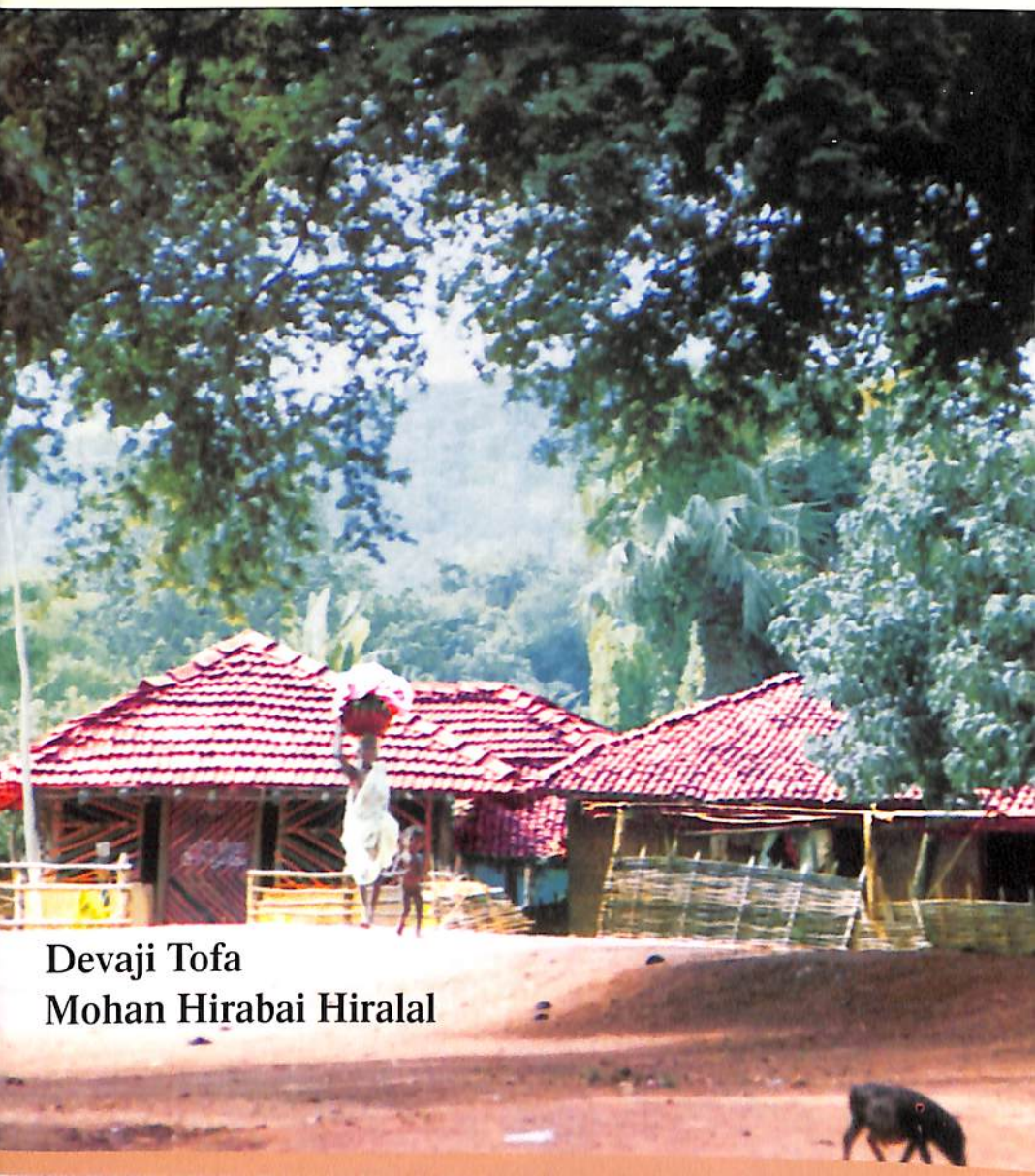


Mendha (Lekha)

The Village that declared that

‘We have our government in Delhi and Mumbai,
but in our village we ourselves are the government.’



Devaji Tofa

Mohan Hirabai Hiralal

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**Devaji Navalu Tofa
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Introduction

The world is groaning under the heels of injustice, oppression and exploitation. The strangle-hold of power is choking it to death. It is tormented by wars, terrorism and the arms race. Science and technology have sold themselves to power, wealth and greed.

