

Mining conflict and transformative alternatives in Korchi

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Abstract

In the last few decades, villages in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district have been struggling with three significant challenges – iron-ore mining in their forests, abrogation of their recognised forests rights and increased state militarisation in the region. However, in Korchi, along with resisting against the state-sponsored mining and asserting their rights over traditional territories under the Scheduled Areas and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 – commonly known as Forest Rights Act, the villagers are also beginning to re-imagine and reconstruct their traditional governance systems, localise control over their forest resources, raise gender concerns, and revive cultural identity. The process unfolding in Korchi brings out how collective power of people can be used to trigger positive transformations in the situations of extreme conflicts.

Author's profile

Neema Pathak Broome has studied environmental science and completed a post graduate diploma in wildlife management. She is a member of Kalpavriksh, coordinating the Conservation and Livelihoods programme. She is part of the team monitoring implementation of conservation laws and policies, in particular the Wildlife Protection Act and Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006. Her main area of interest is conservation governance, particularly indigenous peoples' and community conserved territories and areas (ICCAs). She has been involved with documentation, research, analysis and advocacy related to inclusive conservation governance and ICCAs in India and South Asia. She also coordinates a local process of participatory conservation governance in Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary in Maharashtra.

Shrishtee Bajpai, a researcher-activist based in Pune, is a member of environmental action group Kalpavriksh. Her current research is focussed on exploring alternatives to mainstream democratic governance models, documenting worldviews of indigenous communities and networking. She helps in coordinating a process called the Vikalp Sangam (Alternative Confluence), which aims to bring together practitioners, thinkers, researchers, and others working on alternatives to currently dominant forms of economic development and political governance. She is a core team member of global platform similar to and partly inspired by the Indian process called the Global Tapestry of Alternatives. Shrishtee is also involved in

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Mining conflict and transformative alternatives in Korchi

The history of takeover of forests in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district¹, and the rest of India began in 1854 by the British. Under the British patronage, these areas were encroached by many outsiders, including money lenders and traders, which led to large scale exploitation of the Adivasis (Vidyarthi 1976). After the zamindari or feudal system was abolished in Independent India, the forests in Gadchiroli, like the rest of India, came to be vested with the Indian state and suitable areas were handed over to the forest department in 1951. Despite a long history of various resistance movements, legal and policy efforts towards decentralisation of governance, the control over forests has continued to remain with the forest department.



Mining in Surajagadh, Gadchiroli. Photo by Shrishtee Bajpai

¹ This article is based on a long-term study being carried out by Kalpavriksh, with Amhi Amchya Arogyasaathi (AAA) and Korchi Maha Gramsabha as part of the ACKnowl-EJ (Academic-Activist Co-Produced Knowledge for Environmental Justice) project. ACKnowl-EJ is a network of scholars and activists engaged in action and collaborative research that aims to analyse the transformative potential of community responses to extractiv-ism and alternatives born from resistance. (<http://acknowlej.org/>)

The forests of Gadchiroli are dense and rich in timber, bamboo and other forest produce. They are important to local people economically, ecologically, spiritually and socially. These forest resources contribute significantly to the economy of the state as well. For instance, 85 per cent of Maharashtra's bamboo comes from Gadchiroli.² The other commercially important forest resources include tendu leaves³ (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), mahua flower, lac and silk. Forests of Gadchiroli have therefore been extensively exploited by the forest department by granting leases to industries or through large scale extractions by the state-controlled Forest Development Corporation of Maharashtra (FDCM).⁴ As per the data from the forest department of Gadchiroli district, currently 51,823.1 hectares (ha) of forests have been leased to FDCM, most of which fall within the traditional boundaries of surrounding gram sabhas⁵ (official term used for a village; literally meaning a village assembly). Since the mid-1990s, the mineral rich forests of Gadchiroli have been gradually leased out for mining. By 2017, there were 25 sanctioned and proposed mines in the district. Collectively, these proposed and sanctioned mining projects will destroy approximately 6,453.11 ha of dense forest directly, while an additional 16,187.4 ha and more would be impacted by mining-related allied activities in Gadchiroli. These mining leases are being given to small and large corporations sometimes in clear violation of the country's legal provisions related to forest diversion, particularly the clause of Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) provided under the Scheduled Areas and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 – commonly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006.^{6,7}

Mining in Korchi taluka

Korchi, an administrative subdivision or taluka⁸ of Gadchiroli district, is located 92 km north from the district headquarters. It inhabits 133 villages or gram sabhas, which were

² http://www.mahaforest.nic.in/fieldoffice/internal.php?lang_eng_mar=Mar&oid=34&MID=1

³ One of the commercially important NTFPs. These leaves are used for making bidis (Indian cigarettes). Fruits are an important source of nutrition.

