

Incorporating Stakeholder Perceptions in Participatory Forest Management

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Semi-Arid Production System

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Street Play Report

Madhya Pradesh Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti

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CAMBRIDGE HARDA PROJECT
CULTURAL JATHA/STREET PLAY CAMPAIGN

A REPORT

ORGANISERS : M.P. BHARAT GYAN VIGYAN SAMITI
SUPPORT: CAMBRIDGE HARDA PROJECT

1. A few words about ourselves

Humans have had an intimate relationship with the forest from time immemorial. But life in the forest does not depend on humans – it is human life that has always depended on the forest. To those living in urban areas, the forest may be important from the perspective of protecting the environment. But if you ask the forest dwellers why the forest is important to them, they will say it is their mother and father. The forest provides them their daily bread. It is the source of every facet of their livelihood. Honey, *amla*, fruit, resin, herbs, fuel – all this is the produce of the forest. To the *adivasis*, the forest is not just the basis of their lives but a whole philosophy of living.

Even today, the *adivasis* believe the forest is theirs. The government and the *adivasis* - each has its own point of view about the forest, their own interpretations. But the basic question is, who does the forest belong to? Who is its guardian and protector?

The life of the *adivasis* has always been inextricably and intimately connected to the forest. That's why they feel a sense of ownership. That's why they are always on collision course with the government over the issue of whom the forest belongs to. The government believes the forests are being degraded and depleted. It sees danger signals for the future of Planet Earth and believes the only answer lies in regenerating the forest through community-based forest management programmes.

The Cambridge Harda Project has sought to evaluate and analyse this relationship between the government and the *adivasis* in the context of community-based management of forests. The project has sought to acquire a deeper insight into and convey a closer understanding of how the *adivasis* perceive the forest and the government. This was the message put across to the participants when they asked why and for what purpose this information was being collected. They were keen to participate when they learned where and to whom this information was being provided.

Keeping in mind the desire of the participants and with all due respect for their sensibilities, the project decided to crystallise its learning of the crucial issues emanating out of its discussions with the government, *adivasis* and forest dwellers in the form of a street play. It also decided to tour the villages to stage performances of

this street play. The response has been heartening and one can say with a measure of confidence that this effort has achieved considerable success.

2. The methods used during the campaign

- Organisation of meetings in the *jatha* format in 10 villages.
- Preparation of a play and songs focused on issues that emanated from the preliminary campaign.
- Organisation of a training camp at Rehatgaon (Harda district) for artistes selected from different districts. The purpose was to train them to conduct a district-level cultural *jatha* on these issues.
- Preparation of posters and pamphlets.
- Performance of the play and songs in 24 selected villages.
- Collection of feedback from the audience after they had witnessed the performances.
- Documentation of all the activities conducted during the campaign.

3. Some feedback on the activities conducted

The first step was a meeting organised between the Cambridge Project team members and officials and members of the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti during which each aspect of the campaign was discussed in detail. A framework for developing the content of the cultural *jatha* was worked out and a date was fixed four days later for outlining the narrative plot of the street play based on the issues identified.

The narrative prepared by the communication group of the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti during the subsequent meeting was appreciated by all. Some additional points were suggested for incorporation and the date for finalising the script/screenplay was fixed.

A three-day script writing workshop was then organised to prepare the script/screenplay. Participating writers were briefed on the campaign and project issues that required to be highlighted, after which they prepared a very powerful and high-quality play, along with songs and posters.

The following artistes/writers participated in the workshop: Santosh Kaushik, Halim Khan, Anil Dheeman, Manoj Kulkarni, Balaram Gumastha, Asha Mishra, Kishore Umrekar.

The script was prepared on schedule and two plays, seven songs, one poster and one pamphlet were finalised during the workshop. The training schedule for the plays/songs was also finalised and an intensive training workshop was conducted subsequently.

