

Exploring Mendha Lekha: An Ideal Village

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Stepping out of the position of being a passive receiver of state largesse, a tiny village in Maharashtra has found its power, over the last two decades, in a collective decision-making process that takes cognisance of the needs and capabilities of each of its people, paving the way for enhanced confidence to interact with the government, agencies and the outside world, and creating living conditions and environment worth emulating

Mendha Lekha is among the celebrated villages of India, along with other well-known villages such as Hivre Bazaar and Ralegan Siddhi. Hivre Bazaar has undergone a remarkable transformation from being a drought-affected *gram panchayat* to a village that has adopted a three-crop farming system. This shift has made every family in the area a *lakhpati*. The credit for this transformation goes largely to the leadership of the young and educated village *sarpanch*, Popatrao Pawar. Ralegan Siddhi, in Ahmadnagar district of Maharashtra, is known for the transformation that took place because of the ridge-to-valley watershed work, as well some of the remarkable decisions of the *gram sabha*, under the leadership of Anna Hazare.

Similarly, among its other achievements, Mendha Lekha is known for being the first village in India to have been allotted Community Forest Rights on 1800 ha of its land. It is also quite uniquely famous for the functioning of its *gram sabha* and the negotiations the community has conducted with the government over the last three decades.

At PRADAN, our image of an 'ideal' village is one that has certain characteristics, which includes a significant change in the livelihood scenario, the active preparation and implementation of Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) plans in the village, and one where women are members of a vibrant collective—either of a producer institution or of an SHG Federation. It is a place where residents have negotiated strongly with the government to establish basic amenities in their village, have acted against the atrocities they face, have played a pivotal role in governance of their village, etc. Wanting to see one such 'ideal' village in the country, I visited Mendha Lekha, in Lekha *panchayat*, Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra.

My visit to Mendha Lekha

With these PRADAN assumptions of an 'ideal' village in my mind, I got down from the bus at the beginning of the village Mendha, popularly known as Mendha Lekha. I was very excited to finally come to a place I had heard so much about. As I started walking towards the village, I was struck by its simplicity. It appeared like any typical village. The houses were made of mud and had tile roofs. Except for the main road into the village, the other roads were of *murrum*. The first thing I saw was a meeting hall, a simple building with a tiled roof. A big tree offered shade to the surrounding area. There was a large open space behind the meeting hall, which had bathrooms and toilets for visitors.

I soon met Devaji Tofa, the *ex-sarpanch* and Mohanbhai Heerabai Heeralal, who, through his organization Vrikshamitra, has played a very pivotal role in making Mendha Lekha what it is today. They welcomed me and were pleased with my first impressions of the village, which I told them were beyond my expectations. After a while I just had to ask, though I was worried about how the question would be received, "Why is this village one of the most talked-about, so-called 'ideal' villages in India?"

Tofa was not fazed by the question and explained that it is something that he is often asked. He responded, "We have never claimed ourselves to be an ideal village. It is the outsiders who have called us that. It is possible that it is because of the kind of change that has taken place here."

What he said next was profound and has stayed with me and has forced me to reflect on the way I have been working as a development worker all these years.

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He spoke of the identity of the Gond community and how it has

evolved, and gave examples of their ancestors' beliefs. The essence of what he said was that the community believed in preserving the very identity of the Gonds and not be swayed by the mainstream development agenda. They did not blindly accept everything that came to them but rationally questioned these before accepting or rejecting them. This rationality and clarity came through to me as Devaji Tofa spoke. His response is engraved in my memory. It has made me question my approach, and the approach of all interventionists to work, or for that matter the very discourse of mainstream development. Bettering rural livelihoods does not necessarily mean urbanizing. Communities are challenging this discourse and that is evident in Mendha Lekha.

I met Devaji Tofa again later in the day along with other villagers. The general practice in the village is for villagers, mostly women, to come together and discuss the pertinent issues and then meet with any visitors and share their experiences. I had many questions, specifically about how this entire process began and how much time it took them to come to where they were today. I wanted to know if there was any external agency supporting them and how all the villagers became mobilized about the issues that needed addressing. I was also curious about whether they faced any opposition from the state and how they dealt with that, and what the role of women was in this movement. What was the contribution of women in upholding and preserving Gond

culture, and what was their vision for the future?

