On the Cusp: Reframing Democracy and Well-Being in Korchi, India

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Introduction

Mainstream governance and development models – characterised by seemingly democratic but inherently **centralised and top down governance systems and extractive, commercially motivated, capitalist economic policies** – have failed to achieve minimum levels of well-being for a very large part of humanity. They have in fact caused large-scale human and environmental injustice. However, there are also countertrends either resisting current models or developing and defending alternative forms of governance and well-being (Singh/Kulkarni/Pathak Broome 2018). In this paper, we explore and discuss the emergence of one such process towards direct democracy and well-being in Korchi *taluka* in the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra state in India. We use Zografos' definition of direct democracy as a "form of popular self-rule where citizens participate directly, continuously, and without mediation in the tasks of government" (Zografos 2019).

India has a federal democratic system that is decentralised in form but retains strong political and administrative centralisation in its spirit and functioning. The *adivasi* (tribal) and other traditional forest dwellers across much of India are dependent on forests for their subsistence, livelihoods, cultural and spiritual needs, yet historically have had little control over surrounding forests. These communities have resisted their systemic alienation from use, access, governance and management of their surrounding forests
by colonial and post-colonial governments. A strong grassroots movement led to the enactment of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, or the FRA, in 2006.This Act, along with another radical law for the tribal areas, the 1996 Panchayat (Extension) to the Scheduled Areas (PESA), has paved the way for transformative democratic processes to take shape for *adivasi* and other forest-dwelling communities in India.

This discussion paper attempts to understand and analyse how these laws were

used by an already mobilised community in Korchi *taluka* to move towards direct democracy and greater economic, social, ecological and political well-being. We discuss the model of democracy adopted by the Indian state and official processes of decentralisation; the emergence of alternative democratic processes in Korchi and what they hope to achieve; and factors that lead to the emergence of such processes and constraints and the hurdles that they face. An analysis of the process in Korchi helps foster a greater understanding of the interface between forms of representative democratic governance and direct democratic systems.

Background and context

History and context of the Panchayati Raj System – for decentralised democracy in India

In 1947, at the time of India's independence, there was an intense debate in the country about the form of democratic governance to be adopted: Gandhi's *gram swaraj* or village self-rule (Gandhi 1962) or the Nehruvian envisioning of the British Parliamentary system. Gandhi suggested a system of governance based on village self-rule where the basic unit of decision-making would lie at the level of each village. This institution, a *panchayat,* would consist of five people, to be elected annually by the adult villagers, and would be subject to strong oversight or checks and balances by all residents.

The *panchayat* was to be the legislative, judiciary and executive combined. They would also adopt local systems of economic benefit and livelihoods, education and health. The *panchayats* would cover the entire country and their representatives would ultimately govern the country. This model was heavily criticised by the likes of Dr B.R. Ambedkar on the grounds that traditional village systems are cesspools of caste, class and gender oppression and this model would continue and perpetuate the social, cultural, economic and political alienation and oppression of the mistreated castes and genders (Jodhka 2002).

Independent India opted for a federal system of governance based on electoral political democracy modelled after the British Parliamentary system (Ahmad 2017). Responsibilities for governance were divided between the central government and the state governments. Representatives to the central Parliament and state Legislature are elected once every five years by the people of India. In 1957, based on the recommendations of a government committee (the *Balwant Rai Mehta*

Committee), democratic decentralisation in the form of a three-tier *Panchayati Raj* System (PRS) was envisioned, which was adopted by all states by the 1960s (Brahmanandam 2018). This meant that within the state the first level of decision making would be a *gram panchayat* (village executive). A group of *panchayats* would form a *panchayat samiti* at the *taluka* level and *zila parishad* at the district level (see figure below).