4. Formation of the coordinating committee

Since the campaign was to be conducted in Harda district, it was necessary to involve respected and influential local people, hence a coordinating group was formed comprising the following members: Harimohan Sharma, Shobha Vajpayee, Rita Gaur, Raghavendra Shrivastava, Sher Singh Malviya and Ganesh Gurjan.

5. *Jatha* workshop

Duration: September 16, 2004 to September 29, 2004

Number of participants: 15

Place: Environment Centre, Rehatgaon (Harda)

The training camp was organised at the Eco Centre of the Forest Department in Rehatgaon (Harda district). A total of five girls and 10 boys participated. A few of the boys were from Bhopal, while the rest were from Harda. Some *adivasi* artistes were also invited to the training workshop.

The training was not restricted to the play alone. It included discussions on the project and other issues like the environment, importance of forests and their management. The participants were also briefed on the objectives of the cultural *jatha*. The drama training was conducted by Santosh Kaushik and Halim Khan, while Santosh Kaushik also trained the singers. The two plays that were rehearsed for staging were 'The Forest Is Ours' and 'Budha's Dream'. A total of six songs were also finalised around themes like the environment, rights, education and consciousness/awareness. The major issues that emerged from the research conducted by the Cambridge Project were incorporated in the play 'The Forest Is Ours' (see script in Appendix). They included the following:

- The *nistari* pastures are not sufficient to meet the grazing needs of the villagers.
- No one helps to extinguish forest fires. People used to help earlier when they were paid to do so.
- Both the forest dwellers and the government have their own viewpoint about the forest and their own interpretations.
- Encroachment beyond the *nistari* pastures.
- Increased pressure on forests because of population growth in villages.
- Women attend meetings but are not allowed to speak or participate in the discussions.
- The clash between activists and the government.
- The activists keep giving their interpretations/perceptions to the forest dwellers.
- Joint forest management committee meetings are held regularly in which various aspects are discussed and explained.
- The area under forests is shrinking.
- Wild *tulsi* is spreading rapidly.
- Grazing land for cattle is diminishing.
- The scarcity of fodder is leading to a decline in cattle wealth.

Artistes who participated in the workshop: Nandkishore Wankhede, Suryadeep Trivedi, Sukhram Vamne, Kunwar Balli Singh Handa, Pheroze Ahmed, Santosh Chalekar, Munnalal Nagori, Rajesh Solanki, Kamlesh, Dinesh Malviya, Neha Tijare, Varsha Tijare, Kiran Gawai, Nasreen Bano and Kamaljeet Kaur.

6. Staging of the *jatha*

The cultural *jatha* was staged in the selected villages after the training workshop. The villagers were familiarised with the objectives of the *jatha* during and after the performances. A dialogue was thus established with them. Before staging the play, the performers would make a round of the village, beating their *dholaks* (drums) and announcing the time and place of the performance, and putting up posters and distributing pamphlets. This was to ensure greater participation of the villagers. After the performances, feedback was also collected from the audiences.

The villagers were highly enthusiastic about the performances. The audiences expressed their agreement with all the aspects and issues highlighted in the play. They also urged staging of similar performances in future.

7. List of villages selected for the performances

Rehatgaon, Dhanpada, Sigampur, Keljhiri, Gangradhana, Amba, Manasa, Aamsagar, Bouthi, Bori, Dhenga, Lodhidhana, Salaidheka, Rawanga, Karmda, Keli, Deedamda, Unhal, Uchan, Dheki, Kukdapani, Chikalpar, Bhimpura, Richharia, Jamnia Khurd, Badjhiri, Jhapanadeh, Magardha.

8. Feedback from villagers on the cultural *jatha*

Discussions between the villagers and the artistes were held after every performance. Villagers said the plays met with their expectations. In several instances, they began discussing the issues highlighted in the play among themselves. This showed that the play had stirred their emotions and they agreed with the way the relationship between the Forest Department, NGO and government and forest dwellers was portrayed.

