PEOPLE AND FORESTS
(A Participatory Study)
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SOCIETY FOR PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN ASIA
Acknowledgements

This study was conducted during 1989-90 by Mohan Hirabal Hiralal and Savita Tare of Vrikshamitra, Gadchiroli (Maharashtra) as a part of their ongoing involvement with local tribal communities in support of their struggles for retaining and regaining access to and control over natural resources. This booklet is based on the text prepared by them and is intended to highlight the participatory study methodology used as a contribution to ongoing conscientization and organization of the tribals themselves.
Enormous amount of knowledge exists with the people about food, fuel, fodder, fertilizer etc. i.e., about things that directly affect their livelihood. This knowledge is still unknown to the so called ‘expert’s. Each villager, too, does not have the entire set of such knowledge but collectively they come to know about most of it.

This knowledge is not only restricted to forest produce, but also encompasses the patterns and processes of utilizing these resources. This information is used by the people in the struggle for survival and thus contributes in making them more confident, self-conscious and understanding about issues that affect their lives, directly or indirectly.

Livelihood of people has been adversely effected due to the ecological imbalance that we are seeing nowadays. This is felt through growing insecurity of food, fuel, fodder, water and employment. These problems greatly affect the poor, especially the women among them.

We got acquainted with these problems while working among landless labourers, labourers working on Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) projects, and small peasants. This was while working alongwith Jagrut Adivasi Sanghatana and “Jangal-Bachao Manav-Bachao” (Save Forest, Save Man) movement in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra.

Discussions with informed individuals at concerned research institutions and the reading of relevant literature led to an acquaintance with the concepts and models of development and economic planning. Through this process we got an idea of problems at the macro level, and felt that these problems should be studied in detail at the micro level. It was felt that micro studies will facilitate a deeper understanding of factors affecting the lives of tribals and their knowledge systems to improve the same.
The purpose of this study was to generate a thinking process about such problems in small groups at the village level through the review of traditions, social and moral ideas, social structure and institutions, with the emphasis on pooling of information and experiences of the people. It is thus a participatory study project about the issues centered around the problems of food, fuel, fodder, fertilizer, water and employment.

However, it has to be made clear that the people of villages with whose participation we were supposed to conduct the study did not participate in taking the above decision.

Expectations from the Study

An important question that has to be answered before any such study is undertaken is:

What will the study achieve, both for the participants as well as the organizers?

In this respect, we can list the benefits we perceived from undertaking this study as the following:

- It will help people in understanding the problems of food, fuel, fertilizer, water, employment and in seeking solutions to them;
- The participants will be acquainted with the process of studying from experiences and through discussions;
• The participants will realize that they improve their self-confidence and understanding of the concerned issues through recollecting and analysing experiences;

• The participants will feel inspired and confident to find ways for solving their problems on their own rather than depending on others for the same;

• The study organisers will gain knowledge of the subject and experience and skills in conducting the study.

Identification of the Field of Study

We started by giving thought to the questions like,

What would be our area of study?

How will it be selected?

How are we going to initiate the study? etc.

We had a good contact in Dhanora Tehsil of Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra through the 'Jangal-Bachao-Manav Bachao Movement' and decided to concentrate our field study there. Historically, tehsil Dhanora can be divided into seven sectors according to the zamindari area. (1) Dhanora (2) Khutgaon, (3) Rangi, (4) Jambhali, (5) Murumgaon, (6) Kotgul, and (7) Pendhari. Zamindari existed in this area until its legal abolition in 1950. All these zamindars were Gonds. The religious structure and organisation in this area was formed in accordance to the zamindari sectors and they are still the same (on the religious and social matters). The adivasis in this area still identify themselves according to the zamindari sectors. This led us to think on the same basis and we decided to select the villages from the Khutgaon, Dhanora and Jambhali sectors for the purpose of the study as we had comparatively better contacts and acquaintances in those sectors.
Awareness-Raising

The main activists from these three sectors were contacted. They were also concerned about the forest issues of the area. Hence we discussed the different problems associated with forests. We usually arrived at a common conclusion that it was necessary to go deeper into the subject and also awaken the people on this matter. The question that came up was the nature of this awakening and study? It would not take place just by giving a public speech. It was decided to try the way of discussion with the people. For that the idea of launching an awareness campaign by bicycles was appreciated and accepted by the activists.

Activists came to know that a meeting of all the village-chiefs of Khutgaon zamindari was going to be held at Mendhatola Ashram School for some religious cause. Activists took this opportunity to raise their view at this meeting. There were about 70-80 participants out of which 40-45 were village chiefs. Activists planned to involve the local MLA to introduce the topic to the chiefs and the activists then explained and elaborated these issues.

After listening, the village chiefs gave their consent to the cycle tour and agreed to provide all the required support. Details of the cycle tour like number of tours, dates, duration and coverage of each tour were discussed at the meeting. Four cycle tours were planned, the first lasting 6 days, the next four days and the last two of three days duration each. The village chiefs agreed to receive them at their respective villages.