Political and administrative structure in India

The PRS adopted by the federal states differed from that envisioned by Gandhi in his concept of *gram swaraj* but both were designed based on the local systems of governance customarily prevalent in the Indian subcontinent. The word *panchayat* literally means an "assembly of five wise and respected elders" chosen and accepted by the community. The traditional *panchayats* are also called the *Jat Panchayats*or the *Khap Panchayats* (a *panchayat* of a specific caste or tribe or any other self-defined group of people). Traditional *panchayats* are largely known to exclude women and young people and discriminate against other castes. The PRS received constitutional backing in 1992 with the 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India. Some powers and responsibilities were devolved to the *panchayats*, including the preparation of economic development plans and social justice. The PRS, however, has been heavily criticised in recent years for its failure to secure meaningful democracy. Some of the reasons that lead to its decline include (Banerjee 2013):

1. The most important reason for its decline is attributed to the otherwise centralised tendencies of operation in the country's political and administrative system, meaning that the remaining financial and legal powers are largely centred in the state/central state institutions.
2. *Panchayats* themselves were not seen as institutions of direct democracy, as the power of decision-making is in the hands of the elected representatives. *Panchayats* were often constituted at the level of a cluster of widely dispersed hamlets or villages, making it difficult for members of all constituent villages to participate in its general body meetings, which are held at least eight times a year.
3. The PRS has seats set aside for women and members of disprivileged castes as office bearers, but in practice the participation of women (except in a few cases) has been symbolic, with their husbands assuming the actual power. The environment of *panchayat* general body meetings has been difficult and

unsupportive of women's participation, consequently limiting their involvement.

4. Unaccountability, lack of transparency, inefficiency, corruption, nepotism, favouritism, uncertainty and irregularity have been intricately linked with the functioning of the *panchayats* across the country.
5. *Panchayat* elections have not been held in many states, and where they are held they are increasingly influenced by the national and regional political parties. It has become common practice for these parties to establish roots in a village through candidates standing for *panchayat* elections. This has created political divisions and factions within the villages and *panchayats*, often leading to murky politics of power rather than elections for this basic unit being based on issues of local significance.
6. *Panchayats* are financially weak and dependent on the administration to implement village development programmes, functioning merely as agencies to implement predetermined and pre-financed government schemes.
7. Continued colonial distrust of local institutions in independent India meant that there was limited devolution of power and responsibility to the *panchayats*. These were subsequently further curtailed due to the decline in the performance of the *panchayats*. Most of the development programmes are administered directly by the parallel administrative bodies.

Intended as a means to achieve direct democracy, *panchayats* have been reduced to an extension of political parties, fuelled by nepotism and patriarchy in society and further fuelling it to enhance their own power and control.

Extension of the Panchayati Raj System to the Scheduled V Areas and PESA

In 1992, the PRS was not extended immediately to areas that were tribal-dominated and enjoyed special constitutional protection. There are over 705 Scheduled Tribes in India (tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as mentioned in Article 342 of the Constitution of India), occupying about 15% of India's landmass and accounting for roughly 8.6% of the country's population (MoTA 2013). Tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as mentioned in Article 342 of the Constitution of IndiaRecognition of their unique socio-cultural practices, worldviews and self-governing social and political organisation (Von Fürer-Haimendorf 1982; Elwin

1964) led the colonial government to formulate policies of isolation and the enactment of special laws for their protection. Post Independence, the policy of isolation was replaced with policies intended to integrate the tribal population into the rest of the population while continuing to afford them special status and protection. Article 244 of the Constitution provides for the creation of Scheduled V and VI areas in regions with higher tribal populations, called them Scheduled Tribes (STs) and granted certain privileges, benefits and protections.

Forests in India were taken over by the Colonial British government in 1865 by enacting the draconian Indian Forest Act and creating an elaborate and centralised forest bureaucracy. As it paved the way for the takeover of forests and other common property resources by the colonial government, recognised no use, access, management or governance rights of the local people, imposed heavy penalties for any customary or other use and access, which was criminalised under the law. Colonial interests in these forests were commercial in nature, and customary governance and use were considered an obstacle to maximising benefits for the colonial state (Guha 1994). The centralised political and administration system did not allow for local, traditional self-governing structures, which in turn were increasingly affected by internal rifts, patriarchy and social discrimination and injustice.

