

MODULE 1
DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT PERSPECTIVES

readings

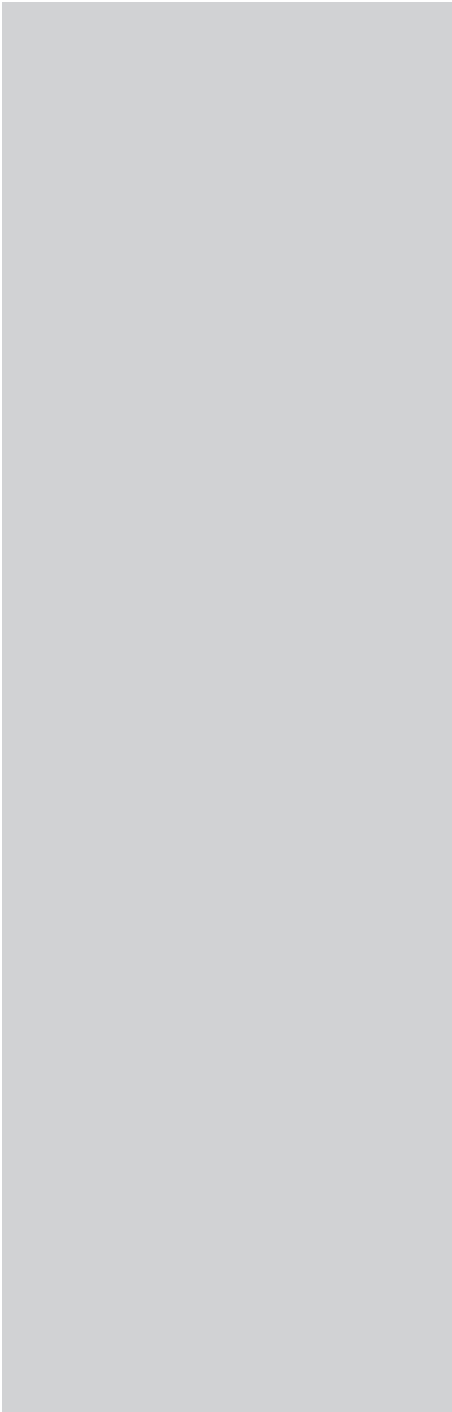
CHALLENGE OF THE BALANCE

Understanding Environmental Management In India

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Centre for Science and Environment



Module 1

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Villages in the country are highly integrated 'agrosylvopastoral' systems. Each Indian village has its own cropland, grazing lands and tree or forest lands and each of these systems interact with each other. What happens in one component invariably impacts on the others. Trees or forests provide firewood. This helps villagers to avoid burning cowdung, which in turn helps to maintain the productivity of the croplands where this dung is applied as manure. Also, trees and crops help to complement the grasslands in the supply of fodder for domestic animals. A typical village has an intricate mix of land-use options that allow fodder to be collected each month.

The village of Sukhomajri has been widely hailed for its pioneering efforts in micro-watershed development. Its inhabitants have protected the degraded forest that lies within and around the catchment of its minor irrigation tanks. The tanks were built with Mishra's help in the late 1970s and early 1980s and cost a total of a couple of lakhs of rupees. The tanks helped to increase crop production by nearly three times and the protection of the forest lands by the villagers has greatly increased grass and fodder availability. This, in turn, has increased milk production. The combined result is that, in just about five years, between 1979 and 1984, annual household incomes increased by at least Rs 5,000 per annum — a stupendous achievement by any standard. And all of this development has been obtained through the improvement of the village natural resource base, and self-reliance

The lesson of Seed is not the trees it has planted or protected but in its very system of being. Most environmentalists and government officials tend to see answers in grasses, trees, watershed management, smokeless chulhas or biogas plants. The government has countless plans and programmes to bring these about. But most remain on paper. Community participation is today a slogan for the government. But it is dead in its content and distorted in intent. For what it really means is that the government will plan and the people will participate through their cheap labour. Seed shows a totally different way

traditional systems are extremely important even in this so-called world of modern science and technology. Their ecological rationality remains valid even in the modern context. Wherever modern technology has been introduced, without testing it out for its ecological rationality, societies have suffered. Because productivity is important in a world where both population and human demands are growing, modern science and technology is also needed. But it must build upon traditional systems keeping intact their ecological rationality. This is the challenge modern science faces

For P R Mishra, these are not 'ordinary people' in the parlance of the educated Indian, the language of the media, the big newspapers and what not. For him, they are the power and spirit of India. For Mishra, his project is not a project, it is a school, and its beneficiaries are students. Indeed, Mishra has turned the entire nation into students. He has shown, more than absolutely anybody else, that the nation has yet to learn what the nation's environment can yield and how that yield can be harnessed through people's control over their environment

In Mendha, yet another struggle took place over the forests, which resulted in villagers taking total control of their forests and demarcating village boundaries, almost as sacred as national or state boundaries. The fight this time was over the traditional nistar or rights over the forests, as conceded by the state. Over the years, these rights have progressively been curtailed, some in the name of development and some for environmental purposes

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MODULE

The environment-development connection

The following sets of readings will familiarise you with the manner in which the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) has approached the environment/development problematic in India.

Whereas “the environment” was an issue much publicised in the mainstream media, argued CSE founder-director Anil Agarwal in an 1985 essay called Politics of Environment, and government too had begun to undertake policy initiatives and massive programmes, “There is a major problem with this entire range of concerns and activities: it does not appear to be based on a holistic understanding of the relationship between the environment and the development process in the country”. The programmes were ad-hoc, without clear priorities and “there is too much of a policeman’s attitude”. Indeed, there was “little effort” on the part of government “to modify the development process itself in a manner that will bring it into greater harmony with the needs of the people and with the need to maintain ecological balance, while increasing the productivity of our land, water and forest resources.”

How should the environment be used? Who uses it? Who benefits from it? Any understanding of the environment-development connection in India, CSE has argued, must posit clear answers to these questions. Thus, any such understanding must look closely at the relationship between people and the environment, a relationship born out of a concern for a more equitable and sustainable use of the environment.

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Yet in 1990, Sukhomajri, now the happy village, became the first village in India to be charged income tax for the benefits it was getting from its regenerated environment — grass, wood and water. It all happened because the village again became a village republic, with its own boundaryman, superintendent of tanks and what not

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Independent India's leaders did not change anything and, as a result, about one-third of India's land is still controlled by the bureaucracy — about one thousand district magistrates and district forest officers. Every Indian village today has a boundary on a revenue map but in many cases more than half the land within a village boundary can belong to an uninterested officialdom. This is like running a corporation half of whose capital — natural capital, in the case of a village — is owned by a distant outsider who has no interest in the use of the capital but will also not allow its users any control over it either

SET 1: MEET THE PEOPLE, INDIA'S REAL RESOURCE MANAGERS

A set of readings that introduce you to this conceptual terrain, properly peppered with examples

Reading 1: Holistic community, fragmented apparatus

"A village, geographically considered, is a tract of country comprising some hundred or thousand acres ..., politically viewed it resembles a corporation or township." Each village had a full complement of officers and civil servants, "including one boundaryman, who preserves the limits of the village, or gives evidence respecting them, in cases of disputes. The superintendent of tanks and watercourses distributes the water for the purposes of agriculture. ... Under this simple form of municipal government, the inhabitants of the country have lived from time immemorial. The boundaries of the villages have been but seldom altered; and though the villages themselves have been sometimes injured and even desolated by war, famine or disease, the same name, the same limits, the same interests... have continued for ages. The inhabitants gave themselves no trouble about the breaking up and divisions of kingdoms...".

This is how an official House of Commons report published in 1812 described an Indian village and its administration. It could also have added that the wealth generated by such villages was so enormous that it made India one of the richest and most urbanised countries in the world and attracted Europeans like flies from all over. But why quote this passage nearly 180 years later?

Because the message contained in this paragraph may be extremely relevant for managing India's extraordinary natural resource base in the 21st century. In the last 180 years, the corporate Indian village, as described in this report, has disappeared. The British nationalised all those lands in the country that were not being cultivated. Those lands which were used for grazing went to the revenue department and those lands which had forests on it went to the forest department.

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Near Chandigarh, amidst the degraded and denuded Shivalik Hills, was a village called Sukhomajri — the dry village. When soil conservationist P R Mishra first walked into it, in the mid-1970s, investigating the enormous silt load coming into the Sukhna lake and choking Chandigarh's water supply, he saw only naked hills and naked people. Hills were crumbling. The soil was bare. Goats were plenty. And houses had nothing but poverty and famished people.

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In Sukhomajri, the main reason why the villagers protect their watershed is because they have an assurance from the forest department that they have the right to the usufruct of the land. After long and protracted negotiations with the state forest department, the villagers were able to get this agreement. Earlier the forest department would auction the grass in the degraded watershed to a contractor who in turn would charge the villagers high rates for the right to harvest the grass. The villagers argued that since they were protecting the watershed, they should get the benefits from the increased biomass production and not the contractor. The state forest department then agreed to give the grass rights to the village society as long as the villagers paid the forest department a royalty equivalent to the average income earned by the forest department before the villagers started protecting the watershed.

The villagers pay their village society, called the Hill Resources Management Society (HRMS), a nominal amount to cut grass in the watershed. A part of this is used to pay the forest department and a part is used to generate community resources for the village. With protection, grass production has increased manifold in the watershed. If the forest department's assurance, however tenuous, was not available, the entire Sukhomajri experiment would have collapsed overnight.

A crucial role in this entire exercise was played by a village-level institution that was specifically created in Sukhomajri for the purpose of watershed protection. HRMS, as this institution is called, consists of one member from each household in the village. It provides a forum for the villagers to discuss their problems, manage the local environment and ensure discipline amongst its members. The society makes sure that no household grazes its animals in the watershed and in return it has created a framework for a fair distribution of the resources so generated — namely, water, wood and grass — amongst all households in the village. Today, the entire catchment of the tank is green and the village is prosperous and capable of withstanding even serious droughts. The society now earns so much money that under the country's tax laws it has become taxable. The money can be further used by the village to increase the productivity of its common forest and grazing lands and water systems. The commons will support the economic growth of the village's inhabitants through the supply of food, fuel and fodder, artisanal raw materials, wood and monetary resources for development.

If the villagers save some of this income, they can continue to invest back in the improvement of their natural resource base. In this way, we will see taking place what Mishra calls cyclical development — improvement of common environmental resources, improving, in turn, the productivity of village resources and villagers investing in the improvement of common resources.

Since the improvement of common resources provides, in the case of Sukhomajri, water for irrigation and grass, which increase the productivity of privately-held resources like croplands and livestock, there is now a vested interest in the villagers to protect and manage their commons. The fabled boundaryman helps by keeping out any outsider who wants to graze for free. And villagers inside must follow disciplined use of natural resources. In other words, Sukhomajri has put an end to all free riders — from governmental ones to private ones.

But Sukhomajri has also taught us one other thing — the holistic nature of 'village ecosystems' which sectoral and fragmented bureaucracies

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cannot deal with. Sukhomajri teaches us that the starting point for environmental regeneration, in many cases, should be water and not trees. Once a small water-harvesting system has been built and an equitable system has been developed to share the water, the village community will immediately see the benefits of protecting the catchment of its water system through controlled grazing and planting trees and grasses. Slowly one thing will lead to another and the village community will start managing its entire village ecosystem.

But how does it go with our government? Those interested in trees are not interested in water and those interested in water do not know anything about trees. Let us start with the villagers themselves, the people of this country. Big landlords or waterlords of any kind are bad.

[First published as an article in the column *Green Politics* in a New Delhi-based daily *The Economic Times*, March 3, 1991]

Reading 2: Seed of Plenty: India's first Village Republic

Norway is a country equal, in terms of population, to half of Delhi — about four million. Excluding Oslo, which has about half a million people, the country's remaining population is distributed over about 20 counties and 400 municipalities. Therefore, the lowest system of effective governance in Norway, which also includes a high order of self-governance, covers just about 9,000 people.

In India, the lowest system of effective governance is the district — about 450 of them — which gives well over 150,000 people per lowest unit of governance. And even at that mega level, there is hardly any self-governance. Not surprisingly, India is in a mess, especially its environment. But conditions can be different.

Unknown to all powers that be in Delhi or Jaipur, or even to most voluntary agencies who love to boast about their own projects, Seed, a poor, small tribal village, tucked away in the deforested Aravallis, is making environmental and legal history. Seed is a unique, legally sanctified, village republic where the village community has legal powers to plan for its natural resources, to implement its policies and to judge, penalise and prosecute. The village has a self-imposed land-use plan, the likes of which can hardly be found in any other village of India, which determines when and how grazing takes place or trees are cut. Offenders are fined and the village over the last 10 years has levied and collected fines worth nearly Rs 5,000 — an enormous sum for a poor tribal village — for cutting trees, grazing in prohibited areas and even for plucking leaves. The village was even about to prosecute a local forest officer but relented when he publicly apologised. The environmental result is dramatic. Areas demarcated as protected are green and afforested. Travelling through the barren moonscape of the Aravallis, Seed stands out like a green oasis.

The lesson of Seed is not the trees it has planted or protected but in its very system of being. Most environmentalists and government officials tend to see answers in grasses, trees, watershed management, smokeless *chulhas* or biogas plants. The government has countless plans and programmes to bring these about. But most remain on paper. Community participation is today a slogan for the government. But it is dead in its content and distorted in intent. For what it really means is that the government will plan and the people will participate through their cheap labour. Seed shows a totally different way.

The village, located near Udaipur, is registered under the unique Rajasthan Gramdan Act of 1971, possibly the most radical action ever inspired by Vinoba Bhave. The act gives executive and legal powers to the *gram sabha* (or village assembly) which consists of the village's entire adult population. The act does not provide for any elected village council (*gram panchayat*). So what we see in Seed is not representative democracy at work but participatory democracy. The *gram sabha* has full control over the common lands within the village boundary including those lands which were earlier with the forest and revenue departments.

The village commons have been divided by the *gram sabha* into two categories — one on which both grazing and leaf collection is banned and the second on which grazing is permitted but cutting trees, or even leaves, is strictly prohibited. The protected area is green, even during droughts. During the crippling drought of 1987, the village was able to harvest 80 bullock-cartloads of grass from this patch, worth a fortune at that time, which was distributed to the families equally. The *gram sabha* does not allow even trees on private lands to be cut without its permission, which it gives only after assessing the needs of the family.

Enforcement is possible only because the village assembly has legal powers to fine and penalise. This legal control is vital for village-based land-use planning. Today, a third of the land in India on which grasses and trees can grow is under government control. And almost half of this land is degraded. Under existing land laws, if villagers were to plant trees on degraded revenue or forest lands, they could be jailed. Strange for a country that talks about massive afforestation programmes.

Government officials normally nod their heads in agreement but, in the absence of good political leadership, invariably add, “But people are not ready for such ideas. Village institutions are corrupt and greedy and the poor are incapable.” Can we not change this colonial mindset?

In Seed, the system of village governance is that the entire village collective takes decisions. This village of about a hundred households elects a *karyapalica* (the executive) as well as an *adhyaksh* (chairperson). The executive committee consists of representatives of all sections of the community, including women. The *karyapalica* cannot undertake any work without the decision of the *gram sabha*. To streamline work, Seed has formed six committees — for crop loans, forest and nursery development, water resources development, legal problems, a *vikas samiti* (development committee) to oversee development programmes, and a *kosh samiti* for finances. But the bank account is in the name of the *gram sabha*.

Seed’s villagers do not even have to face the terror of the petty *patwari*, the officer in charge of land records. The villagers keep the land records and changes are made with the permission of the *gram sabha*. Given that over 75 per cent of Indian villages have less than 200 households, is it not possible to expect adults in other villages to discuss and solve their problems?

