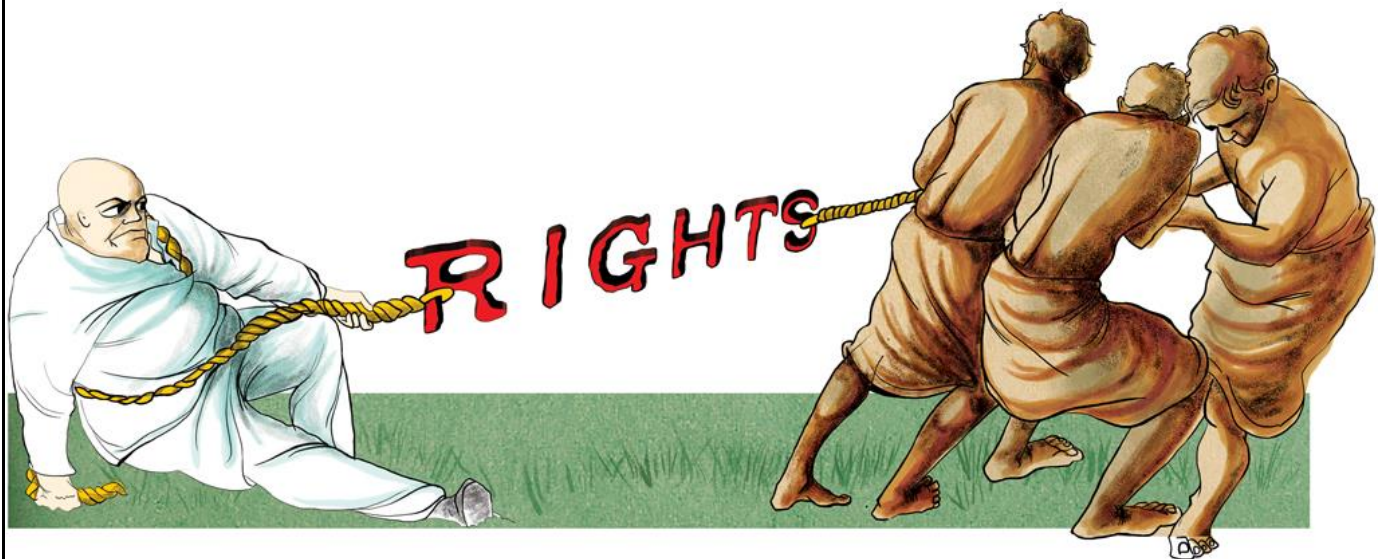


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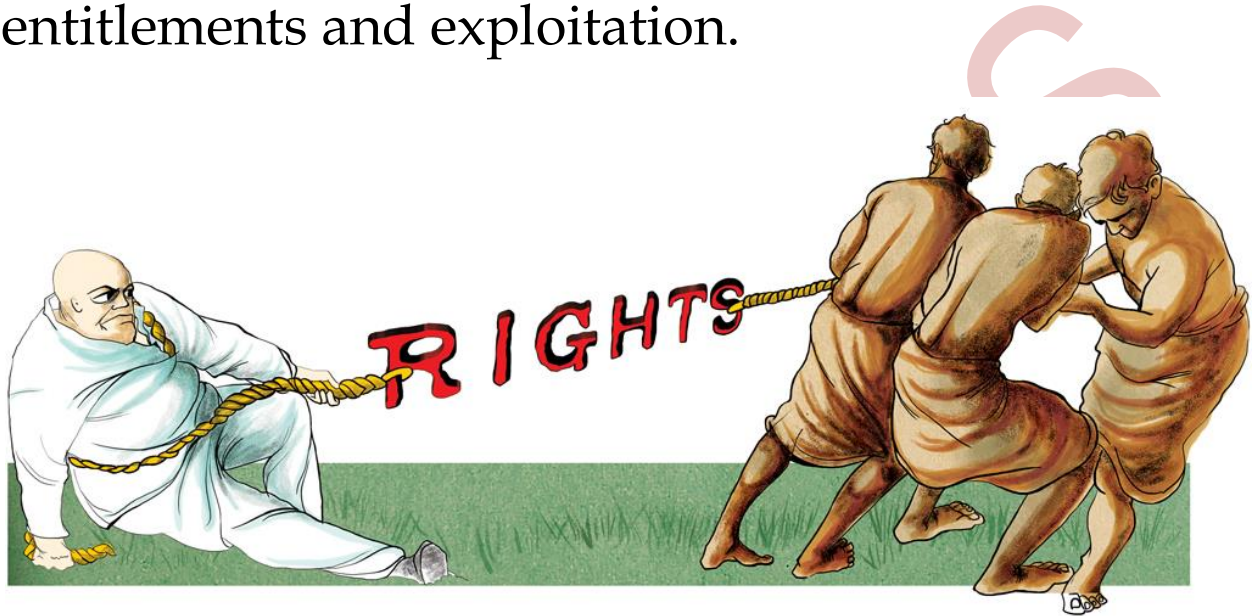
How tribal leadership in Chhattisgarh is helping people access rights

The civil society's intervention in the tribal regions began in early 1980s on two issues- sustainable livelihood, particularly in forest areas, and, local governance

If you pass the tiny villages dotting the highway in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh and meet its unassuming natives free from the trappings of city life, you might say to yourself, "Oh! They are not poor, they are just beautiful." This first glimpse belies all your notions about the region which has witnessed countless bloody encounters between paramilitary forces and the Naxals, or for that matter, people defying all attempts of the government to bring them into the mainstream.