⁴ <http://www.fdcmm.nic.in/>

⁵ http://www.mahaforest.nic.in/fieldoffice/internal.php?lang_eng_mar=Mar&oid=34&MID=1

⁶ http://www.mahaforest.nic.in/fieldoffice/internal.php?lang_eng_mar=Mar&oid=34&MID=1

⁶ Forest Rights Act, 2006, is a key piece of forest legislation passed in India on 18 December 2006. It provides for recording of Adivasi rights (indigenous peoples) over their traditional forests. These include, individual forest rights (IFRs) over land being cultivated by the forest dwelling communities without legal documents; community rights (CRs) of use and access to forest land and resources; but most importantly it provides for the gram sabhas to claim rights to use, manage, and conserve their traditional forests (here on CFRs) and protect them from internal and external threats.

⁷ <http://www.countercurrents.org/2017/06/17/mining-in-gadchiroli-building-a-castle-of-injustices/>

⁸ An administrative district for taxation purposes, typically comprising a number of villages.

traditionally divided into three Ilakas (feudal territories)⁹ namely, Kumkot Ilaka including 60 gram sabhas; Padyal Job Ilaka including 30 gram sabhas and Kodgul Ilaka including 40 gram sabhas.¹⁰ In Korchi, around twelve mining projects are proposed in Zendepar, Agari Maseli, Nadali, Sohale and Bharitola villages, covering a forest area of about 1,032.66 ha.



Zendepar forest area proposed under mining. Photo by Shrishtee Bajpai

In 2003, the Nistar¹¹ forest area (area over which individual and collective usufruct rights of the local villagers are officially recorded) of Zendepar gram sabha was diverted and reserved for iron-ore mining by the Gadchiroli district collector without the gram sabha's consent. People in the area found out about the proposals accidentally in 2007. On December 12, 2008, the Ministry of Mines released a letter approving the mining lease for iron-ore over 65 ha in another village in Korchi, Sohale, for a period of 20 years. However, this was processed without seeking consent letters from the surface land owners, permission from the forest department, necessary clearance of land owned by Adivasis and site clearance from the

⁹ An administrative unit under the control of one traditional feudal lord or a Zamindar.

¹⁰ <https://www.censusindia.co.in/subdistrict/korchi-taluka-gadchiroli-maharashtra-4055>

¹¹ Nistarpatrak, gaonamuna (village sample) and P1 record of the Zendepar village.

Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). Sarpanch Sangathana,¹² an informal collective of sarpanchs¹³ in Korchi, initiated a taluka level boycott of state assembly elections due in 2009 demanding withdrawal of mining proposals. This strategy proved successful and the government responded and assured that the leases would not be granted for mining. Meanwhile, around the same time, 87 gram sabhas in Korchi taluka filed and received their individual forest rights (IFRs)¹⁴ and community forest rights (CFRs)¹⁵ claims under the FRA. However, Zendevar and Nandali villages received their CFR titles without the forest area that was proposed under mining.

Despite the government's assurance, in the same year, a public hearing was organised in Gadchiroli, which was opposed as the villagers demanded that it be held in Korchi to ensure effective public participation. Nonetheless, despite the distance, people attended the hearing in Gadchiroli in large numbers and raised concerns relating to the impacts of mining. Apart from political, ecological, and economic objections, communities cited strong spiritual reasons to reject mining.

In the words of Samaru Kallo from Zendevar village:

"We will never let our forests be mined, not just our village forests, but we stand with all the Adivasis who are resisting destruction of their forests. All our gods live in the forests. We Adivasis do not have temples. These stones, trees, twigs, forests, they are our gods. The spirits of our ancestors live in these forests. If they forcefully relocate us, we will go, and we will even take our family gods, but what about the community gods and the spirits, where will they go? They cannot leave these forests?"

Villagers' opposition was registered and the public hearing was dismissed. However, in 2016, some villages received a notice about another public hearing. Following that, a meeting was held by Mahila Parisar Sangh, the taluka level women's federation on gender empowerment through the FRA, in Temli village in Korchi. In this meeting, mining and its impacts on environment and livelihoods of people, particularly on women, was extensively discussed:

¹² The collective emerged out of the need to better implement government development schemes and policies meant for the local villages in addition to raising other local issues of concern.

