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Forest rights in Bastar: Of tribals being 'guests' in their own woods

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The Darbha administrative block in Chhattisgarh's Bastar district is rich in natural resources. With dense Sal (*Shorea robusta*) forests occupying a significant portion of its area, Darbha is among the favourite tourist destinations in the state.

However, despite such natural wealth, it is among the most backward blocks in India and contributes to making Bastar one of the most backward districts in the country.

Socio-economic poverty

Darbha has been identified as the 22nd most backward block in India in a survey by the erstwhile Planning Commission. The average literacy rate for Darbha is around 40 per cent, according to the 2011 Census, which is much lower as compared to the average 70 per cent literacy rate of Chhattisgarh.

The census data also shows that several villages in the block do not have sufficient medical facilities. Though agriculture is the primary livelihood for the block population, the total area under irrigation is less than one per cent of the total cultivable area.

Eighty-three per cent of Darbha's population is tribal. Since the block is heavily forested, people depend on forests for a variety of purposes, including livelihood generation.

However, the State of Forests Report 2017 shows a reduction in the geographical area under forest cover for the entire Bastar administrative division over the last decade.

People's relationship with forests

An understanding of the local community's dependence on the forests can facilitate identification of existing gaps and strategies, which can promote conservation and sustained use of the forest by the community.

This article shares insights from a study in a few villages of Darbha block, to understand the role of forests in the local people's lives and how it has evolved. It draws inferences and suggests recommendations based on these insights.

Bhadrimau is a remote hamlet near Kakalgur village in Darbha, home to 60 households from the Dandami Maria tribe. It is nine kilometres from the gram panchayat and the village ration shop. It has no public transport facility except on two days of the week, when weekly markets are held in the nearby villages.

Bhadrimau has an *anganwadi* centre and a government primary school. However, to pursue education beyond primary, one needs to stay in the villages near and far, which have government boarding schools.

People moving away from forests

A discussion with members of three women self-help groups (SHGs) and men from Bhadrimau revealed that people here are substantially dependent on the forest for their livelihood, second only to agriculture.

Women from the Raj Mata SHG shared that they depended on the forest in a variety of ways such as the extraction of minor forest produce including medicinal herbs, grazing of their cattle, worshipping, burying their dead, fetching water for themselves and their cattle, fetching fuel and construction wood among others. People expressed a strong association with the forest in one way or the other.

Another village in Darbha, Temrubhata, again a Dandami Maria tribe habitation like Bhadrimau, has moved ahead of Bhadrimau on this continuum of dependence on the forest.

Temrubhata, which is far from the forest, used to enjoy, according to members of the women SHGs of the village, forest cover like that of Bhadrirau at one point of time. However, none of the discussion participants could recall having seen that forest in their lifetime.

What is making people leave forests?

Women from the Bavdi Mata SHG in Temrubhata talked about their having to depend significantly on the forest for their livelihood till a decade ago.

However, 30-year-old Raju Poyam from Temrubhata said that currently, people visited forests only occasionally, mostly to gather leaves and wood, during village festivals or functions.

Chaiti, a 40-year-old SHG member from Temrubhata, attributed this change to the improvements in agriculture facilitated by interventions of the government and civil society organisations.

However, the improvement in agriculture, though necessary to ensure better incomes, is only one of several factors affecting people's dependence on the forests. A diagnosis of the present situation in Bhadrirau hints at the other major factor driving the reduction of the forest's role in people's lives — a lack of recognition of the customary rights of people on these forests.

People reduced to guests in their forests

Like Bhadrirau and Temrubhata, people from different habitations in Darbha are at different points on this continuum of the dependence on the forest. However, at all these places, only their usufruct rights have been recognised. This means they have the right to enjoy forest produce only if they do not destroy or waste it.

A lack of recognition of people's customary usage and access patterns and their traditional rights over these forests has reduced them to guests in these forests, unable to either think of them as their own or act for their conservation.

Even though Dhanno Mandavi, a 50-year-old man and other older people in Bhadrirau recall having struggled for their rights over the forest when the Kanger Valley National Park

was carved out in their vicinity in 1982, the younger generation does not share this enthusiasm.

Although people confess witnessing over-extraction from the forest, they do not perceive themselves as capable of checking this over-extraction by people from other villages. Twenty six-year-old Sanjay Markam says that the forest is open to all and their village has no control over who accesses it; it belongs to the forest department. Moti Sodhi, a 26-year-old woman and other SHG members agree with Sanjay's statement.

Recognising customary rights

This study highlights that the neglect of the local community's customary rights is a potential reason contributing to the degradation of forest resources in Darbha and in the entire Bastar region, which has a significant geographical area under forests.

Therefore, there is a strong need to recognise these customary rights and enhance the community's capacity to conserve their forests.

The first step in the legal recognition of these different *bundles of rights*, as termed by Elinor Ostrom, the noble laureate widely recognised for her work on the Commons, is their identification and documentation in terms which are comprehensible across the different groups of stakeholders.

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