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## Reimagining Wellbeing: Villages in Korchi taluka, India, Resisting Mining and Opening Spaces for Self-Governance

*Village assemblies in Korchi, along with resistance against mining, are actively engaged in reimagining and reconstructing local governance. Women's collectives have also started to assert their voice in these emerging decision-making spaces. This article attempts to provide a glimpse of why and how this process unfolds.*

*Gram Sabhas* (village assemblies) in Korchi *taluka*, Gadchiroli district, state of Maharashtra, India, along with local resistance against state-sponsored mining, are actively engaged in reimagining and reconstructing local governance institutions. 90 out of 133 *Gram Sabhas* in the Korchi *taluka* (a type of government administrative level) have come together to form a federation of village assemblies that they call *Maha Gramsabha* (larger *Gram Sabha*).

At the same time, women's collectives have also started to assert their voice not only in resisting mining but also in the newly emerging village and *taluka* level decision-making institutions, including the *Maha Gramsabha*. These collectives are emerging as platforms to resist mining, devising strategies, rules and regulations for forest management and conservations, localizing control over their livelihoods and other economic resources, reviving cultural identity, raising social and equity concerns, asserting direct and engendered democracy and questioning existing models of development. This article is an attempt to provide a glimpse of why and how this process is unfolding.

### ***Resistance and organization from below***

Although officially administered by the Gadchiroli District Administration and elected Panchayats (executive committee of one or more villages elected to be the first unit of governance in India's Panchayati Raj System, or local self-government), people in Korchi *taluka* informally continue to have their traditional *Gram Sabhas* and *Ilakas* (territories constituting of multiple villages) as village and supra village level self-governance structures. With little political and economic powers these informal institutions till recently only focused on socio-cultural activities or conflicts. Inhabited by 133 *Gram Sabhas* with 43,000 people (73 per cent belonging to Gond and Kanwar indigenous tribal communities), the Korchi *taluka* has three traditional *Ilakas* namely, Kumkot, PadyalJob, and Kodgul *Ilaka*.

Nearly 85 per cent of the Gadchiroli district is covered by forest. Almost the entire population depends heavily on the forest for a cash-based and also subsistence livelihood. Besides forests being important for local economies and livelihoods, they are an integral part of the *adivasi* (indigenous) socio-cultural practices and political identity. Yet, people till recently had restricted and limited access and use rights because of colonial, centralized forest governance and management laws, policies and bureaucracy, leading to a culture of bribes and atrocities for using forests. These forests are also important for the state government. Commercial extraction of timber and other non-timber products has conventionally been carried out by the forest department through leases given to contractors and paper and pulp companies and, in more recent times, to mining companies.

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**For decades, people in Gadchiroli have resisted against the oppressive and alienating forest policies, bribes and atrocities committed on the local tribal communities. Adding to this, the recent state-sponsored mining.** Between 1990 and 2017, 24 mining leases have been sanctioned or are proposed in the District, collectively impacting approximately 15,000 hectares of dense forest directly and over 16,000 hectares indirectly. In Korchi *taluka* alone around 12 mining leases are proposed despite strong local opposition, impacting over 1032.66 hectares.

In 2006, submitting to a long-standing grassroots struggle across India against alienating, oppressive, top-down forest and conservation policies, the Parliament of India enacted a landmark legislation: The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act 2006, also called Forest Rights Act of India (herein referred to as FRA). FRA provides for recording 14 kinds of pre-existing but unrecognized customary forest rights to scheduled tribes and other traditional forest dwellers. Most important among these being the **Gram Sabhas to claim rights to use, manage, and conserve their traditional forests and protect them from internal and external threats.** The Act also requires free, prior and informed consent of the *Gram Sabhas* before their customary forests are diverted for non-forestry purposes. **Among the many radical provisions of this law and the most significant is the powerful envisioning of the basic unit of governance to be the Gram Sabha** - to be self-determined by a group of people residing in a settlement which may or may not have been described as a village in the government records thus far.

### ***Empowering Gram Sabhas***

After a sustained campaign, rights to use, manage, and conserve their traditional forests of 85 *Gram Sabhas* in Korchi *taluka* were recognized between 2009 and 2011. These empowered the *Gram Sabhas* to govern their forests and also sustainably use it, since it was now under their ownership.

Some local leaders, particularly from villages which had received these specific rights but were also facing threats from mining projects, used this opportunity to understand how laws like FRA could strengthen and empower *Gram Sabhas*. And also to **mobilize local people towards understanding how legally empowered Gram Sabhas could work towards self determination and self governance, including asserting greater but equitable control over forests and local economy.** *Taluka* level meetings lead to intense discussions on the functioning, rights, powers, and duties of a *Gram Sabha*. By 2017, 90 villages in Korchi *taluka* had reconstituted and strengthened their village *Gram Sabhas* to be an inclusive decision-making body, transparent and accountable at the village level. Each *Gram Sabha* opened a bank account, appointed a secretary and a president. These office-bearers are in charge of the village communication with the government officials and other outside actors. *Gram Sabhas* began to negotiate and market their non-timber forest products. The profits were now entirely with the *Gram Sabhas*, which paid for the labour (all families in the village), retained some percentage for the village bank account and distributed the remaining as profit shares to the collectors. *Gram Sabhas*, which until then were economically and legally disempowered, began to gain both. For example, from nearly zero income in 2014, the 87 *Gram Sabhas* had a total income in 2017 from the sale of non-timber forest products of over 120 million rupees (about US\$ 1,700,000).

