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IN QUEST OF FELLOW TRAVELLERS ON A ROAD LESS TRAVELLED: Destination Mendha

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Questioning the dominant mode of life and livelihood choices and critically analyzing the development interventions aimed at attaining them, the villagers of Mendha choose the most suitable method of a collective way of life for them, with a sustainable form of governance mechanism and ecology, adherence to values, stakeholder mobilization and horizontal spread in nearby villages

MENDHA, A SMALL VILLAGE IN GADCHIROLI district (Maharashtra), holds a special place in the development arena of India. Today, when most of the development models for rural India are centred on individual aspirations and an extractive mode of production, Mendha adheres to a commune life-world, defiantly yet non-violently.

PRADAN organized an exposure visit for its professionals from 26 to 29 August, 2018, to understand the relevance of what was being done in Mendha to their own context. They were accompanied by leaders of three villages—Jana in Gumla district, Jharkhand; Chattania in Singrauli district and Jharna Ghughri in Dindori district, Madhya Pradesh.

The visit aimed at understanding this unique model from the 'worm's-eye' view, at redefining engagement within PRADAN and at creating

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vibrancy for the collective way of living among the participant villagers. The village-level leaders, who participated, became the co-researchers in the Action Research (AR). The AR intends to explore sustainable means of intensification of livelihood in different socio-ecological systems to create alternative models, along with re-skilling the community. The three partners of the Action Research on Sustainable Intensification (ARSI) are the villagers, Azim Premji University (APU) and PRADAN.

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The ongoing journey for a better life is based on exploring the best practices of the past, questioning and reflecting their current actions and accepting feedback to bring about change. Study groups, or *adhyayans*, are made at each *gram sabha*, for the problems of today, its implications on

tomorrow and solutions in the long run. Hence, Mendha seemed ideal as a potential partner for the researchers because by the end of the AR, the villagers would be questioning critically the ubiquitous, extractive, individual enterprise and, yet, continue learning and practising the collective way of living.

Village-level researchers-cum-leaders coming together for the exposure visit also helped in building a shared understanding of the AR. This was the first time they interacted with each other, shared their experiences and discussed a future course of action. They were helped to keep in touch with each other over the phone at least once a month for peer learning. During the exploratory visit, they shared their plans with each other and also improvised on them, based upon inputs from the others.

After discussions and going through the relevant literature, the three pertinent areas of exploration deduced by all the visiting participants were:

- a) Governance and systems of the village, including common fund management
- b) Forest rights and *gram daan*

- c) Well-being, youth and linkages with stakeholders

This led PRADAN professionals and the villagers to divide themselves into three groups, with participation from each of the geographical areas, to explore the above aspects. Each evening, the respective teams sat separately and built a shared understanding of the findings and sharpened their questions for the next day. This helped the participants to juxtapose their own context with the journey of Mendha and identify aspects that needed further investment and strength that could expedite their movement. Each day, for some time, all the participants sat together to listen and learn from the villagers of Mendha and empathetically engage with each other's AR journey.

PRADAN professionals saw Mendha as an AR over a long period of time and drew lessons for their way of engagement with the community. The movement of Mendha is deep, in terms of the realization among the people and their adherence to values, with a sustainable form of governance mechanism and ecology. Interestingly, it is also thick in terms of its stakeholder mobilization and horizontal spread in nearby villages.

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Governance and Systems of the Village

The villagers of Mendha adhere to the principle of, “*Delhi me humari sarkar; gaon me hum hi sarkar* (In Delhi, we have our government; in the village, we are the government).” This exemplifies the spirit of ownership that the villagers of Mendha have adopted. Over time, Mendha has worked on building internal sustainable systems. The *gram sabha* in the village ensures everyone's participation in the meetings, be it men, women and youth.

Mendha village is divided into three hamlets and the *sabha* takes place at the hamlet level first. At this level, it is ensured that everyone participates in the meeting. In case someone is engaged in some other work, she or he has to inform the *gram sabha* prior to the meeting. This ensures everyone's participation, making it a platform where all decisions are taken through consensus. Even if a single person disagrees with any decision, that decision is not passed.

