

# 3 Forest rights act, local collectivisation and transformation in Korchi<sup>1</sup>

*Neema Pathak Broome, Shrishtee Bajpai and Mukesh Shende*

## Introduction

The world over, Indigenous Peoples and other traditional communities and their habitats are facing destruction due to the demand for industrial growth and development. The peoples and the communities nevertheless are not only resisting the ongoing onslaught of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ but are also voicing the urgency of looking for fundamental alternatives to the current global order (Singh, Kulkarni and Pathak Broome, 2018). Korchi taluka an administrative sub unit of Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra State in India is one such region. Nearly 75.96% of the total geographic area in Gadchiroli is under forest cover, till recently under the jurisdiction of a highly centralised forest department.

Korchi taluka includes 133 villages or gram sabhas (village assemblies), which were traditionally divided into three *Ilakas* (feudal territories),<sup>2</sup> namely, Kumkot *Ilaka* including 60 gram sabhas; Padyal Job *Ilaka* including 30 gram sabhas and Kodgul *Ilaka* including 40 gram sabhas. Although officially the *taluka* is administered by Gadchiroli district administration, informally and independently the *Ilakas* continue to have their traditional village level to supra village level self-governance structures, mainly addressing socio-cultural issues. As per the 2011 census, the total population of Korchi was 42,844, of which 73% belonged to Scheduled Tribes (STs)<sup>3</sup> mainly Gond and Kanwar adivasi (tribal) communities. Around 8% of the total population is Scheduled Caste (SC).<sup>4</sup>

Almost the entire population of the taluka is heavily dependent on forest/ forest resources for cash-based and subsistence livelihood. Collection of fruits, flowers, tubers, leaves, fodder, firewood, honey, wild fruits, wild vegetables, medicinal plants, tubers, meat, for self-consumption and sale of non- timber forest produce (NTFP) such as Bamboo, tendu leaves or bidi leaf (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), mahua flowers (*Madhuca indica*), among others is important for local economy, subsistence and community health. Live livelihood is supplemented by daily wage labour on other farms or migration to cities. Dependence on the outside markets for food is minimal, most food requirements are met from agriculture and forests. In addition to forests

being important for economy and livelihoods, they are an integral part of the adivasi socio-cultural practices and ceremonies and hence their political identity (Koreti, 2016).

90 out of 133 gram sabhas in Korchi have come together to form a collective that they call Maha Gramsabha (MGS) (a federation of gram sabhas). Similarly, women's self-help groups have formed a federation (Mahila Parisar Sangh) to address traditional discrimination, exclusion and violence against women and to increase women's voice in local traditional and contemporary decision-making institutions. These collectives have also been drivers behind the resist against mining which is being proposed by the state in the sacred forests of some of the villages in Korchi. These collectives are emerging as models of direct democracy and playing a critical role in transforming many local situations such as localising control over economy, reviving cultural identity, raising social and equity concerns, questioning existing models of development, monitoring local health and education, among others.

In Korchi, as in many other parts of India, historically injustices have been perpetuated by external factors such as centralised forest bureaucracy denying local access and use rights, and corporate and state nexus appropriating land and resources; and internal factors such as traditional systems of patriarchy and caste, class discrimination. The processes in Korchi enable us to understand that the existing underlying conditions of overtly unresisted conflict situations arising from these internal and external factors create a situation of dissatisfaction and a need for change. A direct conflict (in this case proposed mining leases) creates a situation of urgency for resistance. And a change in legal environment through laws like the STs and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act 2006 and Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Rule (Maharashtra) 2014 (PESA) driven by conducive causes and conditions could become the enablers for alternatives to emerge. In this chapter, we will look at the emergence of such alternative processes and the factors that enabled their emergence. Finally, we will use the Alternative Transformation Framework (ATF) (Kothari, 2014) as an analytical tool to understand the elements and characteristics of these alternatives.

### ***Methodology***

This article is based on the report of a collaborative documentation of the multidimensional process taking place in Korchi. The study was carried out in 2017–2019, by Kalpavriksh (an environmental action group based in Pune, [www.kalpavriksh.org](http://www.kalpavriksh.org)) in collaboration with Amhi Amchya Arogayasathi (a local rural health-based organisation) and the MGS (the executive committee of the federation of village assemblies in Korchi). The study was carried out as part of a global project, the Academic-Activist Co-generation of Knowledge on Environmental Justice or ACKnowl-EJ ([www.acknowledgej.org](http://www.acknowledgej.org)).

The methodology of this case study developed at the backdrop of addressing the social issues within the wider framework of indigenous methodologies and the need to have ethical guidelines. Hence, the initial few months were spent in discussions with members of Ami Amchya Arogyasaathi (AAA), MGS and local activists about the objectives of the study and its relevance for the local processes. After many discussions, it was decided that the study will focus on the brief history of the social movements in the region, the emergence of the MGS at the backdrop of it, the women's collective at the level of the taluka and the visions of well-being that underlie these processes. The documentation of local history and detailed compilation of the MGS process was required by the community to keep it as a record that can be used as an awareness tool among the people and especially the youth.

The deeper understanding of the context was gained by looking at three villages in detail, namely, Zendevar, Bharitola and Sahle. The three villages were selected keeping in mind time and resource constraints, along with below four pertinent reasons

- a Zendevar village is directly affected by the proposed mining conflict in the village and has been strongly resisting it.
- b Being immediate neighbours, Bharitola and Sahle although not yet directly impacted by proposed mining stand threatened and are actively supporting the local resistance.
- c All three villages actively involved in building local governance institutions, rules and regulations and are part of the MGS.
- d The local leaders of these villages are also very active and found semblance to the research objective and were willing to contribute to the research process.