¹³ A *sarpanch* is a decision-maker, elected by the village-level constitutional body of local self-government called the gram sabha (village government) in India (gram panchayat).

¹⁴ IFRs are rights over land being cultivated by the forest dwelling communities without legal documents.

¹⁵ CFRs are rights to use and access to forest land and resources; but most importantly it provides for the gram sabhas to claim rights to use, manage, and conserve their traditional forests.

“The forests are most essential to us. For Adivasis, development is to have access to basic health and education. People get food, fruits, leaves and flowers from the forest. Our development will happen here. If this forest is given to a mining company, then we will lose our independence. We will be like slaves. Mining won’t lead to development.” – collective stand by the Mahila Parisar Sangh in Korchi.

Despite strong opposition, a public hearing was again held in Gadchiroli on August 6, 2017. Gram sabhas from across Korchi taluka mobilised resources to reach Gadchiroli and once again vehemently opposed the proposal. A Right to Information (RTI)¹⁶ application was filed by Zendevar village in 2017, seeking information about all mining leases proposed and granted within Zendevar forest area, their current forest status, copy of gram sabha resolutions under the FRA if villagers have given consent or not, topography sheets and maps of the village and mining area, and a copy of proposals by the company. Out of all the requests, the information was made available only on the area sanctioned for mining, which included 278 ha of Zendevar’s traditional forest area.

Though the mining has not been initiated yet, the strategies to mount pressure on the local people to agree to mining continue in many ways: Through publication of propaganda papers by the proponent companies listing out ‘benefits of development’ if mining was to go ahead, organising events with the youth including through educational institutions, co-opting members of the gram sabhas that are opposing mining, and targeting leaders, among many other ways.

Towards transformative alternatives

The processes of clearing mining proposals and lack of information to local villagers are in complete disregard of local traditions, cultures, needs and worldviews, in addition to be in violation of their rights under the FRA. Local communities, however, are not giving up. They are not only collectivising but also beginning to re-imagine their social organisation and

¹⁶ Right to Information Act (RTI) was passed by Parliament in 2005. Under the provisions of the Act, any citizen of India may request information from a "public authority" (a body of Government or "instrumentality of State"), which is required to reply expeditiously or within thirty days. The Act also requires every public authority to computerise their records for wide dissemination and to proactively certain categories of information so that the citizens need minimum recourse to request for information formally.

localise the control on forest resources. Through this, they are also questioning the mainstream development models and centralised decision making of the state.

Mahila Parisar Sangh: Women, mining and role of women' collective

Women have played a critical role in the resistance as well as alternative transformation processes that are emerging in Korchi. In this predominantly patriarchal society, women had little say in traditional institutions and forest governance. Women also faced a number of social challenges, including domestic violence abetted by alcoholism, lack of resources or property and decision-making rights. To empower women financially, legally and socially, a local NGO, Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi (AAA),¹⁷ started creating women's self-help groups (SHGs). These SHGs led to emergence of local women leaders who facilitated a collective of SHGs called Mahila Parisar Sangh. It has since become a support group for women facing injustice, oppression and violence within the family or the community. One of the critical push for the resistance to mining came from the discussion on mining and its impact in one of the meetings of the women collective as mentioned above. Along with this, women are playing an important role in collectivisation and democratic processes in Korchi.



Mahila Parisar Sanghs mining meeting, Zendevar village. Photo by Shrishtee Bajpai

¹⁷ www.aogyasathi.org/

Moving towards direct democracy

The need for collectivisation and political decentralisation began in Korchi from 2009 onwards. At the wake mining conflict, communities realised that they need to collectivise to make the state institutions, particularly the local and administrative institutions, accountable. The Sarpanch Sangathana was one such collective. However, it remained in the hands of a few sarpanchs who were the powerful people in the community, influenced and supported by national level political parties and their agendas, and with no women representation.

On the other hand, many local leaders and activists began to initiate processes within their villages to understand what it meant to have received CFR rights. This collective deliberative process initiated discussions on the role, powers, rights and responsibilities of a gram sabha. They also began discussing strategies towards empowering gram sabhas instead of panchayats as a first unit of decision making and gaining control over natural resources. Along with the help of local NGOs like AAA and other activists, the concept of gram sabha and its legal powers were researched upon extensively, published and distributed as fliers across the villages, and put up as posters at various public places.

