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Surakshya se Samrakshan ...

Few Unacknowledged Struggles for Nature Conservation in Orissa

Panchayati Raj (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996

This Act confers the ownership and decision-making rights over non timber forest products (NTFPs) to local institutions. It emphasizes more decentralized system of governance to panchayats and gram sabhas in Scheduled Areas.

The Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Act, 2002

Two new insertions are made in existing categories of Protected Areas (PAs) under the Sec. 36 of this Act. The Conservation Reserve declared under this section aims at inclusion of Government owned biodiversity rich areas (particularly areas important as corridors) in official PAs. An advisory committee called "The Conservation Reserve Management Committee" (CRMC) would be formed and it would provide inputs to Chief Wildlife Warden (CWW) in conservation measures. This committee includes representatives from concerned Village Panchayat. However CWW would remain the chief decision making authority, which could consult (CRMC) in management of this area, this could limit and under estimate the community's aspiration for conservation.

In this section there is also a provision of declaration of Community Reserve (CR), which aims at inclusion of private and community owned areas (though most of the common land is taken over by Government) with conservation values, where community has volunteered in conservation of wildlife. Here a self regulatory Community Reserve Management Committee comprised of community representatives and one representative of concerned department will be responsible for conserving, maintaining and managing the community reserve and elected chairman of the committee will be Honorary Wild Life Warden on the CR.

Since most of the CCIs are present on Government owned lands these provision are not enough to provide them legal recognition. Furthermore, it is difficult to accommodate diverse, situation specific institutional arrangements in a uniform configuration. The Ministry of Environment and Forest is yet to draft guidelines for implementation of CRs, which would define the effectiveness of aforesaid provisions.

Biological Diversity Act, 2002

This Act emphasizes the participation of the local community in the conservation and use of biodiversity. Under Sec 37 of this Act, the State Government in consultation with the local bodies can declare areas of biodiversity importance as Biodiversity Heritage Sites which could be used by communities involved in biodiversity conservation. However clear guidelines for this category is still awaited.

The Scheduled Tribes and Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006

This Act is considered as one of the revolutionary act in the legislature history of India. It is expected that this act will rationalize "historical injustice faced by forest dwellers". In addition to the right of community over land and forest produces, it also impart community the access to biodiversity and rights over related traditional knowledge and intellectual property rights under sec. 3-1(k). For the first time in the legal history of India it acknowledges traditional rights of forest dwellers to conserve and nurture their forest resource under the sec.3-1 (k).



COMMUNITY BASED FOREST CONSERVATION

The history of community forest protection and management in the State dates back to pre independence days. These initiatives were the result of spontaneous reaction to increasing resource scarcity caused, among other reasons, by the State's commercial exploitation of the forest. These initiatives existed in the backdrop of the local people's struggle to assert control over natural resources.

There are about 12,000 forest protecting groups, spread all over Orissa protecting around two million hectares of forest ranging from a few years old to several generations old. These initiatives exhibit an array of diversity in origin, management systems, institutional arrangements, benefit sharing mechanism and conflict resolution, that signifies situation specific conservation models evolved due to various interacting factors. Livelihood assurance through collection of forest produces, ecological services and economic benefits from the forest were the main considerations behind many initiatives, thus, it is the interaction between forest and the local community, where people felt the need to secure their future through local action. Further years of protection have resulted in well stocked forest and excellent biodiversity. The Forest Survey of India (FSI) reports of 2001 and 2003 have recognized the achievement of these initiatives by clearly mentioning that most of the open forest in the State have been converted into dense forest due to community efforts.



Dengajhari: A Distinctive Example of Women Initiated Forest Protection

In the Ranpur block of Nayagarh district more than 180 villages are protecting several hectares of contiguous patch of forest. Dengajhari, a small tribal hamlet is one of these villages. It is a distinctive example of women initiated forest protection, where women patrolling groups are struggling to protect their forest from commercial greed.