Rameshwar Prasad, who has spent a lifetime of dedication in Seed, has a telling story. When Bhave first came to the area in the 1950s, he told him that Indian villages have food self-reliance but it was necessary to move towards self-reliance in other aspects of life. (Bhave was, along with Jayaprakash Narayan, among the most pre-eminent Gandhians in independent India. He initiated both the bhoodan movement (exhorting landowners to give some of their lands to the landless) and the gramdan movement, through which the general assembly of a village was to be given control of the common land belonging to the village.) Nearly 30 years later, Prasad finds that even food entitlement has gone. Worse, even the wherewithal to grow food — water in the wells, for instance — has gone. With the Aravallis now a totally barren range of hills, Seed has never seen such a shortage of water and such an acute scarcity of fodder. This is not an isolated case. No government is capable of dealing with such crises. It can at best help the people to cope.

Seed clearly shows the government must be just an enabler. But substantively the villagers must decide, choose and manage.

[First published as an article in the column *Green Politics* in a New Delhi-based daily *The Economic Times*, March 10, 1991]

Reading 3: India’s cultural diversity is an outcome of ecological diversity

Every Indian schoolchild is taught about the unity in India’s diverse cultures. But few are taught why we have such diverse cultures. Cultural diversity is not an historical accident. It is the direct outcome of the country’s extraordinary biological diversity. Until the global ‘multinational

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Traditional land-use and occupational structures have invariably been locale-specific and also invariably ecologically sound. Today, however, all these systems are either being negated or directly destroyed by modern development programmes, often in the name of scientific progress. Modern science is usually logical and rational but its application has become the 'new superstition' — 'it has to be applied' is the refrain and it is done without much thought about its social and ecological context. Traditional knowledge is vital because of its ecological rationality — its inspiration being the sustainable use of the ecosystem in which it has developed

culture' fuelled by the Industrial Revolution hit the world, each culture — in India, as much as in the rest of the world — was the result of the people trying to survive within their immediate environment and indeed of an attempt to optimise the resources of their environment.

The people of Rajasthan developed nomadism and animal care-based occupations because the land was fragile and could not be used intensively. The people of Mizoram and Nagaland developed shifting cultivation as their system of survival entirely because they had to live on slopes and this was the best way to maintain the fertility of the slopes. Lifestyles and production systems like these developed steadily through experimentation and observation over centuries till they became so culturally ingrained that they became almost like genetic knowledge — knowledge that is coded into each one of us and which we practise everyday, but of which we rarely know the basis.

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Indians have traditionally been great water harvesters, possibly the best in the world. All across the country there are numerous traditional technologies to collect and store rainwater. But probably the most fascinating traditional water-harvesting system is that of Jodhpur, a city in the dry Thar desert. During the 1980s, the city repeatedly faced acute water shortages. How then did it ensure water for their citizens when there were no pipelines, tankers, tubewells and power stations? Drought was definitely not an unusual phenomenon in the desert even then. And there is no recorded instance in history when these cities had to be depopulated because of lack of water.

What we have discovered is that Jodhpur once had an astounding system of water harvesting but which has been mercilessly destroyed over the years. The city is situated at the edge of a rocky plateau, which constituted the main catchment for its water supply. Long canals were built, running over kilometres, all along the catchment area, which transported rainwater to the city where it was stored in numerous tanks. The most important tanks in the city are Ranisar and Padamsar built by Maharani Jodha in 1500.

Since both Ranisar and Padamsar are situated at a high elevation, the seepage from these tanks was further collected through an extensive system of wells and step wells in the city, thus ensuring that both surface water and groundwater were fully utilised. Each locality in the city had its own well or *bawdi* (step well). The *bawdis* often had steps going down three to four storeys underground so that people could collect the water. At the start of the century, the city of Jodhpur had nearly 200 water sources — about 50 tanks, 50 step wells and 70 wells. Inside houses, people used to collect the rainwater from rooftops in underground tanks called '*tankas*'. Rainwater from roofs was carefully channelled into them. Now there is little left of these tanks.

The catchment of the tanks has been destroyed and turned into quarries for the famous Jodhpur stone. Out of the 14,000 hectares (ha) of catchment area, about 11,000 ha is occupied by quarries. After the rains, the quarries trap water and prevent it from reaching the canals. The extensive network of canals has also been neglected and destroyed. As a result of all this, there has been no overflow from Ranisar to Padamsar in the last seven years. Balsamand Lake, the city's second largest lake, has gone dry twice in the last four years. Baiji ka Talab, a massive tank in the heart of the city, is today a dumping ground for rubbish and a playfield for children. The Fatehsagar and Gulabsagar tanks have become

cesspools of stagnant water. Even more depressing is the condition of the underground step wells. These beautiful structures have become refuse dumps. Not surprisingly, the city has acute water problems. This is not only true for Jodhpur. In almost all desert towns, traditional water systems are in a state of disrepair and mismanagement. As modernisation brought people piped water supply, they began to neglect their traditional systems and depend on the government.

The modern potential of these systems is enormous in the water-starved towns and village of Rajasthan. Most areas of the Thar desert get an average annual rainfall of over 100 mm. But even if it is assumed that all of the Thar desert receives an average rainfall of 100 mm, this means that every ha of land receives at least one million litres of water per year — enough to get water for 110 persons a year at the rate of 25 litres per day. Since land is hardly scarce in western Rajasthan, there is no village in the Thar desert which cannot meet its drinking water needs.

In fact, journalist Om Thanvi found during the drought of 1987 that villages close to the Pakistan border, which had not yet benefited from government water schemes, had some water to drink as they still had their traditional systems intact. The 'developed' villages, however, were thirsty. Their tubewells had either no water or no electricity to pump it. And the villages were waiting for government tankers.

The cold desert of Ladakh has an equally fascinating and ingenious system of water harvesting. Ladakh, located at the edge of the trans-Himalayan Tibetan plateau at a mean elevation of 12,000 feet, is cold and dry. Most areas of the Thar desert get more precipitation than Ladakh does. One would have thought that human survival would be impossible in this harsh climate. Instead the region has developed a very rich culture. And, again, largely because the local people have learnt to make optimal use of the resources available to them. Ladakh has abundant sunlight and good soils, but without water it is a vast barren desert. Glaciers are the only source of water. But they melt slowly through the day and water is available mainly in the late evening — too late to cultivate the fields. Also, as the growing period is short, all farmers need irrigation almost at the same time. Given these enormous odds, the Ladakhis have developed an excellent irrigation system. Villagers tap the streams coming down from glaciers with the help of small channels. The water, thus diverted from the streams towards the evening is taken to small tanks locally known as *zings*. The stored glacier water is then used next day in the fields. Each village has a vast network of canals and *zings*. To ensure equity in the distribution of the scarce water, the villagers elect a village water official known as the *churpun* at the start of each agricultural season. The *churpun* ensures that each farmer gets adequate water so that even the last field in the village is irrigated.

Nagaland has another amazing system. Scientists, technocrats and politicians have all agreed that shifting cultivation (or *jhum*) practised by the farmers of the Northeast is an extremely destructive form of agriculture. For the past 40 years, India has tried every effort to get rid of this practice. Many plans and schemes have tried to get the hill tribals to abandon *jhum* in favour settled cultivation. But hardly any of them have succeeded. *Jhum* fires continue to burn all over the Northeast.

Jhum cultivation is not intrinsically irrational. Prof. P S Ramakrishnan of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, one of the few scientists who has studied *jhum* cultivation, contends that *jhum* is a highly sophisticated farming system, best suited to the ecosystem of the Northeast. Mountain soils are normally poor in fertility and need heavy manuring for continuous cultivation. Scientists prefer terraced agriculture but then the farmers have to apply enormous quantities of manure to sustain their croplands. In the shifting mode of cultivation, the burning vegetative cover helps to enrich the nutrient base of the soil. It is only when the *jhum* cycles become very short that this form of cultivation becomes ecologically destructive. In most parts of the Northeast, *jhum* cycles now range from three to five years whereas earlier they used to 15 to 20 years, and the productivity of *jhum* fields has been dropping. Despite all this, the system of shifting cultivation goes on. The government wants to stop

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The year was 1974 and the man was P R Mishra, a soil conservationist with the Chandigarh branch of the Central Soil and Water Conservation Research and Training Institute. His objective was to locate the source of the silt flowing into the Sukhna lake, which had lost 60 per cent of its storage capacity by the early 1970s, depriving the privileged in Chandigarh of water. Local engineers suggested dredging the lake, a perpetual money-making scheme. Mishra, however, said the erosion should be controlled at the source

shifting cultivation altogether. It wants the tribals to move to terraced farming or tree crops. Scientists work furiously to develop alternatives that look pretty and scientific but are unacceptable to the people. The tribals plod on with their traditional system.

The village of Khonoma in Nagaland has, in fact, found an answer to this problem. Instead of replacing shifting cultivation, it has tried to stabilise shifting cultivation at lower cycles. A tree called alder (*Alnus nepalensis*) grows across the Himalaya in landslide areas. It is capable of fixing nitrogen and coppices extremely well. About a 100 years ago, the farmers of Khonoma began to plant alder in large numbers in their shifting cultivation fields. The current agricultural system is now built around the alder. Once every four to six years the tree is heavily pollarded, that is, all its branches are completely cut. The farmers then cultivate the land for two years. Then as the branches regrow, the fields are left fallow for another two to three years. During this period, the farmer begins to cultivate another plot of land with alder, beginning a new cycle. Ramakrishnan estimates that with the use of alder, the same quantum of nutrients is returned to the soil in four to five years as would happen in a 15-20 year *jhum* cycle. The Khonoma farmers, obviously hard-pressed with decreasing shifting cultivation cycles, must have observed their environment carefully to find a solution within their own natural resource base and discovered the properties of alder.

What do these examples show? Firstly, that traditional systems are extremely important even in this so-called world of modern science and technology. Their ecological rationality remains valid even in the modern context. Wherever modern technology has been introduced, without testing it out for its ecological rationality, societies have suffered. Because productivity is important in a world where both population and human demands are growing, modern science and technology is also needed. But it must build upon traditional systems keeping intact their ecological rationality. This is the challenge modern science faces.

A fresh evaluation of traditional systems can also have major political and cultural repercussions. A fresh evaluation of traditional systems will force Indian experts to concede that they can learn much from 'illiterate' villagers who know their environment very well. In a 'whitewashed' country — as Sartre would have put it — nothing can go further in giving people pride in themselves.

[First published as an article in the column *Green Politics* in a New Delhi-based daily *The Economic Times*, September 15, 1991]

Reading 4: The Wheels of Change: Mishra's Alchemy

He had walked for hours to find the head of the canal that was bringing silt into the Sukhna lake in Chandigarh. When he reached his destination he saw, as he was to describe it some years later, "only naked hills and naked people". The year was 1974 and the man was P R Mishra, a soil conservationist with the Chandigarh branch of the Central Soil and Water Conservation Research and Training Institute. His objective was to locate the source of the silt flowing into the Sukhna lake, which had lost 60 per cent of its storage capacity by the early 1970s, depriving the privileged in Chandigarh of water. Local engineers suggested dredging the lake, a perpetual money-making scheme. Mishra, however, said the erosion should be controlled at the source. He was laughed out. But Mishra, as crazy as he is today, decided to walk the length of the stream that was bringing the silt to find the source of the erosion.

What he found was the village of Sukhomajri, abjectly poor and desperate. The crops were poor and the villagers had no other option but to scrounge off the surrounding land. The hills were degraded and eroding. The village lost a staggering 900 tonnes of silt per hectare (ha) each year. Each year, erosion swallowed up agricultural land leaving the farmers without any alternative but to continue grazing in the naked hill.

Mishra set up base in the village. The villagers, as can be expected, were hostile. Each day, Mishra would build soil-conservation structures —

brushwood dams and gully plugs. Each night, the villagers would destroy the structures and take away the brushwood for firewood. When asked why, their answer was simple: “The people of Chandigarh are rich. We will continue to send mud and they will continue to remove it. We are poor and have no other way to survive but to graze our animals and get some milk.” A typical rural development parody.

This continued for two years till Mishra realised something that seems so obvious now: that change was not possible unless the villagers themselves benefited from it. So he built a small earthen dam to store the water. It was a villager called Daula who taught Mishra this. It was a bad drought year — 1979 — and of the crops had almost withered. Villagers were desperate for water, which was stored behind Mishra’s soil-conservation dam. They approached him to get some of it. Mishra agreed, but on the condition that the villagers stop grazing in the watershed.

And so began what became a rural development fairy-tale. The villagers got water, but grazing continued. When asked, a villager replied: “What water? We don’t get any water. It is given to the landed few.”

To change this, water was then given to the family and not to the land. Every household was given rights over the water from the common watershed. Those with no land sold it or bartered it for crops. The supervision was handed over to a newly created, democratic village society. The efforts paid off. Grazing in the hills stopped voluntarily and with this closure, grass production increased dramatically — from less than one tonne to 2.6 tonnes per ha in just four years. With increased fodder, which was distributed equally between households, keeping goats no longer made sense. Between 1977 and 1983, the number of goats fell from 206 to just 32 while milk-yielding buffaloes rose from 79 to 146. With cropland, grassland and animal productivity rising, incomes in the village increased rapidly. A share of the individual income was invested in the village fund and, in turn, the village’s common resources. In the late 1980s, Sukhomajri’s village society was taxed by the government for the income earned from selling grass — making it the first such case in the country.

Mishra, however, has moved on. Retirement has taken him to an even more destitute part of the country — the tribal belt in Palamau district, Bihar. By 1986, he had started work in Bhusaria village, a small tribal hamlet, where people worked as agricultural labourers and survived on a diet of coarse cereals and roots, which they dug from the land.

The first thing Mishra did was to bring the villagers together to form a society. Since there was no common land, he persuaded the villagers to pool their decrepit land, sharing the benefits from increased productivity. In the beginning, the response was tepid, but eventually 36 acres were pooled. Both the landless and landowners agreed to be “students” and work the land.

Mishra’s scheme has three basic elements. One, to optimise water use. No rainwater is allowed to drain away outside the village boundary. To hold the water, villagers have made a series of reservoirs, tanks and simple trenches. Two, to use water and crop and tree combinations to increase biomass productivity. In just two years, Bhusaria has converted 25 acres of uncultivable land into a multi-tier plantation with trees, vegetables and crops. The third, and possibly the most crucial, element is the system for sharing the produce. In the case of Bhusaria, Mishra has devised a system by which the benefits of the land are shared equally between the landowner, landless worker and the village institution. “The 1:1:1 system,” as Mishra puts it, “motivates all hands to protect the system.” The one-time investment, in this case the initial project funds, were used to increase funds generated from the land, which were then invested back into the village. The village institution now provides, from this capital, seed money to individuals to produce vegetables. While the accounts of the village funds are maintained by elected members, accountability is institutionalised. These members can be changed overnight by the village assembly and the village also elects social auditors to scrutinise accounts. This ensures that no money is squandered and, as a villager of Bhusaria puts it, investment goes only to the stomach or the bank.

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Indian environmentalists have always talked about the need for an alternative process of development — a process that will make the best use of the country's natural resources, reduce inequalities, and encourage people to take control of their environment and pull up their economy by its bootstraps. If there is one person who has shown that this is possible, it is P R Mishra — a forester who strayed into soil conservation, and, in turn, into community mobilisation. What Mishra has been able to do in Sukhomajri and what he is now doing in Bhusaria is an outstanding example of a person's commitment to a dream — to show what people's power can do

This would have sounded too good to be true if economists like Kanchan Chopra and Gopal Kadekodi of the Institute for Economic Growth, Delhi, had not studied Mishra's work carefully and evaluated it for its economic viability. Their study shows, firstly, that land productivity has improved tremendously. At the end of two years, annual income from the vegetable plots was Rs 4,000 per acre. Papaya and other fruits, with a two-year cycle, brought incomes of Rs 13,000 per acre. Narotiya Devi, one of the poorest, who contributed one acre of land received Rs 2,000 as her share from the earlier infertile, useless plot.