The rate of economic growth has been increasing. Rich are becoming richer. But on the other hand, economic disparities and unemployment are growing alarmingly. In the mad race for development, natural resources are being plundered, jeopardizing the very existence of life. Human efforts are needed to come out of this situation.

Experience has clearly demonstrated that power centres formed from the surrender of power by scattered individuals cannot pull man out of this mire. Neither the power of violence nor the coercive power of the state can alleviate human suffering. People's power is now the only alternative left. And people's power can develop in a society which cares for all. If interests of all are to be guarded, violence in all forms has to be eschewed; and decision-making by majority is a form of subtle violence. Theoretically, it is not difficult to grasp. But arguments of the critics and lack of actual experience raise doubts in the mind. On the other hand, it is crystal-clear that the way of violence and majoritarianism is taking us deeper in the mire. Mendha (Lekha), a tiny village, has done historical work—without being aware of it—of showing a way out of this impasse. It has shown that a village community can work on the basis of consensus, and that violence can be successfully resisted by non-violence.

To enable the evolution of people's power, two things are necessary from village level to the global level.

1. The political structure: See fig. 1
2. The knowledge process that is free from the tensions of decision-making: See fig. 2

Fig. 1 : The political structure

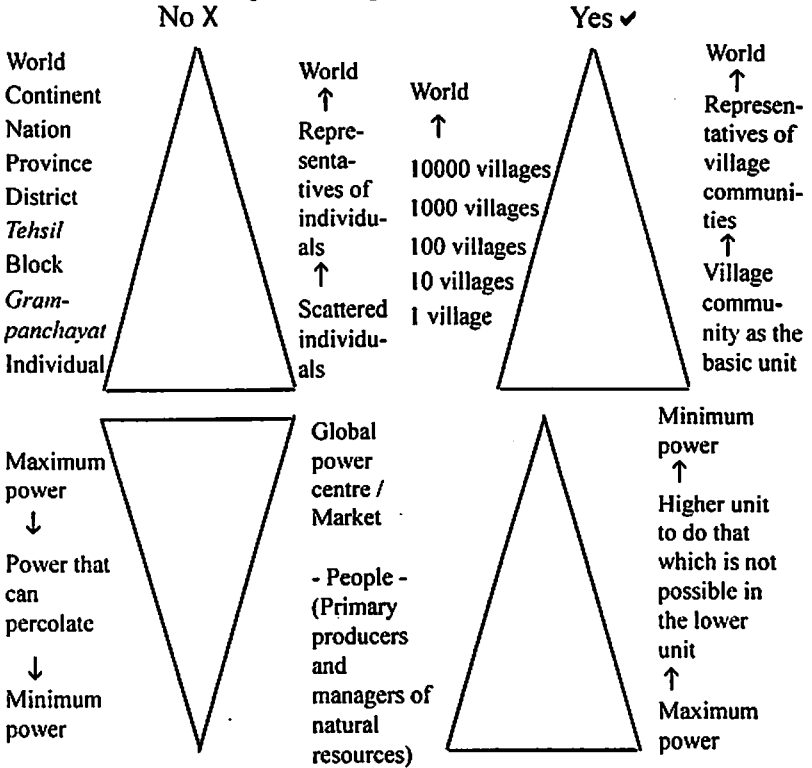
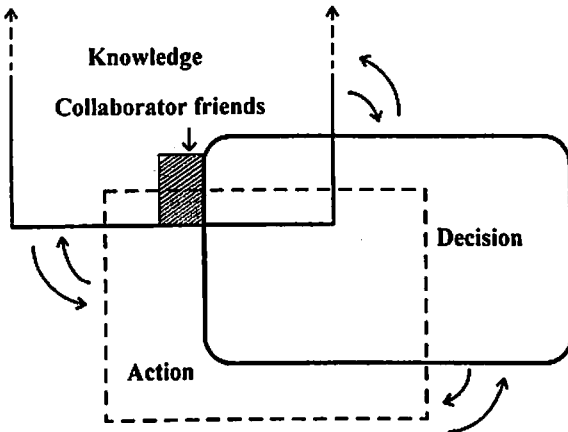


Fig. 2 : The knowledge process



A village community is the basic unit of human society where there is maximum possible participation of people on social, political and economic levels. It could be a village or a rural or urban locality where people live together and take decisions concerning all of them through mutual discussions and evolution of consensus. Three criteria could be laid down in this context:

1. Population: It should be around 300 to 500.
2. Geographical area: It should be such that the people can assemble frequently for discussions within minutes of giving a call.
3. Unanimous resolve to take decisions in the *gramsabha* by consensus.

