

**Livelihood Security and Village Development  
through Forest Conservation  
in Pachgaon, Maharashtra**



*Villagers of Pachagon patrolling their forest Photo Credits: Sneha Gutgutia*

**A case study prepared by Sneha Gutgutia, Kavya Chowdhary and Rupesh Patil**



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## **Pachgaon Village, Chandrapur**

### **Background**

Pachgaon was the first village in the Chandrapur district of Maharashtra whose claim to Community Forest Rights (CFR) was recognised and title was given in the year 2012. Since the historic “The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act” was passed in 2006 many villages across India have claimed forest land that was rightfully theirs and but had been denied to them. Since 2012, the village of Pachgaon has done commendable work in the management and conservation of its forest and the wildlife within it following the footsteps of villages like Mendha Lekha in the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra.

Pachgaon is a small village located in the Gondpipri taluka of Chandrapur district. It falls under the Tohogaon *panchayat* or village council and has 60 households with a population of around 250 people. 72 percent of the population belong to the Scheduled Tribe (ST) Gond, 28 percent constitute Other Backward Classes (OBC) which include members from the Kunbi and Marar communities and Nomadic Tribes (NT) which include members of the Kapewar and Gaadi Lohar communities. Farming is being done by only 10% of the households in Pachgaon in a total area of 91 acre and people mainly derive their income by cutting the bamboo that is available in their forest. They also depend on the forest for grazing their livestock and extracting wood for fuel and farming purposes. The total area of forest under conservation and use is 1006.416 ha out of which the villagers have declared 85 ac as *devrai* or sacred grove.

Their forest boasts of animals such as the Bengal tiger (*Sher/Bagh*), Leopard (*Bibat*), Sambar, Spotted Deer (*Cheetal*), Barking Deer, Sloth Bear (*Asval*), Gaur (*Ran Gawa*), Nilgai, Indian Wild Pig (*Ran dukkar*), Wild dog (*Ran kutra*), Jungle cat (*Ran manjar*), Gray Langur, Indian Hare (*Sassa*), Monitor lizard (*Ghorpud*); birds such as Jungle fowl, Indian Peafowl (*Mor*), Egrets (*Bagla*), Asian Paradise Flycatcher (*Swargiya nartak*), Parakeet (*Popat*), Black Drongo (*Kotwal*), rock pigeon (*Parva*), Jungle crow (*Kavla*), Green Pigeon (*Hariyal*), Spotted Dove (*Kawda*) and more; and trees such as Indian gooseberry (*Aavla*), Teak (*Sagwan*), Indian Butter tree (*Mahu*), East Indian ebony (*Tendu*), Baheda (*Behada*), Chebulic Myrobalan (*Hirada*), Bel, Ceylon Oak/Lac tree (*Kusum*), *Surya*, Malati, *Nirmadi*, Indian Kino (*Beeja*), Indian laurel tree (*Ain*), Indrajao (*Kuda*), Ceylon Iron Wood/Milk tree (*Khirni*) and more. Shatavari (which is a kind of Asparagus), an endangered plant whose root is used to make medicine is found abundantly in their forest.

### **Towards Community Conservation**

According to the people of Pachgaon, conservation of forest and its resources started only after the village got community rights over the forest. Before this the villagers would not care to do anything even in case of forest fires, but now men and women both rush to douse forest fires. In two or three such instances when men and women saw fire in a distance and rushed to put it off, they realised that the fire was infact in the nearby forests and not in theirs. This was because earlier the forest belonged to the Forest Department (FD) and earlier than that it belonged to the *malguzars* or revenue collectors, when the *Malguzari* system or land revenue system was prevalent in the area, and both stopped them from taking up conservation efforts. Bamboo cutting skills were however acquired as the villagers have been cutting bamboo in the forest since it belonged to the *malguzars* in return of daily wages.

Prior to achieving the claim to the forest as a community, it was difficult for a majority of people in the village to support their livelihoods. According to the villagers, farming was done on a really small scale and many could not till in their farm lands because they did not have enough money to buy the necessary inputs for farming. Distress out migration to neighbouring states such as Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka was high. Men folk would spend months away from home and family to work and still were not able to send enough savings home to support their family members. The village had no *nistaar* or customary rights over their forest and had to either steal resources such as firewood from the forests or bribe the forest guard. Either way they would have to give the FD officials money, livestock such as hens, rice or red chilies.

They were exploited in many other ways as well. Under JFM Joint Forest Management (JFM) only 6-10 people got employment for just 4-8 days in a month. As reported by the villagers, the profit raised by selling *Tendu* and collected wood would go the Forest Department and the collectors from the villages were paid only daily wages for their labor. Allegedly, the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) and other forest officials involved with JFM also tried bribing the people of the village to convince them to work under JFM only. They would offer the villagers buffaloes, cows, goats and better employment opportunities in bribe but the villagers of Pachgaon refused it all. Between the years 2007-12, however, the villagers had been availing work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), with the help of Vijay Dethé from the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Paryaavaran Mitra.

