



COMMONS TALES

Compendium of Stories

presented at

**Commoning the Commons Virtual Conference
Celebrating Community Stewardship**

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INTRODUCTION

Commons, or shared resources such as groundwater, forests, pastures, along with the cultural knowledge systems linked to them, play a vital role in sustaining the lives and livelihoods of millions of people globally.

Rural communities play a central role in safeguarding, conserving and responsibly managing these resources through ingenious and sustainable practices that have stood the test of time. The diversity of approaches and indigenous knowledge not only offers a blueprint for cultivating harmonious connections with nature but also presents effective solutions to the challenges we face, particularly in the context of the ongoing global climate crisis.

The unique perspectives of rural people, including forest dependent communities, small and marginal farmers, pastoralists and landless echo the accumulated knowledge, expertise, and deep understanding of Commons passed down through generations. These narratives, grounded in the realities of daily life, deserve widespread attention and discussion. It is imperative to create supportive platforms that can amplify and propel these voices forward, ensuring that the valuable insights from the ground level are recognized and shared on a broader scale.

As a part of the Promise of Commons initiative, the virtual conference - “Commoning the Commons: Celebrating Community Stewardship”, held from December 8th to 10th, 2022, served as a dedicated platform for community members to exchange their insights into natural resource governance and management. The conference was organised as a part of Annual World Commons Week (December 4-10, 2022) celebration which promotes sharing of knowledge and experiences around Commons.

Designed to facilitate community-to-community engagement, the conference aimed to promote cross-learning, enriching participants’ knowledge and capabilities. In addition, the event sought to bring together practitioners, academics, policymakers, and members of civil society, providing them with the opportunity to benefit from the wealth of varied experiences shared during the conference.

The conference featured 59 speakers, representing diverse communities from 11 states in India, who shared their stories across 8 thematic areas outlined below:

- Commons and Biodiversity
- Commons in a Landscape
- Land and Water Commons
- Commons and Food
- Commons and Gender
- Commons and Livelihood
- Commons and Culture
- Struggles of Commoning

The conference operated through two parallel Zoom channels, hosting approximately 20 presentations each day. The structure involved community leaders delivering 10-minute presentations in their preferred language, followed by a 5-minute summary presented by a facilitator in either English or Hindi. Additionally, the event witnessed the involvement of numerous NGOs, researchers, and academics who served as facilitators for the community leaders as well as joined as participants to the discussions. The online conference drew a participation of over 1000 attendees.

This publication, titled “Commons Tales,” stands as a comprehensive compendium encapsulating the rich narratives and stories shared during the Community Conference in 2022. Within its pages, readers will find a diverse collection of experiences, insights, and wisdom presented by community leaders from across 11 Indian states. “Commons Tales” serves as a testament to the invaluable knowledge and practices associated with Commons, offering a unique glimpse into the varied themes explored. This compendium is a treasure trove of community-led perspectives, fostering a deeper understanding of the intricate relationships between communities and their shared resources.

We sincerely hope you find this compendium engaging and informative and look forward to your suggestions to enhance and refine our efforts in future endeavors.

RESTORATION AND CONSERVATION OF SIDHHA BABA PAHADI FOREST



The conservation efforts of Sidha baba Pahadi forest hillock led to many NTFP like medicinal herbs, honey, tendu patta and fruits such as Mahua, bel to bound back.

Samptiya Bai Yadav
Madhya Pradesh

Siddha Baba Pahadi hillock has a rich cultural history and the five villages recognise this as a place of worship. The legend says that long back, an old woman used to climb up the hill every day, which created curiosity among the villagers. The villagers then found out that she used to come here to worship. The villagers then started protecting that hillock. But after a few years, their protection stopped, so due to overexploitation the forest started to degrade.

Communities from five villages led by the women leader, Samptiya Bai Yadav from the Kanhari Khurd village of Kanarikala panchayat came together to restore and conserve the Sidda Baba Pahadi. She shared that annually the villagers come together to plant new saplings and that every month a meeting is held regarding the conservation of the hillock. The village communities then realised this and then decided to form a samiti, which would help in conservation of the hillock. Earlier only men were part of this samiti and later on women also became a part. Rules and regulations were also prepared with the consent of all the villages. Due to these efforts that forest on the hillock started to improve and provided many NTFP like medicinal herbs, honey, tendu patta and fruits such as Mahua, bel. The community were aware of the benefits that forest provides to the villages.

Activities such as chopping of wood and open grazing were completely banned and those found guilty would have to pay the fine. The dead and decayed leaf litter from the trees in the forest play a role of fertilizers for their agriculture fields; they also provide oxygen and are now home to a lot of birds and butterflies. All these efforts slowly gave results, as the birds and butterflies returned to the area and the biodiversity increased. The samitii has taken up the process of sensitizing the neighbouring villages regarding the importance of such forests. The people from the district administration have also taken note of these efforts and regularly visit this site.

Pradyumna Acharya, FES
Facilitator

FROM 'WASTELAND' TO BIODIVERSITY RICH 'HOT-SPOT'



With continued protection of common lands, we have abundant fodder for our livestock. The increased access to NTFP has also enabled the few landless households to improve their livelihoods. There are many fauna, flora species living in our Sandrakonda. Which gives us fresh air, environment in the village.

Gopal Reddy
Andhra Pradesh

Gopal Reddy hailing from Neerugattavaripalle village of Mulakalacheruvu Mandal, Annamayya District, Andhra Pradesh is a farmer. He is also the president of the Sandrakonda Tree Growers Cooperative Society (TGCS), a community institutions of the village.

Neerugattavaripalle and the adjoining Gudisivaripalle villages share the 30 acres of common land on which communities are dependent on fodder and NTFPs. Twenty years ago, the common land suffered from scant vegetation cover, a consequence of extensive tree felling by both villagers and outsiders who would transport the wood using bullock carts. This resulted in the degradation of the lands and a severe shortage of fodder for livestock.

In 1998, the communities of Neerugattavaripalle and Gudisivaripalle collectively registered the Sandrakonda TGCS. The main objective of the TGCS has been the restoration of degraded common land to meet the essential needs of the villagers. All the 60 households of the two villages are members of this institution.

The Institution prepared a prospective plan to restore the hillock. Community implemented revegetation activities, soil moisture conservation measures, land bunding, and established boundaries around the area allocated. Institution spent around 6 lakhs till 2003. Later MGNREGS works were taken up in the hillock. They have planted many trees and built boundary walls for the common land. The efforts led by this institution have positively impacted their immediate environment, lives, and livelihoods in many ways.

Over the years, vegetation has rebounded, featuring diverse tree and plant species in the village such as Neem (*Azadirachta indica*), Maddi/Arjun Tree (*Terminalia arjuna*), Neredu/Jamun (*Syzygium cumini*), Seema Chinta/Sweet Tamarind (*Pithecellobium dulce*), Narepi (*Hardwickia binata*), Usiri/Indian Gooseberry (*Phyllanthus emblica*), Thumma/Babul (*Acacia leucophloea*), Kanuga (*Pongamia pinnata*). The common land is also flourishing with diverse species of fauna including peacocks, partridges, little egrets, greater coucals, quails, antelope, wild boar, porcupines, and gray langurs.

Ramesh Babu Bethi, FES
Facilitator

CONSERVATION AND LIVELIHOOD NETWORK OF THE TIZU VALLEY COMMUNITY CONSERVATION AREA



The conservation efforts led improved biodiversity in the region and we boasts of having 222 bird species in our territory.

Ivan Zhimomi
Nagaland

The Tizu Valley Biodiversity Conservation and Livelihood Network stands as a collaborative venture involving the Community Conserved areas of Sukhai, Kivikhu, and Ghukhuyi villages. The Tizu River and its adjacent forests faced escalating threats from deforestation, unregulated hunting, soil erosion, and overexploitation of fish, leading to a rapid decline in fish populations, wildlife, and forest resources. To counter this, the Sukhai village council took the initial step by declaring 789 hectares of forests as Community Conserved Areas (CCAs) and imposing bans on destructive activities. Subsequently, Kivikhu and Ghukhuyi villages united, declaring 204 hectares and 370 hectares, respectively, establishing joint CCAs covering approximately 1363 hectares.

A governing committee, inclusive of representatives from the three villages, spearheaded key initiatives such as the preparation of the Peoples Biodiversity Register and a comprehensive management plan. Supported by FES, endeavors extended to community-led nature-based tourism, capacity building, and the introduction of Green Hero Awards. Collaborations with organizations like the Balipara Foundation facilitated agro-forestry, habitat restoration, and the establishment of a farmers market.

The CHENGU festival, focusing on local bird culture, showcased the rich heritage of the Naga people, fostering unity and promoting eco-tourism. Noteworthy achievements emerged, including 28 homestays, 16 youths trained as local guides, 6 pursuing forestry careers, and 18 forest guards receiving training. Ongoing conservation efforts led to a resurgence in biodiversity, boasting 222 bird species, 200 butterfly species, 31 reptile species, and endangered wildlife like the Chinese pangolin and clouded leopard.

Recognition followed with prestigious awards such as the India National Biodiversity Award in 2018, the Balipara Foundation Award in 2021, and the Governors Award in 2022. Challenges persist for the committee, necessitating strategies to secure livelihoods, incentivize initiatives, and coordinate diverse schemes. The interlinked nature of biodiversity, tradition, and culture serves as a guiding principle for their forward trajectory.

COMMUNITY-LED CONSERVATION OF BATS: A STORY FROM ODISHA



We have banned the hunting of bats in our village. Anyone killing the bats have to pay a fine of Rs. 5000.

Mongal Dehuri
Odisha

The Taramakanta village in Kendujhar District of Odisha is nestled deep inside dense forests. The mornings in the village usually break its silence with the voice of bats. Normally, the bats leave the trees in the evening and return before the sun rises. At the west boundary of the village, there is a temple of goddess Andharipidho, where stands a very old Kurum tree that houses thousands of bats. During the day, they hang from the tree upside down and create an illusion of fruit on the tree.

Mongal Dehuri, a resident of Taramkanta village, says that bats have been living in the village for generations and they were a major part of his growing up years. The villagers have been caring for the bats for generations and is an important part of the village heritage. They believe that these birds came to their village as a blessing of the goddess and brought a lot of prosperity to the village. The villagers believe that the bats eat different wild fruits and help in the propagation of several species and help the forest grow.

In the early 2000s, some outsider came to the village and started hunting the bats as it is believed that consuming the bat can cure asthma and several other diseases. They influenced the villagers and offered prices for killing the bats. The bats were sold in local markets. This incentivised a lot of villagers to earn money through bats.

Some village elders including Mongal Dehuri decided to act against hunting of bats. They held gram sabhas to spread awareness among the community members and passed a resolution banning the hunting of bats. Anyone found to be hunting bats have to pay Rs.5000 to the Gram Sabha. The Gram Sabha also released a rulebook for the conservation of bats.

They did not stop with this. They also do campaigns during market days in neighbouring areas. Mongal says that even though his village has taken active steps to protect the bats, this is not the case with surrounding villagers where hunting of bats is still very prevalent. The bats also have to go outside the village in search of water where they face the threat of hunters. Recognising this the villagers are planning to build water structures in the village to ensure water provisions for the bats.

Saswatik Tripathy, FES
Facilitator

A RESPITE FOR THE DYING GREAT INDIAN BUSTARD/ GODAWAN JAISALMER



The great Indian bustards play a vital role in controlling insect and rodent populations is also important for preventing crop damage and ensuring food security.

**Sumer Singh
Radheshyam
Rajasthan**

**Dimpal, FES
Facilitator**

The Great Indian Bustard, primarily a grassland bird, holds considerable significance for agriculture in India. The bird's presence in grasslands serves as an indicator of a healthy ecosystem. Additionally, its foraging behavior plays a crucial role in controlling insect and rodent populations, mitigating potential damage to crops. Designated as the state bird of Rajasthan and predominantly found in 2-3 blocks of Jaisalmer, the Great Indian Bustard is now on the brink of extinction, with a population dwindling to around 120 individuals. This alarming decline has led to its classification as critically endangered on the IUCN Red List.

Sumer Singh Bhati, Radheshyam, and other wildlife conservationists from the community are actively engaged in the conservation of the Great Indian Bustard. Based in the Thar Desert region of Rajasthan, the bird's population has been rapidly declining due to various factors, including habitat loss caused by high-tension electric wires in grazing lands and Orans, as well as the reduction of food sources resulting from shrinking grazing lands and the disappearance of local grasses like Sewan. Other threats include hunting and various environmental challenges.

Moreover, the grasslands inhabited by the Great Indian Bustard are crucial for livestock grazing, and many rural communities in India rely on livestock farming for their livelihoods. Therefore, the conservation of the Great Indian Bustard's habitat is not only vital for the survival of this bird species but also essential for ensuring the sustainability of rural livelihoods in India.

Singh has been working with local communities, government agencies, and NGOs to raise awareness about the importance of conserving the Great Indian Bustard and to develop strategies to protect its habitat. He has also been involved in research and monitoring efforts to better understand the bird's behavior, distribution, and population trends.

Singh has played a key role in the establishment of the Desert National Park and the Great Indian Bustard Sanctuary in Rajasthan, which provide protected areas for the bird to breed and forage. He has also been instrumental in promoting community-based conservation efforts, such as the creation of community reserves and the development of sustainable livelihoods for local communities.

Singh's work has received recognition from the Indian government, and he has been awarded with several prestigious awards for his contributions to wildlife conservation. His efforts have helped to raise awareness about the plight of the Great Indian Bustard and to mobilize support for its conservation.

Singh says, the conservation efforts for the Great Indian Bustard can help to promote sustainable agriculture practices that are beneficial for both the environment and the economy. For example, the conservation of grasslands can help to reduce soil erosion and increase water retention, which can lead to better crop yields. The bird's role in controlling insect and rodent populations is also important for preventing crop damage and ensuring food security.

VAN GUJJAR YUVA SANGHATAN: BIODIVERSITY & BREED CONSERVATION IN KUNAO CHAUR COMMONS



The Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sanghatan is youth led movement to protect the Kunao Chours.

**Mohamad Meer Hamja
Founder, Van Gujjar
Tribal Yuva Sanghatan
Uttarakhand**

The Van Gujjars, nomadic pastoralists, lead a lifestyle centered around grazing and seasonal migration to find fodder for their indigenous Gojri buffaloes. Primarily residing in the Terai-Bhabar and Siwalik regions of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh during winter and monsoon, they venture to Bugyals in the Himalayas or the Ganges floodplains in search of greener pastures in the summer.

Founder of the Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sanghatan, Mohammad Meer Hamja, emphasized their role in preserving biodiversity and managing Kunao Chaur pastures in the Gohri range of Pauri Garhwal district, Uttarakhand. This Sanghatan, dedicated to conservation, breed protection, and biodiversity documentation, empowers Van Gujjar community members to assert their customary rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006.

Elders play a pivotal role in transmitting pastoral knowledge through hands-on activities like grazing, lopping, and grass cutting within the Chaur. The Sanghatan facilitates Maai congregations each season to draft a management plan for pastoral activities in specific Chaur areas.

Through strategic efforts, the Sanghatan imparts specialized knowledge about local grasses and herbal remedies, revitalizing indigenous curative systems for livestock diseases. Their awareness campaigns have successfully educated pastoralists about the dangers of consuming poisonous weeds.

Valuing diversity within the grassland, the Sanghatan promotes forestry activities for sustained fodder supply, contributing to community resilience and sustainable pastoralism. Notably, fire hazards in the Chaur have significantly reduced due to wild grass consumption and the establishment of firebreaks along grazing routes.

Livestock browsing in the Chaur has facilitated tree growth, creating denser and lush top growth suitable for lopping. The indigenous resource management approach of rotational grazing minimizes forage trampling and ensures even distribution of animal excreta, fertilizing larger Chaur areas.

Establishing informal grazing guidelines, the Van Gujjars consider local climatic factors, established trails, soil fertility, grass availability, presence of lantana, and fire hazard mitigation through grass consumption. Prioritizing livestock with higher nutrient requirements ensures efficient utilization of pastures.

The Sanghatan is committed to training youth in scientific lopping and seasonal efforts for local species conservation, ensuring the continuity of their unique forest-based livelihoods.

