management mandated equal sharing of profit, the Forest Department often delayed or underreported profit to the detriment of forest villages.

Mendha Lekha, which had a forest protection committee as early as the 1980s, had first-hand experience of the struggle for community rights. Their journey mirrors that of Kajipod, Lavari and Vasala Makta, which all had varying degrees of interaction with the forests around their villages. Forest guards stationed near Lavari and Kajipod would often illegally seize people's chicken or produce if they caught them going to collect firewood or other forest products. In some cases, they made residents undertake forced labour when they were unable to pay monetary fines. This fraught relationship with the Forest Department was the norm for decades.

The path to the enactment of the Forest Rights Act was paved by

the efforts of various civil society organisations, tribal groups, and environmental activists. Sudhakar Mahadole, a leader from Mendki near Vasala Makta, who we will meet later in this book, was a member of the drafting committee of this act, and had for years led and participated in struggles for more ownership over forest lands. These groups highlighted the rights and knowledge of forest-dwelling communities in sustainable forest management and called for legal recognition of their customary rights. The drafting of the Forest Rights Act involved consultations with stakeholders across the country. This has contributed to its comprehensive nature.

While the Forest Rights Act represented a landmark in recognizing the rights of forest-dwelling communities, its implementation faces several challenges. A lack of awareness among both communities and government officials, bureaucratic hurdles, and resistance from vested interests hindered the efficient implementation of the Act. Some critics also raised concerns about potential misuse of the Act for commercial exploitation of forests.

Despite challenges, the Forest Rights Act has led to transformative changes in the lives of forest-dwelling communities. By legally recognizing their rights, the Act has empowered these communities to assert control over their resources and participate in decision-making processes. This recognition has also contributed to poverty reduction, improved livelihoods and in some cases, social transformation. Additionally, the Act's emphasis on community-based conservation has shown positive results in terms of forest regeneration and biodiversity conservation.

Advocacy groups and civil society organizations continue to work towards enhancing awareness, streamlining implementation, and addressing emerging challenges. The Act's potential to foster inclusive development while conserving the environment underscores its ongoing relevance.

The Forest Rights Act of India rectifies historical injustices, empowers marginalised communities, and harmonises conservation efforts through granting rights to indigenous and forest-dwelling populations. Through recognizing traditional knowledge, promoting sustainable practices, and fostering participatory governance, the Act embodies a holistic approach

Key provisions :

Recognition of rights : The Forest Rights Act recognizes the rights of forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers over their ancestral lands and resources. It acknowledges both individual and community rights, including rights to cultivation, habitation, and use of minor forest produce.

Land rights : The Forest Rights Act recognises individual and community rights over land. This includes the right to cultivate and reside on forest land that was traditionally used by forest-dwelling communities. These include community forest rights and individual forest rights.

Community Forest Rights : The Forest Rights Act empowers communities to manage and protect their community forest resources, enabling them to play a central role in conservation efforts. This provision aims to balance ecological concerns with local knowledge and practices.

Individual Forest Rights : The Forest Rights Act grants individuals the right to cultivate on plots of land that are under the control of the Forest Department. These rights restore the traditional practice of farming particularly to Adivasi communities.

Conservation : The Forest Rights Act emphasises the importance of sustainable forest management and biodiversity conservation. It recognizes the crucial role that forest-dwelling communities play in conserving the environment and traditional knowledge.

Recognition of other rights In addition to land and resource rights, the Forest Rights Act also acknowledges the right to protect and preserve cultural and religious traditions, and it seeks to prevent eviction of forest-dwelling communities from their lands, which remains a serious problem till today.

to land rights and environmental stewardship. Its journey from advocacy to legislation reflects the spirit of collaboration between civil society, communities, and the government in shaping a more equitable and sustainable future.

The journey of implementing the Forest Rights Act has been far from smooth. This has not been helped by the bureaucratic hurdle of filing claims, which requires extensive documentation and scrutiny from the level of the gram sabha to the state. As we will describe in an appendix to this book, not only is raising a claim cumbersome, the process of implementing community forest rights involves a great deal of unity amid struggles. For marginalised communities, this raised the barrier to accessing the process. The recently amended rules for the Forest Conservation Act further reduce the powers of gram sabhas to make these claims. The Forest Rights Act clashes with other laws and policies, including that of wildlife protection and the Forest Conservation Act itself. These conflicts lead to confusion and delays in the implementation of forest rights.

Numerous challenges have hindered the effective execution of the Act, ranging from bureaucratic hurdles to resistance from vested interests. Since 2006, only around 50% of the claims raised under the Forest Rights Act have been granted. Maharashtra has approved 58.8% of community forest rights claims and 45.5% of individual forest rights claims. The poorest performing state, Uttarakhand, has accepted 184 IFR claims and only one CFR claim. These figures gained urgency when the Supreme Court in February 2019 said that "encroachers" whose claims had not been recognised should be evicted from forest lands. This order was subsequently stayed.

The nature of interactions with the Forest Departments has also changed.Once they receive CFR, gram sabhas can begin to harvest and sell non-timber forest products including bamboo, tendu, mahua, gum, charoli and hirda. Villages can develop their livelihoods while conserving the forests around them. This is when they often come into conflict with Forest Departments.

Mapping the Area : Vidarbha and its Contex

Vidarbha, a region located in the eastern part of the state of Maharashtra, has a rich and complex social and political history that spans centuries. Nagpur, at the heart of Vidarbha, is Maharashtra's second capital. Today there are eleven districts and two divisions in the Vidarbha region, which is now bordered by Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Telangana. Historically, socially, politically and geographically, Vidarbha is different from other Maharashtra regions. Vidarbha has the highest level of natural resources, but is behind in development.

The history of Vidarbha is marked by cultural diversity, economic fluctuations, agrarian struggles, and political transformations. From ancient times to the present day, Vidarbha's trajectory has been shaped by various factors, including its geographical location, societal dynamics, and interactions with ruling powers.

After India gained independence in 1947, Vidarbha was initially a part of Madhya Pradesh and became a part of the newly formed state of Maharashtra in 1960 after the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement. Power in Vidarbha has largely remained in the hands of land-owning Kunbis, who are an OBC community linked closely to Marathas from other parts of the state. Vidarbha also has the highest population of Adivasis in the state, as well as the vastest tracts of forest lands. These communities include Gonds, Pardhans and Kolams.

Maharashtra has a vibrant history of social movements and struggles. Vidarbha has been no less. Baburao Shedmake, a prominent Gond independence fighter, is from Vidarbha.

These communities have historically depended on forests for their sustenance, cultural practices, and traditional ways of life. However, colonial and post-colonial policies often led to the displacement and marginalisation of these communities, as their rights to the land and resources were neglected or undermined.

Though the area is rich in resources, development in this region has lagged behind. This includes access to basic services like healthcare and education, as well as non-exploitative employment opportunities.

Turning Our Lense Inward : How We Do What We Do

CORO (Community of Resource Organisations) India was founded in 1989. Based in Mumbai, the organisation works with marginalised people of various backgrounds. Its vision is to create a society based on equality and justice, with no discrimination based on caste, gender, class, religion, region, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and age, amongst other factors.

CORO India began a paraprofessional course in social work with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and Nirmala Niketan in 1996. Within five years, they had established techniques to identify and widen the perspectives of potential grassroot leaders. In 2002, with an aim to expand their reach, CORO India started the Centre for Grassroots Leadership to allow access to leadership techniques without the barriers of education or social location.

Two years later, in 2004, CORO India began to run a pilot Leadership Development programme to train these leaders. Until this point, particularly in academia and non-profit spaces, Grassroot Leadshipship Development was exclusively tailored to academicians and heads of institutions. They were not meant for people coming from the grassroots who had a wealth of their own experience but not in the vocabulary of social change that was prevalent in more elite circles.

While 34 of the first 40 Grassroot Leaders were from Mumbai, there were a few Grassroot Leaders from other parts of Maharashtra, including Vidarbha. Some of whom we will meet later in this book. The programme united their grassroots leadership backgrounds with techniques that enabled them to make sustained interventions in their spheres of influence.

Maharashtra has a long and vibrant history of progressive social movements. There are thousands of NGOs and issues in the state. Instead of replicating the work that they were already doing, CORO India decided to focus on building their grassroots leadership capacity. By 2011, they had structured a programme based on this, with a well-structured team outside Mumbai. This was a new kind of work for CORO India, because for the first time, they were working with remote teams in a new kind of social work. In Marathwada, from 2009 to 2015, CORO

India facilitated the process of making a group of 26 single women, showing that collective action could bring positive change. By 2015, the grassroots leadership programme had become so successful that people eagerly awaited announcements for Grassroot Leaders Development Program. Today, CORO India has grassroots leaders in 122 blocks of Rajasthan and 249 Maharashtra. There are a total of 1,688 leaders from 550 organisations.

From communities, For Communities : Grassroots Leadership Development

CORO India has started the process of working for community forest rights in 121 villages in Vidarbha through its grassroots leadership development programme. Most of the grassroots leaders in Vidarbha are Adivasis. In Maharashtra, 70% of the leaders are women. Many don't have an educational background in social work, though since they are nominated by organisations, they are active in their own communities. These leaders change not just at the personal and family level, but also help to grow systems and facilitate the process of knowledge generation and dissemination. One grassroots leader, Ganga Jawarkar from Dharani Melghat, was the first woman in the village to pass her 10th standard exams. She became a sarpanch thrice, second time elected president of farmer producer in market and now helps eight other gram panchayats in the CFR process.

There are three aims of CORO India with its grassroots leadership programme: leadership development, organisation development and community-led development. This can involve work such as campaigns against caste atrocities, the development of women and leading campaigns for youth. Grassroots leaders can choose issues relevant to the regions they come from. Leaders from Marathwada often work on access to water. In Konkan, leaders learn how to navigate bureaucracy. Grassroot Leaders from Vidarbha often focus on the community forest rights and Panchayats (Extension of Scheduled Areas) Act process. Where people organise and make demands, the system must respond.

Every year, CORO India invite for applications for the grassroots leadership programme. People who are already linked to CORO India's

network, or from grassroots organisations are eligible to apply. Once they receive the forms, CORO India scrutinises them. They see if the forms are correctly filled and also check if the organisation has clarity on the issues it works on. At the next stage, the CORO India team visits organisations to see their work first-hand. Only after that is the interview stage, where they have a free-flowing discussion about the work, achievements and impact of the applicants. Finally they select grassroot organisations and leaders each year.

Over the course of the year-long programme, there are five training modules. The idea is that the Grassroots Leadership Development Programme should promote leaders who work with their own communities and are able to answer questions about the needs of the community.

The first module is about understanding oneself. People have opinions and judgments about others, but often find it difficult to assess themselves. Next, grassroots leaders work to understand the geographical, social, cultural, political context of their work area, as well as thinking about resources, amenities and facilities. After this, discussions shift to what a leader is and should be. The first assignment is to go to their community and create a participatory process where they work to build teams at the ground level. Together, they create political maps that show which areas of which villages have the most resources, or whether Dalit or Adivasi areas have streetlights, road or crematorium access, and garbage disposal. Caste discrimination often manifests in these amenities. With leadership, excluded people can demand their rightful facilities.

Grassroots leaders discuss gender equality and constitutional values in the second module of the programme. Women, including trans women, are not often part of leadership processes. They attend meetings but do not participate. They are governed by social norms. How can they be encouraged to grow? The programme also talks about participatory citizenship and the Constitution, including how caste discrimination is outlawed in the Constitution, the social context of the Constitution when it was drafted, and who were involved in its making. Discrimination is unconstitutional. The programme goes through each word of the Preamble to understand its meaning. Finally, grassroots leaders decide

what issues they want to work on, whether it is community forest rights, education or women's rights. The assignment for this module is to begin changes within their own households.

In the next module, the focus shifts to how to work in a systematic way, using research and analysis tools to collect primary and secondary data. Skills taught include how to take personal interviews and group discussions. They are next taught how to communicate and to present their views. If they don't know the answer, instructors encourage them to admit that they do not but that they will find out. Finally, they learn how to use the Right to Information Act. The assignment here is to file an RTI, which will increase their knowledge and demonstrates seriousness to their community.

The fourth module talks about planning the process of getting to the root of issues, whether it is education, drinking water or access to forest lands. The grassroots leaders make annual plans for the next few years and together, they brainstorm strategies and programmes to make this a reality.

The fifth and final module teaches grassroots leaders advocacy, whether it is working with the administration, accessing the media or approaching legislators. CORO India's regional teams help them to make this a reality, whether it is meeting with uncooperative bureaucrats or holding a public hearing. One of the assignments at this stage is to meet the local MLA and request them to raise your issues in the legislature. The emphasis always is to put forth one's needs in legal ways.

Throughout the year of training, regional coordinators visit each grassroots leader once every month with inputs, capacity training and training of heads of organisation. Once the programme is over, the idea is that their organisations now have the resources to continue this work on their own. Around 80% of the grassroots leaders in Vidarbha return for periodic regional campaigns, while the regional coordinators continue to give inputs though with less frequency.

With this framework in place, let us now move on to these remarkable stories of people who have transformed their communities in a matter of a few years.

Glossary

CFR : Community forest rights, a section of the Forest Rights Act which gives an entire village collective rights over a section of the forest.

CFR Management Committee : A committee that helps to implement plans for community forest rights.

Fali : Tendu collection centre

FCA : Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980

FD : Forest Department, the government's body that manages forests across India

FRA/Forest Rights Act : Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006

GLDP : Grassroots Leadership Development Program, facilitated by CORO India.

GR : Government resolution, a formal document that outlines intended government action.

IFR : Individual Forest Rights, where the Forest Department gives people land to conduct farming on forest land.

JFM : Joint Forest Management, a type of forest management where the Forest Department and villages shared the proceeds of sale of NTFPs.

Mukhia : Traditional village chief

NREGA : Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005

NTFPs : Non-timber Forest Products, materials such as seeds, roots, leaves, and fruit that can be gathered from forests and sold in markets or used domestically.

PESA : Panchayats (Extension of Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996

PVTG : Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, a subclassification of Scheduled Tribes

Vidarbha : A culturally distinct region of eastern Maharashtra.

Transforming Political Agency : The Story of Kajipod

Kashinath Salam, a 37-year-old man from a small Adivasi village in Nanded district, sat in nervous silence in a group of young activists and local leaders gathered in Mahad in western Maharashtra in 2016. It was the first day of a one-year Grassroot Leadership Development for grassroots leaders, organised by CORO India. He watched as others in the group spoke about their work, while facilitators taught the group about constitutional values and leadership. Kashinath is from Kajipod, a small hamlet in Kinvat taluka, which is one of only two Adivasi blocks in the entire Marathwada division. For years, Kashinath had worked to secure various forest and settlement rights for his people. But here, in the presence of others, he was silent.

The tamarind tree in Kajipod, serving as a shelter space for community meetings.

Seven years later, Kashinath, now 43, laughs as he recounts his nervousness. “I had to sit with so many people that I got bewildered,” he said, talking about his experience with the Grassroot Leadership Development. “When they asked me why I didn’t talk, I said I don’t understand what is going on! I don’t understand what is being said or what should be said.”

Slowly, though, he began to gain confidence. First, he began to talk to the other Grassroot Leaders. Then he began contributing to group discussions and would say what was on his mind. At the end of the Grassroot Leadership Development, Kashinath remembered, laughing once again, “I became so smart that the other Grassroot Leaders would tell me to talk less!”

It had been a long journey for Kashinath. In 2015, the year before he joined the Grassroot Leadership Development, he had almost decided to give up his work as an activist working to get individual and community forest rights implemented in Kajipod, simply because there was no formal settlement or gaothan for him to build a house. “I was ready to go to Javarla rather than stay here and fight with the government,” he said. “How many days would I go without a house?”

At his lowest point, a former CORO India Grassroot Leader Vasudev Todsam told him that if he had questions about activism, he should join the Grassroot Leadership Development, where he would get all his answers.

Laying the Groundwork : Kajipod Tackles Governance

Kajipod is a Kolam hamlet with only thirty houses nestled in one of the few forested areas in Nanded district. Kolam people live in Maharashtra and Telangana. Kajipod is in Nanded district in the Marathwada division of Maharashtra, near the state border with Telangana. The closest city to Kajipod is Adilabad in Telangana and the Kolami language has resonances with Dravidian languages.

The Kolams are an Adivasi group that the state government has classified as a “particularly vulnerable tribal group”. These groups are even more socially and economically marginalised than other Scheduled Tribes. Their access to education and resources is lower

than other Adivasi groups, and they typically live in hamlets secluded from main, mixed caste villages. They are systematically excluded from development parameters including education, healthcare, pakka houses, and permanent settlements. A 2008 study showed that 63% of the Kolam community were alienated from the land – meaning that they were landless and were disproportionately dependent on agricultural labour or forest produce for subsistence. (Ref: http://www.ticijournals.org/engaging-with-the-question-of-livelihood-among-scheduled-tribes-in-maharashtra-gearing-theory-and-practice-towards-emancipation/)

Kajipod was in a similar position. A primarily nomadic village for several years, around twenty families settled in their current location at Kajipod, around three kilometres from Jawarla and at the base of a hilly reserved forest, only around 25 years ago. For years, people gathered and sold firewood from the forest for monetary subsistence. This was gruelling physical labour that has had long-term impacts on the health of the women who used to carry these bundles on their heads and walk to the marketplace in Mandvi, which is three kilometres from Kajipod. The Kolam people also maintained farms at the top of the hill adjacent to their village, where they "encroached" upon land under the stewardship of the Forest Department. There was no power line to the village. People instead illegally set up wires from the grid. Nor were there roads or water facilities; people had to get water from a small pipeline far away from their settlement. Politically, they did not participate in gram panchayat

Women leaders engaging in a discussion during the village development process.

Gramsabha Meeting in Kajipod

proceedings in the Gond-dominated main village of Jawarla. Even if they attended meetings there, they were never encouraged to speak or to present their concerns to the larger community. The Kolams were isolated and marginalised, and that might have been the end of their story.

But then the Forest Rights Act was passed in 2006. That changed everything.

An organisation called the Navi Ummed Sanstha had begun to work in Kajipod two years earlier in 2004. Amit Kulkarni, who later founded this organisation, had participated in a Grassroot Leadership Development organised by another organisation called Econet, based in Pune. Amit had surveyed Kinvat taluka in the eastern part of Nanded district. He found that though Nanded was a part of Marathwada, Kinvat had more in common geographically and culturally with the neighbouring district of Yavatmal in Vidarbha. Kinvat is one of only two blocks in all Marathwada that has a dominant Adivasi population. Amit also found that there was the problem of "encroachment", people gathered non-timber forest products, and this area was eligible for rights under the Panchayats (Extension of Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996.

With the support of Econet, Amit and Vasudev worked with the people of Kajipod to understand their problems.

"When we first went to Kajipod, people would not even talk to us," Vasudev said. He is from the Gond community and felt a kinship with the

Kolams. “Though I was Gond, I could speak their language. We used to directly go into their houses and talk because I was someone from their own community. We slept in the same places on the floor, ate together, went to the forest together. We lived exactly as they did.”

Other NGOs had come and gone, making unkept promises and people were reluctant to trust that Navi Ummed Sanstha could be any different. The organisation saw the Forest Rights Act as an opportunity.

Amit, Vasudev, Kashinath, Madhavrao Maraskole, Maruti Tekam and around seven to eight others met one day in 2008. Kashinath was then around 26 years old and the most educated of the group, having passed his tenth standard exams. His father was active in Kajipod and his mother was known for her “daring” because she was unafraid of going to the main village.

In that meeting, they made a list of goals they envisioned for the village. This included a host of rights that they were entitled to under PESA, to gather non-timber forest products, and the Forest Rights Act. They decided that their first goal would be to secure individual forest rights or IFR titles for the land that they cultivated on top of the hill near their village. Until now, the Forest Department treated them as encroachers, often serving them with eviction notices and fines. Through the Forest Rights Act, they could become custodians of their own lands. If they received these titles people would perhaps come to trust the Navi Ummed organisation.