9. Some suggestions

Very little discussion was devoted to eliciting suggestions from the villagers. Their first suggestion was that such performances should be conducted regularly in villages. A second suggestion was that the villagers should themselves prepare and conduct such cultural *jathas*. If they are trained to write and stage their own plays, a new campaign can be taken up, which would be an important step forward in generating awareness among the public on issues related to forests, people and the environment.

Appendix

THE STORY OF A FOREST

Script by Santosh Kaushik

Characters

Jungle baba
Narad-ji
Villagers – 6
Village women – 4
Forest guard
Government official
JFM committee members – 2
Activists

First scene

(Jungle baba comes on stage, clad in leaves)

Jungle baba : I'm Jungle baba, your unfortunate, helpless slave. They say I'm the jewel of Mother Earth, linked to the clouds. And the vapour of the clouds is linked to life, to each and every one of you. Yet today I stand before you, forlorn, ravaged, dying a slow death. How can you forget that every facet of your life is connected to the forest? If I die, how can you live? You cannot exist without me.

(Jungle baba breaks into tears. Narad-ji enters)

Narad-ji : Narayana, Narayana. Jungle baba, why are you so distressed? You are the life of this Earth, its heartbeat, its pulse. Who has wounded you so grievously?

Jungle baba : Greetings, oh king of sages. *(Points towards the audience)* I have given them fuel, fruit, gum, timber for their buildings, greenery and the cool shade of my canopy. It is my vitality that produces the paper they use. I have provided shelter to countless birds. I give them the freshness of the breeze. Yet today I'm dying. The forest is being whittled down. The air is polluted and dirty. People don't care about me. They are too wrapped in themselves, in their own lives. They fell me down mercilessly to satisfy their selfish desires, to cater to their personal needs. Look over there, just look ... the flames are spreading across my breast. Please help me, save me.

Narad-ji : Calm down Jungle baba. Don't excite yourself like this. Narayana, Narayana.

(He beats the fire down with a sheaf of grass. Jungle baba prostrates himself at Narad's feet)

Narad-ji : Rise Jungle baba. Everything will be okay. Nature does not preach nor complain. Nature merely absorbs the knocks and insults and corrects the folly. Come with me.

(Scene changes)

(Some villagers are playing cards. Narad-ji and Jungle baba approach them.)

Narad-ji : You people just sit here playing cards. What's the matter? Can't you see the forest is on fire? Why don't you go and douse the flames?

1st villager : Why should we put out the flames? It wasn't us who set the forest on fire.

2nd villager : Let the one who lit the fire put out the flames. It isn't our responsibility.

Narad-ji : But don't you understand it's you who will suffer a grievous loss?

3rd villager : Why are you breaking your head over all this baba? These people aren't going to put out the fire.

Narad-ji : Why not?

3rd villager : No one's paying them to put out the fire. They used to be paid to do it.

Narad-ji : That's a strange way of looking at things. Whose forest is it anyway?

1st villager : Partly the government's, partly ours.

Narad-ji : But isn't the government your government?

2nd villager : Ours? Why should it be ours? The government is the government. Period.

Narad-ji : But who elects the government? It's you who choose it. It's you who form the government. Don't you realise the government is for your own good, for your betterment? You must learn to make it work for you. Aren't you all educated?

1st villager : No.

Narad-ji : You must educate yourselves, you can educate yourselves. No one's too old to learn. You must learn to understand the hidden world of the alphabets. You must come together to fight for your rights.

If the fire spreads it will destroy everything. The grass will be burned. There will be no fodder for the cattle. The herbs and shrubs will be burned. The animals, every living thing will be burned. The trees will be burned.

Oh you foolish people. Can't you understand? The forest doesn't depend on you for its life. It's you who depend on the forest for your lives.

1st villager : Brothers, listen to baba, he speaks the truth.

(Everyone stands up).

2nd villager : Yes baba, the forest is truly ours. Come, let's go to the village and gather the people to put out the fire.

(Suddenly they hear a commotion in the distance.)

Narad-ji : What's all this noise?