VILLAGE COLLECTIVIZATION TO CONSERVE FORESTS



21 villages joined hands to say no to cutting down their trees.

Sobha Ram Marskole
Madhya Pradesh

The story of the Surpan River Valley Federation reflects a powerful example of community-driven conservation efforts and collective action to protect forest resources and grazing lands. The federation's formation and subsequent unity among villages showcase the strength of communal decision-making in addressing regional issues related to common resources. One very important milestone of this federation was when the villagers came together to stop a government project that was intending on the cutting down of mixed species trees in the area and promote monoculture plantation of teak.

The Mohgaon project had stated they would begin with the felling of mixed trees such as sajha, dhava, harra, bahera and the planning and plantation of teak. The soil that supports the growth of teak does not allow other shrubs and even grasses to grow and this majorly hampers livestock grazing. The initial lack of attention from the federation escalated into a pivotal moment when the villagers rallied together to oppose the project.

As of 2018, the community people of these 21 villages took a stern action to stop the teak plantation by officially placing their concern with the Mandla district collector. This collective action, combined with persistent advocacy and engagement with local authorities, eventually led to the district collector's order to halt the teak plantation.

In Kunegaon village, the forest department again went on with their activity of cutting the forest trees. The villagers put forth his arguments again with the collector. The villagers are the protectors of forests, and the forest dept thinks it to be their right to sell it off. However, after much tussle and convincing with the forest dept people, they agreed to spare that patch of land that they were fighting over.

The success story of these 21 villages in reclaiming control over their forests highlights the importance of community solidarity, informed decision-making, and persistent advocacy in safeguarding natural resources and asserting local rights over communal lands.

Ram Kumar Yadav, FES
Facilitator

YOUTH LEADERSHIP TO INITIATE LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION



The village level institutions came together to conserve their land and water resources by implementing and following collectively decided rules.

Jiya Lal Maravi
Madhya Pradesh

Jiya Lal Maravi is a resident of the small village called Barkheda in Mandla district, Madhya. Barkheda grapples with degraded common lands infested with lantana.

In response, villagers formed a samiti to tackle environmental issues collectively. Notably, both men and women played pivotal roles in the samiti. Their initial focus centered on enhancing the diversity of the forest, recognizing that the existing tree cover lacked the essential variety of species. This deficiency had adverse effects, diminishing rainfall and impacting the local livelihoods.

The villagers seek permission from the forest department to work on their forest lands and simultaneously decide to eliminate the lantana. This move aims to prevent wildlife from destroying crops and encourage the growth of diverse flora.

Turning attention to water scarcity, the samiti decides to rejuvenate Hanthisagar, an existing pond. Facing difficulties during dry months, they plan the construction of check dams and tree planting to prevent soil erosion.

However, implementing this plan encounters resistance when a villager refuses to give up parts of his land for the check dam. Through discussions and persuasion, he eventually agrees, allowing the construction of the check dam and planting of trees to secure a stable water supply.

With the water body revitalized, villagers explore pisciculture to generate additional income. The samiti establishes rules governing water use from the check dam, including gate operations and water extraction quotas for farmers, ensuring pragmatic management of this essential resource in Barkheda.

Pradyumna Acharya, FES
Facilitator

COMMUNITY MOBILISATION FOR DEVELOPMENT OF PASTURELAND



We must take responsibility for our land. If we don't unite, who else will? It's ours to care for, addressing issues to sustain our lives and livelihoods.

Deepak Shrimali
Rajasthan

In the arid state of Rajasthan, the cattle rearing community in Bhuj village depends on grazing their animals on the Chargah, or common pasture land. It falls under the revenue village- Rawaliya Kala, Chak-B of Gogunda Block, With 133 households and a population count of 780 people, the village's primary sources of livelihood are agriculture and livestock rearing, mainly sheep and goats. They receive their small ruminant fodder from Moravan and Kara Mathara in the form of khakhra leaves and grass, as well as fuel wood for their kitchens and mahua flowers, which are used to prepare a local brew and medicine.

The community has two plots of pastureland. The biggest one is called Moravan and is "protected," covering 35 hectares (ha). The smaller one, Kara Mathara, has a 15 ha area but is "unprotected." Pastures in villages here are of community and belong to the panchayat, so no individual has a claim over them. On the contrary, while Community grassland is used to feed animals, encroachments have come upon these plots over a period of time, with people clearing the land and not letting cattle herders to collect fodders for individual interest.

The need for cattle herders to defend their livestock and the environment arises from encroachments on pasture area, which ultimately led to the establishment of a village institution, "The Bujheshwar Charagah Vikash Evam Prabhandhan Samiti," with the assistance of a Panchayat NOC that granted permission to oversee the development.

The Committee has built boundary walls, helped to raise the water level, and restored healthy grassland over the years. Throughout the past 15–16 years, another committee called "Talab Vikas Committee" has been responsible for water protection. He also mentioned that the committee had established numerous different norms and guidelines, such as the requirement that any fodder harvested from grazing land be accompanied by a receipt for rupees 20 and that the depth of pond water utilised for Ragi cultivation should not exceed 1.5 metres.

With the committee formation each family was able to accumulate 200 to 300 pali of fodder over time, which is enough to meet their needs at a very low cost. He also mentioned that with the assistance of locals and some officials, they recently ran a campaign in the village called "HAML A" during the Hariyaali Mahotsav to raise awareness of the value of protecting pastureland and generating income in neighbouring communities.

Shreya Sharma
Facilitator

KOTRA VILLAGE'S FOREST CONSERVATION EFFORTS



The Kotra Village Institution's persistent efforts transformed the forest, fostering biodiversity and economic benefits. Their success inspired regional conservation and development.

**Kalubhai Ramjibhai
Taviyad
Gujarat**

**Samji K Dama, FES
Facilitator**

Kotra village, located in the Santrampur block of Mahisagar district, is primarily inhabited by Scheduled Tribes, with agriculture and animal husbandry being the main livelihoods. In 1998, the Village Institution (VI) was formed with an 11-member committee, and the VI took up the responsibility of protecting the 200 hectares of forest land near the village.

To ensure forest conservation, the VI registered under Joint Forest Management (JFM) and developed bylaws for safeguarding the forest. They implemented grass seeding in the pasture land and established two nurseries for plantation. Soon after, the VI acquired their Community Forest Rights (CFR) title to the 200 hectares of forest land under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), which granted them greater control over the forest resource governance and protection. The bylaws established by the VI promoted responsible forest management and equitable sharing of forest products.

However, the VI faced challenges, such as grazing by animals from neighboring villages and violations of forest protection rules by some community members. To address these issues, the VI engaged in dialogue with community leaders from neighboring villages and organized night watches, involving every household to protect the forest. They also held meetings with nearby villages to foster collaboration in conservation efforts.

As a result of the VI's persistent efforts, the forest in Kotra village transformed into a green, dense area, providing a conducive environment for various wildlife species, including hornbills, leopards, rabbits, and new bird species. The VI's success led to the sharing of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) like timru leaves, custard apple, and mahua, benefitting the community economically. Additionally, the positive impact of the VI's work extended to neighboring villages, creating a spillover effect on conservation efforts in the region.

The VI also engaged in other activities, facilitated by Kadubhai, to promote ecological soundness in the village. They adopted improved agricultural practices, such as seed treatment through bio-culture, line sowing, and preparing Jivamrut (organic manure). Moreover, the VI supported the Panchayat in preparing the GPDP plan and assisted eligible people in accessing government schemes. They also participated in water conservation projects under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

The VI's efforts extended beyond their village as they played a role in the conservation plan for the Santrampur block, facilitated by the MAP (Mahiti Adhikar Gujarat Pahal). They engaged in landscape-level efforts, leading the federation, organizing Gram Samvad (village dialogue), and supporting the federation process in the Kadana block.

In conclusion, Kotra village's VI has been instrumental in transforming their forest into a green, thriving ecosystem through sustainable practices and collaborative efforts. Their success in forest conservation has not only benefited their community but also had positive ripple effects on neighboring villages. Additionally, their engagement in various ecological and development activities showcases their commitment to holistic progress and the well-being of their region.

CONSERVATION AT THE LANDSCAPE

- DIKHU RIVER CATCHMENT



In teamwork, 14 villages joined hands to take care of the Dikhu River, and the young generation is actively involved. These young folks know how important it is to look after the river because it's all about securing their own future.

Tokugha Sumi
Nagaland

In the northeastern state of Nagaland, a remarkable tale unfolds as 14 villages unite to safeguard the Dikhu River, the longest river in the region, against mounting threats. The villages faced a challenge as they were widely scattered, making meetings a logistical hurdle. Yet, recognizing the urgency, they decided to reserve both sides of the river for a substantial 500-meter stretch.

The Dikhu River, a vital tributary of the Brahmaputra River, plays a crucial role in the region. Its waters are a breeding ground for various aquatic species, including endangered ones like the Golden Mahseer and several Schistura species. The river also serves as a habitat for numerous rare and endangered species, supporting the livelihoods of millions of people.

Despite its significance, the catchment area of the Dikhu River was under tremendous pressure. Uncontrolled harvesting of fish and other aquatic species, habitat loss due to changes in land use, uncontrolled hunting, and the depletion of wildlife were rampant issues. The upper catchment areas were particularly affected, leading to the loss of animal corridors and forest cover.

In 2010, two villages took the initiative to protect a 14.5 km stretch of the river, forming the Dikhu Green Zone. Inspired by this, the efforts expanded, and 14 villages collectively created the Nanga Greener Zone (NGZ), covering an impressive 2800 hectares. To safeguard the upper catchment areas, the NGZ mobilized eight more villages, establishing Community Conservation Areas (CCAs) covering 1172 hectares.

This collaborative effort brought a total of 5977 hectares under community conservation, marking a significant achievement. Villages continue to establish CCAs to protect the upper catchment areas and create animal corridors. The result has been an improved ecological balance and the reappearance of various wildlife species, a testament to the positive impact of community-driven conservation.

Looking ahead, the communities plan to expand their efforts by mobilizing both upstream and downstream villages to join the cause. They aim to create more corridors by declaring additional CCAs, generate awareness targeting the youth, and revive traditional practices for the sustainable use of resources. This inspiring tale showcases the power of community unity in protecting and preserving the natural treasures of the Dikhu River.

MANAGING INVASIVE SPECIES



The village level institutions came together to conserve their land and water resources by implementing and following collectively decided rules.

Yogesh Kumar Ureti
Madhya Pradesh

Yogesh Ureti, a dynamic young leader from Khamhariya Raiyat village in Mandla district, Madhya Pradesh, recounts his journey in persuading the villagers to eliminate the pervasive lantana infestation. This invasive plant not only plagued their village but also extended its reach into the neighboring areas, covering significant portions of the forest lands. The dense growth of lantana posed challenges for locals attempting to navigate the forest for fuelwood collection, and it served as a haven for troublesome wildlife, including wild boars and the locally known “ladiya”, a small ruminant. These animals wreaked havoc on agricultural crops, causing substantial harvest losses.

Frustrated by the recurring crop failures, the villagers convened in the village samiti in 2019, with every household represented. A collective decision was made to eradicate lantana from their common land. Each family contributed a volunteer to dedicate the necessary time to the task. In 2019, the arduous process took approximately 35 days to clear the widespread lantana. Remarkably, the villagers repeated this effort in 2020. The momentum continued in 2021 and 2022, and it only took about 5 days in both the years to rid the area of lantana plants, resulting in the clearance of approximately 62 hectares of land. This sustained four-year endeavor yielded significant benefits.

The once-inaccessible forest land became more navigable, facilitating fuelwood and fodder collection for the villagers. Additionally, the concerted efforts led to the emergence of a more diverse range of plant species in the area. Crucially, the initiative contributed to a reduction in animal attacks on crops, alleviating a longstanding concern. Through their collective and persistent actions, the villagers have fostered a healthier environment, demonstrating the positive impact of community-driven efforts on the local landscape.

Alok Vishnoi, FES
Facilitator

TRANSLATING INVASIVE SPECIES MANAGEMENT INTO LIVELIHOOD GENERATION



Chichhari's transformation—from neglecting their commons to becoming stewards of natural wealth—is a testament to collective action empowered by awareness and collaboration.

Chain Singh Uikey
Madhya Pradesh

Ram Kumar Yadav, FES
Facilitator

The journey undertaken by residents of Chichhari village, a hamlet in Mandla district in Madhya Pradesh, is a remarkable tale of transformation. From initially being unaware of the true value and untapped potential of their village commons, they have now harnessed the land to generate sustainable livelihoods.

It was discovered through consultations that in 2015, post meetings with the gram sabha, a rights lease (adhikaar patta) had been obtained over 25 hectares of land. However, due to the villagers' lack of awareness and subsequent inaction by community members, the plot remained forgotten, overgrown with weeds and wild plants and frequented only by stray, wild animals. Moreover, the growth of *Lantana camara*, an invasive species, made the land unfit for livestock grazing and perpetuated the loss of available resources.

Over the years, in a fruitful collaboration undertaken with Foundation for Ecological Security (FES), the village embarked upon a journey of triumphant collective effort, involving work on widespread community mobilization, generating awareness on tenure rights, undertaking development initiatives such as *Lantana* removal, and devising a collective vision for the commons.

Reinforcing the spirit of collective decision-making and through continuous endorsement of the restoration, a clear decision was reached by the community: their commons needed to be mapped and a committee needed to be formed for better protection and management of the land in coming years.

Subsequently, a committee of 16 members was formed, including a chairperson and a secretary. Several development activities, such as the construction of a boundary wall and removal of the troubling *Lantana* overgrowth, were also undertaken to secure the land. Rules were devised and the revived land is now successfully put to use for livestock grazing by the villagers.

Since 2016, collection of tendu leaves – a significant source of livelihood for the villagers – had been undertaken from the commons at a rapid pace, mostly through the contribution of the community's women. However, while contributing the most to the collection process, it became evident that these very women also remained devoid of actual ownership rights. As the community worked on rejuvenating its commons and tendu leaf collection increased exponentially (it now stands at one lakh sixty thousand leaves) through better management of land, this issue was highlighted in village meetings. Thus began a process which has resulted in tendu patta cards being issued in women's names here. It fosters a sense of ownership and identity while giving women control over their commons and livelihoods.

The once-unassuming residents of Chichhari now stand tall as stewards of their commons, custodians of their natural heritage. Their success story serves as an inspiring example of how collective action, community empowerment, and a shared vision can unlock the hidden potential within a village.

HOW A TRIBAL VILLAGE ACHIEVED SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH MGNREGA



Bhuiya tribe in Uparabirikala thrived with MGNREGA, combating run-off through innovative trenches. From forest to cashew-turmeric farming, a transformative ecological success.

Jagannath Pradhan
Odisha

In the small village of Uparabirikala, the Bhuiya tribe depended on the forest land for their livelihood. With a hilly and undulating topography, it was impossible to cultivate crops during the rainy season, and during the Rabi season, there was no water for cultivation. However, everything changed with the introduction of MGNREGA, a scheme that aimed to provide employment and ensure sustainable development in rural areas.

The village committee was supposed to plan some work to be done under the scheme, and during a common meeting, all the members discussed how structures could help develop their village. It was during this meeting that Jagannath raised the issue of high run-off in the sabha. This sparked an idea, and the Sabah started planning how to slow down the run-off so that it could recharge the soil.

With the spirit of change and innovation, the village committee started to make staggered trenches on the hills and rainwater harvesting structures so that all the water could flow through a stream and not into the village. They even created stone diversions on the stream to use the water for cultivating the land twice a year.

The results were phenomenal. Most families stopped shifting cultivation in the forest, and one of them even started a Cashew plantation, earning Rs.80,000 per annum. Others who used to do shifting cultivation now cultivate Turmeric for their livelihood.

The use of MGNREGA in ecological restoration brought about a significant change in Uparabirikala. The villagers were able to use the resources available to them in a sustainable manner, resulting in increased income and better living conditions. It is a story of how a small community can bring about a positive change by working together towards a common goal.

