

160 women from a tiny village called Rahu in Melghat get Rs 10000 as share of profit through bamboo harvest

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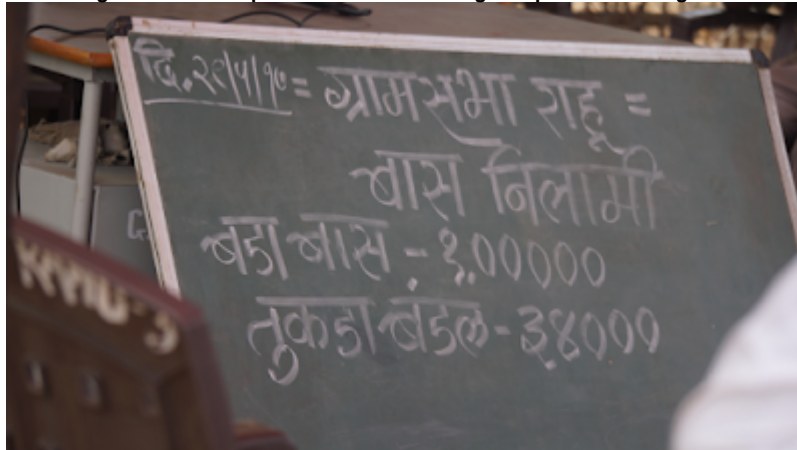
A village called Rahu in the northern fringes of the Melghat Tiger Reserve in Amravati district of Maharashtra manages its 4500ha of forests under



FRA and PESA.

For the last 4 years, they have been engaged in

marketing their Minor Forest Produce of bamboo and tendu collectively through their village Gram Sabha. This is the only village in the 2 blocks of Melghat that has been harvesting the bamboo. As the entire world is caught under the lockdown due to COVID Pandemic, people in Rahu are weighing their pros and cons of harvesting bamboo-this season. For the last 4 years, summer is their peak time with almost all villagers of Rahu and also the needy from neighbouring villages participate in the harvest of bamboo. Tendu season begin in May and last for almost 4 weeks. Management of MFP has become a sustained source of livelihoods for the villagers. In the last 4 years, Rahu has earned almost over 3 crores from bamboo harvests and about 10 lakhs from tendu. 50% income from bamboo harvesting goes into wages, transportation and harvesting operations, rest is saved for the next season's management costs. A portion of this amount is used for village welfare and development. In one year, they decided to reduce the drudgery of women in filling water and hence got tap water connections to all households, in another year, they got handy solar lights to deal with the erratic electricity supplies and also to take to the farm for the night vigil. Bamboo has made a huge difference in their lives. When we began discussing this process of management of minor forest produce with the villagers, all of us were posed with the question, where do we get funds from. With a zero balance, and only collective motivation, wisdom, hard work, the sound technical knowledge of the people in harvest, the honesty and transparency, the Gram Sabha made a profit of over 18lakhs. Since then nothing has stopped their journey, rather they have become more responsible, vigilant of the forest fires and any illegal efforts are thwarted by the Gram Sabha. The Gram Sabha recently recognising that a lot of money was also going into alcohol has brought about a complete ban on the brewing of liquor in the village. Thus one action has made immense



changes in the lives of the people.

Indicators of financial stability

point to the increased number of motorbikes in the village that has increased their connectivity to government offices, banks and markets. It has also led to some kids getting into better schools for education. With money also comes a huge responsibility of its management. With a team of young people, both men and women included, Rahu is a good record keeper. Most of its payments are done through banks and audits are carried out regularly. The first quarter of 2020 and the 5th years of its MFP management, was initiated with a grand decision of sharing of profit with all its stakeholders in the village while keeping funds for the harvest. The Gram Sabha resolves to share the profit made through the management of Minor Forest Produce to the tune of Rs 10000 per family for 175 households, however, the decision did not end here. It was also resolved that this fund of 10000 would be deposited in the bank account of all the women of the household, only in extremely exceptional cases, the funds would be transferred to men. This resulted in the transfer of funds to almost 95% of the women in the village with few exceptions of lapsed accounts or with no adult female members in the family etc. 20 households from amongst the 175 chose to get LPG connection through forest department as they also subsidise the refill, hence an amount of Rs 2260 was paid to the forest and the balance of 7740 transferred to the accounts.



While we all worry about our paycheques, Rahu unfettered by the economic slowdown at least for now was preparing to go for its fire protection rounds, while the Gram Sabha would meet later to resolve the bamboo harvest decision later in the week. The Gram Sabha values the forests and knows the outcomes of protecting and nurturing it while sustainably harvesting the resources that are required to keep the lives of people running. 10000 may sound a pittance for us in the towns and cities, but it means a great amount of security to the people who barely earn enough from one season of agricultural harvests otherwise. An example in times of COVID, of how villages in forests at least could move forward in self-sustenance and self-reliance while protecting and conserving their forests as well as their livelihoods and improving their own Governance.