In most of the tribal areas, village chiefs and priests have a major role
in deciding the course of action on most of the issues confronting the village. Due to the political process in the past few years in this belt, the influence of priests has considerably reduced. We did not emphasize that we should involve them. Even though we needed the cooperation of the chiefs initially, we were very clear that we would not be solely dependent upon them. Our approach was that those among them who expressed interest, were welcome to participate.

**Cycle Tour Begins**

We reached Udgaon as per schedule. After conducting the meeting and discussions there we reached the next spot where three other activists of Dharona area joined us. On the sixth day, when we had already covered fifteen villages, the total number of cyclists became sixteen. Everyday we covered 3 to 4 villages and had meetings. These meetings lasted 1-2 hours or sometimes even more. The normal participation ranged between 25-125 people. In some villages women participation was low, in some others it was greater. The process of discussion was natural and proceeded in both ways—among the activists of cycle tour, and with villagers.

**What are Our Problems?**

People had prior information of our programme, hence they would gather on their own after our arrival. The meeting would start with a group song. First, we would explain the purpose of our visit, that "we are interested in understanding the nature of our problems, the factors causing them and their solutions, that is why we have started the campaign. We believe that our problems will not be solved by any single individual or by a group of few, but all of us must come together and think about the situation collectively. Every person is bestowed with enough wisdom and intelligence. Everyone's outlook and experience is also important. Here nobody is going to deliver a lecture but we will all discuss and express ourselves. Let us start from our major problems.

**Peoples Reaction**

Generally people would put forth the difficulties such as village
tanks, roads, electricity, hospitals, schools, unemployment of their educated children and then turn to the problems of poverty, forests, and unemployment in general. Of course the order of difficulties would be different. If the attendance of women was good, and if they started speaking, they would come out with the problems of forests and alcoholism as priorities.

**Involvement of Village Women**

Among Gonds there is no tradition of women attending meetings. Hence to get women to attend we had to contact the chiefs and convince them. The women naturally felt awkward and embarrassed to participate in the discussion. At times we had to take a stand that “now men will please keep quiet for some time, and let the women put their views - so as to make them speak.”

**We must act on our own**

As the people came out with a list of problems they would be asked to point out those of greater importance so that they could be discussed with priority. Most of the times the order came out as the problems of forest, alcoholism, unemployment and poverty. The nature of these problems, their causes and remedies would then be discussed.

Through the discussions, in the limited period of one meeting, one thing which became clear was that “whatever assurance the Government, political leaders, or bureaucrats may give, nobody is going to solve our problems. The problems kept increasing day by day as we have trusted and relied on them. Now we must not depend on others to solve our problems and must try on our own. There have to be two steps in our attempt, (1) first to study the problem collectively and then (2) implementation of the action-programme which will come up as result of the study”.

In the end, we used to discuss our interest in studying the interdependence of people and forest and ask them if they would participate if we plan to do such a study together with them. At most of the places people agreed whole heartedly but at some places it was evident that their positive response was just casual and not very sincere.
By this process we conducted meetings and discussions in 48 villages of Khutgaon, Dhanora, Jambhali and Potegaon Zamindari sectors during four cycle-tours spread over 15 days of “People’s Awakening Campaign”.

Advantages of Cycle Tour

During the cycle-tour the activists kept discussing among themselves whenever and wherever they halted, either for taking rest, or for drinking water. Of course, the topics were not at all restricted. All the issues from international to local issues entered the discussions alternately, but most of the time the discussions used to end up on the issues of forests and people. The cycle tour benefited the activists in one more respect, that was mutual introduction and developing healthy relations.

On the whole, the experience was quite new to all those involved in the process of the cycle tour. The MLA had experienced cycle touring for the first time in his life. In the beginning he was a little frightened at the idea of cycle-touring. But now he gives a special lecture on the topic of the advantages of cycle-touring.

The most important thing that was realised was that public contact and communication can be made in its the real sense by the method of cycle touring. The kind of people who approach you when you travel by a jeep are quite different from those interacting with you when travelling by a cycle. With a jeep the whole programme becomes a hurried one and the type of interaction and association with the people is of a very different nature as compared to a cycle tour.

Outcome of the Awareness Campaign

1. The meeting and discussions with the villagers helped the activists to understand more about the people, their problems, the geographical setting and about themselves. This further helped in the selection of the villages under study.

2. The activists participating in the campaign were exposed to a new outlook and a new way of approaching the solution.
3. The people gained more knowledge and a different comprehension of their situation. A process of change in their outlook itself was initiated. They realised the necessity of using their collective potential rather than rely on others.

4. The process of communication was initiated at two levels through a single programme. One with the people of the villages visited and the other with the activists at the regional level.

5. It helped in the selection of the proper villages for the study.

6. It made it possible to identify like-minded voluntary colleagues.

7. With the help of this experience and information gained through this campaign, it became possible to make proper changes in the working methods of the study.
Selection of the Villages

In our earlier plan it was mentioned that 10 villages would be selected at a distance of less than 15 kms. from the market place and another 10 to be at a distance of more than 20 kms. from the market place. Our assumption behind this selection was that a faggot of fuelwood or any other load can be carried by a person up to a distance of 15 kms. Therefore, it would be possible for us to select two types of villages, one from where such supply is made and another where the long distance did not allow the possibility of such a supply.

