

## **Collective Initiative to Protect the Forest Resources and Creating Ownership: A Story of Remote Villagers in Mayurabhanj of Odisha**

**By:** Laxmidhar Singh\*

\*Senior Manager, Atmashakti Trust

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### **Abstract**

Since the ages, humans have been dependent on the forest for life, livelihood, companionship, and spiritual connection. Before the idea of the modern nation-state, the people, especially the forest dwellers, had access to the forest. The forest communities were managing the woods with their inherited knowledge and wisdom. The modern governance system restricted forest access and made it public good with more extensive state control. We have mixed experience with these government-managed forest resources. However, there are beautiful examples where the community has come forward to protect and manage forests by themselves or with minimal support from government institutes. The collective values, spiritual relationship, and management system are yet to be analyzed much. This article will highlight a remote village called Mandam in Eastern India to emphasise the role of the community in forest protection and management.

### **Introduction**

State forestry began in the 17th and 18th centuries in various parts of the world. It has witnessed bitter and continuous opposition from forest dwellers like peasants, indigenous communities, pastoralists, charcoal iron makers, and basket-weavers. This is because state forestry primarily wanted control over forest resources and restricted resource access to the historically forest-dependent communities. In India, the policies by the British, starting from The Indian Forest Act 1978, to have authority over forests, faced severe armed resistance from the forest-dwelling communities. These included the indigenous communities of the land in the Chottenagpur, Bastar, and Adilabad regions. The British were forced to formulate legislation to safeguard the interest of indigenous communities and treat those areas separately. For centuries, the forest has been a source of livelihood, daily needs, and spiritual solace for humans. They had free access to forest resources. Therefore, the communities whose survival depended on forest sustainability were at the forefront of the movement against the arbitrary state control of the forest. The British policies, to some extent, changed to accommodate the rights of indigenous communities but largely remained state-controlled.

Post-independence, this legacy continued. For example, the Indian Forest Act of 1927 remained intact. The core of the forest policy, to assert a monopoly over forest resources without considering the rights of forest inhabitants, was adhered to even in the Forest Policy 1952. The forests were made public for the greater interest of national development. Several other acts were added to protect flora and fauna by restricting harmful activities inside the forest.

In the colonial period, the Indian forests suffered immensely as timber was used for making substantial railway tracks. Timber was exported to the Middle East and Western countries during the two World Wars to build bridges, ships, and temporary houses. The post-colonial period witnessed large projects for development in terms of big dams, factories, mining, national highways, and constructions for national security. This process led to colossal deforestation. At the time of the first independent Forest Policy of 1952, the country aimed to reach 33% forest coverage. As per reports of the Forest Survey of India, the total forest cover in India in 2023 is 7,13,789 square kilometers which is 21.71% of the country's total geographical area.

The areas inhabited by the Schedule Tribes, like hill districts, tribal districts, and the northeastern region, have a more significant forest presence. As per the same FSI survey, the forest cover in the hill districts is 40.17% of that total geographical area. The total forest cover in the tribal districts is 37.53%. The total forest cover in the North-Eastern region is 64.66% of its geographical area. Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh have the highest forest coverage area.

Interestingly, the forest coverage areas of the above states have the highest tribal populations. They have a symbiotic relationship with the forest. Several works of literature have explained nature's close relationship with indigenous communities. Verrier Elwin, the foremost interpreter of Adivasi (indigenous) culture in India, argued that all tribals had a deep knowledge of wild plants and animals. Some could even read nature like an open book. Citing the example of the Gonds, he wrote that the idea of heaven was miles and miles of a forest without any forest guards. Post-independence, he argued for amicable adjustments for tribal needs. The major tribal communities have been practicing settled agriculture in and around the forest after shifting from hunting and gathering for their livelihood. Surveys have found that 30-35% of the household income of Scheduled Tribes in forest areas comes from the seasonal collection of non-timber forest products. The tribes depend on the forest for additional seasonal food requirements like mushrooms, fruits, vegetable flowers, and leaves. Apart from livelihood, the forest is a sacred place; the habitation of their deities.

