



GOOD PRACTICES IN LOCAL DEMOCRACY

How forest ownership rights reshaped the fortunes of a tribal village

By *Roli Srivastava* | Nov 2024

Pachgaon, a village in Maharashtra has tapped its forest to start a bamboo business, create jobs and arrest migration. The village pays taxes and is also making a neat profit.



PACHGAON, Maharashtra: It's a little past 10 am and the sound of axes clacking against wood envelop the forest in Pachgaon in central India as axe-wielding villagers work in a collective rhythm, cutting, piling and tying bamboo branches in bunches.

About 200 metres away, a massive depot larger than a cricket stadium is bursting with seemingly endless rows of bamboo branches, stacked neatly by size in different sections. Not too far from the depot is a small one-room windowless office painted in the colours of the forest — the silent record-keeper of Pachgaon's turnaround from abject poverty to wealth in just over a decade.

The amazing rag-to-riches story is the outcome of the implementation of two Indian laws that restored to the tribal community its traditional ownership rights over the forest which they lost to rulers and colonisers several generations ago. These laws, despite being decades old, were rarely enforced.

However, the dogged persistence of Pachgaon's residents has seen the enforcement through with stunning results — the village's bamboo business fetched a profit of INR 37 lakh in the last financial year and a total of INR 34 million in the past decade.

Villagers in Pachgaon walk to the forest to cut bamboo

Under the two laws — the Forest Rights Act 2006, and the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 — tribal villages can apply for “community forest rights papers” or title deeds to designated forest resources, and also constitute their own Gram Sabhas (village councils) to take decisions on governance and the marketing of the fruit, seeds, herbs and trees that they pluck and cut from the forest.

When enacted, the laws were hailed as pro-tribal legislations that would correct the historical injustice tribal communities had suffered for long years. But poor awareness of the laws on the part of forest dwellers and reluctance on the part of the State to give complete control has marred the impact the two legislations could have had on forest-dwelling tribal communities.

Pachgaon’s harnessing of these laws to become financially independent is a success story that stands out among the hundreds of villages that won rights over their forests but could not use them effectively. The village received its

community forest rights papers in 2012, winning over 1,006 hectares of forest land three years after putting in an application. “Earlier, the forest was with the forest department. But now it is with us. We have formulated 115 rules on how to expand it, nurture it and protect it,” said Gram Sabha member Sanjay Gajanan Gopanwar.

When the villagers received forest rights, the first thing they did was to have rules and regulations on how they would use their forest commercially and for their own community. They have created a methodology of forest conservation.

PRAVIN MOTE, FOREST GOVERNANCE AND ENVIRONMENTAL ECONOMICS RESEARCHER

SMALL VILLAGE, BIG DREAMS

Pachgaon is a small village of 75 families with a total population of 300, many of them from the Gond community, one of India’s largest tribes.

“People here are largely landless and depended on the jungle for their living,” Gopanwar told the author when she visited the village on an overcast June morning.

“Farming work in our village was not steady owing to frequent floods every monsoon that damaged the crops. Villagers had no choice but to migrate to Karnataka and

Gujarat for work. But even after putting in 12 hours a day, they never had enough money.”

Chandrapur district, where Pachgaon is located, is home to coal mines but also a famous wildlife sanctuary, the Tadoba National Park. The district has dense forests “but there was no livelihood ever linked to it”, said Vijay Dethe, who started his own nonprofit called Paryavaran Mitra (Friends of the Environment) to work on improving job opportunities for forest-dwelling people in Chandrapur.

The decades-old pattern would have remained unchanged had it not been for campaigner Dethe, who was working on livelihood issues in neighbouring villages and passed by Pachgaon every day.

“I would identify Pachgaon from its bamboo trees,” said Dethe, sipping tea in a highway dhaba, as he recalled his fresh-out-of-college days of helping villagers implement the newly enacted National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which offers 100 days of paid labour to adults aged over 18. The scheme following the enactment commenced in 2006 and was able to draw some migrants back to Pachgaon, who wished to find work in the village itself even if it didn’t pay as well as their city jobs.

Pachgaon villagers at work in the village's bamboo forest

Unlike the other villages he was working in, Dethe found Pachgaon, where most residents were landless, particularly impoverished. With more than half its population migrating for work, the village wore a deserted look, he recalled.

As the desperation for work mounted, villagers approached Dethe to check if there was some way that could fetch them more income and a more organised work opportunity than the NREGA scheme. Dethe saw the answer in the rich bamboo reserve and told the villagers about the Forest Rights Act 2006 that would give them the opportunity to own the forest. It would in one stroke tackle income and work concerns.

“I knew that forest-dependent livelihood was the way forward,” he said. “As long as you are dependent on the government for everything, you will not be able to create

your own jobs. The activist added that he could connect with people on the livelihood challenges they faced, as he came from a labourers' family himself and had funded his own college education by taking up odd jobs.

In 2009, Pachgaon applied for its community forest rights. It waited for three years for a response, during which time several villagers dismissed the entire forest ownership dream as a foolhardy endeavour, an elusive goal that would never be fulfilled.