Changes after cycle tour

During the cycle tour it was noticed that the people from no other place than Dhanora (i.e. the market place itself) sold the faggots of fuelwood. Therefore, the criteria of selecting the villages within and more than 15 km and 20 kms respectively got automatically cancelled. However, we were careful to select the villages of mixed population together with the tribal villages. Also, villages of both types were chosen in such a way that some of both types were close to the forests and some away from them. We sat and discussed the selection of the villages with the local activists and then finalized the list.

Honey-bee method

After finalizing the villages to be studied, we started visiting them one by one and having casual discussions with the people. Although the
conversation started with any topic, we would soon arrive at the issues regarding forests. The participants could get a chance to relate different pieces of their experiences and information and try to understand them in different contexts. Everyone would argue on the basis of one's work, liking and experience. We used to proceed from the same argument, asking questions and sub-questions and adding our responses and opinions either for or against it. Thus the discussions proceeded smoothly. The relevant information gathered informally was like the manner in which honey is collected by the bee, and like in the process of pollination in a flower, some very different kinds of seeds are sown automatically in the minds of the people participating in the discussions. This allowed the establishment of a very informed and smooth communication with the villagers. (See Box 1 for an example.)
FOREST BELONGS TO WHOM?

Generally, the discussions with the people were based on taking up the following questions:

**Question:** Forest belongs to Whom?
**Answer:** To the Government.

**Question:** To whom did they belong earlier?
**Answer:** Either to the King or the Zamindar.

**Question:** And before them?
**Answer:** It has always belonged to them.

**Question:** Did the government or the king or the zamindar create it?
**Answer:** No.

**Question:** Who created forests?
**Answer:** God/nature.

**Question:** Which other things are created by God/Nature?
**Answer:** Man, animals, birds, other insects, whole Universe.

**Question:** What do all of them need for survival?
**Answer:** Food, air and water.

**Question:** Has it not been created/provided for them?
**Answer:** Yes.

**Question:** What does an infant need for survival?
**Answer:** Mother's milk.

**Question:** Suppose, mother’s milk can be sold in market for Rs.1,000 per cup. Will it be right for the father to deny milk to child and sell it in market.
**Answer:** No.

**Question:** Why? Is it not because an infant’s survival depends on it and selling it for money will not be right.
**Answer:** Correct.

**Question:** Who has, therefore, a right over mother’s milk?
**Answer:** Infant/child has the right.

**Question:** On what do we depend for our survival?
**Answer:** Agriculture and forest.

**Question:** Who, therefore, has a right over agriculture and forest?
**Answer:** Those who depend on them for survival; that is, us.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Then to whom should the forest belong? To the Government?</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then, Zamindar?</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Industrialist?</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then to whom?</td>
<td>To us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will it then be right to sell the forest for money/profit, depriving those who are dependent on it for survival?</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why?</td>
<td>First right is of those for whom it is necessary for survival.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whose dependence is greatest for survival on forest?</td>
<td>Poor, Cultivator, animals, birds and other living beings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For whom is forest being denuded?</td>
<td>For rich people, businessmen, government servants, political leaders, contractors, industrialists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In that case, will these people save forest?</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who then, can save the forest?</td>
<td>We - poor people and cultivators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For whom should it be saved?</td>
<td>For us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And for who else?</td>
<td>For our children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And for who else?</td>
<td>For animals-birds who can not speak.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And for who else?</td>
<td>For the whole world.</td>
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After experiencing this we felt that the method of random sampling is not necessary for this study. In the random sampling method, the researcher goes on tracing a particular family. This, naturally, causes certain questions to arise in the minds of people as to why only a particular family is being traced and not the others? Where and how did the researcher get their name etc? This leads to a feeling of mystery and distrust about the researcher in the minds of the people. This can easily be avoided by following the honey-bee method.

It was possible for us to include both the poor and the rich as well as the adivasi and the non-adivasi families and individuals in the discussions. Another observation was that occasions when all members of a village are available at leisure are rare other than the occasion of ‘polo’ (an irregular day declared to stop all kinds of work and business for some social or religious cause). Such occasions were the best to conduct discussions. Hence, we decided to accept the informal and natural method of discussing only with those who are available and at leisure and only at the time that is convenient to them, rather than accepting the method of random sampling and keep hunting and chasing people all the time. Considering the objectives, we did not feel the method of random sampling to be appropriate at all and so it was avoided.
We decided about the things which ought not to be done, they are as follows:

1. Not to tell the people that we are going to solve their problems or that the report of our study will make the government know the actual plight of the people and that would induce it to solve their problems. Also not to behave in such a way so as to create such an impression in their minds.

2. The study should not be conducted in villages where the people were not found to be willing to participate after knowing that we are not going to do anything for them.