Saswatik Tripathy, FES
Facilitator

PROTECTING LANDSCAPES: A CASE STUDY OF 19 VILLAGES COMING TOGETHER



The landscape supports 192 bird species, 72 species, 250 plants. We passed resolution to create safe passages and ban hunting of threatened species across 14 villages.

Lungsi Haikube
Nagaland

In the beautiful Mt Pauna Landscape, nestled in Nagaland's Barail range, a community of 19 villages has come together to protect its rich biodiversity. This landscape, home to the third-highest peak in Nagaland, Mt. Pauna boasts incredible flora and fauna, making it an essential part of the Eastern Himalaya Endemic Bird Area.

This area is not just a collection of villages; it's a treasure trove of nature's wonders. With around 198 bird species, 72 mammals, and about 250 plant varieties, Mt Pauna is recognized as an Important Bird Area (IBA), with the flagship bird being the Blyth's Tragopan, also Nagaland's state bird. Rare species like Red-Faced Liocichla, Brown-capped Laughingthrush, and Naga Wren Babbler find refuge in this haven.

The community understands the significance of this landscape. It serves as a major water catchment area, supporting the lives and livelihoods of millions. However, it faced challenges such as habitat changes, loss of forest to monoculture plantations, natural disasters, and wildlife trade.

In response to these threats, representatives from 14 villages joined hands to create the Mount Pauna Biodiversity Conservation Forum. This collective effort is a testament to the community's commitment to addressing conservation issues at the landscape level.

They didn't stop there. The community, through 26 Community Conservation Agreements (CCAs), passed resolutions to create safe passages and ban hunting of threatened species in their villages. The formation of the Mt Pauna Range Conservation Plan earned recognition from the District Administration.

A remarkable aspect of their efforts is the rescue of threatened species, previously targeted by hunting. This community-driven initiative showcases the power of collective action in preserving nature. The Mt Pauna Landscape is not just a collection of villages; it's a harmonious blend of people working hand in hand to safeguard their natural heritage.

GENDER AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN WATERSHED DEVELOPMENT



With a focus on collective ownership, particularly involving women, it led to increased crop areas, elevated groundwater levels, and improved livelihoods.

Dayabhai Maganbhai Patel
Gujarat

Modhava is a village in the Dhanpur block of Dahod district. The community here was heavily dependent on rain-fed agriculture, leading to poor socioeconomic conditions. The villagers faced financial struggles, borrowing money at high interest rates from local money lenders, and seeking livelihood opportunities elsewhere through migration. Natural resources in the area were also neglected. With support from NABARD, a watershed project was implemented between 2017 and 2022.

The Modhava watershed project brought about a transformative change in the village's development. By implementing various interventions, the project successfully increased the cropping area during both kharif and summer crop seasons. There was an 8% increase in the kharif crop area and a 16% increase in the summer crop area compared to the pre-project period. Cultivation of crops like maize, paddy, and wheat saw an increase of up to 11%. Additionally, the groundwater level rose significantly by 114%, leading to improvements in milk production and the cultivation of vegetables, fruits, and cash crops.

Women played a pivotal role in the success of the Modhava project. They actively participated in village watershed committees (VWCs) and were involved in building economic resilience through various livelihood activities. Utthan facilitated women from marginalised households to form self-help groups (SHGs) and provided them with training and capacity building activities.

The Modhava community exemplifies the effectiveness of an integrated and inclusive approach to watershed development. The collective ownership of natural resources that resulted from this project led to sustainability and a positive impact on the lives of all, especially the marginalised sections.

Through their efforts in watershed development, gender equity, livelihood security, and conflict transformation, the community has together uplifted the lives of many and fostered a sense of community ownership and sustainability.

Naresh Jada, Utthan
Facilitator

ROOTS OF RESILIENCE: SAHALA'S COMMONS-DRIVEN TRANSFORMATION



Our villages are a testament to the transformative power that collaboration among village communities, government departments, and civil society organisations can wield in the pursuit of a better life.

Pabitra Mohan Dehury
Odisha

Pabitra Mohan Dehur is an active community member of Sahala village. Nestled in the heart of the Kankadahat block in Dhenkanal district, Sahala has a rich history of community-driven forest conservation from ages.

Sahala is not just any village; it was a living witness to the profound impact that a collective effort could have on the lives of a forest dependent community. In the discourse on commons, much emphasis is often placed on forests, but the story of Sahala highlighted a less-discussed aspect—water. The villagers understood the importance of treating water as a common resource and made efforts to improve accessibility. In this process, they recognized the symbiotic relationship between the land and water.

Their journey began with a series of activities aimed at eco-restoration, conservation, common land treatment, and soil conservation. Their active involvement got support from various government departments, including the Horticulture, Forest, and Siri culture departments. In a unique convergence model, these departments joined hands with the community to bring about agricultural and livelihood options in the village.

In the early days, Sahala's households primarily cultivated crops for personal consumption. However, with the implementation of watershed and soil conservation activities, they could grow surplus crops that could be sold. As a tangible outcome of these efforts, an Agriculture Production Cluster emerged within the village. This cluster played a pivotal role in streamlining the production and sale of the agricultural produce, providing the villagers with a reliable economic avenue. The shift from mere self-sufficiency to active participation in the market marked a significant milestone for Sahala.

The villagers, in collaboration with local institutions, played a crucial role in sustaining the positive changes brought about by eco-restoration, conservation, and agricultural development.

Sahala's story echoed beyond its boundaries, inspiring neighboring villages and garnering attention beyond the district. The internet, a powerful tool for sharing stories, became a conduit for Sahala's tale of resilience and transformation. News of the village's journey spread, showcasing how a small hamlet could become a beacon of hope through collective action and sustainable practices.

Niranjan Sahoo, FES
Facilitator

REVIVAL OF A RAMSAR WETLAND SITE BY LOCAL COMMUNITY



We all depend on Tamapara ma (mother) for freshwater, essential for our well-being, from villagers to city dwellers. Fortunately, individuals in roles ranging from Sarpanch to MLA and collector collaborated to include Tamapara in the Ramsar project.

Ravena Kanemana
Odisha

Mr Durga, Pallishree
Facilitator

Situated in Ganjam district, Tampara wetland is the second-largest freshwater lake in Odisha, with a catchment area of 409 ha, providing essential resources to 30,000 families in Chhatrapur NAC - fulfilling their water requirements for agriculture, fishing, and domestic usage as well as providing habitat to the flora and fauna. It also acts as a natural buffer during floods and storms. However, over the last few decades, a 50% reduction in catchment area due to inflow blockages. The communities came together to work collectively, in collaboration with NETCOAST, to revive the area.

A restoration and management plan, integrated into the Gram Panchayat Development Plan, marked a significant turning point. As NETCOAST worked to capacitate the communities with the skills to undertake restoration and clean-up, the communities together decided to not dispose plastic on its banks. Some Eco-Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) measures were also taken for sustainable resource management.

The results were transformative. The issue resonated with various stakeholders, from elected Panchayat leaders to community influencers. Tampara's plight became a rallying point for community-led environmental stewardship. Through this sustained momentum, Tampara earned recognition as a Ramsar Site, signifying its international importance. Now, Tampara stands as a testament to the indomitable spirit of community-led conservation, where collective action safeguarded a lifeline and secured a sustainable future.

BARAKUTNI VILLAGE: A MODEL OF COMMUNITY-LED CONSERVATION RECOGNIZED WITH PRAKRUTI MITRA AWARD



Our elders set the path, supported by FES, we enforced strict forest protection rules. Unified in firefighting, we now inspire the youth to lead in safeguarding and preserving our forests for the future.

Jisudan Disari
Odisha

The forests in Barakutni villages were undergoing degradation over the years. Human wildlife conflicts were increasing and incidents of forest fires became very common. In 2008, the village leaders of Barakutni, formed a community institution to conserve their forest with the help of civil society organizations. Rules such as controlled grazing, forest fires, NTFP collection, were formulated to ensure maximum protection of the forest area. Systems like 'thengapalli', where each family takes turns to protect forest resources, were instituted.

From 2014, the community-initiated Soil Moisture Conservation measures to enable regeneration. This was supported by government and non-governmental development programs, but the community's active contribution was even more encouraging. In 2016, the VI submitted its CFR application after demarcating 1,000 acres of protected forest land.

Their efforts began to show results. There was a visible increase in the forest cover and improved biodiversity in the protected forest area. The civil society organizations in partnership with government helped in converging schemes and government programs departments. The rural cadre and trained volunteers played a pivotal role in influencing other villagers at federations, Gram, Block and Zilla Panchayat meetings. There was even a significant attitudinal shift in the line departments, who applauded the community's conservation efforts.

Today, this settlement of 94 households is a model for their efforts to protect, restore, conserve and collectively manage their Commons. On World Environment Day, the Odisha Forest Department and the Zilla Samiti awarded Barakutni VI with the Prakruti Mitra Award and a cash prize of INR 20,000. This award is given to communities that have contributed significantly to conservation and sustainable management of the environment.

Pradip Mishra, FES
Facilitator

COMMON LAND RESTORATION WORKS IN KETHAVARAM VILLAGE



Kethavaram serves as an inspiring example of how communities, with strategic partnerships and dedicated efforts, can be stewards of their natural heritage for generations.

V Govardhan
Sarpanch, Kethavaram
Andhra Pradesh

Kethavaram in Kurnool stands out as a model panchayat for its exemplary commitment to restoring and preserving its commons. Right from the outset, the villagers and the sarpanch recognized the pivotal role that common lands play in their lives and livelihoods, especially in the context of being a predominantly agro-pastoral community with a significant reliance on livestock, making these commons the lifeline of their community.

The village's rich history of preserving common heritage is exemplified by the successful conservation of rock paintings estimated to be over ten thousand years old. This deep-rooted practice sets the stage for the community's forward-looking approach to the conservation of their natural resources.

Integral to the success of this initiative is the collaboration between the village members and various civil society organizations. These external entities played a crucial role by offering technical support and capacity building for conservation efforts. The implementation of multiple projects under the MGNREGA program, guided by scientifically prepared detailed project reports from UVAS (community institution for commons management) members and villagers, showcases a comprehensive approach to improving the health and management of common lands.

Collaborations with organizations civil society organizations brought in technological tools through which community could map their common lands and better plan the interventions. Engaging with Tahsildars and other government agencies further reinforces the commitment to protecting the commons.

The meticulous planning, including the creation of roadmaps for staggered trenches, cattle ponds, check dams, and various water restoration projects on the common lands, demonstrates a holistic strategy for sustainable land management and the effective use of public resources for biodiversity restoration and community livelihoods.

This community-led movement has yielded tangible results, including improved vegetation cover, enhanced soil moisture, and increased water retention. Beyond the environmental impact, it has fostered a strong sense of community among the villagers, showcasing the power of collective action in achieving sustainable development. Kethavaram serves as an inspiring example of how communities, with strategic partnerships and dedicated efforts, can be stewards of their natural heritage for generations to come.

S Habeed Basha, APARD
Facilitator

WOMEN INFLUENCING VILLAGE LEVEL PLANNING PROCESSES IN MANDLA



Ensuring women's participation in decision making is crucial for ensuring equity in resource distribution.

Anita Yadav
Madhya Pradesh

In Mandla District of Madhya Pradesh, the efforts of members of a Mahila Sabha to ensure that women's voice in decision-making is heard loud and clear emphasizes the power of collective action in local governance. The village of Baniyagaon was reeling under water stress for quite some time. In the highly undulated area, in the absence of water stopping structures like checkdams, water would easily run-off. If rainwater is not stopped, very less water is available for agriculture in the rabi season as well for the livestock.

Water-related issues had been at the forefront of discussions in the Mahila Sabha for quite some time. The conflict arose when the Forest Department and Panchayat mutually decided upon a spot for construction of the stop dam between Kheesi and Baniyagaon villages, without taking into account the opinion of the women. The official plan was to construct the anicut within the forest area in a location that was not likely to benefit villagers in the nearby habitations. Mobilized by community leader Anita Yadav, the women insisted on having a stop dam constructed in an apt location, thereby maximizing the benefits to be accrued from it.

However, Anita Yadav stood up to the challenges and objected to the decision of having it constructed within the forest area. She had to go to great lengths to convince the Panchayat-appointed engineer that the spot selected by the Mahila Sabha was more reasonable as it would benefit farmers of both villages. Despite all the women attendees being illiterate, urged forth by Anita, they managed to file an application to the district administration. Finally, the Mahila Sabha emerged victorious as the stop dam was constructed at the spot selected by them. Today, it benefits the farmers and villagers of both Kheesi and Baniyagaon, as well as the birds and livestock in the region.

Ramkumar Yadav, FES
Facilitator

WOMEN-LED IN FOREST MANAGEMENT PLANNING: A STORY FROM MAHARASHTRA



The women worked very hard to mobilize the communities. Our biggest achievement was the forest management plan.

Vanita Pendor
Maharashtra

In a landmark achievement in 2016, Khadki village in Yavatmal, Maharashtra, received CFR title for over 236 hectares of forest land. However, the villagers were largely unaware of their rights. The due process of filing community forest rights was not followed- members were appointed to the Forest Rights Committee without the knowledge of the community. Recognising this, some civil society organizations along with community members such as Vanita Pendor chose to mobilize communities and actively engage them in management of forest lands.

Initially, there seemed to be not much enthusiasm regarding collective rights over forest land and consequently, no major conservation and management efforts were expended till 2021-22. The women of the village, led by Vanita Pendor formed a collective. They gathered insights on Community Forest Rights, mobilised the community members. educated themselves on the nuances of the Forest Rights Act and proceeded to lead the preparation of a forest management plan which was then submitted to the SDLC. The collective ensured that women were at the core of decision-making in this process and facilitated the formation of rules regarding forest management within the community.

However, even after the plan was submitted to the SDLC, the Forest Department did not seem to support the community in undertaking conservation works upon the land. The community members are waiting for approval of their management plan.

Govind Pednekar, FES
Facilitator

WATER MANAGEMENT THROUGH NEERUGATTI (WATER MANAGER) SYSTEM: A STORY FROM ANDHRA PRADESH



The tank in my village always has ample water and everyone gets a fair share of this. This is all due to the neeruganti system and proper user association.

Nageshwar Rao
Andhra Pradesh

Mr. Nageshwar Rao is a farmer and the president of a village institution in Gajulapalle village within the Papepalle panchayat, Peddamandyam mandal, Annamayya district. He plays a pivotal role as the leader of the water user association for Brahmana Cheruvu, a substantial tank spanning 27.5 acres. This water body is the lifeblood for forty-eight farmers cultivating 42 acres of land beneath its influence. Seven additional farmers from nearby villages also rely on Brahmana Cheruvu for irrigation.

In order to ensure a just and equitable distribution of water, the community has appointed Laxmi Devi as the Neeruganti, entrusting her with the responsibility of managing water resources for the collective benefit. The community have implemented simple yet innovative methods to guarantee uniform water supply to all fields in the command area. The Neeruganti's key functions include deciding on the dates and times for water supply, disseminating this information through announcements, notifying farmers of pest or disease afflictions, overseeing the maintenance of tank outlets, scheduling repairs for the tank canal, and organizing "Ganga Pooja - Bonam" ceremonies to invoke divine blessings for plentiful water in the tank.

Unlike many other tanks in the region that have fallen into disuse due to inadequate maintenance and a lack of coordination between Neerugantis and farmers, Mr. Nageshwar Rao and his fellow farmers adhere diligently to the community established rules. Each year, after Diwali, a ritualistic puja and offerings to Goddess Ganga mark the beginning of the water management process. Farmers collectively clear the supply channels and initiate nursery bed preparation for Paddy cultivation. The Neeruganti oversees watering and channel clearance during this critical phase. The farmers remunerate Neeruganti by providing her with grains.

The effectiveness of the Neeruganti system is evident in the unanimous sentiment expressed by the farmers: "The tank in our village consistently maintains ample water levels, ensuring a fair and equitable distribution to all. This success is attributed to the Neeruganti system and the proper functioning of the water user association." The community's commitment to sustainable water management, coupled with Mr. Nageshwar Rao's leadership, stands as a beacon for successful and harmonious agricultural practices in the region.

