

# OXFAM IN ACTION

## Activating Village Committees to Manage Forest Resources in Odisha



ऑक्सफैम इंडिया  
**OXFAM**  
India

NO. 10 | DECEMBER 2015

Oxfam India is part of a global movement working to fight poverty, injustice and inequality. In India, it works in seven states<sup>1</sup>. Oxfam India's programme on Fair Sharing of Natural Resources is aimed at promoting tribal livelihoods, food security and environment protection, and control and sustainable management of natural resources by facilitating access to rights, like the Forest Rights Act, recognised by government. In Odisha, Oxfam India has been working with Regional Centre for Development and Cooperation (RCDC), an NGO, since 2010 to enhance capacities of communities to claim their rights, facilitate participatory natural resource management, conserve and manage forest resources, and promote livelihoods.

A large majority of people in India depend on agriculture and allied activities (forests and fisheries) for livelihoods. The share of agriculture and allied activities sector to total GDP was 13.9 per cent in 2014-15. Despite an overall declining trend in its share to the total GDP in the past 63 years – from 52 per cent to 14 per cent – largely owing to a structurally changing economy, these sectors have grown by 4.7 per cent in 2014 as compared to a growth rate of 1.4 per cent in 2013<sup>2</sup>.

The Planning Commission estimated that about 27 per cent of the population depends on forests for livelihoods<sup>3</sup>, and a majority of these are *Adivasis*<sup>4</sup>. Forest-rich states are also rich in minerals, making the forest-dwelling *Adivasis* vulnerable to displacement by mining and other development projects. In spite of being endowed with rich forest resources, these communities suffer food insecurity and low economic development<sup>5</sup>.

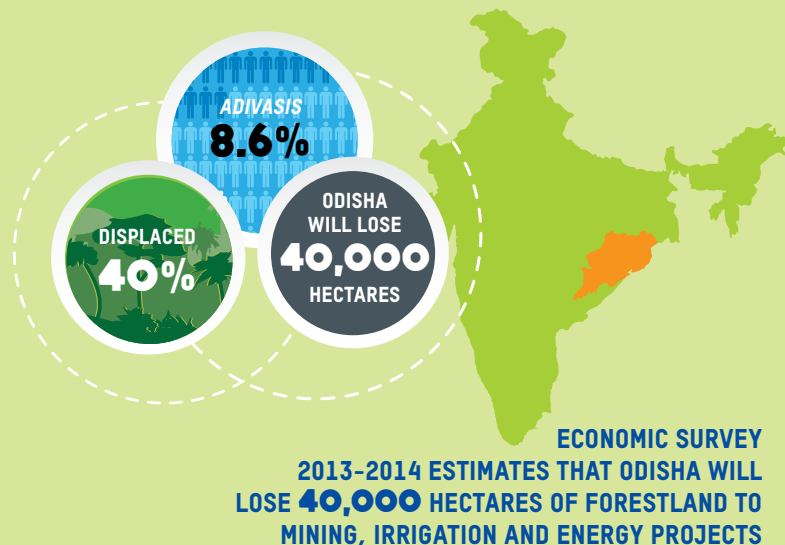
With land requirement for industrial projects set to triple in the next 15 years<sup>6</sup>, the source of livelihood of the *Adivasis* and other traditional forest dwellers will be even more threatened. Studies show that Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP), that includes a variety of fruits, medicinal plants and bamboo, contributes between 10 to 70 per cent of the total income of households. Further, a large majority of forest dwellers are dependent on forests for 25 to 50 per cent of their food requirement<sup>7</sup>.

It is in this backdrop that proper implementation of legislations such as the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dweller's (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 (hereafter Forest Rights Act) assumes significance. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) recognises the traditional and customary rights of forest dwellers—both Individual Forest Rights (IFR) for cultivable land in forests and Community Forest Resources (CFR) Right. This includes Community Rights (CR also known as *nistaar*), grazing land, and minor forest produce<sup>8</sup>. The Act also empowers the Gram

Sabha, through formation of CFR Management Committees to conserve and manage forest resources<sup>9</sup>.