What they shared with me that evening and from the discussions that I had with Devaji Tofa, and other members at other times, gave me insight into the three-decade process that has made Mendha Lekha what it is today. This is also shared in a small book written by Mohanbhai and Devaji Tofa.

I would like to take you through this journey.

IN OUR VILLAGE, WE ARE THE GOVERNMENT!

“We have our government in Delhi and Mumbai. But in our village, we ourselves are the government.” This epitomizes the approach to polity in the village of Mendha Lekha!

During a participatory study in 1987–89, ‘Forest and People’, a Study Circle was formed by the villagers to study the *nistar* (forest produce being used for the villagers’ own use) rights of the people. The Study Circle comprised persons with an interest in the study, who debated every question threadbare and, thereby, helped the *gram sabha* take proper decisions. No decision was supposed to be taken in the Study Circle; that was the exclusive prerogative of the *gram sabha*. When they realized that securing *nistar* rights required a strong village organization and that the government, political leaders, bureaucracy, or NGOs could not solve this problem, the villagers felt the need of forming their own village organization.

During the Study Circle meetings, the villagers realized that liquor and the lack of participation of women in the organization were the main challenges that needed to be addressed. They also realized that ego, selfishness and

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ignorance, in both the rich and the poor, create problems. Discussions were held in small groups to search for solutions at the individual and the collective level. The first step was to accept that they had common interests and needed a mechanism for decision-making

by consensus; that they needed to refrain from imposing any decision on anybody and to continue discussing matters until consensus was reached. This helped in strengthening the village organization. Vinoba Bhave and other thinkers had already talked about consensus decision-making; the villagers realized it when they began to address their needs. They also became aware that they had, to some extent, already been practising consensus decision-making, based upon their own wisdom!

CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

There are certain concepts to be cognisant of so as to understand the movement in Mendha Lekha. ‘Consensus Decision-making’ process is one such. What kind of polity should there be? Political systems have evolved from being tribal polity to becoming nation-states, and there is now an advance towards sub-continental nation-states. Whatever the ideology—capitalism, socialism, communism or anything else—all centralized polities, based on the principle of representation, have the individual as their basic unit. Individuals surrender their innate power to some or the other power centre and weaken themselves; and these power centres, comprising representatives, also prove to be weak in fulfilling their promises about freedom, equality, brotherhood, justice, prosperity, security, and maintenance of law and order and peace, in spite of all the power acquired from the individuals. It is absolutely clear that any type of dictatorship or authoritarianism or the monopoly of power is not acceptable.

Acharya Vinoba Bhave, a great disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, sketched a picture of the desirable polity in his book *Swarajya-shastra*. He has called it *sarvayatan*. A village community taking decisions by consensus is the basic unit of this polity. Vinoba Bhave talked of consensus, but wrote at the same time that he had never come across a village community taking decisions by consensus.

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Most of the followers of Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave believed that consensus decision-making was too Utopian and dismissed it out of hand. They continued to think and work in the framework of democracy based on representation, decision-making by majority, and centralization.

Every individual has desirable and undesirable qualities. The social structure should be such that undesirable features are effectively suppressed and positive features are given a scope to blossom. A community in a small village or locality that takes decisions by consensus is the only structure that can achieve this successfully. Thus consensus decision-making has always remained at the core of Mendha Lekha.

GAON-SAMAJ SABHA

Mendha (Lekha) is a constituent of the Lekha *gram panchayat*, which comprises three villages—Mendha, Lekha and Kanhartola. The *gram sabha* of the *gram panchayat* of Lekha, as per the Gram Panchayat Act, is the assembly of all the voters in these three villages, whereas the *gram sabha* of Mendha is the assembly of all the adult villagers in Mendha. To distinguish between these two, we may call the latter *gaon-samaj sabha*.

For the *gaon-samaj sabha* of Mendha, attendance of at least one male and one female member from each household is compulsory. If it is not possible for someone to attend on account of some important work or some other genuine reason, he or she has to inform the Chairperson of the *gaon-samaj sabha* or the *Mahila Mandal*. A fine is stipulated for non-attendance without genuine reason, and it

has to be deposited before the next meeting. Decisions in the *gaon-samaj sabha* are taken by consensus. Even if a single person disagrees, the discussion continues until consensus is reached—the disagreeing person may be man or woman, rich or poor. It is not the question of convincing him; it is genuinely believed that he or she may be right and his concerns need to be heard and addressed, before moving forward. If a consensus is not reached in any meeting, the matter is deliberated upon in the Study Circle or in the next *gaon-samaj sabha* meeting. But decisions are never taken by the majority.