The *gram sabha* has many groups, based on different themes, which have their own rules and responsibilities. For example,

forest conservation, forest rights, education, MGNREGA, biodiversity, youth, justice and SHGs. Community work in the village is part of every individual's duty. Everyone residing in the village contributes their labour, resources and time for the development of the village. The villagers have also given importance to study circles called the *adhyayan* groups, in order to study any issues that may arise.

The villagers have formed a *gram kosh* (village treasury), in which money comes from several sources. Each villager contributes 10 per cent of his/her income to the village fund; they do this only when they have been given work by the *gram sabha*. The fund is utilized when required for marriages, education or any emergency in the community. The *gram sabha* lends money to the villagers from the fund and the person taking the loan, returns it within a year without any interest. In case there are many requests for a loan, the *gram sabha* gives priority to those in dire need. Those who are not able to pay back the money are helped by the others to raise money from any work done.

The *gram sabha*, therefore, ensures that the basic needs

of the villagers are met. It has systems in place to monitor and evaluate the functioning of the *anganwadis*, *gram kosh*, etc. The village has its own set of rules and regulations that govern its day-to-day functioning as well as the use of its resources.

The village has many committees that look after different affairs of the village. The idea of having separate committees evolved during the discussions in the village meetings when the villagers realized the need to enhance efficacy and accountability. It has a forest protection committee that looks after its forests; a grain bank committee, an education committee, a law and order committee, and many more. Primarily, these committees have been formed to share the responsibilities of protection and development of the village and the villagers. Every committee has a set of rules that govern its functioning and also describe the roles and responsibilities of each of its members. All these committees finally report to the *gram sabha*.

Mendha has women's SHGs that also monitor the functioning in the village by being part of different committees,

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thus ensuring the efficient management and governance of the village. The number of committees and *adhyayan* groups varies as per the need of each village.

The homogeneity in the governance of Mendha has worked to rekindle traditional values and to adhere to norms. This was challenging in many of the AR villages, inhabited by people of different castes, tribes and other prevalent forms of marginalization, in terms of resources and social constraints. The only institutions that the AR villages could identify to invest in are the women's SHGs along with their associated tiers and village-level traditional committees. They initiated discussions in the SHGs about the formation of men and youth groups in the village, along with investing in strengthening traditional village committees. One village also decided to start a grain bank, and all the three villages have agreed to start a *gram kosh*.

Community Forest Rights and *Gram Daan*

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The ever-existing struggle between the indigenous tribal groups and the forest department intensified in Mendha after

the *ghotul* (a traditional village structure for common gatherings and important meetings) was brought down by a forest official. This propelled Mendha to undertake the process of claiming community forest rights under the Forest Rights Act 2006. This Central Government Act ensures a community's rights over forest land, which they are majorly and, traditionally, dependent upon. The Forest Rights Act has evolved with the idea that no one can preserve, conserve and manage forests better than indigenous groups.

A friend and a social activist from Maharashtra, Mohanbhai Hirabai Hiralal guided the Mendha *gram sabha* through the process. The *gram sabha*, here, is in complete charge of the process and has claimed 1,800 hectares of forest land, in and around Mendha. This forest is rich in bamboo, which the villagers harvest and sell through the *gram sabha* by calling for tenders. The *gram sabha* has sold bamboo worth Rs 1 crore and 25 lakhs. This money is now used for all *gram sabha*-led activities.

Since then, Mendha has sold huge amounts of bamboo. Owing to the sale of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) and, in particular, *tendu* leaves, Mendha has had a stable income over

the years. The villagers have collectively defined the rules and regulations for the protection and the management of the forest. There are patches of the forest that are completely inaccessible and protected. In collaboration with the forest department and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), they have undertaken plantation and water conservation measures in their forest. They have also initiated a tree nursery and forest produce processing centres in the village, based on their traditional skills. They have community oil mills, bamboo craft centres, honey processing units and NTFP godowns for nuts and other forest produce. Every day, four volunteers go to the forest for micro-level management and surveillance.

