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Tribal Community Conservation Strengthens Biodiversity In Similipal Tiger Reserve



Protecting natural forests and wildlife has been a way of life for indigenous communities inside Similipal Biosphere in Odisha. Their efforts have been recognised a few years ago under the Forest Rights Act and the legal recognition has encouraged tribals, enriched biodiversity inside the sanctuary, recharged water sources and enhanced livelihood.

“For the last couple of years or more, we are regularly sighting animals like deer, bear, elephants,

rabbits and wild boars inside our jungle just 500 metres away from our houses. It was not the case earlier, when we hardly stumbled upon a wild boar during our 6-7 hours stay inside the jungle. Our degraded forest has been revived,” said Birsingh Goiya (60), an inhabitant of Tangru Sahi, a periphery village of Similipal sanctuary in Odisha.

Legal recognition of their rights under the Forest Rights Act has encouraged tribal communities in Similipal biosphere of Odisha to protect the environment they coexist with.

In the early 70s, wildlife and forest cover of Similipal had started degrading due to rampant smuggling of timber, according to Deepak Pani, secretary of Gram Swaraj, an NGO that works with the tribals for the regeneration of Similipal biosphere. The Similipal Forest Development Corporation (SFDC), which was formed in 1979 to protect the sanctuary’s biodiversity, instead further catalysed the smuggling and amid controversies, the SFDC was closed in 1990, he said. A major Maoist attack in the early 90s paralysed the already slack Forest Department (FD), clearing roads for tree felling and poaching in a more intense manner, he added.

All these prompted the inhabitants to strengthen their protection initiatives even though they were under constant fear of the FD's hostile response.

Support from the civil societies and implementation of the Forest Rights Act gave them a moral boost, added Pani, who has done extensive research on Similipal's biodiversity.

In April 2015, 43 villages inside Similipal received Community Forest Rights (CFR) title deeds under FRA, said Mohanty Birua, the *sarpanch* of Astakuanr gram panchayat (GP) inside the sanctuary. Similipal is only the second so far as recognition of CFR inside a tiger reserve is concerned, the first being Biligiriranga Swamy Temple in Karnataka in 2011.



Traditional fire management practices of the indigenous community members have controlled the wildfire incidents inside Simillipal biosphere since 2015 when the villager received their CFR titles. Photo by Hemanta Kumar Sahoo.

A 2018 report by the World Wildlife Fund maintained that humanity has wiped out 60% of wildlife including mammals, birds, fishes and reptiles between 1970 and 2014. However, in many places, where the indigenous communities have led forest protection efforts, not only the forests have survived, but also wildlife has thrived.

Another report on biodiversity and ecosystem services said that nature is generally declining less rapidly in indigenous peoples' land than in other lands. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) in India has only aided this conservation, environmentalists and

researchers assert, by recognising the efforts of traditional dwellers of forests but also legalising their stay inside sanctuaries and national parks ensuring their rights to protect, manage and regenerate their traditional community forest resource (Section 3(1) (i) of the FRA).

Formal recognition

Decades ago, people from villages neighbouring the Similipal biosphere, like Bhanjania, Tingiria, Dayapasi, Balanapasi and Purunia, used to cut valuable trees like sal, piasala and asana, said Gopal Chandra Guiya, former president of the forest protection committee of Tangru Sahi under Baunshanali GP inside the biosphere. “For generations, we have been protecting our forests as we depend on them for all our needs. But, when outsiders intruded, timber smuggling went unabated and we failed to check it in our usual method. So, we formed a committee – *Juan Marshal Juvak Sangh* – in 1993.”

Their efforts were recognised in 2015 and the CFR land deed certified them as sole protector and managers of their forests. They rechristened their committee as *Guru Lakhabhadra Gosthi Jungle Sambal*

Suraksha O Parichalana Committee which was responsible for protection and management of the forest.

“Under the committee, we conduct meetings twice a month and sort out issues related to forest protection, management and Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) selling,” Gopal said. “For decades we are continuing the practice of *thengapali* to protect forests,” he added. Explaining the term *thengapali*, he said a group of villagers carrying *thengas* (bamboo lathis) go inside the forest to patrol it on a rotation basis.

Community ownership at Similipal

“I have grown up with these trees and animals. I know the nooks and corners of my forest, the points from where the timber smugglers sneak and which trees they intend to fell,” said Birsingh. “How can a forester just because he is appointed by the government protect my forest which he does not know at all?” he asked.

Narrating their successful conservation efforts, Gopal said, “While we fine Rs 1000 to each intruder, we impose an additional fine on them for felling

trees and poaching. The fine amount depends on the quantity and species of trees they fell. Maximum amount of fine is collected for felling of *sal* trees. We fine them more if we find them killing animal/s. We detain these offenders and hand them over to the FD," he said, adding that at present the practice has been stopped as the wrongdoers are aware about their tight surveillance.