To implement the decisions, various committees are formed. They are the Joint Forest Management Committee, the Public Works Committee, the Justice Committee, the Grain Bank Committee, the Health Committee, the Education Committee, the Women's Committee, the Water-Distribution Committee, the Youth or the Gotul Committee, the Village Fund Committee, the Sanitation Committee and the Agriculture Committee.

The First Successful Experience—The Creation of The Gotul

Once these principles were agreed upon, there were a number of issues handled by the *gaon-samaj sabha*. The initial and the most

significant amongst them was that of the Gotul. The Gotul was once a unique cultural institution among the Gond tribals. Influenced by the criticism of the outsiders, they had destroyed it. The *gram sabha* of Mendha, on realizing its significance, decided to rebuild it.

The first step was to build a Gotul hut for which it was decided to bring teakwood from the *nistar* forest. As it was a matter of legitimate *nistar*, there was no question of seeking permission of the Forest department. People went to the forest, brought back teakwood and erected the Gotul hut. The Forest department tried to seize the wood, but the villagers stood their ground and peacefully defended their rights. The department, then, sought the help of the police.

Armed police, more in number than the villagers, entered the village along with the Forest department's party. While the men of the village stayed inside the homes, the women gathered together in full strength in front of the Gotul and faced the police. As decided in the *gram sabha*, they told the police, "We will not reply to bullets with bullets. We will not fight with sticks or throw stones at you. We will not even abuse you. But keep one thing in mind, if you uproot our Gotul and seize the wood, we will again go to the forest, bring teakwood and rebuild the Gotul hut. And we will do it every time you uproot the Gotul. If you still want to uproot it, do so by all means."

The Forest department's men broke the Gotul and took away the wood. The villagers, as declared, rebuilt the Gotul within two days. The incident sparked rage in the Cluster of 32 villages. People of these 32 villages gathered to deliberate the future course of action. Sending a deputation to higher authorities, demonstrations, *dharnas*—all sorts of measures were suggested. Finally, the people thought that they should fight it on their own

ground—in their villages. It was decided to build Gotuls in the other villages as well and 12 villages took up the challenge. And these 12 Gotuls were erected on the appointed day. When one Gotul was uprooted, 12 more Gotuls sprang up. How many Gotuls would spring up if 12 Gotuls were to be destroyed?

The government realized its folly, and did not repeat it. Significant it was that the villagers observed non-violent polity in this struggle.

NEGOTIATION WITH THE FOREST DEPARTMENT

The *gaon-samaj sabha* of Mendha decreed that outside agencies such as the central or the state governments, contractors and NGOs should not do anything in the village without the prior permission of the *gaon-samaj sabha*. If some agency were to try to do something, the whole village would resist peacefully, adopting the methods of the Chipko movement. The *gaon-samaj sabha*, being supreme at the village level, there was no question of seeking anybody else's permission.

However, many times the villagers did face challenges. The *gaon-samaj sabha* had not allowed the *sarpanch* of the village to cut bamboo although he had approval from the Forest department. There was also the case of a paper mill, which used to cut bamboo from the villages by getting the lease approved through the Forest department. The government had given the lease for bamboo-cutting to the mill on nominal rates, even in the forest where the villagers of Mendha had *nistar* rights.

The villagers wrote a letter to the Chief Minister of Maharashtra opposing this practice. Meanwhile, the people did not allow the mill to cut bamboo in their forests, by resorting to a movement on the lines of Chipko. This protest continued for three years. The paper

mill, the Forest department and the police, all tried their best to persuade the villagers. The *gaon-samaj sabha* offered the solution that the Forest department and the Joint Forest Management Committee of Mendha jointly cut the fully grown bamboos, which should then be provided on priority to farmers, artisans and other villagers, and only the remaining bamboo would be supplied to the paper mill.

After three years of struggle, the government finally accepted this proposal. In 2011, Mendha created history by being the first village to get sanction of Community Forest Rights under the Forest Rights Act.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 is the result of a protracted struggle by marginal and tribal communities of our country to assert their right to forest land on which they have been traditionally dependent. This Act is crucial for millions of tribals and other forest dwellers in different parts of our country because it provides for the restitution of deprived forest rights across India, including both individual rights to cultivated land in forests and community rights over common property resources. The Forests Rights Act (FRA) allots individual or community forest rights to a member or members of a forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribe and to Other Traditional Forest Dwellers [any member or community that has for at least three generations (1 generation = 25 years), prior to 13 December 2005, primarily resided in and depended on the forest and forest land for bona fide livelihoods needs], the right to hold and live in forest land, under individual or common occupation, for habitation or self-cultivation for livelihood.