3. Questionnaires should not be filled up for collecting and recording the problems.

4. No paid assistants to be employed for carrying out the work of the study.

5. The families were not to be selected by the random sampling method. This meant that the identified families would not be specifically searched for in the villages.

6. Contact should not be established with any village through the medium of any government servant.

7. No identity card should be acquired from the organization sponsoring the study, collector, other officials or political leaders for carrying constantly with us so as to get recognition or for convincing people wherever necessary.
Based on some of the principles outlined in the approach above, the study process characterized a few elements that were found to be significant in elaborating the methodology.

Realisation of Self-power

The process of realising self power was initiated through the following things:- whatever small contribution of their information and experience in the discussions, seeking new meanings while trying to connect two instances of experiences or information and thus realising that they too have something that the others can learn from and also the consciousness that they themselves can find the answers to their questions. Once this process was initiated certain questions started arising in the minds of the participants, then began the search for their answers. This in turn lead to new questions and so a chain of questions and answers was formed. Such a process does not allow a person to keep quiet. We had a nice experience of this through our study.

In every meeting we made clear to the participants that we were not there to provide them any benefit except providing a chance to participate in the Study to understand their problems themselves. We said, "We want to know your situation; you can come and participate, understand us and also the problem from a different angle. We felt that understanding brings commitment and without understanding, commitment is a burden."

After going to a new village, the initial four to five meetings or even more were started by everyone introducing themselves. We would insist that
every man and woman present in the meeting to tell their name, village of residence and the work they do. Many of them, particularly the women, felt very embarrassed to say out their names in front of all. This simple act of self introduction in front of a group/crowd initiates a feeling of self-recognition leading to self-confidence.

An attempt was made that people should be active partners in the study themselves because this develops a different kind of a capacity. It generates knowledge, helps in building confidence to understand the complex relationship of forests, soil, species etc. with the villagers.

Ask questions

This generates a thinking process leading to questions about forest use to arise—everybody starts thinking and puts forward their own views. This helps in building up respect for each other. Every person has some special interest, identifying it and talking to them on the subject will make their interest grow and knowledge broaden.

Information exchange

This will open up avenues of knowledge generation. This process generates knowledge, knowledge generates understanding of the issues and thus a feeling of confidence.

Involve all sections of the people

An attempt was made to involve all those who could have an interest in this process (politicians, teachers, women, revenue and forest staff of the government etc.). Care was taken that people do not get the impression that only a particular group is attending the meetings or is involved in the process.

Individual knowledge should spread

Everyone does not know everything. Therefore identification of the people who have the knowledge and spreading it to others is of crucial importance. These people should be encouraged to tell their observations, the idea being the spread of individual knowledge to others.
Identification of key persons

Three activists from Dhanora and its surroundings were constantly interested and involved in the study right from the beginning. They became our colleagues. The interest of these activists lasted up to the end of the study or rather increased over time. All of them had a real liking for social work and they worked in their own village apart from helping people in other villages. Whenever we visited any village, at least one of them would accompany us. All of them were adivasis, the Gonds, from the local area. The presence of each one of them contributed immensely to the completion of the study. It is necessary to mention their most important virtue here. They were quite clear from the beginning that they would not be given any kind of monetary return for the participation, involvement or the time spent on this study. In addition, their economic condition was not good. Even then they used to spend their time and participate in the study. We knew about their economic condition but any sort of remuneration was purposely avoided, even though it was possible. The reason for this was that we were keen to search for our real colleagues and not paid employees. We had not made any provision of more paid co-workers in our project proposal. And this decision really helped us to recognise our colleagues.

We observed the increasing involvement of our colleagues even after eight months of the study and also the resulting economic pressure on them. It was at this time that that we discussed the issue of remuneration with them and it was decided that remuneration would be given in proportion to the time spent by them in the study (we adjusted and shared this amount from our honorarium). Since we had been working together for a period of eight months, enough understanding had developed between us so as to not destroy our relationship with them due to the payment of remuneration.
It was decided to conduct a three-day camp of all activists working with democratic means in the adivasi areas of Gadchiroli. It was also decided not to get money for conducting the camp from any external source but to meet the expenses through individual contributions, both in kind and money. The idea behind this was that if money is taken from an external source then we would become dependent. Contribution by the people will lead to a feeling of self-confidence as they would feel that it is their own work.

The people came to know that individuals and groups at the national level were also struggling about similar issues and so it was decided to invite some of them for the meeting to get their views also.

Involvement of MLA’s

With the view to invite all the activists in the district, it was felt that it would be better to send the invitations in the names of the both the MLA’s of the area. They were also the leaders of the ‘Jangal bachao Manav Bachao’ movement. Both of them gladly accepted the people’s decision. This was exceptional as they belong to two different political parties: Congress (I) and Janata Dal.

In our process, the established leadership of the area was used as they had some inclination about the issues involved. We had decided that we will not compromise on the issues even if it meant that we would not get the cooperation of some of these people.

The camp was conducted between the 16th-18th of September 1988 at
Heti in Dhanora tehsil. About 500 people participated in this meeting. Most of them came to listen and some did ask questions occasionally. About 60 active participants were present throughout the process.