Despite enjoying constitutional protection since colonial times, post-Independence as well as now, *adivasis* face oppression and land and resource alienation through the forest policies, centralised governance and corporate land grabbing.
The *adivasi*, however, has consistently resisted such intrusions. In 1996, in the wake of strong grassroots movements, the government extended the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the PRS to adivasi areas by enacting the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act (Bijoy 2012; Bhuria 2004). The PESA sought to enable the village gram sabhas (assembly of all adult members) to implement a system of self-governance. The Act empowered the gram sabhas to safeguard and preserve the traditions and customs of the people, their cultural identity, community resources and customary mode of dispute resolution, to, for instance, regulate the ownership of minor forest produce and control government plans and resources for such plans. Gram sabhasare to be consulted on the use of land for development and their recommendations are mandatory for any issue of prospecting licences or mining leases. Federal states were to make rules under the PESA to grant gram sabhas enough powers and authority to work towards self-governance. Soon after the

enactment of the PESA, however, the Supreme Court of India passed a brave judgment using it. The Samatha case (Samatha 1997), as it was called, against the state of Andhra Pradesh challenged the state's right to allow private mining companies in Scheduled V areas. The judgment upheld the contention, revealing the power that the PESA could yield in Scheduled V areas. This led to covert attempts by many state governments as well as central ministries to dilute, scuttle and underplay the implementation of the PESA. Most states didn't draft the Rules and those that did ensure that the Rules removed or diluted the empowering provisions of the PESA. The immensely powerful potential of the PESA for self-rule and direct democracy in *adivasi* areas remained largely unused and ineffective.

English: Village assembly in Mendha(Lekha), Block Dhanora, Dist, Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, Indi मराठी: ग्रामसभा मेंढा (लेखा), तालुका धानोरा, िजल्हा गडिचरोली, महाराष्ट्र, भारत @Subodhkiran

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act 2006 – Forest Rights Act (FRA)

In this context, there was another radical change in the legal environment in 2006. After a long-standing grassroots struggle waged by the forest-dependent *adivasi*

communities across India, the Parliament of India enacted landmark legislation – the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 (hereinafter referred to as the Forest Rights Act or FRA). The FRA, for the first time in the history of Independent India, acknowledged the historic injustice committed against *adivasi* and forest dwelling communities in India and granted them forest rights
over their traditional forests, which the Act emphasised as "already vested". The FRA recognises14 pre-existing forest rights, including the right to *gram sabhas* of the tribal and other traditional forest dwellers *to use, manage, and conserve their traditional forests (*hereafter referred to as Community Forest Resources or CFRs*) and protect them from internal and external threats*. The Act also provides for the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of the *gram sabhas* before their traditional forests are diverted for development projects.

Context of resource extraction and political alienation through democratic deficit in India's Gadchiroli district

Severely affected by the centralised, top-down and oppressive forest policies and practices, the Gadchiroli district has seen a number of resistance movements demanding village self rule. It has also seen strong movement among women both as part of their communities against external imperial and colonial forces but also against the systems of social discrimination within their own patriarchal societies, the most significant of the former movements being the "save people and save forests movement" of the mid-1980s, which demanded greater tribal autonomy, control over decision-making and rights related to forests and their resources. Slogans like *Mawa Mate Mawa Sarkar* (We are the government in our village) and "our representatives govern from Delhi and Mumbai but we are the government in our village" emerged from Gadchiroli, intensifying the self-rule movement in the district. Villages such as Mendha-Lekha declared *de facto* village self-rule, inspiring many others to follow suit (Pathak Broome 2018). Despite these resistance movements, control over forests has remained in the hands of the forest department and forest leases continue to be issued for commercial extraction (Pinjarkar 2013; Ali 2016), including for mining (Pathak Broome, N./Raut, N. 2017; Newsclick 2018)
ina clear violation of the country's legal provisions related to FPIC provided under the FRA 2006 and PESA 1996.

Zendepar villagers gathered to discuss and resist mining in their sacred forests in Gadchiroli District, Maharashtra. @Neema Pathak Broome

Moving towards direct democracy in Korchi

The FRA was enacted in 2006 and PESA Rules for the state of Maharashtra were finally drafted in 2014. Considering the potential of these two to secure self-governance and establishing *gram sabhas'* rights and FPIC over forests (Padel 2014), they have faced stiff opposition from existing power centres including the forest department. Consequently, by 2016 (over a decade after its enactment) only about 3% of the FRA's minimum potential had been unlocked throughout the country (CFR-LA 2016). Due to a range of factors, mainly the people's movement, Gadchiroli has fared much better, having achieved over 60% of the FRA's potential and bringing around 38% of forests in the district under the control of local *gram sabhas* (CFR-LA M 2017).