In terms of methodologies, various elements like tracing the family genealogy for the three villages, compiling the history of the region, helping in biodiversity mapping in the three villages and helping in other local processes were added after consultation with the MGS members and AAA. To begin with, each Gram Sabha passed a resolution to contribute towards the research process by helping in documenting the history of the village, carrying out bio-diversity surveys, and socio-economic mapping among others. The respondents were suggested and collectively selected by the MGS, AAA members and the authors. The data of socio-economic status, bio-diversity mapping, and data on sale from NTFPs was collected by AAA with the help of MGS members. The methodology involved group discussions, detailed interviews, participation in cultural activities, particularly the village yatras (annual gathering and ceremonies), walking through the forests with the local people and participation in other local activities whenever possible. As part of the study over two years, the authors visited Korchi villages six times between September 2017 and April 2019<sup>5</sup> where general, non-structured conversations were carried out with communities

*54 Neema Pathak Broome et al.*

guided through rough draft of questions put together for the study. A total of 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with MGS activists, community members, AAA members, Mahila Parisar Sangh members and a few forest

department officials. Apart from the interviews, there were around ten focused group discussions (FGDs) held with the executive committee of MGS, village assemblies, women's self-help groups and village committees. The authors also attended MGS monthly meetings, regular strategy meeting and meetings between the MGS and cluster level representatives. To gain understanding of women's perspective, a gathering of women from 30 villages in Korchi taluka and also neighbouring areas was organised wherein representatives from AAA, Mahila Kissan Adhikar Manch<sup>6</sup> and

Kalpavriksh also participated in addition to the men from these villages. Apart from FGDs, the authors had multiple conversations in the local gathering and meetings organised by MGS. The study was also supplemented with some secondary literature. A consultative process was followed all along the research to ensure that the ideas are continuously exchanged and the key results were presented back to the MGS and AAA for feedback.

### ***Conceptual framework for analysis***

“Across the world, there are a number of processes by communities, or organisations, government bodies, movements and business that are trying to tackle various dimensions of unsustainability, inequity and injustice. Many of these processes are challenging structural forces such as capitalism, statism, patriarchy, racism, casteism and anthropocentrism. In this sense, they can be seen as *alternatives* to the currently dominant system. It is proposed that alternatives are built on the following spheres (or overlapping spheres) seen as an integrated whole; in this or other forms, these have been expressed by many in the past but are re-emerging in the new contexts of the 21st century: radical and delegated democracy, social well-being and justice, economic democracy, cultural diversity and knowledge democracy and ecological integrity and resilience (these are explained further in the note referred to below) (Figure 3.1).

The above approach is part of (and detailed further in), an evolving note ‘In Search of Radical Alternatives’, laying out a framework to imagine pathways and visions that are fundamental alternatives to today's dominant economic and political system, taking us towards equity, justice and ecological sustainability.<sup>7</sup> This document has emerged from an ongoing process called the Vikalp Sangam (Alternative Confluence)<sup>8</sup> that aims at bringing together practitioners, thinkers, researchers and others working on alternatives to currently dominant forms of economic development and political governance. It aims to create a cross-sectoral platform on alternatives (or constructive work) to share, learn, build hope, collaboration and to dream and deliberate towards an alternative future,

One of the issues faced by movements working towards radical transformation is that many actions being claimed as alternatives are actually

*Forest rights act 55*

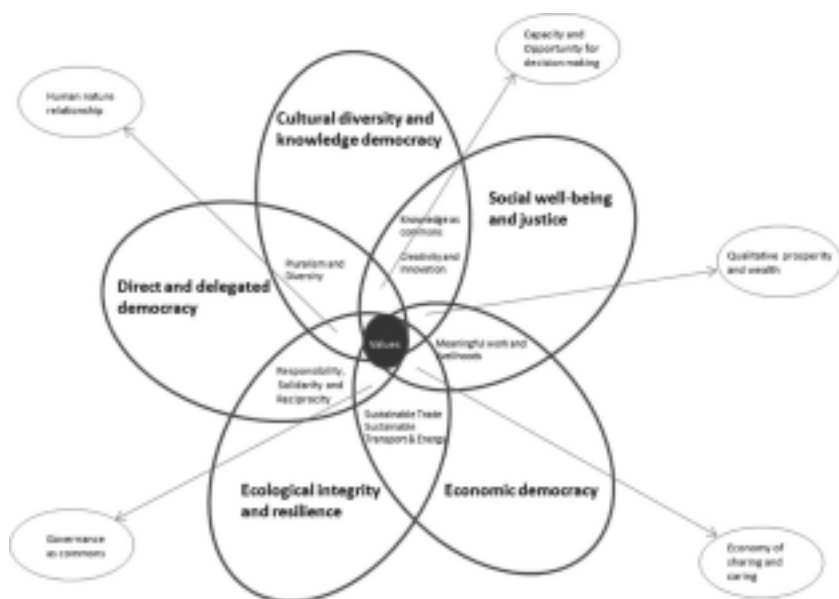


Figure 3.1 Spheres of alternatives transformation.

Note: the topics mentioned in the overlapping areas are only indicative, not exhaustive.

dealing only with the symptoms (e.g. recycling waste rather than challenging its generation and the economic forces that create it), rather than bringing in radical or transformative changes. In addition, they might be fundamentally challenging one dimension of transformation but might be negatively impacting other dimensions of transformations. In order to understand these and other complex issues, a tool called the Alternatives Transformation Format (ATF) has been developed as part of ACKnowl-EJ, the Academic-Activist Co-generation of Knowledge on Environmental Justice Project ([www.acknowledgej.org](http://www.acknowledgej.org)).<sup>9</sup> The ATF (Kalpavriksh, 2017) notes

across the world there are initiatives by communities, civil society organisations, government agencies, and businesses to tackle the challenges of unsustainability, inequity, and injustice. Many of them confront the basic structural reasons for these challenges, such as capitalism, patriarchy, state-centrism, or other inequities in power resulting from caste, ethnic, racial, and other social characteristics; we call these transformative or radical alternatives.

The ATF helps to get an understanding of whether changes are taking place towards greater direct or radical democracy (where people on the ground are core part of decision-making), more control over the economy by the

56 Neema Pathak Broome et al.

public (not the state or corporations) and the revival of relations of caring and sharing, sustaining or reviving cultural and knowledge diversity and the

commons and greater equality and justice on gender, class, caste, ethnic, 'race' and other aspects, all of this on a base of ecological resilience, sustainability and fundamental ethics of co-existence amongst humans and between humans and nature."