“Leaders had come before the elections and made big promises,” Amit said. “They even gave people money. But they did nothing. We said we don’t want any money.” The only expenditure for the villagers was on photocopies and travel to block offices.

In 2009, they began the process for applying for individual forest rights. The small group of activists from the village went to the Tribal Department and to the sub-divisional officer in the district. Navi Ummed showed them how to fill the forms. It was a good time to apply for these rights. In the run-up to elections in October 2009, the state had put pressure on bureaucracy to implement the Forest Rights Act. Local authorities were actively searching for villages whose claims they could recognise.

The people of Kajipod were also putting pressure on the administration. In 2009-10, Sudhakar Mahadole, an established social activist from Chandrapur district, was leading a movement to secure forest rights in Vidarbha. CORO India was also a part of this. (Read more about Sudhakar Mahadole in the chapter about Vasala Makta.) The people of Kajipod were among the few representatives of the Marathwada region who attended rallies at Nagpur. This involvement marked a significant step in their growth as political actors.

The people of Kajipod also wanted to apply for community forest rights or CFR at the same time as they applied for IFR. But they were concerned that they would receive only one or another of the two claims. When the sub-divisional magistrate said that they would accept only IFR claims, they submitted that first.

It was around this time that Navi Ummed and Kajipod came into contact with CORO India. Vasudev applied for a grassroots leadership development programme with CORO India, through Navi Ummed. He received the Grassroot Leadership Development in 2010. At the time, Vijay Dethe was the regional coordinator for CORO in the Vidarbha region, and he closely led efforts to bring forest rights to the hamlet.

One of the assignments of the Grassroot Leadership Development was to build a support group in the village so that not only would community members be involved in their own development, but also so that as a leader, the Grassroot Leaders would not have to work alone. The underlying philosophy of the leadership is to build a multi-level structure of leadership so that the entire burden is not on one individual and that after the Grassroot Leadership Development is over, the leaders should have resources to continue their work independently. Kashinath, Krishna, Sandhya Giri and Anita Gurmole were members of Vasudev's support group. They also went on to become Grassroot Leaders under the GLDP.

Vasudev used his time at the Grassroot Leadership Development to secure CFR claims for Kajipod. Like Kashinath, he too was scared of speaking in public. But over the year of the grassroot leadership programme, he built up his courage and began to implement these leadership skills.

Local Forest Produce and Medicinal Plants on Display.

Kajipod faced a curious problem. By 2010, community forest rights were commonly applied in districts in the neighbouring division of Vidarbha in eastern Maharashtra. Unlike district officials in Vidarbha who had become familiar with the procedure of processing claims to forest rights under the Forest Rights Act, officials in Nanded in Marathwada had to be persuaded to accept that Kajipod's claims were legitimate.

The sub-divisional officer in charge of the forest rights committee in Nanded was doubtful about whether one village could receive both IFR and CFR. Kajipod's team of activists had taken with them a dossier of supporting documents, showing accepted CFR claims from Vidarbha. "This is Marathwada," the officer objected. The Forest Rights Act, he said, did not apply to Marathwada.

Kashinath said. "That [Vidarbha] is in Maharashtra, but this [Marathwada] is also Maharashtra. You will have to give us this land."

The sub-divisional officer posed other objections. "'Why do you need community forest rights'," Kashinath recalls the officer asking their delegation. "'You have farms and places for your houses. Why do you need collective rights over the forest?'"

The team remained firm. "We said, 'Today you have given us these rights, but tomorrow another official might not," Kashinath said. "Then where will we get our wood and forest produce from? If we can't get it from the jungle, then where?'"

The sub-divisional officer also said that if Kajipod received CFR, they would continue to chop firewood and so strip the forest bare. Vasudev told him that at that point, the only livelihood available to people was that of collecting firewood. That was the only resource they were allowed to gather. But over time, the people of Kajipod had begun to plant palas, lac and even fruit trees such as sitafal. They were diversifying their resource pool. "We were dependent on the forests when there was only firewood," Vasudev told the sub-divisional collector. "Now we have farms [through IFR] so we can think of how to protect and secure the forests."

Their determination paid off. The Collector finally gave his approval to begin processing the claim.

The sub-divisional officer helped them once they submitted the claim. For three months, the official said their application was being processed.

The sub-divisional official peppered them with questions: what kind of demand this was, how much land they used for grazing, how far in the forest they went to collect forest produce, proof of identity and caste.

"Our men had to learn how to make the claim from the Econet people," said Dambai, an elder from Kajipod. "It was difficult to talk to sahebs."

One such proof that they had to declare was that they were Kolam in the first place. Though everyone knew and accepted that they were Kolams, the state speaks only the language of paperwork. "We told saheb that we stay here, our ancestors stayed here, I have claims, I have land, but I just don't have the caste certificate," Kashinath said. "Until we got proof of that identity, we did not see the benefit of our work."

Finally, Madhavrao Maraskole, mukhia of Jawarla, stepped in and vouched for them. "We knew from names and surnames who were Adivasi," Madhavrao said. "We spoke to the Collector and explained that these people have stayed here for so long; they farm here; give them the certificate and let them make their gram sabha." In the end, only one file was rejected.

The proof of identity is essential to all work that has followed. "Now if you go to other villages and ask what happened, why is there no development here, they say they don't have caste proofs with them," Kashinath said. Why? Because they do not have plots of land. Why? Because their village settlement is not formally recognised. Why? Because they do not have caste certificates.

"No other village has been asked for as many proofs as we were," Kashinath said. But because of the detailed process, when they finally received their CFR title, it was more comprehensive than any other village in the area. It covered rights for drinking, settlement, NTFP collection and grazing, and all of these were recorded painstakingly on a map.

This map too was made with the support of Econet and Navi Ummed. Over three days, the Kajipod team surveyed the village and mapped features such as the drainage pattern of the area, sources of water, and the extent of land. The Forest Department approved their final map around two months later.

The final title records both individual and community forest rights, which secured both their farmland and their village settlement. However,

the farmland they received is less than the actual area that they cultivate. Kashinath, for instance, used to farm seven acres of land. Now, he only has three acres. Nobody in the village has received more than five acres of land. Only one documentation issue now remains: to convert Kajipod from a forest village to a revenue village, which will entitle them to a wider bouquet of government schemes. The Gram Sabha has passed a resolution approving this; higher authorities have yet to act on it.

Kajipod's struggle has led the way in Kinvat. In all, 29 villages in that block have received community forest rights, following Kajipod's example. The people of Kajipod actively help other villages to participate in this process.

Developing constitutional values in Grassroots leadership

This change in material circumstances has led to profound changes in the village.

Our GLDP Leader, Kashinath Salam, with village leader Dambai in Kajipod.

Kashinath was able to build a pakka house for himself in 2016, with aid from the government. Vasudev had encouraged Kashinath to apply for the grassroots leadership programme in 2013 itself. When he was selected, Kashinath declined it: he was scared it would be too big a step for him. He continued to work with Vasudev, however. It was after he rejected the Grassroot Leadership Development that he began to consider moving away from Kajipod to Jawarla because he no longer wanted to live in a kaccha house. While Vasudev continued to encourage him to apply, Kashinath's wife Anusuya also began to urge him to reconsider. In 2015-16, Kashinath applied for and accepted the GLDP position.

Vasudev worked hard to secure CFR claims for Kajipod. Kashinath in turn used his leadership training period to help the community to implement these rights.

In the year that he became a CORO India grassroots leader, he successfully implemented schemes worth one crore rupees. One of these

CFRMC Meeting at Kajipod

gave three lakh rupees to each of the thirty households in the village to build pakka houses. Another scheme secured three lakh rupees each for fifteen people's farm wells and a third was to build a concrete road to the village.

"It was very difficult to explain [this work] to people [at home]," Kashinath said. They said that my work at the Grassroot Leadership Development was not suited to the conditions of the village. They wanted to know which official would even entertain them. "I had to work with the sarpanch, the gram sevak and the talathi. I initiated contact with the Forest Department, forest rangers and people in the Collector's office. I learned how to talk to them and what information I needed. And slowly the entire administration realised that I am a leader here."

The GLDP programme has multiple assignments. These include meeting the local MLA and getting their projects featured in local media or on social media. There is also a task to create a resources map of the village. This map is not just a geographical representation of areas in the village. It highlights amenities such as water, roads, streetlights, garbage disposal and crematoriums – and matches them to caste locations. Which areas of a village have more resources? What kind of discrimination do Dalit and Adivasi people face? In the case of Kajipod, which is home only to Kolams, the comparison was between the Gond-dominated village of Jawarla and Kajipod itself.

"Making this map changes the perspective of Grassroot Leaders," said Deepak Marghade, regional coordinator for Vidarbha at CORO India. "They get to see who is using what resources on a political, cultural and gender level."

"There were three important things I learned through the training," Kashinath said. "One was to speak the language of the Constitution. Second, was to unite people. The third was that leadership cannot be done alone. You need to train other people mentally. That is when leadership can happen. Only after I trained them did I truly become a leader."

Evolution of Livelihood: Changing the Economic Landscape

The first thing anyone notices about Dambai Kodape, 42, is her candour and self-confidence. An older resident of Kajipod, she led a group discussion with women, one blazing hot afternoon in May, under the shade of an awning roofed with dried leaves. Dambai remembers the village from her childhood – she grew up in Kajipod, went to Telangana to marry, was unhappy and returned to the village of her youth within a few years. She has stayed in Kajipod ever since.

Women from Kajipod making handmade bamboo articles from forest produce, a major source of livelihood.

Before the village's community forest rights claim was recognised, people subsisted on the income from cutting bamboo and firewood, Dambai said. Women would carry massive bundles of wood, or modis, on their heads, and walk all the way from Kajipod to Mandvi, three kilometres away.

"We got the modis from the jungle and sold them in the town," Dambai explained. This was strenuous work, causing long-lasting pain in their chest and shoulders. People used to go in pairs to cut bamboo and to the town. One person would sell the modis for a meagre one to two rupees, and the other would

use that money to buy rice, oil and other ration essentials. But this work lasted only three to four months in a year. At other times, the Forest Department would employ them to cut bamboo. When harvest season came, people would work as agricultural labourers on others' farms.

It was a tough life, Dambai said. Though people in the village have traditionally harvested produce such as mahua or firewood from the forest, the Forest Department did not approve. Since Kajipod's residents often did not have enough money to pay a fine, the department instead illegally confiscated their crops, or seized their chickens, dal or jowar. Sometimes, they would tell the residents to do a day of 'voluntary' labour without pay.

Dambai and other women collected water for daily use from a nala or gutter, with extremely poor quality. This shocked the state Governor when he visited their village in 2018. The Governor then released funds to build a water storage tank.

Nor was there any permanent settlement. People used to be nomadic, in a tradition of shifting harvesting. The size of the village kept changing, as people sometimes migrated to nearby towns for economic sustenance or shifted to different plots after a dispute. From 12 to 13 houses, there are now around 30 to 32 houses. There used to be three to four hamlets like Kajipod in the area. Kajipod is now the last one to remain.

With community forest rights, things began to change. For one, forest fires decreased as people took ownership of preventing them. The village itself settled in the place that Kajipod is located today. Daily wages increased from around three to five rupees to Rs. 100 to Rs. 150 today. Though they still cut bamboo, their allocated stand of bamboos is around ten kilometres away, near an abandoned settlement. Still, people now have the economic resources to hire tempos and tractors to transport the bamboo for sale. More, they have begun to make secondary products from bamboo, such as stools, fences, and baskets. Women from the village have a contract to sell these at Nanded railway station on a weekly basis. The Tribal Welfare Department has aided them with apparatus to collect and sell honey.

Other material amenities have come in. Earlier, the only television was in the local school. Now, there is one in every house. People have

mobile phones and motorbikes, though girls do not yet have access to them. Education began through night schools established under the Sarva Shikshan Abhiyan in the 1990s. Today there is a school up to the 7th standard in Jawarla, expanded from the primary school until the 4th standard.

The department of agriculture and the Adivasi development department has been active in Kajipod. They have contributed tin roofs, ladders, houses, cycles, fertilisers and pesticides, sheds and sewing machines. "When the government wants to implement any new scheme, they come to us first," Kashinath said proudly. "Today when we want to build a house, then we can do it. We don't need to ask the government for permission or give documents to them."

With changes in material circumstances, the people of Kajipod also began to assert themselves politically. One such instance came in 2018, when C. Vidyasagar Rao, then the Governor of Maharashtra, visited Nanded. Madhavrao, the mukhia of Jawarla, recounted the story, late one evening in May.

"When the governor came, we told the tehsildar to arrange for a tempo to bring the people of Kajipod to Jawarla," he said. "We thought it would be better for them than walking all the way. But they said no. We are not going to him. Let him come to us. The governor saheb should come to our pod. And the governor really went there on his own and saw their houses.

"[People from Kajipod] would ask nothing from the government," Madhavrao said. "The government had to go to them." And when it did, people would retreat to the forest, for fear of being arrested or beaten. But the changes have been profound. People who never used to talk in public are now talking and protesting. They are demanding space and equality in treatment. Earlier, they were scared and accepted only as much as they received. That is the change that has come. If there is no water, they ask, why is there no water. They see themselves as citizens.

Shifts in culture: Changing menstrual taboos

Long held social customs are beginning to change incrementally. One such custom is that of isolating menstruating women. Even today, when

Group of women together run oil process unit

a woman is menstruating, she sits outside the house, in the courtyard for the five to seven days that her period lasts. She is given food separately and bathes apart from other women. People who see them waiting outside know not to approach them as their period is ongoing.

Over time, as women enter the workforce, they are slowly beginning to change these practices. Earlier, women used to get food on leaves or used plates made of clay, Dambai said. Now, slowly, they are allowed to use utensils from the house.

"We tell grassroot leaders to start changing their behaviour with women in their household," explained Pramod Walde, another regional coordinator for Vidarbha at Coro. "We ask how they behave with them. Women also tell about how they are not allowed to speak, not educated, and have to marry early. Women eat after everyone has eaten. People start talking about that. Can we change that starting from our own house?"

"Ladies are the ones who can change these customs," Kashinath said. In his own family, he has tried to convince his wife Anusuya to not leave the house during her period. She is reluctant to do so given social pressures to conform. He believes that the best way to do this will be to send women for training programmes such as the ones Coro holds. "We have seen the outside world, that's why we came to change," he said. "That's what women need to do, get experience in the world, one step at a time."

Women's imaginations for themselves are shifting. Instead of immediately starting farm work, they should first go to school, even if it

is a residential ashramshala, Dambai said. There will be problems if they study and don't get jobs, but they can still marry and do housework. She would not mind if younger girls from the village began to work in shops. Indeed, women already go to Nanded to sell the bamboo products that people make. Girls are also getting married later in life. From marriages at 10 to 12 years of age, people are now waiting until they reach adulthood.

Other practices are shifting. Burning firewood used to cause women's eyes to burn. Dambai proudly demonstrated a smokeless stove that Amit had brought to the village. "Earlier, our eyes burned so much that even rubbing them would not help. That has changed now."

"People used to ask why Adivasis do not mingle or live with 'lok'," said Ajay Atram, a young vaidu in Kajipod. He means mainstream society. Any time any official visited their village, people would routinely hide in forests. People are less scared now. It used to be compulsory to bathe before entering the house after anyone visited the main village market. Now, that happens less frequently.

Dambai has a simple explanation. "We might not want to go to the forest, but we also would not like to work in Mandvi or Jawarla [the nearby towns]. The atmosphere is so filthy that after going there, we don't even feel like drinking water from there. Our village is clean."

Dreaming large : The way forward

As a village inhabited only by one scheduled tribe community, Kajipod has made great leaps. This is even more remarkable when you see that they are classified as particularly vulnerable, excluded even beyond the norm from social and economic development. These changes are an achievement for a community once regarded as voiceless.

"We never thought that we would see this kind of change," Dambai mused. The village has developed beyond what it was in their parents' generation. "We would just watch the trees grow. Then Navi Ummed came and since then we have improved so much. We didn't even have a village settlement, but after we got our titles, everything has improved."

The people of Kajipod have developed a business plan of Rs. 1 crore, making use of seed sowing, honey, and their bamboo business. They plan to involve 100 Kolam youth around the area in implementing these plans.

Around five years ago, the department of agriculture approved farm wells for their plots at the top of a hill. “We wanted lift irrigation so that all farmers would get water, but since we got permission for wells, we built those,” Kashinath said. What they did not know, however, is that the soil on the hilltop was soft; both wells have since collapsed.

Of some concern now is the increasing dependence of people on micro loans from moneylenders in Adilabad, said Dambai. Villagers have attempted to grow bamboo closer to their settlement, to cut down the long distances they must travel for that plant. For two years, their crop got damaged because of animals from the forest. The Collector has yet to send someone to do a panchnama or formal recording of the losses they faced, without which they cannot collect crop insurance. Instead, both the Collector’s office and the Forest Department advised them to install a periphery of nets around their fields.

Climate change is another pressing challenge. “Earlier we were not allowed to collect mahua and gum,” said Kashinath. “Now, we are allowed to collect it, but because of unseasonal rain, it gets destroyed.” Even traditional medicinal plants are harder to come by.

“We have saved so many things, but we have not yet saved the jungle,” Kashinath said. “If we expand the forest only then will we continue to get benefits from it.”

Water filtration and storage plant installed at kajipod through the intervention of the gram sabha.

Collective Compensation Benefits All : The story of Lavari

Pandurang Gawde, Rahul Hidami and Lalsaiji Madavi, sat in the power grid company's office in Kurkheda. There were two main representatives of the company and a few others in the room. The company's officials were exceedingly polite. They offered tea, biscuits and snacks to the trio from Lavari, a small village in Kurkheda block in Gadchiroli district.

They soon came around to the order of business. The power grid company wanted to build a power line through forest land that belonged, under the Forest Rights Act, to the people of Lavari. They had offered to

plant trees elsewhere as compensation for the loss of the original trees. But the people of Lavari did not yield. This was insufficient compensation by their reckoning, and did not account for the loss of revenue that the entire village would face for 20 years because of this.

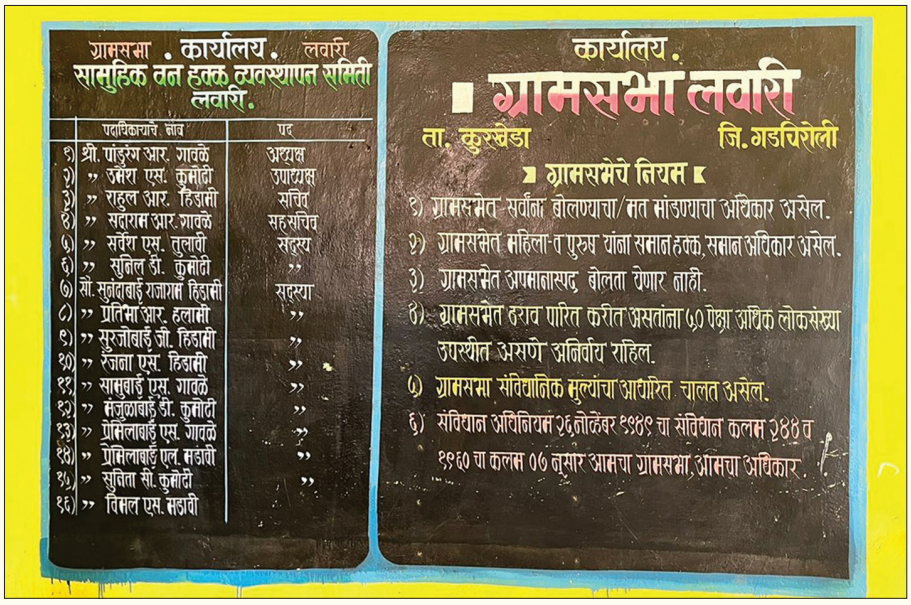
Then the power grid company officials began to offer them bribes to withdraw this protest.

The head office of the power grid company was in Kurkheda, the main town of the block by the same name in Gadchiroli district. Their offer began with two lakh rupees. The men refused. The officials then increased their offer to three lakhs, five lakhs, seven lakhs and finally, fifteen lakhs. "We will give this to you in your savings accounts," Pandurang recalled them saying. "Nobody will know that you took this money."

