

Mendha fights for managing its forest- 'Mawa nate, mata raj'

The message is loud and clear. Nature has no room for manipulation. We may either preserve it or perish with it. This is clearly evident from the collective wisdom of Mendha, a tribal village in Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra, which shows how to conserve forests and manage natural resources. Mendha village is 40 km far from Gadchiroli in Dhanora tehsil. It is mainly inhabited by 480 Gond adivasis. Mendha village today may be called country's first village to get a legal record of rights to manage its forest, water and forest produce as per the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Right) Act, 2006. The Gond people have been guarding their forests since ages. Their livelihood and sustenance depended on forest produce. However, now they can generate revenue from the minor forest produce.

Devaji Tophia, former sarpanch of Mendha village has been instrumental in this process. He never had any formal schooling but he is a man with a vision and wisdom. "It is an important responsibility of our community. Individual property rights do not carry much importance for us. Community ownership is important. Villagers are developing plans to collect, process and market minor forest produce. It would help in generating income. It would also

provide gainful employment," he said. He mobilised the villagers to establish a participatory system of governance and standing to get their forest rights back from the government. As per the law, land ownership belongs to individuals and that bestows upon the village community implicit ownership of adjacent forests, including consumption rights, for example, cattle grazing collection and storage of minor forest produce, and management and disposal of resources. Mendha village is surrounded with 1,800 hectares of forest area, which is replete with a variety of bamboo, teak, herbs, mahua flowers and at least 20 different varieties of produce.

The only way to conserve forests is to give its management to local tribal communities. The villagers first protested against the felling of forests for commercial purposes in the mid-eighties. They did not allow outsiders into village territory. They also laid down rules for themselves in order to conserve the forests.

Almost a decade ago they realized the worth of collective strength. By working jointly they managed to resurrect the dried up Kathari river that flows along their village. Today, the village has set an example for scholars and researchers from all over the world to study.

Gram Sabha is the authority- a signboard with that slogan on the

Sabha's office wall is an indicator of strong, effective and vibrant community participation. It is mandatory for everyone to seek the Gram Sabha's permission before commencing any work on the community land, and decisions are made by consensus. When the Biodiversity Act came into being, Mendha became the first village to get in place a biodiversity register (record of the biodiversity in its forest). Almost all the households in the village own biogas — its first step toward energy self-sufficiency.

Though Mendha has been managing its resources under the joint forest management (JFM) scheme since 1992, but the government did not provide to the Gram Sabha its legitimate share of 50 per cent of the revenue from the sale of minor produce and bamboo. The struggle began and tribals began to assert their rights on the forest and its produce. Mendha declared, 'Mawa nate, mata raj' (we are the government, we will have our rule). Finally, having won the legal right, Mendha now has to decide what needs to be done with the minor forest produce, such as tendu leaves, amla, honey etc. Mendha also got support from various agencies in understanding government procedures and law. But when it comes to decisions, it is always gram sabha. Outsiders could only work as support system in this village.