The alternatives framework and the ATF together set the background for analysis of various initiatives at transformation in India that Kalpavriksh is undertaking case studies on. This is part of an ongoing process in Kalpavriksh to understand myriad attempts at generating and practicing alternatives that not only challenge the dominant 'development' paradigm but provide viable pathways for human well-being that are ecologically sustainable and socio-economically equitable. Apart from this case study, ATF was used for the first time in India to look at a craft from multiple dimensions (economic, socio-cultural, political, ecological and ethical) and understand multiple dimensions of transformation taking place in the lives of *vankars* (weaver) community of Kachchh, Gujarat, India linked to an overall revival of the handloom weaving (*vanaat*) craft from a time when it was in sharp decline.

## Background

Across India, forests were taken over by the Colonial British government in 1865 by enacting the Indian Forest Act and constituting an elaborate and centralised forest bureaucracy to manage the forests. Colonial interests in these forests were commercial, and customary governance was considered an encumbrance in maximising benefits for the colonial state. These customary uses, therefore, were either extinguished completely or allowed as privileges rather than rights. Local forest use continued but remained dependent on bribes in kind or cash and to the whims and fancies of the forest bureaucracy (Guha, 1994). The colonial and draconian forests laws, policies and bureaucracy have continued in Independent India (Pathak Broome et al., 2014). Much like the tribal and other traditional forest dwelling communities across India, in Gadchiroli district also, forest-dependent tribal and non-tribal villages have been severely affected by the centralised and oppressive forest bureaucracy and denial of use and access rights. Forests in Gadchiroli also have commercially important forest produce, particularly Bamboo and *tendu* leaves. 85% of Maharashtra state's Bamboo comes from the forests of Gadchiroli. Extraction and trade of these commercially important forest products has till recently been a monopoly of the state with local people only earning the daily wage income (Maharashtra CFR-LA, 2017). Consequently, the district has seen a number of resistance movements rooted in different ideologies including socialist, Gandhian and even armed Maoist movements demanding village self-rule. Among the most important of these resistance movement has been the one in the mid-1980s against government plan to build an extensive network of 17–18 hydro-electric dams

*Forest rights act 57*

over an important river Indravati flowing through the district. The movement called the 'save people and save forests movement' demanded greater tribal autonomy, control over decision-making and rights related to forests and its resources. This deepened the self-rule movement in the district, with villages

such as Mendha-Lekha declaring de facto village self-rule and in inspiring many others to do so (Pathak Broome, 2018). Asserting self-rule, however, remained an uphill task for villages across the district in the absence of any legal and policy support and State's policies of commercial exploitation continued. By the 1990s, the underground mineral potential of the district became evident and forests of Gadchiroli gradually began to be leased out for mining despite strong local opposition. As of 2017, 25 mining proposals were sanctioned or proposed in the district, collectively impacting 15,946 acres of dense forest directly and over 40,000 acres indirectly through allied activities (Pathak Broome and Raut, 2017). Twelve of these mining proposals are in Korchi taluka impacting about 1032.66 ha of forests. The presence of armed Maoist in the region has become a reason for heavy militarisation of the district and frequent encounters between the police and Maoist (real and suspected). Political economy of the region has led to an intense politics of violence.

In this context, a radical change in the legal environment came in 2006, after a long-standing grassroots struggle of the forest-dependent Tribal communities across India. The Parliament of India enacted a landmark legislation – The STs and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act 2006 also called Forest Rights Act of India for short (herein referred to as FRA). The FRA for the first time in the history of Independent India acknowledged the historic injustice on forest dwelling communities in colonial and post-colonial times. The Act provided for recording and recognition of 14 pre-existing forest rights, including the rights of the local *gram sabhas* (village assemblies) ***to claim rights to use, manage, and conserve their traditional forests (here on Community Forest Resource or CFRs) and protect them from internal and external threats.*** The Act also provides for Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) of the *gram sabhas* before their traditional forests are diverted for non-forestry purposes, including mining. Considering its potential to turn forest governance on its head by making *gram sabha's* consent mandatory for diversion of forests, the Act has faced stiff opposition from existing power centres including the forest department. Consequently, till 2016 – over one decade after its enactment – only about 3% of the Act's minimum potential had been nationally met (CFR-LA, 2016). Because of multiple factors, mainly the people's movement, Gadchiroli has fared much better with about 38% of the total forests in the district already under the control of local *gram sabhas* by 2018 (Maharashtra CFR-LA, 2017).

## **Process towards alternative transformation in Korchi**

We explore below how in the above-mentioned backdrop of historical injustice, conflict situations, resistance movements and various transformative

58 *Neema Pathak Broome et al.*

processes unfold, particularly after the enactment of the Forest Rights Act 2006 (FRA) and Panchayat (Extension) to Scheduled Areas Act 1996 (PESA).

### ***Alternative transformative format (ATF) and processes in Korchi***

The conflict situation of mining stemming from the historic conditions of



injustice and un-sustainability triggered the need towards greater political empowerment and collectivisation of *gram sabhas*. Using the ATF, we try to understand *gram sabha* empowerment in turn triggered transformative processes towards greater economic security, economic and social equity, re-building ecological consciousness and cultural revitalisation, impacting structural root causes of injustices in three major ways:

- 1 Bringing greater political autonomy by facilitating *gram sabhas* empowerment towards exercising direct democracy in matters concerning their village and holding is state and non-state actors accountable.
- 2 Gaining control over means of production (the forests in this case) and localising forest-based economy with ecological rejuvenation and long term sustainability at the root.
- 3 Addressing gender, caste and class gender inequities, particularly in decision-making.

The flower of ATF spheres below depicts the interweaving of the Korchi process towards protection, conservation and reclaiming control over forest resources with that of reconstruction of local governance institutions, localising control over livelihoods, reviving cultural identity and raising social and equity concerns. At the root of being able to achieve these are underlying principles and values which include, open and transparent dialogue and deliberation, consensus-based decisions making; openness and respect for diverse opinions, learning by doing; maintaining transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, equity, respect for freedom, principle of sustainability, a sense of enoughness, maintaining non-violence, and finally 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) (Figure 3.2).