"We said no," Pandurang said. "So many people depend on this forest for their daily survival. We will benefit if people also benefit and get the full compensation. But if we take this, this will rupture our community. We are not going to betray our community."

The grid company officials countered. "Think of the future, your next generation. You can get a plot [of land], buy cars. So much can be done with fifteen lakh rupees."

And still, they refused.



A board at the office of the Gram Sabha in Lavari that outlining their rules and regulations.

Finding What Already Exited : Claiming Community Forest Rights

To understand the significance of this decision, it is important to see how far Lavari has come. Lavari is a small Adivasi Gond-populated village in Gadchiroli district in eastern Maharashtra. It is five kilometres from the gram panchayat Antargav, which has seven other hamlets. It is 20 kilometres from the nearest large town Kurkheda. Surrounding Lavari for 10 to 15 kilometres is a vast forested area, between which there are no other villages.

For years, the people of Lavari lived in deep poverty, similar to other villages in the area. Its distance from the main town nearby meant that people had to migrate for work. People did not have the financial capacity to buy even bicycles to commute, Pandurang said.

Today, Lavari has 103 houses, up from 94 before they got their CFR claim. The income of this village is mostly from farming paddy and collecting NTFPs.

"We were so poor that even Patils would not give us money," Subhash Durve, 27, recounted. If they took loans, Ramlal Kumbre, 28, said, they would take produce in return and would arbitrarily set interest rates. "Our only occupation was paddy farming. When we sold NTFPs, we would just sell at whatever rate they gave us." Traders would come to buy mahua and people would in turn sell mahua for rice or for salt, in an entrenched barter system. Paddy farming was the only real income and even that depended on the weather. Without a tractor to sow the field, people used to plant seeds by throwing them. If the paddy grew, then it grew. If not, they did not have the resources to replant them.

The Forest Department also used to harass them. When they caught villagers collecting or selling NTFPs, forest guards would forcibly take their chickens, alcohol or mirchi as compensation because nobody in the village had money. Worse, at a fixed time each year, forest guards would illegally coerce the entire village to give one sack of mirchi per family.

Let alone police, teachers and talathis would not come to the village. Until 2016, even contractors would not come to build roads to the village out of fear of Naxals. People were ready to do the work, but the materials would not come.

Change was made possible with the passing of the Forest Rights Act in 2006 and by the unexpected generosity of a district Collector. Mendha Lekha, famous as the first village to get community forest rights in India, campaigned from 2006 onwards to get that claim. Due to their advocacy at the district level, in 2014 the Collector granted CFR titles to every village Gadchiroli that was eligible, regardless of whether they had raised claims. The only problem was that nobody knew they had gotten this. This was the case in Lavari.

Coro India's team first visited Lavari at the end of 2015, when Deepak and Pramod went with the organisation Gram Arogya Sanstha to meet the remote village where they were working. At the beginning of January 2016, Rahul joined Coro India's Grassroot Leadership Development Programme as a Grassroot Leader, the same year as Kashinath, whose story is mentioned in the chapter on Kajipod. His project with the Grassroot Leadership Development was to strengthen the gram sabha. But to secure the CFR title and to implement the act, they needed the title to be in their possession.

The administration had handed over the title for 536 hectares under CFR to Lavari in 2015, but soon took it back, citing errors in the title. A year later, they had not returned. For the gram sabha to begin to work to implement community forest rights, they first needed the title.

A signboard at the entrance to the village of Lavari detailing the rules and regulations of the CFRMC.

"The title tells you what rights we have under the law, but we had not received the title," Rahul explained. When they went to the block revenue office, the officials there said that they had sent all titles to the collectorate at Gadchiroli. Having never been to that town, which is 100 kilometres away from Lavari, Rahul was afraid to go alone.

Deepak of Coro India wrote a request to enter the collectorate and made a plan to go together.

Early one morning in 2016, Rahul and other members of the gram sabha boarded a bus to Gadchiroli. Deepak accompanied them by bike to the Collectorate. They were confronted with a mountain of files in which their elusive title could be found. Since the administration said that they could not search for the title on their own, Deepak , Rahul and others sifted through the files painstakingly through the day until, as the sun was setting, they finally found the CFR title for Lavari.

This was a pivotal moment for the village.

Seeds of Assertion : Owning their Title

After receiving the title, the next step was to understand what they could do with this. As a part of his Grassroot Leadership Development project, Rahul led the village in surveying the village to understand what its resources were. The Forest Rights Act gives guidelines of how many members should be on a CFR management committee and a gram sabha. They decided to cut bamboo.

They first began with bamboo cutting work in 2015. This was their first assertion under the new law. Without prior implementation experience, they were scared that first time of repercussions from the Forest Department, or whether they would even be able to sell the bamboo. Ordinarily, a single person could cut 100 bamboos in a day. But when they began, they fearfully cut only 2,000 bamboos over four to five days, at the rate of 500 bamboos a day. (In 2022, by comparison, they cut up to 34,800 bamboos in three days, or 11,600 per day.)

Retaliation came that same week. Forest guards came and asked who had given them permission to cut bamboo. They said that they would fine everyone in the village Rs. 3,000 to Rs. 4,000 and would put them in jail. The officers advised all the villagers to hide some portion of the bamboo in their houses, to avoid confiscation.

“We said we have laboured for free so why should we pay a fine?” Pandurang recounted. Not only were they cutting the bamboo for free, they were also not going to profit from it. “There is a law, that is why we have cut and kept bamboo,” the leaders told the guards. “For now,

nobody has earned anything from our free labour."

When the guards insisted that they must have cut the bamboo for someone else, the people of Lavari showed their community forest rights documents and said they were willing to go to jail for this. The guards eventually backed down. Within a few days, the villagers earned Rs. 1.98 lakh from the sale of the bamboo they had cut. That money went directly to the bank account of the gram sabha.

There were other hurdles. In 2016, at the height of the protest against the power grid company, a contractor who bought bamboo from them attempted to cheat them. The contractor took half the bamboo that had been cut, but did not pay up front. When the villagers went to Mohla to ask about him, they found that he had gone to Mumbai. The leftover bamboo got spoiled as it had no buyers.

"Earlier, we did not know how to do business and did not even know what was written in the agreement," explained Umesh Tumothi, 25. After that incident, they decided that they would get all sale agreements notarised and stamped, going into as much detail as who should pay how much if the bamboo catches fire. "Now we know the rules and laws of bamboo cutting," he said.

Taking on the state : The fight for fair compensation

Less than a year after Lavari secured its CFR title, people from the power grid company came to mark trees to be cut for their powerline. The red and yellow painted markers sent a wave of outrage through the village. These trees were not only essential to the daily needs and survival of Lavari, they were also under the mandate of the village, according to the community forest rights granted to them by the Forest Rights Act.

This was 2016. The village was still settling into the idea that they had ownership of the resources near their village. “These trees were our livelihood,” Rahul recalled. “Our people depend on it. If we don’t have these trees, where will we get our daily living from? We wanted compensation for this loss.”

The team began with holding meetings at the village, with outside support from Coro India. In all, the village met around 40-50 times over the course of a few months, to discuss and plan their resistance. They were clear that they would resist only using Constitutional forms of protest. People from the village went to meet the Forest department 15 times, the power grid company 17 times, and thrice with the Collector.

Pramod CORO team member facilitating meeting with youth and women from Lawhari for leading gramsabha development plan

They decided to block any action to cut the trees. At one point, the power grid company hired locals from other villages to chop down the trees with axes. The entire village, men and women, hugged the trees to protect them. The company was forced to take back their equipment. The villagers blocked work for 53 days.

The administration responded with a mix of coaxes and threats. Police officers came to the village and asked why they were blocking the tower work. This was a public good, it would benefit so many people. Why should they stand in the path of development? Since it was the work of the central government, they could be jailed for resistance. Pandurang and Rahul found themselves at the centre of surveillance and were threatened that they could easily die in an accident. Though afraid, they started to travel only in groups of ten to fifteen people. The people of Lavari remained defiant alongside them.

If they were supposed to get compensation, how much were they entitled to? With no solutions from the government, the people took this calculation into their own hands. Though the project documents claimed that only 965 trees would be cut, Lavari's villagers soon found that they had marked 1,675 trees instead. Pandurang, Rahul and others sat together to determine the value of each tree according to species. They found that the annual revenue from 1,675 trees was Rs. 5,56,300. Even if the company planted new trees to replace the ones that were cut, it would take 20 years for them to bear as much fruit as they did in 2016.

"Are we supposed to stay away from NTFP work for that long?" Pandurang asked. It was out of the question. To account for this lost revenue, the villagers multiplied the annual revenue by 20, arriving at the total of Rs. 1,11,26,000. They sent this claim to the divisional forest officer, the Collector, the ministry in Mumbai and to the Governor. Not a rupee more or less.

Government officials also attempted to bargain with the committee. At that time, people had begun cutting bamboo, but the Forest Department refused to allow them to issue transport permits for buyers to take the bamboo out of the forest area. This had become a sore point for the people of Lavari, because though they were within their rights to cut the bamboo, they were not able to sell it.

Rejuvenation of the village lake by the Gram Sabha through MGNREGA.

The divisional forest officer told them that they would allow Lavari to issue transport permits if they withdrew their protests and let them build their tower line. “We said transport permits are our legal rights so we will get it anyway,” Pandurang said. “But we also want compensation for the tower.”

Rahul pointed out that people were losing Rs. 11 lakh in revenue because of transport permits. But if they let their struggle stop, they stood to lose Rs. 1.11 crore. Even if they never got permission to issue transport permits, they would still stand to gain from the compensation for the trees to be cut.

These events led to the decisive meeting at the power grid company’s office, where we opened this story.

“They wanted us to think only of ourselves and wanted to know why we were working for the people,” Rahul said. “But our thinking was not like that from the beginning itself. Even now it’s not that. Systems and ways of thinking are different in this village. Even if we benefitted from this, the village would have been left behind. We could not do that.”

“If any other person had been in our position, they would have taken the money and let them clear all the trees,” Pandurang added. “We just knew that we did not want to be separated from our people.”

In the end, the power grid company caved. In 2018 [DATE], they decided to give compensation.

“I think they would have even given us twenty lakh rupees if we had asked,” Pandurang said. “But ultimately, this was such a big struggle that we never thought of taking it back.”

Rahul added, “Because we negotiated with the power grid company, a precedent was made. And because of that precedent, other villages also benefitted.” People from across Vidarbha came to Lavari to learn how they had negotiated with the government. One village in Gadchiroli received compensation of Rs. 2 crore against trees that had been cut. “Through collective organisation, everyone benefits,” Rahul said.

Collective benefits : Becoming custodian for all

The money came in three instalments in 2018, not without more difficulties. The power grid company first wanted to put the money in

Winnowing the paddy collected by Lavari Gram Sabha.

the account of the gram panchayat at Antargav. But it had been the gram sabha of Lavari that had negotiated with them. So people refused to stop their protest and the company paid the amount to the gram sabha.

When the money came, some people in the village said that the gram sabha should divide the entire amount equally among the villagers. But Rahul and Pandurang argued that they got this money for a reason. "If we give all that money away, we are not being responsible," he said. "This is money for twenty years, for us to plant trees because our trees are getting cut. We wanted to make everyone's lives a little easier."

So the first thing the gram sabha did was to survey the village to see who needed what sort of input. They allotted Rs. 30,000 to 94 households – in all, Rs. 28.2 lakh. This money helped people to pay back their loans. Some people wanted bulls to plough their fields. Others wanted chairs.

Next they allotted each family Rs. 10,000 to make their farms more productive. The gram sabha issued an e-tender to build irrigation facilities for Rs. 10 lakh. Productivity improved the next year itself, increasing from 100 quintals to 350 quintals of paddy. "We took the decision that traders will not go to individuals and we started a paddy procurement centre," Rahul said. They sold the paddy collectively for Rs. 5 lakh, at the rate of Rs. 15 to Rs. 16 per kilogram.

People also started planting more vegetables such as chilli, baingan and tomatoes. As a part of Vijayadashami celebrations, the gram sabha also gave each family Rs. 5,000 for seeds and fertilisers. When there was insufficient rain and therefore less work that year, they gave another bonus of Rs. 5,000 to each household to be able to celebrate the festival.

Tendu leaves are processed by drying in the open sun and then packed for sale.

Another year with insufficient rain, the gram sabha distributed one quintal of rice from the village godown to each family.

The gram sabha also made a fisheries business, for which they deepened and expanded two lakes, where fish have now grown in size. They spent Rs. 3 lakh from their account on earthwork, and the administration contributed as well.

It used to be difficult to get work under India's rural employment guarantee act when they went to the gram panchayat. Once they learned how to raise claims for work on their own, the tehsildar was no longer able to harass them, Subhash said.

People did not even know how to ask the government for their needs. But as work increased so did the money reserves. People now have a choice of occupation, whether it is fisheries, collecting tendu or cutting bamboo.

Now that people have money, there is no longer just one 'Patil' of the village. Everyone has become a Patil, Rahul said. Everyone feels they are wealthy. This initially led to some awkwardness about the daily tasks of the village. People started to ask why they should take another person's cattle to graze in the forest, when they already had enough money for themselves. The gram sabha made a rule that every household would take animals grazing at least once a month, including even the sarpanch of the hamlet.

Distributing duties : The power of collective action

Many changes unfolded over the years after they got their CFR claim. "The Forest Department had full domination over us," Rahul said. "It was their road, their jungle. If we had to get wood, we had to ask them for permission and give them chicken and alcohol in return. Now it is not like that. Now, instead of taking from us, they have to ask us for permission to use the forest."

Coro India began to collaborate directly with Lavari's gram sabha, instead of going through the Gram Arogya Sansthan, on the suggestion of Mahendra Rokade, director of Coro India, after he visited the village. This was a new kind of project for Coro, which had previously only ever acted in a supportive capacity to existing NGOs. Between them, Deepak and Pramod visited the village twice every month to discuss plans for the future with them. (Now that the gram sabha is functioning independently, Pramod and Deepak visit less often.) After Rahul, Sarvesh Sulavi, Umesh Kumoti, Nikesh Pudo and Subhash Dhurve became Coro Grassroot Leaders in the years that followed, sponsored by Lavari's gram sabha.

All of them embody the ideas of collective action. One of them is Subhash Dhurve. Subhash is a quiet young man who becomes animated when talking about the development of Lavari. "I thought that after I graduated, I would be unemployed," Subhash said. "I was thinking of myself at an individual level." This changed when he came to Mumbai with Coro. Others in his family asked him why he had to go that far. He too did not know what would come of the Grassroot Leadership Development. "I used to think that I was not enough, that I needed money to help people, but my thinking changed with the Grassroot Leadership

Development," Subhash said. "I began to understand that not everyone can do the work that I can do. I want to work for our people. I realised that I don't need to be rich to help people solve their problems."

As a marker of their renewed independence, in 2022, Lavari's gram sabha made an office at the heart of the village. A two-room one-storeyed cream yellow building, the office inside has portraits of the renowned Adivasi leaders Baburao Shedmake and Birsa Munda, who serve as guiding lights for the work and philosophy of the gram sabha. Outside, they have proudly painted Shedmake's name.

People used to refer to Lavari disparagingly as an Adivasi village, a village of Naxalites, of forest dwellers. "We are people of India," Rahul declared. "Whatever respect other villages get, we also should get it. That was the idea with which we set up the gram sabha here."

"When we made the gram sabha office, we were discussing what name to give it," Rahul added. "Some people said we should name it after this or that great man. But we took a collective decision to honour Baburao Shedmake as we consider him to be a great person."

As long as the manner of thinking is the same, there will be no problem, Rahul said. No matter what the issue is, as a community they will come together. When he first joined the Grassroot Leadership Development, people would not come to their meetings. Rahul had to build trust by getting their smaller needs met, like applying for a ration card or Aadhaar card. As people began to realise that Rahul was working for them, they slowly started to join him. A full year went in this trust-building exercise as people who opposed them slowly began to withdraw their objections. Over time, this extended to other villages, 27 of which have formed a federation with Lavari in which they assist in each other's development.

The people of Lavari were already inclined to the idea of collective development, well before the Grassroot Leadership Development program. They extended this philosophy to what they did with the CFR title when it came. Though members of the gram sabha are also secretaries of the committees they make, they make sure to open a bank account only in the name of another person in the village. Nobody can withdraw money without getting the signatures of the entire committee. This is to distribute responsibility.

The gram sabha made a series of committees. One was a pot samiti. Another was a forest protection committee. Then came the committee to promote fisheries, a fourth to promote paddy, a fifth to develop mahua and a sixth to make arrangements for food.

Nikesh Pudo, a member of Lavari's gram sabha federation from Katamtola who worked to strengthen gram sabhas around Lavari, spoke about how they created rules to use the forest. One of these was that nobody should set fires there. Everyone should be equal. Across India, the common practice of daily wages is that men get paid more than women, even for doing the same work. In Lavari, men and women get the same wages of Rs. 250 per day for cutting bamboo.

They also began to plant trees to expand the forest. "We plant trees to fix water in the ground and oxygen in the air for the coming generation," Rahul said. Fifty years ago, the forest was more productive in the Vidarbha region. Now it has reduced. With climate change, what will the next generation do, the villagers reasoned. "That is why we tell people to take only as much as is needed and to reduce unscientific cutting."

The culture of city dwellers and villagers is very different, Rahul said. "City people think of themselves. But in our culture we believe that the development of one person is the development of all people. This is how great people like Gandhi and Babasaheb did this work. When our culture meets constitutional values, this is what we learn."

Expanding horizons : Working together for Collective Development

As Lavari developed by leaps and bounds, leaders in the village began to think of how to expand their reach. One of the core components of Coro India's Grassroot Leadership Development program is to teach Grassroot Leaders to look critically at social structures. Subhash took up a project of including more women, apart from his main assignment of strengthening the gram sabhas of three neighbouring villages.

Though gram sabha meetings were held in public under the imli tree outside the gram sabha office, women typically did not attend those meetings. As a Grassroot Leader, Subhash's assignment was to increase the participation of women in the gram sabhas. In 2021, with Coro India's

Youth group from lawhari all set for hosting sports tournament in their village

help, women in Lavari formed five self-help groups along a pattern common in the rest of Maharashtra. Subhash went door to door to the houses of women who were presidents and secretaries ,and already had some experience with public life. Subhash and others invited them to come for the gram sabha meetings and to ask questions of them. Around ten women came for a meeting in Bijapur, a nearby village. Anita Duru, Rajula Durve and Sandhya were among the first women to publicly participate in these meetings.

In 20 the gram sabha issued a notice prohibiting the harassment of women. But they soon realised that women from Lavari married into other villages and could be beaten by their new families there. In one incident that Umesh recounted, the husband of a woman from Lavari fed his son urea to kill him and to frame his wife. She spoke to her brother who was still in Lavari. In turn, he brought this problem to the gram sabha. “The gram sabha said that she is a woman and our sister,” Umesh, whose assignment was to get younger residents involved in the maintenance of the gram sabha, recalled. “If our rules don’t apply to her and we stay quiet, how is that fair?” The entire gram sabha got into cars and went to her village. After three fraught meetings, they brought her back to Lavari. The woman remarried and now has a second child.

The gram sabha also began initiatives for menstrual health. A nurse came to take meetings about using pads and how to maintain cleanliness

during the menstrual period. The gram sabha also offered financial support to women who have urinary tract infections, sexually transmitted infections or gastrointestinal issues.

People in Lavari also used to practice untouchability when women were menstruating. Women would have to stay outside the house and bathe, make their food, and eat apart from the rest of the family. "We believe that men and women are equal," Rahul said. "If women are equal, why should anyone keep them out during their periods? If we want to change, we have to take women with us."

Women now approach the gram sabha for help in financial difficulties and if they have to manage family members who drink excessively. Girls now get married only once they become 18, and some who are studying are even marrying at 25 years.