Every day two women go in the forest for patrolling. Work Overload during agricultural season, kendu leaf collection season doesn't bother much for them. Every woman in the village considers herself responsible for protection of forest that fulfills their domestic and agricultural need of fuel wood, fodder, small timber and forest produces. They perceive forest as a source of community development and a resource which needs to be managed sustainably for succeeding generations. The women patrollers still remember the day, October, 11, 1999 when twenty seven women fought with two hundred men who were armed with sharp weapons and took about sixty bullock carts to carry wood from the forest. It was the first day of protection when women from Dengajhari realized about necessity of collective action for resource protection and that they have the strength to do it.. They immediately constituted '**Ghodadei Mahila Samiti**' (women's committee), for forest protection. Every woman in the village is a member of the committee. There is an executive committee of seven members, consisting of president, vice president and convener; still most of the matter is discussed in general meeting for decision. The committee is part of block level federation '**Maa Maninag Jungle Surakhya Samittee**' consisting of forest protecting groups of Ranpur block. Interestingly like Dengajhari there are many villages in Ranpur block protecting their neighbouring patches of forests and all such villages are part of the block level federation. This block level federation along with district level 'Nayagarh district federation' is member of state level informal set up the '**Orissa Jungle Mancha**' (OJM). The OJM looks into larger level issues and advocate for community based forest management where community has rights over the resources that they are protecting since ages.



CULTURALLY CONSERVED AREAS/SPECIES

Orissa has a long tradition of cultural conservation. The philosophy of conservation lies in the culture and ethos of society that encompasses care of forest in the form of sacred groves or worship wild species as incarnation of God. Many endangered species threatened to extinction in other places are conserved in areas where religious sentiments are attached with these creatures.

Sacred Groves: Orissa is one of the leading States in number and distribution of sacred groves. The actual number of sacred groves is not known and it is very difficult to determine. However sacred groves are more evident in tribal dominating areas. About 322 sacred groves are recorded from Semiliguda block of Koraput district itself, (Malhotra et al. 2000). They have different names at different places like 'Sarana' for Santhals, Munda, Pauri- Bhuyani and Kandhs in western Orissa, "Zahira" i.e. grove of Sal, Neem and Asan trees protected by both Santhals and Kolhas in Mayarbanj. Size of sacred groves varies from one tree to vast stretches of forest mostly supporting natural climax vegetation due to minimal human interference. Governing rules and regulations differ from place to place, like in some sacred groves limited harvesting of forest products are permitted while in some sacred groves the area is kept totally undisturbed.



Humma: Religious conservation of endemic fish Mahashir

Humma, a renowned historical monument is situated on the bank of river "Mahanadi", about 27km from Sambalpur district headquarter. This important religious place of Hindus is famous for an ancient temple of lord Shiva which has a unique architectural importance due to its slanting structure, otherwise known to present only in the slanting tower Pizza in Italy. Another distinguishing feature of this place is reverence of "Kado" or "Mahashir" fish (*Tor mahandicus*) as incarnation of lord "Bishnu" as "Matsya" avatar. Humma is a very distinctive place where community is protecting the endangered, endemic and commercially important fish species due to religious belief. About one and half km of river stretch in and around the temple is protected by the villagers of Humma village. The most important role played in conservation is that of the fisherfolks in the village who do not fish Mahashir, despite its commercial importance, although the entire village through the temple committee does decisions about the river stretch and the temple.

Maneshwar: A safe shelter for Indian Soft Shelled Turtles (*Asperadetus gangeticus*)

The village Maneshwar situated in Sambalpur district got its name because of presence of the three century old "Maneshwar" temple of "Lord Shiva". A distinctive population of soft shelled turtles is also one of the attractions for devotees visiting the temple. The turtle otherwise seriously threatened by large scale illegal poaching activities feel safe in small water tank of temple since it is believed that killing or harming them will bring misfortune. The tank is linked with river "Malatizor", one of the tributary of River Mahanadi, the conventional habitat of turtles. A symbiotic association between villagers and turtles can be observed here, the turtles get safety and love from villagers and villagers get clean water since turtles keep water clean



Star Tortoise revered in Parlakhemundi

A small population of star tortoise (*Geochelena elegans*) is conserved in network of temples in Parlakhemundi of Gajapati district. Parlakhemundi a historical town located on the banks of Mehindratanya river distinguishes itself from other towns in Orissa in protecting the star tortoises in almost all the temples as the people believe them to be incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Though star tortoises are Scheduled III animals, few species are globally threatened due to their illegal trade. This illegal trade is also creating problem for the local population but people do not dare to touch these species inside the temple premises.