In the Gadchiroli district, the village of Mendha-Lekha was the first to file a CFR claim over the forests of which it had *de facto* taken charge. It became one of the first villages to receive a legal title over it and started to sustainably manage, conserve and earn revenue from forest produce (Das 2011). Many villages both within and outside the district went to Mendha-Lekha to learn from them, including the local leaders from Korchi *taluka*. By 2012, 87 of the 133 village

gram sabhas in Korchi had claimed and received CFR Right titles over their traditional forests.

The 2014 PESA Rules meant that village *gram sabhas,* rather than *panchayats*, became the first level of decision-making. The local social leaders in Korchi used this opportunity to initiate village and *taluka* level discussions on the concept of *gram sabha* and the implications of their empowerment, the role of the FRA and PESA in strengthening *gram sabhas*, mining as a means of development and the idea of development itself, among other things. The discussions on development were triggered by multiple proposals to begin mining operations within the customary forest boundaries of some of the villages, which they are collectively resisting. Over a period of time, multiple open and transparent public debates and discussions, including during cultural ceremonies and gatherings, influenced villages in Korchi to create *gram sabhas,* draw up rules and regulations and open bank accounts to allow the *gram sabhas* to become effective and empowered institutions of self-governance.

In 2016, after an intense *taluka*-level debate and discussion, it was felt that individual *gram sabhas* by themselves were not strong enough to prevent exploitation by the market forces as they ventured into the collection and trade of forest produce. A decision was made to establish a federation of all 90 *gram sabhas*, the *Mahasabha Gramsabha* (MGS), which would be more inclusive, fair and transparent than any of the existing traditional *taluka*-level bodies. By 2017, *gram sabhas* at village level and MGS at *taluka* level had emerged as
institutions of self-governance. Individual *gram sabhas* began organising regular village-level meetings while the MGS started meeting once a month in Korchi town. Member *gram sabhas* formally wanting to join the MGS would pass a resolution to this effect after a detailed discussion within their village, before selecting two women and two men to represent them in the MGS general body and agreeing to pay an annual membership fee of Rs 5000 to cover the MGS' operating costs (earned from the sale of non-timber forest products (NTFPs)). To facilitate greater interaction between neighbouring *gram sabhas,* 10-12 villages would meet in clusters. The MGS executive body comprises 15 members, including one woman and one man from each of the seven clusters and one person with disabilities. The 14 members represent all social groups (caste, class and gender) in accordance with their demographic structure in Korchi *taluka*. The MSG has since evolved into a *taluka*-level pressure group for oversight on all issues related to local well-being.

Addressing the limitations of the existing structures of decentralised governance

This socio-political three-tier structure of self-organisation in Korchi is helping foster greater direct democracy and local well-being in four major ways:

1. Securing greater political autonomy by facilitating *gram sabhas'* empowerment towards exercising direct democracy through self-rule, rather than decisions being made by elected representatives (as in *panchayats*), and organising higher levels of delegated democracy at cluster and *taluka* level.
2. Strengthening autonomy by holding state and non-state agencies and actors accountable to the decisions of the *gram sabhas*.
3. Gaining control over means of production (the forests in this case), strengthening the forest-based economy, and granting greater financial autonomy to the local *gram sabhas*, while ensuring ecological sustainability. 4. Addressing inherent social caste, class and patriarchy based injustices.

Empowering *grams sabhas* to ensure direct democracy and self-rule at village level and the MGS for delegated democracy at higher levels

Panchayats still perform all government administrative and political functions at their level. The *gram sabhas* are empowered by the FRA and PESA to use, access, manage and govern forests within the traditional village boundaries. They are responsible for the conservation and protection of biodiversity and their natural and cultural heritage. An empowered and aware *gram sabha* provides for the right, ability and opportunity for everyone to take part in decision-making, including women. The community leaders have therefore placed great importance on ensuring that *gram sabhas* are empowered and well-informed. Such empowerment is attempted through discussions in the MGS and through regular training programmes. An important component of this is also the continuation of traditional peer-to-peer learning. Consequently, MGS and *gram sabha* members also visit other *talukas* where similar processes are unfolding. They stay connected with each other through social media and also use local media to spread awareness. Traditional religious and cultural ceremonies are also used for self-empowerment and knowledge-sharing.