As people's financial circumstances improved, they were able to devote more resources to educate their daughters. Varsha Madavi, 17, is one of a new generation of girls who has been able to study until the 12th. Earlier, she recalled, girls only used to study until the 5th or 7th standard, before marrying young. Now having completed her 12th standard, Varsha wants to train to become a nurse, like the ones who come to their village to educate them on menstrual hygiene. Other young girls share this dream.

"I like going to the ashram school because we have time to study there," Varsha admitted. "At home, we have to help our families as well."

"We used to have equality in our society," Rahul said. "We used to dance together, hold hands and not go our own ways separately. We did not know that equality was a part of the Constitution, but once we studied the Constitution, this clicked for us." Though nobody has yet made use of it, the gram sabha has also announced that it will financially support anyone who wants to study abroad.

Umesh organised the young people of Lavari in other ways too. In 2019, he encouraged young people to create a youth group that would assist in marriage functions. The president of the group is Sampat and Devidas is the vice president. "After we finished our 12th standard in the ashram school, we were thinking of how to strengthen our village," Umesh said. They held a meeting, making sure to invite young women and girls as well. "We decided that for any event in the village, we will

handle arrangements for that." They divided into groups of 17 to 18 people and now handle cooking for weddings on the basis of a roster, working together to feed everyone who participates in the celebrations.

Their youth group also made a ground for kabaddi, kho kho and volleyball. Just as the older men in the village learned how to speak to official authorities, younger people also learned how to ask for meetings at the gram panchayat level. After two attempts to meet the panchayat for assistance, they received permission to build the ground on the third meeting.

In 2021, inspired by a tournament held at the nearby village of Asankheda, the youth group decided to hold a kho kho and kabaddi tournament in Lavari. They publicised the event on social media, printed pamphlets and shared photos with everyone who had mobile phones. In all, 130 teams came from Gadchiroli, Chandrapur and even from Chhattisgarh. Each team had 12 to 15 members, meaning that Lavari suddenly had to host around 1,700 new people. The youth group rose to this challenge.

At a meeting, members of the group discussed how to organise food and host the invitees. Those who had spare rooms offered them to the players, each agreeing to host one team each. They cooked food for everyone and distributed it at the primary school. They also divided tasks for each day among themselves and printed 72 t-shirts for all the volunteers. There was no gram sabha at the time, so Rahul helped them instead.

"This is the first village where there has been no violence after a kabaddi tournament," Deepak from Coro India said. "Even the police asked us how we managed so many people."

This organisation has had another outcome: young people of Lavari now also speak up at gram sabha meetings, after Umesh, Sampat and Devidas requested elders for permission to participate.

Once they began speaking up in the meetings, Sampat, Devidas and Umesh were among those in the group who started talking about how to protect their culture. Over the years, people in the village had begun to forget their traditional dances and only danced the rela. They began to learn their traditional dances from singers and dancers from other

villages, who perform at marriages. In 2021, the same year as the kho kho and kabaddi tournament, the group also distributed handbills for a dance competition that has happened every year since then. Thirty villages participated in the competition, some Adivasi, others of mixed caste.

"This is not timepass," Umesh explained. "We get to learn a lot and teach others our songs. These songs are about social change, about nature, about great people."

Umesh also spoke about other tasks the group has taken on. They make teams to keep the village clean. If girls or young women approach them with problems, they try to help. Young men and women both go to the fish market. They have also helped to plant trees and have even built a small dam in the jungle for animals to drink water.

Employment is another focus. They have helped some young people to get enrolled in the police, for example. Now, they want to start a library with books and a place to sit and study.

The main gram sabha is also focussed on the future. According to Rahul, the gram sabha has achieved 50% of their goals for improvement. Now, they want to build a water tank and provide filtered water to every house. They want to increase avenues of employment so that people do not have to migrate. "In 2016, we didn't have such a comprehensive vision," Rahul said. "We just wanted to improve the reputation of our village. But as we grew, so did our goals."

Benefits to All : Building a federation

As Lavari's renown grew, Pandurang, Rahul and the gram sabha began to think of how they could involve their nearest neighbours in their growth. In 2019, they floated an idea to their neighbours: if they united and sold their tendu leaves together, wouldn't everyone benefit from it?

Tendu traders usually visited three villages: Lavari, Yerkadi and Dongargaon. When they went to other villages, they would pay Rs. 180 to Rs. 200 per leaf bundle. But in Lavari, they would give as much as the people of Lavari asked, whether it was Rs. 500 per bundle or Rs. 800.

"We said we also collect the same leaves, so why is there so much of

a difference in rates," Rahul said. "We explained to them that we should form a union and that they could then get our union rates."

The people of the other villages did not agree the first year Lavari made this offer. They believed that their leaves were so small that it was not possible for them to get the same rate. But a year later, in 2019, they joined the union and got higher rates. More villages joined. Lavari made similar deals for rice procurement and the fisheries business. Now, there are 28 villages in this federation.

"In areas with the Forest Rights Act, there are more problems with the Forest Department and other departments," Subhash explained. "It is important that every village should be strong so that arrests for going to the forest decrease."

The main concern remains the Forest Department, which, citing the Forest Conservation Act of 1980, says that villages have the right to sign transport permits, but not to print them, which adds another step to the bureaucracy traders have to fulfil. This goes against the Forest Rights Act, which says that gram sabhas have the right to issue transport permits.

Having made the federation, the gram sabha then began to think of

paperwork. Many of these villages had CFR committees, but they did not have the essentials they needed to conduct business. Lavari showed them how to make bank accounts for every gram sabha member of the federation, and procured stationery, letterheads, stamps and invoice booklets for them as well. They also trained the other gram sabhas in how to maintain records.

Each village has two representatives in the federation, who are the president and secretary of their gram sabhas. Pandurang became the president of the federation and Rahul the secretary. All meetings have a minimum quorum of 50% attendance. At least one person from each village should attend. But thus far, this has never been a problem. Women too have begun to join the federation. One of them is Akshara Walke from Palasgad. The federation is planning to encourage more women to join them.

The auction process for tendu leaves happens through the president and secretary, but according to the direction of the federation, which decides when to issue a notice for tender, which contractors to call and what rates to offer. Everyone has an equal say in this process. The tendu auction happens in the open in the village, from where company people then transport it further up their supply chain. This is a stark difference from tendu leaf auctions that used to take place in the office of the Forest Department, where nobody could possibly know how much money was paid in black to those officers. Between tendu and bamboo, each family in the federation now has an annual income of Rs. 1 lakh.

"We thought of a federation because we can't run such a large business on our own," Rahul said. "It is just not possible in a small village like ours. What we can do is small businesses like poultry. But if we work collectively, we can increase both productivity and profits."

A few more villages want to join the federation, Talegaon, Sadartola and Mohgaon, but they might only be able to join in 2024.

The main product sold at the collective market of the federation is tendu. Bamboo is there only in some villages such as Palasgad, Charbatti, Bamni and Lavari. Since Lavari has more bamboo than its people can harvest, the gram sabha invites people from Palasgad and Bamni to harvest it as well instead of letting it remain uncut. Yet the overall number

of trees has increased with the ban on unscientific cutting. However, due to climate change, overall NTFP production of items such as hirda, beda and mahua has decreased and there are fewer fruit than there used to be.

"As long as the collection of NTFPs was in the control of the government, everything would get depleted rapidly," Rahul explained. "Now we need to increase this productivity." This they are doing by not only planting more trees, but also caring for the saplings to ensure that they reach maturity. Just giving birth to a child is not enough, Rahul said. You also have to nurture and take care of it. If they want to save trees, it cannot happen without the intervention of locals.

This work has also earned the trust of the government. The administration now approaches Lavari first for new schemes, just as in Nanded they approach Kajipod. These might be schemes to develop wells, farmlands, education, health, and for women. When a pivotal government resolution that allowed gram sabhas to raise work orders under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act came, it was discussed first in Lavari and then went to other villages, Nikesh said.

Sushma Tai Sudhakar bhau of Akshay Seva Sanstha addressing gramsabha federation gathering

Lavari also extends support to other villages. The Mohagav gram sabha in Dhanora block wanted to build a godown for their tendu business. They met Devaji Topa from Mendha Lekha (the village that first got CFR claims recognised) who in turn told them to approach Lavari for help. Lavari extended a loan of Rs. 50 lakh to five gram sabhas in Dhanora block. They repaid it in full within a year, and Lavari charged no interest. Dhanora's revenue since then has increased to Rs. 1 crore.

"We gave them the loan because they were doing this as a collective," Rahul said. "Individuals might not have been able to repay us." They notarised the agreement to protect their interests.

Said Rahul, "It is not enough for just one village to be independent and self-sufficient. All of them should be like this. The great people who came before us all worked for society. We can't do as much as they did, but we are trying. To work for our country or our village."

Strength in Collectives :
The Story of Vasala Makta

As we saw in the first two stories, community forest rights can galvanise entire communities. In Kajipod, these rights led to permanent settlements, stable livelihoods and a revival of cultural traditions and practices. Lavari took this a step further by creating a federation of gram sabhas that now helps other villages to change.

In Chandrapur district, we find the third part of our story. What possibilities open up when federations arrive in new villages? In 2019, a village called Vasala Makta used the support of a federation to do something nobody before them had done. The gram sabha of the village fined the Forest Department for cutting bamboo without the permission of the sabha.

How did a small village dare to challenge the mandate of the Forest Department? Let's begin at Mendki, a village fifteen kilometres away from Vasala Makta. Sushmatai Mohurle is the president of the gram sabha federation, Brahmapuri taluka, based in Mendki, which supported Vasala Makta in its endeavours. Poised and confident, Sushmatai is the kind of person who changes the atmosphere of a room when she enters it.

Fifteen years ago, Sushmatai applied for the Coro India grassroot leadership programme through the Akshay Seva Sanstha, an organisation working for land rights of people in Chandrapur district in Vidarbha. Sushmatai was already working with the Akshay Seva Sanstha on self-help groups when Sudhakarbhau Mahadole recommended her for the leadership programme.

"We didn't have women in our struggle, we didn't have women in our movement, or in our functions," Sudhakarbhau said. "But slowly a few women who were courageous joined us and we decided that they would become leaders.

Though nervous, Sushmatai applied. Like Kashinath and Rahul, she came to the leadership programme afraid to speak up in public. She had studied until the eighth standard. As part of her work with the Akshay Seva Sanstha, she would occasionally attend meetings with officials, where she would not talk, but would only listen. "The programme gave me the self-confidence to talk in public," Sushmatai said.

At the programme, her topic of study was to build the capability of women, whether social, economic or political. She learned about the Forest Rights Act and expanded her reading horizons. "I loved to read, but I mostly used to read stories about gods," Sushmatai said. "But [after the leadership programme] I learned to read about laws, about the servitude of workers, and how this should be ended so that we can become independent."

Her first step towards independence came when she decided to start a small business at her village, Kalam, which is seven kilometres from Mendki. In six villages around her own village, there were no xerox shops. The only shop in the village was a kirana shop. When people had to photocopy documents, they would have to travel to Brahmapuri town.

Sushmatai used the stipend she received from the programme to establish a small xerox business. On the day she went to buy the machine, she had only Rs. 5,000 with her because the Grassroot Leadership Development money had paused for three months. The machine cost Rs. 35,000 and an additional lamination machine cost Rs. 3,500. She took a loan from a bank and also went to her mentor Sudhakarbhau for help. He loaned her the balance money and she bought the two machines. She repaid him slowly over time from the revenue from the photocopying machine as well as from the grassroot leadership programme money when it came.

"This is how my economic growth happened," Sushmatai said matter of factly. "I found a path out of servitude."

As she became more active, people began to recognise her. A lone woman, she learned first how to cycle and then to ride scooters, one of which she had taken on loan. She began travelling through the block to inform people about community forest rights. Fifteen years later, she has become a familiar face and people recognise her as someone who

works on forest rights.

She completed her education through open university in Nagpur. In 2012, she became sarpanch of her village. She remained popular even after her term of office ended. “When people want answers to their questions, they come to me because I know these processes,” she said. They often bypass the sitting sarpanch as he does not have these answers.

In 2017, Sudhakarbhau and others decided to form a gram sabha federation with three villages. The president of that federation, they decided, should be Sushmatai. This is the federation that supported Vasala Makta when they stood against the Forest Department.

Federation strength

The federation itself is a product of decades of work. Sudhakarbhau Mahadole, who encouraged Sushmatai to participate in social movements is a veteran of forest rights; he was on the drafting committee of the Forest Rights Act along with others such as Subhash Lomte, Pratima Dalvi, Ulka Mahajan, Sukhdev Uikes, and Medha Patkar. He lobbied

Forest management committee meeting at Vasala makta

for other traditional forest dwellers to be included in the act, alongside people from Scheduled Tribes.

Sudhakarbhau began his engagement with forest rights in 1993, when a forest officer told him that people in his area could apply for individual forest rights and cultivate farms on forest land. But what should they do with this land? At a meeting Sudhakarbhau and other activists decided to start the Jabran Jyot Andolan, a movement to secure cultivation rights for farmers who had encroached on forest lands. This movement was later called the Vidarbha Bhumi Hakk Andolan and they supported everyone claiming land from the state government.

In 1997, Sudhakarbhau did a Grassroot Leadership Development with the Vidarbha Lok Vikas Manch, through which he was able to intensify the struggle for individual forest rights. In 2003, he registered the Akshay Seva Sanstha as an organisation, appointed a president and secretary, and decided what the ideology and focus of the group would be. Though they held rallies and meetings from the level of village to Vidhan Sabha, their real fight began after the Forest Rights Act was passed in 2005, Sudhakarbhau recalled.

Even before the bill became law, the Vidarbha Bhumi Hakk Andolan had already helped people to raise individual claims for land. After the law, the organisation went from one village to another, holding meetings and preparing claims for individual titles.

Sudhakarbhau shifted his focus in 2011, when he joined Coro India as a grassroots leader. Sujata Khandekar from Coro India visited Mendki and while chatting with him in his xerox shop, suggested that perhaps he could think about applying for community forest rights. Through the grassroot leadership programme, he visited Mendha Tola and Pachgav, two of the first villages in India to get community forest rights and learned from their journey. After the Grassroot Leadership Development, they prepared the first community forest rights claims, learning the process from Vijay Dhete and Pramod Walande of Coro. In 2011, the organisation submitted CFR claims for 5,000 people in Nagbhid and Brahmapuri talukas of Chandrapur. Thirty villages in three talukas applied for CFR through the organisation as well.

With individual forest rights, only Adivasis received titles for their

Community waste management systems at Vasala Makta… beds also serve as sources of organic fertilizer.

agricultural land. Community forest rights are more expansive and allow people who are not Adivasi too to get land. Community rights also gives people the security to utilise the forest. That is why community forest rights are better, said Sudhakarbhau.

"The government had not done any work on community forest rights," he said. "The only claims [in Chandrapur] were those prepared by the Akshay Seva Sanstha."

Certain events accelerated the rate of claims being accepted. In 2014, the Maharashtra governor C. Vidyasagar Rao visited the region. Someone from the Forest Department called Sudhakarbhau and asked if they had any pending claims that they could approve before the governor's visit. Sudhakarbhau told them about the 5,000 claims they had already submitted for individual forest rights and seven to eight community forest rights claims. After a round of verification, the government approved these claims. That was how villages such as Ekara, Sirsagar Tukum and Kalamgav got their CFR in Brahmapuri block. Another round of claims came when Ratan Tata visited Chandrapur. Through this, Rampuri, Bhodra, and Lohar Dongri received CFR titles.

The villages also learned from other villages that had already led the way, such as Lavari. (Read more about Lavari's journey in the previous

Gram Sabha Federation meeting in Shirsagar Tukum to discuss the process and management of tendu leaf production.

chapter.) Having received community forest rights, the next question was what to do with them. Lavari had by this time already established its collective market. In Chandrapur, four villages came together for this in 2016. They were Ekara, Rampuri, Tukum and Navegaon. This was when they had the idea for a federation that would implement community forest rights.

"We thought that that if we sell individually, we will all get different rates," Sudhakarbhau recalled. "But with a federation we could get better rates."

The question then arose of who the president of the federation should be. People at first turned to Sudhakarbhau, as he had played a leading role since 1993. But he declined. He did not want to be president, secretary or even member of the federation. It should be led by local leaders, he said, and who better to lead it than Sushmatai, who knew the work, had the political experience, and was tireless in her work to empower villages.

Rather than accept the presidency of a woman, around half the potential members of the federation left it.

"They said that I could be a secretary because that was writing work, but the president should be a man," Sushmatai recalled. But she was not going to stand down. "I presented my position to everyone. I wanted to be president, not secretary. And I wanted it for only one year." If, after that year, they felt she could not do the work, they were free to change

the president. But they should give her a chance.

People who joined the federation later created problems with her. If a payment was delayed, they would blame it on the incompetence of the president. A few gram sabhas did not approve of seeing a woman talking and making decisions and they left. Of those who supported her, a year later they all agreed that "even though she is a woman, she is working well." At the end of that year, Sushmatai called for applications for a new president. All the members said it was not necessary. "You have all the experience and you give everyone time," they said. "Everyone else is busy with other work. You are present even at last-minute meetings and work through the night to make decisions on the same day."

"The committee has been so supportive of me," Sushmatai said. "Unlike in other organisations, they don't find faults in my work. We do fight, but we don't hold it between us. I don't mind when they tell me things because as an organisation, we should be able to talk to each other. They know that this work is everyone's responsibility, not just the president's. That is why we have been able to grow as an organisation."

As the federation's work expanded, villages continued to join, to the point that there are now 25 members of the federation. When other gram sabhas need help, they approach the federation because it doesn't take sides or take advantage of their vulnerability.

Ranveer Thakre, former sarpanch of Ganeshpur which is a member of the federation, recalled how difficult it was to set it up. "Sudhakarbhau worked on the edge of a sword to make this federation."

When members of the federation went from village to village to talk about the federation, the Forest Department would visit those villages a few days later and try to convince people that the team was making fools of them and that the federation could not be formed. Members of the federation had to go multiple times to the same villages to convince them that they were not out to cheat them. Only after that did people join.

Even today, after all the work that they have done, it remains difficult to secure a title from the Forest Department. "There are so many benefits to CFR that officials still try to block it," Sushmatai explained. In Brahmapuri taluka, 75 villages have received CFR, but their hamlets remain excluded. However, only 15 to 20 have truly begun to work to

Community toilets installed at places plantation sites.

exercise the benefits of CFR, that too, with the help of the organisation and federation.

In one hamlet, where the federation helped villagers to set up a gram sabha to claim forest rights, the gram sevak and sarpanch of the main village interrupted and said that they already had a gram sabha committee so the work they were doing was not valid. People in the hamlet were already able to collect tendu and do NREGA work, so they had no need for collective forest rights. The federation had to intervene with the sub-divisional officer, Sushmatai recalled. They waited five entire days at his office to meet him. When he finally met the federation, he ordered that the title be given to the hamlet. More than one committee was formed in other villages too, leading to fights and factions as gram panchayats fought to retain control of the gram sabhas in their jurisdiction.

In most villages, around 80% of the population is traditional-minded, said Ranveer. But where villages are backward, they are held back by officials.

In some cases, the Collector granted community forest rights to hamlets, but without preparing them or helping them to establish a gram sabha. Often, they give smaller areas than people are truly entitled to. At one village, Kharbi, a gram panchayat member proclaimed that he would die before he would let the hamlet get their claim to community forest

rights. Sushmatai stepped in to reassure them. "I told them, 'Don't lose courage, you will have to fight, but keep your hopes up,'" she said.

Every time the sub-divisional officer changes, people from the federation go with legal documents to explain the law and rules that accompany it to the new officer. But since they are united, it has become easier to put pressure on them.

This unity has helped when the federation faces difficult circumstances. In 2014-15, mahua trees flowered more than usual, so political forces attempted to use it to their advantage. A young person in the village died while collecting mahua, which created a tense atmosphere. "People were scared to go to the forest because one person had died," Sushmatai recalled. "We had to hold meetings and tell people even though the land was with the Forest Department, they still had the right to collect NTFPs and sell them." The only thing they didn't have permission for was to cut trees.