The second tangible result is employment-creation. Chopra and Kadekodi conclude that in comparison to Bhusaria, "no other ongoing programme of rural development can guarantee such a stream of total benefits in terms of sustained employment and an income which is much above the minimum wage". Obviously, there is a lot to learn from Mishra's form of development.

And this perhaps is his greatest contribution. Indian environmentalists have always talked about the need for an alternative process of development — a process that will make the best use of the country's natural resources, reduce inequalities, and encourage people to take control of their environment and pull up their economy by its bootstraps. If there is one person who has shown that this is possible, it is P R Mishra — a forester who strayed into soil conservation, and, in turn, into community mobilisation. What Mishra has been able to do in Sukhomajri and what he is now doing in Bhusaria is an outstanding example of a person's commitment to a dream — to show what people's power can do, what a Daula can do in Sukhomajri or what a Narotiya can do in Bhusaria.

For Mishra, these are not 'ordinary people' in the parlance of the educated Indian, the language of the media, the big newspapers and what not. For him, they are the power and spirit of India. For Mishra, his project is not a project, it is a school, and its beneficiaries are students. Indeed, Mishra has turned the entire nation into students. He has shown, more than absolutely anybody else, that the nation has yet to learn what the nation's environment can yield and how that yield can be harnessed through people's control over their environment.

Maybe the final question to ask is why an outstanding man like Mishra, who worked within the framework of the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR), never rose to become its director-general. Mishra's brand of green revolution is surely far more important than the green revolution wrought by M S Swaminathan, however important that may have been. When, in fact, there was discussion about his promotion from a pretty lowly position, he was told by a former director-general of ICAR that he should write more scientific papers so that his worth could be judged — something like the growth rates of certain grasses under certain soil conditions. Mishra retired almost unsung, unwanted and unknown. India only knows how to respect its talkers, but not its doers.

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Reading 5: Mendha village declares self-rule

A village meeting in Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra. Tribals from neighbouring villages have gathered in strength to discuss self-governance. A visiting expert gives a slogan, "Our own government in our village". As the meeting progresses, an old tribal asks, "But if we demand our own government in our village, then whose government is there in Delhi or Bombay? Is it not our own government?" The old man's query made everyone sit up. Obviously, there was something wrong in their logic. After a lot of discussion a new slogan was coined: "Our own government in Delhi and Bombay. But we ourselves are the government in our village". Taking this message to heart, the village of Mendha in the district, earlier this year, declared "independence".

This discussion amongst these villagers of so-called primitive tribes, admirably describes the difference between representative democracy and

participatory democracy. And this powerful message must spread widely if villagers are to manage their own village affairs, especially their village environment. Indian *netas* and bureaucrats can wax and wane as much as they want in the UN or elsewhere about India's democracy. But the fact is that there is no democracy at the grassroots worth the name. All decisions are taken by politicians and bureaucrats; these percolate down to govern our villagers and their environments. Mohan Hirabai Hiralal and Savitri Tare of Vriksha Mitra (Friends of the Trees), an environmental organisation, are working amongst the tribals of Gadchiroli district. Their documentation of the tribals' efforts to govern themselves and their environment is fascinating. It speaks of the tremendous problems villagers face when confronted by a faceless bureaucracy; the resilience of the tribals; and most of all their ability to organise and plan for economic development. It is a tale of faith and hope we desperately need.

One incident relates to the building of a *ghotul* in the village of Mendha. The *ghotul* is a customary dormitory where boys and girls are schooled into becoming future members of tribal society. The Mendha tribals decided to build a new *ghotul* and went into the village forest to collect wood. But this incited the wrath of the forest department which alleged that as the people had not formally requested for the wood, their action was illegal and the wood would be confiscated. The tribals argued otherwise, staking their traditional rights to the wood from the village forests and their traditional practice of building *ghotuls*. But to no avail.

The forest officials, unable to fight the Mendha villagers on their own, quickly dubbed them Naxalites, got police support and came and demolished the illegal *ghotul* and carried away the government wood. But the tribals warned that if the wood was seized, then before the next sunset they would build another *ghotul* at the same spot. And sure enough, overnight new wood was cut or "stolen", and the building constructed. This act of rebellion spread like wildfire and within a week, as many as 12 different villages challenged the government's authority over forests by building "unlicensed" *ghotuls*.

This is not an act which would surely gladden the heart of environmentalists concerned about the protection of forests. But the lesson from Mendha is that this control over decision-making is vital for any long-term sustainability of natural resources. It is well known that forests play a critical role in the life of tribals. Just how much has been documented in great detail by Mohan and Savitri. Indeed their detailing of the food, fuelwood, fodder and employment benefits that forests bring to the lives of tribals shows clearly that their life would not be possible without these resources. Forests provide an extraordinary diversity of products.

In Mendha, yet another struggle took place over the forests, which resulted in villagers taking total control of their forests and demarcating village boundaries, almost as sacred as national or state boundaries. The fight this time was over the traditional *nistar* or rights over the forests, as conceded by the state. Over the years, these rights have progressively been curtailed, some in the name of development and some for environmental purposes. The tribals, in effect, have been made thieves in their own lands, say Mohan and Savitri, even as contractors plunder forests under official patronage. In most cases, they also found that the tribals were extremely uninformed about their rights, with the government machinery making every effort to make them believe that these rights did not exist, and that any use of the forest was really dependent on the compassion of the forest guard or range officer. The *nistar* rights were, thus, an extremely sensitive issue. A few years ago, Mendha and other neighbouring villagers noticed that the forest department had started digging "trench-cum-mounds", known as TCM in forester's jargon, to fence off the forest land. The villagers protested as this fencing effectively stopped their cattle from grazing. Each time the foresters would start work, the villagers would reach the spot and sit down in groups to stall any digging. This stalemate continued till a meeting of the *gram sabha* (assembly of all adults in the village) decided to pass a resolution saying that the forest department had to take permission from the *gram sabha* before it could carry out any work digging, planting or cutting of any forests within the village boundary. "Without this permission, work done would be resisted and stopped," wrote the villagers to the forest department.

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The villagers of Mendha have decided that the gram sabha will be empowered to take all decisions regarding the distribution, plantation and future planning of forested lands. For the sake of convenience, a small committee has been formed to take care of day-to-day management but all major decisions are taken jointly. For instance, the villagers have agreed upon a distribution strategy that includes selling of the surplus, after the village's needs have been taken care of, to nearby villagers or towns. The proceeds will go to the village fund for future development

The decision was sent to the administration and a meeting was organised with district officials. Given the determination of the villagers for carrying out what was probably an unprecedented move, the meeting was organised in the village itself, right in front of the illegal *ghotul* which had once been pulled down by the same administration. Maps were pulled out as the boundary of the village was discussed. The discussions revealed that the villagers had the legal right to the use of forests within their village boundary. The villagers then insisted that the rights over their forests be respected and their development and use be determined by the *gram sabha* of each village.

The villagers of Mendha have decided that the *gram sabha* will be empowered to take all decisions regarding the distribution, plantation and future planning of forested lands. For the sake of convenience, a small committee has been formed to take care of day-to-day management but all major decisions are taken jointly. For instance, the villagers have agreed upon a distribution strategy that includes selling of the surplus, after the village's needs have been taken care of, to nearby villagers or towns. The proceeds will go to the village fund for future development. This has virtually led to the imposition of lines of control being drawn around several settlements. In these village republics, the villagers have opted for an open, village-level forum for the management of their resources. And with their independence now asserted, the villagers are making plans to afforest 50 hectares of their degraded forest land, something existing forest laws of the land do not permit the citizens to do.

Even in the early stages of these village republics, there are some interesting results and lessons. For instance, one problem that is emerging is in the relationship of this village forum with the official village institution, the *panchayat*. The village *panchayat* in the case of Mendha covers three separate revenue villages with the *sarpanch* belonging to one of the other settlements. Recently, the villagers of Mendha found that the *sarpanch* had given permission to a local contractor to quarry stones from within the boundary of their village. When the villagers resisted, saying that under their village resolution the use of all natural resources would be determined by their *gram sabha*, the *sarpanch* refused to accept their authority staking his claim as the official leader of the villages. A confrontation took place; villages obstructed the trucks carrying the stones, even as the contractor threatened police action. The argument of the villagers was simple, "You say the *sarpanch* is more important than the village, but actually the *sarpanch* is made by the village and not the village by the *sarpanch*." Finally after much heat and anger, the *sarpanch* gave in. The villagers had asserted their authority.

Mendha has a lot to teach all of us. But are our *netas* and officialdom ready to learn? Given that the government has introduced the Panchayati Raj Bill in the last Lok Sabha,¹ which purports to give power to the people, the need to learn has never been so urgent or so important. We can only hope the government will look and learn before it leaps.

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Reading 6: Helping people help themselves

Consider the plight of a village community when governmental agencies come visiting. Like the proverbial salesman each 'line department' has its own mission and targets to meet. So, the animal care person pushes cattle, without a thought about where the fodder will come from; and, the foresters plant trees without a care for how the trees will integrate with the local agricultural system. The irrigation person builds ponds or tanks, without a thought for the land use needed to protect the catchment, without which the pond becomes a fast silting ditch in the ground. In one instance, we know of sanitary engineers who even planned for flush latrines in the heart of the Indian desert, where even drinking water is hard to come by.

The net result of this extremely fragmentary and sectoral planning is wasteful, inefficient, and ultimately disastrous. According to one estimate, the government spent over Rs 25,000 crore on rural development programmes during the 1980s, apart from the expenditure made on

agriculture and irrigation. But the public assets created under these programmes are nowhere near the expenditure incurred. This will be an ongoing story of our investments in rural areas unless the very approach to planning and investment management does not change.

The problem lies in the fact that Indian villages are not organised along the lines of the Indian bureaucracy. Villages in the country are highly integrated 'agrosylvopastoral' systems. Each Indian village has its own cropland, grazing lands and tree or forest lands and each of these systems interact with each other. What happens in one component invariably impacts on the others. Trees or forests provide firewood. This helps villagers to avoid burning cowdung, which in turn helps to maintain the productivity of the croplands where this dung is applied as manure. Simultaneously, trees and crops help to complement the grasslands in the supply of fodder for domestic animals. A typical village in the Himalayas, for instance, has an intricate mix of land-use options that allow fodder to be collected each month.

This fine-tuned system can, however, easily be torn apart, as is indeed happening. Forest degradation is leading to a shortage of firewood. Destruction of village-level water-harvesting systems is leading to reduction in groundwater recharge. What is needed is the holistic enrichment of each of the village ecosystems in a manner which increases the productivity of each component of its resource base. And this should be done in a manner which is equitable and sustainable. Only this comprehensive and integrated management of India's natural resources, village by village, can help us to meet the 21st century challenge. Literally, every inch of the country's land must be a green cover, under crops, grasses or trees.

The task is indeed massive, but it will be a sheer impossibility if the government thinks that village planning means that it has now to plan for each one of India's roughly six lakh villages, and formulate new programmes with catchwords like 'micro-planning' and 'people's participation'. The only way this stupendous task of planning for each Indian village can be done, rapidly and judiciously, is if it is participatory, and done by the people themselves. In fact, this is exactly what the experience of voluntary agencies working in villages across the country shows. At a recent meeting organised by the Centre for Science and Environment, groups described their experiences of planning with the people at India's grassroots. Many of these agencies also began with an extremely sectoral approach. Some introduced forestry, some irrigation and some income-generation activities. But as their work expanded and villagers asserted their priorities, the work became more and more integrated and holistic.

The results have been outstanding. The control and management by village communities has led to ecological regeneration and tangible economic benefits. In Ralegan Siddhi, in Maharashtra's Ahmednagar district — the work of Anna Hazare — villagers have created a green oasis in an otherwise parched, drought-prone area. Today they have a bank in the village and bank deposits totalling Rs 23 lakh. In Sukhomajri village near Chandigarh, average household incomes have risen by at least Rs 2,000 a year. And in Bhusaria, a village in Bihar, barren land is now yielding vegetation worth up to Rs 20,000 per hectare (ha) per year. Villagers in tribal, poverty-stricken Bhusaria are beginning to save money in the first two to three years of ecological regeneration work.

Speaking at a meeting, economist Y K Alagh, a former member of the Planning Commission, claimed that available studies show that the real rate of return of these projects are fairly high — about 18 per cent, going upto as much as 31 per cent. Alagh pointed that even if these are not the most accurate statistics, it is clear that returns are very high. Few large projects achieve such high rates of return.

Alagh also pointed out that when people participate, the costs required for village management are much lower. In fact, high costs of government departments make several important village natural resource management activities unviable. For instance, Karnataka's former develop-

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The challenge before India is to develop a village-centred development strategy through which people can plan for their natural resources and have the legal power to implement their programmes. The role of government agencies and of voluntary agencies would then be to help the people help themselves. This will mean a major change in the way we do things. The environmental survival crisis at the grassroots and the financial crisis at the top will inevitably force us to change our ways

ment commissioner, Zafar Saifulla, said that early government estimates of desilting tanks, Rs 41 per cubic metres (cu m) of earth removed, made the entire idea of maintaining the village tanks financially impossible. But by involving the people, getting rid of machines and other changes, the costs could be brought down to Rs 6 per cu m. The activity became viable. Alagh pointed to a major conclusion we should all draw from this. The country's financial crisis is telling us sharply that more of the same is not possible. And since the financial crisis is a reflection of the resource crisis at the grassroots, we must change our ways to empower the people to plan for and to manage their natural resources. While government projects often talk about investing Rs 40,000 per ha to develop irrigation facilities, people's participation and local village planning has brought down these figures considerably.

The challenge before India is, therefore, to develop a village-centred development strategy through which people can plan for their natural resources and have the legal power to implement their programmes. The role of government agencies and of voluntary agencies would then be to help the people help themselves. This will mean a major change in the way we do things. The environmental survival crisis at the grassroots and the financial crisis at the top will inevitably force us to change our ways.

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Reading 7: Unshackling rural India to build from basics

Large parts of western India are in the grip of a drought. Hundreds of thousands of people are migrating in search for work, water and fodder. This has been happening for decades every time there is a drought and the state has become extremely conscious of its vulnerability to weather fluctuations since the droughts in the early 1970s devastated its rural economy. We are firmly convinced that every crisis throws up a societal response and sometimes even extraordinary human ingenuity. The same has happened in Maharashtra. In the 1970s, fired by the crisis that he saw amongst his fellow citizens, breaking stones on relief works, a young industrialist, Vilasrao Salunke, dedicated himself to the task of building up a new, drought-proof village economy. Salunke left his business to his equally doughty wife, Kalpana Salunke, and came up with the famous concept of *pani panchayats* — village water councils that would ensure good management, rational use and equitable distribution of the available water. In villages where he worked, Salunke was able to reverse rural-urban migration to urban-rural migration. Using his resources, Salunke was able to show how a society can literally pull itself up by its bootstraps.

Then came another person by the name of Krishna Bhaurao Hazare, an ex-army recruit who had retired to his village, which was ecologically devastated and socially decadent. The village was a drunkards' den and starvation was common. Krishna Hazare by the dint of his perseverance and efforts, turned the entire ecology of the village around. He bunded every *nala* to allow every drop of water to percolate into the sub-soil layers; organised the villagers to use the replenished groundwater resources equitably; and then began to green all the hills around. The results have been outstanding — far more dramatic the green revolution of the 1970s, which devastated the ecology and failed to benefit the poor.

These were people with a commitment; honest, simple people responding to the ecological and social crisis that they saw around them in the once proud region of the Marathas. They showed that given human will and tenacity there is a lot that mother Earth can give on a sustainable basis. Drought can be banished from Maharashtra.