This led to a chain of such Sahyog Shibirs to be held, each after an interval of three months. The second camp was held at Edapur, tehsil Kurkheda on 23-25 December and the third at Potegaon, tehsil Gadchiroli between 3-5 March 89. A conference on ‘Forests and Development’ was also organised in Potegaon in continuation of the third camp. These shibirs proved to be an excellent method of advancing the study on issues as well as people’s mobilisation on the same.
here are some issues that are relevant at the village level while others can only be handled at relatively macro levels. With the expansion and contraction of spheres, the most appropriate and useful level of dealing with an issue were identified. The people also gained a good opportunity to experience and test their strengths and weaknesses at different levels.

As issues began to emerge and action began to be taken, it was felt that people’s awakening and study had to deepen.

It was decided to arrange a people’s awakening procession in the Dhanora region so as to awaken the people on the issues of nistar nights, forest and alcoholism. The date of 12th April 89 was fixed. The plan was as follows. One procession will commence from the village Lekha Kanhartola, pass through Mendha, Tukum, Kharkadi, Markegaon, and Heti and reached Dhanora. While the other procession would commence from Chevala and, reach Dhanora via Malanda, Pawani etc. Both the processions would join at Dhanora and proceed via Salebhatti, Vadegaon, Dhawari and terminate at Japalai where there would be a concluding function.

In each procession a small sapling of Mahua was decorated and was carried together in a ‘Palankee’ (a box with it’s top open borne on horizontal poles on men’s shoulders). Men and women participated enthusiastically with their traditional musical instruments. They were playing drums and were dancing on the way. The atmosphere was filled with the tunes of Re aa...
Rela 5 Re sss Rela sss Re (the tunes of their traditional dance). The procession proceeded on the tunes of Gondi songs composed on the topics of nistar rights, forests and liberation from alcoholism. The whole surrounding was filled with lively slogans. The meanings of which were as follows:

'Save Forest - Save Man', 'Forest is support for life - stop its business', 'Right to Nistar is a Right to Live', 'Form Organisation - Save the Forest', 'We are one - Prohibit liquor', 'Our government in our village - Distribute the powers of Delhi', etc.

At every village the procession was received gladly and the women welcomed it in the traditional way. Then the procession would move on all the roads and reach the major spot, where the Palanke would be kept down. In the public meeting the activists would explain the purpose of organising a procession and about the issues of nistar, forests and alcoholism in Gondi language.

Late in the night the procession reached its' terminus. In the concluding meeting, the representatives of all villages expressed their intentions and motives. After expressing the firm determination to save forests and to achieve liberation from alcoholism, the function ended in the loud acclamation of slogans.

**Link with Action**

One of the interesting aspects of the study was its close, and at many times, immediate link with action. As issues of people's concern emerged and got discussed, it also resulted in developing some plans about action. This was largely due to the mobilisational aspects of this method. Actions related to four issues are briefly described here:

**Nistar Rights**

In the first Sahyog Shibir, the people who had come from outside Gadchiroli gave information that the process of notification of the forests of Gadchiroli district as Reserve Forest was being carried out by the government and had already reached its final stage. The only thing that was left was its publication in the government gazetteer. The news was shocking
to everyone present, including both the MLA’s who were also not aware of any such action being taken by the government. None of the people remembered if the Government had informed them as it is essential for the Government to give the people a due chance to put in their objections and claims.

It was felt that, once the notification is published the people would lose their traditional Nistar rights (see details in Box 2) and the powers of the forest department will increase manyfold resulting in the increased outrage, harassment and injustice with the people. This act of the Government may also lead to the danger of people losing faith in the legal procedures. There is thus the danger of anti-democratic and destructive forces getting encouragement.

**Box 2  Nistar rights and the protest against T.C.M.**

People’s traditional rights over forests, land, water are known as ‘nishar rights’. People are very sensitive about them since they have been enjoying these rights for a very long time. They enjoyed free rights for fuel, timber, grazing and other necessities of life until the abolition of zamindari in 1951. In the later years the government policy has been to put an end to these rights in one way or the other. Being a sensitive issue, assurances were given liberally in this regard to secure more votes but nothing of consequence was done to restore these rights in their full form. Whenever this topic was touched upon in the village meetings, discontent would always be expressed.

In many villages the work of surveying to mark the boundary between the Forest and Revenue land and the work of digging a Trench-cum-Mound (TCM) on this boundary was being done by the forest department. The people’s reaction was that the TCM was being dug between the village and the forest to create an obstacle for grazing cattle as well as for not allowing them to exercise their nistar rights and so they were against it.

They argued, “If the government had a pure intention of carrying out a survey, they would have done it by simply putting the marking stones for demonstration. But instead of doing that why are they insisting so much on T.C.M. The survey is only an
excuse, they really want to abolish our nistar rights.” People had a thorough discussion among themselves and arrived at the following stand - “We are not at all against the survey but if the government is going to dig T.C.M. forcefully and put an obstruction in our availing of nistar rights, we would protest peacefully and stop the work of T.C.M.”. They informed the DFO, Gadchiroli by sending an application through the Ranger. Even after that when the forest department tried to start the work on the TCM forcefully in village Pandharsoda, Dhanora tola and Chavela, all the men, women and children of the village gathered and sat on the site and stopped work.