Oxfam India's work in the three states of Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh has been guided by the objective to empower the CFR Management Committees. In Odisha, Oxfam India and RCDC work in 17 villages in the three districts of Balangir (Santala block), Kalahandi (Golamunda block) and Mayurbhanj (Thakurmunda block). A total of 1479 households, 1146 of whom are from Gond, Kolha, Bathudi, Saunti, Kisan and Kondha tribes, are part of the Oxfam India-RCDC endeavour to enhance capacities of communities to claim their rights and facilitate participatory natural resource management. Gram Sabhas are empowered to conserve and manage forest resources and promote NTFP-based livelihoods. Oxfam India supports RCDC to bring communities and the administration on a common platform and establish linkages between them.

### HOW ADIVASIS FARE?



**ADIVASIS CONSTITUTE 8.6% OF INDIA'S POPULATION<sup>8</sup>**

**NEARLY 40% OF THEM HAVE BEEN DISPLACED BY DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS<sup>9</sup>**

**IN FOUR AND A HALF DECADES SINCE INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE, MINING HAS DISPLACED 25 MILLION PEOPLE WHILE INDUSTRIALIZATION HAS DISPLACED AROUND 60 MILLION PEOPLE IN THE COUNTRY. OF THIS 2 MILLION ARE IN ODISHA ALONE; 75% OF WHICH ARE ADIVASIS AND DALITS<sup>10</sup>**

# FROM VILLAGE FOREST PROTECTION COMMITTEE TO CFR MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE



The members of the Village Forest Protection Committee meet regularly to discuss protection, conservation and forest management strategies

The 17 villages, where RCDC and Oxfam India work, protect, conserve and regenerate forests for livelihood and food security. In this regard, Village Forest Protection Committees (VFPC) becomes critical. All the Gram Sabha members are part of these committees. Through the years, they were first converted to Forest Rights Committee (FRCs) and, most recently, to CFR Management Committees.

RCDC established these committees' before the FRA was enforced. VFPC is the first rung of a four-tier forest protection system, of which only three remain<sup>10</sup>. The Committee kept a watch over the forest, regulated NTFP and firewood collection and stopped illegal

tree felling. At the second tier, there is the Block *Jungle Manch* that takes care of conflict and border issues; the District Forest Forum that provides the platform for advocacy is the third and final level.

VFPCs were a counter to the largely non-functional, corrupt and unpopular *Van Suraksha Samitis* (VSS) formed under Joint Forest Management (JFM). In this regard, decentralisation of forest governance and devolution of powers to Gram Sabha<sup>11</sup> has empowered *Adivasis* to exercise their existing traditional rights over natural resources. This is in contrast with JFM, initiated in 1990s, which promised profit sharing between the community and forest department, but vested control in the forest department.

The VFPCs also include former VSS members. After the FRA was passed, RCDC activated the Gram Sabhas to form Forest Rights Committee (FRC). VFPCs were converted to FRCs with a change in the composition to two-third *Adivasis* and one-third women. These committees are the first stage of verification of forest right claims.

After the titles were received, FRCs was reconstituted and renamed CFR Management Committee with a mandate to draw up a plan to conserve and manage forest resources. Technically, CFR Committees are similar to VFPCs, but while the latter was a self-instituted body, the former is legally constituted and empowered under the Forests Rights Act.

While all Gram Sabha members are part of the CFR Management Committee, 15 are selected as executive members. These members have well-defined roles and responsibilities and membership is rotated on a regular basis. The CFR Management Committee meets once every month.



Protection and conservation of forests, in some of these Gram Panchayats, have been going on for a couple of decades now. The community vouches for its impact on the biodiversity and the revival of water bodies

# CONSERVING AND MANAGING FORESTS



The household income from selling brooms now ranges between Rs 2000 to Rs 8000. Earlier, they lost raw material to forest fires which restricted their income to a little more than Rs 1000

**K**anthajal, a traditional healer and a former president of the Kanakpur VFPC, believes management of the Kumkot Churaphar forest has done wonders. The Kanakpur village falls under the Khaliapali Gram Panchayat in Golamunda block of Kalahandi district<sup>12</sup>. “We would take forest produce earlier but lot of herbs and plants were lost to grazing and forest fires. But now, special care is taken to protect the forest and we are able to get a lot of herbs,” says Kanthajal.

“Our first task was to tackle grazing, forest fires, green felling, and the distribution of forest resources. So sub-groups were formed. For instance, there is one on forest protection and another on wildlife protection. There is also a biodiversity sub-group. A forest resource inventory was also drawn,” explains Pravat Kumar Misra, RCDC’s project manager.