People who sit in urban capitals, of course, have doubts and often ask why these efforts don't multiply. The answer lies in the fact that it is the mindset of the Indian middle classes, totally colonised and whitewashed by the erstwhile white masters, that is behind the growing crisis.

Because what this mindset does most of all is to straightjacket the system in such a way that rural people, especially the poor, cannot do anything themselves to respond to their crisis. The rules left behind by the colonial rulers are so strictly enforced — except when the lack of enforcement lines the pockets of the enforcers — that the poor cannot do anything for themselves. And only a person with a tenacity level of one in a million can succeed. So India's rural advancement gets limited to those cases in which the leadership is in the hands of a person who is prepared to sacrifice all and keep plugging endlessly away at the system, namely, the political-bureaucratic machinery, to take small steps each time. *Gita's* famous phrase that 'You should do your deed without thinking of the fruits' may not have been internalised by most Indians, but the Government of India has definitely created a system whereby anybody interested in working with the poor must accept the wisdom of the *Gita*, whether one likes it or not.

Let us take the example of that business called afforestation. In 1985, Rajiv Gandhi declared to the nation that this would be a priority task before the nation and that it would be done through a people's movement. Nearly seven years have gone by, the country still does not have a policy to encourage the people to take up afforestation. On the contrary, our experience is that every time an initiative comes from the people, the system responds with tremendous distrust and hostility.

There are many such examples. But a fine example of this comes from a tribal settlement called Motewadi near the town of Manchar in Pune district. The settlement is situated next to a totally barren hillock. The villagers are keen to plant trees on the hillock and protect it, and, of course, derive advantage from the grass and other green products they will get from this exercise. The snag is that this hill belongs to that *sarkari* department called the forest department which believes that everybody else is a fool or a crook. Over a year has passed and the villager's request is yet to draw a positive response from the glorious *sarkar*.

And it is not that these tribals living in some remote corner have not been able to get their petition to the right quarters. On the contrary, which big man in Maharashtra or Delhi has not heard of their petition ? But the straightjacketed system has not moved.

These tribals are led by a young tribal politician, Baba Pansare, who has been actively involved in several anti-dam protests in Maharashtra together with respected tribal leaders like Baba Adhav and others. In recent years, he has focussed more on development programmes like afforestation and provision of drinking water. Pansare got in touch with Salunke in early 1991 and took him to Motewadi. Salunke was impressed by the villagers' resolve to take care of the hill but cautioned them against any precipitate action like a *satyagraha* to plant trees on the hill. He suggested that they approach the government for permission first.

Around that time, Maharashtra's ex-chief secretary, D M Sukthankar, had retired and taken up the leadership of the Maharashtra branch of World Wildlife Fund. He organised a meeting in Pune which was also attended by R Rajamani, secretary of environment at the Centre, and Samar Singh, head of wasteland development activities in Delhi. Salunke raised the issue of Motewadi in the meeting and everyone promised to help get the necessary permission. The meeting was also attended by the forest secretary of Maharashtra who showed enormous interest. Papers were then given to relevant officials but nothing moved.

After a few months had gone by, the Maharashtra government was again approached. The forest secretary promised to ask the local conservator of forests to give a report. Again nothing happened, but queries later revealed that the conservator had described this as a possible land-grab exercise. And the secretary did not know what to do. Pansare of course was furious. He dismissed the suggestion that the government could help the villagers to plant trees under the state's Employment Guarantee Scheme. He and Salunke clearly said that unless the

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Wouldn't it be a sad day for India when a group of villagers have to undertake satyagraha to plant trees? Gandhiji would definitely not have been amused to see the state of our affairs. But Gandhiji is in heaven. Which International Monetary Fund will rescue India's poor and force our bureaucracy and politicians to change their ways?

villagers have some rights to those trees, the grazing would continue and the trees would never get protected. Every year, the forest department in Maharashtra gets trees planted on hillocks under the scheme. Many of these hillocks are the same ones year after year. Trees on government land are not cared for either by the government or the people.

By that time, the forest secretary changed. He agreed with Salunke that rights would have to be given to the local people to the trees proposed to be planted. Meanwhile, Pansare brought a group of villagers to meet politicians and officials in Delhi. At our request, the environment minister of state, Kamal Nath, met the villagers and promised to help. Last week, one of us visited the village and saw the hillock. It is indeed ridiculous to suggest that anybody would like to grab that land for agriculture. Only a demented mind can suggest such a thing — one which is full of distrust of the people.

A few months ago, Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao had agreed to attend a meeting of grassroots environmental activists like Salunke and Hazare organised by us in Delhi. Summing up the proceedings of the meeting, we had congratulated the prime minister for his bold steps in liberalising the urban-industrial sector to allow the entrepreneurship of our people a fuller play. But we had requested the prime minister to carry forward this liberalisation to the rural sector where people's enterprise is more strangled and straightjacketed than any Tata, Birla, Shriram, Du Pont or IBM can imagine in their wildest dreams. Since India must build itself up from below, it is vital that the liberalisation must begin from there.

Otherwise India's lands will remain brown. Unfortunately, brown is good for the forest department because it now reaps a rich harvest by way of money and jeeps to plant ever more trees.

Wouldn't it be a sad day for India when a group of villagers have to undertake *satyagraha* to plant trees? Gandhiji would definitely not have been amused to see the state of our affairs. But Gandhiji is in heaven. Which International Monetary Fund will rescue India's poor and force our bureaucracy and politicians to change their ways?

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SET 2: TWO STORIES

When villagers declare self-rule, or hug trees to stop them from being chopped, protection of the environment is not uppermost in their mind. But the right to use resources is, or even the right to control resources, so ensuring these resources are only sustainably used

Reading 1: The Chipko Movement

A: Preface

Chipko: Environmentalism of the poor

Whenever a dictionary of green terms is written, even if it is in English, it will contain at least one Hindi word. And that word is Chipko.

The idea that people are prepared to hug trees to save them from being felled excited and enthused so many people across the country, that it built the foundation for a nationwide environmental concern and a whole generation of home-grown environmentalists. Given the fact that there was a powerful environmental concern growing in the West, there would have been, sooner or later, a fallout of this Western phenomenon in India. But this country did not have to wait for it. Chipko had a deep intellectual impact and helped to resolve the conflict between the concepts of development and environmental protection, without which the environment concern could not have come to enjoy a reasonably widespread acceptance in a poor, developing country.

Whereas Indira Gandhi had told the 1972 Stockholm Conference in no uncertain terms that “poverty is the biggest polluter”, Chipko told Indians and the rest of the world that it is the poor who suffer the most when the environment degrades. They depend on their immediate environment for their daily survival. And, therefore, they have a vested interest in its management on a more sustainable basis.

Chipko has been the subject of hundreds of articles, numerous films and quite a few books. Various aspects of the movement have been highlighted, including the nature of the environmentalism of the poor; the interest and role of women in environment movements; the demand for community control over natural resources, and the role of the state in dispossessing the poor from their resource base. All of this has been most inspiring and will continue to be a beacon in the days ahead.

Twenty years after the start of the movement, a *Down To Earth* correspondent visited many of the villages where the movement had begun and grown. His report, however, is unexpected and demands introspective study by all those interested in the environment, the poor and the larger Indian society. It seems that in all the writings on Chipko, what was neglected is that which the local participants of Chipko most wanted. The interviews show that for them Chipko was an assertion of local people's rights over their resources, but in a very developmental context, though, of course, the nature of development they were seeking was integrated with environmental concerns.

But with the conservationist element receiving greater emphasis, a gulf widened between the local reality and the national and international perceptions. And, it now appears, this expanding gulf finally began to alienate many of the youth who came into the movement hoping for rad-

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Chipko's multi-faceted identity has resulted in it meaning different things to different people. For some, it is an extraordinary conservation movement of the poor; for others, it is a local people's movement to regain control of their natural resources, snatched away first by a colonial power and then by the free government of India, and, finally, it is a movement of women trying to save their environment. Chipko dismissed the notion that it is the poor who wantonly destroy their environment and do not want to protect it

ical political change. A few of them even started a Ped Kato Andolan — the very antithesis of the perception of the Chipko Movement — when the centrally controlled Forest Conservation Act began being an obstruction to the construction of village roads, ropeways, bridges and electric poles in the region.

But, looked at in another way, both actions amount to the same local concern: the right of local communities to decide how they should manage and use their resource base. The state has, meanwhile, used the growing environmental concern to centralise environmental management without any concern for devolution of environmental rights and obligations. Not surprisingly, even women from the legendary villages of Reni and Doongri-Paitoli, now ask: “Hamen kya mila (what did we get)?”

There is every possibility that many will disagree with our report on Chipko. We, too, are sad in presenting it because knocking a legend is painful. But our correspondent's report shows one thing: A deeper analysis of Chipko and its gains is needed, for only then will we get a better understanding of the true environmentalism of the poor.

— Anil Agarwal, April 30, 1993

B: The main Story

Chipko: an unfinished mission

In 20 years, Chipko has acquired many facets, primarily as a conservation endeavour by the poor, a struggle for local control of natural resources and an effort by women to protect their environment. Chipko influenced the world, but have its local objectives been met? Amit Mitra toured the districts of Garhwal and Kumaon and met the people behind Chipko and those whose lives it has touched. He traces the origins and the spread of Chipko and assesses its contributions, its discord and its standing today.

“NO WOMAN ever had to hug a tree to protect it,” says Chandi Prasad Bhatt, the founder of Chipko. “It was not necessary to do so, for the mere threat was enough.” The concept of hugging a tree to defend it was so powerful, it brought in a new consciousness to the country that put environment at its centre.

Chipko “to hug” in Hindi today evokes romantic images of poor, village women in the hills of northern India determinedly hugging trees to prevent them from being cut down by the very axes of forest contractors that also threatened their lives. But Chipko's multi-faceted identity has resulted in it meaning different things to different people. For some, it is an extraordinary conservation movement of the poor; for others, it is a local people's movement to regain control of their natural resources, snatched away first by a colonial power and then by the free government of India, and, finally, it is a movement of women trying to save their environment with a message to loggers: “Our bodies before our trees”.

Chipko dismissed the notion that it is the poor who wantonly destroy their environment and do not want to protect it. In fact, as a women's movement, it inspired eco-feminism in India and, to some extent, throughout the world.

The volume of literature Chipko generated is enormous, but, today, 20 years after its birth, questions remain: What has been its impact locally, nationally and internationally? Did it achieve its objectives or were its gains only intellectual, with few benefits for the villagers?

The struggle

Chipko's first battle took place in early 1973 in Chamoli district, when the villagers of Mandal, led by Bhatt and the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Mandal (DGSM), prevented the Allahabad-based sports goods company, Symonds, from felling 14 ash trees

This act took place on April 24 and, in December, the villagers again stopped Symonds agents from felling in the Phata-Rampur forests, about 60 km from Gopeshwar.

In 1974, the forest department marked trees for felling in the Peng Murenda forest, near Reni village in Joshimath block, badly affected by the massive Alaknanda flood of 1970. More than 680 ha were auctioned for Rs 4.7 lakh to Jagmohan Bhalla, a contractor from Rishikesh. But the women of Reni women drove out the contractor's labourers on March 26, 1974. This was a turning point for Chipko, as it marked the first time that the initiative by women, especially when their menfolk were not around. The Reni incident also prompted the state government to set up a nine-member committee, chaired by Delhi botanist Virendra Kumar and whose members included government officials; local MLA, Govind Singh Negi of the Communist Party of India (CPI); Bhatt, and Govind Singh Rawat, the block pramukh of Joshimath. The committee's report, submitted after two years, led to a 10-year ban on commercial forestry in Reni and in nearly 1,200 sq km of the upper catchment of the Alaknanda. The ban was extended for 10 years in 1985.

Another response to Chipko was the formation of a Van Nigam, a state-owned forest corporation, in 1975 to take over all forms of forest exploitation from private contractors. "It was generally believed," says Surendra Bhatt, a veteran Sarvodaya worker of Uttarkashi, "the government would not be as ruthless and corrupt as private contractors in exploiting forest resources." But this belief was unjustified for many agitations were targeted in time against Van Nigam.

The protests spread

Meanwhile, other protests were staged in the Uttarakhand region. In 1974, a struggle was launched on July 25 and reached its peak in October by villagers from the Vyali forest area near Uttarkashi, seeking to halt tree-felling. In Kumaon, Chipko made its debut at the Nainadevi fair in Nainital in 1974, and then proceeded to block forest auctions at several places, including Nainital, Ramnagar and Kotdwar. The movement in Kumaon gathered momentum following major landslides at Tawaghat in 1977 and student activists successfully blocked the auction at Shailley Hall in Nainital on October 6, 1977. On November 28, another protest by students was forcibly dispersed by the police and many of the activists were arrested. The Nainital Club was set ablaze and this led the police to open fire. Says poet Girish Tiwari "Girda", whose folk songs inspired Chipko rallies, "In 1942, during the Independence movement, the British fired two rounds in Nainital. Since then, there never was any firing in Nainital."

In Tehri Garhwal, meanwhile, Chipko activists led by Sunderlal Bahuguna began organising villagers from May 1977 to oppose tree-felling in the Henwal valley. They resorted to direct action in December 1977 to protect the Advani and Salet forests and in March the following year, 23 volunteers, including women, were arrested for opposing a forest auction at Narendranagar. "The struggle in Henwal," recalls Pratap Shikhar, "marked the transformation of Chipko from an economic struggle to a fight for conservation." The agitation to save the Badyargarh forests gained momentum after the jailing of Bahuguna, who began on January 9, 1979.

Chipko resumed activities in Chamoli during 1977-78, with the women from Pulna stopping the felling of forests in Bhyunder valley. Similar

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The government instituted a 15-year moratorium on commercial felling in the Uttarakhand Himalaya. Long before the moratorium, however, it had become clear that Chipko had significantly slowed the march of commercial forestry: The output of major forest produce from the eight hill districts declined from more than 62,000 cubic metres in 1971 to 40,000 cum in 1981

protests were staged in Doongri-Paintoli in 1980, and in Bacher, as late as 1984-85. "But by then, the Chipko protests were breathing their last," says Sudarshan Kathait of Gopeshwar, who was actively involved in the Chanchridhar struggle. "After early gains, Bhatt began to spend more time on plantation work, eco-development camps and organising women into Mahila Mangal Dals (MMDs). And Bahuguna did not believe at that time in plantations, though he is currently involved in promoting afforestation."

After Bahuguna met British forester Richard St. Barbe Baker in 1977, he became an ardent conservationist and in April 1981, he went on an indefinite fast in support of his demand for a total ban on felling in the Himalaya above 1,000 m. Indira Gandhi, who was prime minister then, set up an eight-member expert committee to look into the matter.

Although the committee exonerated the forest department and its sustained yield forestry policy, the government instituted a 15-year moratorium on commercial felling in the Uttarakhand Himalaya.

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The roots

According to social historian Ramachandra Guha, author of *The Unquiet Woods*, Chipko is the latest in a long series of peasant protests going back to the turn of the century against commercial forestry in the Uttar Pradesh Himalaya in the Uttarakhand Himalaya. In 1916, British officials were nonplussed at the "deliberate and organised incendiarism" by the people of Kumaon to the opening up of forests to commercial exploitation, but that also deprived the people of their traditional rights. The 1916 agitation, which began as a general strike against *utar* (forced labour) and then became a systematic campaign in which *chir* (pine) forests were burnt down all over Kumaon, especially in Almora, led to the formation in 1921 of the Kumaon forest grievances committee.

In Garhwal, a protest that is still remembered is the one the local people refer to as the infamous Tilari *kand* (incident). On May 30, 1930, a massive satyagraha was held at Tilari against the forestry policies of Tehri Garhwal state, which were similar to those introduced by the British in the rest of Uttarakhand. The maharaja of Tehri was in Europe and his prime minister, Chakradhar Juyal, crushed the Tilari protest in a replay of the Jallianwala Bagh incident. Soldiers shot down unarmed people, including children, and many drowned in the Yamuna while trying to flee.