Empowered *gram sabhas* and their MGS take up issues of well-being discussed in the monthly meetings for further action including in the areas of health, education, culture, ecological sustainability, livelihoods and others.

Ensuring transparent and open functioning

Openness and transparency within the MGS was guaranteed from the outset by ensuring that monthly meetings are held regularly and that issues, concerns and updates are shared by the *gram sabha* representatives. Delegates present all MGS proposals and discussions to their own *gram sabhas,* while delegates inform the MGS about their respective *gram sabha's* discussions of and decisions on new proposals. The financial details are also shared and discussed in monthly meetings at the *gram sabha* and during MGS meetings. Past expenses are shared and future budgets are prepared during these meetings. Any changes proposed at the MGS are passed on to the *gram sabhas* for discussion.

Addressing social discrimination and retaining adaptability

The processes in Korchi, though embedded in local socio cultural values and principles, have also incorporated many modern and contemporary ideas of political economy, human ecology, equity and social justice. For example, while the principle of consensus-based, inclusive decision-making and collective community action are integral to *adivasi* culture, greater emphasis on gender participation in decision-making, women being equal or primary beneficiaries of local economic activities, inclusion of non-*adivasis* (particularly scheduled castes) in decision-making bodies, are new aspects. The MGS executive body provides for equal representation regarding scheduled tribes, scheduled castes and other disprivileged classes, women and persons with disabilities. During the evolution of the processes towards *gram sabha* empowerment and the constitution of the MGS, the local leaders demonstrated maturity and adaptability by transforming a potentially damaging conflict situation between different ethnic groups (*adivasis* and non-*adivasis*) into an opportunity for creating dialogue towards a more open and inclusive institutional arrangement. They did this by taking into account the concerns of the minority non-tribal groups while also addressing the fears of falling into insignificance expressed by the traditional leaders of majority tribal groups. The minority groups were economically and politically more powerful than the majority *adivasis*. Ensuring a balance in power and
privilege was important. The wisdom lay in doing away with the limitations of both the

traditional and non-traditional existing institutions, without fostering fears and ill will. It was therefore ensured that traditional *adivasi* leaders would be granted the traditional respect and be included in various capacities, like advisory elders, but without remaining the only voice of or for their community. At the same time, the traditional *jat panchayats* also continue to exist. They have not remained unscathed by the ongoing debates and discussions. Many of the local social leaders are also members of the *jat panchayats*. *Jat panchayats* have therefore made some significant changes in the oppressive, discriminatory socio-cultural practices. For example, women are now part of the decision-making process even here. Similarly, it was important to continue involving the leaders of the official *panchayats* as their skills and resourcefulness would be useful for the process, while their antagonism could destabilise it. This was a delicate balance between challenging traditional or conventional hierarchies and power relations within and between the communities while minimising isolation, exclusion and antagonism of those who have been in power. The MSG has been successful in achieving this balance thus far, acknowledging that this is a continuous process and challenges will need to be addressed as they arise.

Gender-inclusive decision-making

Women Parishad's meeting, January 2018. @Neema Pathak Broome The inclusion of women and their concerns in the processes has likewise been a unique feature of the democratic process in Korchi. This has been possible because of a fairly long history of women's mobilisation in Gadchiroli through empowering women's self-help groups (SHGs) and their federations, in which Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi (AAA) played a crucial and catalytic role. Small committees of 10-20 women and men initially set up in rural India for the financial support and empowerment of women which have in many cases evolved to become agents for change through the general empowerment of women. The federation works constantly to ensure that women do find space in all decision-making processes, including gram sabhas and the MSG, and receive equitable benefits. Since the gram sabhas now serve as the decision-making bodies, not the panchayats (far away from the village), there are many more opportunities for women's participation. Some gram sabhas have also made special efforts

to ensure that meetings are held at times when women are able to attend them. Few gram sabhas, if any, have female office bearers; women are continuing their efforts to change this. The women's SHG federation leaders have played an important role in training *gram sabhas* in bookkeeping and accounting procedures thanks to the leaders' extensive experience in SHG accounting. Korchi *gram sabhas* are currently handling millions of rupees and maintaining the most transparent accounts (as also acknowledged by the local government agencies). In fact, one of the leaders, Kumari bai, has also been appointed an advisor and financial consultant to the MGS. This is in addition to other SHG members holding executive positions within the MGS.