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A total of 1800 ha of land has been allotted to the *gram sabha* in Mendha Lekha. It has divided the land into four sections. In one section, fully grown bamboo worth Rs 1 crore is cut and sold by the *gram sabha*. About 50

per cent is the cultivation cost; thus about Rs 50 lakhs every year is the income of the *gaon-samaj sabha* of Mendha Lekha!

OTHER SUCCESSFUL ACHIEVEMENTS

A lot of money is sanctioned and spent in the name of tribal development but it hardly reaches the tribals. The village studied this problem; the *gaon-samaj sabha* wrote to the government that the money sanctioned for the development of the village be given directly to the *gaon-samaj sabha*. After negotiations, this was agreed upon and the Gaon Niyojan va Vikas Parishad (Village Planning and Development Council), Mendha (Lekha), was registered by the villagers to receive the money.

The *gaon-gram sabha* has also devised effective measures against corruption. It decided that a receipt must be insisted upon, if anything is given to government employees. There is an 'opposition leader' in the village. He critiques every proposal in the *gram sabha*. He does not participate in the Study Circle but argues vehemently in *gram sabha* meetings. The villagers do not look upon him as an enemy; rather they look upon him as a friend who points out the pitfalls in proposals.

What Parliament is to the nation or the Legislative Assembly is to the state, the *gaon-samaj sabha* is to the village or locality. However, it does not have an executive; it does not get constituted through an election. It is self-existent. Nobody has created it; therefore, nobody can put an end to it. Such

gram sabhas, or local committees, should be the basic units of the socio-political system.

WHAT HAS CHANGED OVER THESE YEARS?

Devaji Tofa spoke about the changes in the village over the last few years. The inferiority complex of the villagers has decreased to a great extent. Earlier, they could not face any officials or people from urban dwellings; now they deal with any outsider on an equal footing.

The production, sale and consumption of liquor were widely prevalent. The village has now put a complete ban on it. If someone needs liquor for any traditional ritual, he has to seek the permission of the *gram sabha*; he can then distil and use only the specified quantity. If someone drinks outside the village, it is ignored, as long as he does not create a scene in the village; if, however, he creates a nuisance, he is fined.

Earlier, government officials, contractors, traders or NGOs did not consult villagers about any work they proposed to undertake in the village. Now, they have to seek the prior permission of the *gram sabha*.

Earlier, there was no participation of women in the *gram sabha*, at any stage of decision-making and implementation. Now women are equally involved.

Earlier, the cutting of trees for fruits, leaves or honey was widely prevalent. Now, the *gram sabha* has banned the same, and it has completely stopped.

The government had given the contract of felling bamboos in the forest to the Paper Mill whereas the people had the *nistar* rights. The workers of the mill used to cut bamboos into pieces, depriving farmers and artisans of the

long bamboo pieces that they needed. This also resulted in the degradation of bamboo clusters. Now, the *gram sabha* has the Community Forest Rights in its name by which 1800 ha forest land has been allotted to them. The bamboos from one-fourth of this section are harvested each year and first supplied to farmers and artisans on a priority; only the remaining bamboo is sold to traders or the Paper Mill. The annual sale of bamboo is up to Rs 1 crore, of which 50 per cent is net profit.

Corruption was rampant. The villagers looked upon the government employees as enemies of the village, exploiters and plunderers. The government employees, on the other hand, saw the villagers as their enemies and a selfish lot. Now both respect each other and sit together to discuss the various issues. Government employees provide the villagers with the information they need.

Earlier, the villagers were not aware of their strength as a collective. They believed that political leaders alone had the strength. Political leaders, too, had the same belief. Now, both the villagers and the political leaders at the *tehsil* level have realized that the leaders can never match people in strength; and that the leaders can be strong only if the people are strong.

Villagers of neighbouring villages used to think that tiny Mendha could not stand against the mighty government, and they would express this opinion time and again. They now realize how wrong they were, and have even started emulating the Mendha villagers.