*Addressing political decentralisation through direct, inclusive, transparent and delegated democracy*

The roots of the most recent processes towards transformation in Korchi lie in multiple sequential events. These include a strong women-led resistance to the proposed mining leases in the early 2000s, the enactment and implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of India in 2008, particularly the Community Forest Resource (CFR) Right which meant rights to use,





- Organising annual pilgrimages
- Retelling and recreating local narratives
- Influence of varied ideologies

management rules by gram sabhas

*Figure 3.2 Korchi transformation flower.*

- Forest based localised economy
- Asserting dignity of labour
- Reduced out migration
- Economic empowerment of the gram sabhas

- Federation as Political pressure group
- Consensus based decision making

## *Forest rights act 59*

- Gendered governance
- Inclusion of SCs and OBCs
- inclusion of youth
- inclusion of differently abled

- Countering the market forces

- Local self governance
- Engendering direct democracy

- Revival of sense of belonging
- Conservation and

sustainably manage and conserve their traditional forests; and the formulation of Maharashtra state rules under Panchayat (Extension) to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act of 1996 (Bijoy, 2012) in 2014. PESA had important and empowering provisions for autonomy of the village *gram sabhas* (assemblies of all adult members of a settlement or a village). The formal political and administrative unit for a village was a panchayat<sup>10</sup> (village executive body at the level of a village and its multiple hamlets) through elected representatives. The traditional decision-making bodies on the other hand were at the village and *Ilaka* levels but invariably included only male elders of the community, thus excluding women, youth and non-tribal castes and communities.

After the implementation of FRA and PESA rules, in Korchi, as in the rest of Gadchiroli district, multiple factors such as strong grassroots movements, active and process-oriented nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and some supportive government officials led to better implementation of the two enabling laws. By 2012, 87 out of 133 village *gram sabhas* in Korchi had claimed and received legal titles over their traditional forests. The local social leaders and activists in Korchi used the opportunity provided by PESA rules and FRA enactment to initiate village and taluka-level discussions on what was meant by an empowered *gram sabha*? And what role could the acts like FRA and PESA play in strengthening the *gram sabhas*? Over a period of time, multiple debates and discussions on *gram sabhas* and processes of

60 Neema Pathak Broome et al.

self-rule were organised, including during village and *Ilaka*-level cultural gatherings. Influenced by these open public debates and discourses, villages in Korchi began to organise *gram sabha* meetings, formulated rules and regulations of local governance, opened up bank accounts and became effective institutions to deepen direct democracy.

In 2016, a taluka-level meeting was organised in which people from all communities, political ideologies, local formal and informal institutions and diverse other backgrounds were invited. After an intense debate and discussion in this meeting, it was felt that a supra level body was needed to support and facilitate mutual learning among the *gram sabhas*. Individual *gram sabhas* by themselves were not strong enough to prevent exploitation by external market forces as they ventured into collection and trade of NTFP. A larger *gram sabha* collective, which would be more inclusive, equitable and transparent than any of the existing taluka or *Ilaka* level institutions, was needed. It was decided to constitute a federation of all 90 *gram sabhas*, called the Mahasabha gramsabha. Unlike the traditional institutions, the MGS would include people from both tribal and non-tribal communities, different castes and women.

By 2017, *gram sabhas* at the village level and MGS at the taluka level 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, select two women and two men to represent them in the MGS general body and agree to pay a membership fee of Rs 5,000 per annum towards MGS functioning (earned from the sale of the NTFP). To facilitate greater interaction between neighbouring *gram sabhas*, 10–12 villages would meet in clusters. MGS executive body is of 15 members, including one woman and a man from each cluster (of seven clusters) and one person with disabilities. The 14 members represent all social groups (caste, class and gender) as per their population in Korchi taluka.

## 1 Addressing social inclusivity, well-being and justice

Indian society in general has been characterised by moderate to severe inequities within and between communities, related to caste, class, patriarchy and masculinity, age or generational domination, and others. Addressing these inequities is fundamental to addressing root causes of injustice and hence achieving meaningful transformation and well-being for all concerned. *Gender*: In Korchi, the women collectivisation (Mahila Parisar Sangh or a federation of 40 women's self-help groups) and their struggle against discriminatory and oppressive traditions within their community began in the 1990s. Women leaders emerging from these struggles and movements had a significant role to play in the resistance against mining. By 2016, when discussions on *gram sabhas* empowerment and self-determination were initiated at

*Forest rights act 61*

the taluka level, women leaders realised that discussions on women's participation in decision-making and their economic empowerment from the sale of forest produce were negligible. Women leaders raised the concern that while they are always at the forefront of resistance, they were not included in decision-making processes. This led to the decision that all local formal and informal institutions, including the MGS would have 50% representation by women (legally it is required for all local formal bodies such as the panchayats). The fact that discussions and decisions are now happening at the *gram sabhas* and not the Panchayats, already provides a much higher opportunity for women's participation. Some *gram sabhas* have made special efforts to ensure that meetings are held at times suitable for women. *Parisar sangh* also ensured that Korchi taluka is one of the few in the country with a focus on the rights of women under the FRA and Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, 1996.

*Ethnicity*: As the processes towards *gram sabha* strengthening were gaining momentum, conversations around empowerment of *gram sabhas*, and STs under PESA, began brewing discontent among the minority non-tribal population in the taluka, particularly the STs<sup>11</sup> and the Other Backward Classes (OBCs).<sup>12</sup> This issue was squarely addressed in the taluka meeting called by the local leaders in 2016, for which people from different castes, communities, political ideologies, formal and informal institutions and backgrounds were invited. After much discussion and clarifications, all par

ticipants agreed that empowerment of *gram sabhas* and their federation the MGS was needed for real transformation and it must be inclusive. These discussions converted a potentially significantly damaging conflict situation between different ethnic groups (adivasis and non-adivasis) to an opportunity for creating dialogue towards a more open and inclusive institutional arrangement indicating the maturity, adaptability and wisdom in the process. In this delicate situation while it was critical to take into account the concerns of the minority ethnic groups, equally important was to take into account the fears and insecurities of the traditional leaders and elders of falling into insignificance. It was therefore ensured that traditional elders get the traditional respect and included in various capacities, including as advising elders but do not become the only voice of or for the community.<sup>13</sup>

*Youth: Gramsabhas* gaining control over forest and forest produce has meant that the *gram sabhas* are now also ensuring livelihoods and economic benefits. Many young people from the community are involved in the harvest of the forest produce, forest management and conservation, and in administrative activities of the *gram sabhas* which require accounts keeping, record maintenance, networking and alliance building, among others. However, there is still a large youth population particularly who have been through higher education outside the villages, caught in a tussle between these unfolding local processes and the lure of the market, the outside cultures and the pull of right-wing religious elements. MGS has made special efforts to engage with the youth associations and groups to initiate debates

62 Neema Pathak Broome et al.

on the local processes and their impact. Integration of these youth, however, remains a challenge.

