

## Community Forest Management Initiatives in Odisha by RCDC

Forest and forest dwelling communities have a symbiotic relationship. The Forest Dwelling Schedule Tribes (FDST) and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFD) have realised the importance of forests and wildlife. Hence community-based forest protection, conservation, regeneration and management is a way of life for them and as a secure tenure they have their usage and access rights. In 2005 RCDC undertook an enumeration of such forest protecting communities in Odisha and the study revealed that 12000 CFM groups are protecting 2.5 mha of forest. About 12 million people are directly dependent on the forest resources for their livelihood needs.



In Odisha community-initiated forest protection and management process took its shape in early twentieth century. Such initiatives were an outcome of a response to environmental degradation and continuous dwindling livelihood opportunities from the forests. The predominant agrarian community, faced with shortages of small timber and bamboo for agricultural operations and reducing yield due to land degradation, took to forest protection as the panacea. Some isolated cases in the then undivided Sambalpur and Koraput districts pioneered this initiative and set an example for others. The aftermath of this initiative was highly acknowledged and replicated in many places of Odisha. The process was grounded in almost all the districts having a patch of forest. Over the years, it took the shape of a mass movement. But it gained momentum mostly in 80's and 90's. These two decades witnessed formation of many Communities Initiated Forest Management (CFM) groups. Community institutions sprung up at village and cluster levels to nurture and manage forests. An inclusive approach to resource management ensured that all the villages dependent on a particular forest patch come together to form a participatory and democratic institution to manage that particular forest. Now in many places people have accepted it as a way of life rather than a mere activity.

**Challenges:** Irony is that public law-making process has yet to consider these initiatives as viable resource management institutions rather there have been a constant and consistent effort by the state authority to dismantle the process.

**Post FRA Scenario:** The Schedule Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Recognition of Forest Rights Act 2006 provide authority to the Gramsabha to prepare Community Forest Resource Management Plan to manage the resources sustainably by the people (u/s 5 of FRA). Section 5 of FRA empowers the holders of Forest rights, Gramsabha and village level institutions to protect the forest, wildlife and biodiversity and the eco-system and to ensure that the decisions taken in Gramsabha to regulate access to community forest resources and stop any activity which adversely affects the wild animals, forest and the biodiversity are complied with. The Post FRA regime also is in tune with greater attention to forests through its protection, regeneration, conservation and management to increase ecosystem services especially for agriculture and to facilitate poverty eradication which is the mandate of MDG and SDG. Local institutions are empowered to utilize their local natural resources for better livelihood and food security.

#### **Role of RCDC:**

RCDC has been working for strengthening of community forest management in the state since its days of inception in the year 1993. RCDC started working with the strong belief that the communities are the best managers of natural resources as they have the highest stakes in these resources. As Odisha had a rich history of communities protecting and managing forests it resonated the basic premise of the organisation. From then onwards the approaches of the organisation has pivoted around Community based forest management. At the beginning, the role of the organisation was to document various experiences of Community Forest Management and disseminate the same both vertically and horizontally. This led to production of newsletters like and news updates on forestry such as Ama Jangal Amara (bi-monthly newsletter in Odia), Community Forestry (quarterly newsletter in English), Jangal Khabar (news update as and when necessary), Jhar Darab (quarterly NTFP newsletter in Oriya) etc. It also produces a series of booklets in Oriya and English on different issues in forestry, on different NTFP items etc. Through these publications we were able to reach various stakeholders including the forest protecting communities and likeminded CSOs within the state, the forest department and various institution of importance within the state and beyond.

#### **Networking:**

RCDC started its interventions in Bolangir, in late 1990s for facilitating a process among the forest protecting communities to build up their own platform at the cluster and district level to safeguard their interests and fight for their rights over forest. A district level federation among the forest protecting communities has been functioning for last 18 years in Bolangir. RCDC subsequently extended its interventions in forestry networking in 22 districts of Odisha which have a sizable forest coverage baring 8 coastal districts. Before the organisation started the networking initiatives, efforts were made to motivate communities to protect forest close to their villages and the process led to forest protection movement through Thengapali, watch and ward etc. Women led forest protection groups exhibited tremendous success as the forest conflicts are less with better benefit sharing. Our perspective on CFM has led to coming together of different CSOs working on community forest management and we also have facilitated federating of CFM groups at different levels starting from village, cluster, zone and district. The District Level Forest Federations (DFFs) are again federated into a state level organisation called as Odisha Jangal Mancha (OJM) which is basically a platform for policy influencing.