The village organization was weak earlier. There was no thorough thinking through before taking any decision. The villagers were scattered, not united and worked as individuals. Now, they study every matter in detail in the Study Circle before taking any decision, which

they do only by consensus. This has strengthened the village.

SO MUCH TO BE DONE!

The people of Mendha Lekha have never claimed to be the 'ideal' village. They are very candid in saying that like all other villages, they also have a mix of good and bad people, and it is only the process that they have adopted that has helped them perform beyond the ordinary. They also say that they are under no illusion that everything has been achieved in Mendha Lekha. They do realize that much remains to be done. These include:

All the decisions have not yet been fully implemented. For example, it was decided that one man and one woman member from each household should attend the *gaon-samaj sabha* meetings. The attendance is never 100 per cent.

All are not equally sincere about forest patrolling. Everyone wants to fulfil his/her own needs by bringing necessary articles from the forest. When it comes to taking responsibility, however, not everyone evinces adequate enthusiasm and interest.

People attend meetings of the *gaon-samaj sabha* when they need something. For example, if someone wants grain or money from the village fund, he or she does not mind sitting through a meeting, however long; but they do not actively participate in the discussions about village affairs.

Some people do not make timely repayment of loans taken from the *gaon-samaj sabha* even if there is no genuine reason. This sets a bad precedent.

When asked what has changed over these years, they say it is their thought-process, consciousness as citizens, confidence to deal with internal struggles as well as negotiation capacities with outsiders

Women do participate in the *gaon-samaj sabha* meetings, but still there is no perceptible rise in leadership among them. Effort is needed to persuade them to speak.

The youth have come together in the Yuvak Mandal; however, they are yet to place their issues

before the *gaon-samaj sabha*. It is not clear what direction they want to take and, as a result, some of them fall prey to addiction.

Although liquor is banned, marriage parties of brides sometimes bring liquor with them. Liquor is also smuggled in surreptitiously at times.

The institution of the Gotul has not yet been fully activated because of lack of proper understanding of its significance.

Devaji Tofa's wise words to his community are: "Believe only in yourself! Learn from others but do not try to emulate them. Always stand by the decisions taken by consensus in the *gaon-samaj sabha*, for therein lies your good and the good of your village. Consensus decision-making as a process has enabled Mendha to forge ahead despite occasional reverses, to build people's power to some extent, and to go from strength to strength."

APPLYING LESSONS FROM MENDHA LEKHA

The idea of Ideal

I was moved by Devaji Tofa and many other villagers' words that they had never claimed that they are the 'ideal'. The people of Mendha Lekha count their shortcomings candidly. When asked what has changed over

these years, they say it is their thought process, consciousness as citizens, confidence to deal with internal struggles as well as negotiation capacities with outsiders.

Mainstream development has always equated development with urbanization, which has an inherent focus on infrastructure building. When government agencies or civil society organizations (CSOs) invite outsiders and funding agencies for field visits to showcase their work, they focus on changes in the physical conditions that have come about over the years through their assistance. The changes are visible in an earthen dam, a vegetable crop, school building or boundary wall, *panchayat bhawans*, poultry sheds, plantations, etc. However, seldom do outsiders and the implementing or facilitating agencies have the intent or the interest to know about the people's internal struggle and journey over the years. Even when it is shared, a CSO's attitude is condescending, as if it could not have happened without it and that the villagers need to be grateful to CSO representatives.

Vision of a liveable village

The communities we work with are mostly tribal. When we 'facilitate' meetings of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) or Village Organizations (VOs), we seldom invest our effort in harnessing the potential of the group or the collective. Our interaction is focussed upon the outcome, which is to be 'facilitated' to arrive at, within a short span. I wish that rather than taking up an agenda from the outside, which we think is useful for them, we invest time in getting to know their agendas/issues/vision. We need to know what their idea of a harmonious village is. We need to understand the community's relationship with nature.

The vision of an ideal village needs to be that of the villagers and not that of outsiders like the government or CSOs, who are mostly urban-raised and have fancy ideas about development

Tribals have been living harmoniously with nature since ages. Nature is deified and trees and animals are worshipped by various clans. It is only after colonization that their relationship with nature has become disturbed. Left to themselves, tribal communities

are not materialistic and live in sync with nature and its cycle. The vision of an ideal village needs to be that of the villagers and not that of outsiders like the government or CSOs, who are mostly urban-raised and have fancy ideas about development.