By the end of 2016, as the concept of gram sabhas was catching on, the traditional Ilakas began to see themselves as supra gram sabha bodies. Encouraged by the above processes, the Ilaka sabhas¹⁸ (territorial assemblies) began to include within their programmes and ceremonies, political discourses and conversations on gram sabha empowerment, direct democracy, how the laws like FRA could help empower gram sabhas, mining and its impacts, concepts like growth and development, colonisation and imperialism, among others. Efforts were made towards revisiting the meaning of the word 'adivasi' (indigenous), Adivasi cultures and histories, retelling the stories of tribal revolutionary heroes (usually invisible in mainstream historical narratives) and understanding co-option of animistic Adivasi cultures into dominant religions. The process also worked towards understanding how legally empowered gram sabhas could work towards self-determination and self-governance, including asserting equitable control over forests and local economy. As gram sabhas began to gain empowerment and recognition, it was important for them to get strong in order to support those who were just beginning to reorganise themselves and develop mutual learning and support. The traditional Ilaka sabhas had their limitations in being able to address these issues, as they were not seen as truly inclusive of all sections of

¹⁸ These were meetings at the level of an ilaka represented by the poojaris (community priests) of all villages in an ilaka.

society like non-tribals (like Other Backward Classes and Scheduled Castes) or women in their decision-making processes. To tackle the inefficiencies of the traditional institutions, curb market exploitation, ensure equity in benefit sharing and enable knowledge, learning, and exchanges, a federation of 90 gram sabhas – Maha Gramsabha – was formed in 2017.

A federation of gram sabhas

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. All designated representatives are obliged to report back to their gram sabhas. Newer policy prescriptions or information are 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 actions are discussed and details of expenses incurred are shared. Four representatives from each member gram sabha constitute the general body (GB) of the MGS, while an executive committee of 15 members (one female and one male from seven clusters¹⁹ including one person with disability) representing marginalised groups like women, other social groups like SCs and OBCs and disabled persons is selected to handle the day to day functioning. It has been specified that the executive committee would change in every three years and its president be from the Scheduled Tribes.

In one of the first meetings of the MGS, the Mahila Parisar Sangh members insisted that along with challenging the hegemonic and top-down bureaucracies, it is also important to challenge the established traditional structures that legitimise oppression of women and restrict women's role in decision-making. Their efforts ensured that the executive committee has women representatives. Along with this, MGS has mandated to have two women representatives along with two men from each gram sabha that passes a resolution to join the MGS and adhere to its rules and regulations. The fact that the decision-making bodies are now the gram sabhas and not the panchayats (far away from the village), there is a greater opportunity for women's participation. Through the efforts of the Mahila Parisar Sangh, some gram sabhas have also made special efforts to ensure that the meetings are held at times when women are able to attend. The sangh also ensured that Korchi taluka is one of the few areas in the country with a focus on the rights of women under the FRA and

¹⁹ Cluster is a group of villages divided by the MahaGramsabha based on their territorial boundaries. Each cluster may have 7-10 villages. 87 gram sabha members of MGS have divided themselves into 7 clusters, namely, 1) BodeseraPadyal Job 2) RaopatGangaramGhat 3) Peko Pen Saoli 4) Jabragat 5) KuwarpatKohka 6) Shamsheer-gatKohka 7) DantasheroJambadi. These clusters are also used as units for collection and sale of NTFP like ten-du patta and bamboo.

Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, 1996.²⁰ Going a step beyond, many gram sabhas have also taken a decision that women will get 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.

Localising control over forest economy

In 2017, the 87 gram sabhas in Korchi with the support of MGS carried out a total business of Rs. 107,987,970 (1,526,871 USD) from the sale of tendu leaves. As the villagers recall, when the forest department harvested tendu, gram sabhas did not benefit from the trade as there was no transparency on how much tendu was actually being harvested. Villagers claim that harvest was always much more than the initial estimates but any harvest above the estimates was not officially recorded.



A woman gathering mahua in the forest, salhe village. Photo by Shrishtee Bajpai

²⁰ The provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 or PESA is a law enacted by the Government of India for ensuring self-governance through traditional gram sabhas for people living in the Scheduled Areas of India. In 2014, the Government of Maharashtra also decided to draft the Rules under PE-SA, which gave power to the smallest unit of decision making the village assembly and granted rights over the minor forest produce among others.

