Forest Conservation and Management in Pachgaon

Written specially for the Vikalp Sangam website Pachgaon is a village in Gondpipri taluka of the Chandrapur district of Maharashtra whose claim to Community Forest Rights (CFR) was recognised and title given in the year 2012. Since then, the village has done commendable work in the management and conservation of its forest and the wildlife within it following the footsteps of villages like Mendha Lekha[1]. The village has a small population of 250 out of which 72 percent belong to the Scheduled Tribe Gond and the rest belong to Kunbi and Marar communities (that fall under the category of Other Backward Classes) and the Kapewar and Gaadi Lohar communities (which fall under the category of Nomadic Tribes). The total area of forest under community conservation and use is 1006.416 ha or 2486.90 ac, out of which the villagers have declared 85 ac as devrai or sacred grove after 2012. The forest is used for harvesting bamboo, as grazing land for livestock and for extracting wood for fuel and farming purposes. Their forest is rich in a variety of flora and fauna species and boasts of having the Bengal tiger (Sher/Bagh), Satavari (Asparagus racemosus), an endangered plant whose root is used to make medicine, is also found abundantly in their forest.

Livelihood Challenges and Struggles of the Community

Only 10 percent of the population of Pachgaon practises agriculture. Before receiving CFR rights, a large fraction of the population found great difficulty in earning a livelihood. Distress out migration to neighbouring states such as Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka was high. The village had no recorded nistaar or customary rights over their forest and had to either steal resources such as firewood from the forests or bribe the forest guard. Under Joint Forest Management (JFM), only 6-10 people got employment and that too for just 4-8 days in a month and reportedly, the profits gained from the sale of tendu leaves were not shared with the villagers either. Other avenues for income generation were employment under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) between the years 2007-12. However, the villagers soon realised that they could not depend on NREGA as a means to earn a livelihood and that they were rampantly being exploited by the forest department for accessing forest resources that were rightfully theirs. Through Vijay Dethe of the non-governmental organisation Paryaavaran Mitra, the people of Pachgaon learnt that there are provisions in the “Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act” also known as the Forest Rights Act, 2006 which enables them to claim the right to ownership of forests that they have traditionally used and inhabited, and also to its management and conservation. The village gram sabha then filed for CFR rights on 17th of December of 2009.

After filing for claim to the Sub-Divisional Level Committee[2] (SDLC) on December 2009, repeated reminders were sent to the government officials and departments to take action on the claim submitted. When no heed was paid despite regular reminders, the villagers warned the District Collector of Chandrapur saying that they would launch a “One villager cuts one bamboo” satyagraha on 14th of April, 2012 in which everyone from the village would break one bamboo each from the forest. The date chosen for the satyagraha, 14th of April also happens to be the birth anniversary of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who framed India’s Constitution and always stood up for the rights of the oppressed. Seeing their determination, on 13th of April 2012, the District Collector of Chandrapur faxed a letter to the Tehsildar or tax inspector of Gondpipri who informed the Pachgaon gram sabha through the Talati or village accountant that their claim for forest rights has been sent to District level Committee (DLC). The satyagraha was called off and, finally, the DLC granted their claim on 16th of June, 2012. On 25th of June, 2012 the forest rights documents were handed over to the Pachgaon gram sabha.

The frequent travels to Chandrapur to visit the different offices and departments were funded by voluntary collection of a sum of Rs. 300 from each household of the village. Meanwhile, the forest department also tried to prove their claim wrong in numerous ways, such as, by saying that Pachgaon alone cannot claim the rights to the forests to which twelve other villages also had claim and that the documents submitted were not complete. However, the gram sabha of Pachgaon pursued their cause with relentless determination and crossed all hurdles to attain the rights to their customary and traditional forests.
The village takes all the decisions in the gram sabha by consensus of the majority. The gram sabha is generally called four to five times at least in a month and then as per need. There isn’t any other separate committee or institution for governance and management of forest. The gram sabha does not believe in having a president or secretary to ensure that the process of decision making is inclusive and transparent. However, a group of 38 individuals, elected by the gram sabha, undertake all tasks and responsibilities with respect to governance, management and development of the village and forest. A President is however selected for each gram sabha meeting. Men and women are alternatively selected as the President. The rules and regulations to conserve and manage forests and the everyday affairs of the village with respect to conservation have been decided in a gram sabha. In all, there are 115 or more rules combining all the categories and sub-categories. To ensure participation of women, youth and other disadvantaged and underprivileged sections of the population, it has been mandated that the gram sabha meetings have to be attended by two members of each household in the village and whoever fails to attend two consecutive meetings has to pay a fine of Rs.50. They also ensure that everybody should get an equal opportunity to speak in the meeting.