With the comprehensive training that Sushmatai offers, people now proactively request her to come to their villages to teach the secretary and president of the gram sabhas, and members of the CFR management committees on how they can implement CFR.

For all this work, neither the organisation nor the federation earned a single rupee. The work was more important to them than profit.

"We don't do any work without first discussing it amongst us," said Ranveer. "We have four steps to manage problems. First at the gram sabha, then the committee, the federation and finally, an organisation like Akshay Sewa Sanstha or Coro. We settle disputes democratically."

"As long as the community is not strong, nothing will change for them," said Sudhakarbhau. Those places that did not have CFR remained the same. Others have managed to transform their livelihoods and are plucking tendu, collecting NTFPs and selling forest vegetables.

And this is exactly what happened in Vasala Makta.

Changing livelihood : Vasala Makta joins a federation

For years, Vasala Makta was, like many other hamlets near forested areas in Vidarbha, in deep poverty. People used to leave their houses with packed lunches before dawn and walk seven kilometres away to

Our Leader Bhagyashree Thakare leading the women leaders' meeting alongside Gram Sabha Federation President Sushma Moharle.

break rocks on a hill. Sometimes men would walk ten kilometres to work as porters at the agricultural market at Nagbhid or Tuklur. They would have to haul up to 100 kilograms of rice.

Women walked seven kilometres to Chandali in Nagbhid block of Chandrapur or out of the district to Telangana to pluck chillies, earning only Rs. 100 to Rs. 120 for their work from morning to 7 pm. The chillies burnt them so much that the village knew when the women had returned, from the sound of coughing on the road. Many women covered their arms with cow dung to ease the burning sensation, recalled Dhanwantabai, a resident of Vasala Makta.

Around 150 men and 100 women would work on the Patil's field from Vasala Mendha. Women had more daily work than men, but neither had work through the year, said Bhagyashree Thakre, a current Coro India grassroots leader and resident of Vasala Makta.

Everyone went everywhere by foot. Even cycles were out of the question. Though they grew rice on their farms, none of them could afford to keep it for their personal consumption, said Asha. They had to sell it all. There was only one well for 240 houses so women had to collect water four times daily, said Bhagyashree. Water tankers used to go to the gram panchayat Vasala Mendha first, and only then to Vasala Makta.

Vasala Makta is a village with a mixed population of OBCs and STs. They were, however, united by poverty. Change came to Vasala Makta in

2020 with a gram sabha, Dhanwantabai said, which meant they could finally stand on their own feet.

How Vasala Makta got Community Forest Rights

Before Vasala Makta got its community forest rights, there was a joint forest management committee formed in 2003, centred in the gram panchayat in Vasala Mendha. The president of that committee was Gurudev Lakshman Pendam and the secretary Purushottam Pandurang Kolte. The management committee had eleven members. Under the joint forest management plan, villages shared the revenue from NTFPs and management of the forest with the Forest Department, with 20% of the value of NTFPs and other products going to the gram panchayat and the rest to the government.

In 2015-16, their outlook towards the forest began to change. Ramprakash Raut was a member of the gram panchayat and saw a government resolution that encouraged people to raise claims under the Forest Rights Act and to set up management committees for community forest rights. That was how he realised it was being implemented in Chandrapur district.

One day that May, he met 7-8 people sitting at a school, holding a meeting. Among them were Tejrambhau Baghmare and Sudhakarbhau.

Sudhakar is facilitating village-level meetings to strengthen the process of Community Forest Rights.

At that time, the Akshay Seva Sanstha had helped 32 villages get their CFR titles. When Ramprakash asked them for help, they immediately replied that this was the only reason they were sitting at the school, to help people with their problems.

"They told us that they would show us the path, but that we would have to walk it," remembered Bhagyashree.

Soon after, Ramprakash and others in Vasala Makta made a request to set up a CFR management committee. The gram panchayat put a notice in the village and the gram sabha met. People nominated and seconded members, following which the management committee was formed. "We used to think that this is not our land, but the government's," said Ramprakash. "But we realised that this is our forest, our NTFP, our land. We are the owners of it, and it is our responsibility to maintain our wealth in the way an owner does."

They decided to file a claim for community forest rights, to formally transfer the management of the forest to the gram sabha.

The gram panchayat in Vasala Mendha did not take kindly to this plan. They began a social boycott of the people of Vasala Makta, an act which is now illegal. They blocked the road access to the village and said they would not let the people of Vasala Makta take daily essentials from there.

"They would tell us not to go by their road," remembered Dhanwantabai. "We asked them if it is their father's road that they are trying to stop us."

People from outside the village would come to their forest and break their equipment. The Forest Department maintained that it was their own forest. That year, when the people of Vasala Makta cut bamboo, the joint forest management committee fined them Rs. 10,000. The people showed that they had made a CFR claim.

Finally, on July 29, 2017, they received their CFR title.

Fining the Forest Department : Using collective strength to Enforce Laws

For a few years after that, the management committee sat idle. They had the title, they had possession of the forest, but they didn't know what to do with it. This was the backdrop against which the gram sabha at Vasala Makta fined the Forest Department.

After Vasala Makta received its title under the Forest Rights Act, the Forest Department decided to continue business as usual. In 2019, they hired workers from outside the village to cut bamboo. The villagers saw them going to the forest. They realised that the outsiders were doing the work that the villagers were supposed to do.

"Without asking the gram sabha, they did as they pleased," Gurudev Pendam, a member of the CFR management committee explained. "We realised that they were using the language of law against us."

At a loss for what to do, Ramprakash called Sudhakarbhau. He, Sushmatai and Tejram Baghmare all came within an hour. In the evening, the gram sabha held a meeting, where they decided to stop the transport of bamboo. They blocked the road in Nagbhid while they obtained a panchnama. Knowing that officials in the Forest Department would not be held accountable by their own people, the gram sabha decided that they would instead fine the Forest Department Rs. 80,000.

"This is our property which we had planted," Ramprakash said. "It is not the government's. We are the owners. We didn't show them proof of ownership because it was our land. Why should we have showed them the proof?"

After two days of a standoff, they let the workers leave after paying a fine of Rs. 10,000. The embarrassment for the government lay simply in the fact that they had been legally fined.

Work by the CFR Management Committee

After this standoff, the CFR management committee became more active. In 2017, Ramprakash, who had previously been the secretary of the gram sabha, stood for elections and became sarpanch of the gram panchayat. "I was wondering what work we should do," he said. "I had a dream that I would develop the village."

In 2021, Ganeshbhau of Akshay Seva Sanstha came to tell them how the CFR management committee should work. The first order of business was to involve women in the process. There were many women in the village who were ready to work outside their homes, Bhagyashree said.

They were energised by this. Not many people would collect tendu. "If a woman is alone, or there is no man in the house, she has to manage

everything on her own so she would go to collect leaves," Bhagyashree said. "But she would see this as her burden."

The fali or tendu collection centre was five kilometres away in Mindala, Ramprakash said. There was no fali in Vasala Makta for 35 years. The gram sabha decided that their mission would be "amcha gav, amcha vikas" (our village, our development). From the point of view of the future, what work would be important, they discussed. They learned from the federation that gram sabhas could sell NTFPs on their own. A collective tendu market was one answer to this.

The Forest Department attempted to block them, saying that this was not the work for which they had received their CFR claims. The gram sabha also did not know that they were supposed to give notice letters in September of the previous year, to announce that they would be selling tendu leaves in the coming season.

Sudhakarbhau had to meet the Collector to get permission for them. The Collector, Ramprakash recalled, said, "There has been corona for two to three years. People are coming close to dying of hunger and you [the Forest Department] are stuck on rules. This is not right." The Collector gave an order that Vasala Makta and other villages could start their tendu markets in 2022.

"The experience of the federation was united with our new beginning," Ramprakash said. "That is how we started the market."

The federation helped with everything from finding contractors, drafting rules and setting up the market. The federation, which is independent from the Akshay Seva Sanstha, was composed only of people from various gram sabhas.

In the first year, the CFR managing committee earned nothing from tendu sales. Workers were paid and contractors bought tendu, but not everything they collected. The contractor with whom Vasala Makta made an agreement said that he would buy tendu leaves at the rate of Rs. 5,100 per bundle. But a lot of the leaves were plucked too early and he refused to pay for that. The fali ended in just two days. In 2023, the fali went on for nine days and the committee earned Rs. 5 lakh from the sale of Rs. 1.75 lakh leaves.

"We might not have made a profit the first year, but we learned

from that experience and are now enjoying the fruits of that learning," Ramprakash said. He is confident that the fali will continue to grow.

The Forest Department continues to intervene, saying that people can pluck only as many leaves that could fit into a standard bag. That bag is so small that it gets filled in just two days. When the Forest Department manages tendu sales, contractors pay royalty on the standard bags that they buy from the department itself. One poda has 70 leaves, a 100 podas is called a shekda, while 1,000 podas make up a standard bag. Often, to reduce the royalty they have to pay, contractors declare that they have bought a smaller amount. They do not need to do this in Vasala Makta's fali.

People in Vasala Makta are able to fill 2,000 sacks, up 100% from the 1,000 sacks they used to fill earlier. In Nagbhid in Brahmapuri block, the Forest Department scrutinises any extra sacks only from Vasala Makta, Ramprakash said. They do not scrutinise other villages. When Vasala Makta said they wanted 250 bags, the Forest Department said they would give 125. Vasala Makta asked for at least 150, to which the department agreed. But when the fali time came, they sent only 59 bags to the village.

"When the Forest Department holds auctions, they pluck up to three lakh leaves," said Tulsidas Katlam, treasurer of the federation. "But when it comes to us, they tell us we can't pluck more than one lakh."

Another time, they said that Vasala Makta's forest lies in the periphery of the Ghodadhari Vyagrah Project forest, which is a central forest. Because of this, they said, the people of Vasala Makta legally could not collect tendu. The village held an emergency gram sabha meeting, where they clarified that the village does not fall into this project area. The Forest Department accepted it. The very next day, they sent a letter saying that they had given 59 standard bags, which was the correct number.

Economic transformation : Using CFR to replace hazardous livelihoods

Since the village got rights to CFR, its people have been proactive about guarding it.

The gram sabha has made a list of rules for collection and management

Plantation drive led by Vasala Makta villagers under MGREGA

of the forest and the village. If someone sets a fire in the forest, there is a fine of Rs. 1,000. If someone breaks firewood without permission, they have to pay for the value of the broken wood, while the person who catches them gets a reward of Rs. 150. The guard who protects the forest gets a salary of Rs. 3,900 per month. Each house contributes Rs. 50 to pay for guards for the forest. Now that there is a guard, fewer people come from outside the village to pluck their tendu.

There is an election for membership of the committee every year. Every week, people are on a roster to clean the village, from Ramprakash to young adults. It is not permitted to drink and attend a gram sabha. In all, there are ten committees in Vasala Makta, including a management committee, a women's committee and a vigilance committee. The gram sabha appoints people, especially women, who have leadership skills.

There have been economic transformations too. People now have work through the year, said Bhagyashree. "We used to get only ten days of work [under NREGA], but now we get 100 days," she said. One person can sell NTFPs worth as much as Rs. 10,000, a huge change from the situation before this, when they had to hide and steal products from the forest.

Women can earn up to Rs. 10,000 every two weeks with tendu collection, Asha said. People also collect mahua, hirda, behda, nimba, avla, charoli and biba. The committee has made a plan to collect and sell mahua. People collected mushrooms, but did not know how to sell them. Nor do they yet have a concrete idea of who would buy hirda and behda, and are considering going to Mumbai to explore their options.

“We can collect whatever fruit there is in the forest,” Bhagyashree said. “We just don’t know how to sell them yet.”

Over time, the gram sabha has begun to assert itself in many ways.

In December 2021, Ramprakash visited Balapur, a village in Nagbhid block. There, he came across a paper that mentioned a government resolution issued at the end of November. This GR, dated 30 November, 2021, said that gram sabhas as well as gram panchayats could raise claims for work under the state employment guarantee act.

“Not one official knew about this GR so there was nobody to implement it,” Ramprakash recalled. So they met the sub-divisional officer in Brahmapuri to tell him about it. “When the gram panchayat was in charge of employment guarantee, despite being from the gram panchayat, they did not assert their authority, which meant that the scheme did not reach people. Because of that, we faced poverty.” At the zilla parishad level, there is an approved budget of Rs. 12.12 crore over three years. However, these schemes do not come to local people. People would get 12 to 18 days of work.

Ramprakash discussed this GR in the next gram sabha meeting and got unanimous support from them to implement it in Vasala Makta. There are 262 sanctioned schemes under MNREGA. The gram sabha can also raise demands for their own work. In Maharashtra, 300 of 365 days in a year can be claimed for employment guarantee. The gram sabha registered on the NREGA portal and is slowly building this as an employment option. They plan to implement ten works with a budget of Rs. 2.3 crore. This includes plantation of fruit orchards. They plan

Plantation drive led by Vasala Makta villagers under MGREGA

to plant 14,000 trees over three years so that every family has some permanent work.

Building dreams : Looking to a debt-free future

Off the road opposite Vasala Makta, beyond a patch of teak forest, there is a wide, open field where new saplings are planted. Women painstakingly water them every day. As Bhagyashree said, "We are going to benefit from these trees in time. If we don't water them, who will?"

At one end of the field is a roofed enclosure that gives some respite from the intense summer heat. Near the enclosure is a garbage bin made of branches and flanking it on either side are field toilets, one for men and the other for women. This field is where visitors to Vasala Makta stay during meetings or other functions, or when the people of Vasala Makta itself hold feasts. It is unique for its facilities. Often, people come there to study.

"People understand the problems and their solutions, but they prefer not to do anything about it," said Ramprakash. "But the world has changed from before. We like having conveniences like chairs or beds in our houses. If we have money, why should we not spend on such facilities? It has to start somewhere."

Ramprakash has a dream for the village. This is what he said: "Everyone in this village has negative balance in their bank accounts because of loans. I want everyone to be debt-free in the coming years and to have a plus balance. Only after that will our lives truly change. If one family goes ahead, the whole village can thrive. I want debt to stop being inter-generational."

He wants to take the village to a point where it can not only employ all its residents, people can also be employed from outside. Of the 82 families in the village, only one person has a permanent job now. The entire village will depend on the work that the gram sabha does now. A godown for all the produce made in the village will cost Rs. 25 lakh but over time will save lakhs from prevented losses.

"Today I am mobile and active," Ramprakash said. "But when I'm 60, I should be able to get a pension for my family, of at least Rs. 5,000 per month, with an additional Rs. 2,000 for those who are destitute."

"We should do a survey of the needs of every family to see how much oil, sugar and salt they need weekly," he added. "We should buy that amount from Nagbhid and give everyone a kit of rations every month according to their needs."

This money, he emphasised should come from the bank accounts of men, not women, as women already have the responsibility for managing the house.

"Only if we stay with the federation can any of our work get done," he said. "No gram sabha can do this work on their own. They will fail in the first instance."

As people grow economically, they are also growing in other spheres. There are now 30 girls who are studying until the 12th standard. People have the money to send them to ashram schools away from the village, as the primary school in the village is only up to the 4th standard. Asha's daughter is even studying for her BSc. in Nursing.

There are other dreams. [XX] the deputy sarpanch wants to focus on education and wants to build a gym or exercise centre for people. Praful, 23, wants this as well as a library. Young people, all members of a group of youth, are beginning to imagine new futures for the village and for themselves. Yogender, the president of the group, wants to buy jersey cows and start a dairy. Because there is employment, people can now work and study, said Rupali, a young woman. Shailesh, a young man who works in the electricity department, wants more greenery to shade people from the heat in summers, while Santosh wants to be a contractor for farming supplies.

Prashant, a young boy, loves to act and wants to be known in theatre as a villain. Bhushan, who is studying in a technical training institute wants to start ecotourism as a business in the village. Praful wants to study for an LLB, but cannot afford that yet. He too studied at a technical training institute after his 12th standard because he did not have funds.

"Whether it's for claims or implementation of schemes, we always have a struggle," said Sushmatai. "All change starts with struggles."

Story of Persistence : Sushmatai's Journey

At the heart of the federation's work is Sushmatai's leadership. "Today the committee members are united," she said. "Even people who disagreed earlier or left us, are now with us in the federation because they understand that the federation is doing good work."

It was not always this easy. Sushmatai joined the Akshay Seva Sanstha around 2006, eager to learn. One of the first things she told Sudhakarbhau after she joined the organisation was, "I want to learn, teach me everything."

Married in 1998 at the age of 16 years and 1 month, Sushmatai already had two daughters. Her husband, who ran a paan tapri business when they got married, had begun to drink excessively. His father was an alcoholic and his mother was mentally unwell. Though people of her

community used to give dowry, Sushmatai's family did not have the financial capacity for this.

Sushmatai had her first daughter at 18, at around the same time her husband began to take to alcohol. Two years later, when she had her second daughter, her husband lost his paan-tapri business. For a few months each year, Sushmatai would leave her two children with her parents-in-law and travelled 300 kilometres to pluck tendu in another state. When at home from January to May, she would go with her husband to the forest and collect gum, mahua and tendu, also for sale. She and others who went to collect NTFPs faced harassment from forest officials. They did not know that there was a law that could protect them or that this was their right. As a couple, they earned around Rs. 600 each week. Her husband would take half the money, saying that it was his earning, and spent it on alcohol.

Sushmatai met Sudhakarbhau in 2006, when he came to her village to help women to set up self-help groups. She almost did not go to the event because she did not want to leave her young daughter. But she changed her mind. "Since I was young, I have always wanted to hear what people are talking about so that I can think about it too. I heard him speak and I realised that self-help groups are good."

Though she wanted to join, her husband forbade it at first. The anganwadi worker created three self-help groups in the village. The subscription for the self-help group was Rs. 25 per month, which she could not pay. But the anganwadi worker saw potential in her. She was educated "not much, but I had general knowledge" and they liked her personality. They urged her to join and become secretary of one of the self-help groups. She refused at first, saying that she did not have the money. The anganwadi worker offered another way: on the days that she went to work, she could give them the money before she went home. In that way, she could save and participate in her financial upliftment. She finally accepted. "I thought at the time that from now on, this is the work that I want to do," she recalled.

In time, she met Sudhakarbhau personally when she approached the self-help group for a personal loan, which they got from the Akshay Seva Sanstha. He inquired about her family situation and hearing of

her circumstances, asked her to join the organisation. He said that they would offer training, and she eagerly agreed.

"I got it into my head that I want to learn how to write," Sushmatai said. "I didn't want to take help from others." She would sit with balance sheets and account books and learn from them. She did audits of accounts for the State Bank of India and cooperative bank. She learned how to assess accounts worth up to Rs. 5 lakh in value. Women from ten villages came to her for help with this. Sitting in Sudhakarbhau's xerox shops, she would do the accounts for their self-help groups. Her only fee for this work was Rs. 20 per project.

Sushmatai's husband disapproved of her going for meetings and returning at night. He would make her sleep outside with her daughter. Women from the self-help group were familiar with these attitudes in

their own families. Older members came together one day to explain the work to her husband. Listening to them, her husband had a change of heart.

"He began to say if people can go to the moon, you can at least go as far as a protest," Sushmatai said. "I still remember those words of his. He would say that his life was ruined but that I should do some good work with mine." He kept his word. He stopped beating her, doubting her or suspecting her. For three years he was her constant support.

In 2011, the year that Sushmatai applied for the Coro India grassroot leadership programme, she had also been asked at the same time to apply for a job as a helper to the anganwadi worker. In doubt, she asked her husband for advice. He said, "If you take the work of the helper, then you will have to wash dishes and work with your hands. You have

learned so much through your trainings until now, that you should be receiving salaams. Your work should be well known. Don't fill the form for the peon, fill up the form for the Grassroot Leadership Development." Standing by his words, he took her on his cycle to the main town to fill up the programme form and send it.

Her husband died on August 8, 2011. In September that year, Sushmatai was selected for the programme. Her financial situation was dire. People contributed to help her buy one month's rations because she did not even have rice in the house. While her parents helped her, other relatives did not. They wanted her to leave her social work and stay at home.