Ramesh Babu Bethi, FES
Facilitator

AN EXAMPLE OF GROUNDWATER SHARING FROM ANDHRA PRADESH



Our initiative of groundwater sharing has also inspired farmers from neighboring villages.

M Harinatha Reddy
Andhra Pradesh

In a country grappling with the escalating challenge of water scarcity, a visionary farmer in Vepulapalle village, Andhra Pradesh, has pioneered a distinctive solution to address the pressing water needs for agricultural purposes. M Harinatha Reddy has ingeniously established a collective ground water-sharing system sourced from three borewells, benefitting over 10 farmers in the village.

In the village, only some farmers could afford borewells. While areas proximate to the borewells receive ample water, fields situated farther away traditionally relied heavily on rainfall for cultivation. Recognizing the imperative for enhanced water management, particularly for crops like groundnut, tomato, and paddy, the farmers of Vepulapalle collaboratively forged an agreement to establish rules and regulations for sharing groundwater resources.

Harinatha Reddy's borewell initiative operates as a shared resource among farmers in and around the field. Regular monitoring of water levels has become a routine practice, accompanied by a systematic approach to water utilization within the village.

Before embarking on borewell installations, these farmers engage in comprehensive research with the help of various civil society organizations. By employing a blend of modern and traditional methodologies, their endeavors involved identifying water recharge areas, analyzing topography, and understanding the drainage contours of the region. Subsequently, they strategically implement trench setups that traverse the fields, ensuring equitable access to water across all sections.

This collective action has not only resulted in the successful cultivation of approximately 26 acres of land but has also sparked a social movement within the village. The formulation of rules, such as a collective responsibility to address pipeline breakages by pooling resources for repairs, showcases the unity and commitment of the farmers towards sustainable water management.

The impact of this pioneering initiative extends beyond Vepulapalle, as neighboring farmers from nearby villages visit to understand these innovative practices and adopt it in their villages. The success story has resonated with several farmers, prompting discussions on replicating this model in their respective villages and localities.

Harinatha Reddy, along with his dedicated team, has played a pivotal role in raising awareness about water scarcity in the region. Their efforts have empowered villagers to judiciously manage groundwater resources through active participation and collective management. This exemplary initiative stands as a beacon of hope and practicality in the face of a growing water crisis, showcasing the transformative potential of community-driven solutions.

Ramesh Babu Bethi, FES
Facilitator

PROMOTING LIVELIHOODS VIA COLLECTIVE CLIMATE ACTION AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT



Earlier when someone visited, they would see that there was no drinking water in the village during summers. Now it seems good, everything is greener.

Nange Sing Netam
Madhya Pradesh

Dhamanpaani, a little known hamlet in Madhya Pradesh, popularly known as 'Kaalapaani' amongst locals, has been historically abundant with natural resources and receives 1200-1800 mm rainfall annually. Yet, the village struggled with providing access to water and a decent quality of life to its inhabitants. Despite availability of rainwater and land (with presence of over 100 hectares of common land), more than 90% of the locals were forced to migrate every year. Moreover, from the month of November, most of the villagers would routinely travel 3-4 kilometres to procure water for basic necessities. Climate change was imminent and local livelihoods seemed to be a distant aspiration. This region too, not unlike other tribal hamlets normally observed, seemed to suffer the brunt of severe weather fluctuation, soil erosion and consequences stemming from the loss of forests.

Taking these issues forward as the situation grew dire, in 2018, the inhabitants came together and started preparing a ridge-to-valley natural resource management plan for the village. SHGs, women's collectives, youth groups and the elderly of the village mobilized the inhabitants to prepare a management plan which would be valid till 2025. To this end, street plays, resource mapping, large village meetings and transect walks were undertaken to aid the preparation. PRADAN, the tribal department, AJEEVIKA, other organizations and various government initiatives supported the village by raising 3 crores in funding. Thereafter, PRADAN also supported the village in initiating various development activities as a result of which, a pond, gabion and other such structures were constructed, leading to conservation of 8 lakh cubic metres of water. Under MGNREGS, 100 days of guaranteed employment began to be availed, leading to reduction in out-migration from the village. The panchayat supported PRADAN in turn and was receptive to positive change.

Vaibhav Sonone, PRADAN
Facilitator

FISHING IN THE TEMPORAL PADDY FIELD SEMI-COMMONS, STORY OF SIMHACHALAM FROM ANDHRA PRADESH



We are able to catch about 20 species of fish that we can catch and feed on.

Simhachalam Savara
Andhra Pradesh

A unique story of semi commons and its special feature of harvesting fish brings forth another interesting relationship that communities and people share with their land. In Jammitota of Srikakulam District, Andhra Pradesh, there is a unique set up of “semi commons” where large tracts of paddy fields are under private control when the paddy is being grown. But once the paddy is harvested, a unique socio ecological transformation occurs in the village.

The lands are blessed with several small streams that provide water downstream. This water is diverted through the paddy fields, which creates a unique “lake” system, which allows fish to grow. These fishes are trapped using traditional methods such as “sala” and “singa”. This has resulted in community members being able to access fish, which is an important part of their food basket.

“We are able to catch about 20 species of fish that we can catch and feed on,” says Simhachalam, a key Savara community member, shining light on the diversity in the species of fish, which reflects on the health of the local biodiversity in the region. This practice brings together people from 23 villages, who share the catch amongst themselves.

The region sees positive rainfall in October and has sufficient water that flows in the streams through the fields. This results in fields being waterlogged in some regions and not sustainable for paddy cultivation. A solution that the community members such as Simachalan suggest is that these lands be converted into farm ponds, so that fisheries can be pursued as a form of employment.

With the presence of fishing being part of the traditional knowledge in the region, there is potential for such interventions. While there was dependence on chemical fertilizers for paddy, this unique ecosystem that contributes to the food basket has made people move to non-chemical methods.

The larger question that this unique practice brings about is to make this sustainable, through nonchemical use in their agriculture practices in upland areas and ensuring that the land is still accessible. This set up of “semi- commons” opens up a new perspective on how we understand natural resources, who owns them and most importantly, who accesses them.

Kanna K Siripurapu
SaciWATERS
Facilitator

WASTEWATER LINKAGES AND REGIONAL FOOD SECURITY: A CASE STUDY OF CHANDLAI VILLAGE, JAIPUR, INDIA



These days water from urban areas is diverted to water-stressed rural areas. But no one is ensuring if these water is safe for growing crops.

Ramesh Jangid
Rajasthan

Garbhit Naik,
Central University of
Rajasthan
Facilitator

Recent urbanisation in and around the Chandlai lake, situated south of Jaipur has resulted in a major health and sanitation concern in the nearby villages. Chandlai lake is an important ecological feature in the region as it not only hosts thousands of migratory birds, but is also a key source of water for agriculture for farmers nearby. However, in recent times, the lake has been under threat due to the release of domestic and industrial waste from both urban and rural households.

The detrimental effects of the water management was first noticed by Ramesh Jangid, who works in a nearby government hospital. Cases of water borne diseases had been on the rise, and people were losing their lives to such diseases. Upon investigation, Jangid also discovered that livestock in the area were being affected by these diseases. It was then that the villagers realised that the Chandlai lake was the key common factor in the region for these cases.

A study was conducted by a researcher around the same time to investigate the potential effects of wastewater inflow to the lake. Initially, the study aimed to assess the impact of wastewater on the population of migratory birds. However, as the research progressed, alarming health issues associated with the lake were discovered. This led to the expansion of the study to examine the broader social and ecological implications on the communities that rely on the lake. The study was then done in close collaboration with farmers and community members of the region. It was also discovered that the sewage is carried by the Dravyavati river, which runs into the lake.

Various soil and water sample testing were carried out, and the findings indicated elevated levels of harmful contaminants in the lake which pose a threat to migratory birds. It was also discovered that the water has a negative impact on the farming practices in the region and impacts livestock as well. High PH levels in the water, high moisture content in the soil were some of the emerging problems due to the inflow of sewage into the lake that was impacting agriculture output. Notably, the increased pH levels can lead to the degradation of the soil quality in the agricultural lands.

The textile industries were recognized as significant contributors to the pollution of the lake, as they had been disposing wastewater without proper supervision, leading to the accumulation of heavy metals in the lake beds. Livestock graze in the shallow lands of the lake, and the contamination in the lake is ingested by the animals resulting in health hazards for the animals, and the products consumed from the animals.

This scientific study, which is yet to be published, has made some key discoveries that highlight the negative impacts of pollution. The villagers are now looking at mobilizing and creating awareness among the residents in and around the lake, to ensure strict lake management policies. The community is looking at leveraging their rights over the common lands, and therefore ensure that the land is protected. They are working towards engaging local institutions to ensure that there is no waste water discharge in the region. This serious pollution of a large lake from urban wastewater drainage is a serious threat to the local communities and their access to water resources.

LEVERAGING MGNREGS FOR ECO RESTORATION FORESTS AIMED AT ENSURING FOOD SECURITY



MGNREGA has given us an alternative livelihood and has helped reduced shifting cultivation, and improve the health of the common lands.

Jaladhar Nayak
Odisha

Talabirikala is a village at the foothills and surrounded by forest in Odisha. Individuals and communities living in the village had to depend mostly on Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) for their livelihood as there was scarcity of cultivable land in the region. The undulating terrain in the foothills made it difficult for water storage and runoff was high, making the land infertile and difficult for agricultural practices. This had increased the reliance on the forest for income generation, which proved difficult to manage. Besides NTFPs, shifting cultivation was the only other source of livelihood, which resulted in a series of ecological issues.. This included temporary reduction in forest cover and increased strain on the landscape.

In recent years, rampant shifting cultivation has proved to be an extremely damaging form of occupation for the villagers. In earlier days, the practice was carried out with caution and adequate time was given before the forest grew back. However, today it has become an excuse to clear more and more forest land for cultivation. Shifting cultivation also resulted in the killing of bees and other pollinators, which added more stress on the regeneration of the flora in the region. Factors such as increased temperatures, change in wind patterns further aggravated forest fires in the region.

As there were no other livelihood sources, MGNREGS quickly became a major source of employment and income generation in the region. The communities also realized how MGNREGS can be leveraged to restore the degraded forests. The communities attended the Gram Sabha and demanded restoration of the forests. Over the years, the restoration efforts bore fruit in the form of enhanced production of NTFP, a vital source of income.

The initiatives implemented through the MGNREGS have led to an augmentation in the moisture levels of the soil in the region, aiding in the increase in production of mushrooms, a key NTFP in the region. The works have been beneficial in multiplying the production period by two times. This increased availability of mushrooms has resulted in the increase in markets in the region.

The increased fertility and water availability in the region has also resulted in a positive shift towards engaging in agriculture practice for millets and horsegrams in the region. The MGNREGA programs were used for construction of water soaking pits and other forms of water management structures in the region.

Saswatik Tripathy, FES
Facilitator

A LIVING ENCYCLOPEDIA ON MEDICINAL PLANTS AND THEIR USAGE: THE STORY OF SHEKHAR REDDY



There are so many unknown properties in the plants that grow in our common land that could cure diseases.

P Shekar Reddy
Andhra Pradesh

Lalu Prasad, FES
Facilitator

Shekar Reddy hails from Andhra Pradesh and has dedicated over three decades of his life to the profession of traditional healing. His philosophy towards his practice is that nature gives, and it is our responsibility to comprehend and utilize the resources effectively.

Reddy engages in the collection of various herbs and medicinal plants from the local common lands in his village. He offers free treatment to people, and his reputation for healing is renowned, attracting people from far off cities like Hyderabad and Chennai who seek his expertise in herbal medicines.

Reddy believes that there exists an inherent connection between humans and nature, which in turn provides healing remedies if we are attentive to it. “These days people run to medical stores for simple ailments. We have so many plants and herbs that can even help people cope with diabetes, but we no longer have the patience” he says, sharing his experience. Shekar Reddy believes that people do not put effort to work with traditional medicines, and therefore are complicating their bodies with artificial medicines.

The COVID 19 pandemic saw a small movement towards the use of traditional medicine for multiple reasons. Due to the lockdown, accessing medical facilities became difficult and people had to rely on locally available medicine. This also magnified the general feeling of stress induced from a global pandemic that resulted in people wanting to be treated at home. This gave him an opportunity to share his knowledge with the younger generations in the village.

Sharing his experience about the younger generation and their interests, he is of the opinion that youngsters need to be introduced to the vast medicinal value of traditional plants, and its impact on their lives. He also believes that these are very important cultural and social activities that lead to interaction and knowledge transfer among community members. He conducts wisdom walks, where he shares his knowledge with the younger generation in his village.

The access to commons and the herbs are vast and can treat a series of ailments. Plants can heal minor injuries, joint related issues and have seen reduction in stress, managing of blood pressure and even menstrual cramps.

There is a need for documentation and management of these resources so that people use them instead of paying large amounts in hospitals. He also says that the usage of traditional medicines can help reduce risk of improper drug usage that people often resort to when they cannot afford healthcare. He is confident that traditional medicine is an integral part in ensuring that communities and common lands thrive and can work together to help the other.

Common lands are home to several traditional medical herbs and plants, and maintaining a close relationship with the land and the community not only helps protect the biodiversity of the region due to mobilisation of local communities, it can also provide health benefits that are of nutritional value and medicinal value. This relationship serves as a crucial link in the maintenance of health of the residents in these regions.

PROMOTION OF SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE THROUGH WATER CONSERVATION



Every creature on Mother Earth needs water every day. We need water for household requirements, and growing crops. Nowadays, many farmers depend on groundwater for their crops and drill borewells, thereby exploiting the resource. This way, water has become scarce, with insufficient water even for our household requirements. It is, therefore, our responsibility to conserve every drop.

Pareshamma
Andhra Pradesh

Lalu Prasad, FES
Facilitator

Thamballapalle is a village located in the drought-prone district of Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh. The village's history of cultivating water-intensive crops like tomato and paddy had severely impacted the local groundwater table; the continuous cultivation of these crops led to an alarming situation of water scarcity. Pareshamma, a Community Resource Person (CRP) from Thamballapalle, had attended several programs on millet cultivation, crop water budgeting, sustainable agriculture practices and groundwater games facilitated by FES.

Through these capacity building programmes, Pareshamma was introduced to practices such as less-water-intensive millet cultivation, which she realized were critical to bring relief to the acute water scarcity situation being faced by the village community. She facilitated meetings and discussions with the community, raising the issue of the disappearance of millets from their diets over the past 40 years; she tried to impress upon the farmers that millets required less water than paddy or tomato. She faced some pushback, since the income from millets was less than that from paddy; millets didn't have a strong market in the area since its consumption had reduced over the years. Families were unwilling to shift from paddy, which had become the core of their diet. However, Pareshamma persisted and started advocating for the benefits of consuming millets and informed the farmers of the ill effects of consuming paddy, which was treated with chemicals and pesticides. She urged the community to revert to their traditional diet to stay healthy, while also informing them about how this shift will help solve the water scarcity in the area.

Soon, a few families started growing and consuming millets. Pareshamma and these farmers, who realized the benefits of the shift, started incentivizing other farmers by distributing seeds free of cost. Coincidentally, a village well had dried up mid-season, leaving several farmers in huge debts due to loss of agricultural yield. She leveraged this situation to urge farmers to adopt the less water-intensive millet cultivation.

This worked and her efforts resulted in about 50 farmers shifting to millet cultivation. Of the 700 families in the village, around 200 have made millets a part of their diet.

Pareshamma's efforts have made significant strides in water conservation in Thamballapalle - something she wants to take a step further by banning the drilling of new bore wells and encouraging more women to take part in conservation efforts. Her drive to promote water and food security amongst her village community continues. She wants to promote production and consumption of millets in more villages starting with her native village, Gopedinne.

RECLAIMING OUR FORESTS: WOMEN'S ACTIVE ROLE IN CLAIMING CFR



Every household takes turn to protect our forests.

Pravati Baral
Odisha

Chakuria Village, situated in Kankadahad, Odisha, stands as a testament to the remarkable collective action led by women in restoring degraded forest commons. Comprising 40 to 42 tribal households, the village faced historical challenges as men would migrate for work, leaving women to grapple with encroachment and destruction of their lands and forests by people from neighbouring villages or outsiders.

