

Course helps Gadchiroli tribals know their forest rights — and win a diploma

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Chandrakant Keechak with Madhav Gadgil. (Express Photo)

TWENTY-FOUR youngsters, including three women, most of them tribals from the backward and conflict-torn Gadchiroli, will board a bus to Mumbai next week to collect diplomas from Mumbai University's School of Economics and Public Policy. Many of them never got around to completing their Class 12, but that didn't stop them from signing up when the Tribal Development Department of the Maharashtra government and Mumbai University offered a 25-week intensive course designed especially for members of gram sabhas that were granted Community Forest Rights (CFR) under the Forest Rights Act.

While Maharashtra's tribal-dominated villages have been granted rights to more than 27 lakh acres of forest land under The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, known simply as the Forest Rights Act, the diploma course, the first of its kind, was planned in order to strengthen such villages' ability to undertake sustainable management of their CFR resources.

"Most of us in the classroom knew only basic facts about what the Forest Rights Act entitles us to, that tribals can get individual land pattas for forest land they have been tilling, or a gram sabha can get a patta for forest land that the village depends on," says Chandrakant Keechak, 25, one of the students from the first batch of the diploma course. "But not even one of us knew how to measure this land, mark boundaries, and certainly none of us had drawn up lists of what forest produce we have joint control over, or how to plan and develop long-lasting livelihoods from such forest produce."

Starting on October 2 last year, the classes were held in a community hall in Mendha (Lekha) village in Gadchiroli, the first village in the country to receive Community Forest Rights under the FRA. The course covered not only the finer aspects of the forest rights law but also a range of associated subjects – from the history of adivasis in India to practical accounting and GST.

Principal Secretary (Tribal Development) Manisha Verma says the idea for the course stemmed from the fact that while the law itself seeks to empower forest-dwelling communities, villagers are practically still dependent on officials of the forest department or revenue department to help manage their forest resources.

"The objective of the course is skill development, capacity building and knowledge development for tribals. Once they learn to make sustainable use of their forest resources, adivasis and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers will be able to build secure livelihoods," Verma says.

When the course was announced late in 2018, the intake was set at 50 students, including 40 from gram sabhas that have been granted some financial assistance from the state for preparation of their CFR working plans. Applicants required no pre-qualifications, barring their own gram sabha's faith that their nominated candidate would return home to use his newly acquired skills for the village. Eventually, 39 applicants made it through a basic entrance test that involved basic competence in math, ability to use a smartphone, etc. A few of them dropped out in subsequent months, forced to return home to earn their daily wages. While the batchmates were referred to as fellows, no stipend was paid although Mumbai University used a government grant to fund the course, arrange for boarding and lodging for the fellows and also a one-way bus-fare from their villages to Mendha (Lekha). Officials said they expect the respective gram sabhas to pitch in with a return bus fare.

The 27 who completed the course include 25 from Dhanora, Korchi and Etapalli talukas of Gadchiroli and one each from the neighbouring districts of Yavatmal and Chandrapur. The first batch was a successful pilot, and officials hope to make the course available to forest-dwelling communities across the state, wherever CFR titles have been given to gram sabhas.

"Our effort was to enable the fellows to manage their forest resources, and specifically to formulate a conservation and forest management plan for their own gram sabha and maybe for gram sabhas nearby," says Dr Vijay Edlabadkar, a former principal of Armori college in Gadchiroli who served as director of the training programme. The course was designed with technical advice from ecologist Dr Madhav Gadgil, who also collaborated closely with the training of the first batch, which comprised members of the Gond, Rajgond, Pardhan and Kolam tribes, as well as a small number of non-tribals.

"We organised guest lectures by top professionals and teachers in various subjects, including marketing, accounting, statistics, stock-taking, landscaping, etc. There were also sessions on gender equity," says Dr Edlabadkar. A theoretical physicist himself, he taught the fellows math, helping them polish their understanding of the decimal system and other basic math they would require for land measurement and accounting.

Keechak, who belongs to Mangda Budruk, a village of 600 residents in Dhanora taluka, is one of only three graduates in the group. "We learnt how to draw up a forest resources management plan, following rules as per the law. We also went back to our villages and used first a GPS app on our smartphones to measure the CFR land and then cross-verified that with a borrowed GPS machine. Almost all of us found that the actual land measurement is much more or much less than the CFR titles given," he laughs.

But the "biggest question" for CFR-holding villages is how to market their non-timber forest produce, including mahua, tendu, bamboo and dozens of medicinal herbs – the only selling many have done is by the roadside.

Keechak is now planning to set up a cooperative for the purpose with the other fellows' gram sabhas, once they return from Mumbai with their diploma certificates on February 24-25. "If the idea of the course is to build a cadre of tribals who can draft forest resource management plans for gram sabhas in their region, then this will be the first big success," he says.

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