Ever independent and strong, Sushmatai made her own decision. A new daughter-in-law had recently come to a neighbour's house. Sushmatai left her daughters in that new daughter-in-law's care. Telling nobody, she went to Pune for the grassroot leadership training.

Through the training, her voice and her self-confidence grew. "I didn't want to do menial work anymore," she recalled. "I wanted to work in the social sector and help other women like me. Which I have done and am doing."

"So much violence happens to women," she continued. "Men think of women as chappals to throw outside the house. I have got so many women out of their houses." The ten to twelve women she helped now go together to confront husbands in the case of domestic violence. "Nobody has to suffer this crime now," she said proudly.

For years, she did this work with minimal resources. She did not have a vehicle so she asked her friend Gunvanta to accompany her by foot for ten days each month. Though Gunvanta had a small child, she readily agreed, and the two enterprising women walked 10 to 15 kilometres each day through forests that had tigers and other predators in it. They have become sisters to one another. "There is nothing that we don't share, whether it is our sorrows or our joys," Sushmatai said. "We wipe each other's eyes and find the strength to continue."

Gunvanta and she have not yet given up their work. Now they both ride scooters. Together, they attend every leadership training session that Coro holds. They go for trainings and travel together. Where one is,

the other is not far behind.

Sushmatai now works to bring more women into the political sphere, alongside her work as a trainer of the Forest Rights Act as well as she is working on the issue of women's wealth. She has become so well recognised as a woman leader in the state that people from the village and block level to the district level know of her work. When there was a property rights campaign, she helped people in 25 villages to send Right to Information Act requests. If someone needs to write to an MLA or Collector, she helps them. She is one of five women in the Vidarbha division who is on a government committee to help women.

Her education has also benefited her daughters. Her daughters studied in the block level for their middle school education, at fees paid entirely by Sushmatai. Her older daughter now works at the district level, while her younger one is studying for her Bachelor of Education.

"I take them with me to teach them how my work is done," Sushmatai said. "I want them near me, but it is also important that they become independent and stand on their own two feet. They should not experience the hardships I faced. I keep doing work here and there to complete their education. Through my work, I have received love."

The attitude of the rest of her family has also changed. Her mother-in-law, who once would not eat food cooked by Sushmatai, now proudly tells people that her daughter-in-law has a job and travels for work.

One day, when riding through a village, she heard children shouting, "Sushmatai, bye! Where are you going?" After this happened a few times, she asked the children how they knew her name, since she was only passing through the village. They said, "Our parents told us your name and that you go to other people's houses to help them."

"That made me so happy," Sushmatai said, smiling. "I am a woman from a family that faced deprivation. I was poor and deprived once, but I have learnt so much now. If I had a regular job, then nobody would recognise me. Only people from the village I worked in would know me – not anyone from anywhere else. But now I have reached a level where if I meet people, they will remember me after we meet. I am so well known that people take my name even when I am not there. They know my work. I feel happy, confident, and proud."

Conclusion : Finding a Way ahead

Since it was enacted in 2006, the Forest Rights Act has transformed the lives of communities across India. As a landmark legislation that restored custodianship of forest lands to people who had been alienated from their own homes and rights for almost a century, the law in its conception stands as a powerful symbol of the intention of the state to correct "a historic injustice". Over time, people like Kashinath Salam, Rahul Hidami, Sudhakar Mahadole, Sushma Mohurle, and countless others have been instrumental in making this a reality for communities across the country.

However, the forest landscape is in flux. In the almost twenty years since it was passed, the Forest Rights Act now stands threatened by policy amendments that change the definition of forests and even withdraws protections that the Supreme Court once enshrined. To take one example, the people of Lavari received community forest rights in 2014. Under new amendments to the Forest Conservation Act, the state no longer requires clearance from the forest department to divert forest areas for other uses for "strategic linear projects of national importance". If the power grid company had made its power line today, the people of Lavari might not have been able to negotiate a fair compensation; their views would not need to be recorded in the first place. Other forested areas that people traditionally treat as sacred groves or use for sustenance used to be protected by the Supreme Court of India as "deemed forests", even when they were not recorded as being on land owned by the Forest Department. Amendments to the Forest Conservation Act withdraws that protection. Many of these changes have happened in 2023, but have been discussed for years before this.

This is even as communities that depend on forests are battling another spectre: that of climate change. As weather patterns shift, with intense bouts of rain concentrated in fewer days, with heat waves and unseasonal

hailstorms, plants, trees and animals struggle to survive. Mushrooms, an essential monsoon food, grow rarer. Bees pollinate flowers later in the year, making the sale of honey more precarious. Unexpected showers devastate the collection of mahua flowers. Traditional knowledge, already embattled by state-designed education that alienates children from knowledge about their surroundings, faces more risks as the forest itself alters.

In this book, we have attempted to show, in simple and accessible language, the ways in which grassroots leaders can use the community forest rights process to inspire collective action for the future. In the face of these structural impediments, it might seem that people's leadership is no longer sufficient to drive change in forest areas. This is incorrect. What we have seen in the last three chapters is that people persist, in the face of incalculable odds, to design their future. When aided by tools and training to navigate bureaucracy, grassroots leaders unite their already extensive knowledge of their own communities with the ability to speak to the state in its own language. What results is the growth not just of individuals but entire communities. People are the creators of their own stories and curators of their own knowledge.

Different Developments : One size does not fit all

We hope to provide a template for communities at different stages of involvement, from communities who want to secure community forest rights for the first time, to those who have those rights and are uncertain of what to do with them. The stories in this book provide three models for implementing these rights.

Different villages and communities might be at different stages of this process. For instance, for villages that do not yet have community forest rights, they might look to Kajipod for inspiration. The material circumstances of Kajipod are very different from that of Vasala Makta, to which communities and leaders can look to for ideas on how to map their resources and transform livelihoods, at a collective federation level. For villages confronted by state action, Lavari's unity shows how much a community can do in the face of state opposition, even as it balances the state and community needs.

We see the first model in Kajipod, where CORO India helped to initiate and sustain the dialogue between people and the state. The residents of Kajipod have been excluded on multiple levels from access to education, healthcare, employment and even secure housing. The Kolams are particularly disadvantaged compared to other Adivasi communities, which is reflected in the political structure of their village. Gonds in the main settlement actively participated in and led democratic processes. Kolams in Kajipod, however, did not believe that they had the right to participate in these activities until only a few years ago. However, despite being legally alienated from the reserve forest near their hamlet, the people of Kajipod had an intimate knowledge of the forest and knew how to live in interdependence with it.

When Kolams began to speak the language of bureaucracy, and by extension, the language of the state, they unlocked the path for transformation. These changes were not easy to bring about. Grassroots leaders such as Kashinath and Vasudeo had to be very clear about their goals for Kajipod before they could interact with the state, as even sympathetic government officials were sceptical about the extent to which they could apply the Forest Rights Act.

For communities at this stage of development, it is important to study the full range of rights available to them, and to understand before application what a community forest rights title might look like, what it means, and how to map these resources. Communities that are not near traditional areas of Forest Rights Act implementation can learn from the example of Kajipod to convince government officials to process their applications in a way that gives them the full range of rights that they are entitled to.

Lavari shows the scope of the second model – how to interact and negotiate with the state after having secured community forest rights, and how to use that for communal good. In the heated negotiation with the power grid company to secure adequate compensation for the loss of their forests, the critical element was unity. The leaders stood united and were supported by their community in this endeavour. Together, they were able to push the state to grant them fair compensation that went far beyond what the state had originally offered.

Not only does the story of Lavari offer inspiration for communities that are embattled by the state, it also shows what united communities can do when they are able to access resources meant for everyone. Openness and generosity define this model. People have diversified their sources of income, relying on their knowledge of the forest. Young men organise a kabaddi tournament in a village where even bicycles were once a rarity. Youth groups work together to preserve their cultural heritage. All this happens in the backdrop of the strengthening of democratic processes as more people participate in communal decision making.

As in Kajipod, these changes did not come easily to Lavari. Simple unity among the grassroot leaders is not sufficient to create this kind of change. Leaders like Rahul Hidami and Pandurang Kolte have had to step back from active participation in the community, as they bear the toll of the negotiations with the state. But with dedicated effort, other grassroots leaders are emerging from Lavari and its neighbouring villages and have taken the task of developing the community further, once again with the aid of CORO India. The imagination of what the community can be is theirs; they learn the tools through the grassroots leadership programme.

The final model, of Vasala Makta, shows how communities can chart their way forward once they have secured rights and begun to make use of community forest rights for their community. Once again, unity is the central theme, but this time it is unity of communities not just the people in one village. With the experience earned through a series of struggles from the 1990s onwards, the people of Mendki were able to ease Vasala Makta's transition from a village dependent on strenuous agricultural labour to one that could command prices for its own resources.

In this model, grassroots leaders form networks with one another, reaching out to new villages, with the underlying goal that if one community benefits, all communities can benefit too. CORO India's extensive experience with collective action has helped to inform the expansion of activity to other communities, even as it works closely with the people of Vasala Makta to imagine change for themselves. This model will be useful for those communities who have already acquired community forest rights and are looking to expand their

bargaining power, or for those communities which are near the ones that have already gotten these rights. Change does not come with just one grassroots leader, but with a network of them working together.

The final section of this book is not this conclusion, but an appendix, painstakingly created over years of experience dealing with the community forest rights process. Compiled by CORO India's Vidarbha leads, Deepak Marghade and Pramod Walde, the appendix explains the process in minute detail, from legal steps and bureaucratic hurdles to tips on how to unite communities around this subject. For those who wish to take concrete steps towards implementing claims under the Forest Rights Act, please read the last part of the book carefully.

New horizons : What can come next

Though we have tried to be as comprehensive as possible in documenting these stories, we are aware of the gaps in our narratives.

We have not yet looked at how fractures can form in these communities. Communities interested in taking steps forward with community forest rights should also have a realistic idea of how disputes evolve – and how they can be settled. If there is an imbalance of power in mixed caste villages, how can leaders make sure that change reaches those who are most excluded. Leaders from marginalised communities are often doubly marginalised – by the state and by their own people. This is why it is important to document strategies for how they can disrupt the power held by more powerful caste and tribal groups, in addition to how to negotiate with the state. In this context, the movement cannot be limited to just accessing economic resources equitably. It also needs to be the basis of long-lasting social change built on an anti-caste and feminist framework. These can become integral parts of the models as described above.

Women are insufficiently present in these narratives. In our interviews, we asked young people at all the villages what they dreamed of for their futures. Time and again, we observed that boys and young men were able to share their dreams for their future. Girls and young women of the same age were often first-generation learners and hesitated to articulate their own dreams. For them, simply by studying up to the 10th or 12th

standard, they were blazing new paths for the next generation. Older women have begun to participate in democratic processes, as for example in Mendki and Vasala Makta. However, they remain the exception and not the norm. Ideally, CORO India will work with women of all ages to build their confidence and to encourage them to pursue a future of their own choice.

Another key area that was beyond the scope of this publication was the nature of traditional knowledge and lived experiences with the forests. This is even though the core of this book is about forests and the community forest rights process. While we documented economic and social processes, this publication is largely silent about forest ecology. People such as Ajay, the young vaidu of Kajipod, are outliers. This knowledge needs to be documented not just for outsiders who might have an interest in forests, but also so that it can be passed on to younger generations within these communities, who can then use it for their benefit. Perhaps CORO India can address the need for intergenerational transfer of knowledge beyond narratives documented in English, through the intervention of grassroots leaders. In our forthcoming publication we aim to consciously bridge existing gap.

The hope is that other communities, on reading this, might be inspired to do the same. We hope that these tools remain a critical starting point on their journey towards the blossoming of their communities.

Appendix

Background of the Forest Rights Act and the Process for Collectively Claiming Forest Rights

The interrelationship of water, forest, land, tribe, and other traditional forest-dwelling communities:-

The Adivasi community shares a unique bond with the forest, akin to that of a mother and her child. The forest provides sustenance and livelihood to the tribe, and therefore holds significant value beyond just monetary worth. The forest is integral to the survival and well-being of the Adivasis, and any damage or depletion to it would have an adverse impact on their livelihood.

A comprehensive understanding of the relationship between tribals and forests can be gleaned from an analysis of various articles. In remote tribal regions, forests are the primary source of basic necessities for the villagers, and the survival of the tribes is inextricably tied to the forest. Communal living is a vital element of tribal culture, and every tribal practice has a traditional connection to the forest. Despite their dependence on the forest for their livelihood, tribals do not exhibit a proclivity to exploit or squander its resources for their own benefit. It is crucial to recognize that the preservation of our culture is directly linked to the preservation of water, forest, and land, which can only be secured if we, as a community, endure.

Although hunting is a long-standing tradition, tribals do not hunt during the breeding season of animals. Madia Gond tribals have different deities named after their surnames. Two gods, four gods, six gods. Different tribal surnames fall into one of these gods. There is no marriage relationship with the person of the same God. Each of these gods has an animal god. For example, someone's god is a

rabbit, someone's turtle. Those whose god is the rabbit do not hunt the rabbit. But those with other gods may hunt animals other than their god. Thus in hunting, not all hunt the same animal. Due to this practice, the balance of the animals in the forest is maintained. If an animal escapes from the net, they do not follow it again. During the rainy season, the bamboo groves in the forest are cultivated. But not all wastes in a single bamboo island are removed. They are reserved for bamboo growth. Gram sabha workers of Gadchiroli and other districts conduct patrols for forest conservation. They maintain the forest in their area by patrolling.

The tradition of nature worship is found in the sun festival of Madia Gond, Kolam, Korku and other tribals. It is their tradition to sow paddy, harvest paddy and during the harvesting of paddy there is also a collective ceremony in the village. The first harvest is done by the village priest. After that, harvesting begins in the village. There is also a separate ceremony to start eating the new grain when the old grain is finished. It is called Nava Pandum. The marriage ceremony is performed in a natural setting. In the past, a plow was kept at the place of marriage ceremony, Moha's head is planted, Moha's sun, moon, stars, tribal weapons used in the fields are carved, tribal symbols are carved. Moha Mundya Poojan is a beautiful ceremony where Rela is danced around the head. Be it worship of Moha or other suns, nature worship is mainly seen in Moha Munda. In the rural areas, even today, on the day before the wedding, there is a Muhurta Medha Rova ceremony, in which the branches of five different trees are planted. He is worshipped. Karanja branches are arranged in front of the marriage house. If we analyze this, some seeds of nature worshiping culture of tribals can be seen in the culture of rural areas as well. But in the tribal areas, such things are still seen.

Tribal culture does not disturb the environment. We have dangerous plastic sheet drones used in city events which pose a threat to the environment. Adivasis still use palsa leaf sheets and drona which easily decompose and produce its fertilizer in the environment. Man, who is considered to be advanced, has done the work of uprooting nature in the pursuit of so-called development. This so-called

development is threatening the environment here. Trees are being felled in tribal areas where rivers, forests and air are polluting to extract the minerals needed for this so-called development. The same situation has arisen in tribal areas. Forest is an integral part of tribal life: Also tribal is an integral part of forest Tribal society lives in mountains, valleys, forests. Although they have no fixed houses to live in, their minimum basic needs are not met, they are living happily in the bosom of nature because the forest is their breath. Nature is present in the actions of tribals who worship nature god. Whether it is a Warli painting. Be it dance. Be it folk songs or festival rituals.

Mahua, Peepal tree, Palas, Umber, Java plum trees are directly related to life and animals and birds. The connection comes because nature is part of his existence.

Battle for Existence :-

The relationship between tribals and forests has been a long-standing one, but the process of deforestation has been ongoing for many years, disrupting this symbiosis. Since pre-independence, the Adivasis have been facing the brunt of this issue, with many being forced to survive without their rightful homes. Deforestation not only affects the trees but also the insects and birds that depend on them, leading to a loss of biodiversity. The impact of deforestation on pollination also contributes to this loss. Furthermore, deforestation leads to soil erosion, reducing the rainwater retention capacity of the soil and directly affecting the local tribal community and its economy, as the food and lifestyle of tribals depend on these forests. Additionally, deforestation adversely affects medicinal plants, wild vegetables, and live seasonal agriculture, leading to a decline in tribal groups. Many tribes are still very ignorant of the world outside the forest and cannot adapt to it to sustain their existence. These issues have been further exacerbated by the decline of wildlife worldwide by 69% in about 45 years after 1970, as cited in the 'Living Planet' report of the World Wide Fund (WWF). A recent study of over 55,000 species found that wildlife populations in Latin America and the Caribbean have declined by more than 80% over the past 48 years, while Africa

and Asia have declined by 66% and 55%, respectively.

At the start of the 19th century, India was home to over 40,000 tigers. However, the most recent tiger census conducted in 2018 recorded only 2,967 tigers, which is 75% of the world's total tiger population. Unfortunately, the future of these majestic animals is uncertain. In 2021 alone, 27 tigers were killed, and last year saw the loss of 127 tigers. The decline in tiger numbers is not an isolated issue; leopards and elephants are also decreasing in number. Additionally, numerous species of birds, snakes, butterflies, and insects are at risk of becoming extinct. For example, 19 species of animals and birds, including the Great Indian bustard (Maldhok) bird, have already been lost from Maharashtra. While efforts are being made to increase their populations, it's crucial to consider how we can protect these species from extinction.

The increasing urbanization poses a threat :-

In urban areas, conservation of nature is often not a top priority for the government and people, but for tribal communities, it's a defining characteristic. Living in close proximity to nature, tribal societies can often satisfy many of their basic needs without requiring as much money as city-dwellers. Furthermore, the crops grown in tribal areas are often cleaner due to natural farming practices that avoid the use of artificial chemicals. In recent times, there has been a growing demand for natural fruits, grains, and wild vegetables in urban areas. It's fair to say that forests owe their continued existence to the presence of tribal communities. This is because forests provide for our basic needs, and as such, tribals often see forests as sacred. They worship rivers, forests, and mountains as though they are gods, while also conserving natural resources.

If we look back at the history of tribal movements, it's clear that many of them have been driven by the need to protect nature. By and large, tribals have fought and continue to fight for their forests and forest lands. Whether it's the earlier struggles of revolutionary tribals against British occupation, the current fight in Manipur, or the fight against resorts in Chadarpur district, these struggles have

always been aimed at protecting the forest and the tribals who depend on it. Recently, the nearby people of Tadoba in Chadarpur district have raised concerns about a local resort. They argue that the benefits of forest tourism are going to the resort owners instead of the local tribals. Meanwhile, new industries and mining operations are causing problems for both the tiger project and the residents. Unfortunately, many of the government's development schemes seem to ignore the symbiotic relationship between tribals and forests.

Tribal forest rights :–

Considering Maharashtra, the majority of the tribals in the districts of Thane, Nashik, Dhule, Nandurbar, Jalgaon, Pune, Nanded, Amravati, Gadchiroli, Gondia and Chandrapur live around the forest area. The total area of the state is 63864 sq. km. The land is covered with forest and this area is 21 percent of the geographical area of the state and out of this 31277 km. That means 49 percent of the area falls under tribal application area. In other words, forest elements play an important role in the economic and social development of tribals. These include forest products, afforestation, plantation, wildlife and nature conservation, protection. Forest Department, Jungle Workers Cooperative Society, Maharashtra State Cooperative Tribal Development Corporation, Forest Development Corporation provide employment to tribals living in forest according to their lifestyle. To augment the income of tribals, they are provided employment through various schemes. Initially, ignorance and illiteracy led to massive corruption in these schemes as well. They were exploited by forest contractors; But now there are various people who are creating awareness among tribals, making them aware of their rights.

Tribals have also fought against this corruption due to charitable organizations and to some extent the literacy of tribal youths and it has reduced. As a result of the continuous struggle for tribal rights, the Forest Rights Act 2006 Rules 2008 have given tribals ownership rights over forests, but due to lack of documents to prove it due to apathy in this regard. Some questions also arose. Some tribals still do not have Aadhaar card, ration card, election card and caste certificate.

Those who have lived in the forest for many generations have to be displaced from their original place. There are also some tribes who live by selling fruits, wild fruits and wild vegetables that come in the forest according to the season, who have been subsisting on traditional crops for years, has created a problem for their livelihood.