Recognizing the severity of the issue, the women of Chakuria, led by the dynamic Parvati Baral, took it upon themselves to address the problem. The initial realisation was that the community lacked awareness about residing in a revenue village and their rights. Through extensive discussions, they initiated the Community Forest Rights (CFR) claim process, successfully claiming 104 acres of forest land. Currently, 80% of households have also claimed Individual Forest Rights (IFR), enabling them to protect and sustainably harvest forest resources for their livelihoods.

The women introduced “Thengapalli” system or forest guard, a common practice in Odisha, where families would take turn to become forest watchers. This brought a mechanism that acts as a safeguard for the forest. Empowered by their success, the community now aspires to diversify livelihood options by sustainably utilising Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). The bond between women and the forest is evident in their frequent, free, and secure visits to the forest.

Chakuria's success in forest resource management has not only improved their own village but has also served as an inspiration for neighbouring villages. Communities that were once involved in encroachment and forest destruction have been inspired to adopt similar processes for the sustainable management of their own forest resources. The story of Chakuria underscores the transformative power of women's collective action in preserving and enhancing the ecological and economic well-being of their communities.

Narayan Sahoo, FES
Facilitator

SAFEGUARDING LIVELIHOOD THROUGH PRESERVING NATURE



Kansab village women are protecting commons from forest fire and illegal tree felling.

Manjulata Pradhan
Odisha

The Kansab village is located on the outskirts of the Satkosia wildlife sanctuary, with thick forests surrounding three sides of the village. The community consists of scheduled tribes who rely heavily on these forests for their livelihoods. They have traditionally protected their forested land for generations, as they hold the belief that the forest shields them from bad omens.

Every year, it was observed that a man-made forest fire incident occurred in the village during the delicate months of April to June. This period coincides with the collection of Tendu patta and Mahua flower seeds, which are highly combustible and abundant, leading to rapid spread of fire across extensive forest areas. These fires significantly diminished livelihood opportunities.

The women of Kansab decided to take the matter into their own hands. A village level committee was formed with the purpose of safeguarding the forest. It was decided that the eight people committee would be responsible for preventing forest fires. Whenever smoke or fire is spotted, immediate action is taken to extinguish it. Additionally, the Thengapalli system has been introduced, wherein two members from different households participate in rotational forest surveillance, ensuring its continuous protection. To ensure efficient functioning of the Thengapalli system, pamphlets outlining all the rules are distributed to every household.

The women firmly believe that the primary source of their income comes from the forest, and as a result, they feel the need to protect it. They nurture the forest as if it were a child (“ma ki tarah palate hain”), recognizing its role as a provider to their livelihoods. The forest provides water for agriculture as well as NTFP. It also serves as a gathering point for various groups like SHGs to discuss sustainable harvesting of its resources. The community has worked towards enriching their livelihood options by eradication of invasive species and protection and regeneration of bamboo clumps. Manjulata Pradhan believes that approximately 35% of their household income is directly generated by forest, therefore rules and regulations are required for maintenance and protection of the forest. The women regularly make visits to the forest, and if someone is found guilty for fire incidents, they report the matter to the village committee for resolution. Typically, the issue is resolved amicably, often involving the imposition of fines on those responsible. In instances where neighbouring villagers engage in unauthorised tree felling, the women’s group takes an active role in catching the culprits and producing the matter before the village committee for appropriate action.

The unity among women has empowered them to confidently assume responsibility and ownership of their resources. Moreover, they have cultivated relationships and mutual understanding with neighbouring villages, thereby raising awareness among women about alternative methods for gathering NTFP that do not involve the use of fire.

Dron Chandrakar, FES
Facilitator

COMMONS AND FINANCIAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN



Working together with each other have built our capacity to address issues.

Savita Ben
Gujarat

Santrampur, situated in the Kheda district of Gujarat, is a tribal area characterised by undulating land and lush tropical forest. The people in this region are mostly dependent on agriculture and animal husbandry for their livelihoods. Amongst them, those who are most vulnerable depend on NTFP as a source of sustenance.

The SHGs in the region were previously inactive due to the low participation of women in training and meetings. Additionally, there was a lack of proper management of the revolving fund, leading to the emergence of a debt trap issue. However, with the assistance from some local NGOs, a federation of women united under the name of Gayatri Mahila Vividh Kalyankari Sahkari Mandali, Santrampur.

The federation has taken necessary steps to regularise SHG meetings. Women leaders were identified and capacitated by means of training, meeting and exposure. Gram Samvaad, an event that brings together community leaders from across the region on a platform has emerged as an active platform for women to raise issues and acquire knowledge. These interventions led to improved management of the revolving fund as well as a better understanding of livelihood options available for vulnerable and women-headed households.

The federation was instrumental in the collective procurement of agricultural inputs. In order to reduce the agricultural costs, they actively promoted “Desi Gaay Aadharit” agriculture. Additionally, the federation also liaised with the government stakeholders and got registered under the Cooperative Act. Collaboration with local Panchayats is also underway to increase participation of women in Gram Samvaad.

Furthermore, the federation has provided support to 12000 households for the procurement of agricultural inputs and strengthened 503 SHGs. VIs have been established to oversee the management and protection of forests. Through these efforts, women have gained newfound confidence and emerged as inspirational leaders.

Devabhai, FES
Facilitator

WOMEN IN KEONJHAR DISTRICT TAKE CHARGE



Mining trucks disrupted road connectivity from Dumuridihi to Rangadihi. Mahila Sabha discussed, women approached the district administration, held demonstrations, and succeeded - an alternate road is now allocated for the mining trucks.

Malati Mahanta
Odisha

Together with other women folk, Malati Mahanta is bringing about sweeping changes to Odisha's Tala Jagar village in the Keonjhar district. Through Mahila Sabhas, these women are enforcing their collective strength to assert their rights and address issues that affect them and the larger community. Over the years, large tracts of forests in these tribal-dominated areas have been cleared to make way for mining activities. The mining that continues unabated in this mineral-rich region has severely affected the lives of the indigenous communities. Through the Mahila Sabhas, which has provided them a platform to make their voices heard, the women of Tala Jagar raised concerns about the mining trucks' movements through their village. These trucks, which plied throughout the day transporting iron and manganese from the mines, caused severe safety concerns. Apart from road blockage, pollution, and other health hazards, the truck movement made Tala Jagar's only road unsafe and dangerous. Due to an increase in the number of accidents, households were reluctant to use it, restricting young children especially. It caused further distress as it was the only road that existed to their school.

With Malati Mahanta facilitating the Mahila Sabha discussions, the women decided to take matters into their own hands. They held demonstrations and protested outside the mining company located in Banspal block's Suakati area. The protesting women demanded that the mining trucks be prevented from entering their village and utilize another route instead for their activities. Despite facing grave threats and attempts to foil their protests, the women persevered. Unrelenting, they petitioned the District Collector to address the injustice meted out to them. With the Panchayat's support, they also registered a First Information Report (FIR) with the police and raised their concerns with local media, seeking appropriate support and recognition for their issue. The women's persistent efforts did not go in vain. The continued protests and growing concerns forced the mining company to identify a different route to continue their activities. In addition to diverting the trucks away from the village, the community obtained relevant permissions to renovate the existing road. Thus, the women's collective effort ensured that the road was safe again for the community.

Kunami Majhi, FES
Facilitator

GETTING WOMEN TOGETHER FOR CONSERVATION AND COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR A BETTER TOMORROW



If there's no plants in the soil, how will we get fresh water and clean air? Together, let's nurture our Commons. Women united achieve greatness. We should encourage our daughters to excel in studies and contribute positively to make a difference.

Raju Devi
Rajasthan

“Plants in soil provide vital water and air. Women united achieve greatness. Encourage our daughters to excel in studies and contribute positively to make a difference.”

Raju Devi is an active member of Devnarayan Charagaah Vikas Samiti Mahua, Mandalagarh and the Madalgargh Block Federation. Having to frequently visit the Panchayat office after the death of her husband, she realized the importance of asserting her own rights for her son's and her sustenance. And decided to seek the support of the other women in the neighbourhood. By way of regular VI meetings for common land restoration, exposure visits for enhanced learning, and on-site training, she started her journey towards inspiring community action.

The women in the community traditionally used to offer prayers at Peepli ka Chabutra , a common porch, which also acted as a safe space exclusively for them. It had become polluted over the years, and would flood during the monsoons. Rallying their support, she led them in raising this issue in the Gram Sabha, submitted an application to the Panchayat and pushed to get it fixed. Now, it is frequented by women for the Dasha Mata puja regularly.

Raju Devi has emerged as a respected leader in her community, often discussing with other women at the MGNREGS site. She has motivated the women to ask for fair wages, or “poora kaam poora daam”, discussing the issue at the MGNREGS site itself, refusing the use of JCB when working on pastureland conservation. The community efforts to remove the encroachment from the Village Commons were led by her, as well as attempts to ensure access to social security schemes.

She also mobilized the community to plant and care for 500 saplings, including fruit trees, in the cemetery, through 16 days of her voluntary labour or shramdaan. She thinks of these plants as her family and feeds the birds every days; she sees all this work as her offerings to her faith. She now advocates for young girls to go to school and study well to improve their lives, and for women to also shape village-level decisions, and support each other!

Sushmita Kumari, FES
Facilitator

SECURING COMMUNITY FORESTS RIGHTS TO ENSURE EQUITABLE LIVELIHOODS



Our journey in Samaiya village demonstrates that when people come together, prioritize the health of our forests, and work towards equitable livelihoods, we can create a model for harmonious coexistence with nature.

Hanumant Singh Paraste
Madhya Pradesh

Hanumant Singh Paraste leads the Praakrtik Sansaadhan Prabandhan Samiti, a Natural Resource Management Committee established in 2018 in Samaiya village. Comprising 11-12 members, the committee, in collaboration with the Gond community in Niwas block, Mandla district, Madhya Pradesh, embarked on a journey to establish a sustainable forest-based livelihood system.

The Gond community, with land parcels ranging from 2-3 bighas, relies heavily on forests due to the prevalent single cropping agricultural practice. The committee's primary objective is to protect the existing forest and ensure equitable opportunities for sustainable livelihoods across the village.

In response to the forest degradation, the committee initiated the process by demarcating the community forest boundary. Subsequently, a comprehensive record of 80-85 Mahua trees, along with essential species like Char Chironji and Harra Baheda, was established. In a Gram Sabha discussion, it was decided to allocate 2-3 Mahua trees to each family without them or to landless families, resulting in livelihood security for 32 households.

The Mahua trees yielded 1-1.5 quintals annually, and the forest additionally provided 1.5 Kg of Tendu leaves per year. To ensure sustained protection, individuals from the community were designated to regularly visit the community-owned forest.

Women asserted user rights over Mahua trees, emerging as an active stakeholders. The community prioritized revegetation to restore and maintain forest health, leveraging the Panchayati Raj structure and approaching the Sarpanch for support.

Amid the quest for a sustainable forest-based livelihood, the community encountered challenges, notably a debate over user and maintenance rights of Mahua trees allocated to select households. A week long discussion resolved this, while similar challenges regarding community-owned forest maintenance were addressed through discussions with Village Forest Committees (VSS) and Samiti.

To enhance forest protection and livelihood strategies, the committee planned to build a boundary wall. The community committed to actively engage in forest protection practices, ensuring better management of the forest and its resources.

Hanumant Singh Paraste's leadership and the community's collaborative efforts showcase a successful model of establishing a balanced and sustainable forest-based livelihood system. Through proactive measures, inclusive decision-making, and conflict resolution, the community in Samaiya village has set an inspiring example for harmonizing livelihoods and environmental conservation.

Alok Vishnoi, FES
Facilitator

GUARDIANS OF LIFE-SUSTAINING FOREST



I am a guardian of the forest, and it sustains not just our livelihoods but our very way of life.

Nakalla Mallamma
Andhra Pradesh

Ms. Nakalla Mallamma, a courageous forty-two-year-old single woman is the daughter of Shri Kadiriappa, resident of a small village Nakkalavarikota flanked by Sadhukonda and Mallaiahkonda hillocks of Sadhukonda reserved forest which lies in Gurrnavandlapalle Panchayat, Peddamanyam Mandal, Annamaya District, Andhra Pradesh. Her livelihood is sustained by Non-Timber Forest Products (NTPF) collection and agriculture labour. She along with her community members are guardians of the village's forests and local environment as it sustains their livelihoods in a rapidly changing world.

Nakalla spends several hours a day collecting various types of fruits, leaves, honey, seeds and other NTPF products. She scours the forest floor for the fallen fruits or seeds and collects them carefully and brings them back to sell them in the local markets and towns in a radius of around fifteen to twenty kilometers. Families as collective groups are engaged in NTPF collection, a part of which is sold for money and other part is bartered away to get food grains (chiefly rice). A family on an average collects around five to seven hundred kilograms of seeds in a year, some of the produce is further processed into broom sticks, leaf plates etc., before selling. One such market is Kalicherla where the produce is sold fetching a decent sum of up to ten thousand rupees per annum for a family.

The community members are economic benefits that the forest provides at all levels. Collection of the NTFP produce motivates them to protect their forests from any threats as it supplements their livelihoods. In the past the community members have together combated forest fires.

“The forest sustains our livelihoods; hence it is our duty to defend our forest”, Nakallamma along with other community members also explain the benefits they have derived as what we term them as ecosystem services such as their standing crops are less prone to attack from pests and destruction as birds from nearby forest act as controlling agents keeping check harmful pests and other insects.

The forest provides them fodder for their sheep and goats which are reared in large numbers by the community members. Anecdotally, they believe that they are less prone to diseases as they get fresh air to breathe. They emphasize that forests contribute to the overall well-being of the poor, in terms of food security, nutrition, health and subsistence.

There are around sixty six villages located in and around the forest spread across fifteen hundred acres of land which depends partially or entirely on forests.

Ramesh Babu Bethi, FES
Facilitator

WOMEN LEADERS FOSTERING ECONOMIC RESILIENCE THROUGH COMMUNITY NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT



Selling tendu patta can fetch a family Rs 8,000-10,000 per season while dealing in mahua fetches them maximum Rs 20,000 per year. The selling of seed oils (from mahua and sal tree) can get them Rs 2,500/- per year. Many families have now begun dealing in these resources for livelihood.

Urmila Behera
Odisha

Urmila Bahera, a 24-year old woman, sometimes cycles to villages covering distances of up to 15 kilometres. She courageously navigates bumpy roads, streams and elephants along the way.

Urmila's understanding about the need for conserving Commons improved after engaging and participating with the village community in capacity building programmes. She also learnt how to identify and protect natural resources, especially shared water resources.

Urmila is a master in simplifying complex ideas. For instance, explaining the importance of forest conservation and water-budgeting to the villagers is not an easy task. But she made it possible with her remarkable skill for articulation.

Urmila has conducted water assessment exercises in 15 villages in Angul district, aiding the locals to correctly assess groundwater situation and learn about how to recharge groundwater for irrigation purposes.

She also presented her findings from the water assessment to village communities, initiating discussions on water use and management. During her training with FES, she had learnt to use a Groundwater Monitoring Tool (GWMT) on her phone. She demonstrated how to measure well-water levels and feed the data on the tool. She also sensitised people regarding Community Forest Rights (CFR), including eligibility criteria and processes involved in claiming their rights.

Soon enough, she took on the position of a Panchayat Resource Person (PRP). Urmila began conducting meetings with the village committees and panchayats for discussing the long-term impact of water conservation while also explaining how ward members can persuade people to use resources more judiciously.

Urmila has compiled forest and water-related data on at least seven villages where she has listed down important forest resources such as tendu patta, bamboo, mahua and their usage as means of livelihood.

Mayadhar Mishra, FES
Facilitator

ONE TREE, ONE DROP OF WATER - REVEGETATION AT MAHI RIVER BANKS



By collaborating with communities and organizations, we transformed wasteland into thriving commons, securing livelihoods and preserving the land for future generations.

**Rathod Natvarsinh
Mangalsinh
Gujarat**

Natvarsinh Rathod played a crucial role in addressing a landscape-level issue concerning the expansion of a ravine along the Mahi river in Sarnal Village, Gujarat. Collaborating with organizations such as the National Tree Growers Cooperative Federation (NTGCF), FES, NABARD, and the government, the community aimed to restore common lands, providing secure livelihood opportunities, especially for landless farmers.