“We just couldn't believe it. Brothers fight over land. And this was government land. Why would they give it to us?” said Vinod Ramswaroop Tekam, a 35-year-old villager, chuckling at the memory of the serious discussions villagers had in countless meetings about why the forest ownership application would not yield anything.

Cynical as they were, however, the villagers continued to pursue it, sending reminders to officials and even planning a protest. But before they could take to the streets, the village received its community forest right papers on 25 June 2012, a date it now celebrates as an annual festival, the Van Haq Divas (Forest Rights Day). Every year, villagers gather in the village centre, place the hard-won Community Forest Rights papers on a plastic chair, decorate them with flowers, light incense sticks and join their palms in front of the documents in gratitude. They then distribute sweets and spend the day in festive mode.

As per the Forest Rights Act 2006, this meant that the minor forest produce was now owned by the village to manage, develop, stock and sell, rights that had earlier rested with the forest department for close to a century. The protection of the forest was also now in the hands of the village and the Gram Sabha and its executive committee became the official governance and business unit.

The non-believers — those sceptical of forest rights ownership — are now a proud part of Pachgaon's flourishing bamboo business and happy that they were proved wrong. They work in the jungle all day, participate in regular meetings conducted in front of the Pachgaon office and take decisions on running the business together.

“The day we got the papers was a festival,” said Tekam. “We were overwhelmed that we had won this right, that our *satyagraha* (movement) had paid off. We were now 100% assured that the forest was really ours. After we got the papers, many villagers returned from the cities to

which they had migrated. Now bamboo is our source of income.”

THE BEGINNING

The win was only the beginning. Pachgaon’s perspective of its forest had changed but the work on the ground remained. The village initiated this by deciding to map the trees in the jungle and set up a group of volunteers to guard the produce. Guarding the forest was made a mandatory task if villagers wished to get employment in it.

The tree-mapping exercise threw up the obvious conclusion: the forest had abundant bamboo, a prized product that the village could trade. Pachgaon had its workforce of villagers to cut the bamboo. All it needed was buyers, and they rose to the occasion here as well.

Before he became a campaigner, the activist had dabbled in many jobs to fund his education, including that of a salesman peddling oil, masalas, toothpaste and cosmetics. Drawing on his past experience, he and a few villagers started tracking the bamboo auctions being conducted in the forested region, sitting in for the proceedings and taking notes on the process and paperwork. They then approached forest officials — the erstwhile owners of the forest who used to market the produce — for their suggestions and shared their learnings with the other villagers.

Based on these insights, the village started grading the produce based on the length and girth of the bamboo

branches and pricing the bunches accordingly. Thicker and longer branches, used in building construction work as scaffolding, fetch a much higher price than the leaner ones that are picked up by farmers for the bamboo trellises they use to support vine vegetables.

The new-found knowledge still wasn't enough to launch a business. The village needed various documents, including a bank account, a PAN Card and GST registration. It also had to have professional accounting software installed. The villagers decided that the Gram Sabha itself would be the business unit instead of a formally registered cooperative — thus, all the paperwork and documentation would have to be in the name of the Gram Sabha and its executive committee.

The villagers first hired a chartered accountant on a monthly salary to help them navigate the daunting, maze-like processes. Eventually, documents were obtained, things fell into place and the trade was all set to begin. The villagers got down to cutting the bamboo and calling the traders. They also decided that wages for bamboo-cutting would not be paid until the produce was sold.

On a warm April morning in 2013, a clutch of traders showed up at the makeshift depot the bamboo had been stored in. Brimming with pride and confidence, the villagers showed them their wares. But the euphoria was short-lived; the traders found their produce overpriced and rejected it. The villagers then lowered their quotation, found buyers and the first deals were struck. Pachgaon

had learnt its first business lesson on pricing in a competitive market.

Pachgaon Gram Sabha member Sanjay Gajanan Gopanwar goes through files with sale details of bamboo in the village office

Sales records show that the village sold 8,100 bamboo bundles for about INR 7 lakh in 2013, the first year of its business. The next year, it sold over 17,000 bundles, this time fetching a revenue of INR 27 lakh. In the past decade, the business has raked in a maximum revenue of nearly INR 60 lakh though it also saw lows when the revenue plummeted to less than INR 8 lakh in 2020, the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the Gram Sabha ensured that its employees — about 70 villagers who cut bamboo in the forest — were always paid and no one had to leave the village to look for work.

In 2015, as business grew, so did the paperwork. The village required a space to keep all its invoices,

registrations and PAN documents safely, and constructed a one-room office with a computer-printer-internet set-up. However, it decided against a businesslike hierarchical structure. “We don’t have a chairman or secretary,” said Gopanwar. “If one person is appointed as the head, then people interact with just that person. This way, turn by turn, everyone is involved.”

REAL GAINS

The villagers of Pachgaon are not number-crunching, business-minded people poring over Excel sheets to track revenue, profit and loss. They don’t have profit figures on their fingertips and don’t consult their chartered accountant on money questions. But they are very clear what the revenue is for: to create jobs in the village, fund raw material to build homes, and support college education for young villagers.