The forest acts have vested the power to protect, conserve, and manage the forest to the Forest Department at the center and state levels. However, the forest has been attacked by timber smugglers, illegal encroaches, and exploiters. That is why, despite several afforestation attempts by the government, only a meager amount of growth has occurred in forest coverage. For example, as per FSI, only 3253 sq. km of forest cover was created between 2011 to 2021. The historical role of the inhabitants in conserving and managing forests was not addressed in the policy framework till the Forest Right Act 2006 came into force. Though the joint forest management system came in the policy document of 1988 and was executed in some places, ownership was not vested in the communities. The role communities played in prohibiting hunting and stopping smugglers from entering the forest and the sustainable conservation methods remain unrecognized.

### **Brief Description of the Village**

Mandam is situated in the Mayurbhanj district in the Eastern state of Odisha in India. The village is dominated by the indigenous tribes referred to as *Kolha* in the official records. The village has four scattered habitations that are connected by roads. As per the 2011 census, the

village has a population of 252, out of which 109 are male and 143 are female. The forest entirely surrounds the village. The literacy rate of the village is below the national and state average.

The primary source of income is settled agriculture, in which they cultivate paddy as a significant crop. Besides, vegetables are cultivated in their backyards for household consumption, and the rest are sold in the local market. Apart from that, non-timber forest products are gathered as additional household income.

### **History of Forest Management in the Village**

The oldest member of the village, Chandra Mohan Hembram, is nearing 100 years old. He recalls a few decades ago a hailstorm in the village. It destroyed the crops of the entire village. They had nothing to eat as the annual grain production was significantly lower. Most days that year, they depended on forest produce for livelihood. The *Sal* leaves were a great support to them. Earlier, they collected Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) from the forest in a sustainable manner, but this crisis reminded them of the need for forest conservation.

He further says that he has seen villagers getting concerned about degrading forest resources around the village since his adolescence. They were worried about where they would get timber to build houses. Future generations will be left with nothing if the forest is not protected from destruction. From this sustainable approach to natural resource management, their thinking has led to forming a village committee to initiate forest conservation activities.

In the beginning, the villagers did not form any formal committee. The informal committee was run by unwritten norms set by the collective wisdom of a long time by villagers themselves. Then the Forest Department started forming *Vana Surakshya Samiti* (Forest Protection Committee) in parts of the state to initiate joint forest management with primary stakeholders. The committee formed by the villagers is named after the deity worshiped inside the forest, *Maa Budipat Forest Welfare Committee*.

### **The Budipart Reserve Forest**

The forest is spread over 25 square km. It is a dense tropical forest. The forest is declared a reserve forest by the Government of Odisha. This forest has abundant plant species, but *Sal* is the dominating one. The reserve forest also houses a large number of mammals, reptiles, and birds. The non-timber forest products are *Sal leaves, Shiali leaves, Tamarind, Gums, Resins, Mushrooms, Mahua flowers, and Mahua seeds*. It provides food, fruits, medicines, and other goods for consumption. The income from NTFP collection contributes mainly to the household income of the villagers. There is a sacred grove inside the forest where *Maa Budipart* is worshiped by the tribal communities annually.

### **Threat to Village Forest**

The Budipart reserve forest is surrounded by five villages apart from the Mandam. The timber smugglers from these villages came to the forest, fell trees, took the timber, and sold the branches as fuel wood. The hunters from nearby areas used to kill animals. Firewood was excessively extracted from the live trees and sold in the market, getting harmed during the

collection of NTFPs. This was an alarming situation for villagers. The Forest Department could not protect the forest as they were small in numbers, and the area was vast. Sometimes, the forest guards were attacked by villagers, so they were helpless.

### **The Traditional Management System**

All the households in the village are a member of the committee by default. In the early days, one member from each household would patrol daily. This was required to outnumber timber smugglers from neighboring villages. The female members took the lead in patrolling. Young, college-going students participated in large numbers. Gradually they started patrolling on a rotation basis. If any family is found absent in discharging the patrolling duty, they are punished with a fine. The acceptable amount is collectively decided in village meetings. The students who join forest conservation duty are encouraged with an honorarium to support their studies. The forest is divided into parts for patrolling. The forest's possible exit and entry points are closely watched by patrolling team after the formation of *Van Surakshya Samiti*, the people in charge of patrolling are paid a small amount.