Mendha (Lekha) is such a village community—a progressive community that is going from strength to strength since 1987. It is like a lamp in the surrounding darkness. Let us hope that this lamp lights up more and more lights.

Mendha : People's Power in action

Mohan Hirabai Hiralal

Institutions basically are structures that regulate social behaviour. They represent the values and culture of the people. They create the social space they regulate, wherein the people work and are linked to the spheres of influence of other institutions.

The individual and the society have been existing since time immemorial. Although every individual is naturally an independent, perceptive, biologically distinct and self-aware entity, he exists basically as a member of the society. On the other hand, society is constituted of individuals only. Both the individual and the society are simultaneously influencing each other. It seems that there has always been a need for a suitable social structure that could regulate the individual's behaviour, and also a need for individuals who could create such structure. The meaning and extent of the word 'suitable' have, of course, been different for different times, societies and cultures.

Societies, like individuals, have their peculiar nature, virtues and vices, sublime and ignoble tendencies. Nature has given the maximum amount of freedom of choice to the human beings. There are instances in history of their using this freedom to take the road to self-destruction. But history is also witness to the fact that they have a tremendous capacity to learn from experience and correct their mistakes.

Man has made a great blunder in believing that he is separate from nature which he can vanquish. It cost him dear; and he is still paying the price for it. Man is an integral part of nature linked to other parts which are all interdependent. Now is the time to realize this and take corrective steps. Man has taken a giant leap in the field of science and technology, but as far as the realization of values like freedom, equality, brotherhood and justice is concerned, he is still greatly lagging behind. Economic prosperity is increasing, but at the

same time the ocean of economic inequality, poverty, social injustice, insecurity, frustration and violence is surging up around the islands of that prosperity. Ecological imbalance is posing a threat to the human existence itself.

Political systems have evolved from the tribal polity to the nation-states, and there is now advance towards the subcontinental nation-states. But whatever be its ideology — be it capitalism, socialism, communism or anything else — all the centralized polities based on the principle of representation have individual as their basic unit. Individuals scattered like the grains of sand, and their representatives above them — that is the prevalent structure. Individuals surrender their innate power to some or the other power centre and weaken themselves; and these power centres, constituting of representatives, too prove to be weak in fulfilling their promises about freedom, equality, brotherhood, justice, prosperity, security, maintenance of law and order and peace in spite of all the power acquired from the individuals.

What then should be the kind of polity? It is absolutely clear that any type of dictatorship or authoritarianism or the monopoly of power is not acceptable. Acharya Vinoba Bhave, a great disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, has sketched a picture of the desirable polity in his book 'Swarajya-shastra'. He has called it '*sarvayatan*'. A village community taking decisions by consensus is the basic unit of this polity. Vinoba here appears to put forth, in the context of polities, the principle in the management science that structures too, like individuals, have their faults; and they cannot be removed by removing the individuals manning them.

When a village community unanimously decides to take decisions by consensus, a different structure comes into existence, even though the members of the community remain the same; and this structure is powerful in the real sense.

Vinoba talked of consensus, but wrote at the same time that he had not come across a village community taking

decisions by consensus. Most of the followers of Gandhi and Vinoba believed that consensus decision-making is Utopian and dismissed it out of hand; they continued to think and work in the framework of democracy based on representation, decision-making by majority, and centralization. Experience of different types of structures which have individual as the basic unit, and are run by representatives who take decisions by majority has, however, brought home the growing relevance of Gandhi and Vinoba, not only for India but in the global context as well.

Imbalance in the values, structures and lifestyles is bound to lead to social injustice, ecological imbalance, insecurities and destruction; while balance and harmony between them will lead to social justice, ecological balance, security and development. It is the responsibility of both the individual and the society to achieve this balance and harmony. But man today is hankering after unbridled individualism and consumerism. Unfortunately, even majority of the deprived and the exploited share this world-view. Modern civilization has everyone under its pernicious spell.