Protests over forest policies deemed inimical to local needs continued after Independence. The 1962 Indo-Chinese war opened up border areas to development. An extensive network of roads ran deep into the hills, literally opening the way for a wave of forest officials and contractors. Most of the labourers were recruited from outside the region and their work triggered landslides, soil erosion and irreversible damage to watersheds. The local villagers got nothing except damage to their environment.

The DGSM was formed in 1964 in Gopeshwar by Bhatt. With the blessing of the Sarvodaya movement, it worked to promote Vinobha Bhave's concepts of gramdan and of a non-violent, self-reliant, village society based on rural industries. DGSM became involved in anti-liquor campaigns, in the construction of roads, including one running through Gopeshwar, and in setting up a resin factory and a saw mill there. However, DGSM's attempts at cottage industry-scale development ended disastrously in the face of competition from established firms and the forest department's preference to supply forest raw material to outside industrialists than to local, cottage industries.

The Sarvodaya campaign against alcohol provided a platform for women, but increasingly it was the conflict between local and outside contractors over forest exploitation that became the rallying point for popular protest during the 1960s. At a memorial meeting at Tilari in 1968, the people in Garhwal renewed their resolve to fight for forest rights. The Alaknanda floods of 1970 gave further impetus to the protests against outside contractors, which peaked in 1972 with demonstrations in Purola on December 11, in Uttarkashi on December 12 and in Gopeshwar on December 15.

These demonstrations failed to move the state and local activists began to look for new ways to protest. In its first phase, Chipko sought to force the government to end its preference for big, outside forest contractors and instead award contracts in small lots to local labour cooperatives. It wanted an end to the export of raw material from the region and start local forest-based industries. Chipko aimed at ushering in forest management policies that would meet the needs of the local villagers.

CPI election pamphlets distributed in the region in 1962 and 1967 made the same demands. "Chipko was not a conservation movement, as it is presently projected," says P C Tiwari, an Almora lawyer and a former Chipko activist. "Bahuguna, too, favoured granting the local people the right to fell trees for commercial exploitation. On April 4, 1977, he performed a ceremony to worship the axe, the major instrument of survival of the forest labourer. He was not a conservationist then."

Kathait agrees, saying, "Chipko was primarily an economic struggle. Environment and ecology were attributed to it later and Bahuguna started projecting it as a conservation campaign. The local people wanted their economic survival first." It's a matter of regret, adds Kathait, that Bhatt is now toeing the Bahuguna line.

An illustration of local economic compulsions is the Mandal incident, which H K Singh of Gopeshwar College says had its roots in 1969. "The files of late Subedar Bachan Singh Bist of Mandal, the Symonds' contractor between 1969 and 1972, show that he did not get the contract because he demanded exorbitant wages for labourers," Singh explains. "He then organised a meeting in Mandal on March 18, 1973, where leaders like Alam Singh Bist, the pradhan of Khalla village, and Bachan Lal, the secretary of the Shoshit Dal (Depressed Classes' Association), threatened to hug trees if Symonds brought in outside labour. Bhatt was away then from Gopeshwar and the Mandal meeting was a local affair, without any mass participation."

As it turned out, on April 24, DGSM workers and students and villagers from Gopeshwar held a rally to prevent Jagadish Prasad Nautiyal, a Symonds sub-contractor, from entering the forest. Bhatt, too, opposed the felling of trees by outside contractors because it was DGSM's aim to establish cottage-scale industries through local labour cooperatives.

Says Nautiyal, now gram pradhan of Banglo-ki-Kandi village near Mussoorie, "I was a sub-contractor of Symonds. Earlier, I had worked as a labourer. In 1973, I got the contract for felling trees in Pangarbasa forest near Mandal village. That was the first time I got a contract and, as it turned out, the last. Bhatt said he would not allow the felling and the villagers threatened to hug the trees.

"I got scared and did not go to the forest. Instead, I met district forest officer Narinder Singh Negi, who asked me to wait till he could pacify the DGSM workers. After three months, I was permitted to fell trees in Phata in the Kedarnath division. But the DGSM got there, too. I lost Rs 32,000 in payments to 17 labourers. The DGSM didn't chipko any tree, but it put up posters against me all over Gopeshwar even though I had not engaged any Nepalese labourers. The workers were from my village."

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The transformation of Chipko from a struggle to control local resource use to a national movement was influenced heavily by a growing global environmental concern. Chipko began independent of global environmental consciousness, but in interacting with the rest of the world, Chipko assumed a deep conservationist bearing. In the process, its utilitarian and developmental stance was steadily eroded

Meanwhile, during October-December 1973, Bahuguna undertook a padyatra between Gopeshwar and Ukhimath to publicise the need to save trees and to expound the philosophy of non-violent direct action. Symonds agents also staged padyatras, going from village to village and explaining they had already paid for the trees. The agents also spread a rumour that a movie was being screened in nearby Rampur and when the villagers guarding the forest left their post, they quickly felled five ash trees. But the villagers returned the next morning, disappointed because there was no movie, and were able to drive off the contractors, who had to leave the trees behind. More demonstrations followed until December 31, when the Symonds permit expired. But Nautiyal says he had to leave earlier because "my dwindling resources ensured that I quit the whole business in three months."

Chipko's impact

The transformation of Chipko from a struggle to control local resource use to a national movement was influenced heavily by a growing global environmental concern. Chipko began independent of global environmental consciousness, but in interacting with the rest of the world, Chipko assumed a deep conservationist bearing. In the process, its utilitarian and developmental stance was steadily eroded.

Reacting to Chipko in 1980, Indira Gandhi told Nature magazine in an interview, "Well, frankly, I don't know all the aims of the movement. But if it is that trees should not be cut, I'm all for it." When informed that Chipko was concerned also about poverty in the region, she replied, "Naturally, anybody who lives in a backward country has to be concerned with that, too." But clarifying that trees are important in themselves, she added, "The cutting of trees has immediately brought havoc because it has increased our drought, it has increased our floods and it has made vast areas much more difficult to live in."

But in transforming itself, Chipko contributed immensely to national and international ecological movements. As Bhatt puts it, "Chipko was like the discovery of the elephant by blind persons. One person felt the trunk, another the legs and each thought each felt the real thing."

Irrespective of Chipko's grassroots achievements, it accomplished a lot at the national and international levels. Says Shekhar Pathak, a Chipko activist now teaching history at Kumaon University in Nainital, "A distinction is necessary between what happened locally and the national and international movement that grew out of it. Chipko put forests on the political agenda in the country. The Forest Conservation Act of 1980 and the very creation of the environment ministry are due to the consciousness created by Chipko."

And Nirmal Kumar Joshi, director of the Forest Training Institute at Haldwani, adds, "Chipko created a new wave of understanding among foresters. We realised that our plans to exploit forests were not at all scientific, as it was claimed. We realised that nurseries and plantations were more important than cutting down green trees."

International ecologists saw Chipko as a cultural response of the people's love for their environment. Chipko was popularised by the feminist movement, who pointed out that village women have to walk long distances to collect fuel and fodder and they become the first victims of forest destruction. Eco-feminists argued that women are therefore closer to nature and more ecologically conscious.

But Chipko's biggest contribution probably was the pro-poor environmentalism that it brought in its wake. Says Mahendra Singh Kunwar, who was a student during Chipko's heyday, "It dismissed the notion that the poor destroy their environment and do not want to protect it. The Chipko message captured the imagination of activists across the world. Until Chipko, people refused to believe the poor could live in harmony with their environment."

“Chipko had a very humane appeal: Cut me down before you cut down the tree. The tree is far more important than my life, it is the basis of my survival.”

Several environmental activists discerned in Chipko a powerful assertion of people of their rights over their environment. This concept, in fact, set a major trend in environmentalism, and one Chipko observer has written, “Local control over the habitat — in this case the forests — might have been illegal in terms of contemporary laws, but it was not immoral.”

This was the true social justification of the protests, which defined a new morality in environmental concern. “This gave rise to the notion of the need to empower local communities to manage their resources,” says Shamsar Singh Bist, an ardent Chipko activist when he was a student in the 1970s. He is now associated with Uttarakhand Kranti Dal, a local political party.

Unfortunately, people’s control over local resources has been the least of the state’s concerns, even though, under pressure from the growing, international, environment lobby and the “summits” in Stockholm and Rio, it has adopted a series of conservationist policies. However, most of them still deny people the rights to manage their environment for their own use and so the villagers who participated in Chipko have suffered as a result.

Diverging concerns

Academics like Guha have traced three main Chipko streams: one led by Bahuguna, which blames materialism for ecological degradation and wants strict conservation; another led by Bhatt, which works at environmental regeneration with people at the centre, and, the third named Uttarakhand Sangharsh Vahini (USV), which seeks to move Chipko away from being publicly identified with Bahuguna and Bhatt, though the latter founded it. USV insists the human-nature relationship must be viewed in the context of relationships between humans and so social and economic redistribution are more important than ecological harmony. USV does not associate itself with state-sponsored development programmes and has on occasion engaged in sharp confrontations with the administration in Kumaon.

Several USV activists formed the Uttarakhand Kranti Dal, which is leading a movement for the region to be given statehood. Dal activists felled thousands of trees throughout Garhwal and Kumaon during their 1988-89 *ped kato andolan* (fell trees movement), which was launched to counter delays in environmental clearance for road and water pipeline projects. Explains Bipin Tripathi, who led the 1978 struggle to save the Chanchridhar forest from being felled by a paper mill, “We cut trees in 111 places, where the government was using the Forest Conservation Act to hold up development projects. After all, we had to consider whether the trees are for the people or if it’s the other way around. Nearly 4,500 development schemes in the hills are held up due to environmental reasons. The hill people want trees, but they want development, too.”

It is indeed an irony that the very region that gave Chipko to India and the world now has activists promoting the *ped kato andolan* (cut trees movement). The came about because the state cited the environmental concerns that were first enunciated in the country by Chipko to centralise forest management, instead of decentralising. Now the complaint throughout Uttarakhand, from Almora to Uttarkashi, is: “We got nothing from Chipko. Even our *hak-hakooks* (traditional rights and customs) to forest produce, have been taken away from us.” Gayatri Devi, the heroine of the Doongri-Paintoli struggle, says, “Earlier, we could fight the contractors, but now the sarkar and the Van Nigam are the biggest contractors. How can we fight them?”

Even in Reni, a woman who wished to remain anonymous, complained, “They have put this entire area under the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve.

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In Reni, a woman who wished to remain anonymous, complained, "They have put this entire area under the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve. I can't even pick herbs to treat a stomach ache. Chipko karke hum latak gaye, bus ab aur kuch nahin karna (We got into enough trouble with Chipko. Now we don't even want to attempt anything else)." The woman said she had come to hate the word paryavaran (environment)

I can't even pick herbs to treat a stomach ache. Chipko *karke hum latak gaye, bus ab aur kuch nahin karna* (We got into enough trouble with Chipko. Now we don't even want to attempt anything else)." The woman said she had come to hate the word *paryavaran* (environment).

Analysing these complaints, Bist says, "The internationalisation of Chipko wrought havoc on the local people in many ways. While green felling has been stopped to a large extent, the people watch helplessly as the Van Nigam continues to be the biggest exploiter. The roads, electric lines, bridges and water pipelines that we need are all held up.

"Chipko was essentially an economic campaign, a fight for local livelihood and when this was not achieved, the people became disillusioned. Now, even their traditional rights have been taken away and the forest guard is supreme." This is conceded by N K Joshi, a forester, who says, "The Forest Conservation Act has not given the people much. It has not stopped development but it has certainly delayed it, as permission to build roads and lay down pipelines has to be obtained now from the Centre. This can take months and no villager wants that long."

Both Bhatt and Bahuguna maintain the villagers' traditional rights have not been taken away. They maintain that the media myth that it was, is fostered by vested business and political interests to break the movement. Bhatt concedes development has been affected in the region, but he blames this on "short-sighted government policies" and not on Chipko. On the other hand, Bahuguna contends, "Development is the major cause of ecological destruction. The needs of modern civilisation will have to be curtailed to preserve the environment."

Is Chipko moribund now? Bahuguna says no and describes his agitation against the Tehri dam as a continuation of Chipko. Bhatt, too, calls his campaign against the extension of the Vishnuprayag hydroelectric project to the Bhyunder valley and his encouragement of the afforestation work undertaken by MMDs as Chipko-related. Bhatt explains he has moved on to what he calls *rachnatmak* (constructive) activities, primarily involving women in tree-planting. The trees they plant, he adds, generally have a higher survival rate than forest department plantings. DGSM holds a number of three-day environment camps annually and they attract a few hundred people each. In 1986, MMDs of 30 villages where the DGSM worked got the Priyadarshini Vrikshamitra Award of the then National Wastelands Development Board.

Bhatt receives some government support for his afforestation work, exposing him to criticism that he has "governmentalised" Chipko. But, then, Bahuguna's critics say he has "internationalised" Chipko by putting it at the service of the world conservation community, from which he derives considerable support.

But the Himalayan villagers, who joined Chipko to further their struggle for basic subsistence rights that had been denied to them by state institutions, are dissatisfied with what they got. Their major complaint is the eulogising of Chipko to the extent that their other social movements, such as against alcoholism and untouchability, were overlooked. Alcohol continues to be the bane of Uttarakhand and the plight of women there is still unhappy.

Media role

The media may have played a key role in building up Chipko, but today it is subjected to widespread criticism in Uttarakhand. Says Bist, "Looking back, a major reason for the failure of Chipko was the role the media played. They made it an international movement, but how many newspapers bothered to send reporters to villages in the interior Uttarakhand? They reported on hearsay because they never talked to us."

Pratap Shikhar of Jajal, a Chipko activist during the 1970s, was even more forthright in his criticism of the media. "The media reports sparked a

wave of bitterness between Bhatt and Bahuguna, creating an unbridgeable rift between them, to the utter damnation of the movement," he says.

The many national and international awards received by Chipko leaders alienated them further from the people. Both Bahuguna and Bhatt were awarded the Padma Shri, Bhatt received the Magsaysay Award and Bahuguna accepted the Right Livelihood Award given to Chipko.

But Pathak analyses the movement differently: "The major failing of Chipko was its refusal to recognise its political dimensions. Political organising — both at local and national level — and electoral politics are necessary for a movement of this kind. But when politicisation was attempted, especially by the youth who came into the movement, the Sarvodaya workers dissociated themselves from it."

Bist confirms the youth did try to politicise Chipko, "but we were highly confused at that time. We looked to Bhatt and Bahuguna for leadership."

Nor did political parties learn from Chipko. The national CPI leadership didn't show any interest in the mass movement even though local CPI cadres were involved in it. "The final act of betrayal," says Bist, "came when a potentially radical political movement for self-determination and self-management of our resources turned into a purely conservationist one."

What this means is that a movement that could have given the world its most powerful green party with village self-governance at its heart, fell apart. It inspired a generation of young Indians to consider environment a critical concern, but many of the young of Uttarakhand who came to join it in the 1970s feel empty today.

C: 4 comments

Chipko's triumphs extend beyond the forest

A look at the achievements and failures of a movement that began spontaneously in the Garhwal region two decades ago to protect trees from human rapacity, by Jayanto Bandopadhyay

TWENTY years ago, the people of the remote Garhwal village of Mandal decided to resist commercial felling of the trees on which they depended for their basic needs. Their resistance soon spread to other parts of Garhwal and Kumaon, where local pressures on the area's limited grazing resources had reduced them to near unsustainability. The resistance, later dubbed Chipko, is an excellent example of a local survival economy seeking to protect itself against the increasing biomass demands of a non-local market economy.