When individuals from rural or urban areas with limited education and skills come to earn a living, the pressing question of how to survive arises. However, some have taken action by advocating for their right to access natural resources such as water, forests, and land. For instance, tribes in the Nandurbar area have successfully established businesses centered around naturally grown custard apple and other forest produce, while others in the Gadchiroli district have experimented with selling tendu leaves. With collective strength, these tribes have been granted the right to sell bamboo, tendu leaf, moh, harad, beheda, amla, charoli, honey, gum, and more. Encouragingly, other tribal areas like Kajipod in Nanded district, Lavari in Gadchiroli district, and Vasala Makta in Chandrapur district are actively pursuing similar endeavors to overcome poverty while preserving their forest-based lifestyle. The sanctuary in which the villagers have shown their right. In Section 3.1(e) of the Forest Rights Act, the tribals of this country have been given area rights, i.e. rights to live, build houses and area rights.

The question at hand is whether the indigenous peoples who protect the forests and the environment by living within them should be labeled as uneducated, while those who cut down the forests for profit or other purposes are not. For centuries, these communities have recognized what many educated individuals who pursued industrialization have not: that our existence depends on the survival of the forests. The tiger, snake, mountain, bush, land, and river were revered by these groups as symbols of their own existence, and were fiercely protected against both foreign and domestic threats. This is likely why the forests have endured for so long despite ongoing pressure. It is unfortunate that those outside the forests failed to recognize the gravity of the situation. However, as we experience increasingly frequent and severe natural disasters, and see the effects

of climate change on a global scale, the importance of trees and forests is being recognized at all levels, from local to international.

This highlights the impressive knowledge and understanding of the tribal communities, who are often considered illiterate. However, mere discussion will not suffice, as urgent and tangible actions must be taken to protect the remaining forests. It is crucial to find a solution that does not displace the sons of land their homes, as failing to do so could lead to dire consequences such as the need for artificial breathing apparatus. We must act swiftly to prevent such a situation from becoming a reality.

According to Devaji Tofa, a respected tribal leader, Gadchiroli is a district that sits atop a valuable resource. However, there are those who seek to exploit this resource. To safeguard the forest environment, the tribal community has been using legal protections, such as those provided by the Constitution and the Pesa Act, to fight against these threats. This is not just a battle for the tribal people, but for all inhabitants of the planet. Let us unite in the fight to preserve nature.

The historical injustice inflicted upon tribals and other traditional forest dwellers due to the deprivation of their collective forest rights is a matter of great concern. In order to redress this issue, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 and Rules 2008, Amended Rules - 2012 were enacted with the primary objective of recognizing and restoring those forest rights.

The Forest Rights Act is a crucial piece of legislation in India that aims to promote sustainable environmental management and safeguard the rights of indigenous communities over natural resources. Officially known as the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 and Rules 2008, Amended Rules - 2012, it serves as a vital measure to protect the country's valuable ecosystems and preserve the heritage of its local populations.

Over half per cent of the land is covered in forests, with 15-20% of marginal land used for primitive agriculture. The livelihoods of those

in these districts have traditionally depended on the forests and will continue to do so. To support these forest-dwelling communities, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act-2006 provides individual and collective forest rights. The government has published a booklet outlining the background and key objectives of the Act, which provide a comprehensive vision for implementation.

The Forest Rights Act serves to protect the Scheduled Tribes and Traditional Forest Dwellers who have long lived in the forest but have not had their rights recognized. Through this Act, the necessary documentation and record-keeping processes are put in place to ensure fair registration and protection of these forest rights.

Forest rights encompass both rights and responsibilities for the sustainable use of resources. The village community has been granted the rights to protect the biodiversity in the area of use and maintain environmental balance, thereby strengthening the development process of the forest area. The law also ensures livelihood and food security of the local people involved in it. However, due to historical injustice, the forest rights of Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers over their traditional lands and habitats were not properly recognized in settlement and other policies during the British colonial period and post- independence period. The life of the forest dwellers is fundamentally integrated with the existence and sustainable development of the ecological ecosystem of the forest.

It is crucial to effectively tackle the feeling of insecurity surrounding unresolved rights. The Act also seeks to ensure fair compensation for individuals who have been compelled to vacate their means of livelihood as a result of development projects undertaken by the Central and State Governments.

The opening statement of the Act clearly states that the primary objective of recognizing forest rights is to rectify the historical injustices inflicted upon forest dwellers by removing their rights. The survival and growth of villages adjacent to forests depend on the collective use of forest resources that have been traditionally utilized. Consequently, the implementation of collective forest

rights is prioritized over individual rights in the regulations. However, the attention of both the people and government is heavily focused on individual land claims (Patta), and there is a prevalent misunderstanding that collective forest rights entail access to public facilities such as schools and hospitals in villages.

Historically, forest-dwelling village communities have relied on collective rights as the foundation of their existence. While it is now a legal requirement to make a claim for these forest rights, it is crucial that gram sabhas in these areas take the initiative to educate all members, determine their collective forest resources, obtain necessary documentation, and form study groups to review all revenue and forest records. Immediate action is necessary to ensure the protection and continuation of these communities' traditional ways of life. .

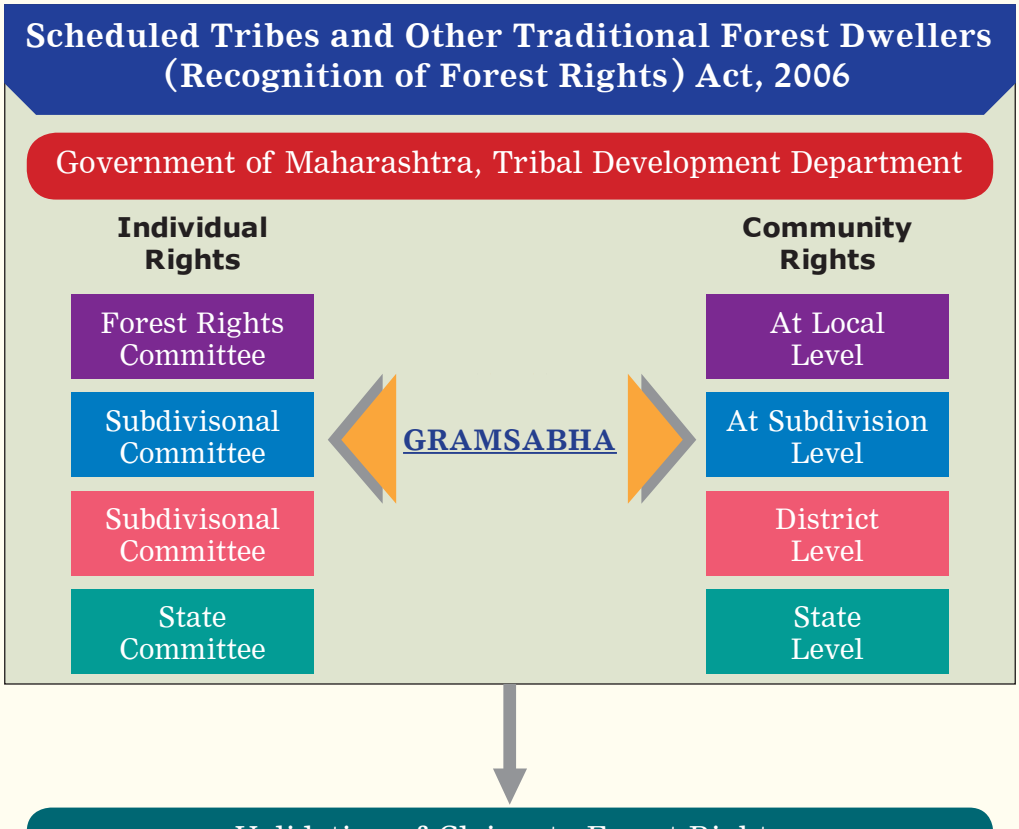
Key collective rights include the following:

- Ownership rights; the ability to gather, use, and sell forest products that are customarily gathered from either outside or inside village boundaries; The Act states that other vegetable products, excluding timber, bamboo, sticks, stumps, vines, tussocks, silk cocoons, honey, beeswax, lac, tendu, medicinal herbs, and tubers, are considered minor forest production.
- Additional collective utilization entitlements encompass the cultivation of aquatic fauna and reservoir resources, grazing and settlement activities, as well as recreational pursuits.
- Moreover, the prerogative extends to safeguarding, revitalizing, and overseeing all communal assets that predate conservation efforts.
- Furthermore, intellectual property rights extend to the collation of biodiversity, traditional knowledge, and cultural diversity.
- Lastly, the statutory framework delineated in the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006 delineates various other traditional rights pertinent to forest dwellers, with the exception of hunting rights.

Committee for Forest Rights

The pivotal right to safeguard traditional forests represents a cornerstone provision within the statutory framework, as articulated in Section 2(1) and Section 5 of the Act. This legislation empowers collective groups to undertake measures aimed at the protection, restoration, conservation, and management of all communal forest resources, including forest flora, fauna, biodiversity, wildlife, and water reservoirs. Notably, the group possesses comprehensive authority to safeguard not only the forests within their jurisdiction but also the cultural and natural heritage, encompassing sacred sites such as devrai and religious locations, from any form of degradation or destruction. Prior to December 31, 2007, there was no legal means for the community to safeguard common woods. This was altered by Section 5 of the Act, which gave groups the authority. According to Section 5(d), the Gram Sabha has the authority to establish guidelines for the use, defense, and access of communal forests. It can also enforce these guidelines. The Gram Sabha has the authority to restrict the forest department from planting trees on Gurucharan or collective land since the group has rights over these natural resources. Similarly, the Gram Sabha can claim the forest as a collective resource and emphasize the significance of protecting its cultural and natural history if it is set aside for mining or other uses.

This suggests that the village group has the power to challenge and overrule decisions made by the forest department, the government, or uninvited parties on the management of the forest. The village group also has the power to enforce decisions taken jointly and protect its forested areas. The process of acquiring rights begins at the village level, where it is made possible by the joint efforts of the Gram Sabha and the Forest Rights Committee to establish the committee.



Individual Rights

The entitlement to forest land designated for agricultural or residential purposes, and under possession as of December 13, 2005, is conferred under Section 3(1)(c) of the legislation.

Community Rights

All customary entitlements concerning the forest, encompassing privileges such as the extraction of forest produce, gathering of dried firewood, fishing, crab collection, and cattle grazing, are encapsulated within the purview of collective and forest rights. Furthermore, if a village or community has historically exercised the prerogative to safeguard and administer its communal forest, along with the authority to harvest and utilize secondary resources within both the village confines and beyond the traditional jurisdiction, such prerogatives are delineated under Section 3(1)(h) of the statute.

The process and mandate for vesting forest rights, as outlined in Section 6(1) of the legislation, pertain to the establishment and operation of Forest Rights Committees.

- The Gram Sabha is a traditional forest authority that initiates the process of determining the nature and extent of forest rights. Calling for forest rights claims with evidence from people, receiving claims through Forest Rights Committee, Checking the forest rights claims and reporting any deficiencies to the concerned. To ensure by site inspection. To verify the evidence and make a resolution recommending for the recognition of forest rights or rejection of the claim in the prescribed manner.
- Forwarding all forest rights claims to sub-division level committee along with gram sabha resolution.
- Each village council, its duties, wildlife, forests and the need to preserve and protect them. Provide information on forest rights and responsibilities of others for the protection of biodiversity related to these endangered flora and fauna, and provide forest and revenue maps and voter lists for Gram Sabha or Forest Rights Committee to review and consolidate all relevant Gram Sabha decisions. Map and details provided by Gram Sabha. Investigate Gram Sabha decisions and maps to ascertain the truth of allegations; hear and decide inter- Gram Sabha disputes regarding the nature and extent of forest rights; and Hear applications and petitions from people who have suffered. Filed by State Agent. Individual and collective forest rights claims are sent to district committees for final approval.

MEMBER Assistant Deputy Conservator of Forests

MEMBER Officer from the Tribal Department who oversees subdivisonal level work

MEMBER Three members of the Panchayat Samiti appointed by the Zilla Parishad. Two of them must be tribe members. If no tribe member is available, members of other traditional forest dwellers will be recruited

- Responsibilities of others for the protection of biodiversity related to these endangered f lora and fauna, and provide forest and revenue maps and voter lists for Gram Sabha or Forest Rights Committee to review and consolidate all relevant Gram Sabha decisions.
- Map and details provided by Gram Sabha. Investigate Gram Sabha decisions and maps to ascertain the truth of allegations; hear and decide inter- Gram Sabha disputes regarding the nature and extent of forest rights; and Hear applications and petitions from people who have suffered.
- Filed by State Agent. Individual and collective forest rights claims are sent to district committees for f inal approval.

Composition of district level committees

Composition of Province / Sub-division Level Committee	Composition of Province / Sub-division Level Committee
PRESIDENT	District officer
MEMBER	Assistant Deputy Conservator of Forests
MEMBER	Officer in charge of the district of the tribal department
MEMBER	The Zilla Parishad appoints three members, with a provision that at least two must be tribals.

In accordance with Rule 6 (b), it is essential to provide all necessary information to the Gram Sabha and Forest Rights Committees. It is also crucial to review the forest rights claims and accompanying documents that have been submitted by the sub-division level committee and provide final approval. Additionally, the committee must hear appeals from individuals who are dissatisfied with the sub-division level committee's decision regarding inter-district demands. To ensure coordination between districts, the committee must provide guidance on the inclusion of agreed-upon forest rights in other documentation, as well as ensure the publication of documents containing forest rights. Furthermore, it is vital to ensure that certified copies of forest rights and ownership rights documents are provided to the relevant parties and Gram Sabha while maintaining the Act's objectives. Lastly, the committee must examine whether the forest rights demands of incredibly primitive tribal groups, nomadic groups, and pastoralist groups have been appropriately addressed.

Structure and functioning of State Control Committee

Composition of State Control Committee

PRESIDENT	Chief Secretary
Chief Secretary	Principal Chief Conservator of Forests
MEMBER	Secretary, Department of Education
MEMBER	Commissioner, Tribal Department
MEMBER	Secretary, Forest Department
MEMBER	Secretary Tribal Department or Social Welfare Department
MEMBER	The provision states that in cases where a Tribal Advisory Council does not exist, the State Government shall be responsible for electing three tribal members appointed by the Chairman of the said Council.
MEMBER	
MEMBER	

Functioning of State Control Committee

Our goal is to establish clear guidelines and measures for approving forest rights, ensuring fair and safe processes throughout the state. We will hold regular meetings every three months to review our progress and report to the Central Government as required by Section 8 of the Act. If any authorities fail to carry out their responsibilities, we will take appropriate action and document the recognition and restitution process in a half-yearly report. We are committed to monitoring the rehabilitation process in accordance with Section 4 (2) of the Act and Section 3 [1 (d)], and regulating proceedings related to rehabilitation under 4 (8).

Action programme / Stages to be done by Gram Sabha and Forest Rights Committee

Phase no.	Program o f Action / Details of Action (Phases)	Comments/ Procedures
1.	To obtain information related to the Forest Rights Act, including enforcement applications, claim forms, and relevant documents and records, please follow the guidelines set out in Rule 6, Section b of the Act. The sub-divisional committee is responsible for providing forest and revenue maps, as well as voter lists, to both the Gram Sabha and the Forest Rights Committee. Additionally, Rule 12, Clause 4 states that upon receiving a written request from either the Gram Sabha or the Forest Rights Committee for information, records, or documents, the relevant officer must provide a certified copy thereof. If necessary, interpretation by an authorized officer should also be facilitated. To make a request, please submit an application in writing addressed to the Sub-Divisional Officers in accordance with the aforementioned rules.	Application for written request as per Rule-12 (4).
2.	To establish the boundaries of a collective forest area, settlement, revenue, and forest records are used. Additionally, it is important to create a list of forest resources with local names and record the details on a map. In the absence of a plan sheet, the traditional use area's square boundaries must be determined and detailed descriptions or landmarks prepared. It's also crucial to obtain statements from two senior individuals from neighboring villages before two witnesses and the forest rights committee. The concerned parties must then sign or leave a thumbprint. If multiple villages use the same forest area, the Forest Rights Committee of the respective Gram Sabhas must create a written resolution about joint use and submit it to the Gram Sabhas. Finally, a certificate in the prescribed format from the Sarpanch affirming that the applicant group is a Scheduled Tribe or a Traditional Forest Dweller is required. (Rule 13 Section 1-Z and Rule 12 Section 3).	A written narrative by.. an elder

3	To initiate a collective forest claim involving all members of the village, please follow these steps: First, obtain the claim form and thoroughly review the preparation instructions. Then, based on the records, complete the form accurately and in compliance with both Rule 4 and Rule 12.	Claim application of collective forest rights
4	To ensure proper handling of claims by the Forest Rights Committee, it is important to follow the outlined procedures. This includes providing a written notice, signed by the Committee's Secretary, to the relevant departments at least 7 days prior to the acknowledgement date. Additionally, a xerox copy of the claim application must be submitted along with the notice to the Forest Range Officer in accordance with Rule- 12.	Verification Notice
5	To comply with Rule-12 (2), it is necessary to prepare a Return Finding Report. This report should utilize the provided template, "Review Findings of Forest Rights Committee and Recommendation regarding Collective Claims." Detailed instructions on filling out this report can be found in Rule-12.	Notice as per rule 12
6	As per the provisions of Rule 12(2) and Rule 11(5), it is mandatory to issue a notice for convening the Gram Sabha to present the findings report of the return before the Gram Sabha for consideration. As per rule 11 (6), the responsibility of issuing the notice for this gram sabha lies with the secretary of the gram panchayat, commonly known as the gram sevak. The gram sevak is expected to issue the notice and ensure that it reaches the relevant departments in a timely manner.	Gram Sabha notice
7	According to Rule 11 Section 2.5, the Forest Rights Committee is required to present their findings to the Gram Sabha. Following this, the Gram Sabha must review the information and pass a resolution in accordance with Rule 11 (5).	Gram Sabha Resolution Sample

	To properly fill out the resolution, it is suggested to use the sample resolution titled ₹Gram Sabha held in connection with collective forest rights claim.₹ Additionally, it is important to prepare a detailed report following the specified title pattern and with the assistance of the Secretary and Gram Sevak. It is crucial to ensure that the Gram Sabha has the necessary quorum of members present. The quorum is defined as at least two-thirds of the total villager population, which is approximately 67 out of 100 members or 70% of the total list of eligible voters in the village.	
8	As per rule-11 (5), it is necessary for the gram sabha to submit a claim, accompanied by all required documentation, to the sub- divisional officer or the sub-divisional level committee chairman. This claim should aim to establish collective forest rights, and can be prepared by drafting a letter in the prescribed format available at the office.	Letter addressed to sub-divisional officer
9	To initiate the claim proceedings, it is recommended to send reminders to the Sub Divisional Officer after 7 to 15 days from the date of filing the claim. This will ensure that the process moves forward smoothly and without unnecessary delays.	Reminder
10	After one month of filing the Right to Information claim, one should request details of the proceedings by obtaining a note sheet. This note sheet should contain information on the proceedings under the Right to Information act.	Application under Right to Information

Samples to be used for collective forest rights claim process/ documents to be attached with claims
Application for forest rights information, records, documents Certificate to be issued by sarpanch Accounting statements of older people

Instructions regarding filing of collective claim application

- Application/Visual Map of Claim of Collective Forest Rights Instructions regarding filing of return and gram sabha report Notice of return to be given by Forest Rights Committee Return Report of Forest Rights Committee.
- Gram Sabha Notice Gram Sabha Report
- Sarpanch's covering letter of claim application
- If applicable, copy of certificate / seven twelve copies / map have suffered. Filed by State Agent. Individual and collective forest rights claims are sent to district committees for final approval.

Upon the acceptance of the claim of collective forest rights to the gram sabha, the direct execution of the work will be carried out through the gram sabha.