Comparative income of families and gram sabhas from sale of tendu leaves in Korchi taluka

Years	Payment/ standard bag of tendu leaves (in Rs.)	Share retained by forest department for its use (in Rs.)	Share retained by gram sabha for village development (in Rs.)	Collecting families received (in Rs.)	Total collective income (in Rs.)
2013	4,577.37	6,225,452	0	35,277,561	41,503,013
2014	5,071.09	7,356,601	0	38,622,156	45,978,757
2015	4,796.17	6,957,653	0	36,527,679	43,485,332
2016	8,272.37	15,001,170	0	60,004,680	75,005,850
2017	11,910.39	0	14,038,436	95,029,414	107,987,970
2018	4,600	0	5,422,066	36,286,134	41,708,200
2019	5,700	0	7,091,066	50,650,475	57,741,541

Sources: The data was collected by Amhi Amchaya Arogaysathi, Korchi and Maha Gramsabha.

In addition to the tendu leaves, the income is also earned from the sale of other forest fruits such as jamun (*Syziziumcumini*), mahua (*Madhuca indica*), charoli (*Buchnanian lanzan*), among others. The three gram sabhas in Korchi that this study focused on – Zendepar, Salhe, and Bharitola – earned around Rs.5,96,653 (8,405.64 USD) on an average from tendu, mahua and tarota in 2016 and around Rs. 10,21,516 (14,391.1 USD) in 2017. Along with this, the average annual income from farming in the three villages is around Rs.9,39,600 (13,237.07 USD).

The direct income from the non-timber forest produce including bamboo, tendu and others is clearly more than the incomes that the mining companies have verbally been promising to people, particularly the youth. An analysis carried out by those engaged local processes in Korchi suggests that the propaganda material circulated by the mining companies of employing 78 unskilled labour will not exceed beyond Rs. 350/ day.²¹ Additionally, there would be differentiated income for men and women. On the other hand, the income from the forest produce is equal for men and women, and provides equal opportunities to earn for all members of gram sabha.

²¹ <https://capindia.in/minimum-wages-maharashtra-2019/>

Village-level socio income data from 2016-2017

Village name	Number of families	Income from farming	Income from other sources	Income from tendu, mahua and tarota 2016	Income from tendu in 2016	Income from tendu, mahua and tarota 2017	Income from tendu in 2017	Total income in 2016	Total income in 2017
Zendepar	46	8,21,000	8,34,600	3,48,200	2,23,800	7,42,200	6,28,400	24,17,300	28,11,300
Bharitola	56	10,70,800	8,34,600	12,31,760	6,50,700	17,71,718	10,18,600	31,37,160	36,77,118
Salhe	53	9,27,000	2,05,700	2,10,000	1,41,000	5,50,630	4,26,830	13,42,700	16,82,630

Sources: The data was collected during the course of this study (2017-2019) by Amhi Amchaya Arogaysathi, Korchi and Maha Gramsabha.

Ecological considerations

Conversations with people in the community in Zendepar, Salhe, and Bharitola revealed that gram sabha empowerment and laws like FRA and PESA have helped in reversing the process of alienation from the forests among the communities.²² A few gram sabhas in Korchi have started making rules and regulations for management and protection of forests. The three villages have also put in place a system of regular patrolling of their forests to check over forest fires and felling of trees. Zendepar, Salhe, Bharitola and Nandli gram sabhas have planted over 70,000 saplings of bamboo, amla ('Indian gooseberry), custard apple, mango, and guava, among others on 100 ha of their forest land. The FRA requires all gram sabhas to formulate management plans and strategies for the forests over which their rights have been recognised. In addition, some of the gram sabhas like Bharitola and a few others have been funded by the government to compile their 'community biodiversity registers' to safeguard and record local biodiversity and associated traditional knowledge.

²² Based on the conversations that the authors had with the community members during the study period- 2017- 2019. The detailed report will be available by end of October, 2019.

Conclusion

The processes of assertion of rights, self-governance, and forest conservation and management are unfolding in Korchi under varied threats. This includes responding to hegemonic and oppressive state policies (including heavy militarisation of the region and macro-economic policy), which are deeply skewed in favour of corporatisation and privatisation or addressing internal hegemonies and patriarchy. Yet communities have emerged as creative political force, providing alternative models of local governance and suggesting that there are alternative ways of meeting human needs and aspirations, without destroying the earth and without leaving half of humanity behind.

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