The people of Pachgaon soon realised that they there were facing rampant exploitation at the hands of the FD for accessing resources that should have been their own. Vijay Dethé could also explain to them that they could not possibly always depend on NREGA as the only other source of livelihood and that they would not be able to do such hard labor forever. Through Vijay Dethé the people of Pachgaon learnt that there are clauses in the Forest Rights Act, 2006 which enables them to claim the rights to use resources widely available in their forests, like the bamboo, to generate income and also be able to manage and conserve it.

Hence they filed for the claim to 1006.416 ha or 2486.90 ac of forest land under the Community Forest Rights on 17th of December 2009 and got the claim on 25th of June 2012. However it was not an easy struggle. Bringing together the people of the village to collectively make the claim was a big difficulty as people thought that they could never possibly get claim to such a huge forest area when they did not even have the claim to the lands they till. After filing for claim to the Sub-Divisional Level Committee (SDLC) on December 2009, repeated reminders also would have to be sent to the government officials and departments. A reminder was sent to the chairperson of SDLC on 4th of January 2010 and when no response was received another one was sent to the District Collector (DC) of Chandrapur on 12th of September 2011. More reminders followed on 19th of February 2012 and 13th of March 2012. When no heed was paid, the villagers warned the DC saying that they would launch “One villager cuts one bamboo” *satyagrah* or fight for truth on 14<sup>th</sup> of April, 2012 whereby everyone from the village would break one bamboo each from the forest. When asked why that particular date was chosen, they replied saying that it was the birthday of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, who not only framed India’s constitution and always stood up for the rights of the oppressed. Meanwhile the FD also created another set of challenges for them. They tried to prove their claim wrong in numerous ways such as by saying that Pachgaon alone cannot claim the rights to the forests to which twelve other



villages had the claim to as well and that the documents submitted were not complete. These accusations were proved null when it was established that the other twelve villages had the rights to use the forests for grazing and making drinking water available to their livestock only. The people from the village would also have to frequently travel to Chandrapur to visit the different offices and departments, the funds for which was managed by collecting a sum of Rs. 300 from each household in the village. Seeing their determination, on 13th of April 2012 the DC faxed a letter to the *Tehsildar* or tax inspector of Gondpipri who informed the Pachgaon GS, through the *Talati* or village accountant, that their claim for forest rights has been sent to District level Committee (DLC). Seeing this, the Pachgaon GS decided to call off the *satyagrah* for the time being. Finally, the DLC granted their claim on 16th of June 2012 and on 25th of June 2012 the forest rights documents were handed over to the Pachgaon GS.

**Box 1**  
**Bamboo Conservation and Management Practices**



*Bamboo clumps found abundantly in the forest of Pachgaon Photo Credits: Sneha Gutgutia*

The people of Pachgaon cut bamboo in the forest for all months of the year except in the months when it rains to ensure that the bamboo plants grow. The date from when Bamboo cutting is stopped, somewhere around June, for four months till October, when it is resumed, is decided in a GS. The resuming of bamboo cutting is preceded by worshipping their deities, Bhimsan Dev and Mauli which reside in the forest. Since bamboo requires three years to grow, they have divided the forests into three zones and bamboo is cut in each zone only once in

three years to ensure regeneration. Hand axes are used to cut bamboo. Men and women both go for bamboo cutting and are paid equal wages.

Cut bamboo is stored in the depot that belongs to the village and here the bamboo is graded according to the various purposes that it is sold for. Currently people from the neighbouring village of Parsodi are doing the gradation as no one from Pachgaon was ready to do it. For bringing the cut bamboo to the depot, the GS hires tractors from neighbouring villages as no one in the village presently has one. Once enough bamboo has accumulated in the depot, a date is fixed in the GS for auctioning of bamboo. The minimum rate at which the bamboo would be sold is pre-decided in a GS before the auction. People who buy bamboo in such auctions are those who require bamboo in paper mills and also people who require bamboo for their farms. Two people from the village are employed to guard the bamboo stored in the depot from theft and they are paid by the GS. There are also two supervisors who supervise cutting of bamboo in the forest and guarding cut bamboo at the depot and they are appointed on a voluntary basis.