The *gram sabha* imposes a penalty for breaking community laws. Annual plans are made for fuel usage and people take turns to bring firewood and other resources from the forest. Mendha has recently applied for a *gram daan*, a provision by the Central Government, which promotes a *gram sabha's* ownership of all the village land. This has been a topic of discussion in the *gram sabha* for

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at least three to four years, with everyone trying to understand and come to an agreement. They arrived at the consensus that all individually owned land would be donated to the *gram sabha*. The respective land users would continue to use the land as earlier and contribute a portion of their produce to the *sabha*. Individual sale and purchase of this property would be prohibited. The *gram sabha* would also be responsible for providing land to the needy and the landless residents of the village. The forest is one of the major pillars of their collective way of existence.

The documentation for the *gram daan* in Mendha is almost complete. Currently a part of Lekha *panchayat*, Mendha will, by adopting this Act, be an independent *panchayat* by itself henceforth. Government schemes and funds allocated to a *panchayat* will be allocated to Mendha *panchayat* and a secretariat will be established to run the system. This, in itself, illustrates self-rule and governance.

For the participants of the AR, Community Forest Rights (CFR) was something new and the idea that the village belongs to the forest, along with generating revenues for all sections of the village was very appealing

to them. They agreed to start exploring CFR. One forest village called Jharna Ghughri became a revenue village through CFR. The villagers of Mendha showed an interest in starting the discussion on CFR. But the researchers of all the three villages arrived at the conclusion that discussion around CFR and the *gram sabha* requires strong unity and conviction in the village. For this, they have decided to start hamlet-level/tola-level meetings and to initiate some collective actions that may help them foster mutual help and fraternity.

Well-being, Youth and Linkage with Stakeholders

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Mendha has also made a considerable investment in its upcoming generations. The youth have a very crucial role in all the community work. Together, they raise plant nurseries and re-plant the saplings in the forest. Everyone above 18 years of age must compulsorily attend the *gram sabha* in Mendha, which they do regularly. There is a separate meeting for the youth, in the *ghotul*, a place that is made especially for youth interaction and education on the values of life, the art of ideal living and on tribal customs.

The young villagers get together and plan all the festivals and occasions. Earlier, education related to life was imparted to young boys and girls in the gatherings. Now, the youth talk about issues that arise and resolve any disputes between boys and girls. All cultural activities are also taught and practised in these meetings. Hence, the platform helps the young generation learn about their culture and understand their role as citizens....lessons so important because the young will carry forward their lineage.

The youth also migrate to nearby cities for work seasonally. Though the migration rate is not very high, the villagers say that it has increased over the last few years. This year, more youth have migrated in search of better opportunities. They usually return with two-wheelers and comparatively stylish *avatars*, trending among the youth.

AR researchers instantly saw the similarity in the trend of youth issues and migration between Mendha and their own villages. They questioned the lack of earning opportunities in the village to cater to the aspirations of the young people and their attraction to lavish urban lifestyles as well as issues with the

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existing education system, which makes the youth look for jobs rather than becoming farmers. These questions need further, in-depth exploration before arriving at any conclusions. Hence, they have decided to include as many young folk as possible in all the forums and interactions in their village to understand their aspirations.

Women's Struggle in Mendha

The women of Mendha have had to struggle a lot to save their traditional space. They fought with the forest authorities when the latter brought down their *ghotul*. The women argued with the forest authorities and said, "You take wood from our forest and sell it to the companies. We have been living here for so long and we have been protecting the forests and you can't even let us take the wood from the forest to create our traditional space." The women then decided to go to the jungle overnight to get wood and they created their traditional space again.

When the forest authorities came to destroy the *ghotul* again, the women made it clear that if that happened, they would go to the forest again, cut trees and build another *ghotul*: the

forest authorities would then be responsible for the destruction of the forest. At this, the forest authorities gave up and the women celebrated.

When recollecting their struggles, the women in SHG meetings also discussed domestic violence and non-cooperation of family members. When they returned home late in the evenings from these meetings, discussing issues at home and also related to the *ghotul* struggle, their families refused to open the door and many of them were forced to sleep outside their houses in common spaces. These issues were collectively raised by them at the *gram sabha*, the very next day, where the *sabha* condemned the behaviour of their respective families. No stern action was taken against the families; however, the women are grateful to the *gram sabha* for listening to their issues.

Cases of domestic violence are also addressed by the *gram sabha* by charging penalties from the offenders.

1. First-time offenders pay a fine of Rs 250 to the *gram sabha*.
2. Second-time offenders pay a fine of Rs 800 and feed the whole village.