## 2 Ensuring control over means of production, forest-based economy and equitable benefit sharing

The political empowerment is closely linked with the economic process of ensuring forest-based localised economy and gaining control over local livelihoods. In many ways, in fact the sustainability of the processes in Korchi is dependent on *gram sabha*'s and MGS's capability to ensure a sustained control over forests and forest-based economy and addressing challenges posed by external market forces. The collection and sale of tendu-patta and bamboo by the *gram sabhas* began in 2017 (until then it was exclusively controlled by the forest department). The *gram sabhas* were helped by the MGS in understanding the process of auctioning and facilitating negotiations with the traders. Neighbouring *gram sabhas* were organised into smaller clusters and each cluster fixed a uniform rate for their forest produce, which was then negotiated with the traders.

In 2017, Korchi *grams sabhas* collectively received Rs. 107,987,970 (1,526,871 USD) as profit in addition to the daily wage collection fees to the individual families and all other expenses covered. The total turnover from tendu and bamboo is currently at about Rs. 160 million or USD 2 million annually. Of this amount, the *gram sabhas* have retained about 5 to 20% as administrative overheads while equally sharing the remaining with all fam

ilies who participated in the collection, including women. *Gram sabhas* have maintained detailed and meticulous records of collection, people employed and amounts disbursed. This has meant 70–80% increase in income at the family level and 100% increase in income of the *gram sabhas* (which till then had no income or funds), empowering them financially to undertake activities for village well-being. Family income which has conventionally been in the name of the male head has in some villages been given to the woman. Directly participating in the activities related to trading, marketing, record maintenance and other allied activities has also resulted in increased awareness and skill enhancement among the *gram sabha* members (including women). The overall revival and localisation have resulted in reducing the distress outmigration which was rampant till a few years back.

Control over forests and forest-based economy has also helped the MGS to demystify the job and development promises being made by the mining companies. Local leaders' calculations have indicated that local livelihoods and well-being are most assured with a combination of options that villagers currently have. Food needs are largely met with the agriculture and forest, and cash requirements are being met with NTFP trade from the forests and other allied activities, leaving villagers with time to participate in community and collective cultural and political activities. Mining companies can only employ a handful of local people, mainly men and largely in unskilled sector while destroying the forests and forest-based income, affecting

*Forest rights act 63*

agriculture, causing water and air pollution and creating insecure and unsafe environment for women and children.

### 3 Addressing ecological wisdom, integrity and resilience

Rights and ownership over forests has revived a sense of ownership and a need for ensuring ecological sustainability towards the forests which had eroded over the years because of alienating colonial policies. Local elders remember that forests were rich, dense and supported many wildlife species (including mega fauna) till three decades ago. Slowly, forests began to degrade because of unregulated extraction for self-consumption, increasing populations, growing towns and their fuelwood needs and illegal extraction by outsiders. After receiving right under the FRA, some *gram sabhas* have started making rules and regulations for management and protection of forests, including a system of regular forest patrolling. Controlling fires has resulted in greater regeneration and richness in the forests. FRA requires all *gram sabha* to formulate management plans and strategies for the forests over which their rights have been recognised, such a planning would be required for sustainable harvest and sale of the commercially important NTFP. Under a Tribal Development Department programme, some *gram sabhas* have initiated drafting the management plans. With or without management plans, many villages have carried out successful plantations of diverse local species. In almost all cases, extraction of NTFP is carried out on rotation (ensuring that not all parts of the forest are extracted at one go). Using the free prior informed consent clause of the FRA, villagers have already registered their rejection of the mining

proposals. Mining threat, however, is not over.

#### 4 Use and revival of cultural spaces and addressing cultural vibrancy

Assertion of cultural identity has been a crucial part of the overall transformation in Korchi. Community leaders in fact used elements of existing cultural practices to strengthen *gram sabhas*, such as the system of community elders sitting together to discuss community issues. Regular ceremonial community gatherings have been very significant and crucial forums to discuss and develop collective strategies. Traditional cultural spaces such as *yatras* (an annual pilgrimage to a Sacred Natural Site) in Korchi have emerged as platforms to resist mining, initiate dialogues on issues of centralised governance, patriarchy, discrimination in traditional systems, definitions of 'being civilised vs being backward', definitions of 'development', electoral politics, among others.

#### Enablers for resistance and transformative processes

One distinct feature in the current process in Korchi is the supportive legal environment because of enactment of the FRA and PESA Rules for Maharashtra. However, it also suggests that mere enactment of the law cannot  
64 Neema Pathak Broome et al.

bring about transformation. This is particularly so with radical laws such as FRA and PESA for which the state's political and administrative will towards implementation remains abysmally low resulting in nationally limited or tardy implementation. There were multiple reasons why there was a better implementation of this Act in Korchi and rest of Gadchiroli. It is therefore important to understand enabling agents and factors that led to realisation of the potential of these legal provisions and emergence of the transformative processes. Some of these are described below: **Social capital embedded in adivasi culture, including** setting aside time for the commons and community activities including community celebrations and festivities and engagement with community welfare activities is very much part of tribal culture. The community-oriented culture of the adivasis helped in multiple ways in moving towards transformative alternatives. The culture encourages viewing benefit of others intricately linked with the people coming together for a larger cause along with greater emphasis on collective practices, traditional systems of leadership (even if gender biased) and the culture of respecting community elders which provides an environment for emergence of community social leaders. Such leaders have played an important role in anti-mining resistance movement, efforts towards empowerment of *gram sabhas*, formation of MGS and other transformative processes in Korchi. **Long history of political mobilisation and debates on 'development'** in Gadchiroli district have led to emergence of many resistance movements. Movement towards self-rule after Save Human Save Forests Movement in the 1980s led to self-rule experiment in many villages including Mendha-Lekha which continues to influence and inspire local people and leaders (Pathak Broome, 2018).