SPECIES PROTECTION

Kodbahal: Where deer feel safe in the embrace of villagers

In Kodbahal village of Sundergarh district villagers conserve a small population of spotted deer (*Cervus axis*) in two hundred hectares of mixed deciduous forest protected by them. Forest is the lifeline for villagers. Along with fulfilling their basic necessities it provides livelihood to them through various forest products. Villagers believe that the wild animals are adored by the village deity and hence shouldn't be harmed. Though this belief was prevalent, the conservation measures took shape in late nineties when villagers started forest protection to make sure sustenance of forest that ensures their lives and livelihood. The regenerating forest provided suitable habitat to deer and other wild animals and rotational patrolling by villagers checked the frequency of logging and poaching. Deer depredation on crops is a common experience in this village where agriculture is the prime livelihood source. Deer don't hesitate to invade in human habitations and to raid crops in home gardens. A herd of deer roaming around village is a common site for villagers. However villagers seek official recognition so that they can improve their efforts and protect the animals that they adore and cherish

Blackbucks protected at Bhetanoi-Balipadar region

Blackbuck (*Antelope cervicapra*) conservation at Bhetanoi-Balipadar-Buguda region of Ganjam is a famous example of community wildlife conservation. More than thousand bucks are taking shelter in an assemblage of seventy villages, located in drought prone region of the State. These villagers also have to sacrifice considerable amount of their agricultural produce because of depredation by bucks. Orissa's public learnt of Buguda, when it was awarded the first Biju Pattnaik award for wildlife conservation. Documentary evidences this protection initiative to at least as far back as 1918. However in the last 50 years, protection measures were further strengthened as the animal population began dwindling because of poaching and other reasons. As a result of the protection measures taken by the community the number has risen from about 100 to more than 500. Reportedly about 60% of the village has been left fallow due to water scarcity and also due to the crop damage by the Black buck. Yet the villagers apprehend anyone found hunting the animal. The villagers believe that these antelopes are devotees of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna and thus it is a sin to kill them.





Protection of Birds: Where Winged Visitors feel at home

Rugudipali is an example of such an initiative where the local community has been involved in protection of birds for the last 20 years. Rugudipali comes under Makundpur GP of Deogaon block of Bolangir district and is situated just 25 km from the district headquarters. The villagers have been actively involved in the protection of hundreds of Asian Open Bill Storks, locally known as Gendalia who have been a part of the village life since the last two decades. Villagers share that the protection initiatives started twenty years back when these avian species were found to be visiting the area for the first time. It is interesting to find that the birds' visit coincide with the onset of rain. These birds start coming to the area around mid of June (Sital Sasti) and stay up to November. Villagers share that primarily the security provided by the villagers have been responsible for inviting these birds in large numbers as they get safe breeding ground in the trees present around the village.

Pakidi: A heaven for Peafowl

Pakidi hill range of Ganjam district came to the notice of whole Orissa when the "Peacock Protection Committee of Pakidi" got prestigious "Biju Patnaik Award for wildlife conservation" for the year 2006. This honor is further augmenting the aspiration of peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) conservation among the people at Pakidi. The villagers from seven villages are actively protecting peacocks and everybody in the village is concerned about safety, food and water requirements of the bird. The peafowl are so acquainted with the villagers that they don't bother to enter the habitations. Peafowl freely grazing in the fields is a common site at Pakidi. The attachment of villagers with the birds is intense and can be observed at its best when women and children provide water to the peafowl in pitchers by traveling several kilometers in scorching heat of summer. This is done on rotational basis where every person takes responsibility to protect the birds. The forest department has played an important role in facilitation of this initiative. People consider peafowl as an asset of their village and wish that outsiders appreciate these birds and their conservation efforts. Hence they wish to develop the area as an ecotourism site, where tourists can enjoy peafowl sightings and villagers could arrange fund to improve their efforts.



