



MENDHA – LEKHA,
INDIA

*WE are the
GOVERNMENT in our
village*



From escaping into forests at a site of an outsider to achieving self-rule by negotiating their own terms, within three decades... (Narrated by Neema Pathak Broome)



An anti-dam movement in late 1980s turns into movement towards self-rule. Forest, land, and water belong to the village and they have a right to protect, manage and use them.

At the centre of the movement - an understanding that what a community achieves depends on the strength of its governance system and local institution/s.

Through numerous discussion over 5 years, village moves ahead with following major principles, among others:

- All interactions of outsiders with the community as a whole
- A common, all inclusive decision-making process, the *gram sabha*
- Open and transparent decision-making
- Ensuring informed decision-making through study circles
- Consensus decision making
- No direct external intervention in decision-making, only through study circles
- All conflicts to be resolved through dialogues and discussions following non-violent means



Some major achievements



Ecological

- Improving forest quality by not allowing unregulated and commercial extraction of forests by any outside agencies, regulating local use, containing encroachments, controlling forest fires and others



Social

- Equitable access and availability of natural resources to all
- Improved water and soil situation, improved agriculture
- Resolving conflicts with aggressive neighbours through peaceful means
- Ensuring year round source of livelihood options for all
- All external programmes and schemes implemented only through the *gram sabha* – ensuring equal participation and benefits
- Involvement of youth



Political

- Better negotiating power
- Greater control over processes affecting village and its forests
- Countering subversion by national politics by unanimously selecting deserving candidate based on performance for supra village political institutions.



Challenges faced and attempts at resolution

***De facto* in control but not yet recognized by the law. However, now claiming under The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006.**

Villagers have little trust on the government system not sure of them fulfilling commitments.

Conflicts with the neighbouring villages because of reducing natural resources in the surrounding areas. Attempted years of patient and peaceful discussions, Mendha villagers have now been able to clarify boundaries and have also managed to convince the neighbours to be part of study circles to understand the processes of degradations, political agendas and legal provisions. Villagers hope that this will lead to a greater participation in conservation efforts by the neighbours.

Need to study impact on bamboo and other species because of extractive use.

Others factors behind success..

- Unselfish and inspirational leadership by a group of elders led by Devaji Tofa
- Timely and need based help by civil society groups such as Mohan Hirabai Hiralal of Vrikshamitra,

Village views on external support

Legal strengthening is important for sustaining the effort but laws have to be sensitive to local needs and situations

International and national networks are important in times of need and also to increase local awareness and knowledge

No external support can help a community if the village itself is not willing, strong and united.

“Every village/community has to strengthen itself through non violent struggle against injustice (ahimsa), learning (Adhyayan), and self-rule (swaraj). A federation of such strong communities will be the strongest support and help – where we can learn and draw strength from each other.”

-----thank you-----