3. Third-time offenders pay a fine of Rs 1600 and feed the whole village.

The offences are often justified by the men, who say that the women are not doing their part of the household chores or are not keeping the food ready when they return home from work. This is also widely accepted by the women, some of who say, "*Khana samay par nahi diya toh pati marega hi*. (If we don't serve food on time, obviously we will get beaten up.)"

The women also shared that they have to stay outside the village, in a separate home, during menstruation as per the practice of the locals. They have to cook their own food there and they cannot enter the village during those seven days. Usually, these houses are *kuchha* (make shift) houses; in Mendha, however, they have constructed two cement concrete houses for this practice in the outskirts of their village. The villagers themselves contributed their labour for this. In Mendha, for the last few years, women are allowed to enter the village but are not allowed inside the houses during these seven days. As a relief, they shared that they can now take cooked food in a tiffin from their homes. Surprising it is that, in a village

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like Mendha, the women face such a bizarre discriminating practice till today.

In comparison to the men leaders, women leaders were not very visible in the forefront. They are a part of every *gram sabha* committee; however, their contributions in the committee, apart from their fight for the *ghotul*, are hazy.

AR researchers found that the women of the SHGs and their participation in various discussion forums in the village have made them more empowered. The women also address issues of gender discrimination. They thought that the movement in their own villages would be more holistic because of the presence of strong women's collectives.

Mendha village is exemplary in terms of its thoughts on democracy, self-governance and egalitarianism. It has found its own ways of subsistence without becoming dependent on anyone. The villagers adhere to the idea of a 'commune'.

Devaji Tofa, a community leader of Mendha, mentioned that having one's own governing system took Mendha towards

independence and self-sufficiency. And this has only been possible because of the power of the Collectives. The struggle of the villagers of Mendha has had a great impact on the government in terms of accountability of its policies. This has helped in sensitizing the bureaucracy, responsible for various programmes and policies. Today, the information of any development programme assigned for that area reaches the village easily and the village takes decisions; the forest department also co-operates with them in protecting the forests. Officials in the government hesitate to take bribes from the villagers of Mendha, and many government officers bring outsiders on visits to this village. The struggle of the villagers has brought it recognition.

Mendha is an inspiration for the nearby villages. Rather than remaining as an oasis of the alternative, Mendha has become a flowing river of the alternative and has nurtured nearby villages to take collective action to preserve the forests and fight for their rights. As many as 40 nearby villages have made Collectives to take decisions together to develop their village and to selling NTFP. Over the

last two to three years, they have been selling *tendu* leaves like the people of Mendha, and the money received is being utilized for the development of their villages.

The percentage share of the money for several development actions by various committees is taken together by the leaders of the group of 40 villages. Mendha faces a problem in selling its forest produce due to the stiff competition with the forest department and the monopoly of the traders. Now that many villages have a similar agenda and are fighting for their rights over their forests, they, as a force, are planning to negotiate in the market for a fair price and for their sovereignty. Today, when Maharashtra stands tall with maximum land under CFR, Mendha and its influence in Gadchiroli (the only district in country with the highest amount of CFR) is its backbone.

Over a period of last three months, the village-level leaders have initiated some action in the villages. The meetings with the villagers resulted in three different kind of actions, depending on their context. In Chattania of Deosar, which is more diverse in terms of class and caste, villagers started groups

Jana village of Gumla has initiated work around CFR. They have opened a *gram kosh*, discussed CFR in the *gram sabha*, formed a forest committee and are preparing documents to share with the stakeholders to have access and control over their forest

for men and a grain bank, with a belief that these initiatives will help them break social taboos of sitting together and sharing of food among the different sections of society. Jharna Ghughri village of Amarpur initiated meetings in their hamlets with both men and women of the village to understand how they can stay united. This helps strengthen their women SHGs. Along with this, the leaders are also

conducting a series of meetings in the village, to arrive at different action ideas. Jana village of Gumla has initiated work around CFR. They have opened a *gram kosh*, discussed CFR in the *gram sabha*, formed a forest committee and are preparing documents to share with the stakeholders to have access and control over their forest. All the village-level leaders meet regularly in their respective villages after the exposure visits

and are in touch with the leaders of other villages. The villagers of Mendha are taking these initiative ahead as a group.

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