Situated along the Mahi river, the village had about 34 hectares of revenue wasteland facing erosion, with the groundwater table declining to 110 feet. In 1987, Natvarsinh Rathod, along with the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), organized a Gram Sabha to address the issue. The community decided to undertake a five-year plantation project on the 34 hectares, registered under National Tree Growers Cooperative Federation (NTGCF). In 2009, collaboration with NABARD through the Watershed Development Fund (WDF) led to the construction of farm bunds, check dams, and bamboo plantations on both private and common lands, supported by a comprehensive soil-moisture conservation plan. The regenerated pasture provided dry wood and fruits like Seetaphal, Kankora, and Gundar, benefiting villagers. The plantation reduced soil erosion, preventing further loss of land to the expanding ravine. This rejuvenation allowed landless individuals to access fodder for livestock rearing and earn income by selling milk. Consequently, groundwater levels increased to 80 feet, enabling cropping in all three seasons—Kharif, Ravi, and Summer.

Natvarsinh Rathod also facilitated the annual organization of a village general meeting, introducing the practice of former sarpanches attending the current Panchayat body meeting. Compliance with government rules, including audits, lease fees provision, and regular progress reporting to officials from departments like MGNREGA, NABARD, DDO, and collectors, was ensured.

Addressing encroachment challenges, the farmers were assured that the land would not be transferred to others. Instead, it would be transformed into common pasture land, benefiting the current occupants. This assurance led to the withdrawal of encroachment, with the affected farmers becoming laborers in the plantation process, safeguarding their livelihoods. The story underscores the significance of thriving commons in supporting the livelihoods and economy of a village. Legal protection and continued plantation efforts have been crucial in ensuring the preservation of these commons.

**Devabhai, FES
Facilitator**

MEWA DEVI'S IMPACT: PANCHAYATS SAFEGUARDING COMMON LANDS IN VATERA, RAJASTHAN



Mewa Devi, a 38-year-old, serves as the Ward Panch of Vatera Gram Panchayat in Rajasthan and holds the position of President of Charagah Vikas Samiti. Mewa Devi played an important role in elevating the status of Charagah, the region's pasture, to a recognized livelihood asset within the village.

Mewa Devi's journey began with her active participation in meetings and training organized by Mahila Jagruk Manch, preparing her for the role of ward panch. She initiated the setting up of the Charagah Vikas Samiti and also got budget approval in GDP for the development of village commons. Aside from that, Mewa Devi personally inspected the Charagah alongside the Patwari, followed by organizing village-level meetings. She ensured a contractual removal of the Babul trees through Panchayat to generate income sources through the Charagah. While the Charagah had been acting as income support to those owning livestock, Babul tree removal as well as digging of trenches to plant other varieties of trees like Peepal, Khejur and Neem trees restored the common lands. Mewa Devi also negotiated wages of up to 200 INR for MGNREGA laborers.



Our commons become the foundation of prosperity for all.

Mewa Devi
Rajasthan

Mewa Devi had undergone several struggles in her personal life, she was forced to become a caregiver to her family at a very young age. She was also married off at the tender age of 14 and lost her husband very soon. Left with a child, she began earning her living by working as MGNREGA labour. Overcoming patriarchal restraints, she however engaged with the public spaces and platforms. Her personal journey became an inspiration to other women in the village who supported her. Her involvement with the Mahila Jagruk Manch created a platform for women to engage in public interactions, breaking free from traditional family roles. This allowed women to voice their concerns in Panchayat-level interactions leading to improved information dissemination on common facilities like pension, MGNREGA work. Her fluency in both the local language and Hindi acted as a bridge in relating the issues faced to the facilities available and encouraged increased participation among all the common villagers. She has also worked towards promoting stay-in educational facilities, with hope of empowering the younger generation among women.

Ranchhod Devasi
Jan Chetna Sansthan
Facilitator

SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF FOREST COMMONS AND STRENGTHENING NTFP-BASED LIVELIHOODS



The collection of NTFP not only fulfills the food requirements but also to provide livelihood opportunities, such as processing and sale of NTFP products.

Madan Hembrom
Odisha

Mahuldagar is a hamlet located in the Kamakhyanagar block. It has eighty-two households and is demographically tribal dominated with the Munda being the dominant tribe. The village is surrounded by forest in its periphery, therefore the dependence on the forest is very high.

The source of livelihood for these villages is labour and revenue through the collection and sale of non-timber forest produce (NTFP). Villagers collect eight varieties of tuber crops, twelve varieties of leafy vegetables, eighteen kinds of fruits, twenty-two types of mushroom, seven varieties of herbal plants and one type of gum. They sell these items in nearby markets. The collection of NTFP not only fulfills the food requirements but also to provide livelihood opportunities, such as processing and sale of NTFP products. Annually, every household earns an income of up to thirty-five thousand rupees through the collection and sale of NTFP.

There are proper bylaws and management processes and steps in place. Rules and regulation in relation with collection of NTFP, tubers, fuelwoods are in place. The village community has taken steps like listing trees from which to collect fuelwood, identifying areas from where such fuelwood can be collected, penalties for collecting from restricted sites and implementing strong vigilance to prevent neighbouring villagers from exploiting their resources (Cheda System). Regarding tuber harvesting, only mature tubers are selected, whereas in case of leafy vegetables, only the leaves are plucked out rather than uprooted.

The Government is supporting the collection and sale of Kendu leaves. Consequently, the community has filed a claim for the right to a community forest over an area of 323 hectares of forest to SDLC. This claim would enable them to rightfully grow, harvest and market it along with other NTFP through the Gram Sabha. A long-term plan for forest protection, conservation and management of forests also referred to as the post CFR management plan has been made by the community. The community has also made Ajeevika Yojna (livelihood plan) for processing and value addition of collected NTFP to invigorate the NTFP economy.

A federation has been constituted by the community members of adjoining panchayats for inter-village communication and relationships. This federation serves as a platform for collectively addressing pressing issues like forest fires and learning from the best practices of sustainable harvesting. Every Sunday traditional ecological knowledge is shared within the community, with the active participation of youth, to ensure the continuity of practices adopted by the village.

Niranjan Sahoo
Facilitator

SECURING COMMUNITY FOREST RIGHTS TO CURTAIL RURAL MIGRATION



We can create livelihood opportunities for youngsters by improving the resource base in our villages. Agriculture improves, forest improves and we do not have to migrate out for work.

Kamal Singh Yadav
Madhya Pradesh

Kamal Singh, a community champion, worked tirelessly to secure a sustainable future for his village by restoring the village commons. This not only improved the village's economic situation but also drastically reduced migration in the village due to better employment opportunities.

Recognizing the link between dwindling forest cover, rainfall issues, and agricultural challenges, Kamal and a group of villagers formed a committee of 10 to tackle the problem.

They started by raising awareness through village meetings and mapping the village's land and forest areas. Rules were put in place, fining those who chopped trees at the village level. With support from PRADAN, the villagers created contour trenches to prevent soil erosion and used MGNREGS to build boulders and gabions. This not only helped with plantation but also enabled diverse crop cultivation throughout the year.

Kamal, along with the Mahila Samiti, facilitated irrigation with solar panels, benefiting families new to vegetable farming. Increased water availability allowed traditional cropping systems to thrive. Villagers embraced organic fertilizers, significantly cutting costs and enhancing economic stability. The community even developed multi-layered farming prototypes.

With improved water availability, villagers planted trees on 50 acres, doubling income from Tendu leaves. While LPG partially replaced fuelwood, forest protection increased the supply of dry wood. Securing the forest commons also safeguarded village livelihoods, empowering women and ensuring better education opportunities for children.

Kamal faced challenges convincing community members, especially those relying on selling logged trees. By mobilizing the youth through awareness, he successfully shifted towards sustainable practices. Elected as the first Sarpanch, Kamal promoted resource conservation and sustainable livelihoods. Working as a CSP under PRADAN, he showcased his village's success to 11 others.

The Mahila Samiti introduced a monthly occupation chart, ensuring at least 100 days of local employment through MGNREGS and agriculture. External support from livelihood missions and NGOs furthered sustainable development, creating awareness for future actions. Plans focused on water, forest, land, community, and animals. Collectivization into Mahila Samiti and Yuva Sangathan enhanced community mobilization.

Kamal Singh's dedication and strategic efforts transformed his village into a sustainable model, inspiring others and attracting external support for continued growth.

Adrija Seth, PRADAN
Facilitator

VALUE ADDITION OF TAMARIND SUPPORTING OVER 300 WOMEN



300 women from 30 SHGs across four villages are benefitting from our enterprise. We acquired license to sell our produce.

Malati Devi Mutika
Odisha

Malti Devi Mutika, a grassroots leader from Karada, a tribal village in Odisha's Rayagada district, is making a significant impact on her community's livelihood. In this region, where the forest and agriculture play crucial roles, villagers heavily rely on the forest for various needs, especially non-timber forest products (NTFPs) like tamarind, mushrooms, hill broom, mangoes, mahua, amla, harida, bahada, and honey, throughout the year.

Recognizing the importance of tamarind as a key NTFP, Malti Devi took the lead in her Self-Help Group (SHG). Despite limited technological resources for processing during that time, the group gained insights from government representatives and NGOs about NTFPs. In 2014-15, when Forest Right initiatives were introduced, villagers conducted Gramsabha meetings to ensure responsible collection and utilization of forest resources.

With tamarind becoming the primary NTFP collected, Malti Devi initiated the collection and sale of tamarind through their SHG. From 2016-17 to 2020-21, they persistently engaged in this activity, overcoming challenges and reaping the benefits. Recognizing their efforts, the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) in Gunupur decided to support them with a Van Dhan Vikas Kendra (VDVK). With funding from TRIFED, a central government initiative, the village received machinery and essential tools to enhance tamarind processing and value addition.

Now, the VDKV has expanded to include 300 women from 30 SHGs across four villages, contributing significantly to the overall success of the enterprise. They even secured a block-level license, facilitating the sale of their produce.

Malti Devi is an inspirational leader, guiding and encouraging women to optimize their efforts, efficiently manage resources, and remain resilient in the face of challenges. As a result, the income of the 300 SHG members in the village has experienced consistent growth. Malti Devi played a vital role in the formation of the SHG in 1998, witnessing a remarkable transformation from a two-rupee monthly contribution per member to a significant hundred rupees per month. This uplifting journey underscores the positive impact of effective SHG leadership and united community efforts on the path to sustainable development.

Niranjan Sahoo
Facilitator

MAHILA SABHA PAVES THE WAY FOR FOREST CONSERVATION AND IMPROVED LOCAL LIVELIHOODS



By removing Lantana, we not only reclaimed our forests but also improved livelihood opportunities.

Juliyana Maravi
Madhya Pradesh

Juliyana Maravi, a prominent community leader hailing from Mowala village in the Mandla district of Madhya Pradesh, actively participates in the Mahila Sabha, a collective effort involving both men and women in her village. The Mahila Sabha, dedicated to safeguarding their local ecosystems, employs bio-fertilizers to protect the forests and fields. Additionally, the members engage in the sustainable collection of non-timber forest products (NTFP), medicinal plants, and wood, while consistently monitoring the health of the forests. Recognizing the indispensable role of women in forest conservation, they deliberate on strategies to enhance forest biodiversity during their meetings.

The Mahila Sabha has played an important role in disseminating vital information about the forest, facilitating the eradication of the invasive Lantana species. Previously, Lantana posed a threat as animals would hide in its bushes, causing nocturnal crop raids and hindering the collection of Mahua, a valuable resource. Removing Lantana yielded multiple benefits, including increased tendu leaf collection, the revival of native plant species, and afforestation efforts. Notably, women, traditionally involved in tendu leaf collection, advocated for tendu cards in their names to ensure financial autonomy, redirecting the funds towards responsible family use, including education expenses.

Post-Lantana removal, women actively participated in jungle cleaning, garnering admiration from neighboring villages and transforming them into inspirational figures. The Mahila Sabha fostered unity among women, empowering them to address domestic violence collectively. Through regular meetings, they promoted equitable distribution of household responsibilities, challenging traditional gender roles. Village-level gatherings spurred further societal changes, such as initiatives to eradicate the dowry system. Remarkably, the women contribute Rs 100 per girl child born in the village, offering financial support when she reaches maturity or marriage.

The elimination of Lantana not only revitalized their livelihoods but also enabled the cultivation of crops like Kodo-Kutki. In a testament to communal solidarity, those with limited or no land now sustain themselves by working on larger farmers' lands. Juliyana Maravi and her fellow Mahila Sabha members embody resilience, sustainability, and empowerment, making lasting contributions to their community.

Pradhyumna Acharya, FES
Facilitator

DOB: THE FOUNDATION OF LIFE



Jungle mein charaibandi hone ki wajah se dob ab nasht hone ki kagar par hain.

Thanks to the ban on grazing in the forest, dobs are now on the verge of ruination.

Pandhari Hekade
Maharashtra

Dob pooja is a festival traditionally celebrated by the semi-nomadic pastoralist Nand-Gaoli community which belongs to the Vidarbha region in Maharashtra. The area in which they reside is hilly in nature and comes under the Melghat Tiger Reserve.

Dob refers to a small pond-like structure in a flat area where water has settled. Buffaloes choose their own dobs for the purpose of resting after their morning milching or afternoon grazing. This usually happens during monsoon when they want to protect themselves from the increasing number of flies and other insects. In the dob, the biggest buffalo sits in the middle, followed by other buffaloes. Cows surround the dob but do not sit in it. The water in the dob is not used for drinking; it's only used as a place of rest. Earlier, dobs could accommodate 300-400 buffaloes. However, they are now getting smaller.

The dob pooja festival is celebrated 15 days before Diwali on 'Kojagiri Poornima'. This time of the year also coincides with the shrinking of dobs in the region. During the pooja, traditional rituals are performed to please gods and nature as part of an effort to resuscitate the drying water bodies. It is also a way for the community to revere, respect, and thank mother nature for the resources it provides. This tradition can be traced to the importance that the local ecology holds for these cattle and buffalo rearers. The forests, grasslands, and water bodies provide their livestock with fodder and water for over six months a year, proving themselves to be vital for the production and supply of milk in the region.

The rituals in themselves are simple but reflect a deep connection with nature. During the ceremony, vermilion, kumkum, and turmeric are applied at the banks of the drying dob. A coconut is then cracked and offered to the pond, followed by burning incense sticks and putting them in the sand. Fruits like lemon, dry dates, and almonds are offered to the dob to satiate the gods and thank mother nature for everything. For the prasad, a crushed mix of roti, jaggery, and ghee is offered to everyone present during the ritual.

However, dobs now face a threat of extinction. Due to the general practice of alienating humans from the local ecology in the name of conservation of forest areas, the Nand-Gaoli community is forbidden from entering the forests. This has significantly reduced the involvement and motivation of the community in protecting the dobs, thereby negatively affecting their health. This, in turn, has a potential to impact the ecology of the forest as these small water bodies are fast disappearing, taking down with it the surrounding ecosystems.

Such cases point towards some larger questions - is it right to see humans as entities separate from nature and with a world of their own? Or is acknowledgment of interdependency of both humans and other natural elements a path to look forward to? Past human involvement in this region had boosted the ecosystem by the way of protecting dobs. These are important signals which tell us that such practices and lifestyles are lessons for future roadmaps on how to envision and maintain forest lands.

Ajinkya Shahane
MKCL-CPC Forest
Rights Facilitation
Center
Facilitator

OF COLLECTIVES, CULTURES AND LOCAL ECONOMIES: CELEBRATING A WAY OF LIFE THROUGH COMMUNITY TOURISM



Bibhuti Debbarma
Founder, Youth for
Integration Trust
Tripura

Khamtingbari, a picturesque little village tucked away in the forests of western Tripura, is slowly emerging as a model for best practices linked to promotion of local economies and sustainable tourism. Located in the Mandwai block in West Tripura district, just off the National Highway (NH-8) and accessed easily from different parts of Tripura, the village is surrounded by lush greenery and remains sparsely populated. It is inhabited by a population of 7000, mostly from the Rupini and Molsum communities, and adorned with distinct houses constructed using traditional architecture, which punctuate the densely forested surroundings and make it easily recognizable. This also makes it an ideal spot for launching homestays and nature camps to foster the participation of locals in a cultural exchange and promote traditional crafts and cuisine.