The money that comes from the sales of bamboo at the auction goes into a separate account of the GS. The GS of Pachgaon distributes the money back to villagers every month after accumulating the daily wages for the whole month. The daily wages are also decided in GS. Currently, the people are getting paid Rs. 385 per day during the bamboo cutting season. They cut around 65 bamboos per day and get Rs. 4.70 for each bamboo they cut and Rs. 16 for each bamboo bundle they tie. Usually each person cuts around 65 bamboos per day and ties them into 5 bundles. 10% of every month's amount that is received by every person in the village is retained by the GS to be given to them in the four months when no bamboo cutting happens. Any dues to the GS are also deducted from it. The villagers also claimed that as the rate at which bamboo is sold increases every year, the daily wages increase at the rate of 10%. Fines ensure that rules and regulation are followed. An interesting fact was that though the village employs only the people of Pachgaon for any activity that happens in the forest, it also allows their son-in-laws from other villages to cut bamboo and get employment.

### **Rules and Regulations**

There is no separate village level institution to take care of conservation and management of the forest at present. The village takes all the decisions in the *gram sabha* (GS) which take place according to the village requirements but on an average it takes place 4 - 5 times and sometimes as much as 6 times in a month. The GS does not have fixed positions like that of President, secretary or treasurer. A group of 38 people from the village, elected in a GS, have undertaken all kinds of responsibilities and tasks with respect to the management. This was done because it was often seen that mostly the educated or influential people from the village take up important positions in these village level bodies and many-a-times such people also get co-opted by the FD. Such incidents have previously foiled development plans in many villages. A president is however elected for each GS. The GS has decided the rules and regulations that will be followed to conserve and manage forests and everyday affairs of the village with respect to conservation. All the categories and sub-categories combined there are in total 115 or more rules. They ensure that everybody should get an equal opportunity to speak in the meeting. Some of the rules with respect to GS functioning are as below:

1. Men and women are alternatively selected President for each GS.

2. All the residents of the village who are 18 years of age and above have to be present for the meeting and two members from each household should be present for the meeting.
3. Whoever fails to attend two meetings consecutively are fined Rs 50.
4. The GS maintain a register to record attendance at these meetings, the minutes of the meeting and also the purpose for which the meetings were held.

Some of the rules with respect to forest conservation and management are listed below:

1. The GS has appointed two persons who are responsible for allocating the duties of forest guards.
2. To guard the forest, the male members of the village have been divided into 14 groups of 5 members each and each of the groups guard the forest twice a month. Even though women don't guard the forest, they are involved in controlling forest fires and to negotiate with those who have been found stealing from their forest but refuse to pay the fines.
3. The areas for patrolling in the forest are decided taking into consideration the threats of theft in the forest.
4. If any of the forest guard fails to complete his duty, he is fined Rs 200.
5. In the summers, they patrol from 7AM to 12PM. During winters and rains they patrol from 7AM to 6PM.
6. Night patrolling is done only when there are repeated cases of wood cutting, hunting or fire in the forest.
7. The fines for stealing from the forest are: Rs. 500 for people on motor bicycles; Rs. 300 for people on bicycles and Rs. 150 for people on foot and carrying a head load.
8. Grazing happens from June to April and the permission letter is given in June. In Pachgaon one person from the village takes everybody's cattle and another person takes everybody's goats to graze in the forest every day. They avoid the bamboo cutting zones and the *devrai* for grazing.
9. To resolve conflicts with neighbouring villages, a GS is called and atleast two elders from the village should be present in the GS.
10. Anyone who enters the forest, the villagers themselves, must sign on a register and explain the purpose.
11. No kind of extraction of resources is to be done in the *devrai*.

### **Granting of the CFR Claim and Continued Struggle**

Soon after the claim to the forest under CFR was granted, the GS had made a working plan for conservation and management of forest but there were not enough funds to execute the plan. The men then decided to work voluntarily in what is called *shramdaan* and went to work in the forest everyday while the women looked after the farms and the children for a total of 17 days. But new problems arose when they could not sell the bamboo as there were difficulties in obtaining PAN card, TAN card and VAT registration as the holder of the rights on the title deed that was given to the village. The tile instead was in the name of "Shri Ramesh Bhauji Tekam and 119 others of Pachgaon" instead of "All members of *Gram Sabha* Pachgaon". So an application was made to the District Collector (DC) to rectify this on 13th of December 2012. A reminder was sent on 31st of December 2012 and on 6th of January 2013 two representatives from the village were chosen to meet the DC on the following day. In the DC's office, the two representatives were insulted and literally thrown out. After much follow up, on 14th of February 2013, the document

was corrected with the appropriate title on basis of which the GS could then get PAN card, TAN card, register under VAT and plan to sell bamboo. Later on 15th of February 2013 a letter was received by the Pachgaon GS from the Deputy Conservator of Forest, Central Chanda, Chandrapur Forest Division, that the authority to cut bamboo and to dispose off was being granted to Forest Rights Committee of Pachgaon.