This issue was discussed in the first ‘Sahyog Shibir’ at Heti in September. The people felt that the forest department takes up a number of tasks in the forests within the village-boundary but never felt it necessary to ask the villagers’ permission to do so. It was decided that in every village people should think over the situation in their Gram Sabhas, pass the resolutions and inform the forest department as follows - “If however you want to carry out T.C.M, plantation or any other work in the forests within the village-boundary, the gram sabha should be asked beforehand. Until the prior permission of gram sabha is sought, no work should be carried out. In case any attempt is made to start any work without seeking prior permission, we would protest peacefully and would not allow that work to take place”. Thus people took the critical step towards Gram-Swargya.

Whenever the topic of nistar was discussed in village meetings, it was noticed that the majority of the people did not have any idea of ‘Nistar Patrak’. Most of them had an understanding that the nistar rights had ended legally and if they wanted to collect anything from the forest, it depended on the compassion of the guard or forester. When told that legally the nistar rights are still valid, they were not able to believe this for some time.

Due to these discussion the people came to know that their nistar-rights were still valid and decided to get more details about it and also make an attempt for its implementation. It was decided to make an application to the Patwari to get a true-copy of nistar-patrak with its settlement map of 1922-24. Then, senior people of the village should accompany the guard and the Patwari to locate the forest of nistar rights and also make an inspection of the village boundary. Thus, the forest of nistar-rights should be taken in possession of the concerned village and no work be allowed to take place without prior permission of the villagers.

Since then, people of many villages have started demanding the government bureaucracy to issue the nistar-patrak along with settlement maps and identify nistar forests and village boundaries. This forced the SDO of Gadchiroli to issue a letter to all the patwaris instructing them to do so. The people were much encouraged with this.
It was decided at the meeting that both the MLAs would send a telegram to the Chief Minister as well as the Commissioner, Nagpur division informing them about the feelings of the people on this issue and requesting them to stop the process of notification. We were assigned to collect all the relevant information and prepare a petition on behalf of the people which was signed by the two MLA’s who submitted it to the Collector.

The telegram, the petition and the awakening initiated through the village meetings, the discontent displayed through the public meetings and the reporting by the L.I.B.(Local Intelligence Branch) all collectively resulted in the detainment of the notification. The Chief Minister called the MLAs for discussing the issue. A high level conference was organized by the govt. with ministers and senior officials. Before the conference held at Potegaon, public opinion was expressed by conducting public meetings. At the conference itself the people registered their fierce emotions and discontent against this notification and gave a warning through passing a resolution (see the text of the resolution in Box 3). The chief secretary of the state govt. had personally come to Gadchiroli district to get a clear understanding of the situation. The peoples’ point-of-view was explained to him at the meeting in Potegaon. After his return from Gadchiroli, another high level meeting was organised in Bombay by the government. It was learned that the conference led to a decision that the government should not be in a hurry to finalize the notification. But the government did not cancel the wrong procedure of forest settlement. Thus the people had won a small battle but the activists were quite aware that the real battle lay ahead.
The Resolution of the Forest and Development Conference Potegaon (Dist. Gadchiroli) on 5th March 1989

1. If the agricultural land belongs to the farmer and the factories are owned by the industrialists, then why should the forest be owned by the Government? To protect, grow and use the forests, the ownership of the forests should be entrusted to the village in the forest areas.

2. Any interference in our forests, even if done for development, should be with the prior permission of the villages.

3. The Nistar forests should be reorganised with the help of Gramsabhas, so that the people can make use of their Nistar rights from the forests. The Gramsabhas should be given responsibility to protect and maintain the Nistar forests. The process of demarcation of the reserved forests should be suspended till the Nistar forests are determined and declared.

4. In accordance with the forest policy of the Government of India the leasing of forests or sale of forest produce to the contractors or industries should be stopped till all the requirements of the villagers are fulfilled first.

5. All encroachments till 1978 should be given pattas. The Pattas for the land encroached thereafter should be given only for plantation of fruit trees and mixed forests.

6. The rural poor and unemployed should be given forest land on Tree Patta with the responsibility and ownership for the purpose of afforestation. The necessary expenditure should be made from the Employment Guarantee Scheme.

7. The right of people on the minor forest produce like Moh, Tol, Char, Tembhru, Gum, Tubers, roots, leaves and fruits etc. should be accepted. The government should not take any royalty from the people and those who collect them should get the full market price.

8. The paper mills should not be given the lease to cut bamboo from the forests. That right should be given to the village councils (Gramsabha) who will look after and cut the bamboo and shall sell the surplus bamboo to the paper mills after the requirements of the people in the villages are fulfilled. Those who supply bamboo should be given share in the ownership and profit of the paper mills.
9. Mahua has a major life support role for the people in the forests. There are legal restrictions on the quantity of Mahua which people can possess. If there is no restriction elsewhere on the possession of the sugar cane or jowar which too can be used for the production of illicit liquor, there should similarly be no restriction on the possession of Mahua by us. Bamboo shoots are our food. There should be permission to use it within the limits permitted by the Gramsabha.