Similar kind of an initiative is observed near Dhanmandal Railway Station. Dhanmandal market place in Badchana Block of Jajpur District has been the home for the winged visitors (Asian Open Bill Storks) since more than 100 years. According to the local people these birds come in flock, each in a pair of two, in the month of June, breed and fly away with their little ones around the month of December. local people these birds come in flock, each in a pair of two, in the month of June, breed and fly away with their little ones around the month of December. But Dhanmandal stands out from rest of the places as here the railway staff and the GRPF (Govt. Reserve Police Force) are actively protecting these birds and happily play the role of custodians of these avian species. The local people revere the birds and take good care of these visitors and protect them from any threats. This unique co-existence of men and birds in the remote village of Orissa has now become a conservation model for many.

Gopa Chhak situated in Kendrapara dist. of Orissa is another area, which attracts egrets and cormorants. This place has its importance as here a group of businessmen have formed 'Sitaram Banijya Committee' to protect these birds. They do not allow hunting of these birds and have formulated certain rules and regulations for the protection of the birds.

WETLAND AND COASTAL/MARINE HABITAT CONSERVATION

Orissa's coastline of 480 sq kms ranks among the world's largest turtle nesting and waterfowl wintering grounds, along with considerable other wildlife. Community efforts are visible in various points here too. The wetlands and coasts of the State are providing shelter to thousands of migratory birds and sea turtles. The State also holds distinctive examples where local communities are conserving migratory animals/birds even at the expense of their livelihood.

Mangalajodi: A Winter home for thousands of Migratory birds

Mangalajodi village is one of the many villages located along the banks of the Chilika Lagoon where thousands of migratory waterfowls and resident birds visit and breed each year. Like other neighboring villages Magalajodi was famous for poaching of migratory birds. Few villagers were involved in these poaching practices who later on transformed into die hard conservationist through the efforts of local NGO, "Wild Orissa". Today the people who were earlier killing the birds are actively protecting the birds and their nesting ground with the support of whole village. They have formed "Sri Mahavir Pakshi Suraksha Samiti" (Bird Protection Committee) in December, 2000. The effort of the committee was recognized by the state government of Orissa when it got the most prestigious "the Pakshi Bandhu (brothers of birds) Award for the year 2001" and the 'Biju Pattnaik Award for Wildlife Conservation for 2006'. The ex-poachers, who have sacrificed their major income source at the cost of conservation, are now promoting sustainable fishing and community based ecotourism, to sustain their livelihood.

Olive Ridley Turtle Protection

Olive Ridleys nests in tens and thousands on the Rushikulya, Gahirmatha and Bhitarkanika beaches. While the later two are under official protection, the local community has been actively involved in protection of the species in Rushikulya. This site was unknown to the scientific community before 1994. At that time, fisherfolk from Purunabandha, Pallibandha, Gokhurkuda and Nuagaon who entirely depend on the estuary and offshore waters for their livelihood, collected and ate or sold the turtle eggs. With the involvement of researchers from Wildlife Institute of India (WII) during the early 1990s, some youth from Purunabandha became aware of the threatened status of the species and the need to protect them. In 1998-99, the youth formed a group (Rushikulya Sea Turtle Conservation Committee) and started generating awareness in the area through turtle conservation in the area. The committee has made an interpretation centre and are now trying to earn some livelihood through regulated tourism in the nesting/hatching season. Similar initiatives have now been taken up by the youth in Gokhurkuda, Pallibandha and Nuagaon villages. The villagers not only protect the turtles during the nesting and hatching season but also have special fishing norms during the mating and nesting times to avoid turtle deaths in the sea.



MAJOR THREATS TO COMMUNITY CONSERVATION INITIATIVES

Lack of Recognition: Despite occasional and sporadic incidence of awarding, majority of community conservation efforts remain unrecognized. The conventional legal and administrative frame work underestimates local knowledge and institutions in conservation and development programmes.

External influences: Various external factors like global forces and lopsided development, market driven forces and inappropriate external fund results into fading of many of these efforts.

Community's internal dynamics: There is need to address some of the inherent issues faced by the community like internal conflicts, inequities, weak institutions and changing social values to ensure long term sustenance of these efforts.