**Local co-production of knowledge and co-learning- District level study circle:** a district-level study group (*Abhyas Gat*) set up by civil society actors

historically involved in resistance and transformative movements in the district contributed to transformative processes and effective FRA implementation. The study group discussed the FRA, its implications and procedures for claiming the rights. They also helped with evidence generation to support the claims. Discussions in the study group ensured that the much-forgotten existing record of rights was provided to all the villagers by the district administration. Mendha-Lekha started the process of filing claims and became the first *gram sabha* in the country to have their rights recognised, paving the way for hundreds of others in the district and in the country (Pathak Broome, 2018). **Peer learning and support from other taluka level *gram sabha* federations in Gadchiroli:** In the recent time, another forum for mutual learning have also emerged which largely include the *gram sabha* members instead of civil society groups. Much like the federation of *gram sabhas* in Korchi, federations of *gram sabhas* have emerged in other talukas of Gadchiroli since 2016. These federations are important source of support for each other, particularly when faced with larger district-level challenges, including exploitative

*Forest rights act 65*

markets and traders. The federation members consult, advice and support each other while also financially helping each other in difficult times by offering loans and disaster relief.

**Role of AAA:** AAA, a local NGO, has been present in Korchi for a few decades and has worked towards health, forest management and women's empowerment. AAA has also supported local social leaders, including women as *karyakarta* (village activists) under various projects and provided them opportunities to interact with actors at the district, state and national levels, 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 acceptability within the larger community. AAA has also provided timely help in accessing information and capacity building through various training programmes.

## **Characteristics of transformative processes through Korchi's Lens**

The analysis below is specific to the context of Korchi in particular and Gadchiroli district in general. We understand that resistance and transformation are contextual and dynamic processes and what is relevant in this context may or may not apply to other areas and situations. Yet we believe there would be many common underlying characteristics connecting resistance and transformation across situations.

### ***Continuous yet episodic and spiral – keeping political consciousness active***

Political, social, economic and ecological alternative transformative processes in Korchi indicate that resistance and transformation are continuous and yet episodic. Political economy and resultant conflicts are evidenced from the historical events in this district also indicating that **conflict is often an integral**



**part** of the process of transformation. The tribal lands of the central Indian forests have been at the heart of conflicts through the history as the people have constantly resisted these ingressions of pre colonial, colonial and post-colonial rulers. Independence of India in 1947 did not mean greater autonomy or freedom of decision-making for the adivasi and other local communities. The country continued to follow extractivism and capitalism-based development; centralised and top-down forest governance; and exclusive and representative electoral democracy. All of the above stand in direct contradiction with the worldview, socio-political organisation of the adivasis. These contradictions have been historically and currently the underlying causes of a continuous environment of conflict, within which some events, policies or actions trigger stronger episodes of resistance.

66 *Neema Pathak Broome et al.*

The environment of resistance has kept the political awareness and consciousness alive, leading to emergence of collectives like Mahila Parisar Sangh and the MGS. Such autonomous, organic, inclusive and discussion-based collectives are crucial in creating an inherent understanding that resistance alone is not enough to challenge the root causes of injustices. The local processes towards strengthening self-rule are critical to impact the political economy of the region. Some of the past transformative actions have continued to sustain and inspire new ones while others have been co-opted and undermined by the established power structures. So, while the progression may appear to be circular as similar events arise over a period of time, coming apart and reinventing themselves they are not exactly the same in their reinvented form.

### ***Scalar, temporal and evolutionary***

We see that the transformation is an evolutionary process having both scalar and temporal dimensions. Multiple factors emerging at various points in time through the history can be transformative at different levels, e.g. individuals within the community, individual villages, taluka as a whole and at the level of the district. These transformations are subjective and do not impact the society uniformly at all points in time. Instead, they contribute to the overall evolution of the transformative processes particularly when these differently transforming processes and actors come together. Thus, transformative process is a result of evolution over a period of time as also coalition of or friction between various individuals, ideologies, civil society groups, deliberative process at different scales at any given point in time. District-level study circle and its influence in the process in Korchi, taluka level federations and their interactions, individual villages like Mendha Lekha located in other talukas but influencing processes in Korchi (and getting influenced by them) are the scalar dimensions of learning and evolution of the transformation process in Korchi.

### ***Locally rooted but also addressing traditional and customary discriminatory practices***

The transformation process in Korchi is definitely embedded in local socio cultural and political values, conceptions of well-being, principles and histories.

Simultaneously, these processes and practices 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 the adivasi traditions, 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 newer inclusions.

*Forest rights act 67*

***Within a transformation process conceptions of well-being can be internally diverse and conflicting***

The conceptions of well-being or transformation are not universally accepted conceptions in all 90 villages. There are several diverse and internally contradictory views and influenced by different actors and factors. The capitalist and extractive economy and its propaganda machinery have been effective in influencing a large part of the population, particularly the youth. The existing state education system further alienates them from their own culture, creates consumptive and career-based aspirations, motivating them to support mining and the promised jobs. The right-wing religious groups have also influenced a large part of the population and their agenda aligns more closely with the growth-based model of development. Considering the presence of multiple ideologies and conceptions of well-being, which ideology will influence the dominant processes at any point in time would depend on multiple causes and conditions. In many ways, the transformative processes in Korchi are continuously impacted and evolve because of the dialectics of these multiple conceptions of well-being.

***Non-static and no fixed recipes***

Even though in this analysis we are making an attempt to theorise and articulate the characteristics of the process of resistance and transformation in Korchi, the process itself does not have a self-articulated 'theory of change'. All processes are dynamic and non-static, continuously changing and evolving towards the larger goal of greater local autonomy and greater systemic accountability to be able to achieve equity, justice and well-being. Gram sabha members, Parisar Sangh members, MGS members have to continuously deal with newer challenges and opportunities. The unarticulated theory of change as it appears to us is asking we walk, walking we learn, learning we change (**Zapatista ref to be added**).

