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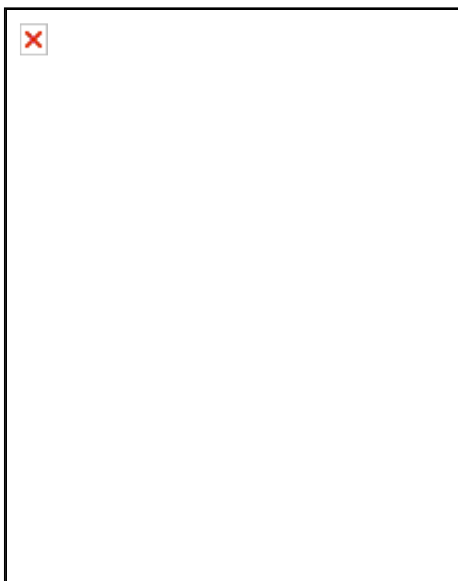
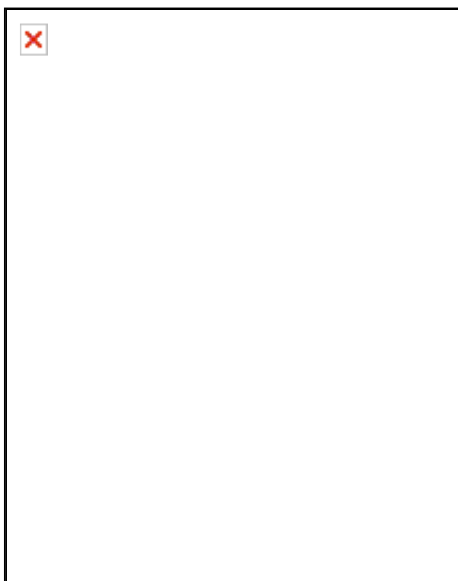
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Baiga tribals show the way in forest conservation

Mahim Pratap Singh



***United efforts:* Baiga tribals from Dhaba (left) who stood up against the forest department and saved their village forest and a view of the rejuvenated water body in their village (right).**

Dindori (M.P.): While the forest department has consistently stressed on the damage done to forests by “people”, tribals in Madhya Pradesh have achieved spectacular forest

conservation results through simple, community-based planning.

The Baiga tribals, a Primitive Tribal Group (PTG), from the Dhaba forest village of the Samnapur block here have managed to protect and expand over 600 acres of forest cover around their village.

Efficient plan

What started as a village-based movement eight years ago to “save the forest from the forest department”, has now matured into an efficient forest management plan being sustained through community monitoring.

“A few years back, some of us went to the Mendha-Lekha village in cross-border Maharashtra and saw the results of local forest conservation measures. When we came back, we decided to do something to save our forests too,” says Shankar Singh, a resident of the village who was at the forefront of the movement.

“We decided that we had to save the forest from the department as well as our own people,” he says.

For this, all 17 families from the village held meetings and formulated simple rules to be followed. These included a ban on taking axes inside the forest, a ban on smoking bidis inside the forest to prevent fires and disallowing outsiders from taking anything from the forests without informing the villagers.

A violation of these rules results in social boycott in the form of villagers not attending social functions like marriage and funerals of the violator’s family. Sometimes, a monetary penalty is also imposed. These simple rules have translated into a thriving and dense forest area with perennial water availability with rejuvenated water bodies. “Earlier, we had to fetch water from the neighbouring Dagona village as water in our village wells and ponds used to dry up by March,” says Sukkal Singh, another resident of the village.

Conservation of the forest led to increase in ground water and increased availability. “See, water is available even at this time of the year,” he says, proudly showing the community pond in his village.

The residents have now filed community claims for the forest and the water bodies in their village under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.

It all started with the Sal trees in the forest getting infected by the Sal Borer forest pest. The pest attacks Sal trees and has really been a cause of concern among environmental activists in the last few years.

Infected trees

The forest department decided to cut down the infected trees through coupe felling. However, according to the villagers, the department wrongly marked more trees than needed. When they learnt of this, the villagers stood up against the department.

“We drove out forest officials from the forest. When the news reached higher officials, the DFO came here and when we showed him the wrongly marked trees, he understood and ordered re-marking,” says Phoolwati, a woman from the village.

She, along with other village women like Indra bai, and Maniko bai, has participated equally along with men in the forest conservation efforts undertaken by the villagers.

“Now the forest officials cannot dare to take any action without consulting with us first,” she says.

Bold steps

Another step taken by the tribals in Dhaba as well as 12 other villages towards better forest management is the formation of Jungle Adhyayan Samooh or forest study groups. These are groups of 5-10 young boys and girls who learn from community elders and go inside the forests to study and profile endangered flora-fauna, herbs, roots and other useful forest produce.

“They bring back collected samples and preserve them for future reference in the form of a herbarium,” says Balwant, an activist working with the Baiga tribals in the region.

According to the villagers, the process has not only brought about expansion in forest cover, it has helped them procure several herbs and other minor forest produce from the forests, which were in scarce supply earlier.

The groups meet up twice every month to discuss their findings. Sukkal Singh and Arjun Singh, members of these groups from the Dhaba and Chhapra villages, will be running for Sarpanch in next year’s panchayat elections for their respective panchayats. They are almost certain to win too since there is nobody running against them.

Their names have been unanimously approved and put forward by all the villages in their respective panchayats.

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