Youth-inclusive decision-making

With party politics exerting ever greater influence, many *panchayats* in India are increasingly drawing in young people to engage in divisive party politics, which focuses on individuals and their amassing of power. In Korchi, however, the *gram sabha* processes have inspired many youths, who are engaging in the harvesting of forest produce, forest management and conservation, resistance against mining, and in the administrative activities of the *gram sabhas* (which require skills in account keeping, record maintenance, networking and alliance building, among others). There are many others who are caught in a tussle between these unfolding local processes and the adivasi way of being on the one hand and the lure of the market, the glamour of the dominant outside society, and the pull of right-wing religious elements on the other. The more right-wing Hindutva outfits have long striven to have *adivasis*

considered Hindus. With the right leaning party in power in the country, such efforts have increased in recent times. This is more common particularly among those who have been through higher education outside the villages. The MGS is constantly thinking of ways to include such youths in local processes, by engaging in cultural activities, monitoring education institutions and establishing a library, among others.

Strengthening local livelihoods and financial stability for *gram sabhas*

The process of direct democracy in Korchi is closely linked to the local forest-based economic processes and gaining control over means of production. In many ways, the success of the processes in Korchi is dependent on the ability of the *gram sabhas* and the MGS to help sustain forest-based livelihoods and economy. The *gram sabhas* began collecting and selling tendu patta (leaves of *diospyros melanoxylon* used to wrap tobacco) and bamboo, two important forms of commercial forest produce in the region, in 2017 (this had previously been exclusively controlled by the forest department). By 2019, the *gram sabhas* collectively received about Rs 160 million (USD 2 million)from these forest products in addition to the daily wages paid to the collecting families. Different *gram sabhas* have retained differing shares of this total (ranging from 5% to 20%) to cover their administrative overheads while sharing the remaining amounts equally with all families who participated in the collection, including women.

Taking over the sustainable harvest and sale of these forest products has brought about a 70-80% increase in income at the family level and, for the first time, income for gram sabhas (which up till then had no income or funds), empowering them financially to undertake activities for village well-being. In some villages, women are their family's breadwinner, traditionally the role of the male head of the family. Directly participating in activities related to trading, marketing, record maintenance and other associated activities also meant increased awareness and skill enhancement among the gram sabha members (including women). The overall revival and localisation have reduced outmigration, which was rampant just a few years ago. Although outmigration continues, it is rarely as much of compulsion as it was before.

Greater control over the forest-based economy has also helped the MGS demystify the job and development promises being made by the mining companies. With generally declining employment rates in the country, the local leaders' calculations have indicated that the current combination of options open to villagers best protects

local livelihoods and well being. Agriculture and the forests provide food, while the trade of forest produce and other associated activities provide cash, leaving villagers with ample time to participate in community and collective cultural and political activities. They claim that standing forests provide more for longer and without the destruction that mining would cause. Mining companies would employ a handful of local people, mainly men and largely in unskilled work, while destroying the forests and forest-based income, affecting agriculture, causing water and air pollution, and cultivating an insecure and unsafe environment for women and children and taking away their income.

Engaging with and addressing party politics

In 2017, the MGS discussed and felt that elected *panchayat* representatives had failed them in their struggles and were instead representing the corporate-politician interests in the region's political economy. The local *gram sabhas, the*refore, decided to participate in *Panchayat Samiti* and *Zila Pachayat* elections to help them gain political control over the three tiers of the PRS. The *gram sabhas* fielded candidates under an oath to follow ethical principles accepted by the *gram sabhas* but lost the elections. The results of the election and events during the election period were discussed, analysed and found to be divisive, corrupting and taking a heavy toll on the unity of the collective. They felt that it may be better to work as a pressure group from outside rather than trying to engage with electoral politics. An assessment of the historical events in the district also showed that the local leaders who engaged with electoral politics were co-opted and
unable to achieve the objectives for which they engaged with this system.