But the struggle did not end there. The bureaucracy and government departments kept on finding many ways to oppose the self-rule established by the villagers. In the year 2014, the second year of forest management, the Chief Conservator of Forest (CCF) denied signing the register before entering the forest even after much request by the people from Pachgaon who were guarding the forest at that point. The CCF took offense at this and soon the village was accused with illegal cutting of 1060 bamboo clumps (12852 bamboo sticks in total) and hoarding the cut bamboo sticks in their depot. On the basis of this allegation issuing of transit passes (TP) to the village was stopped. The villagers claimed that cutting these bamboo clumps was important from the point of view of conservation. A meeting was fixed with the DC to resolve this issue but a day before the meeting some officials of the government came with a truck to take away the 12852 bamboo sticks to the government depot. As the bamboo was loaded in the truck, all the men, women and children from the village sat on the road in front of the truck to stop them from taking away their bamboo. A call was quickly made to the DC to stop them. The bamboo was eventually returned to the village. The next day at the meeting with the DC, both parties were asked to resolve their issues with the help of the Guardian minister.

### **Impact of Forest Conservation and Management**

**On community:** Ever since the GS was formed, regular meetings have started and people's political participation has increased. The employment that has been received due to bamboo cutting has decreased the out migration to almost nil. The people of the village claim that they are much more economically stable than before and that their lifestyles have also improved. The GS has started a primary school, street lights have been put up and water tap facilities have been provided at common points. The children of the village also go for further studies to Tohogaon, Kothari and Chandrapur.

Income stability has helped them take ethical stand on a few issues. The village decided in a GS that since the *Tendu* leaves can only be used to make *beedi*, the leaves will not be collected and used to generate income anymore, despite the fact that these trees are abundant in their forest and it generates a monthly income of almost Rs. 5 - 6 lakhs for the entire village. Similarly flowers of the *Mahua* trees are no longer being used to make alcohol which was consumed and also sold locally. *Mahua* trees are also abundant in the forest and now their flowers are left for the livestock to graze on.

Recently the GS also organised games, *kabaddi*, in partnership with other GS from other villages for both men and women and gave out lucrative prize money to winners. They refused to take money from any other individual or source and paid for the entire event on their own.

**On Plants and Wildlife:** An area of 85 ac in the forest has been declared a *devrai* by the villagers and it is being managed as a sanctuary or rather a critical habitat of the animals found in the forest. There are two or three sources of water in the *devrai*, which have water throughout the year and support the wildlife, are conserved. Not even leaves are picked in the *devrai*. This is to



ensure a dense habitat for the wildlife. The number of wild animals has increased as proved by the increased sightings of the animals. This also ensures that there is enough food for the predators. Incidences of crop destruction by wild boar have also increased due to an increase in their population but the villagers did not report it as a pressing issue. Knowledge gained from other villages in the district hints that probably the villagers are relying on the growing numbers of predators to restore the balance in the numbers of animals in the forest and eliminate this problem in the near future.



*Tiger paw print seen near a water source in the devrai of Pachgaon forest Photo Credits: Sneha Gutgutia*

### **Future Plans**

The GS plans to build its own office and guest house on a 5.5 ac land that it has bought with the money made by bamboo sales. They also plan to build a watchtower for observing animals in the forest. They will do some work on a pond in the forest so that it retains more water. A survey of the existing flora and fauna is also on the list of things they plan to do. They have also planned to plant more bamboo trees, fruits and cultivate medicinal plants like Shatavari, Ashwagandha and Sonamukhi in their farm lands. Those who do not have farm land, will be allowed to plant in the land owned by the GS.

### **Conclusion**

The people of Pachgaon decided to take matters in their own hands after having faced livelihood insecurity, denial of rights and exploitation for a long time. Enactment of the Forest Rights Act worked as an effective tool to provide them with the tenure security that they needed to ensure livelihoods, food and ecological security, which in turn helped resolved social security for the people in the village. The story of their past and continuing struggle to ensure enough livelihood



opportunity for themselves and their future generations is very motivating. Their meticulous management, record keeping and future planning will prove an example to thousands of village which are getting ready for the same fight. Lastly, the entire case of forest management and conservation in case of Pachgaon explains how conservation practices by those whom it concerns can make for local social and ecological wellbeing.

**For more information contact**

Vijay Dethe  
Village Virur Station,  
Rajpura Tehsil, Chandrapur District,  
Maharashtra.  
E-mail: paryavaranmitra.dethe1@gmail.com  
Ph: +91-9421812425

Gajanan Thamke  
Village Pachgaon, Post Tohogaon,  
Gondpipri Tehsil, Chandrapur District,  
Maharashtra: 442701.  
Ph: +91-8552054322

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