***Ever-alert, agile, multi-dimensional and responding to threats***

The processes of resistance and transformation in Korchi have been ever alert, agile and responsive in real time. This is evident in the manner the local leaders responded to the social discontent on inclusion of other castes and women's participation. Strategies are decided based on the need of the hour and importance of the issue in the monthly meetings. These could include any social

and political issue at any scale, i.e. village, cluster, taluka or district. The process of transformation constantly faces internal contradictions and external threats which the regular and transparent discussion in the monthly meetings attempt to address.

68 *Neema Pathak Broome et al.*

### ***Located in and dependent on inherently contradictory context***

Also, within the processes of resistance and transformation, there are many inherent internal contradictions. Among the most significant being heavy dependence on the state and its adopted exploitative capitalistic model of economy and representative electoral democracy. *Gram sabhas*, the institutions of direct democracy, remain dependent on state institutions which remain centralised in their spirit and disconnected from local issues. Similarly, NTFP trade such as tendu leaves and bamboo which are the main stay of the people in the region and have been crucial in causing a radical shift in the local economy are themselves dependent on the external capitalist markets. Market fluctuations and vagaries have serious impacts on their sustainability.

### **Sustainable development goals and alternative transformative processes in Korchi**

We believe the processes in Korchi hold important lessons for the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (SDGs, 2015). Two main goals that SDGs have set out to address are *eliminating poverty* and *achieving ecological sustainability*. In their preamble, the SDGs declare

We envisage a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equity and non-discrimination.... A world in which consumption and production patterns and use of all natural resources are sustainable, one in which humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other living species are protected.

Although these SDG goals and preamble have been much appreciated, yet globally there have been doubts about their being truly realised. Ironically, the mechanism envisioned for achieving the SDG goals is in direct conflict with the goals themselves. This is because of three fundamental (among other) lacunae in the mechanism that has been envisioned to achieve SDGs (Kothari, et al., 2018). These are

- 1 The SDGs are envisioned to be achieved by reliance on existing economic order and prevalent model of economic growth, which are the very fundamental basis for the root causes leading to the very injustices and inequities that the SDGs intend to eliminate. The current economic model sustains itself on concentration of economic resources and political power in the hands of a few, mainly the state and private corporations. Such concentration of power and resources is supported by and in turn supports, at all levels, systems that support patriarchy, class and caste divides, and communal divisions.
- 2 The SDGs continue to depend on national governments and their centralised

to the goals, targets and activities. This again contradicts with another root cause of ecological degradation and social inequity, the top-down and centralised decision-making processes. Like many international targets, the SDGs have also ignored decentralised decision-making institutions and processes of direct democracy.

- 3 Last but not the least is the absence of clarity on what basic set of ethical values or principles would underlie the processes in place to achieve all goals, targets and activities within the SDGs.

The alternative transformative processes in Korchi are among the many other alternative pathways across the globe (add red ref) which could help achieve the main goals and the intention of the SDGs. By creating local institutions of direct democracy, which include social and ecological justice and equity, economic self-reliance and equity and cultural and social vibrancy, they help achieve SDGs meaningfully and effectively. The processes in Korchi have in fact emerged as a response to the ecological degradation and social injustices resulting from growth-led development, centralised and top-down decision-making. The above-mentioned three fundamental lacunae in the SDGs Framework are addressed in many ways by the processes in Korchi as described in sections above.

Politically, the processes towards empowerment of *gram sabhas* and women's self-help groups and formation of their federations are towards achieving greater direct democracy with people in collectives having the power to take or significantly influence decisions impacting their lives. Through these collectives, the local people are now better empowered to hold outsiders, including state agencies, more accountable. Economically, the *gram sabhas* have gained control over the means of production and localised forest-based economy, thus enhancing local livelihood opportunities and affecting distress outmigration. Ways have been devised for equitable benefit sharing, including the rights and benefits to women. Caring and sharing for each other, helping and learning from each other and supporting each other as a community are at the core of these economic relations. While achieving better and equitable economic benefits, they have resisted and rejected models of ever-increasing economic growth which come at the cost of destruction through mining and other extractive means. Not only have they used their political and economic empowerment to resist mining and other forms of ecological degradation but have also put in place local systems of self regulation, ecological restoration and forest patrolling to ensure ecological well-being and long-term sustainability of the forest resources.

While building processes towards political decentralisation and direct democracy and strengthening local economy by gaining control over means of production, social relationships have been delicately addressed based on mutual compassion and respect, cooperation instead of competition and with a central focus on qualitative well-being for all. This has been achieved including by changing traditional patriarchal systems to include women in

decision-making and by taking into account the concerns of the non-tribal STs and OBCs. While doing so, respect for traditional elders has also been maintained.

Cultural spaces have been maintained and enhanced during the process, reflecting respect for cultural diversity and a stress on the knowledge commons. These achievements in five spheres or dimensions of life, including social, cultural, ecological, economic and political, themselves rest on a foundation of values and principles, such as subsidiarity, open and transparent dialogue, consensus-based decision making, openness to new and diverse ideas and opinions, openness to learning by doing, transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, equity, respect for freedom, mutual respect, right to information, sustainability, enoughness, non-violence, among others.

## Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank all gram sabhas, MGS, and Mahila Parisar Sangh members from Korchi and Amhi Amchi Arogyasaathi. Special thanks to Mahesh Raut who is one of the co-authors of the original report but could not contribute to this chapter because of extraneous circumstances.

## Notes

- 1 The authors of this report would like to thank members of Maha Gramsabha, Korchi, Amhi Amchaya Arogyasathi and community members of Salhe, Bharitola, Zendevar, Bodena, Phulgondi, Padyal Job, Kodgul and Tipagarh village assemblies.
- 2 An administrative unit under the control of one traditional feudal lord or a *Zamindar*.
- 3 The government of India does not accept the term Indigenous People. Tribal groups have been enlisted as in one of the schedules of the Constitution of India and given a special status. All the listed tribes are called Scheduled Tribes.
- 4 Legal term used for the caste historically considered to be 'lower' and hence discriminated against in the Hindu caste system. Many such castes have been provided special protection and incentives in the Constitution of India. The castes which are listed under this category in one of the Schedules in the Constitution are referred to as the Scheduled Castes.
- 5 Bharitola, Zendevar, Salhe, Phoolgondi, Bodena, Padyal Job, Kodgul and Tipagarh villages of Gadchiroli district.
- 6 MAKAAAM is a nation-wide forum working towards securing due recognition and rights of women farmers (<https://makaam.in/>)
- 7 [www.vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles/](http://www.vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles/)
- 8 [www.vikalpsangam.org](http://www.vikalpsangam.org)
- 9 ACKnowl-EJ is a network of scholars and activists engaged in action and collaborative research that aims to analyse the transformative potential of community responses to extractivism and alternatives born from resistance. The project involved case studies, dialogues and analysis on transformation towards greater justice, equity and sustainability in several countries.
- 10 The executive committee or a Panchayat is elected from a cluster of villages. The decisions are taken at the level of the cluster gram sabhas where only a handful