Drawing up the inventory required dividing the forest into 10 metre by 10 metre plots at different altitudes. A sample of 10 was selected to assess the health of trees and prepare a list of the extinct and endangered trees. This assessment helped understand which trees and plants were important (and should be grown) and what weren’t so useful. Once the inventory was drawn, steps to improve the forest began. Trees were painted to prevent termite attacks, dry leaves were collected for composting and gully plugs were built to conserve soil moisture.

To check indiscriminate grazing, the community formed groups and identified grazing patches to be used in rotation. One person in each group had to ensure that cattle graze on the assigned patch. Guards were appointed to keep a check on forest fires. Fire lines<sup>13</sup> were made wherever required; these firelines also prevent fire spreading from neighbouring villages. *Bidis*, one of the main causes of forest fires, and match boxes are banned in the forest. A night guard is appointed to ensure there are no forest fires.

No major forest fires have been reported since 2010-11. Sporadic cases are reported in summers but they are quickly brought under control. “Forest guards keep a close watch. The community has a punishment and penalty system in place,” says Mithila Bhoi of Khasiguda village in Dhamanpur Gram Panchayat in the Golamunda block. She is a member of the Buddha Raja *Jangal*

*Surakhya Parichalan Samiti* (village CFR Management Committee). As Mithila explains, “We follow the traditional practice of voluntary guarding – *Thengapali*<sup>14</sup>. Each family contributes to a small token, usually foodgrain, for these guards. This is like a registration fee or *Chulichanda*.”

Though the state government<sup>15</sup> rolled out Minimum Support Price (MSP) for 10 Minor Forest Produce (MFP) in July 2014<sup>16</sup>, the organised sale of the forest produce<sup>17</sup>, through state procuring agency like the Tribal Development Co-operative Corporation (TDCC), is yet to take off. However, the recognition of community forest resources rights has encouraged the community to conserve and manage forest resources and boost incomes. Pravat informs that, after getting CFR rights, the household income in these villages have increased, on an average, by 35 per cent. The villages in Golamunda block received their CFR rights in 2012.

According to Mithila, the individual income from selling brooms, now ranges from Rs 2,000 to Rs 8,000. Earlier, they lost raw material to forest fires which meant their income was restricted to a little more than Rs 1000. The community also has free access to *chironji* and *tola* seeds, *neem* and *mahua*. “We sell the *chironji* seeds at Rs 60 a kilogram. Earlier, when we did not have the rights to the community forest resources we were not allowed to sell these items. We could only exchange them with salt,” adds Mithila. Earlier, they didn’t have the right to sell the forest produce and so this was done illegally. But after receiving the CFR rights, selling the forest produce is now their legal right.

By fixing the MSPs, the role of the procuring agency has become critical<sup>18</sup>. The TDCC works directly in some districts and, in the others, the corporation identifies NGOs to procure forest produce on its behalf. The NGOs are selected on the basis of their experience of working with forest dwellers and their rights. RCDC, owing to its experience, was selected as one of TDCC’s procuring agencies. “It’s too early to measure success. Procurement hasn’t been smooth everywhere. TDCC is under-staffed and there have been delayed procurements. In fact, the TDCC is not present in Golamunda but we have been able to facilitate procurement,” says Pravat.

RCDC is facing problems in storage. It hopes that the Cooperative Facilitation Centre (CFC) set up in Jhamjharan village, in Kalahandi, with Oxfam India's support will address this problem. The Centre will be equipped with pulveriser, grinder, and stitching machine. These will be used to store the NTFPs, process them, and store the final produce. The CFC will cater to 10 villages and 232 Gram Sabha members. While Oxfam India and RCDC are contributing Rs 10 lakh towards the Centre, the forest department has agreed to pay Rs 6 lakh as part of village development. This contribution is in line with Section 16 of FRA rules<sup>19</sup>.

The CFR Management Committees in the five villages in Golamunda block have prepared a CFR management plan as per FRA's section 5. The plan charts out projects for income generation, biodiversity improvement and village development for livelihood and food security. The community has proposed planting of fruit bearing trees and tuber crops in the forest, without impacting the forest.

"Preliminary discussions to integrate the CFR Management Plan with the forest working plan have begun. The Gram Sabha has invited the forest department but it has not responded," says Pravat. Oxfam India and RCDC are in talks with the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) and community to work together for enhanced livelihoods. "The community can mobilise funds for such activities from departments such as rural development, environment and forest and Panchayati Raj. Convergence with different government schemes helps," says Pravat.