Their exposure to outsiders has made the tribal people doubt their own wisdom, which has been labelled as non-ambitious and happy-go-lucky; this is not completely true. Our engagement with them needs to be such that villagers are reassured that their ideas are valid and that they have a wisdom of their own and will be treated with respect.

Decision-making: An empowering process

Once the vision and the issues are laid down, the next prevalent practice by us interventionists is to provide solutions and alternatives. We miss the important step of the community themselves deliberating on the causes of the current state of affairs, the possible solutions and their prognosis, leading to the choosing of the solution, from the many that come up in their discussions. This process is more important than the actual solution. The Chinese proverb says: 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for lifetime'.

By teaching them the process, the villagers may be empowered to approach other issues in a similar manner. It requires patience

and painstaking efforts of interventionists to engage in this process. The concept of a Study Circle may be encouraged—a group of people from among the community can study issues. We can help the community look at all the options before arriving at any decision.

The process of consensus decision-making needs to be applied to all the decisions that are taken in the SHG or the village. It is not the decision but the process of decision-making that gives ownership of the ultimate decision. The consensual nature of the process empowers villagers. Often, we rely on a few leaders in the SHG and in the village, who help drive the process, leading to early solutions—all the villagers may not be party to it. The outcome might benefit many but it still may not be an empowering experience for many. Ultimately, only some will feel powerful; many, on the other hand, will feel powerless and be dependent upon the powerful. The outcome may benefit and may bring material change; process-wise, however, there will most likely be 'un-development'.

So to traverse this journey, it is important for an interventionist to be convinced of the alternative philosophy. Once there is conviction, the path will be explored.

Negotiation skills

Rather than empowering a few leaders in the village, the concept of a Study Circle gives space to distributive leadership, wherein many can take charge of different issues, ultimately empowering a large mass, rather than just a few. Different committees, along with Study

No panchayat election has taken place in Mendha village all these years. Panchayati Raj Institute (PRI) members in the village are selected through consensus without incurring the expenses for an election. This is worth emulating in other places as well.

Circles, can also be formed to look after the implementation of solutions. What is also important to increase confidence is the ability to negotiate with outsiders without underestimating the self or overestimating others. The community can grow to be confident about approaching the government, other agencies or any outsider on any issue. This can happen when they

are knowledgeable about the issue they are addressing. CSOs often end up seeing government departments as an antagonist to development. Villagers also need to be encouraged and showed how they can initiate and build a relationship between their community and government line departments.

Governance

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The community needs to be aware of the development fund allocated for village development by the government. The frequency of the meetings of the *gram sabha* is also important. It should not only happen as prescribed by the government but also take place as and when the villagers feel the need for one. In Mendha Lekha, every evening, men and women, who were able to, gathered in the meeting hall, to share their daily happenings, discuss news and learn new things. This is an organic getting-together without a set agenda. Meetings like these are more beneficial than the structured ones.

Understanding the 'life-world' of community

Most important for the villagers is the change in approach from being a beneficiary to an active citizen. The villagers of Mendha Lekha have emerged, not as recipients of the state's freebies, but as people who have made an active contribution to the processes of receiving and actualizing. They proudly claim that they neither pay a bribe nor does anybody demand one from them, simply because they are from Mendha Lekha. They have been utilizing their own funds from the sale of bamboo to give loans to those who need them.

The measurement of MGNREGA work is being done by the villagers and not by the Technical Assistant. The villagers refuse to take government subsidies that are not relevant to them. The village has inspired neighbouring villages to follow its path. Exposure visits are conducted by various CSOs regularly and other villagers learn from the Mendha Lekha experience.

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Gadchiroli district has allotted the maximum Community Forest Rights claims to village *gram sabhas* in the country; this is testimony to the efforts of Mendha Lekha village. Last but not the least, we need to understand that a change in consciousness is a slow process and does not happen in few years. Mendha Lekha is what it is today because of continuous efforts in the last two decades. It requires patience, hard

work, belief in people's capabilities and an enduring vision by a facilitating agency. The interventionist also needs to understand the life-world of inhabitants and not make his/her intervention a formal engagement. Mohanbhai lived in the village for a couple of years with his family to be with the villagers.

My wish is that the six lakh villages in India follow the process Mendha Lekha followed—not that Mendha Lekha be copied blindly but that each builds on its own uniqueness to create six lakh examples of what may be called 'ideal' villages.