*Forest rights act 71*

of people from constituent gram sabhas are able to attend and invariably few women can attend. Often decisions are therefore taken by 5–7 member executive committees or the Panchayat itself. Increasingly, panchayats across the country are strongly

influenced by party politics and their agendas. They have also been marred by corruption. Gram sabhas as envisioned under the FRA and PESA, however, are village assemblies of each village, hamlet or settlement, which can be held at regular intervals, within the village and at times most convenient for the villages and provide much better opportunities for all including women and youth to participate.

- 11 The term “Scheduled Tribes” is referred to specific Indigenous Peoples in different states in India who are defined in Article 342 of Indian Constitution and whose status is recognised by national legislation. They have been provided special protection in the Constitution of India which lays down some principles of positive discrimination for STs and Scheduled Castes (SCs). To know more on this read: The Constitution of India, Article 366 (25) and Article 342. A
- 12 Other Backward Class (OBC) are ‘socially and educationally disadvantaged classes’ other than SCs and STs who are entitled to 27% reservation in public sector employment and higher education.
- 13 At the same time, the *jat panchayats* also continue to exist parallelly. They have not remained untouched from the social debates and discussions. Also, many of the critical actors involved in the process are also members of the *jat panchayats* and have carried the discussions with them. *Jat panchayats* have therefore made some significant changes in the oppressive socio-cultural practices including the excessive expense in cash and kind the families had to bearing during marriage ceremonies, among others.

## References

- Bijoy, C.R. 2012. *Panchayati Raj (Extension to Scheduled Areas Act of 1996): Policy Brief*. UNDP. [www.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/UNDP-Policy-Brief-on-PESA.pdf](http://www.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/UNDP-Policy-Brief-on-PESA.pdf) (accessed on September 15th, 2019).
- CFR-LA. 2016. *Promise and Performance: Ten Years of the Forest Rights Act in India. Citizens' Report on Promise and Performance of The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, after 10 years of its Enactment. December 2016*. Produced as part of Community Forest Rights Learning and Advocacy Process (CFR-LA), India, 2016 ([www.cfrla.org.in](http://www.cfrla.org.in)). Guha, R. 1994. Colonialism and Conflict in the Himalayan Forest. In R. Guha (Ed.), *Social Ecology* (pp. 275–302). Delhi: Oxford University Press. India, Census. 2011. *Census India, Maharashtra Gadchiroli*. [www.censusindia2011.com/maharashtra/gadchiroli-population.html](http://www.censusindia2011.com/maharashtra/gadchiroli-population.html) (accessed on June 15th, 2019). Kalpavriksh. 2 February 2017. *Vikalp Sangam*. [www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/alternatives\\_transformation\\_framework\\_revised\\_20.2.2017.pdf](http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/alternatives_transformation_framework_revised_20.2.2017.pdf) (accessed June 15th, 2019).
- Koreti, S. 2016. Socio-Cultural History of Gond Tribes in Middle India. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 6(4), 288.
- Kothari, A. 2014. Radical Ecological Democracy: A Path Forward for India and Beyond, *Development*, 57(1), 36–45, [www.palgrave-journals.com/development/journal/v57/n1/full/dev201443a.html](http://www.palgrave-journals.com/development/journal/v57/n1/full/dev201443a.html). Also see <http://kalpavriksh.org/index.php/alternatives/alternatives-knowledge-center/353-vikalpsangam-coverage>
- Kothari, A., Salleh, A., Escobar, A., Demaria, F. and Acosta, A. 2018. *Why We Need Alternatives to Development*. <http://wordpress.p288574.webspaceconfig.de/?p=23972> Neema Pathak Broome et al.
- Kothari, A., Bajpai, S., and Padmanabhan, S., 2020. *Ladakh Autonomous Hill Council -Leh, How autonomous, How democratic?* Pune. India. Kalpavriksh Maharashtra CFR-LA. 2017. *Promise and Performance: Ten Years of the Forest Rights Act in Maharashtra. Citizens' Report on Promise and Performance of the Scheduled Tribes and*

- Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006*. Produced by CFR Learning and Advocacy Group Maharashtra, as part of National Community Forest Rights-Learning and Advocacy Process (CFR-LA). March 2017. ([www.fra.org.in](http://www.fra.org.in))
- Pathak Broome, N. 2018. Mendha-Lekha- Forest Rights and Self-Empowerment. In M. Lang, C. König and A. Regelman (Eds.). *Alternatives in a World of Crisis*. Global Working Group Beyond Development (pp. 134–179). Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Brussels Office and Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar, Ecuador.
- Pathak Broome, N. and Raut, M. 2017. *Mining in Gadchiroli – Building a Castle of Injustices on the Foundation of One*. [www.countercurrents.org/2017/06/17/mining-in-gadchiroli-building-a-castle-of-injustices/](http://www.countercurrents.org/2017/06/17/mining-in-gadchiroli-building-a-castle-of-injustices/). (accessed on June 17th, 2017).
- Pathak Broome, N., Desor, S., Kothari, A. and Bose, A. 2014. Changing Paradigms in Wildlife Conservation in India. In S. Lele and A. Menon. *Democratizing Forest Governance in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press (pp. 124–170).
- SDGs. 2015. United Nations General Assembly. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25th September 2015. [www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/](http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/) (accessed on September 15th, 2019).
- Singh, N., Kulkarni, S. and Pathak Broome, N. 2018 (Eds). *Ecologies of Hope and Transformation: Post-development Alternatives from India*. Pune. India: Kalpavriksh and SOPECOM.