1st villager : It happens all the time baba. Some villagers have gone beyond the *nistari* pastures in the forest and encroached deeper into the forest. That's what the dispute is all about.

Narad-ji : What is this *nistari* pasture land?

3rd villager : Come along with us and you'll see.

(All of them proceed to the place where the quarrel is taking place.)

2nd guard : Watch it, you're going beyond your limits. Stay within the boundaries of the *nistari* pastures.

Narad-ji : Just a minute. Why are you people quarrelling?

1st guard : Greetings baba. What can I say, baba. This disgraceful bickering is becoming part of our daily routine. These people encroach into the forest from the *nistari* pastures to graze their cattle.

Narad-ji : But tell me, what exactly is this *nistari* pasture land?

1st guard : Baba, the government has given people rights in the forests to collect forest produce and firewood and also to graze their cattle. These *nistari* rights are for the common good.

Villager : Baba, what are we to do. The population of our village is growing while the resources of the forest are shrinking.

5th villager : We are fed up of telling these people that we need more grazing land. We are fed up of telling them to extend the boundaries of the *nistari* pastures. They just don't listen.

6th villager : Baba, he speaks the truth. What are we to do? Where do we go if we can't get more land for grazing our cattle? This limited area is just not enough for our needs.

Narad-ji : You can't solve all your problems by quarrelling. You people must come together and fight for your rights. Demand more grazing lands. Demand the extension of the *nistari* pastures.

Forest guard : Baba, what these people say is not the whole truth. The forest had enough resources at one time. Who do you think is responsible for its degradation? If there is no forest left, what resources can these people have? No one protects the trees. No

one helps us fight the forest fires. They just think of their personal needs. All of them.

Narad-ji : But they too have their problems. They say there is not enough land for their cattle to graze.

Forest guard : Baba, I agree with what they say. But their problems can be solved only if the forest is protected and regenerated.

Narad-ji : What you say is also correct.

(At that moment some JFM representatives arrive on the scene.)

JFM member : Ram Ram baba.

Narad-ji : Peace be with you.

(Narad-ji talks to the JFM representatives)

Narad-ji : The *nistari* pastures are not enough to meet the needs of the villagers.

JFM member : And they encroach deeper into the forests every day.

Villagers : What choice do we have? What else can we do if we don't encroach?

Narad-ji : Stay calm all of you. Don't lose your tempers.

2nd member : We agree with what you say. We understand your problems. But you should also try and understand our problems.

Narad-ji : What are your problems?

1st member : Baba, the family that once had only five members now has 25 members. The population is rising. People's needs are rising. The pressure on the forests is increasing. There is only one solution – to protect the forest and let it regenerate and spread.

Narad-ji : You're absolutely correct. I'll prepare everyone for this.

Second scene

(Some women are walking towards the forest, singing.)

Song : Gather the *amla* and *achar* brothers
We are its guardians
This forest is ours, brothers
We are its guardians.

Narad-ji : Greetings, oh mothers.

Women : Greetings, baba.

Narad-ji : Where are you going?

1st women : To pick *amla*.

Narad-ji : Do you get enough *amla* from the forest?

2nd woman : Where do we get enough baba? The forest is shrinking. Its resources are being depleted.

Narad-ji : But is it shrinking naturally, on its own?

2nd woman : Of course not baba. It isn't getting depleted just like that. These forest guards are felling the trees, loading trucks with timber and taking it away. Yet if we cut as much as a single branch, we're in big trouble.

3rd woman : As the forest shrinks our cattle herds also shrink. What can we do, there isn't enough fodder for our cattle.

Narad-ji : What else do you harvest from the forest?

4th woman : We pluck *tendu* leaves.

1st woman : We can no longer depend on the forest to fill our stomachs baba. Earlier, we got plenty of *amla*, *achar*, *tendu* and *mahua*. Now there just isn't enough for all of us.

Narad-ji : The forest is dying. Save it. Save it.

(Narad-ji sees some activists holding a meeting with the villagers.)

Narad-ji : What's happening there?