Every individual has desirable and undesirable qualities. The social structure should be such that the undesirable features are effectively suppressed and positive features are given scope to blossom. A community in a small village or locality that takes decisions by consensus is the only structure that can achieve this successfully. Theoretically, one gets convinced about it, but doubts do arise in the mind: Is it possible? Even among a married couple there are differences of opinion. Consensus is hard to be found even in a family bound by blood-relations. How can it be achieved in a village community? Is it against the law of nature? Is it true that development through conflicts is the law of human progress?

We decided to find out for ourselves whether there actually exists any village or locality working on the basis of consensus. It was one of the chief objects of our participatory study project on 'People and forest', in 22 villages in the

Dhanora *tehsil* of Gadchiroli district in 1987. Within one year we found that there was one such village among these 22 villages. It was Mendha (Lekha). For six months we thoroughly examined whether the village really took all the decisions by consensus, and were convinced about it. Mendha has proved that decision-making by consensus is not something Utopian; and has thus made a significant contribution to sociology and political science.

X X X

Mendha (Lekha) is a small village of Gond tribals in central India. It is in the Dhanora *tehsil* of Gadchiroli district in the State of Maharashtra. The hamlet of 84 families with the population of 434 (in March 2007) is on Gadchiroli-Dhanora road, only 3 kilometres from Dhanora, the *tehsil* place, and 30 kilometres from Gadchiroli. It has been in contact with the outside world since many years; still it has retained its distinctive characteristics. Are there no disputes and differences of opinion in this village? No; they do exist. Are there no economic disparities in this village? No; they also exist there. Are there no problems of poverty, hunger and unemployment? These problems also do exist. Do not the villagers come into contact with the politicians, contractors, traders, government officials and religious figures? They do come into contact with all of them. Do they not see theatre plays, cinemas, television etc.? That too is not the case. Then what is it that makes Mendha different? It is the unanimous decision of the village community to take all the decisions concerning the village in the village assembly (*gaon-samaj-sabha*) by consensus that makes the difference.

The *gaon-samaj-sabha* of Mendha has all the adult villagers as its members. Its meeting can be convened within minutes after the call is given. It has been decided that those absent in the meeting will accept the decisions taken in their absence; that everyone's point of view will be heard and respected, but it will be the decision of the *gaon-samaj-sabha* that will finally prevail. There is a study circle which discusses relevant issues,

but is not authorised to take any decision. Participation in the study circle is optional; even outsiders can join the deliberations. They cannot, however, attend the *gaon-samaj-sabha* meetings where decisions are taken.

When the villagers understood various facets of self-governance more clearly through discussions in the study circle, they set out to remove their defects and shortcomings; for they realized that it was the essential precondition for the success of their fight for rights. It was perceived that the cutting of trees in the forest for fruits, leaves, branches or honey was improper; the matter was discussed in the *gaon-samaj-sabha* which decided to impose a fine of Rs. 150 on this practice. This decision was strictly implemented. The Gonds have been a patriarchal tribe; so special efforts were made to improve the participation of women in the *gaon-samaj-sabha*. To take decisions dispassionately with maximum possible participation, the liquor menace had to be dealt with effectively. The village had to wait for one year to build up consensus in this regard; but it had the patience to do so. Gotul is a unique institution in the Gond tribe; it imparted healthy informal education to the young generation. But under the influence of non-tribals, whose perverse perception found free intermingling of young men and women objectionable, the people had demolished this institution. Realizing that it was, in fact, the centre of their socio-cultural organization, the *gaon-samaj-sabha* decided to rebuild the gotul.

The villagers' livelihood depended mainly on the forest, wherefrom they traditionally obtained food, fuel and many other things as a matter of right. This traditional right, called *nistar* right, was confirmed by the State government in 1950 after a detailed enquiry, *nistar patra*s for all the villages were prepared and treated as revenue documents in the *patwari* record. But later the management of forests was taken over by the forest department, and the officials and employees of the forest department started telling the people that the *nistar* rights have been abolished. An unjust system of plunder and

exploitation got established, and the people submitted to it instead of standing up for their rights. On realizing it, the people studied the matter and put up an organized fight for getting authorised copies of the *nistar patra*s. They took the forest and revenue officials to the forest and ascertained the borders of their *nistar* forest. They also stopped giving anything to the forest guards.