Chipko and those associated with it have influenced environmental activism both domestically and abroad. What began as a spontaneous reaction of a rural community has provided a model for other forest-based environmental movements and inspired the global movement for alternative lifestyles.

Despite being known the world over as an environmentalist movement, Chipko's most important contribution is in the area of social and development activism. After the nation became disenchanted with people-based politics and Mahatma Gandhi was reduced to photographs on the wall, Chipko gave Gandhian social action a new image. In the 1960s, Chipko integrated the anti-liquor movement; in the '70s, it started the forest-protection movement, and in the '80s, it spearheaded the movement against big dams. In these ways, Chipko brought to the fore basic

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The most talked about influence of Chipko is its approach to forests and forest policies. By highlighting the threats to the sustainability of the Himalayan forests, Chipko encouraged and strengthened local institutions to undertake forest protection and utilisation. Appiko Chaluralli was set up in the Western Ghats in Karnataka and even in remote communities in Nepal and Bhutan, local initiatives have begun in forest management

questions concerning the dependency of the hill areas on accepted growth-based development models. In the '90s, Chipko's concentration shifted to the debate on sustainable development.

The most talked about influence of Chipko is its approach to forests and forest policies. By highlighting the threats to the sustainability of the Himalayan forests, Chipko encouraged and strengthened local institutions to undertake forest protection and utilisation. Appiko Chaluralli was set up in the Western Ghats in Karnataka and even in remote communities in Nepal and Bhutan, local initiatives have begun in forest management.

If the Himalayan forests survive by the turn of the century, much of the credit should go to Chipko. In an era when the media has become the message, Chipko's image has often been artificially dramatised, even at international gatherings.

Ironically enough, Chipko's lasting impact is not noise at international meetings, but in the enhancement of the strength of the thousands of people of Garhwal, and especially the women, strong, invisible, marginalised, overworked and unpaid. After two decades, they are the real, living impact of Chipko.

Jayanto Bandopadhyaya is with the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Kathmandu. [Note: designation at time of writing, that is, April 30, 1993]

Personality clashes lead to internal schisms

Chipko was the culmination of a century of popular resistance to commercial forestry in the Uttarakhand Himalaya. And its timing was right, says Ramachandra Guha

Unlike past movements, Chipko's underlying message was already part of a major public debate. At both national and global levels, Chipko helped to consolidate incipient awareness that deforestation, soil erosion and floods are linked to the fragility of mountain ecosystems.

Chipko was also interpreted as a critique of the overall development process and as an assertion of the rights of villagers whose labour and resources are subordinated to the demands of the urban industrial sector. Chipko has thus become an inevitable reference point in debates on development alternatives

Its symbolic appeal has been aided greatly by its non-violent form of protest, the participation of women and the obvious sincerity and charisma of its leaders. It is certainly India's most celebrated environmental initiative and widely known (if often misrepresented) abroad. In this capacity, Chipko has been the symbol of the growing interest in a decentralised, environmentally sensitive alternative to the present patterns of "destructive development". More specifically, Chipko and similar movements in other forest areas have had a formative influence on forest policy debates and on the state's significant, if partial, acknowledgement of responsibility for past failures in this sphere.

To the extent that Chipko has contributed to and, in some respects, created a major national debate, it must be rated a considerable success. But what of its impact within Uttarakhand? Here, the verdict must be more qualified. Undeniably, Chipko helped to slow down the pace of forest-felling in the hills and sparked much interest in the Himalayan ecology. But, its potential reach and influence have been severely undermined by serious schisms within the movement. The splits were caused partly by a clash of personality between Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna.

Bhatt and the Dashauli Gram Swarajya Mandal pioneered Chipko, coordinated its early protests and then involved village women with great

success in the reclamation and afforestation of degraded land. The faction led by Bahuguna organised important Chipko protests in Tehri Garhwal between 1976 and 1980, but has since concentrated largely on global issues, neglecting local concerns in the process. The third Chipko faction is the Uttarakhand Sangharsh Vahini. It provided a radical thrust to the movement in the late '70s, but its dedicated core of student activists has since gone their individual ways.

The schisms within Chipko are deep-rooted and difficult to reconcile because the groups are bitterly hostile to each other. Hence, Chipko activists have contributed little to the growing movement for a separate hill state, which is at present the most significant popular initiative in Uttarakhand.

Like the Jharkhand movement, the hill state demand has raised important challenges to the concentration of political power in India even though it is in effect a one-point programme for creation of Uttarakhand from the eight hill districts of Uttar Pradesh.

Ramachandra Guha, is the author of The Unquiet Woods, a history of social movements in Uttarakhand.

The dream remains confined to Garhwal

An essay on Chipko by Madhav Gadgil

The British blamed the improvidence of the Indian peasantry for the destruction of India's forest wealth. Even with Independence, the bureaucracy continued to toe this line and with such effect that in the 1950s, the new forest policy asserted local people should not enjoy special rights over forests in their neighbourhood simply because they happened to be born there. Instead, industries were given special rights to use forest resources at prices as low as 0.1 per cent of prevailing market rates. Farmers in the Alaknanda valley in Garhwal, for example, had to pay much more for pine resin locally than the turpentine factory in faraway Bareilly. As for the valley's fodder-yielding trees, a sports-goods factory retained control over them.

The realisation of their loss and the small measure of power acquired by the peasants in democratic India triggered Chipko, a landmark in India's conservation movements. Before Chipko, conservation movements were invariably elitist, like the World Wildlife Fund, and folk traditions of ecological prudence were certainly fading away, if not totally eliminated. An example of this is that in the 1970s, the Karnataka forest department even recommended the felling of sacred groves to feed the plywood industry.

Chipko turned the tide because people began to realise the well-being of peasants and tribals is linked intimately with the health of the local ecosystem. Commercial users, on the other hand, did not care if a resource base was exhausted because they could always move on to a substitute.

Since Chipko was started 20 years ago, some substantial gains have been achieved. Commercial forest exploitation has been checked to some extent, the new forest policy acknowledges local communities as legitimate guardians of their resource base and above all, most of the states have issued orders assigning an effective role to local communities in managing their forest resources. Unfortunately, little of this has been translated into reality. Throughout the country, local communities remain unorganised and inadequately empowered. Only in West Bengal, where the process of political decentralisation has gone farthest, has genuine progress been made. Land reforms have been implemented and village-level political cadres are effectively challenging officialdom.

Obviously, only when people at the grassroots level across the country acquire actual control over their own destiny, will they be able to

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protect India's long-exploited resource bases.

Madhav Gadgil is chairperson of the Centre for Ecological Studies at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. [Designation at the time of writing: April 30, 1993]

Uneducated villagers bring about a miracle

An essay on Chipko by Anupam Mishra

As a people's movement, Chipko's achievements are well beyond the ordinary. Launched by a small organisation called the Dasholi Gram Samaj Mandal in the tiny village of Gopeshwar in the Garhwal region of Uttar Pradesh, Chipko exerted an immense impact on environmental movements throughout the world. This, despite Chipko's members being mostly simple, uneducated villagers.

Chipko's message was uncomplicated but difficult to implement: Cling to a tree to prevent it from being felled. To do so meant braving the sharp edge of the axe that had already felled many hectares of forest. Only when this message was widely accepted were the trees saved. Chipko confronted other antagonisms. In the first it agitated against manufacturers of sports goods. Then it took on a forest contractor, the licence-granting Uttar Pradesh government and the state forest department.

Chipko also attacked tree-felling for the region's largest temple Badrinath. For this they had to fight against the local cooperative society. Each Chipko campaign was fought with determination as the movement evolved from a minor group seeking forest conservation to a people's determination to tackle all malpractices in their region by involving the masses.

Chipko opposed a local cooperative society's tree-felling on behalf of the largest temple in the region Badrinath. Because of its timely intervention, alteration of the temple's architectural structure was prevented. Chipko also raised its voice against the overloading of pilgrims in buses plying on the route. Bus owners also stopped charging exorbitantly high rates.

Chipko has accomplished much, not only preserving forests but also regenerating them. It has succeeded significantly in explaining the need for all this and for local communities to have the right to decide their own environment protection measures. Chipko influenced the administration and the people of India's largest state through its non-violent agitation. In doing so, it paved the way for other regions and nations to follow suit.

Anupam Misra is attached to the Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi.

D: An interview

"There can be no development without women"

Reaching Doongri, a picturesque village perched 1,750 m above sea level in the Pindar valley in Chamoli district, is a daunting task. The nearest bus stand is at Narayan Bagad, 12 km away and at a height of about 1,100 m. From there, a narrow, slippery mountain path climbs steeply and is certainly not recommended for those who suffer from vertigo. An attempt to build a motorable road to Doongri was abandoned in 1971.

One of Chipko's most significant agitations took place in 1980 in Doongri, when the men of the village agreed to sell their oak forest to the horticulture department so that a potato and apple seed farm could be started there on about 20 ha. However, if the forest was cut down, the women would face severe problems getting fuelwood and firewood, for it was the only forest for miles around. But their opposition went

unheeded. It was at this juncture that Chipko activists intervened. With help from the district administration, they saved as much of the forest as possible, as part of it had already been felled. In the forefront of the Chipko struggle was Gayatri Devi, president of Doongri's Mahila Mangal Dal. The organisation received the Vrikshamitra Award in 1986 and Gayatri Devi came to Delhi to accept it.

But, today, Doongri still remains backward and isolated and in an interview with Down To Earth, Gayatri Devi, now 48, voiced her disappointment. Excerpts:

What happened in your village in 1980?

The horticulture department got 10 ha in 1978 or 1979 — I can't remember exactly when — from Shyam Singh Bhandari, the village pradhan, to build a seed farm for potatoes and apples. This was a part of our forest of oak, rhododendron, gauriphal and atish trees. But towards the end of 1979, a contractor who was related to the pradhan came and erected a stone boundary around the entire forest, which was more than 50 ha. The pradhan wanted to bring in development projects and he thought that a seed farm would lead to officers coming to our village and staying here. He thought we would get roads, schools and hospitals. Then one day, at the end of January or early February, 50 labourers sent by the contractor began cutting down trees. We tried to stop them, but they said they were only labourers and they were helpless. We pleaded with them at first, then there was exchange of abuses and we grabbed some of their axes, while they took away our scythes. But we could not stop them and they cut down about 60 trees.

Why was the forest so important to you?

The forest is our life. It gives us fuel, fodder, medicines, almost everything. The horticulture department had already cleared 10 ha and we didn't want them to clear the rest. What would we get in return?

What did you want in return?

Well, the question of giving away the entire forest does not arise. We could have sacrificed more if we were assured of a road to the village, a school, a proper water supply and a primary health centre. We had to walk 5 km to get fuel from nearby forests. To lose our forests would have meant an even longer walk and, perhaps, a long walk to find a place to defecate.

But was that not what your pradhan also wanted? Why did you oppose his development plans?

That's what they say, but if you think I didn't want development, you are wrong. The pradhan has done nothing since 1971, when the road to our village was abandoned. Even the horticulture farm people have done nothing in the time they were here. We had no faith in them. Many men, including my husband, who is an ex-serviceman, were convinced by the pradhan's arguments. I had no faith in the pradhan. *Aur woh vikas ho hi nahin sakta jisme mahilaon ki hissedari na ho.* (No development is possible without women's participation.)

So what did you do?

First, we went to the then pradhan, but he abused us and drove us out. Then the present pradhan, Bachchiram, who was on our side, got in touch with Ramesh Pahadi (editor of *Aniket*, a weekly published from Rudraprayag). Pahadi contacted Chandi Prasad Bhatt and came to our village. He told us to form a Mahila Mangal Dal (MMD) and fight. I think this happened on February 8. Bhatt came a few days later, stayed in the village overnight and told us of the wonderful things that women elsewhere were doing. We heard of Gaura Devi and felt we could do the same things.

How did the men react?

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They were letting the horticulture department cut down the forests and so they were angry at us for stopping development, opposing the government and defying them. They had been used to women as silent and uncomplaining slaves. We had a big fight and it continued through the year. I became the subject of cruel taunts.

What happened then?

Bhatt forced the sub-divisional magistrate (SDM) to come to our village. He had to ride a mule as he couldn't walk up. This was on February 23. We held him by his collar and forced him to listen to us. The horticulture farm workers had set a hut on fire and spread the rumour that it was the work of the women. The men told us we would be put in jail, but I was ready to go to prison and so were most of my sisters. However, the SDM was very nice and told the men they were wrong and that we could keep our forest. We gave the horticulture department another 2 ha. But I paid a personal price for the pradhan made sure that I don't get an electricity connection.

What does the MMD do now?

After a lot of running around, we got a high school in our village in 1990. The village men joined us in a seven-day hunger strike before the school was allotted to us. Most of us are illiterate, but we want our children to grow up educated. Each of our families contributes foodgrain to engage a guard for the forest. We ourselves put up a stone fence around the entire forest.

Doesn't the horticulture department do anything for you?

Nothing. They don't even give us seeds. We have to pay Rs 10 for a small packet of seeds and that, too, after a lot of pleading. Even then the seeds often don't germinate. They don't employ any of the villagers. Nobody cares for us and we are treated as *pahadi junglis* (uncivilised mountain folk).

But you and your village are famous. Surely, a lot of visitors come here?

Who comes here? Bhatt came just once in 1980. Gopa Joshi of Delhi also came, but they soon forgot about us. Then, one day, Bhatt's son came and said I would have to go to Delhi in 1986 to get an award. And, I went.

But no one came here after that?

When Bhatt and Pahadi don't bother to come, who else will? They became famous because of the work we had done. They got awards and went abroad, but they don't care for us. We hear of Bhatt's organisation planting trees, but they never came here. We too want to plant trees, but from where do we get the saplings?

What about the government?

Do you think these officials would bother? Don't ask such silly questions. And, in any case, even if they want to come, how would they walk such a long distance. There is a very good nurse in Narayan Bagad. Even if she wants to come here, she cannot. She has to spend a full day walking up to our village to attend a delivery case. How many patients can she care for this way? She has to worry about her security, too. Even the block development officer, a lady, has never come up to our village. We desperately need a road. There are times when I wonder whether we are in India or some other country.

What happens if somebody falls ill at night?

We just pray. Our traditional vaidas (doctors) are no longer around and getting medicinal herbs is impossible these days. The other day a woman

had a breech delivery and both mother and child died. The village dais (midwives) are untrained. I have been asking at block meetings for some kind of training for them, but nobody cares.

What did you get out of Chipko?

I don't know. We acted to save our trees. We never clung to any tree but when I went to Delhi, I was told that ours was a very big *andolan* (movement). Maybe it was, but we never got anything out of it. The road to our village is yet to be constructed and water is still a problem. Our children cannot study beyond high school unless they can afford to go and stay in a town. The girls simply cannot do that. Now they tell me that because of Chipko the road cannot be built because everything has become *pariyavaran* (environment) oriented nowadays. Chipko has given us nothing. We cannot even get wood to build a house because the forest guards keep us out. *Hamare haq haqooq cheen liye gaye hain.* (Our rights have been snatched away.)

But why did you end the struggle?

Who said I did? I hold MMD meetings regularly, twice a month, and those who are absent without a valid reason are fined. I also insist that those who steal wood from the forest or cut down trees should be penalised. With the money from fines, we will buy utensils for wedding feasts. I plan to contest the panchayat elections and become the pradhan next year. I am alone and I'm getting old and I cannot do much but as long as I live, I shall not give up fighting to improve our village conditions. My first fight will be for the road, *pariyavaran wale chahe kuchh bhi kare* (and let environmentalists do what they will).