In recent times, the state government's growing emphasis on avenues for community tourism presents locals with a unique opportunity to experiment with tourism and collectivize for community-driven conservation. Accordingly, a proposal has been developed and submitted to the Tripura Tourism Department to initiate sustainable community tourism in Khamtingbari across 500 acres of land, without compromising the landscape's delicate ecological balance or diluting prevalent customs. The suggested design is replete with opportunities for interactions with locals and offers both homestay services and bamboo huts for shorter durations, as well as long-term residencies for scholars wishing to experience and conduct research on the cultural and ecological heritage of Tripura. Additionally, there are plans for organizing different types of camps, including nature camps, cultural camps and technical camps allowing diverse visitors to come and explore the intricacies of local crafts, architecture and farming practices in the region.

This is expected to generate local employment and livelihoods in the sphere of landscape conservation, especially for women, and bolster community action plans for the same. Further, it would preserve local dialects, customs, crafts and food habits, most of which remain undocumented, in a rapidly changing economy consumed by a fast-paced, 'modern' way of life.

Designed as a scalable innovation, the project also aims to lay the groundwork for adventure sports, cultural shows, guided tours, massive plantations and developing walkable pathways in the near future.

While the state's Tourism Department is also engaged in various stages of kick-starting similar projects in other villages, Dr. Mansee Bhargava believes that the real success of these isolated projects would lie in facilitating community leadership, curbing a loss of identity in the face of modernization, and in putting an end to the alarming rates of out-migration amongst locals at a larger, ecosystem level. She adds, "If they [the locals] can be provided livelihoods where they reside and other people can also come and experience and understand the lifestyle of indigenous communities, it would be a win-win... If we wish to conserve the knowledge commons, we have to walk with the communities"

Dr. Mansee Bal Bhargava,
Environmental Design
Consultants, Ahmedabad
Facilitator

REVERING NATURE AS A WAY OF LIFE FOR SANTHAL COMMUNITY



Biju Tudu
Odisha

The Santhal tribe is known for practices which are deeply connected to nature and surrounding ecosystems. These can be seen in their everyday lifestyles and also in the festivals they celebrate. This is the story of the Kankadahad block in Orissa as well, where Santhals in the 40 villages of the block deeply revere nature. Since generations, they have integrated protection of forests with religious, spiritual, and economic significance. Their cultural programs, including music and dance, are a way of bringing all the people together. One of the key features of the cultural practices followed by the Santhal tribe involve worshipping different aspects of nature. Associating religious importance to parts and processes of nature ascribes to them a different kind of value, discouraging community members to tamper with them. Some of these worship traditions include *Fula Puja*, *Janthal Puja*, and *Muchuri Puja*.

The *Fula puja* is celebrated on the onset of spring when plants have started bearing fruits. Non-timber forest produce or NTFPs can be consumed only after this pooja has been conducted. This is done keeping in mind that trees should not be disturbed during their fruition period so that they can reach their maximum fruition capacity. There are several rules that must be followed during and after this pooja, which mostly involves restrictions on which types of plants can be cut. For example, saal, mahua, and mogra trees are prohibited from felling as they are significant contributors to the livelihood and income of community members. Similarly, the *Janthal* pooja is conducted in the month of June to pray for a good monsoon in the coming season. After the rains have hit the region, the moisture conserved in the soil is also worshiped. In *Muchuri* Pooja, people pray for an improved productivity in both common and agricultural lands. During the pooja they plan for an optimal way of collecting NTFPs.

These practices have been handed down in the community from generation to generation. Unlike other regions where the youth is increasingly getting disconnected from local practices of conserving nature, the youth in this Santhal tribe is active and involved in the same. They believe that worshipping nature has a positive relation with increase in productivity. Thus, they always make sure to take care of the forests which usually involves a carefully planned and sustainable mechanism for collection. Examples of this include systematic collection of fruits, ban on cutting certain trees, and selective collection of certain NTFPs to avoid exploitation in the forest.

The community had claimed for CFR in the past and have now received a title for 214 hectares of land. They have also prepared a forest management plan on how to keep protecting their forest post receiving CFR titles. Their cultural programmes have a union where people discuss forest issues. According to the community members, women have started coming to the forefront in these discussions. The case of the Santhal tribe serves as an insightful example - when the daily activities and lifestyles of humans are not disassociated with nature, protection of the environment does not become a call for action, but a way of life.

Niranjan Sahoo, FES
Facilitator

CULTURE, TRADITIONS, AND GRASSLAND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES OF NANDA-GAOLI PASTORALISTS



Jitne pastoralist communities hain, vo sabhi is tarah se rich hain ki biodiversity conservation mein sabhi aage hain

All pastoralist communities are rich in the sense that they are at the forefront of biodiversity conservation.

Prafulla Kalokar
Maharashtra

Biocultural diversity, representing the intricate connection between people and their natural surroundings, finds a vivid illustration in the cultural practices of the Nand Gaoli community, semi-nomadic pastoralists located in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra—specifically in Wardha, Yevatmal, Bhandara, and Melghat regions. During summers, these community members migrate to areas with better water availability, known for being the custodians of Nagpuri buffalo and Gaolao cattle. Their villages, termed *heti*, strategically exist in buffer zones near forests, grasslands, and water bodies, ensuring ample natural resources for sustenance. Their economic dependency on livestock underscores the critical need for fodder availability to secure their income.

Among the numerous biocultural practices of the Nand-Gaolis, the Bhaldev festival stands out. Celebrated from July to August, coinciding with Lord Krishna's birth or Janmashtami, this 12-day festival suspends all economic activities, including grazing. During this time, milk and dairy products are not sold but instead donated to those without livestock. The festival involves worshipping a tuft of an indigenous grass species called 'Lavhan' for twelve days. On the final day, these grass deities are immersed in flowing water bodies, marking the conclusion of the festival and the resumption of livestock activities.

A closer examination reveals scientific parallels to these practices. Prohibiting grazing during the peak monsoon season allows native grass species to flourish, ensuring fodder security in the following months. When grazing resumes after the festival, it aids in wider dispersal of grasses through dung and droppings, contributing to their growth. The immersion of flowering panicles in water bodies further supports dispersal.

However, recent restrictions on forest entry and usage have hindered the celebration of the Bhaldev festival. Additionally, a decline in the numbers of Nagpuri buffalo and Gaolao cow, restricted from grazing in pastures, led the community to establish a Breeder's Association for conservation. Claiming community forest rights in 10 villages has become essential for unhindered access to forest resources for cultural and economic purposes. While the process of obtaining these titles poses challenges, there is hope that, once secured, they will enable the community to sustain their traditional practices and coexist harmoniously with the surrounding ecosystem.

DISCOVERY OF A FORGOTTEN TEMPLE OF AKKAMAGARU - CASE STUDY OF CHINAKAGARIPALLI OF GANDLAPENTA MANDAL, AP



B Bhaskar Naik
Andhra Pradesh

The community members in Chinakagaripalli village of Gandlapenta Mandal in Andhra Pradesh have been actively managing their common land. This land had suffered from degradation and loss of its biodiversity due to the invasion of Bodha Grass. Bodha grass, a prevalent threat to their pasture/common land, is extremely difficult to remove and being inflammatory in nature causes frequent forest fires.

One day while working on their common land the community stumbled upon an ancient temple. The temple has been collectively maintained by various members of the community and was dedicated to a local deity named 'Akkamagaru'. The grass cover around the temple was sometimes so dense that movement was hindered. The discovery surprised the community and word quickly spread throughout the village. This triggered a revival of a dormant belief system. Gradually, a shift was observed in their culture and rekindled the people's connection to their resources.

A symbiotic relationship exists between biological and cultural diversity. This relationship is crucial for ensuring sustainable human development. The once underutilised common now brought solidarity among the community. Villagers came together and decided to restore the temple and protect the land. Over the next few months, they engaged in safeguarding the common land, trees and plants surrounding the temple.

Sacred spaces serve as tools for managing natural resources through people's participation. The discovery of the temple gave a renewed opportunity for the people to understand the need for the protection of common land, and as a result visible social efforts emerged to protect it. The community established rules and regulations to protect the resource and are in the process of reviving and renovating the temple. Every Friday, villagers worship the deities, perform rituals, and plan an annual "Jaathre" (festival) that addresses conservation efforts.

Despite certain differences, nature is integrated into the moral and ethical code of all religions. These values influence our behavior toward others, including our relationship with creatures and plant life. Today, preserving and maintaining ecological balance poses a significant challenge for the people. Natural resources, especially common lands, are facing immense anthropogenic pressure like lopping for fuelwood and fodder, grazing, illegal timber harvesting and forest fires, etc. Traditional approaches for nature conservation encompass various guidelines for the sustainable resource utilization. These landscapes need proper conservation, management, and protection.

Lalu Prasad, FES
Facilitator

ORAN YATRAS FOR PROTECTING THE LIFELINE OF WESTERN RAJASTHAN



Our life, livelihoods and culture are tied to the Orans. They are also haven for wildlife in this region.

Sumer Singh on behalf of community leaders Rajasthan

In Rajasthan, village commons known as orans play a vital role in the lives of livestock-dependent communities. Orans are community-conserved pastures rich in biodiversity, featuring many religious places and water bodies that are crucial for supporting life. Found in Western Rajasthan, including Bikaner, Barmer, and Jaisalmer, these sacred groves are essential for the region's communities.

Orans serve as lifelines for communities by providing grazing lands for cows, sheep, and goats for centuries. They protect soil and water, acting as reservoirs for the region. Home to endangered species like the great Indian bustard, chinkara, Indian desert fox, and a haven for migratory birds like the Siberian Crane. Orans inspire songs centered around the crane, showcasing their importance in local traditions.

Sumer Singh, along with other community leaders launched the Oran Yatra Campaign from 2016, the Oran Yatra is a campaign aimed at preserving and protecting orans. The community leaders walked long distances, taking their campaign to far and wide. The campaign took to those in power from tehsil officers to the District Collector and even to the Chief Minister. It also reached out to an international audience, highlighting the importance of Orans.

Many orans are not officially registered in land records, posing a challenge to their protection. The need for increased awareness about the importance of orans and the threats they face. Overcoming resistance and ensuring strong support from diverse communities, transcending caste and religious lines. The demand of the Oran Yatra is to bring Orans under community governance and ensure their protection and conservation.

Increased awareness among the public about the ecological and cultural significance of orans. Strong support from a diverse population, including lakhs of people. Elevated pressure on the government to update and maintain land records for orans. Growing participation from various stakeholders, emphasizing the collective responsibility towards Oran conservation.

Orans are crucial not only for the sustenance of wildlife but also for the livelihoods of livestock-dependent communities. The Oran Yatra campaign serves as a beacon of hope, rallying people across caste and religious lines to protect these invaluable natural resources. Continued efforts are essential to ensure the long-term conservation and sustainability of Rajasthan's orans.

**Dimpal, FES
Facilitator**

TEN YEARS OF STRUGGLE FOR FOREST RIGHTS



For us, the jungle is everything; it's like our mother, father, and guardian. We were born in the forest, and we will die there as well.

Devnath Netam
Chhattisgarh

Forest identity holds profound significance for rural communities and Indigenous peoples, as the forest serves as the epicenter of their social, political, and economic existence. This invaluable ecosystem not only sustains their livelihoods, nutrition, and employment but also contributes to their sense of identity. Unfortunately, India's forests have a history of being regulated, subjugated, and appropriated since the colonial era.

In response to this historical injustice, the Forest Rights Act (FRA) was enacted in December 2006, aiming to rectify the imbalances perpetuated by colonial-era forest laws. Under Section 3(1)(i) of the FRA, traditional forest-dwelling communities are granted legal acknowledgment of their rights, empowering them to “guard, regenerate, conserve, or manage” communal forest resources. The legislation emphasizes the pivotal role these communities play in maintaining forests and preserving biodiversity.

However, while the FRA provides a framework, its effective implementation faces multifaceted challenges. Chargaon, a village in Nagari Tehsil, Dhamtari District, Chhattisgarh, encountered similar hurdles in their pursuit of Community Forest Resource Rights (CFRR). Overcoming these challenges required concerted efforts by the community and the Khoj organization.

In their decade-long struggle, Chargaon villagers, with the support of the community and Khoj, secured claim titles for approximately 2045 hectares of forest land. Recognizing the importance of a strong Gram Sabha in safeguarding their forests and asserting their rights, Chargaon villagers made attendance mandatory, imposing fines for non-compliance. The Gram Sabha became a vital platform for defending their habitat, water supplies, and ecologically sensitive areas.

Mapping the forest using GPS, the community categorized areas for restricted use, grazing, and fuelwood collection. With CFRR in hand, they now have control over their forest, limiting resource extraction to community members. This newfound authority has not only expanded their revenue sources but also enabled sustainable practices, such as setting up a nursery to cultivate native saplings for forest replenishment.

Chargaon's journey underscores the significance of continuous engagement, active participation in the Gram Sabha, and unwavering determination in securing forest rights. Their success stands as a testament to the enduring resilience of communities like Panchgaon, who persistently fought for nearly a decade to reclaim their rights and bring prosperity to their village and community.

Beni Puri, Khoj
Facilitator

URBAN EXPANSION AND FATE OF COMMONS IN DELHI



For years, we have been using the land for various needs. It is our land . We are not against development. But we have a genuine requirement of land for developing our village and improving our well-being. But our request is denied. Is development only for cities?

Amit Yadav
Delhi

Amit Yadav, an organic farmer from Jhuljuli village on the outskirts of Delhi, finds his community grappling with the consequences of urbanization. As Delhi expands, peripheral villages like Jhuljuli are deemed urban villages, falling under the jurisdiction of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA). This shift strips the Gram Sabha of its legitimacy, leading to a loss of communal control over vital resources like pastures, playgrounds, and ponds.

The transformation accelerated when Jhuljuli was declared an urban village. The once vibrant river running through it now trickles as a polluted stream, a casualty of waste dumping upstream in Delhi and Gurugram. Lands allocated to villagers for cultivation in the 1970s have been a community resource, but with the urbanization plan stretching to 2041, these lands under DDA control remain unused.

Despite a doubling population, the village has seen no expansion in residential areas, resulting in heightened population density and congested living conditions. In response, the village, aided by civil organizations, crafted a development plan that balances growth needs with environmental concerns. This plan, requesting a mere 10-20% of revenue land for housing, amenities, and green spaces, awaits DDA approval.

Amit questions the denial of their legitimate request, emphasizing that their plea isn't against development but a plea for essential land to enhance their well-being. The fear looms that further city expansion will exacerbate congestion, rendering many unable to afford the high-rise apartments proposed by the DDA. The plight of landless villagers, dependent on common lands, adds urgency to the community's call for equitable development, prompting Amit to raise a poignant query: "Is development only for cities, leaving villages marginalized and struggling?"

Paras Tyagi

NAVIGATING THE RIGHTS TO UNCHARTED COASTAL COMMONS



We explained (to our communities) about existing issues and the kinds of issues we could face in the future – some people supported us and some did not... about CRZ...the rules and regulations... we explained everything...We kept the struggle alive and even if we did not see the desired outcomes, there has been some impact – people came to know about the commons, about CRZ regulations, and not just in my village but also in nearby villages...there is a general awareness now.

Magata Behera
President, Village
Committee
 Odisha

Biswa Swaroop Das
Dakshin Foundation
 Facilitator

The story of Gauri, Magata and Surendra Behera and the Purunabandha fisher folk community's ongoing struggle to preserve their commons is a testament to the power of collective action. It proves that an effective collaboration between persistent communities and civil society actors can go a long way in sustaining a rights-based movement.

