

## To maintain sustainability, gram sabhas have to be empowered

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More than 300 million people including tribals live in and around forest areas in India, depending on forests for their sustenance and livelihood. Ecological security is the prime objective of National Forest Policy, 1988, but forest-dwelling communities cannot be separated from forests.

The involvement of communities in forest management was initiated in 1990 through joint forest management institutions—a government-driven programme which did not achieve the objective of involvement of people in decision-making for sustainable forest management.

India's Constitution places trust in village-level institutions for conservation of forest resources, with the 73rd amendment providing importance to such institutions for resource management. Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 and Forest Right Act, 2006 have gone further to empower gram sabhas for the management of forest resources.

Over one million hectares of forests are managed by gram sabhas in eight states—Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Rajasthan. Gram sabhas can potentially administer governance of more than 34 million

hectare of forests. Yet, there are no guidelines with respect to the management of community forest resources by gram sabhas.

The Union ministry of tribal affairs has taken the initiative to conduct research for the development of models of forest governance based on gram sabhas.

The supremacy of the gram sabha must be maintained while preparing governance models under the umbrella of national and state government policies, regulations and judicial orders. The bureaucracy must share authority with gram sabhas and the state forest department must perform the regulatory and monitoring role.

There are examples when some gram sabhas have shown both authority and responsibility, including when mining projects in Odisha were stopped by the gram sabha to save forests and livelihood.

But the present system of so many committees for the natural resource management at village level, including Joint Forest Management Committee, Biological Diversity Management Committee, Watershed Management Committee, and Forest Right Committee, is creating confusion. There is need to have one committee which can have separate sub-committees for the management of forests and biodiversity.

The gram sabha can maintain three bank accounts—operating account for implementing government schemes, core account for revenue received through sale of forest produce, and biodiversity account for receiving money for allowing access benefit sharing of bio-resources utilized by industry.

The gram sabha-based forest governance has to be implemented in a large way to maintain sustainability of forests and improve their quality, along with implementation of community forest resource rights under the Forest Right Act, 2006.

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