10. The proposed big dams including Inchampalli, Bhopalpatanam, Karwafa, Tultuli, Satinala in the Gadchiroli district, Bodhghat in the Bastar district, Mogara in Rajnandgaon district and Polawaram in Andhra should be cancelled because they drown and destroy the tribals and the forests. The money meant for these projects should be used for the small, decentralised modes of irrigation like village tanks, small bandharas, lift irrigation, and wells.

11. If sanction to the small village irrigation schemes is held up due to the Forest Conservation Act (1980), then the Zudupi forest land in control of the Revenue department should be used to grant the clearance to such small projects.

12. The power and responsibility of planning and implementation of the village developments schemes should be entrusted to the Gramsabha. All the money from the national budget for the rural development should be directly handed over to the Gramsabha for proper implementation and utilisation.
Gadchiroli district has become famous through the media as a district intested by the Naxalites. The government feels that the root cause of the problems of the district lie in the neglect towards development of the district. The then Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Sh. Sharad Pawar declared a special action programme for the quick development of Gadchiroli district. A draft plan with an expenditure of Rs. 134.30 crores was prepared to carry out the special development of the district. (See Box 4 for details)

**Box 4**

### Draft Development Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Amount (in Rs. crores)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Electrification</td>
<td>62.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Development of roads</td>
<td>39.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Public health service, education, irrigation, fruit production, fisheries, dairies, sports and cultural programmes etc.</td>
<td>33.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>134.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The statistical information of the district is as follows: (area in Sq.km)

1. Total area: 15,434
2. Area under agriculture (13.19 percent of (i)): 2,037
3. Non-agricultural or uncultivated land (24.52% of (i)): 3,320
4. Forest Area (66.29% of (i)): 10,077
5. Total Population (1981): 6,36,651
6. Total population of Scheduled Tribes (39.94% of (v)): 2,54,282
7. Total population of Scheduled Castes (9.34% of (v)): 60,780
Critique of the Development Plan

Discussions on this topic in the village meetings were inevitable. An enquiry of this special programme was started. The following conclusions/inferences were drawn from the study with reference to the above information:

* A large portion of the district comes under forests but proper consideration has not been given to it. It is essential to give priority to forest development and forest based employment development programmes.

* Excessive importance has been given to electrification and road development, neglecting the needs of the majority. The people’s first need is of year-round employment and its just remuneration. For this it is necessary to plan such a programme that develops both the human and the natural resources of the area.

Preparation of People’s Programme

The question that we now faced was that we had criticized the governments programme but what is the type of development that we want? What would be its practical form? This led to further thought and search from that perspective. A draft of ‘Programme of Plantation and Development on the wasted, denuded forest land by the unemployed rural poor’ was prepared and discussed with the Divisional Forest Officer of Gadchiroli district. The Forest Department took interest and suggested many other points. These were then discussed in the village meetings and the programme draft was finalized.
From the women's point of view, alcoholism was the second most important problem after forests. Initially women were hesitant to initiate the topic of alcoholism in the meeting. Once initiated, they earnestly discussed it. Money earned through hard labour goes waste on liquor, besides wife-beating and suffering of children.

A study had been done on the problem of alcoholism in Gadchiroli with the co-operation of “Search” an institution working in the field of service and research regarding health. It had been observed that liquor worth Rs.7 crores is sold every year in the district, either legally or illegally. In addition, about 1000 people die every year in the district due to the addiction to liquor.

Through the discussions in village meetings, people have realised that "not only economic loss is caused due to liquor, but as majority of the people are in an intoxicated condition, they are not able to sit and think collectively. That is why we are not organised and can not protest against injustice done to us. We cannot save our forest and secure our rights due to this". Wherever people fought for nistar forests or against TCM, they decided to stop the business of liquor first and it was only then that they could succeed. In some villages the people from surrounding villages had to say, "We would join you on forest issues only if you stop the liquor business in your village, as we don’t want to accompany you and make our situation embarrassing". This had a favourable effect. The drunkards of Chavela village who had threatened to beat up the activists when the issue of liquor was first discussed in the meeting, realised the relationship between liquor and forests. When issues of "Nistar Rights" and TCM came up they took the lead to stop the business of liquor.
The people received an instrument of education through village meetings, discussions, study, answers and new questions emerging from those answers. They started experimenting with this instrument easily on every problem confronting them.

Plucking of Tendu leaves is a job which lasts for a whole month from the 1st of May. This provides guaranteed employment for the people in this region. Every year the government gives a contract for plucking these leaves to private contractors. The minimum wage for plucking and collecting the leaves is fixed by the government. The people received a minimum wage of Rs.14/- per 100 bundles of 70 leaves each in 1988.

