

Maha Gramsabha: A Unique Initiative In Central India

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Ashish Kothari interviews Govind Singh Hodi, Kumari Tai Jamkata, Izam Sai Katengey and Shubhada Deshmukh, activists from Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, India. They are at the forefront of a unique initiative called the "Maha Gramsabha", or the "Federation Of Village Assemblies", which is questioning the logic of extractivist development and putting forward an alternative vision for their region.

Ashish Kothari

: As you know the ACKnowl-EJ process is an effort at understanding and learning from community responses to extractivism as well as alternatives which are emerging out of resistance movements. We are very keen to learn more about the Maha Gramsabha (a federation of village assemblies) process that you are part of. How did it start, and what is the objective of the process? What are your future plans?

Izam Sai Katengey: The name Maha Gramsabha (MGS) has emerged quite organically from the collective experiences of our people. Traditionally, we've believed in Ilakas (territories). There were two ilakas in Korchi, one of 30 villages and the other of 90 villages. People used to attend meetings of their respective ilakas. Currently, there is an ongoing resistance against mining projects in the region. A struggle to claim community forests rights is also underway. It was, however, difficult to resolve these issues in ilaka sabhas (ilaka meetings). So, we decided to form a Maha Gramsabha at the taluka (an administrative district) level that could take up these issues. From each gram sabha (village council), two men and two women become members of the Maha Gramsabha. The objective was to create awareness and support base for the implementation of Forest Rights Act. In addition to this, the Maha Gramsabha also provides support and advice on matters related to implementation of state services like education, health, etc.

AK: What is the community composition of these 90 villages?

ISK: People are included irrespective of caste and community. They are included on the basis of being natives of the region. But adivasis (indigenous people) are definitely more in number.

AK

: Which adivasis?

Kumari Tai Jamkata

: Gond and Kavar Adivasis. But Gond adivasis are more in number.

AK: Apart from resistance against mining and implementation of forest rights, what other activities are taking place at the MGS level?

ISK

: The MGS process is about two years old and we are continuing to learn from that experience. There are, however, certain core issues that we focus on as a priority – for example, education. In adivasi areas, education is quite weak; our kids are unable to study beyond the 10

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or 12

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standards. We want to provide better guidance for higher education to them. Also, if MGS generates some revenue then we could also provide some livelihoods support. We're also quite keen to tackle certain social issues – for instance, among adivasis, marriages are a three to four day affair, and we are trying to reduce that to a fewer days and promoting community marriages as well. Likewise, we would want to work towards health, livelihoods, and other issues in the future.



Ashish Kothari, in conversation with a team of activists from Gadchiroli, India.

AK: So, you are saying that there should be higher education but the mainstream education doesn't account for adivasi community's indigenous knowledge or their local language. So are there any discussions within MGS regarding this? Do you think about how to change it?

ISK: Yes, that is a crucial issue for us. We are thinking of establishing a library for our kids at Korchi taluka, where we'll make available books that can provide information about our culture and also information on what sort of livelihood related work can happen in our villages.

AK: Another issue that I want to talk about is that of the local language – you talk in Gondi language (the local language) but in the local schools, the medium of instruction is Marathi (the state language)? Are you worried about losing your own language?

Govind Singh Hodi: At home, we elders talk with the kids in Gondi.

AK: But, what about schools? Should education be in Gondi or in Marathi?

GSH

: According to me it should be in both.

Shubhada Deshmukh

: Many years ago, Maharashtra government initiated a process that mandated that for the first two years the teaching should be in the local language and then shift to Marathi. Some books were also designed that way. But this has not been implemented. I feel that is how it should be. Children should be taught in their local languages at the earlier stages so that they can understand and inculcate the local knowledge, as well as maintain the beauty of expression and uniqueness of their language. Later they should learn Marathi, Hindi, English so that when they have to move outside their villages, they are able to adjust to a different environment.

ISK: I also want to add to this thought. Our children talk in Gondi, but the teacher from the city would talk in Marathi. We would complain that the kids don't understand Marathi, and so how they will get educated? So we told him, "okay, our kids don't talk in Marathi but you should also understand that they have to know their own language, both are important". We, therefore, made a thesaurus for our children, it included four languages – Gondi, Chhattisgarhi, Marathi and Hindi. This renewed their interests in school and their absenteeism rate also reduced.

SD: Through AAAS (Amhi Amchya Arogayasathi), a program was initiated that older children who go to senior school should come back and teach the younger kids in the village in Gondi. Also, the examination question paper was translated in the local language and it was found that they can understand and answer the questions better when they are in the local language.

AK: Talking about other social issues – a lot of people say that there is equality between men and women among adivasis. But, traditionally women didn't participate in gram sabhas or in panchayats. So, how do you try to ensure women's participation in the MGS process?

KTJ: That has been an incremental process – first, women started interacting with community programs through women's Self-help groups (SHGs). Before that, even I would never come out from my house. Taking decisions on non-domestic issues and interacting with people outside was prohibited. But, through SHGs we moved out, took decisions and now we have a federation of 40 SHGs from 30 villages of Korchi Taluka. So like MGS, we also have a women's SHG federation. Now, a lot of women come out and they participate in initiatives beyond their personal matters. Village level issues like health, education, domestic violence, discrimination against women are all discussed in the federation. This leads to discussions on the appropriate forums to resolve these matters. In the federation, we've empowered women to take up these issues either with government officials or local village leaders.



A village council meeting underway in Gadchiroli, India.

Through the SHG federation we visit the health department's Public Health Centre, government ashram shala (government schools), girls' dorm to investigate the implementation of services – what amenities are needed, behaviour of government employees towards young girls and women. We try to resolve some of the minor issues through discussions among ourselves. We also take up issues and questions about government employees with the district administration and elected representatives.