"Neither have we allowed outsiders into our forest, nor the FD for any plantation as most often they plant alien species which are harmful to the biodiversity. We ensure that the forest grows on its own," said Mohanty Jerai, a teacher of Mandam village.

"Earlier, the forest was far away from the village. In the last 10 years, it touched our village boundary. Now-a-days, when we step out in evening, we sight herds of animals like deer or barking deer crossing the road. In the last couple of years, there is not a single case of human-elephant conflict in our panchayat. It is because, they are getting proper food inside the regenerated forest. Further, as poaching has been checked, they are tamed

observing that humans no more intend to harm them,” Jerai added.

According to Birua, the increase in the number of animals is visible in tourist spots like Chahala, Barehipani, Nawana and Joranda inside the sanctuary. Earlier, they had to return disappointed without sighting any animal.

“It is not that we don’t cut timber at all. We take the consent of *gram sabha* and cut timber to meet our needs. When we cut a tree/branch, we make least damage, so that it can re-grow. We are conscious since the beginning about sustainability and the CFR by vesting community ownership has resulted in a more controlled approach,” Birua added.

Trade in forest products, reduction in forest fires

“Earlier, we used to collect forest produce like mahua flowers and seeds, chironji, resins, siali, sal and kendu leaves and Ceylon oak fruits from forests under fear. We would sell these to visiting traders at a very cheap price. If we want to go out and sell these, the forest department won’t allow us easily. They would allow us in exchange of a major portion of the sum we get after selling the produce. Now, we

can go out by producing a *chalan* of our Gram Sabha (village committee) and sell these to whosoever gives us more money,” said Gopal.

Restrictions on collection and sale of NTFP were quashed after recognition of CFR, said Chitta Ranjan Pani, an FRA researcher. Villagers of Bilapagha inside the sanctuary have sold a bulk amount of Siali leaf-plates, and Ceylon oak and chironji seeds in the last year. This was their first collective trading of forest produce which used to be impossible earlier, he added.



Young lady sarpanch Srimati Hembram's family depends on the forest for its livelihood. There is hardly any migration from the village. Photo by Pragati Prava.

Since the community has received CFR, there is not a single incident of forest fire inside the biosphere, said Srimati Hembram (25), sarpanch of Baunshanali GP. “People used to torch the bushes to clear the ground to ensure hassle-free picking of mahua flowers or kendu leaves. Most often, timber smugglers would throw burning cigarettes and leave the fire un-doused when they cook inside the forest. Such recklessness used to cause forest fire,” he said.

“Now, as soon as we get to know about a fire, we rush to that place. Some of us sweep away dry leaves and clear dry vegetations around the fire so that the fire seizes to spread. The rest of us get raw branches and keep beating the flames till it turns off,” said Sushila Alda of Kolha village. By the time the FD people arrive, the fire is already put out, she added.

Recharge of water bodies around Similipal

“Earlier, our three streams used to get dry by November-December every year. Water table of wells went down too. The situation turned grim by 2000. After years of community conservation initiatives, we observed improvement in the flowing

pattern of streams. Now they flow till March and we are getting good harvests,” said villagers of Tangru Sahi.

“There is growing global recognition that community forest conservation efforts – most importantly the local, natural and biodiversity-rich forests – yield better water, food and nutrition security by tackling ‘development and climate induced’ disasters in various ways,” said Ranjan Panda, convenor of Water Initiatives Odisha.

The CFR gave a boost to the livelihood of the indigenous communities in myriad ways – farmers get good harvests every year due to recharge of water bodies; the amount of collection of NTFP increased due to increase of forest cover, and income from NTFP increased due to shift of authority from FD to Gram Sabha. Their economy became self-sufficient and there has been a considerable decrease in the rate of migration, said Pani.

Can people, forests, wildlife coexist?

Karanja Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) Prasanna Kumar Behera is against human presence inside sanctuaries and forests. He said, “Where there are

people, there is no forest.” Giving an example, he said, “There is significant increase in the number of animals in Kabataghai in core area of Similipal after villagers were relocated in December 2016.

However, he said, no enumeration has been done and there is no specific report with the forest department in this regard.

However, according to Premananda Panda, former director of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute-Odisha, where there are tribals, there exist forest, wildlife. “They protect natural objects. They don’t have the concept of accumulation and appropriation and believe that nature around them provides everything they need. They worship deities to protect animals and observe practices for growth of animal population. They believe that so long as tigers live in their forest, they are safe. It is the need and greed of urbanites, which make forests and wildlife vulnerable,” he said, adding, “COVID-19 lockdown has made it clear that nature grows when there is no disturbance from the outsiders. Tribal people are insiders in the jungle.”