RCDC has developed a reasonably good database on forestry in Odisha and neighbouring states. It has undertaken research on different aspects of forest management, NTFP, wild life etc. The organisation carries out regular interaction with different stakeholders within the state and also in neighbouring states on various issues in forestry sector. During the late 1990, RCDC has played a key role in advocating for doing away with the monopoly regime in procurement and marketing of NTFPs that culminated in ushering in the new NTFP policy that vested the ownership of NTFPs to Gram Panchayats. Post new policy RCDC was engaged in promotion of alternative market for NTFP in order to increase the income of the primary collectors and producers from the trade of NTFP. The organisation too provided support service to different CBOs, NGOs and other stakeholders in forestry.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of forest rights) Act, 2006 brought in substantial changes in the approach of RCDC. During the past decade the interventions of the RCDC for implementation of Forest Rights Act had been limited in scale but high in intensity as this was a period where the ground rules for recognition of forest rights in its myriad forms had not yet been laid properly.

RCDC during the last 13 years of involvement in FRA has facilitated IFR/CR/CFR claims in more than 1500 villages. Through our involvement with the communities about 6000 HHs received their IFR recognized. All most all the IFR households have been linked with various Government schemes and programmes like PMAY, Land Development, Farm Pond, Agricultural and Horticultural support, Social Security Schemes, and Plantation activities etc. Facilitating claim making for CFR and CR is continuing in 1008 villages. And this year we also are working with 200 villages for initiation of CRMC and getting them into forest management.

### **CFR Management Plans:**

The main objective of CFR Management is to prepare a practicable model which is people friendly, easy to follow and practice, befitting to the working conditions, need based and community centered in principle. Mere Silvicultural operations cannot augment sustainability in the management process. A holistic approach with greater community participation and sensitization is needed for sustainable forest management.

Till date with the facilitation of RCDC 101 CR/CFRs have been recognized. RCDC has empowered the Gramsabhas / FRCs and CFR Management Committees through organising meetings, trainings, exposures, helped them in claiming the forest rights, prepare plans, helped them in getting Government supported schemes and programmes. As per section 4.1 (e) of FRA amended Rule 2012, CFR management Committees were constituted where CFR titles have been recognized and as per section 4.1 (f) CFR Management Plans are prepared by Gramsabha. Through our initiatives in 20 villages CFR management activities are going on as per the CFR Management Plans prepared by Gramsabhas.

The major activities under CFR management Plan are as follows:

- Institution building and strengthening
- Prioritizing the objectives as per the community need and issues
- Resource assessment and assessment of health of the forest
- Immediate Objective and Long term objective with Protection, regeneration, conservation and management, balancing them with the livelihood needs of the Community.
- Preparation of Management Plan, Approval from Gramsabha
- Integration of the Management Plan with the Forest Department Working Plan

The Challenging area is that the ground rules has not yet be set even MoTA is working on this. These initiatives have yielded good result in Kalahandi with the set examples in NTFPs like Kendu Leaf and Bamboo.

### **Deregulation of Kendu leaf**

On 17<sup>th</sup> November 2017, the Government of Odisha deregulated Kendu Leaf (a government-controlled MFP) for six villages of Golamunda Block in Kalahandi district, namely Kalipur, Kanakpur, Khasiguda, Jamgudabahali, Kasturapadar, and Jamjharan as they have their CFR titles clearly mentioning (Gramsabha) ownership rights over the MFP in general and KL in particular. They formed a federation of the Gramsabhas and negotiated with a trader who agreed to pay as high as Rs.7.50 per a bundle of 60 leaves. This is much higher rate than the Government price of 3 rupees. RCDC has facilitated this deregulation process.

Recently, another 16 villages in Golamunda block and Junagarh Block were added to this deregulation process. As this deregulation process is providing opportunities to the KL Pluckers to earn more, hence more and more villages are entering into this process.

Efforts have been taken by RCDC in case of conversion of Forest Villages into Revenue Villages as per section 3.1(h) of FRA. Conversion of forest villages into revenue villages is going on for 21 forest villages. We are working with the government for the recognition.

### **Habitat Rights**

Last but not the least, RCDC is also engaged in recognition of Habitat and Habitation Rights of PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups) in Odisha. We are concentrating on 4 such PVTGs out of 13 communities in Odisha namely Juangas in Keonjhar, Paudi Bhuyan in Anugul, Keonjhar, Deogarh and Sundergarh, Kutia Kondha in Kalahandi and Kandhamal, Dongaria Kondha in Rayagada district.

RCDC engaged with Government Agencies particularly with Forest Department and Tribal Development Department to ensure community based decentralized forest governance for better management of forest and its resources so that this would contribute largely for combating the climate change menace.