The other aspect of forest management is the sustainable use of forest resources. For villagers, timber is major equipment to build a wooden house. Even for *pucca* houses, timber is required to build windows and doors. So, the committee has formed a rule that only the timber of dried and dead trees would be used for house-making with the prior permission of the committee. S/he would deposit a minimal amount in return to the committee. Entry into the village with vehicles is not permitted, ensuring that only required timber is chopped for the purpose. They also required wood to make traditional plows, traditional beds, and firewood. However, the same principle is applied: only dead and dried timber is used. They ensured that no trees were harmed while collecting non-timber forest products. For example, one is supposed to pluck the lives of a *Shal* tree, but s/he is not allowed to cut the entire tree or any branches of it. They have a graded penalty system as per the gravity of the offense.

Hunting wild animals is strictly prohibited by the villagers as per the law of the land and the norms of the village. They have not come across anybody hunting in the last five years. The growing number of wild animals also helps in conserving forests from smugglers. The forest is protected from fire. The entire village rushes to protect the forest if any fire incident is reported. They follow the control fire method in which they burn parts of the forest to clean the *Mahua* tree beneath to collect *Mahua* flowers during March and April.

### **The Decision-making Process**

The rules to protect the village are primarily verbal, as more than half of the villagers cannot read. The decisions are taken collectively in village meetings. At least one monthly meeting is conducted to review and plan upcoming activities. The financial transaction is made open and discussed among the villagers. Transparency and accountability are vital to the committee's functioning in protecting the forest.

### **The Challenges Faced**

Process continuity is challenging for the committee members. The initiative has created lots of rifts with neighboring villagers. The social relationship is affected by it. The biggest

challenge is patrolling around the forest during agriculture season, as most villagers are engaged in agriculture activities. The patrolling team members also got attacked by wild animals. The dependency on the forest for livelihood is decreasing day by day. The villagers are seasonally migrating to cities for livelihood which is the biggest challenge in protecting the forest. The structure of society is changing as the educated and younger ones are migrating out of the village, leaving behind only the elderly population.

### **Lesson for Policymakers**

The involvement of forest-dependent communities in conserving and growing forests is accepted worldwide. The devolution of forest governance to local administration did not work in countries like Bolivia, Kenya, and Uganda. However, in Asian countries like Indonesia and India, it has worked. China has gone a step further, following the successful devolution of agricultural land to households since 1978. China also started the devolution of forestland to private households with defined tenure. It has generated household incomes and, at the same time, protected the forest.

Nevertheless, it has limitations, as individual ownership of a patch of forest may lead to over-exploitation to increase household income. This over-exploitation could disturb the very natural ecological balances. Community ownership is the way forward to protect and promote forests for ecological balance and sustainable development. Community ownership also should not mean autocracy over forest resource usage. Well-calculated checks and balances with the upper hand on the community would ensure a sustainable world. Such initiatives also will consolidate the community values of cooperation, respect, and solidarity.

### **Conclusion**

Every forest is ecologically connected with other natural resources. The Budipart forest is essential for ensuring regional ecological and biological diversity. Ensuring nature stays as it is the duty of the entire humanity. We have many examples, like the *Budipart Forest Welfare Committee*, run by the community around the world. It is time to learn from the best community forest management practices and put them in the policy framework. There is a growing change in societal structure and needs. The forests must be grown in such a way that they will address the community's needs as well as maintain their natural balance. The sacred groves are found worldwide, some are within defined forest land, and some are outside the forest coverage. The sacred groves are community managed for a long. It is successful because the community owns it and is emotionally attached to it. A similar approach may be adopted to protect community forests. For example, in Budipart, income-generating medicinal plants may be planted to add value to the forest. It will encourage the local communities to conserve the forest collectively.

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