Over exploitation of natural resources: Due to presence of rich resources, most of these areas are targeted by commercial exploiters. The whole struggle and efforts of community become futile when area conserved by people is leased for logging or mining.



LAWS AND POLICIES RELATED TO CCI

CCIs as such hold no legal recognition by the State; still there are some provisions in laws and policies which could be helpful to these initiatives. However, most of these provisions hold very limited scope to recognize and cherish community's efforts and resolve the upcoming issues in present frame where practical implementation may lead to new conflicts.

Indian Forest Act, 1927

Under Sec.28 of this Act the State Government can assign to any village community the rights over a part of reserve forest, such forest is termed as "Village forests". The villagers get rights over the village forests to fulfill their bonafide needs and it is their duty to protect and improve the forest. However the ownership remains with the State Government which is the main decision making and regulatory authority. However this provision has not been used much by the State Government.

National Forest Policy, 1988 and JFM Guidelines

The National Forest Policy, 1988 (NFP) envisaged people's involvement in protection and development of forest, it also stipulate local needs as first indict. This policy came into practice in 1990 through Joint Forest Management Programme (JFM); it is the first ever national scheme wherein villagers are involved in protection of Reserved and Protected forest. It also emphasizes increment in forest cover through plantation on waste land and community land. JFM considers forest dependent communities as one of the stakeholders in forest management.

Since, Orissa is a pioneer State, where there are thousands of self initiated forests protecting groups, the State government passed a resolution of involvement of community in forest protection in 1988, and national guidelines were followed through subsequent JFM resolutions. Now thousands of VSSs (Vana Samrakshan Samitis) are operating in Orissa who get recognition of usufruct and share in benefits of conservation, mean while many of them also received funds to support their efforts.



The state of Orissa is one of the resource rich states of Eastern India. Owing to its peculiar geographical location and wide array of physical features; it has diverse ecosystems with vast variety of flora and fauna and this prosperous bio-diversity makes Orissa a unique place. Orissa clearly symbolizes modern India's contradictions – very high ecological, social diversity & rich natural resources on one hand; extreme poverty and a massively destructive process of industrialization on the other. Efforts by the State agencies to conserve wildlife in National Parks and Sanctuaries coexist with serious conflicts with local communities who reside in & around these areas. These are conceived as 'islands of conservation' where any form of human intervention is considered to be harmful for conservation. The Protected Area approach keeps local people away from benefits of conservation and imposes the cost of conservation on them, banishing their fundamental rights, which results into hostility of local community towards conservation affecting whole goal of conservation. While destructive developmental activities permanently wipe out the resources, force resource dependent community into destitution.

In the context of these contradictions, numerous initiatives by the local communities at biodiversity and wildlife conservation and generating sustained livelihoods emerge as a strong ray of hope. In Orissa we can find hundreds of examples where communities are actively protecting and conserving biodiversity. These initiatives exist on community owned lands, lands whose ownership is disputed as well as government owned lands. These efforts encompass conservation of vast array of ecosystems, habitats of wild flora and fauna and follow a wide range of institutional mechanisms, rules and regulation.

Though these community conservation initiatives are much older than the government managed protected areas, yet they are always neglected and remain unrecognized.

This dossier gives only a glimpse of the diversity of these community conservation initiatives across the State.

CCIs play crucial roles in all spheres of life . . .

- CCIs play a very crucial role in conservation of vital ecosystems, critical wildlife habitats and threatened species. Many CCIs function as a corridor for wildlife and establish linkages between official Protected Areas.
- Some of them are responsible for maintenance of essential ecological services, like soil conservation, water security, stock of genes, etc.
- They synergize links between traditional agricultural system and forest ecosystems and thereby provide larger landscape level integration.
- Some of the CCIs are very crucial for sustenance of local economy; thousands of people are depending upon them for survival, and are socio-culturally attached with them.
- CCIs can be seen as community based models of development built on local ecological knowledge system that offer integration of traditional knowledge with current advancements in conservation scenario.
- They are a part of local community's resistance to destructive commercial activities. e. g., community protected forests threatened by mining, dams and industries, over exploitation of marine resources by illegal fishing activities etc.