The process also revealed how the people at the village level could take back the political power that rightfully belongs to them. One hears of theories saying that power is not gifted; it has to be snatched and retained by the people. How the people could do this was demonstrated at Mendha. The *gaon-samaj-sabha* of Mendha decreed that outside agencies like the Central or the State government, contractors and the NGOs should not do anything in the village without prior permission of the *gaon-samaj-sabha*; if some agency were to try to do something, it will be resisted by the whole village peacefully, adopting the methods of the 'Chipko' movement. The *gaon-samaj-sabha* being supreme at the village level, there was no question of seeking anybody else's permission. Testing time came soon. The villagers successfully stopped the thinning work started by the forest department. When the *sarpanch* (head of the *gram-panchayat* of which Mendha is a constituent) tried to take grit without the permission of the village, he was not allowed to do so, making him realize that the village authority has precedence over his. (The story of the village's fight for its *gotul* has been described in detail in the next article, and is not therefore repeated here.)

Paper mill is the biggest economic power in this area. Government had given lease for bamboo-cutting to the mill on nominal rates even in the forest wherein the villagers of Mendha had *nistar* rights. The lease expired in 1991. The *gaon-samaj-sabha* wrote to the Chief Minister that 'the bamboo in our forest should not be given to the mill without our consent. Even if the lease is renewed, we will not let the mill cut the bamboo there.' Still the government renewed the

lease. But the people have not allowed the mill to cut bamboos by resorting to movement on the lines of 'Chipko' for the last three years. The *gaon-samaj-sabha* resisted all financial baits and threats of violent measures. The paper mill tried by hook or by crook to break the village unity. The forest department sent a letter to the *gaon-samaj-sabha* through the *sarpanch* that if the village persisted in its resistance despite the lease given by the government, complaint would be lodged with the police and legal action would be initiated. The matter was thoroughly discussed in the study circle, and the village wrote back that the department may go ahead with its plan of action. The village had also realized through its study that the mill's method of bamboo-cutting was faulty; it was permanently destroying the bamboo clusters and thus harming the forest. The village therefore demanded discontinuance of this practice, and proposed that the forest department and the Joint Forest Management Committee of Mendha should jointly cut fully grown bamboos, which should be provided on priority to farmers, artisans and other villagers, and only the remaining bamboos be supplied to the paper mill. After three years of struggle, the government has finally accepted this proposal.

A lot of money is sanctioned and spent in the name of tribal development, but it hardly reaches the tribals. The village studied this problem, and the *gaon-samaj-sabha* wrote to the government that the money sanctioned for the development of the village be given directly to the *gaon-samaj-sabha*. Government officials told that money can be given to the *gram-panchayat*, not to the *gaon-samaj-sabha*. People tried to reason with them that *gram-panchayat* is not synonymous with the village. It was then told that the *gaon-samaj-sabha* did not have any legal sanction. People questioned, "Then how do you give money to NGOs?" The reply was that they were registered institutions. The *gaon-samaj-sabha* then decided to register the whole village. For two months the discussion about the memorandum and articles of association was going

on throughout the village. It was decided to name the association 'Gaon Niyojan va Vikas Parishad, Mendha (Lekha)' [Village Planning and Development Council, Mendha (Lekha)]. In its memorandum all the decision-making powers were given to the *gramsabha* (that is, the *gaon-samaj-sabha* or the assembly of all the villagers) which was to meet in the gotul on every full moon day at 12 a.m. without any formal notice each time. The offices were not titled 'Chairman', 'Secretary' etc. as per the prevalent practice; they were titled: Convener (for signing papers on behalf of the *gramsabha*), Clerk (for clerical work), Bank Account-holder no. 1 and 2 (To operate the bank account), Pass-book-holder (to keep the account pass-book), etc. Office of the Charity Commissioner rejected this memorandum on the plea that such executive committee cannot be formed under the law. But there is really nothing in the law to disallow this. The village therefore fought for registration, and finally it won. But meanwhile the government officer who had promised to give money to the *gramsabha* on forming a registered institution had been transferred !