In 1989, government declared a rate of Rs.20 per 100 bundles of Tendu leaves. After much discussion among the villagers of Medhna, it was decided that Rs.20 was not enough and a fairer amount would be Rs.25 per bundle. It was strategically decided that Rs.30 per bundle would be demanded initially and then they would agree on Rs.25/-. Also, it made no point for only people of Medhna to demand a just wage and so it was decided that all villages lying in the area where the contractor operated had to be involved. The responsibility to inform all those villages was assigned to different people. After discussion with the other villages, a strong organisation of all villages was formed. The contractor tried to break the organisation by adopting different tactics, but without success. At last the contractor was forced to agree to Rs.25/- per bundle on the third day. This story spread like wildfire and all contractors in the area were compelled to pay Rs.25/-.
The issue did not stop at this point. Some more thought was given and more decisions taken. Every year some workers come from outside the area during the tendu leaf collection period. It was noticed that some people cut down trees so that they can collect more leaves. This was done out of greed for money. Hence it was decided to prohibit labour from outside from entering the area and it was also decided that if anyone from the village cuts a tree, then that person will be severely fined. This decision was successfully implemented by the people and it further helped them to realise their potential and increased their confidence.
As a result of the study, people undertook action at different levels on these and other issues (See Box 5 for details).

**Box 5**

**Action Taken**

Action can be at many levels. If actions at 1) individual or self level, 2) local or village level and 3) comparatively macro or government level are reviewed with reference to two issues of Nistar and liquor, they are found to have taken place as follows:

### Action at Different Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Individual/Self level</th>
<th>Village/local level</th>
<th>Macro/government level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Nistar</td>
<td>1. Fruit-trees should not be cut.</td>
<td>1. Inspection of land of Nistar rights together with the staff of Revenue and forest department.</td>
<td>1. Memorandum to the Government demanding proper implementation of Nistar-rights, and all the necessary action for that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Only one's minimum requirements be fulfilled.</td>
<td>2. Prohibition from undertaking any activity on the land of Nistar-rights without prior permission of the village.</td>
<td>2. Peaceful protest of the Reserve Forest Notification.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Power and rights should not be mis-used.</td>
<td>3. Any forceful attempt of undertaking work without prior permission of the village will invoke a public protest following the method of peaceful agitation (Satyagraha)</td>
<td>Demand for the authorisation of entrusting the management of Nistar forests to the care of Gram-Sabha.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>Individual/Self level</td>
<td>Village/local level</td>
<td>Macro/government level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
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<td>--------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. To struggle for protecting the forests of Nistar-rights and to develop it to more prosperity.</td>
<td>4. Any villager who transgresses the community decision would be controlled through Gram-Sabha for proper utilisation of Nistar-right.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Liquor</td>
<td>1. Liquor should not be purchased or sold.</td>
<td>1. Ban on the illicit liquor of the village through community decision. Taking over the charge of undertaking such steps, collectively by modest disobedience of the law (Savinaya Kayadebhanga)</td>
<td>1. Earnest demand for the implementation of the directives of central government with reference to the Excise policy in Adivasi-area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Non-co-operation with those who follow the business of liquor.</td>
<td>2. At any such offence, the offender will not be sent to the possession of Police, but will be fined by the Gram-Sabha. For that, revival of proper village institutions and traditions in the new context.</td>
<td>2. Persistent demand for the cancellation of all permits for drinking, and license of all the liquor shops. Public meetings, organisations seminars and agitation to work it out.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As the previous description shows, the process of enhancing understanding of people’s issues moved from broad to specific, from vague to concrete, from local to macro, and from education to action to education. The cyclical nature of this process generated a great deal of understanding of issues and collective mobilisation. The process did not end in Dhanora. It has since continued.

People from other Zamindari areas were observing the developments in the Dhanora area, and invitations from Murumgaon, Rangi and Potegaon zamindari villages were received to visit their areas for a similar study. Invitation of Devsur and Gyarapatti villages of Murumgaon Zamindari was accepted on two conditions, firstly, that the meeting will last for the whole day and secondly that people (men and women in equal numbers) from twenty surrounding villages should join the meeting.

On reaching Gyarapatti we found that people from 28 villages had gathered there. In order to enable the women to participate in the meeting, it was necessary to free them from cooking and hence it was decided to arrange for food at the venue of the meeting. Collection of money and grains was done for this. It was decided in the meeting that, as a beginning of the movement of gram-swarajya, a programme to take over Nistar Forests and its development and preservation be taken up initially. As a part of solving the problem, it was also decided that meetings should be organized in every village to study and understand the problems and to form a village
committee of adult men and women to undertake implementation programmes. After discussing specific problems of the area and deciding on how to tackle them, we had dinner followed by collective songs and dances. These commenced with a few people and soon others mingled and joined in smoothly. This made us think that the people of Devsur-Gyarapatti had joined hands with those of Dhanora-Medhna and that they will be soon joined by the people of Potegaon, and then Rangi, Khutgaon etc. so that one day the entire Gond-van (Lands of the Gonds) will reverberate with songs of freedom, equality, fraternity and justice.