You had mentioned earlier that women's representation in Panchayats (village councils) was very low. That is true. Before the SHGs, we were never invited to panchayat meetings. We did not even know what a panchayat was. In 2000, we did an exercise under Adivasi Swashayan Kayda (Adivasi self-governance rule) to include women in Jat (Community) Panchayat. We cited the 73rd amendment, which mandates a 33% reservation for women in gram panchayat and Zila parishad (District Council). While the Jat Panchayat is a traditional institution, it is still a political one. So, why shouldn't women be part of it. Earlier, if a woman had a grievance against her family or village, only she used to be called for the hearing. It was very difficult for her to talk because first, she was a victim and second, no one was there to support her. Justice was always deliberated upon and handed down by men. At the start, we would just attend and listen at Jat Panchayat meetings, but later some cases started coming to us like on issues of conflict with husband or father-in-law. We decided to call Jat Panchayat meetings on these issues. That's how we initiated the process of including women in decision making bodies, and more importantly, respecting them and ensuring their right to put forward their views.

Like Izam Bhao (brother) belongs to the Gond Samaj, I belong to the Kaware Samaj. So, we started organizing within our village community panchayat. We have an ilaka (territory) of 19 and 16 villages, respectively. The executive committee of both these areas have women representatives. We speak on the behalf of any woman who has been a victim of any atrocity and this has been accepted by the community. These are some of the changes that have happened in the villages.



A protest march against a proposed mining project in Gadchiroli, India.

In 2009, we took a stand against the proposed iron ore mining project in Zendebar village. It was decided that the entire taluka (administrative district) had to come together to mark the resistance. Otherwise, it won't work. Initially, a Sarpanch Sangathana (a group of village heads from each gram panchayat) got together with the hope that if each of these gram panchayats organized itself and got together, then the entire taluka would also forge a unified front for the resistance. It was decided that this group will not be into any kind of party politics – like supporting the BJP or the Congress (two national parties). We will work together for the common cause. This led to the formation of Kissan Sangharsh Samiti (Farmers' Resistance Committee). We insisted upon equal participation of women in all the deliberations. We also encouraged women to become more aware of these issues – what would be the impact of mining on women's health, education and their families. Right now, children travel 12-13 kms to their schools. If mining was to start, there would be trucks plying on that route all the time. How safe would our children be, then? We also visited the neighboring Chandrapur district, where we could see the impacts of mining. The owners of the mining companies initially made lofty promises – that they will plant trees, will construct canals and other water sources, create better educational and health facilities. But, now people in Chandrapur are living like beggars. We don't want that to happen in our villages. Hence, it was important that women also become an active part of the resistance. That is how the entire process of women joining the MGS began.

I used to work with women SHG's and so my initial contact was only with women. But, now I am a part of a process where the entire planning as well as its execution is done together by men and women, not separately. If all hands come together against a common cause and raise their voice collectively, then the impact of that effort is immense. In MGS also we insisted upon equal participation for women. So, respecting that request, two women representatives from each village become members of MGS. Also, the treasurer of the executive committee is a woman.

So, this is how this organization is evolving – women are steadily participating in all decision making bodies and men are supporting them in instances where they face difficulties. For example, in Izam Bhao's village, the SHG was disbanded thrice for various reasons, but now they have got together again with his support. The SHGs have become very proactive on the agricultural front – streamlining agricultural practices, becoming proficient with equipment and machinery and even experimenting with renewable energy like solar lights etc.

AK

: That is really remarkable! Moving on to another topic, I believe, currently 90 villages have received forest rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. Some people say that the way the government or traders and paper-mill owners used to cut the trees, now villagers will do the same with more intensity. I wonder if the forests would survive in such a situation? What do you think about that?

ISK: It may seem like that, but wood cutting is neither a government's right nor that of the gram sabha (village council). The local trees like **Hirda, Mahua, Baheda, (Terminalia chebula, Mahua longifolia, Terminalia bellirica)** give enough for our subsistence. People have also realized that forests are essential and even if they lose their farms, forests will help them survive. So, now the gram sabhas have taken up conservation, protection, management, and regeneration work.

AK: What is the forest cover of the 90 villages?

ISK

: I don't have the exact figure, but around 85% of the entire area is under forest cover.

AK

: Are the local communities protecting the wildlife along with the forest produce?

GSH: Earlier adivasis used to hunt the animals. They also collected plants from the forests to supplement their agriculture. But, now we realise that in the forests everything is essential. It is important to have wildlife, medicinal plants, and fruit bearing plants and everything else. Our movement against mining is essentially to stop the destruction that it would cause to our forests.

KTJ: In each village, we are working towards creating Biodiversity Registers for our various forests.

AK: Can you tell us which big mammals are found in your area?

ISK: Wild-boar, bear, leopard, tiger.

AK

: And, are you hopeful that they will continue to survive in your forests?

ISK, KTJ, GSH

: Yes, they most certainly will!

AK: Any plans for the future in regards to MGS? Like your own notion of 'development' as something different from the way government wants development? What would you like to do in the future?

ISK: If we say that in our village we are the government then whatever we feel is development for the village will be the development that will take place. For example, everyone has the right to live. Which I believe means that all that is required to live – forests, land, education – must be guaranteed. This is what we would work towards. Also, we travel to workshops like this one and learn new things, become familiar with other issues. If other volunteers from our villages also get the opportunity to participate in these events then they will get to know how the country is working and what new ideas are shaping the world. This is also very essential.

AK: That is a very hopeful way to end this conversation. Thank you very much. How would you say it in Gondi?

ISK: Chokode Chokodhbese bes.

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