The village has received a government grant of Rs. 16000 to prepare the outline of a project for drinking water and irrigation from the Integrated Tribal Development Project. Some of the outsiders tried to ridicule the villagers: "You talk of self-governance; then how is it that you seek and accept money from the outside government?" The villagers gave an apt reply: "We do say that 'We ourselves are the government in our village' but it is the latter part of our slogan; the first part is 'We have our government in Delhi and Mumbai'. It means that the Central and State governments too are ours; we have a right on their money as well, and it is our duty to ensure that we get our due share and it is properly utilized."

The *gramsabha* has also devised effective measures against corruption. It has decided that receipt must be insisted upon if anything is given to government employees; otherwise an equal amount would have to be deposited in the *gramsabha*. To check corruption in the disbursement of money

to the villagers, it has been decided that all should go together, examine the muster and make a through enquiry before accepting the money. Once a supervisor in the *tehsil* office came to disburse compensation for crop failure on account of famine. He tried to hurry the matter, thereby arousing suspicions. A call was given for the whole village to assemble. The muster was examined. It was found that there were two musters; the supervisor was taking signatures on one muster showing higher amounts, but was disbursing money according to the second muster which showed lesser amounts. The villagers began to discuss the next course of action. Unnerved, the supervisor begged pardon and said, "You solve the disputes in the village itself. I have erred. Please do not complain to the higher authorities. I will accept the decision of *gramsabha*." The *gramsabha* imposed on him a fine of Rs. 500, and made him swear not to indulge in such corruption again.

The village has constructed more than 1000 galiplugs as part of the comprehensive watershed development plan, and their benefits are being studied. A forest study group has been formed with outside friends interested in study. Efforts are also being made for the development planning of the village. Patrolling is done in the surrounding forest. Joint Forest Management Committee has been formed in August 1993 in accordance with the State government's scheme.

There is an 'opposition leader' in the village. He opposes every proposal in the *gramsabha*. He does not participate in the study circle, but argues vehemently in the *gramsabha* meetings. But the villagers do not look upon him as an enemy; rather they look upon him as a friend who points to the pitfalls in the proposals, and see to it that he attends the meetings. This is possible only where there is consensus decision-making.

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The small tribal village of Mendha is thus defying all odds with tenacity and self-respect. It is going from strength to strength despite occasional reversals. Structures and the ways

of working too, like individuals, have defects. The strength of Mendha is the strength of the socio-political structure that ensures maximum possible participation of the people on account of the resolve to take decisions by consensus.

Mendha is a village of one tribe only. So, outsiders surmise that Mendha could achieve this much because there is a homogeneous community; it is not possible elsewhere; and it is absolutely impossible in urban areas where there is no community at all. But, Mendha is not the only homogeneous village; there are plenty of such villages. Why is there no expression of people's power in them? Clearly, what has happened in Mendha is not because of its homogeneity; what the villagers in Mendha have done is not because of some quality peculiar to any particular caste, religion etc. or because of being rural or urban; it is the expression of a potential that is shared by all the human beings.

What parliament is to the nation or legislative assembly is to the state, *gramsabha* (*gaon-samaj-sabha*) or a locality committee is to the village or locality. It does not have an executive; it does not get constituted through an election. It is self-existent. Nobody has created it; therefore nobody can put an end to it. Such *gramsabhas* or locality committees should be the basic units of the socio-political system. Small revenue villages or localities in rural or urban areas could have such *gramsabhas*, vibrant and pulsating with life. The *gramsabha* of the existing village *panchayat*, which consists of more than one village, is surely not what is meant by the *gramsabha* here; hence the preference for the term *gaon-samaj-sabha*.

When the number of such real *gramsabhas* (*gaon-samaj-sabhas*) and locality committees grows, and they continue working consistently, the structures containing their representatives may come into being in a natural manner in response to felt needs. But such representative structures will certainly have a different lustre and strength.