1st woman : Oh, they are activists of an organisation. They keep coming to the village. They explain things to the villagers.

Narad-ji : Don't they talk to you women?

2nd woman : We are usually kept within the four walls of our homes. Women aren't allowed to participate in the affairs of the village.

Narad-ji : If all you women get together you can achieve something. I'm going to talk those people. Don't worry. I'll stay with you until your path is smoothed and your difficulties are solved.

(The activists are talking to the villagers. The women approach.)

Activist : As I was saying, a mother doesn't feed her child until it cries for milk. Come together, join hands with us and fight for your rights. March ahead.

Villager : But we're just a handful of people.

Activist : A tiny spark is enough to light a fire. The eye cannot see the mountain if it is blinded by even a small splinter. You people should organise yourselves, come together and expand your horizons.

Villager : You're right. We are with you.

(Narad-ji approaches.)

Narad-ji : Narayana, Narayana.

Everyone : Greetings, baba.

Narad-ji : What's happening here?

Activist : Baba, we belong to an organisation. We were just telling these people that you cannot get anything unless you unite and organise yourselves. These people must muster the courage to fight for their rights.

- Narad-ji** : You can achieve a lot without confrontation.
- (Just then a village herald arrives on the scene.)*
- Herald** : Listen, listen everybody. Listen all you villagers. Tomorrow at 10 in the morning, the joint forest management committee will hold a meeting at the *chabutara* under the banyan tree. You must all attend, every one of you. You must tell the committee of your needs, put your views before it. Hear me, hear me everyone.
- (The village herald goes away.)*
- Narad-ji** : Good. This is a good thing that's happening. You people should go to the meeting tomorrow and place your problems before the committee and tell them what you want. *(Tells the activist)* You too should attend the meeting.

(Scene changes)

- (The meeting is in session under the banyan tree.)*
- Village chief** : My brothers and sisters and our chief guest for today – veena baba - I'm happy to see you all attending this meeting in such large numbers. *(Just then his eyes fall on two people - the activist and another volunteer.)* Who invited these people to the meeting?
- Narad-ji** : I called them. All viewpoints must be represented at such an important meeting.
- Village chief** : Okay baba, as you wish. I request you to conduct the meeting.
- Narad-ji** : First of all, I'd like to make it clear to everyone present here that you're all free to express your views. Don't be afraid.
- 1st villager** : Baba, I have a question to ask the committee. All its members are present here. I agree they help us villagers but they don't give us all the information about the working of the committee. Their accounts should be open to everyone. They should be made public.
- 1st member** : What exactly do you want? Are you interested in counting how many mango trees there are or are you interested in eating the mangoes? Which?
- 2nd villager** : No no. There should be transparency in the accounts of the committee.
- 1st member** : Why is that necessary? Do you think we are cheats? Are you saying we're dishonest?
- (The two get into an argument. Narad-ji pacifies them.)*
- Activist** : Baba, this is exactly how these committee members behave with the people. That's why we keep insisting that the villagers unite together. If they organise themselves into one unit they can fight corruption brick by brick.
- 1st member** : What, are you accusing us of corruption?
- Activist** : No, no. I'm not referring to you in particular. I'm talking about corruption in general, wherever it occurs, in whatever form.
- Narad-ji** : Be calm all of you. Don't argue like this and quarrel.