But it is only when you enter the interior road leading to a village, the real story begins to unfold. The grandeur of beautiful forests gradually fades into oblivion, as you see paramilitary forces carrying out search operations under Operation Green Hunt, a name given by

the media to describe the government offensive against Naxalites. The pleasantries exchanged in the state capital, Raipur, suddenly turn into dogged and gritty conversations about rights, entitlements and exploitation.



During the past 10 years, the fight of tribals for rights in Chhattisgarh has virtually turned into a potboiler, chronicling the strategised attempts by NGOs and social activists to create tribal leadership to spread awareness, help flawless implementation of schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Public Distribution System (PDS) and fight issues related to the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

The scale of corruption in MGNREGA and PDS was so high that it was not possible for these organisations to look into individual cases which related to fake job cards under MGNREGA, black marketing of PDS goods and ration cards given to undeserving people. The mining lobby was freely acquiring tribal land at throwaway prices flouting all norms. At the centre of all issues is an unholy nexus between sarpanches, local politicians and block officials.

Interventions for sustainability

The civil society's intervention in the tribal regions began in early 1980s on two issues- sustainable livelihood, particularly in forest areas, and, local governance. For sustainable livelihood, they focused on resources like land and how these could be multiplied in terms of increased productivity, and integrated with other resources. There was also the question of better accessibility to these entitlements and benefits from the government.

But these interventions gained momentum after states like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh became a reality. Now, the issue was not limited to livelihood alone, but the question was to go beyond it, where there is dignity and quality of life. So, apart from their immediate or basic needs, they also focused on building capacities in terms of leadership and participation in local governance, mainly in panchayats and later at the district and state level. They identified core areas and issues which could strengthen their right to live with dignity. They also created a support structure where they could get technical and non-technical information to support their cause.

Jayant Kumar, head of programmes, CASA, an organisation working among tribals, says, “They brought them together and made them understand the issues and challenges. They provided them information and opportunities to know, learn, internalise and act as leaders.

“The issue was not limited to livelihood. The effort was to go beyond, where there is dignity

and quality of life. So NGOs focused on building capacities in terms of leadership”

Through this they have been able to systematize and build a sense of ownership,” he said.

Organisations like CASA work directly with communities and also with other organisations and NGOs, whom they support and fund. This strong relationship has helped the organisation identify the potential of the people. It has also adopted a long-term strategy to build leadership with greater participation of women and ensuring their participation in local governance. They have worked to ensure that 50 per cent women be brought into the leadership hierarchies.

These community leaders come from various backgrounds. Sometimes they are influenced by the corrupt system. But there are a large number of them who have refused to be co-opted by the system. This is a big challenge for civil society. For this, their strategy is simple: if there are wrong people, they leave the issue to the

community to take a call on them. They believe that their job is to enlighten and guide them.

Building social capital

These initiatives have created a huge amount of social capital. The quality of life has improved in a number of areas where they have been intensely involved in terms of better accessibility to entitlements, greater say in the issues and, diversification of the livelihood basket. Such interventions have led to better interaction with the panchayats. There have been many examples when panchayats have adopted micro plans developed by these leaders. This has enabled better functioning of gram sabhas with the involvement of local community in the local governance. This combination has led to social emancipation.

There are many Central and state-sponsored programmes. But the key programmes which have impacted people's lives are MGNREGA, subsidised ration under PDS, land entitlement

under FRA and National Rural Health Mission (NRHM). These programmes are critical to the people, but accessibility and actualisation remains a challenge. Take for instance, the MGNREGA. The average employment that a person gets is 30-40 days, compared to the 100 days envisaged in programme. Worse, people get payment only after six to seven months.

The government has also reduced the coverage of the programme. There is mass scale bungling in the PDS at the lower level and difficulties in accessing land entitlements/rights. The sustained efforts by the local leadership, that civil societies have nurtured, have effectively countered these challenges. They have ensured that people get the MGNREGA payment in time. They have exposed corruption in the PDS and have helped people claim land under the FRA.

Like 45-year-old Benny Puri for enrolling people in MGNREGA, or 37-year-old Ashok Biswas for helping villagers claim land entitlements, or 26-year-old Anusia from exposing corruption in PDS

at the panchayat level, or Vishnu Sevta for filing RTI against a sarpanch for siphoning off money meant for the construction of a village road, or Bansi Thakur, for helping people get Rs 2 per kg rice without facing hurdles. The list is endless. They are all strengthening government institutions without fear.

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