Axes used for cutting bamboo rest on the windowsill in Jyoti and Gajanan Themke's house in Pachgaon village, Maharashtra

If we don't create jobs, people will migrate. More people in the village means better work and better execution of work.

GAJANAN THEMKE, WORKER-MANAGER AT THE PACHGAON GRAM SABHA

The bamboo-cutting season ends with the onset of the monsoon. The Gram Sabha then gives out wages for filling potholes, cleaning drains and levelling drying lakes, with each person getting work for at least 10 to 15 days every month. "It's simple," said Gajanan Themke, 43, a worker-manager at the Pachgaon Gram Sabha. "If we don't create jobs, people will migrate. More people in the village means better work and better execution of work."

Resting on a cot in his courtyard after a long day of work in the forest, Themke said that the villagers did not feel like they were working any more. "We are our own masters," he said, his gaze travelling to the windowsill on which rested two axes that he and his wife, Jyoti, used to cut bamboo.

Themke and Jyoti had cut 100 bamboo branches that day and made INR 840, more than twice the money they used to earn as migrant daily-wage workers in a cement

factory or even for the NREGA work provided by the State. The Pachgaon Gram Sabha's daily wage rate is revised almost every two years; it began with INR 450 and has now reached INR 840.

Over the past decade, since they last returned from the city, Themke and his wife have stopped migrating for work. They have managed to save money to build a concrete house and even cultivate a small kitchen garden. The tomatoes, brinjals and grapes grown here are not for selling — the family consumes them and also shares them with neighbours.

Jyoti and her husband Gajanan Themke pose for a picture at their home in Pachgaon, Maharashtra

For Pachgaon's villagers, the gains from the bamboo business go beyond employment. The profits are used by the village committee to buy bricks, sand, wooden doors and door frames for villagers constructing a house under

the PM Awas Yojana, a government housing scheme that pays them INR 1,50,000 for the purpose. “If you want a good house, this amount is not enough. A single door frame costs INR 5,000,” pointed out Ramesh Bhauji Teka, standing outside his under-construction house.

The other major spend from the proceeds — funding the education of children from the village — is showing results already. More young people are earning a college degree, and two have even completed their Master’s, the first to do so in the village.

Pachgaon gives the same wages to men and women for cutting bamboo. Here the women pose for a picture outside the Gram Sabha office.

Equally significantly, the Gram Sabha has also struck a blow for equality. It pays men and women on par and treats all villagers involved in the business the same. There is no hierarchy — the person chairing a meeting becomes

the decision-maker for that day and could be chopping wood the next. “Men would always get paid more than us for the same amount of work,” said Jaishree Tarache Atram, 36, who earlier did odd jobs as a migrant daily wage worker. “Everything was a challenge for us — food, health, education. We worked hard to earn a living but still found it difficult to make ends meet. Now we have equal wages, which helps.”

LAW, LIMITATIONS

Pachgaon’s success, its villagers believe, is rooted in the business unit’s horizontal structure. The Gram Sabha is not separated as an overall governance unit from the trade unit; it serves as both entities. Most decisions, be they about cutting, stocking, trading, wages and work allocation, forest protection duties or use of the profit for local development, are taken democratically at its meetings. For operational compliance purposes, there are some signatories but they are only executors of the decisions taken by the Gram Sabha.

“When the villagers received forest rights, the first thing they did was to have rules and regulations on how they would use their forest commercially and for their own community. They have created a methodology of forest conservation,” said Pravin Mote, a forest governance and environmental economics researcher, who runs a facilitation centre in Maharashtra to help villages understand and access the Forest Rights Act 2006.

A shrine of local deities sits in the heart of the bamboo forest in Pachgaon village in Maharashtra

Apart from protection of forests and community norms, the Gram Sabha has instituted norms for bamboo-cutting, work allocation, wages, payments, stock and trade and documentation. Recognising the need to protect wildlife, it has created and maintains its own wildlife sanctuary on 36 of the 1,006 hectares of forest land it received as community forest rights.

Pachgaon is also forward-looking. Aware that to continue earning a living from bamboo, new orchards need to be planted, the villagers are now carrying out fresh bamboo plantations. They have also realised that they need to diversify to other products, and for this the Gram Sabha purchased over 10 acres of land from its profits two years ago with a view to storing forest produce other than bamboo and housing a food-processing unit for the *jamun*, *tendu* and *bel* foraged from the jungle.

Trading fruits of the forest was an obvious business expansion plan. “Like the Nashik grapes that we eat, our fruit too could make us money. Hitherto, we would produce it for our own consumption and never thought of it as a business. Now we do,” said Themke, as the setting sun cast a warm glow over his picturesque courtyard. A calm set in on the village whose exhausted residents had worked for over eight hours in extreme humidity.

The village aspires to work even more. The Gram Panchayat has made an application for ownership of another 900-hectare piece of forest land in 2014 and awaits the approval, which will help it tap more produce for its growing business.

Themke’s words sum up Pachgaon’s dream succinctly. “Our next generation will live here,” he said. “What if they don’t get jobs elsewhere? They will always have the forest business.”

About the author

Roli Srivastava is a Mumbai-based climate journalist and founder of [The Migration Story](#).

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