- Volunteer** : Baba, these activists keep inciting the villagers. These people are simple and straightforward. Why can't these activists just help them to get more resources and improve their lives instead of trying to incite them? Can't they just focus on bettering the lot of the villagers?
- Activist** : Baba, we are not inciting the people. We are organising them to fight for their rights. It is these volunteers who keep putting so many obstacles in our path.
- Narad-ji** : Stay calm all of you. Be quiet. It's petty quarrels like this that cause all these problems. Put aside your petty differences and focus on the larger issues.
- Villagers** : Baba, tell us. What are these issues?
- Narad-ji** : For example, take the status of the women. They don't have a say in anything that happens in the village – in the management of the forests, the affairs of the committee, in other important issues that affect your lives. They play no part when it comes to taking crucial decisions that matter to the people.
- 1st woman** : That's true. You should all remember that we make up half the village, half of all society, in fact.
- 2nd woman** : Why is it that only men run the affairs of the world?
- Narad-ji** : Be calm. It's your viewpoint that I'm highlighting. The men should come forward and include women in all important discussions, in making important decisions. They should encourage women to participate.
- Everyone in the village is present here at the meeting – the JFM committee members, all the men and women, everyone. The volunteers and social activists are also here. Is there any government representative present?
- (A government official raises his hand.)*
- Narad-ji** : Why don't you put the government viewpoint before the people. What has the government to say about the problems of these villagers?
- Govt official** : Baba, I request you and all the villagers to look at things in their proper perspective, not in isolation or from any particular point of view. The people are not here because of the government. It is the government that's here because of the people. The government is here to help the people, support them to whatever extent is possible.
- In fact, the people have been given many benefits. They get firewood and timber at subsidised rates from the forest depots. Canals have been built to irrigate their farms. Those who use bamboo to earn a living are being given Rs800 to Rs1200 per month so that the bamboo can be protected and is not cut. The government has livelihood programmes to improve the living conditions of the people. Wells have been dug in the village under this programme. Productivity has increased. The villagers have formed JFM committees. Unemployment has been banished.

Narad-ji : But not everything can be done by the government or must be done by the government. For example, take a look there – the grass cannot grow because the wild *tulsi* (basil) is spreading so rampantly in the forest. If the grass cannot grow, how can you graze your cattle? If you want more grass you must clear the wild *tulsi*. Do you expect the government to do even this for you?

(A villager comes running.)

Villager : Baba, baba, come quick. Jungle baba is lying unconscious near the temple.

Narad-ji : What! Come on everyone. Let's go see what's happened to Jungle baba.

(Scene changes)

(Everyone crowds around Jungle baba)

Narad-ji : Can you see what's happened? Jungle baba is in the throes of death. We're all responsible for this, for his agony. You villagers have your problems. You social activists and volunteers also have your own interests. But remember one thing. If we don't save the forest then none of us can be saved. We are all sailing in different boats, in splinter groups. You must now decide what needs to be done.

(There is silence all round.)

1st villager : We must save the forest.

2nd villager : The forest is our mother.

3rd villager : We should come together and work together.

4th villager : We should first understand each other's problems and sorrows.

5th villager : The forest comes first, then the people.

1st villager : The people come first, then the government.

2nd villager : The forest is our father.

(Together they cut the bonds binding Jungle baba and lift him upright.)

Jungle baba : My children. The forest is like your body. We are all different parts of the body. If the stomach stops functioning, how can the body survive? If the heart stops beating, can the body live? If our hands and feet stop functioning can we work and look after ourselves? If the breath in our body goes we'll be corpses in a few moments. You should all work together in harmony. The happier and more comfortable I am, the happier and prosperous all of you will be.

Song

End

Song of unity

We should all come together

Brothers, only then can we see the light.
Brothers, link your hands, one with the other.

There is strength in unity. Alone you are helpless. So come ...
If you come together, all hardships will be overcome. So come ...
Walk together all of you
The light will soon shine. So come ...

Separated, each one of you is weak. So come ...
But if you come together all of you
Your problems will be solved. So come ...
Your path will be clear.
All obstacles will be shattered.
Every human will be happy and prosperous. So come ...
Come together ... (2)

The forest is ours

The forest is ours brothers.
We are its guardians
It is our family, brothers
We are its guardians

The forest has looked after us through the ages
It has fed us every mouthful
It has navigated the ship of our lives.
We are its

Take care and see that the trees are not destroyed
Our work, our lives are linked to them
They are our grandparents. And brothers
We are its

Let's come together and form our committee
And plan our strategy so everyone's needs are met
We are the guardians of the forest
We are its ...