Towards ecological wisdom, integrity and resilience

The recognition of rights has revived a sense of belonging over the forests that had eroded over generations because of alienating colonial policies. Since forest-based livelihoods are now locally controlled, ensuring the ecological sustainability of the forests is also seen as a local responsibility. These once-rich forests, which have deteriorated over the years because of unregulated overuse and is divided up into individual plots of land, are now being viewed differently. After receiving rights under the FRA, many gram sabhas have started making rules and regulations regarding the management and protection of forests, including a system of regular forest patrols. Such protection and conservation systems are encouraged by the MGS. Controlling forest fires has resulted in greater regeneration and richness in forest biodiversity.

The FRA requires all gram sabhas to formulate management plans and strategies, including for sustainable harvesting and sale of the commercially important NTFPs. Using funds from the Tribal Development Department, some gram sabhas have begun drafting formal management plans. With or without management plans, however, many villages have successfully planted diverse local species. In almost all cases, extraction of NTFPs is carried out on rotation (ensuring that not all parts of the forest are extracted in one go). Using the FRA's FPIC clause, villagers have already registered their rejection of the mining proposals. The threat posed by mining is not over, however.

Enablers of Resistance and Transformative Processes

The mere enactment of radical laws such as the FRA and PESA is not enough to bring about transformative alternatives. Multiple enabling factors ensure that such laws are used to create transformation. In Korchi these include the following.

Members of 70 village gram sabhas (village councils) gathered to discuss and resist mining in their sacred forests of Surjagad, Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra. @Neema Pathak Broome.

Social capital embedded in adivasi culture – collective actions

and celebrations

Setting aside time for common and collective action including community celebrations, festivities and community welfare activities is integral to tribal cultures. This community focus and culture of seeing the benefit of others intricately liked with your own leads to people coming together for collective causes. As such, even though mining proposals would only directly affect a few villages, all 90 villages resist mining collectively. Regular community gatherings and celebrations (yatrasor annual community celebrations) have been crucial forums to discuss and develop collective strategies. Needless to say, the leaders of the transformative
movement built upon existing traditions and systems to transform them into forums of socio-political discourse on conventional notions of centralised governance and politics, patriarchal systems, social discrimination, mining and resistance to it. These gatherings were also key to fostering awareness about laws like the FRA and PESA, among others. The culture of respect for elders combined with the presence of unique social leaders has played a critical role in this movement. Such leaders and elders have guided the processes and movements but often stayed away from formal positions of power, material gain and party politics. These social mobilisers invest their personal time and resources into the process without expecting a personal gain.

Continuous frictional confluence and dialectics of different socio-political ideologies – Resistance and state repression

The continuous presence of different ideologies and strong proponents thereof has led to an uncomfortable co-existence between the socialist, Gandhian, leftist, Maoist and, more recently, Hindu right-wing ideologies. There has been a constant interplay, covert struggle for dominance and resultant dialectics among these ideologies. The upside of this has been greater political awareness, providing space for debate and allowing resistance and transformation to emerge. However, this does have a downside, namely the state repression of those who have dissenting views and are opposed to mining, with the state labelling them anti-state and anti nation and imprisoning or harassing them. This political awareness has historically led to many resistance movements in the region.

District-level study circle and peer-learning and support processes

One of the key factors of the effective and successful implementation of the FRA in

the district as a whole has been
the district-level study circle initiated by some civil society actors historically involved in processes intended to strengthen *gram sabhas*. Study circles provide a forum to understand local contexts, learn from each other and deliberate upon issues. They helped create a district-wide campaign calling for the implementation of the FRA as soon as it was introduced and led to Gadchiroli becoming the only district in the country where over 60% of the potential of the FRA had been realised by 2016. In addition to the district study circle, *gram sabhas* have also created means of exchange and learning among themselves across the district, as mentioned above.

Role of Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi (AAA)

Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi (AAA), a local NGO, has been active in Korchi for several decades and has worked towards improving health, forest management and women's empowerment. The AAA has also supported local social leaders, including women as *karyakarta* (village activists), in a range of projects and has provided them with opportunities to interact with actors at district, state and national level and be part of various discussions and debates. This has helped enhance their existing levels of awareness, information and leadership skills and gain respect and acceptance within the larger community. The AAA has also provided timely help in accessing information and building capacity through various training programmes. This NGO has played a unique supportive role by implementing projects but not imposing and taking control of the local processes.