(Translation of the article originally published in 'Samaj-prabodhan Patrika', October-December 2006)

Vinoba's 'Swarajya-shastra' and Mendha's quest for self-rule

Mohan Hirabai Hiralal

'Hind-swaraj' is a booklet that Mahatma Gandhi wrote in 1909 on board the ship while travelling from England to South Africa. He had discussions about the country's freedom with several Indians residing there. In that context, Gandhiji had put forth in that booklet his ideas about the true freedom of the common man. In chapters 4 ('What is Swaraj?') and 5 ('The condition of England') he unambiguously rejected representative parliamentary democracy, like that of England, as a model for India. The rejection is clear and total. But what then should be the form of polity? The booklet does not answer this question clearly. That was left to Vinoba, Gandhiji's greatest disciple, who provided the answer in his booklet 'Swarajya-shastra' written in 1941 during his jail term. If 'Hind-swaraj' is the first step in the quest for *swaraj* (freedom and self-rule), 'Swarajya-shastra' is surely the second step.

Vinoba states that there could logically be three types of political orders: (a) A wise or capable man may look after the affairs of all, (b) A number of such men may come together to look after the affairs of all, and (c) All the people may come together and look after their affairs with equal responsibility. For these three types, Vinoba coins the terms *ekayatan* (rule by one), *anekayatan* (rule by more than one), and *sarvayatan* (rule by all) respectively. (Here Vinoba has used the word 'man'; it would have been better to use the word 'individual' to include both man and woman. However, there is no doubt that this is what Vinoba meant.) He clearly recommends that independent India should have *sarvayatan* as the political system; but also states:

"However, it is perfectly obvious that sarvayatan does not exist anywhere today. Gandhiji is striving towards it, and he has also evolved a technique to establish such a system. He is trying to

use that technique in India.

"There is a polity that calls itself 'democracy' and poses as 'sarvayatan'. Its show is going on in Europe and America. But no system based on violence can be termed 'sarvayatan' even if it pretends to work on the principle 'one man - one vote'.

"As against this, if all the people, of their own accord, after due deliberation, entrust power to one or more of themselves, whom they know to be wise, competent, free from attachment and hatred and devoted to the welfare of all, then that polity, although ekayatan (rule by one) or anekayatan (rule by more than one) in appearance, should be regarded as sarvayatan, as it is based on non-violence.

"The old Panchayat (the village council) system in India may be said to be a somewhat imperfect but honest attempt in this direction; but it was so unscientific that it is hardly of any use to us today and deserves at the most a passing mention.

"It is sufficient to state here that sarvayatan does not exist anywhere and is yet to be established."

After an extensive discussion, Vinoba mentions the following criteria to judge a polity —

- "1. International brotherhood.*
- 2. Conscious, spontaneous and sincere co-operation of all the elements within the nation, to the best of their ability.*
- 3. Unity of interests between the capable few and the masses.*
- 4. Regard for comprehensive and equal development of all.*
- 5. The maximum possible distribution of political power.*
- 6. The minimum possible governance.*
- 7. The simplest system of administration.*
- 8. The lowest possible expenditure.*
- 9. The minimum possible arrangements for security and defence.*
- 10. Universal, uninterrupted, unbiased and free dissemination of knowledge."*

After some more discussion, Vinoba states:

"The actual form of the polity wherein all the people look after the affairs of all will depend on the stage of development of the

society. However, it must invariably have at least the following four characteristics:

1. All the capacities of capable individuals should be devoted to the service of the people.

2. The people should be fully self-reliant and should co-operate with each other.

3. Non-violence should be the basis of cooperation in the normal course and of non-cooperation and resistance when the need for them arises.

4. Honest work of all should have equal (moral and monetary) value."

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What does the 'conscious, spontaneous and sincere co-operation of all the elements' which Vinoba commends mean, and in which structure could it be actualized? Searching for its answer, we come to the *gramsabha*, consisting of all the adult men and women, taking all the necessary decisions, with full knowledge and without any pressure, by consensus. Only in such a structure the manifestation of people's power is possible.

The main objection against the thesis of Gandhi and Vinoba was that it was Utopian; it cannot be realized in practice. There may be some other reasons. Be that as it may, it appears that even the followers of Gandhi and Vinoba ignored these two booklets—working consistently on their basis was then out of question.