Ganesh Manjhi was among five other IFR title holders, whose land development was linked to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Paddy production on Ganesh's 1.5 acre land (0.6 hectares) increased from 20 to 27 quintal. Similarly community ponds were dug in convergence with the Green India Mission<sup>20</sup>. Nearly 40 households were brought under the Rajiv Gandhi Rural Electrification Scheme. Pravat points out that an empowered Gram Sabha made such a convergence possible.

Though there are no studies yet, the community vouches for the positive impact of forest protection and conservation, which they started in 2007. "The density of forest has increased. Biodiversity has been restored, the spring is no more dry, wildlife is back and we are becoming self-sufficient. Migration has reduced," says Kanthajal. Since 2011, Golamunda block has received two *Prakriti Mitras*, individual felicitations for good conservation, and two *Prakriti Bandhus*, felicitations for villages<sup>21</sup>.

## NOTES

- 1 Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand and Assam
- 2 <http://www.idfcmf.com/gamechangers/2014/08/agriculture-allied-activities-sector-of-gdp/>
- 3 Planning Commission of India (2011)-Report of Sub-Group I on Forestry. In Forests and Sustainable Management of Natural Resources, report of the Working Group for the Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2012-17). New Delhi
- 4 *Adivasis* is the commonly used term for Scheduled Tribes
- 5 <http://www.outlookindia.com/news/article/chhattisgarh-poorest-state-with-479-poverty-rangarajan-panel/848766>
- 6 [http://www.navdanya.org/attachments/Latest\\_Publications10.pdf](http://www.navdanya.org/attachments/Latest_Publications10.pdf) (pg 102)/as accessed on 3rd Feb, 2015
- 7 <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/56/63/42341879.pdf>
- 8 Section 13 (2) <http://tribal.nic.in/WriteReadData/CMS/Documents/201211290401163173828File1036.pdf>
- 9 The amendments to FRA Rules in 2012 streamlined the implementation by vesting powers with the Gram Sabha; under section 4(1)(e) Gram Sabha through CFR Management Committee and CFR Management Plan has the power to conserve and manage forests
- 10 The fourth tier was the Odisha Jungle Manch which is at the state level and gives feedback to various state level departments. RCDC has now stepped away from this, as there was conflict in ideologies within the team. One of the reasons was that RCDC wanted the people's organisation to become independent enough so that they could directly deal with the administration and not requires any handholding.
- 11 Legalised by PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas 1996) in schedule areas and by the Forest Rights Act (FRA) in both PESA and non-PESA areas
- 12 The block in Kalahandi district ranks the lowest in terms of development indicators
- 13 A fire line (also called a fire road, firebreak or fuel break) is a gap in vegetation or other combustible material that acts as a barrier to slow or stop the progress of forest fires. These gaps could be a small path, a river etc.
- 14 '*Thenga*' means stick and '*pali*' loosely translated means turn. The guards go into the forests at night armed with a stick. The next morning, when they are back from the forest they leave the stick in the house of the person who is next on duty. The guard duties are rotated and schedules are made in advance
- 15 The Centrally Sponsored Scheme will have Rs. 967.28 crore as Central Government share and Rs. 249.50 crore as the States share for the current Plan period. The scheme would cover 12 MFPs, which are not nationalized in States having Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes in accordance with Fifth Schedule of Constitution. These are Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan and Jharkhand. The 12 MFPs are Tendu, Bamboo, *Karanj*, *Mahua* Seed, Sal Leaf, Sal Seed, Lac, *Chironji*, Wild Honey, Myrobalan, Tamarind, and Gums (Gum Karaya)
- 16 The MSP was for MFPs excluding kendu leaves and bamboo. It was applicable both in the scheduled and non-scheduled areas
- 17 Non Timber Forest Produce includes Minor Forest Produce
- 18 The TDCC procured earlier as well but there were no MSPs and they relied on the District Price Fixation Committee. These prices were announced usually much after the season and the private players would have already purchased the MFP and NTFP at lower prices.
- 19 Sec 16: Post Claim Support And Handholding To Holders of Forest Rights; Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Amendment Rules 2012 (Ministry of Tribal Affairs Notification, New Delhi, the 6th September, 2012)
- 20 Green India Mission is a central scheme. Ponds have been dug across Odisha under a state scheme as well to enhance inland fisheries.
- 21 These are state felicitations

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