Reading 2: India's village republics

The Second Independence

Tiny forgotten villages teach India a first-hand lesson in governance. Down To Earth reporters and photographers fan out to six states to discover how villages have kept their date with history. An August 31, 2002 story

With the monsoon, the world shrinks for the 25 villages in Visakhapatnam district's Kamyapeta area. Tucked deep in the Eastern Ghats and surrounded by numerous seasonal streams, the 2,500-odd residents of these villages remain cut off from the rest of the world for close to eight months. "If we don't move out, we will starve," says Manmad Rao, a resident of Kamyapeta village. Without a road they cannot access the market to sell their forest produce and foodgrains.

When the Andhra Pradesh government started constructing a bridge over a seasonal river last year, there was jubilation. The world touches Kamyapeta now.

But the story is not that simple. The villages suffered for more than five decades, as they didn't exist in the government records. The government doesn't recognise them and therefore, denies them any support. "We were nobody's children. Anybody could threaten and misbehave with us," says Rao. The residents approached the government officials several times only to be driven out by police. Things did not move till one fine morning in March 1999.

An innocuous stone slab appeared at the entrance of Kamyapeta, declaring it a self-ruled republic. "Since then, our writ runs large," says Rao, who now visits other villages to propagate self-rule. In their first meeting, the villagers asked the government to construct a bridge and give up

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control over what they believe is their resources: thick forest, land and numerous water sources. Within three years, the state government started constructing the bridge with a budget of Rs 2.5 crore. Though the government still doesn't acknowledge these villages, officials never dare to miss any summon from the gram sabha (village assembly).

In fact, Kamyapeta has gained independence for the second time. Home to the legendary tribal freedom fighter, Marie Kamaya, it joined the freedom movement to save its forests and land from British logging companies. Marie's land and house were confiscated and the village was declared 'criminal'. When India attained independence, Marie thought the village's traditional governance system would be restored. "But nothing changed. Earlier we were exploited by the British, now it is the forest department," says Marie Ramana, son of the freedom fighter. "When we declared self-rule, my father's dream came true," he says. Kamyapeta's second independence is, in fact, a realization of Mahatma Gandhi's cherished dream of gram swaraj (village republic).

The real republics

The stone slab, a symbol of the 25 villages' republic status, is also making appearances elsewhere in the country. Mostly in villages scattered across India's poorest regions and yet untouched by the fruits of Independence. A conservative estimate based on different reports shows that close to 1,500 villages have declared themselves village republics. In these villages, residents control their natural resources — forest, land, minerals and water sources. They have also formed effective institutions to manage these resources. They plan, execute and resolve all affairs inside the village. Government officials and programmes are accepted only when the gram sabha approves them. In many such villages, the forest department, the police and other officials are just restricted to executing programmes chalked out in village meetings.

Everywhere the desire for self-rule comes from the threat to livelihood. Take the 125 villages inside the Rajiv Gandhi National Park in Karnataka's Nagarhole. When the government declared their traditional home as a national park, it meant evacuation. What the 40,000-odd residents did was to declare self-rule and take control of the area. A task force was set up in each village to work out the modalities for self-rule. Barriers were erected with signboards directing outsiders to seek permission of the *yajaman* (traditional chief) prior to conducting their business in the village.

Such are the strong linkages of these village republics to control over natural resources that they can be termed as natural republics. For these republics, the freedom struggle means control over forest, land and water.

"The struggle for self rule in every village emanates from the issue of managing natural resources as it is crucial for their livelihood," says B D Sharma, convener of the National Front for Tribal Self Rule and former commissioner of National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. "Declaring self rule is natural for these villages as it ensures their livelihood from forest and land," says Bina Stanis, an activist based in Hazaribagh, Jharkhand. The more the government has control over these resources, the more assertive are the villages. In Balrampur block of Chattisgarh's Surguja district, residents of 20 villages fought over the rights to minor forest produce. Last year, they did not allow the forest department (FD) to take timber from the government forests. After months of conflict, the FD had to pay a 'tax' of Rs 5,000 to get the timber. These villages are now on their way to self-rule.

Scheduled spread

The Constitution's Fifth Schedule gives local communities administrative power over local resources like minor forest produce, water and minerals in specified tribal-dominated areas in nine states. Taking cue from this, in certain areas these villages are adopting their own constitution

and implementing it through the gram sabha. In Rajasthan's Dungarpur and Banswara districts, villages are taking control over forest and mining after declaring self-rule. A movement called *gramganaraj* (village self-rule) is spreading throughout the state's tribal dominated areas. The first *gramganaraj*, village Talaiya in Gugunda *tehsil*, declared self-rule in 1997 to take control over a pond, which was located in the protected forest under the FD. The villagers wrote to the FD that either they allow residents to use the pond or they would forcibly take over. When the FD did not act, the residents grabbed the pond. Today, the gram sabha manages the pond and the forest. "A special feature of these villages is that after declaring *gramganaraj*, a *shilalekh* (stone inscription) is placed inside the village with the new constitution inscribed on it," says Bhanwar Singh of Udaipur-based Astha, an NGO working with tribal communities.

Interestingly, most of these self-ruled villages are located in the scheduled areas. Traditionally and constitutionally, these villages are entitled to autonomous status. In Jharkhand, which has been without panchayats for the past 23 years, self-rule is taking shape. If one drives from the capital Ranchi towards the Karra block, there are more than 178 villages that have declared themselves as republics. In the Ghatsila block of east Singhbhum district, there are 800 such villages, according to an estimate of the National Front for Tribal Self-rule, a movement campaigning for tribal self-rule. For these villages, December 24 is more auspicious than August 15. "After the Panchayat (Extension to Schedule Areas) Act (PESA) came into effect from December 24, 1996, we have a new lease of life," says Kushal Horo, a resident of Masmano village. This act is a radical piece of legislation, which gives virtual control over all the resources to the communities in the scheduled areas. These villages have adopted PESA and merged it with their own traditional systems of governance to manage village affairs.

In all these villages, there is one formal institution — the gram sabha. And without waiting for the governor's definition of a village, people have drawn their village map. The result: even a small hamlet comprising a few households now has its own gram sabha. While the gram sabha has become central to such republics, what keeps them united is the issue of livelihood. While in comparatively new villages with self-rule the gram sabhas directly monitor village affairs, older villages like Seed in Rajasthan and Mendha in Maharashtra have formed different committees to look after different resources in the village.

"In these villages, natural resources and their equitable distribution form the core of governance," says Bhagwan Majhi, a leader of Kucheipadar village in Rayagada, which has declared self-rule. Many of these villages have chalked out their development roadmap. Due to direct intervention of the gram sabha, many villages have evolved innovative solutions to local problems. For example in Kucheipadar, villagers have a community labour participation programme for cultivation in private lands to tackle labour shortage. And to do away with water scarcity, a stream up in the hill has been diverted to the village through a complex network of trenches. "Innovations are natural when people decide for themselves," says Ravi Pragada of Samata, a Hyderabad-based NGO.

The Fountainhead: Dongripara (Dhamtari district, Chattisgarh)

Formerly not even recognized by the government as a village, the residents have now integrated management of forest and water resources and see self-governance as a matter of community pride. Which village is this? "Dongripara Gaon Ganrajya (Dongripara village republic)," is the innocent reply of 10-year-old Gopal Nag of Dongripara, anxiously waiting for October 18. It is his Gaon Ganrajya Diwas (village republic day). Much before he learnt the alphabet and knew about India's Independence Day, Dongripara declared self-rule on this day in 1997. The imposing *shilalekh* erected in the village square declares it a republic and empowers the gram sabha to be the highest governing body.

Geographically, this is the fountainhead of many civilizations on the Mahanadi, officially not a village and by practice a republic. "I do not go to Dongripara. They don't allow me to enter the village," concedes D S Kunjam, Tehsildar of the Nagari Janpad Panchayat, whose department

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doesn't recognise Dongripara as a village. Panchayat leaders also are wary of entering the villages.

Dongripara's biggest challenge was to be recognised as a village, and to have a stake on its surrounding forest and a tank. Their freedom struggle started from here. Home to Halwa, Gond, and Kewat tribes, the livelihood of the residents was dependent on agriculture and collection of minor forest produce, strictly managed by the traditional system of governance. "The system ran perfectly and residents were reasonably prosperous until the *akal varsh* (referring to famine of 1965)," says Nag. As dependence on forests grew, more and more conflicts between villagers and forest department were reported.

The Panchayati Raj Amendment Act of 1992 and subsequently the MP State Panchayat Adhiniyam of 1993 brought some hope for the villagers as it offloaded many government stakes on village resources. "We thought it would set everything right." But the situation became worse with the panchayat levying all kinds of taxes to boost its income, say villagers. The conflict began when the panchayat impinged upon the *nistar* (traditional) rights of the villagers. It leased out the village pond for fishing rights to a contractor and allowed the public works department (PWD) to extract stones from the hill. "The whole panchayati raj became the keep of the sarpanch," says an agitated Sampat Lal Yadu, convener of the gram sabha.

This gave birth to the gram sabha. First it closed the doors for government officials and took over the management of the *dongri* (hill) and the pond. The village constitution (perpetuated in the stone inscription) gives its citizens equal rights over all resources. Through a 10-member appointed *van rakhwali samiti* (forest protection committee), the gram sabha oversees the regeneration of the *dongri*. "Within ten years the green cover will come back," assures Indra Nag, a member of the *samiti*. The gram sabha does community fishing and earns money for funding village development programmes. The PWD is not allowed to take even a single stone chip from the *dongri*. The stone chips, still lying on the foothills, remain the witness to the birth of Dongripara republic on October 18, 1997.

The powerful gram sabha now completely looks after the village affairs and implements decisions through an executive committee of ten members (five of them are women). As a conflict management strategy no decision is taken unless a consensus is reached. "If we do not reach a consensus, the issue is just scrapped," says Aash Bai. The movement has given the villagers two important things — community feeling and pride. "With our governance, they (government officials) talk to us on our terms," says Mehtarani, remembering her arrest during initial days of the village's fight with the PWD. "Village development is the only agenda of the gram sabha. We want to show the other villages that the path we chose for us was right," says Shankar Nag.

A Republican Paradise: Mendha (Gadchirolli, Maharashtra)

Heaven: miles and miles of forest without any forest-guards

Hell: miles and miles of forest without any mahua trees.

— *Leaves From The Jungle*, British anthropologist Verrier Elwin's conversation with a Gond member in 1936.

Gonds in Mendha fought for 'heaven' to avoid the 'hell'. With India's Independence started Mendha's freedom struggle. A village with 80 per cent of its area covered with dense forest, it was a prize catch for the forest department when in 1950 its officials armed with the Indian Forest Act, 1927, took control of it. So many believe that the forest act gave birth to the republic of Mendha.

The forest act is still powerful but the forest department accepts Mendha as a model forest management practice. It became the first village in

India to get well grown forest to manage under JFM, which otherwise gives degraded forest for joint protection.

Mendha has composed the new anthem of India's numerous village republics by practice: "*Mawa Nate mate Raj, Dilli-Mumbai mawa Raj* (in our village we are the government, in Delhi and Mumbai it is our government)". Former governor of Maharashtra, P C Alexander, had to seek permission from the gram sabha in December 2000 to visit Mendha, a virtual acknowledgement of the village's sovereignty.

Mendha probably became the first village in India, where community work demands individual responsibility and hence everybody has to contribute time and resources to it. The village constitution makes it mandatory for its citizens to contribute 10 per cent of his/her total annual earning to implement the gram sabha decisions. As the village has decided not to accept donation or any government programme but to treat them as loans, the contributions compensate. Any work that is started in the village's 1,600-hectare (ha) area, permission of the gram sabha is mandatory. "This makes the village a true republic and an effective participatory democracy," says Mohanbhai Hiralal, convener of Vrikshamitra, an NGO working in Mendha. More so if anybody bribes a government official for work to be done, he/she has to give the same amount of money to the gram sabha also.

At a time when nobody was bothered about the existence of the forest act, Mendha led the nation in exposing the act as another colonial instrument. In 1950, government took over the village's forest by declaring it protected forest under the act. In its first fight against the act under the gram sabha it decided to revive the traditional system of Ghotul in the village. "Ghotul made of wood is a home for young boys and girls where they were taught the traditions and values of tribal culture," explains Shivram Dugga. Villagers constructed a ghotul of teak wood, proscribed by government from felling, in the village.

"The forest department came with a large armed contingent and broke our ghotul as they said we had violated law," says Dugga. This move by the forest department enraged the villagers and they called a *mahasabha* (grand assembly) of 32 villages in the area. The grand assembly endorsed Mendha's fight and vowed to fight over the forest. "Twelve villages constructed ghotuls in their villages and the forest department had to eventually retreat," says Hirabhai. It was a moment of reckoning for the village and its new governance system.

In 1992, the village started its decisive fight over the forest when about 80 per cent of its forest was declared reserve forest. The gram sabha decided to challenge the move of the government, and appointed a *van suraksha samiti* to take control and to manage the forest. The gram sabha took up extensive watershed management inside the forest and constructed 1000 gully plugs in the forest stream. "The effort has increased the productivity of the soil," says Shiva Ram. Finally the forest department allowed the village to manage the 1,600 ha forest in 1996. The ultimate victory came to the republic of Mendha when the state cabinet decided to give back all its traditional rights over forest recently.

Unshakable: Nimalapedu (Vishakapatnam, Andhra Pradesh)

Where the spacious black topped 20-km long road ends, India ceases and the republic of Nimalapedu starts. Life takes a different meaning altogether: "Here people rule," says Sambhu Pollana, the head of the village's gram sabha. The 200 residents are busy harvesting their first crop of paddy in June, unmindful of the fact that the state's one-third villages have been declared drought-stricken. "We have to prepare for the second sowing immediately," adds Pollana. Three crops a year and a kitchen garden in each household make the village prosperous; so much that once it told the district collector that the village would feed him and his hundreds employees for a month.

Pollana should know it better. In 1992, his village was threatened to be bulldozed by the earth-removers of a private mining company to extract

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***The Panchayati Raj
Amendment Act of 1992 and
subsequently the MP State
Panchayat Adhiniyam of 1993
brought some hope for the
villagers as it offloaded many
government stakes on village
resources. "We thought it
would set everything right."
But the situation became
worse with the panchayat
levying all kinds of taxes to
boost its income, say vil-
lagers. The conflict began
when the panchayat impinged
upon the nistar (traditional)
rights of the villagers***

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bauxite. He was told to move out of the village and to settle somewhere else. But a brief meeting of the residents changed the course of their life. "We can't move without the perennial stream and the few tamarind and mango trees," the village meeting decided. Thus began a four-year-long legal battle to throw out the mining company from Pollana's village.

In 1996, the Supreme Court gave its verdict: In the Fifth Scheduled areas, nothing can be taken without the consent of the gram sabha. The gram sabha didn't give the consent to the company. The company had to abandon its Rs 250 crore investment and Pollana declared sovereignty. Since then nobody from the government visits the village. "The biggest lesson is how to govern," says Karingji Ramana, a resident.

That spacious black-topped road, built by the mining company to transport bauxite from the mines, remains a metaphor for the village's 'independence struggle'. Nobody walks on that road and it is used for husking and drying paddy. "We don't have to use it for walking as we hardly go out. Our own resources are enough to have a surplus economy," says Ramana.

The village now harvests three crops and has earmarked all the fruit bearing trees with estimates of their annual economic value. A tamarind tree fetches Rs 1,500 every year, a mango tree fetches Rs 2,000 and the jackfruit tree has unlimited value as they form the common food pool for the monsoon. A small stream has been diverted into the village to supply water. Residents have made their own canal using bamboo and wooden pipes to take water to their fields. "The income from agriculture is sufficient so that the village has decided to give land to the six landless families on lease with nominal fee of few kilogrammes of tamarind and mangoes," says Bala Raju, the village's first college going resident. "My education will also be taken care of by the gram sabha," he says.