Purunabandha is a serene village lying on the coast where the river Rushikulya gracefully met the vast expanse of the sea. For ages, the villagers have found their lives to be anchored by the river and fishing to be the backbone of their livelihoods. On common spaces along the beach, they developed a communal way of life surrounding fishing and related occupations, by using the space to dry their catch, set up local markets and store their boats and nets. However, the tranquillity of the coastal village was disrupted when the Notified Area Council (NAC), an urban body, decided to construct a liquid septic treatment plant near the village. The villagers were not consulted and due procedures, including initiation of discussions in pallisabha meetings, were forsaken. Overnight, the lands they had cherished and held customary rights to were taken away without their consent.

The villagers, led by Gauri Behera, Magata Behera (President of the Village Committee), and Surendra Behera (Vice-President of the Village Committee), realized they could not let this injustice pass without resistance.

In 2018, the villagers participated in a project led by the NGO, Dakshin Foundation. The project aimed to create participatory maps of common lands, enabling the villagers to have a stronger claim to their coastal commons. These maps were integrated with the Odisha State Coastal Zone Management Plan, providing evidence that the lands intended for the construction of the septage treatment plant were, in fact, their commons.

Armed with the map and the knowledge of Coastal Regulation Zones (CRZ) rules, the villagers confronted the NAC, arguing that the proposed activities on their commons were not in compliance. They also staged a protest with the District Collector, demanding justice and recognition of their rights. As a result of their determined efforts, the construction of the treatment plant was momentarily put on hold.

However, this victory was short-lived. The construction resumed abruptly and without transparency during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Undeterred by this setback, Gauri, Magata, and Surendra refused to surrender their fight. They understood the importance of their commons and their impact on not just their village but surrounding communities too. Their struggle continued, fueled by the hope that their story would inspire others to take action.

Collaborating with civil society groups and other like-minded individuals, they dedicated themselves to raising awareness about the rights held over coastal commons. They sought to inform people about the encroachment threatening these invaluable spaces and inspire them to join the cause.

Their journey is not yet over, as they embrace the challenges ahead, determined to protect the coastal commons not just for their village but for future generations.

VANISHING SHORES: UNRAVELLING THE IMPACT OF COASTAL EROSION ON VILLAGE COMMONS



Today our coastal commons have almost vanished, and so has the ground beneath our feet.

Ch. Pratima from Podampetta and A. Sravani and K. Nagamma from Arjyapalli Odisha

The story of Podampetta and Arjyapalli villages serves as a poignant reminder of the fragility of coastal communities and the immense challenges they face today. It is a call to action, urging recognition of the importance of protecting coastal commons, preserving cultural identities, and ensuring the resilience of these communities in the face of environmental adversity fuelled by climate change and unregulated use of resources.

Podampetta and Arjyapalli, located along the Ganjam district coastline in Odisha, were once illustrative of thriving coastal commons supporting an entire community's way of life. These spaces served as storage areas for boats and nets, pathways leading into the vast sea, places for drying fish, and even transformed into bustling local markets. In the community, women fishers took on the responsibility of gathering firewood from the nearby casuarina forests. These forests not only provided them with essential resources but also held great significance for their cultural identity. Today, however, in the aftermath of severe coastal erosion in Odisha, these commons have all but vanished, despite the efforts of the Gaan Parichalana Committee, a village institution, which worked diligently to try to conserve and manage these precious forests.

Coastal erosion, an ever-looming threat, now jeopardizes the very existence of fisher folk communities. Sand dunes, open beaches, and the once lush casuarina forests around these villages now lie submerged beneath the relentless sea. Podampetta, once a thriving village teeming with over a thousand inhabitants, is now an abandoned settlement. Imminent dispersion also tore apart a once close-knit community. Many families were forced to relocate to other areas, while others remained steadfast, clinging to the rapidly eroding shorelines with a glimmer of hope. In this precarious situation, many fishers are now compelled to store their boats and nets on private land for the first time in their lives. Unfortunately, this means they must bear the burden of paying rent, even if it is only a symbolic amount. Women fishers, robbed of their space to dry fish, now travel to far-off places in search of meagre incomes to ensure their survival.

Once upon a time, the coastal commons gave the local communities an identity, livelihood and shielded them from the impact of natural disasters like cyclones. However, that era seems to have come to an abrupt end with the ravaging of existing coastlines and coastal erosion limiting the scope of persisting with a traditional lifestyle, causing coastal communities to flee and find a new identity, profession and spaces to rebuild their homes and community ties all over again.

Biswa Swaroop Das
Dakshin Foundation
 Facilitator

A TESTAMENT OF RESILIENCE AND COMMUNITY ACTION: THE STRUGGLE TO RETAIN NIMBOL'S PASTURES



Public Land Protection Cells (PLPCs) can play a crucial role in helping Panchayats to prevent encroachment of common lands. However there is not much awareness on the functions and powers of PLPCs.

Ashok Kumar Solanki
Sarpanch, Nimboli
Rajasthan

Nimbol, a serene village nestled along the banks of the Luni River, once thrived on a harmonious blend of agriculture and livestock, centered around its 78 hectares of precious pastureland. However, the tranquility was shattered when the discovery of rich limestone and clay deposits in the pastures attracted the attention of industrial giants. Newco Cement Plant, established in the late 2010s, encroached upon Nimbol's vital commons by constructing a cement road without community consultation.

The repercussions of this intrusion were devastating. The ill-placed road disrupted the natural flow of rainwater, causing widespread flooding that submerged and destroyed the once-productive fields of the villagers. In response to this crisis, the Nimbol Charagah Vikas Samiti, formed in July 2019, emerged as a beacon of collective resistance against private interests, seeking to restore ecological balance.

When the villagers, united by a shared sense of loss, petitioned the tehsildar to remove the encroachment, initial success seemed within reach. However, the tables turned when the cement factory retaliated with a legal case against the petitioners and the village Sarpanch, leading to a bureaucratic quagmire that thwarted previous orders.

Undeterred, the community rallied once more, filing a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) that elevated the issue to the High Court. The court, in turn, directed the Public Land Protection Cell to investigate further. Public awareness surged as the villagers' plight gained attention, even reaching the legislative proceedings of the Vidhan Sabha.

A letter from the Vidhan Sabha to the District Collector marked a pivotal moment, prompting renewed tehsildar orders to address illegal encroachment. Despite these efforts, bureaucratic hurdles persist, leaving the encroachment untouched, farmlands flooded, and tehsildar orders unimplemented.

As the future of Nimbol hangs in the balance, the question remains: Can the resilient community reclaim its pasturelands and mend the wounds inflicted on their village? The tale of Nimbol unfolds in the uncertain hands of time, testing the limits of unity and resilience against the formidable challenges that threaten their way of life.

Ganpat Lal, FES
Facilitator

STRUGGLE TO SECURE THE COMMON LANDS



Reviving the commons lands improved people's lives in my community. Our efforts will go on!

Kumarappa Naidu
Andhra Pradesh

This is the story of Mr Kumarappa Naidu, a resident of Chennappagaripalle Village, Thamballapalle Mandal, Annamaya District, Andhra Pradesh. He has been a farmer and village institution leader since the early 1990's showing a keen interest in development of common land and active participation in environmental programmes. Mr. Naidu also serves as a board member for NTGCF and he is a key leader in his community.

Since 1992, the government has initiated the development of barren lands surrounding villages, which are vital natural resources for the local community. These lands are useful for agriculture, water resources, livestock, and environmental benefits in the future. Funds are sourced from both government and non-government organizations. Keeping this in mind, each village Institution has been leased Revenue wasteland by the government which for 20 years was not being used for agriculture. During this period of 20 years, the village institutions took ownership of these barren lands and undertook various soil conservation, water harvesting programs and greening programs, transforming the once-barren hills into lush forests. Consequently, the biodiversity of these developed wastelands, hillocks, and hills saw a substantial increase.

The village Institutions observed these remarkable transformations and discussed them in meetings. It became clear to everyone that the lease period granted to them by the government is only for 20 years. This raised concerns about the future status of the lands. To address this issue, each village Institution passed a resolution and submitted an application form to the local tehsildar, the sub collector and the district collector requesting to extend the lease period from 20 years to 50 years. The application gave a detailed account about the development programs carried out on the village common lands.

These applications were submitted four times before the expiry of 20 years lease period. During this process the village institutions came to know about the "Prohibition Order Book". Upon learning about it, all village Institutions together submitted new applications, proposing the extension of lease term from 20 years to 99 years or inclusion of the hillocks in the "Prohibition Order Book" or the "Prohibition Order List". Along with these applications, they also submitted Common Land Mapping (CLM) reports. In addition to this, GOs were also received from the state level to the district collectors and from the district collectors to the tehsildars to take care of this matter. After receiving these messages, the tehsildars told the lower level officials to respond to the officials and start the process after spending time in the tehsildar's office.

VRO, Surveyor and Revenue Inspector held meetings with the villagers and examined the lands based on the survey numbers mentioned in the applications. They confirmed that all the lands are indeed developed as mentioned in the applications and were classified as government barren lands. Once this confirmation was made to the Tehsildar relevant documents were given to the village institutions. In total, 2402.53 acres of land across four gram panchayats were included in the POB as part of these efforts. The village institutions are committed to continue their endeavors to include all common lands in this important book.

Ramesh Babu Bethi, FES
Facilitator

COLLECTIVE ACTION AGAINST MINING: A CASE FROM ANDHRA PRADESH



Mining is the biggest threat to common lands in our region.

**Veeresh Babu
Burandoddi
Andhra Pradesh**

In the quaint village of Puppaladoddi, nestled within the serene landscape of Aspari Mandal in the Kurnool District, a tale of struggle and resilience unfolded. With 166 households and a population of 486, the majority of its inhabitants belonged to the Backward community. Life in this idyllic village took an unfortunate turn when a mine owner seized a nearby hillock for granite extraction, leasing it for his own gain.

The hillock, home to the revered Anjaneya Swamy and Peddamma Avva temples, stood as a symbol of spiritual solace and community unity. However, the mine owner's relentless blasting of the granite with dynamites to extract slabs had devastating consequences. The walls of these cherished temples cracked under the pressure, leaving the villagers deeply distressed and determined to protect their sacred heritage.

With hopes of finding justice, the village residents rallied together and appealed to the Tahsildar of Aspari Mandal, beseeching him to intervene and halt the destructive mining activity. Sadly, their pleas fell on deaf ears as the Tahsildar succumbed to the pressure exerted by the influential mine owner, leaving the villagers disheartened.

But just as despair threatened to consume them, a ray of hope emerged in the form of the Andhra Pradesh Academy of Rural Development (APARD) team. This dedicated group conducted an awareness meeting on the importance of commons and established the Village Common Land Protection and Restoration Committee (UVAS) in Puppaladoddi. The committee members worked diligently, mapping a total of 72.55 acres, which included the leased mining area.

Buoyed by their collective efforts, the UVAS committee members wasted no time in presenting a representation to the District Collector of Kurnool, earnestly pleading for the cessation of mining activities in their village. Recognizing the urgency of the matter, the District Collector swiftly issued orders to the Mines and Geology Department, instructing them to halt the destructive operations in Puppaladoddi.

The triumph of the villagers did not end there. Emboldened by their victory, the UVAS committee members approached both the Tahsildar and the District Collector of Kurnool, imploring them to record the details of the common lands in the Pahani (Record of Rights). Their request was heeded, and the Tahsildar dutifully entered 44.63 acres of the mapped area into the Pahani.

This act proved to be a turning point in safeguarding the village from further encroachment by vested interests. The indiscriminate allotment of land was curtailed, preserving the commons for the benefit of the entire community. Puppaladoddi's journey from despair to triumph stands as a testament to the power of unity, resilience, and unwavering determination in the face of adversity.

**S. Habeeb Basha, APARD
Facilitator**

FROM REGENERATING THE FOREST TO NAVIGATING THE LOSS OF COMMONS: A STORY OF AMDARI VILLAGE IN MANDLA



Our efforts will continue to grow back our forests for our children!

Shankar Singh
Madhya Pradesh

“When I was 15, my village was surrounded by a lush green forest,” recalls Shankar Singh. People began cutting down trees to sell wood in Niwas market. But indiscriminate tree cutting led to depletion of forest reaching a point where only rocks remained in the place of the once-thriving forest. Villagers, particularly females, faced numerous problems as primary responsibility of resource collection is on them. Condition became so bad that villagers couldn’t even find Datun (wooden brushes) for mouth cleaning. In response, village folks called for a village meeting and it was decided that a committee should be formed to protect the forest.

They initiated the planting and protection of local plant species. As the tree grew, the committee decided that each household would guard the forest on a rotational basis. Individuals who guard the forest have to pass on the responsibility to others on the next day. Through community monitoring, forest rejuvenated once again and lush greenery returned to the village. Villagers were really happy and continued conserving forest for its resources and ecosystem benefits it provided. They started getting non-timber forest products (NTFP) like Char, Chironji, Mahua, Hirda, Behda, Tendu leaves in abundance. There was enough fodder for cattles and village folks were collecting dry fuelwood for household consumption. Even the specific day for dry fuelwood collection was collectively decided by the entire village.

Shankar Singh recalls that through FES they constructed stone bunds to stop soil erosion and invasive species like Lantana were also removed from the forest. But as the trees grew, the Forest department captured the forest, erecting stones and declaring the forest as their property. Only a small patch was left for the villagers. Villagers initially resisted but begrudgingly they accepted one patch for Nistar. In the past year, the Forest Department planted some species in that patch and fenced it off with metal barriers, denying villagers access. Villagers resisted this move of the forest department but the department was adamant about their claims. Villagers now have to sneak through the metal fences and bring things for their subsistence use. They have to pay a fine if caught by the forest officials.

Villagers discussed these issues in the village and gave letters to block and district officials but nothing was constructively done by the department. Frustrated with this they are thinking of getting their rights through Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) act. PESA rules were notified this year in Madhya Pradesh and they are hoping that they will be able to get their rights on the forest land.

Thus the collective efforts of villages for 10 years led to regeneration of forest over the degraded forest land. However, following the restoration forest department demarcated the revenue common as forest and restricted their access to it.

Alok Vishnoi, FES
Facilitator

STRUGGLES FOR SECURING COMMONS IN THE HARSH DESERT LANDSCAPE OF JODHPUR



In the heart of adversity, our unity became the catalyst for change. We refused to trade our principles for jobs and stood firm against environmental degradation. The struggle for safe drinking water is why people still listen, and our work endures as a testament to the power of collective action.

Sundar Bai
Rajasthan

Hailing from the arid desert village of Khardi in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, Sundar Bai emerged as a formidable leader and the Sarpanch of her community. Her resolute determination and leadership came to the forefront when she confronted a major crisis—pollution of the village pond due to mining activities in the surrounding areas, which involved the use of explosives and resulted in toxins seeping into the water supply.

In the face of adversity, Sundar Bai mobilized her community, particularly forming a powerful women's collective. Going door to door, she raised awareness about the dire consequences of mining residues flowing into the pond, turning its waters a toxic red. The pollution not only affected the health of animals and birds but also posed a threat to the quality of drinking water for the entire village.

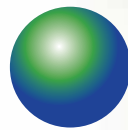
Amidst these challenges, Sundar Bai's leadership became a catalyst for change. Around 200 community members joined forces against mining, standing united against the environmental degradation affecting their lives. When the mining company attempted to quell the resistance by offering jobs, the women steadfastly refused, maintaining their commitment to safeguarding their community's well-being.

Under Sundar Bai's astute leadership, the restoration of common lands became a pivotal focus. Mapping these lands and strategically building assets on them through MGNREGS, she sought to address the larger issue of sustainable resource management.

Her unwavering dedication to securing the right to safe drinking water propelled Sundar Bai to navigate the complexities of challenging the mining company and its contractors. Through persistent pressure and collective action, she successfully brought an end to the detrimental mining activities that were endangering both the environment and the well-being of her community.

Sundar Bai's legacy extends beyond her tenure as Sarpanch, as her community continues to listen to her counsel, and the initiatives she spearheaded for water conservation and common land restoration persist. Her inspiring journey underscores the transformative power of grassroots leadership in addressing critical environmental and social challenges.

Mohan Ram, Unnati
Facilitator



FES

FOUNDATION FOR ECOLOGICAL SECURITY
On behalf of the Coalition of Partners, as part of the
Promise of Commons initiative