Jeevanshalas: a school with a difference

One such significant project was a unique education programme called the *jeevanshalas* (school of life), which was implemented for three years in the aforementioned villages. The concept of *jeevanshalas* was based on the *Nai Talim* (Gandhi1962) system of education, which was particularly
important for the tribal children, who tuned into their forests, often found the classroom- and alphabet-based education system of regular government schools constraining and uninspiring, resulting in huge numbers dropping out. As two of the local leaders said: "We were able to be what we are because we didn't go to the formal school after an initial few years. The school was oppressive, difficult to understand and nothing much to learn. On the contrary, when we roamed the forests we learnt so much more. We also had time to be part of the collective community activities". *Jeevanshalas* envisioned education differently, where learning from the

local surroundings and ecosystem was key. Those influenced by its philosophy are among the main leaders of both resistance against mining as well as the movement in support of transformation processes.

Conclusion

The gram sabhas in Korchi are at different stages of empowerment. While some gram sabhas have established systems of equitable, transparent and inclusive decision-making and benefit-sharing, others are striving to reach that stage. The MGS is also continuously evolving in its structure and operation. Gram sabhas and the MGS face numerous internal and external challenges, the most significant among them being existence within the nation-state and its adopted exploitative capitalist model of economy and representative electoral democracy. Party politics, having entered all other levels of governance, now strives to control the gram sabhas. The PRS institutions at all levels are beginning to feel threatened by the emerging power of the gram sabhas, creating friction with the MGS. Religious right-wing (Hindu in this case) and cultural right-wing tribal outfits are using identity politics for political gain, some of these are supported by the mining companies and often create hurdles for the MGS and gram sabhas opposed to mining. Many local activists, including one of the core team members of this study, have been imprisoned under
the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), which gives the state draconian powers to arrest without a warrant or evidence and keep people in police custody without bail for a certain period of time. While the state accused said team member of having connections with the armed Maoist movement in the district, it is widely understood that he was arrested for his support for the local anti-mining resistance movement and for exposing the corporate and political nexus leading to land and resource grabbing and the disempowerment of the local people.

Despite these challenges, focusing on strengthening the smallest unit of direct decision-making and ensuring that these are inclusive, transparent, financially strong and fair structures has influenced nearly all spheres of social organisation, including economic, political, ecological, cultural and social elements in Korchi. The government's decentralisation efforts are different from the people's movement towards self-rule and direct democracy in that the former remains fixated on the external structure rulebooks at the cost of the spirit of decentralisation, while the latter focuses on the spirit by constantly adapting and evolving strategies, structures, rules and operations to address the opportunities and challenges encountered while

ensuring that the core principles of transparent dialogue, consensus-based decision-making and equity are not compromised. As a Gondi proverb says, *Changla Jeevan Jage Mayan Saathi Sapalorukoon Apu Apuna Jababdarita Jaaniv Ata Pahe* ("to achieve well-being, everyone needs to know what their responsibility is"). The MGS members believe that to be more effective politically, different *taluka*-level collectives need to come together to form a district-level federation and must also have their delegates in the state legislature, which is yet to be achieved. They hope to slowly move in that direction.

Abbreviations

CFR: Community Forest Resource Rights or the Right to use, conserve and sustainably manage forests over which rights were granted under the FRA 2006

FPIC: Free, Prior and Informed Consent

FRA: Forest Rights Act, also called the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006

GS: *Gram sabhas* or village assemblies

MGS: *Maha Gramsabha* or federation of *gram sabhas* in Korchi NTFP:

Non-Timber Forest Product

PESA: *Panchayat* (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 PRS:

Panchayati Raj System

SHG: Self-Help Group

Glossary

Gram panchayat: The elected village executive committee forming the smallest unit of decision-making within India's PRS. A panchayat could cover one or more villages.

Gram swaraj: Village self-rule (or village republic)

Panchayat samiti/Mandal parishad/Panchayat samiti: The PRS has three levels, gram panchayat at village level, with Panchayat samiti/Mandal parishad/Block samiti at the higher level called the Mandal/Taluka/Block, which constitutes a cluster of villages.

Panchayati Raj System: System of governance adopted by India in which the gram panchayats are the basic unit of local administration and governance.

Sarpanch: Elected head of a panchayat
Taluka: An administrative unit at the level of multiple villages

Zila parishad: This is the third tier of the PRS. This tier covers a district, which constitutes multiple Talukas/Blocks. Multiple districts constitute the state.

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