Some of the rules with respect to forest conservation and management are listed below:

- The gram sabha has appointed two persons who are responsible for allocating the duties of forest guards. To guard the forest, the male members of the village have been divided into 14 groups of 5 members each and each of the groups guards the forest twice a month. Even though women don’t guard the forest, they are involved in controlling forest fires and to negotiate with those who have been found stealing from their forest but refuse to pay the fines. The areas for patrolling in the forest are decided taking into consideration the threats of theft in the forest. If any of the forest guard fails to complete his duty, he is fined Rs.200. In the summers, they patrol from 7AM to 12PM. During winters and rains they patrol from 7AM to 6PM. Night patrolling is done only when there are repeated cases of wood cutting, hunting or fire in the forest. The fines for stealing from the forest are: Rs.500 for people on motor bicycles; Rs.300 for people on bicycles and Rs. 150 for people on foot and carrying a head load. Grazing happens from June to April and the permission letters are given altogether in June. In Pachgaon, one person from the village takes everybody’s cattle and another person takes everybody’s goats to graze in the forest every day. They avoid the bamboo cutting zones and the devrai for grazing. To resolve conflicts with neighbouring villages, a GS is called and at least two elders from the village should be present in the GS. Anyone who enters the forest, the villagers themselves, must sign on a register and explain the purpose. No kind of extraction of resources is to be done in the devrai.

**Bamboo Harvesting and Management**

The people of Pachgaon cut bamboo in the forest for all months of the year except in the months when it rains, from June till October, to ensure that the bamboo plants grow. The resuming of bamboo cutting is preceded by worshipping their deities, Bhimsan Dev and Mauli which reside in the forest. The forests have been divided into three zones and bamboo is cut in each zone only once in three years to ensure regeneration. Hand axes are used to cut bamboo. Men and women both go for bamboo cutting and are paid equal wages.

Bamboo that has been cut is stored in the depot that belongs to the village and here, the bamboo is graded according to the various purposes that it is sold for. Once enough bamboo has accumulated in the depot, a date is fixed in the gram sabha for auctioning of bamboo. The minimum rate at which the bamboo would be sold is pre-decided in a gram sabha before the auction. Two people from the village are employed to guard the bamboo stored in the depot from theft and they are paid by the gram sabha. There are also two supervisors who supervise cutting of bamboo in the forest and guarding cut bamboo at the depot and they are appointed on a voluntary basis. The money that comes from the sales of bamboo at the auction goes into a separate account of the gram sabha which then distributes the money back to villagers every month after accumulating the daily wages for the whole month. The daily wages are also decided in the gram sabha. Currently, the people are getting paid Rs.385 per day during the bamboo cutting season. The gram sabha retains 10% of every individual’s salary every month which is then given to them in the four months when there is no bamboo cutting. Any dues to the GS are also deducted from it. The villagers also claimed that as the rate at which bamboo is sold increases every year, the daily wages increase at the rate of 10%. An
interesting fact was that that though the village employs only the people of Pachgaon for any activity that happens in the forest, it also allows their son-in-laws from other villages to cut bamboo and get employment.

**Impact of Forest Conservation and Management**

*On community:* Ever since the *gram sabha* was formed, regular meetings have started and people’s participation in decision making has increased. The employment that has been received due to bamboo cutting has decreased the distress out migration to almost nil. The people of the village claim that they are much more economically stable than before and that their lifestyles have also improved. The *gram sabha* has started a primary school, street lights have been put up and water tap facilities have been provided at common points. The children of the village also go for further studies to neighboring villages and cities such as Tohogaon, Kothari and Chandrapur.

Income stability has helped them take ethical stand on a few issues. The village decided in a *gram sabha*

that since the

*Tendu*

leaves can only be used to make

*beedi*, the leaves will not be collected and used to generate income anymore, despite the fact that these trees are abundant in their forest and it generates a monthly income of almost Rs.5 - 6 lakhs for the entire village. Similarly, flowers of the

*Mahua*

trees are no longer being used to make alcohol which was consumed and also sold locally.

*Mahua*

trees are also abundant in the forest and now their flowers are left for the livestock to graze on. Recently, the

*gram sabha*

also organised games,

*kabaddi,*

in partnership with other

*gram sabha*

from other villages for both men and women and gave out lucrative prize money to winners. They refused to take money from any other individual or source and paid for the entire event on their own.

*On Flora and Fauna:* An area of 85 ac in the forest has been declared a *devrai* by the villagers and it is being managed as a sanctuary or rather like a critical habitat of the animals found in the forest. There are two or three sources of water in the *devrai* which have water throughout the year and also support the wildlife are conserved. Not even leaves are picked up in the *devrai*. This is to ensure a dense habitat for the wildlife. The number of wild animals has increased as proven by the increased sightings of the animals. This also ensures that there is enough food for the predators. However, incidences of crop destruction by wild boar have also increased due to an increase in their population but the villagers did not report it as a pressing issue. Talking to villagers gave a hint that they are probably relying on the growing numbers of predators to restore the balance in the numbers of animals in the forest and eliminate this problem in the near future.
With respect to future plans, the gram sabha plans to build its own office and guest house on a 5.5 ac land that it has bought with the money made from bamboo sales and also a watchtower for observing animals in the forest. They have also planned to do some work on a pond in the forest so that it retains more water. A survey of the existing flora and fauna is also on the list of things they plan to do along with planting more bamboo trees, fruits and cultivating medicinal plants like Shatavari, Ashwagandha and Sonamukhi in their farm lands.

This story is based on a field visit which was done by a team from Kalpavriksh between 14th to 23rd of June 2016.

[1] The village of Mendha Lekha and Marda, both of which are located in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra, are arguably the first villages in the country to have received the CFR rights and title.

[2] The SDLC constituted under section 6(3) of FRA, 2006 shall receive, consider and examine claims received from gram sabhas and then forward it to the next level which is the District level Committee (DLC) also formed under the FRA, 2006.