By 2016, the traditional *Ilakas* began to see themselves as supra *Gram Sabha* bodies. **Traditional Ilaka sabhas (assemblies) began to include conversations on Gram Sabha empowerment, direct democracy, self-determination, FRA, mining and its impacts, growth and development, colonization and imperialism, among others.** Efforts were made towards re-visiting the meaning of the word '*adivasi*' (indigenous), *adivasi* cultures and histories, re-telling the stories of tribal revolutionary heroes (usually invisible in mainstream historical narratives) and understanding cooption of animistic *adivasi* cultures into dominant religions.

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## ***Maha Gramsabha – A Federation of Gram Sabhas***

As the *Gram Sabhas* began to gain empowerment and recognition, it was important for them to get stronger in order to support those which were just beginning to re-organize themselves as well as for the required mutual learning and support. Harvesting commercially important non-timber forest products and selling them required skills, knowledge and strength to deal with the market forces. **Understanding and addressing divisive strategies of the mining companies required collective action.**

The traditional *Ilaka sabhas* had their limitations in being able to address these issues. To ensure that markets do not exploit the weaker, that equity in benefit sharing is achieved and that sharing of knowledge, learning and handholding takes place, in 2017, a federation of 90 *Gram Sabhas* was created. *Maha Gramsabha* (MGS) is now a political, economic, social and cultural space that aims to obtain the recognition of local people's normative regulations for governance. Each *Gram Sabha* selects 2 women and 2 men to represent them in the MGS, passes a resolution to join the MGS and adhere to its rules and regulations. All designated representatives are obliged to report back to their *Gram Sabhas*. Newer policy prescriptions or information is discussed and informed decisions are taken, but only for these to be taken back to the constituent *Gram Sabhas* for ratification. Before acceptance, proposals for future action are discussed and details of expenses incurred are shared.

### ***Women, mining and role of women' collective***

In this predominantly patriarchal society, women had little say in traditional village and forest governance. Women also faced a number of social challenges, including domestic violence abetted by alcoholism, lack of resources, property or decision-making rights.

Supported by local NGO Amhi Amchi Arogyasaathi, slowly, women *parishads* (collectives) started to monitor the implementation of laws and schemes that would empower women. These *parishads* became a support group for women facing injustice, oppression, violence or any other issue within the family or in the larger society. **As the awareness among the women increased and they found the confidence to voice their opinion, many women brought out that their wellbeing and that of their families was integrally linked to the wellbeing of the forests. Hence, it was important for women to discuss issues of forest degradation and rights to use and protect them.**

This became particularly critical for women in 2009, especially in villages which discovered that their traditional forests were being leased out for mining. Through their *parishads*, women became one of the formidable forces in the resistance against mining. **Their physical opposition and vocal expression in various meetings against mining, including the state sponsored public hearings, ensured that the mining lease has remained pending until this date in the Korchi taluka.** Subsequently, through their *parishad*, women have had numerous discussions around the impact of mining in their lives, families and forests and the need for protecting forests. The *parishads* have also been crucial in bringing up women leaders at various platforms to narrate their struggles and opinions, including their conception of wellbeing, which is deeply linked to healthy forests.

During the resistance against mining in the Korchi *taluka*, women leaders in the *parishads* began to realize and discuss that while women were always at the forefront of the resistance, they had no space in traditional decision-making processes, about the village or the forests. By 2015, the discussions on *Gram Sabhas* as units of self governance were gaining ground, *taluka* level meetings were being organized, implementation of the FRA was being spoken about in various *taluka* and

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*Ilaka* level meetings. However, none looked at the issues of women's participation, women's rights under the Acts and economic empowerment of women from the forest produce. Some of the women leaders began participating in the *taluka* level meetings.

In one of the first meetings of the *Maha Gramsabha*, the *parishad* members insisted that **along with challenging the hegemonic and top-down bureaucracies, it was also important to challenge the established traditional structures that legitimized oppression on women and restricted women's role in decision-making, including decisions around forests.** They ensured that MGS includes 2 women representatives along with 2 men from each *Gram Sabha*. Having the first unit of decision-making in the *Gram Sabhas*, within their villages, rather than the *parishads*, which are far away from the villages, already provided much greater opportunity for women's participation. Through the efforts of the *parishads*, some *Gram Sabhas* have also made special efforts to ensure that meetings are held at times when women are able to participate. The *parishads* also ensured that Korchi *taluka* is one of the few in the country where rights of the women under the FRA are being focused on. FRA provides for joint land titles over land for a wife and husband. In many villages in Korchi, titles have been issued jointly but others also in the name of women as first owners or women as exclusive land owners.

Going a step beyond, many *Gram Sabhas* have also taken the decision that women will get the daily wage labour as well as the profits from the sale of non-timber forest products directly in their own accounts, instead of their husbands. In fact, one village, Sahle, has decided that the entire profit earned by the family from forest produce will go only to the account of the women of the family – a powerful and unique decision.

## **Conclusion**

The process of assertion of rights, self governance and forest management in Korchi is still in its initial years and is unfolding organically. A number of enabling factors have played a critical role in the process towards resistance, self-rule, and assertion of local conceptions of wellbeing in Korchi. These include a **long history of political mobilization and debates on 'development', creating spaces of strong local leadership of men and women; presence of unique leaders leading to ideological debates and discourses; legal spaces provided by enabling laws such as FRA; people to people learning and exchanges; greater economic benefits from localizing non-timber forest products economy; enabling yet non imposing support by organizations and individual activists.**

**This has lead to the ever-alert, agile, and multi-dimensional process of responding to internal and external challenges.** This includes responding to hegemonic and oppressive state policies, including heavy militarization and macro-economic policy deeply skewed in favour of corporatisation and privatization; or addressing internal hegemonies and patriarchy. **Inclusion of women's voices in decision-making and benefit sharing has meant a more equitable social organization, stronger resistance against mining, more effective forest management and conservation and a culturally appropriate and ecological sound conception of local wellbeing as an alternative to extractivism based model of development.**

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