Government of Maharashtra, Tribal Department As per the government directive dated June 24, 2015, has established a committee for collective management of forest rights. This committee is responsible for determining the roles, responsibilities, and tasks related to forest rights management and enhancing its capacity to carry out these functions effectively.

- Demarcation of collective forest rights recognised area.
- To make it possible for the Gram Sabha to be composed and built constructively.
- The process of formulating regulations for safeguarding, preserving, and regulating financial transactions and accounts, as well as the collection and sale of by-products, is carried out through Gram Sabha meetings.
- Developing scientifically sound and socially inclusive management and planning frameworks that focus on collective forest resources. These frameworks will be designed to incorporate a people-oriented

approach and will prioritize sustainable practices.

- Determining sustainable livelihoods based on secondary production in areas recognized by collective forest rights.

Government of Maharashtra, Tribal Department – Formation of Collective Forest Rights Management Committee as per Government Decision dated June 24–2015, responsibilities, roles and functions of Collective Forest Rights Committee are as follows.

1. As per the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006, Rules
   2008 and Amended Rules 2012, individuals belonging to Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers are entitled to both individual and collective rights as stated in section 3(1). These rights include the ability to hold forest land for their livelihood through individual forest rights, the right to reside in it and use it as release under collective and forest rights, ownership rights to collect, use, and dispose of secondary forest produce traditionally collected within or outside village limits, as well as water rights that include fish and other products, grazing, and access to traditional seasonal means of wealth.
   Right to protect, restore, conserve, regulate and manage any social forest resource traditionally protected and conserved under Section 3 (1) (h) of the 2006 Act, Access to biological diversity under Section 1 (1) (t), To protect the collective rights to intellectual property and traditional knowledge and to protect wildlife, forest biological diversity as per the provisions of Article 5, to regulate the way to access resources of social forest. For this, the issue of setting up a committee as per the provisions of the Forest Rights Act was under consideration of the government to ensure that the decision taken by the Gram Sabha is being complied with. Based on that, the government has taken a decision.
   Establishment of a Collective Forest Rights Management Committee (CFRMC) under Rule 4(1)(d):
   The protection, conservation, and management of social forest

resources that are traditionally safeguarded and conserved for use under Section 3 (1) (h) of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006, Rules-2008, and Amended Rules 2012, requires the Gram Sabha to establish a committee under Rule 4 (1) (d) consisting of its members. This committee will be responsible for safeguarding wildlife, forests, and biological diversity as per Section 5 and performing duties under the provisions of Rule 4 (1) (f). The ₹Collective Forest Rights Management Committee₹ will be the name given to the committee established under Rule 4 (1) (d) by the concerned Gram Sabha. The Gram Sabha will be responsible for coordination and control.

The executive committee of the Gram Sabha has been tasked with implementing the Forest Rights Act. They will oversee administrative functions such as developing a conservation and management plan for the collective forest resources, managing revenue from natural resource management, and auditing expenses. Additionally, the committee will manage government funds allocated through the bank account.

2. The Community Forest Rights Committee (CMRMC) shall discharge its duties and responsibilities as per the Act 2006, Rules 2008 and the amended Rules 2012 and the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India.
3. In this regard, ₹Gram sabha₹ means the Gram Sabha of the Act Section 2 (g) 2 (h) of all the senior members of the village and in the case of states without panchayats, padas, tolas, other traditional village organizations and elected village committees with full and unrestricted participation of women₹.
4. Guidelines for Collective Forest Rights Management Committee and Supporting Guidelines for Implementation of Non worth Act:
    1. The Collective Forest Rights Management Committee shall be a committee representing all the forest right holders from among the forest right holders in the Gram Sabha. There should be minimum 5 and maximum 11 members. A quorum for a meeting shall be not less than half of the total number of members. But at least one-third of the members present shall be women.

2. The committee responsible for managing the collective forest rights will democratically elect a Chairman, Secretary, and Treasurer, with one of them being a woman. The President should be chosen from the Scheduled Tribe.
3. To call a meeting, the Chairman or Secretary's signature must appear on the notice.
4. In case of an urgent meeting, the village drum should be sounded 30 minutes before the meeting.
5. The Secretary will approve the minutes from the previous meeting and inform members about any actions taken regarding the issues discussed.

Functions of Collective Forest Rights Management (CFRMC) Committee:-

1. With the approval of the Gram Sabha, carry out the duty outlined in Section 5 of the 2006 Act.
2. Develop a conservation and management plan for the collective forest wealth in accordance with rule 4 (1) (f), ensuring equitable management for the benefit of Scheduled Tribes and traditional forest dwellers.
3. Consolidate conservation and management plans with existing Forest Department plans, modifying as necessary.
4. Prepare an effective plan for forest, land, and water management within the collective forest rights management committee's jurisdiction.
5. Establish regulations with Gram Sabha approval and in compliance with the Forest Rights Act to ensure lawful and effective implementation.
6. Approve decisions relating to transportation licenses, product sales income, and changes to management plans.
7. Ensure forest produce is sold at or above the minimum base price set by the government's procurement system for 12 minor forest products.
8. Manage revenue from natural resource management in both Gram Sabha and government accounts.
9. Undertake forest rights-related work, prepare expenditure budgets, and secure Gram Sabha approval.

10. Carry out work in accordance with Gram Sabha instructions and decisions.
11. Provide regular progress reports to the Gram Sabha on work, funds, and related matters.
12. The Committee's books and documents must be preserved, and expenses should be recorded.
13. Gram Sabhas can receive information and training on the Forest Rights Act, Government decisions, and policies.
14. The Register of Community Forest Biodiversity must be maintained.
15. The committee manages its accounts and can withdraw funds from its bank account with the gram sabha's approval.
16. The committee should display completed work details on the gram sabha board.
17. Photographs and other documents of the Committee's work must be kept in Gram Sabhas.

Management of Bank Accounts and Annual Audit :-

1. To ensure the smooth financial and administrative affairs of the collective forest rights committee, it is recommended that a joint bank account be opened in the names of the chairman, secretary, and treasurer, with at least one of them being a woman. Transactions will require the signature of two of these office bearers and the approval of the Gram Sabha.
2. All accounting books, checks, and administrative documents should be kept in the Gram Sabha office, and disbursements will only be made through Account Payee checks in accordance with committee resolutions.
3. The rules regarding the amount of small funds to be kept by joint account holders should be decided by the Gram Sabha.
4. The accounts of all transactions under the Collective Forest Management Committee will be maintained at the Gram Sabha level and audited by the Auditor of the Local Accounts Fund of the Zilla Parishad.
5. To implement the development plan works undertaken by the collective forest rights management committee, the district level

forest rights committee and the sub-divisional forest rights committee should take action with the approval of the Gram Sabha. They should also provide the collective management committees with benefits from ongoing schemes of different departments of the district to strengthen them.

No.	Activities to be done by the activity
Formation of collective forest rights management committee.	Formation of collective forest rights management committee and capacity building by determining the responsibilities and tasks of the committee.
Surveying and photography/ videography	• To collect information about the current situation in the village, economic, social, cultural, geographical, political, basic facilities and other resources of the village. • Baseline and serve data analysis. • Visual photography and videography of the present condition of the villages.
To create awareness about rights/ people oriented activities programme.	• Creating awareness at the primary level about the Forest Rights Act based on people's rights, PESA Act, • Employment Guarantee Act, Biodiversity Act and other relevant laws.
Organizational building and capacity building of study groups and gram sabhas.	• Organizational building of study groups and gram sabhas in villages. • To understand and study Forest Rights Act, PESA Act, Rohyo Act, Biodiversity Act and other relevant laws. To understand and study other rights based schemes. • Development of village resource measurement tool through group initiative.
Formulating and enforcing Gram Sabha rules.	To start the process of implementation by making the rules of gram sabha of villages. In that • Formulating the definition of Gram Sabha. • Formulating definition of Gram Sabha Fund. • Creating a definition of addiction. • Restrictions of village society will include rules of forest, village assembly and mutual symbiosis. • To formulate rules for Gram Sabha meetings.

	• Formulating a policy on women. • Preparation of legal documents required by Gram Sabha. • Formulating rules about responsibilities and roles. • To audit the annual accounts of the Gram Sabha. • To make working plan of gram sabha.
Forest resource mapping and determining business models.	• Mapping of availability and use of forest, by-products, agriculture and farm crops, water, sand, soil, minerals etc. in the village will be done. • Demarcation of forest area. • Preparation of List of Subordinates. • Determining the habitat of wild life. • Inspecting suitable grazing areas. • Inspecting suitable areas for Easter. • Inspecting forest water sources. • Determining appropriate secondary forest produce for forest business. • Preparation of Biodiversity Register.
Formulation and enforcement of regulations for minor forest produce business.	• To formulate the rules of secondary forest produce business and start the process of implementation. In that • Taking notice of Gram Sabha. • Writing Resolution Book. • Rules for Harvesting and Sale of Subordinate Forest Produce • Distribution of secondary forest produce • Salary Rules, Role of Gram Sabha • Removal of auction sale notice and advertisement. • Sales register, bill book, pay slip etc. • PAN NUMBER, TIN NUMBER, GST REGISTRATION
Preparation of management and village development plans.	• On the basis of survey and resource mapping information, village forest management and village development planning plan should be approved by Gram Sabha and submitted to the administration. • Measurement and mapping of community forest resources.

	• Determining the area of natural regeneration and tree planting and its conclusions. • Preparation of water and soil conservation plans. • Determining the process of collection of secondary forest produce and other natural resources. • To plan sustainable healthy livelihood by coordinating various government schemes.
To follow up and advocate at the administration level for the implementation of management plan and village development plan.	• The forest management and village development planning draft prepared by the Gram Sabha should be approved by the administration and start the process of implementation. • Creation of secondary forest produce and other resource based processing industries at village level.
Monitoring and evaluation	• Developing monitoring and evaluation tools. • To monitor and evaluate the objectives set in the Gram Sabha based on the tool. • To understand the actual outcomes and results at Gram Sabha level.

Process of preparation of management plan for collective forest rights area of Gram Sabha :-

Objectives :-

In order to ensure sustainable use of natural resources and promote human welfare, it is important to develop a comprehensive plan for the conservation and management of collective forest areas allocated to villages. This plan should take into account the local environmental conditions and incorporate a range of technical, statutory, and traditional knowledge. To ensure successful implementation, the plan should be based on relevant legislation, including the Rights Act, Forest Protection Act, Wildlife (Protection) Act, and Employment Act.

- The importance of halting forest degradation and conserving our precious natural resources.
- By enhancing ecosystem services and responsibly managing and maintaining our resources.
- We can increase the yield of forest products while also promoting natural regeneration of the area.
- This will lead to a significant increase in forest trees and the preservation of wildlife habitat.
- Ensuring the conservation of biodiversity for generations to come.
- Additionally, we will prioritize soil and water conservation, promoting surface and underground water recharge and the responsible management of our water resources.

Growth :

Participation of citizens in their planning, implementation and control for social, economic development and sustainable livelihood
Items covered in the action plan:-

- Conserving, conserving and enhancing biodiversity.
- Managing flora, fauna and their rights.
- Proper management of minor crops for commercial and industrial use.
- Silhi Culture Operation.
- Sustainable management of forest area for irrigation, fodder, by-products, timber for agriculture and house construction, grazing, grazing, livelihood.
- Soil conservation.
- Demarcation of collective forest area and preparation of land use map.
- Determining assessment and control methods, principles and criteria and responsibilities.

Plan of Action :-

- The demarcation of forest areas is essential for recognizing collective forest rights.
- This will help empower the Collective Forest Rights Management

Committee established under Section 4(1)(e) of the Forest Rights Act.

- Additionally, there should be a meeting with the Gram Sabha to prepare a Natural Resource Management Plan.
- To further support the Gram Sabhas, regular assistance should be provided to help them fulfill their legal responsibilities.
  1. This includes formulating an action plan to ensure the Gram Sabha remains active and regular.
  2. As well as documenting and implementing an effective method for record-keepin
  3. Opening a bank account and completing other legal matters (Government Fees, Excise and Income Tax etc.).
  4. Rules for keeping financial accounts and accounting. Formulation of management plans.

1. Measurement and mapping of community forest resources.
2. Determining the area of natural regeneration and tree planting and its conclusions.
3. To determine the process of collection of secondary forest produce and other natural resources.
   - Preparation of water and soil conservation plans.
   - Planning for sustainable healthy livelihood by coordinating various government schemes.

Key Stages :- The Forest Rights Act can be efficiently implemented by creating and training Management Committees according to section 4 (1)(e) when collective forest rights claims are received. The committee's protection and management plan should be discussed in the Gram Sabha, and the method of action determined. Volunteers should be selected to carry out the work through the Gram Sabha. A conservation and management plan should be prepared and presented to the Gram Sabha, taking into account the suggestions of other departments, including those in the management committee's forest conservation and management plan. Finally, the plan should be approved. The process will be made truly people-oriented by strengthening the Gram Sabhas.

Phase No. :-1 Training of Collective Forest Rights Management Committee and Strengthening of Gram Sabhas:-

It is imperative to establish Collective Management Committees and provide them with requisite training as per Section 4(1)(e) of Forest Rights Act 2006 and Rules 2008. As per the legislation, once the claims are received by the committee, it becomes their responsibility to manage and conserve the resource in coordination with the Gram Sabha. Therefore, it is crucial to provide them with structured and systematic training. Expert trainers will prepare a training format and impart the necessary skills to enable the committee to effectively manage and protect the resource.

Phase No. :- 2 Empowering Gram Sabhas as self-governing self-sufficient institutions by providing legal technical support.

In order to ensure effective and efficient daily operations, legal and financial transactions, transparent documentation and planning, and proper implementation and evaluation, it is essential to empower gram sabhas. Through proper exposure and training, gram sabha members can learn how to utilize natural resources and plan effectively, following established norms and quality standards. By observing the performance of other successful gram sabhas, they can improve their own practices and achieve their goals.

Phase No.:-3 To promote the process of forest and other resource stock delineation and preparation of forest rights area management plans.

The Gram Sabhas process benefits from external technical advice. It is recommended to seek such assistance for tasks such as data collection, financial analysis, document preparation, stock mapping, and traditional and scientific planning. To facilitate this, an advisory committee will be established, comprised of experts from various fields, including forest and wildlife experts, social scientists, and agricultural experts. The committee will oversee resource management, including resource overview, management criteria, livelihoods, water and soil resources, and more, while taking into account the Forest Rights Act, Forest Conservation Act, and Biodiversity Act. This plan

aims to achieve the following goals.

To safeguard and preserve our forests, it is crucial to halt any degradation that may be occurring., Additionally, efforts to boost forest productivity are necessary.

We must take action to promote a healthy ecological balance and maintain essential environmental services.

Furthermore, we should prioritize natural regeneration and growth of forest areas according to situational silvicultural needs.

Reducing air emissions during the growth process of trees is also important.

Protecting biodiversity and maintaining wild animal populations are critical components of forest conservation.

Finally, it is essential to prevent soil erosion through the conservation of water and soil.

We can achieve all of these through biodiversity conservation-based planning and management, with the active participation of citizens to meet their social, economic, and livelihood needs.

Phase No.4:- Comprehensive Plan of Water and Soil Conservation

The proposed project will primarily take place in the forested area. It aims to implement water and soil conservation efforts, determine appropriate treatment methods, and analysis necessary manpower and budget requirements. The assistance of a qualified expert will be sought for this undertaking. Ultimately, it is expected to enhance the available livelihood resources while ensuring proper management and car e.

Phase No.5 :- Resource group organizations will be trained to support this project and understand its methodology and requirements.

Phases of work :- .

The delineation of forest and water rights boundaries

Capacity building of committee members at the village level and beyond Development of a comprehensive management plan for the village.

- Demarcation of forest rights/water rights area.

- Village level and other committee members training village management plan.
- Fine planning on resource measurement, conservation utilization priorities etc.
- Resource measurement, natural regeneration, afforestation and sale and its products, their storage and marketing based on the above aspects, soil and water conservation for livelihood planning, employment opportunities, agricultural development, employment.
- The creation, as a supplementary function of this, includes finally the plan approved by the Gram Sabha and its respective District Collector, Head of the Zilla Parishad.
- To submit funds and technical assistance to the executive and other departments of the government for proper implementation.
- We will oversee the ongoing proposed work by the Gram Sabha and conduct regular reviews.

– This documentation, prepared by Deepak Margade, captures the process facilitated by the Vidarbha Sustainable Livelihood Rights Campaign towards the implementation of the Forest Rights Act.

Appendix 2

Grassroots Leadership Development Programme, India – Training Outline

A. Structure of Training Programme :

- Total 5 training modules in a fellowship year. (First nine months of Fellowship year)
- All 5 Training modules are completed in first six months, 6 weeks gap between two trainings.
- Each module lasts 4-5 days
- Participatory trainings.
- Assignments to be completed after each module during 8 weeks gap.
- 3 modules on leadership core competencies, one on chosen issue.
- State/regional level resource persons/ resource organizations as trainers. This includes some of the mentors, organization heads and implementing team members.

B. Methodology

Training delivery method is participative, reflective and discourse of thought. Learning de-learning and relearning process carryout throughout the training program which we can say conscientization.

C. Modules at Glance

Module I: (Five Days)

1. Understanding self
2. Understanding context/ environment.
3. Grassroots Leadership

Module II: (Four days)

1. Gender and social inequalities
2. Participatory Citizenship
3. Issue based (focus on exploring democratic spaces in the issue based local institution and system)

Module III: (Four days)

1. Communication skills.
2. Research skills as capacity building tools.
3. RTI

Module IV: (Two Days)

1. Process Proposal development

Module IV: (Six days)

1. Citizen centered Advocacy:
2. Executive Advocacy
3. Media Advocacy
4. Judicial Advocacy
5. Legislative Advocacy

D. QGLDP Training Content and Expected key learning

Sessions covered	Key learning's
Identity an understanding self	• Time to reflect on themselves in terms of their role in their social and personal lives • Ability to challenge, accept/redefine their current identity
Understanding social context	• Increased awareness of their presence in their community • Identify inequalities with structure of community • Understanding the immediate physical and social setting in which people live and how it influences people's perception and experience

Leadership, social change and motivation	• Increased motivation and inspiration • Better understanding of the participatory, reflective, entitlement based and action-oriented approach to social change • Enhanced understanding of leadership skills • Ways to adopting a entitle based approach
Understanding gender and social inequalities	• Deeper understanding of gender and social identity, stereotypes, discrimination • Deconstruction of gender based social norms • Increased awareness of laws promoting gender and social equality
Understanding citizenship	• Clarity on fundamental rights and duties • Understanding the need of the constitution and its key elements • Significance of citizenship in our day-to-day lives • Enhanced understanding of how the role of democratic institutions as instruments of change can be made more effective through participatory citizenship • Increased awareness of the fundamental rights and duties • Deeper understanding of the 4 pillars of constitutional democracy legislature, executive, judicial and media/ citizens' group
RTI	• Detailed information on the Right to Information Act, 2005:Why the need of RTI, What is RTI, Challenges to RTI, Agents of RTI, How to file and RTI • Practical learning in how to use this for solving issues of community
Issue based	• Provides spaces for collaborative learning and networking between participants working on similar issues • Helps facilitate the setting of goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) for at least a year based on organized thinking on the issue and the community with whom they are working

Participatory communication	• Role of leaders in communication – mobilization and empowerment • Leadership & communication styles • Elements of communication • Use of communication in conflict resolution: Community dialogue, Negotiation, Mediation, Consensus • Different communication methods: Community dialogue, Collective action, Community theatre, radio, video
Research Methodology	• Understanding of the participatory research process • Research methods: Focus group discussion, Interview, Survey • Fundamentals of participatory research methods • Ethics of participatory research methods • Challenges to participatory research
Process proposal	• Understanding the elements of a good proposal and its significance • Deeper knowledge and understanding of the significance of a process to bring about social change • Learning and analyzing the elements of a process proposal
People Centric Grassroots Advocacy	• Understanding the key concepts of grassroots advocacy • Understanding the key elements of grassroots advocacy • Identification of advocacy issues with related to work • Importance of advocacy for the collective process

Making of this book Conversations with Community

Training

Training