Education, it seems, is the republic's next agenda. The gram sabha has opened a primary school and the curriculum includes self-governance. "While learning alphabets the first word we teach them is 'village'," says B Rama Naidu, the teacher. The school opens whenever the students are free from cattle herding or feel free to study. It is not recognised but the importance of the village is that the next generation will know about the village's rebirth. So it is not a matter of shame when none of the residents, including the teacher, could tell when is India's Independence Day.

In Birsa's Land: Horomocho (Hazaribagh, Jharkhand)

Horomocho is just another sleepy village in the district of Hazaribagh, Jharkhand. There is nothing much that looks very striking in this village of 52 Santhal households. Mud walled houses, *mohua* and *kusum* trees, *kacchha* streets, people lazing around after work — as in most of India's villages. But few things are compellingly unusual.

The forest and the absence of forest department officials is one of them. However, the surprise is on the bank of the Rohargada river, a small rivulet of the Damodar: a community coal mine. Ask the villagers and they are most nonchalant about it. "Oh that! It has been there. It belongs to the village," they will say with a shrug. The next thing that comes to one's mind is the legal part. All the mineral deposits in India belong to the government and the contractors who take them on lease exploit them. Moreover, any mine cannot be like that of Horomocho. Normally, bulldozers and contractors mob any piece of mineral. How come this coal pit here is devoid of any such thing?

The shadow of government has not touched Horomocho. Not since 1943 when a government team came to survey the village. Ten kilometres to the nearest bus stand, Horomocho has not seen many amenities. But nobody complains. On the contrary, they defy these. "We are rich," says Dhaniram Tutu, the Majhi Haram or head of the village in the traditional Santhali system. The village economy is limited to sustenance. For extra

money, they sell forest produce in the nearby market.

Rich they are. They have a coalmine, 200 hectares of *sal* forest, perennial water sources and the agricultural fields. A two-room dispensary and a three-room school, both under the cool shade of *mohua* trees, complete the picture. In 1982, the village declared sovereignty over these. And with the Majhi Haram, the Santhal traditional gram sabha, managing these resources with wisdom, there are not too many worries and plenty of time to play football. They have the best football team in the area.

“Our law is equal for everyone,” says Charku Soren, the deputy chief of the village. The villagers who work around the traditional Majhi Haram system manage things with an iron hand. “We had to be strong,” says Charku, his stern face glowing with the light of a kerosene lamp. He explains why.

The forests of the village were depleted due to massive felling by the forest department as well as the neighbouring villages. “We felt threatened. They (the government) tried to take everything from us instead of giving us anything,” says Dhaniram. This was pre-1982 when some like Dhaniram and Charku have seen schools and gained some confidence. The village decided to act. They went to the forest department officials and told them to take their salary from their homes.

With the forest, they also acquired the coal pits on the banks of the small rivulet in the village. Situated on India's rich coal belt, Horomocho could foresee its fate: one day the village would be buried in coal pits. The only way to save the village forest, protected since last two decades, was to keep the mines commercially unexploited. So the logical step was to declare the mines as community property. “This is a property of the village and it will stay in the village. No commercial use will be allowed here,” says Churku. The villagers now use the mine, a six metres by three metres pit, about three metres deep, filled with water beside the Rohargada river in the village. “Every year the villagers take out about 20 tractor-loads of coal for the village,” says Lambu, a resident. The coal, however, is distributed free of cost and suffices the fuel requirements of the village for most of the year. Remarkably, this has also decreased a lot of pressure on the forest for which the mine was taken over. “It is natural and practical for the village to take control,” says Bina Stanis, an activist based in Hazaribagh.

They are still strong. And united. “You never know this money business,” says Ganesh Ganju, a resident of Lathia referring to the nexus of government officials and contractors. This village also manages its resources like Horomocho and so do seven other villages. “The government can also come anytime to claim the resources,” he adds talking about bitter experiences of the past. However, they all are sure this. Whatever it takes, they are not going to part with their *jal*, *jangal* and *jameen*. Fully aware of the confrontations and the difficulties involved, they are also very confident about winning this war and keeping it that way. Once Birsa Munda did. One cannot see why Horomocho and its allies cannot.

Whither freedom?

Horomocho, Seed or Mendha are just replays of India's past. India had carefully evolved and maintained this decentralised democracy for centuries as a management tool for a complex livelihood system. So strong were these republics that the British Empire tried to exclude them from their formal control, after years of effort to control them and before weakening them substantially.

“The village communities are little republics, having everything that they can want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts,” wrote Lord Ripon to the Select Committee of the House of Commons in 1832.

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Probably threatened by Ripon's assessment and the humiliation of the 1857 mutiny, the village republics were subjected to systematic dosages of government control till they lost their relevance. First, they weakened the institution by taking over part of village's traditional administrative and legal powers. Even then it could not completely wipe out the traditional institutions. They failed because they had to fight the whole society in each and every village. Ultimately they withdrew from some tribal areas and called them excluded areas (the Indian constitution's Fifth and Sixth Schedules recognise these areas as autonomous entities).

For other villages the final blow came in 1856, when Dietrich Brandis, a German botanist and India's first inspector general of forests, was making an inventory of India's trees. After nine years in 1865, the Forest Act came into existence, India's republics were facing the test of centralisation and also alien invasion. It formalised government control over forest and everything inside it thus making villages' access to resources a mercy at the hand of the Empire. Next came the government-created village level institutions to replace the traditional ones. The Appointment of Royal Commission on Decentralisation in 1907 decided that the local government should start from the village level rather than the district level, but favoured the government-created institutions like the panchayats to implement such programmes.

By 1947, such panchayats were in place as units of governance with government-defined judicial and administrative functions. India's freedom fighters opposed this dilution vehemently. Gram swaraj became an important agenda of the nationalist struggle. During the quit India movement in the 1940s, village-based parallel governments cropped up in different parts of the country to counter such panchayats. Many of such villages are now declaring self-rule again. Kamyapeta is one of them.

The final act

After Independence, constitution framers debated the village republics and many aggressively suggested a republic consisting of these tiny republics. But the final draft of the constitution decided to continue the British policy, rather more aggressively. The constituent assembly, that drafted the constitution, failed to legalise and adopt the traditional village institutions as units of governance. "I am glad the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit," said B R Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian constitution.

This statement reflects in the constitution. The constitution underlines the role of the Union government, while giving wide-ranging powers to the states. The village self-rule, however, is not emphasised. Except in Article 40, where there is a provision to "take steps to reorganise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and functions as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government".

For over four decades, the Union and state governments debated the fate of these republics on one hand and on the other, implemented policies that curtailed their powers, particularly their control over resources. The forest act became the new instrument for the government to pursue its commercial interests. Large chunks of land were converted into forest using this act. Using a Cattle-Trespass Act, 1871, — a separate act to protect forest areas meant for the British army that is still in use — residents were not allowed to get fodder for their livestock. Even cattle were not allowed to graze in lush plantation areas. The village forest, as allowed under the forest act, was also taken over or made inaccessible to the villagers.

Forest corporations were formed by different states to commercially extract timber and non-timber produce. Villages were forced to sell their forest produce to these corporations.

Similarly, using an archaic Land Acquisition Act, 1894, the government started acquiring lands, most of which belonged to the tribal villages.

Pursuing Jawaharlal Nehru's policy of centralised management of water, all waterbodies and sources were transferred to the irrigation departments. The panchayats then became agents of such departments and the sarpanchs started calling the shots.

By mid-1960s, it was clear from a nationwide survey of the local governments by the National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD) that these institutions had become fiefdom of the sarpanch. The survey recommended revival of the gram sabha as the nodal bodies of self-governance. A committee set up in 1957 to evaluate the failure in community development programme with Balwant Rai Mehta, eminent social worker, as the chairperson, attributed it to the collapse of the village level traditional institutions or the collapse of the village republics. The committee recommended the three-tier panchayati raj system.

It took 35 years for the government to formally adopt the three-tier system through the adoption of Panchayati Raj Act in 1992. Though local self-governance has got constitutional mandate, it suffers from political will to implement it. Instead of strengthening these constitutional institutions, governments have been curtailing their power over the years. State governments can dismantle these institutions at the drop of a hat. "The constitution provides the maximum of guarantees for the autonomous existence of panchayati raj, while leaving the state legislatures to prescribe the maximum limits of powers and authority within which they could function," says the NIRD's India Panchayati Raj Report.

"After 10 years of the Panchayati Raj act, we have realised that it is ineffective due to lack of powerful gram sabha," admits former rural development minister and now Bharatiya Janata Party president Venkaiah Naidu. Naidu, however, did little to change the situation, despite his much-hyped statement to initiate 'second generation' reforms in the Panchayati Raj act. The current Panchayati Raj act does not make the gram sabha the nodal body of decision-making. According to a status report on panchayati raj by the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, the gram sabhas have never got the mandatory power to influence the panchayats.

Representative democracy has won over participatory democracy. Governments try to weaken panchayati raj institutions by not transferring the control over earmarked 29 departments, leave aside the question of empowering gram sabhas. Hardly nine states have transferred all the 29 departments to the PRIS. No state has put the officials under them. Panchayats lack financial autonomy, as their power to tax, and assess fees and penalties, remain unexercised. Thus, funds chiefly came from higher levels of government, with the tiers of local government acting as lobbyists for funds, and conduits for money received. Local revenue collection at gram panchayat level is negligible — as little as Rs 1 per capita — even in states such as West Bengal and Kerala with relatively strong commitment to decentralisation.

"When powers were shifted to the panchayats, no follow up legislative changes were made to make them effective," says J P Rao, a professor of sociology in Osmania University. Though minor forest produce (MFP) is now under the panchayats, the forest department still controls them and panchayats are just collection centres.

Similarly, panchayats have been given the power to manage minor irrigation, but till now no legislative change has been made in state acts that make state governments owners of waterbodies. In Kerala, during the people's planning campaign, transfer of ownership of irrigation sources to the panchayats was a major bone of contention. All the states have acts dating back to the early 18th century, which give ownership to the governments. Due to this, the PRIS practically remain ineffective. The result: like the mid-1960s, these institutions remain the personal fiefdom of sarpanch.

Such constraints have killed another initiative to decentralise — the Panchayati (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) that came into

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effect in 1996 for the Fifth Schedule areas. This is a legislation that makes villages independent of the government in principle. Arising out of the Bhuria Committee recommendations, it empowers the gram sabha and gives it authority over resources like MFP, irrigation and minor minerals. Unlike the gram sabha in Panchayati Raj Act, in scheduled areas its recommendations are binding on the panchayats. It also left the definition of a village to the local residents enabling each and every settlement in tribal areas to exercise control over their resources. If interpreted in the right spirit, one will need permission of the gram sabha even to enter the village. This is the kind of control that the self-ruled village republics are exercising now.

The provisions for the Fifth Scheduled areas came to light only after a Supreme Court, known as the Samatha judgement, in 1996. The court order declared all mining and industries in the scheduled areas illegal, as they never sought the consent of the gram sabha. The court clearly defined the role of the gram sabha and directed mining companies and other industries to share their revenue with the local people through cooperatives.

Instead of empowering the gram sabhas, in 2001 the Union Government initiated move to curtail the powers of the gram sabha by amending the constitution. Fortunately, the move was stalled, reportedly at the behest of former president K R Narayanan.

Despite the court order and the constitutional mandate, states are yet to devolve power to the gram sabha in the scheduled areas. Except Madhya Pradesh, no other state has devolved power to the gram sabha and defined their roles clearly. With pesa, the government needs to bring in major amendments in its forest and land legislations as the gram sabha has got rights over it. During this debate the government constituted a committee — headed by forest inspector general S C Chaddha in 1997 — to examine the modalities to transfer rights over forest produce to the gram sabha as stipulated under the PESA. But the committee not only rejected the idea of transferring MFPs to the gram sabha, but also recommended that the government should continue to control this trade, throughout the country irrespective of village rights.

This is a major shift in the forest department's approach post-Supreme Court's ban on felling. "Now the forest department sources its revenue from bamboo, *tendu* leaf and other minor forest produce. It is, in fact, informally capturing the market," says Rao. But for the gram sabha, this committee's decision meant a lot as one of the major livelihood sources of villages was kept away from the purview of the gram sabha. Due to this, the authority and influence of the gram sabha is also threatened.

So it is no wonder that many of the village republics started their freedom struggle from rights over MFPs. In Jhalaria village in Balrampur block of Surguja, villagers prevented the FD from harvesting the forest as the produce was never given to them. The villagers insisted that the department should take permission from the gram sabha before it uses the forest. Few months of conflict over it and the village forcefully took control of the forest saying it belong to them according to the constitution. The story spread like wildfire and inspired 13 other villages to declare sovereignty over forest. "Nothing can stop them now as their patience with the present laws has run out," says Sharma.

A memo to the government

There is an urgent message emerging from all these villages: deregulate the behemoth called the Indian government. The same message is echoed by the three million panchayat representatives in India. The village republics have demonstrated how it can be done. In March this year panchayat leaders from across the country met in New Delhi and set a deadline to the government to transfer control over village resources like minor forest produce and waterbodies to the gram sabha by December 31, 2002.

If the government has not taken note of the village republics, the experiences of Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Kerala are lessons to be learnt of

how decentralisation can be achieved. In MP, power has been given to the gram sabha and its recommendations are binding on the gram panchayat. Starting from minor forest produce to minor minerals, the gram sabha has been given the power to control and manage these resources. Further, the state has also introduced a provision of right to recall in its panchayat act for the gram sabha, under which members can recall their leaders for not performing. This serves two purposes: first, people participate in governance and secondly, ensure that their leaders implement their development agenda effectively.

This step is to make the crucial shift from the representative democracy to the participatory democracy.

The provision in the Rajasthan Gram Dan Act that no executive member of the village's executive body can contest general elections also aims for this. The Maharashtra government has also plans to introduce the right to recall. The assembly is yet to approve this. "We have ensured that these structural changes take place for the local self-governance.

Once empowered with legal backing, people will start exercising their power," says MP chief minister Digvijay Singh.

His confidence comes from the Kerala experience. Kerala, under the people's planning process in the Ninth Five Year Plan, gave all powers to the gram sabha and found a marked difference in the development of the state. Under decentralised planning, the gram sabhas accorded priority to water and housing, which were never on the top agenda of the state government's planning process. "Empowering gram sabha will lead to the real betterment of the people," says Isaac Thomas, the architect of Kerala's decentralised planning.

Changing face

Recent court judgements are also an indicator that only gram sabha can bring back democracy to the last level of governance. In April 1996, the Maharashtra High Court asked the state government to form a committee to transfer rights of people over forest in Gadchiroli and Chandrapur districts. The case has its origin in Mendha. The committee has recommended revival of the village forest and to give all rights to the village. "The committee's recommendations, if implemented, would make Maharashtra the first state in the country to actually transfer all *Nistar* rights to the tribals in the scheduled areas," says Mohan Hirabhai Hiralal, convener, *Vrikshamitra*, a Chandrapur-based NGO and one of the two non-government members of the committee. Similarly, in February 2002, the Andhra Pradesh High Court scrapped an irrigation project in east Godavari district as it was not permitted by the gram sabha. But empowering gram sabha must also be accompanied by suitable legislative changes. The government wields extraordinary power through the numerous laws to establish monopoly over resources. This needs to be suitably amended so that the panchayats can exercise control effectively on subjects legally under their control. But the cases of mp and Kerala reveal that even just empowering gram sabha can help override legislative barriers. For example in Kerala, many villages defied government regulations to install small hydropower projects sanctioned by the gram sabha.

The self-ruled villages reported in this article are examples how with people at the helm of affairs can effectively fight government regulations. "These are simple amendments but have wider ramification for the livelihood of millions of forest dwellers," says Dillip Singh Bhuria, who was the chairperson of the parliamentary committee on Panchayati Raj.

Time is running out. Villages after villages across India are crying for decentralised governance. The government must learn from the experiences of the past and devolve power, so that the fruits of development reach the last person in the village. If the government does not wake up, it will be too late.

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