Discussions in Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, an organization of non-party youth founded by Jayprakash Narayan, made me realize that the centralized representative state has no strength of its own. It is people's power that is really strong. Where and how this people's power is manifested? Wrestling with this question led me to the booklets 'Hind-swaraj' and 'Swarajya-shastra'. The truth was brought home to me that the people's power can manifest itself in village communities taking decisions by consensus. But where could one find such a village community? No book

or thinker showed the way. Theoretically the Gandhi-Vinoba's thesis was convincing; but it was essential to find such a village community to see whether the thesis was practicable as well. It was also necessary for me to plan my future work. And we did find such a village—Mendha (Lekha)—during our study on 'People and forest' in 22 villages in the Dhanora *tehsil* of Gadchiroli district. We did not believe this straight away; for six months we tested this discovery. Then came the conviction: a *gramsabha* working on the basis of consensus is no Utopia; it is in the realm of possibility. Mendha (Lekha) has proved this beyond doubt.

When we came in touch with this village in 1987, there was no participation of women in the *gramsabha*; and the mutual cooperation among men too was not sufficiently enlightened. 'Cooperation of all' not being there, and the cooperation that existed not being enlightened enough, the people's power had not fully manifested. During our participatory study on 'People and forest' we came across the natural instinct of study and reflection in some persons; and also found that a sort of unstructured study circle already existed. Being outsiders, we did not want to participate in the *gramsabha*; rather we decided to concentrate on the knowledge process through the study circle. We realized the necessity of 'universal, uninterrupted, unbiased and free dissemination of knowledge' and discovered that the study circle is a necessary framework for it.

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Vinoba has mentioned four essential characteristics of a polity. Which of them exist in Mendha?

1) Capacities of Devaji Tofa, one of the most capable individuals in Mendha, and of Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, a collaborator friend who stayed in the village for a few years and is now in close touch with it, have been devoted to the service of the people consciously, voluntarily and discerningly.

2) People were not fully self-reliant and even now they are not so. But mutual cooperation did and does exist.

3) Non-violence is the basis of cooperation in the normal course and of non-cooperation and resistance when the need arises. The *gramsabha* of Mendha has realized this through the study process, and this has resulted in the manifestation of its strength as well as heroism. The fight for gotul is a case in point.

Gotul was a unique cultural institution among the Gond tribals. But they were taken in by the perverse criticism by outsiders, and destroyed it. The *gramsabha* of Mendha, on realizing its significance, decided to rebuild it. It was also decided to bring teakwood from the *nistar* forest. As it was a matter of legitimate *nistar*, there was no question of seeking permission of the forest department. People went to the forest, brought teakwood and erected the gotul hut. The forest department tried to seize the wood, but the villagers stood as a rock and defended it peacefully. The department then sought police help; and the armed police, more in number than the villagers, entered the village along with the department's party. While men stayed inside the homes, women gathered together in full strength in front of the gotul and faced the police. As decided in the *gramsabha* they told the police: "We will not reply to bullets with bullets. We will not fight with sticks or throw stones at you. We will not even abuse you. But keep one thing in mind. If you uproot our gotul and seize the wood, we will again go to the forest, bring teakwood and rebuild the gotul hut. And we will do it every time you uproot the gotul. If you still want to uproot it, do so by all means." Still the forest department's men broke the gotul and took away the wood.

The villagers, as declared by them, rebuilt the gotul within two days. The incident sparked rage in the *zamindari ilaka* — the cluster of 32 villages. People in these 32 villages came together to deliberate the future course of action. Sending deputation to higher authorities, demonstration, *dharna* — all sorts of measures were suggested. Finally the people thought that they should fight on their own ground — in their villages. It was

decided to build gotuls in the villages. 12 villages took up the challenge. 12 gotuls were erected on the appointed day. When one gotul was uprooted, 12 gotuls sprang up; how many gotuls would spring up if 12 gotuls were to be destroyed? — the government realized its folly, and did not repeat it.

4) The principle that the 'honest work of all should have equal (moral and monetary) value' has not yet attracted the attention of Mendha.

Vinoba later propounded the idea of *gramdan*, as the next step after *bhoodan*, and a step towards village self-governance. Government of Maharashtra enacted a law in 1964 legalizing *gramdan* and framed rules for the same. The residents of Mendha learnt about them, and studied them. But final decision has not yet been taken, as unanimity is awaited. Efforts are being made in this direction.

Out of the four essential requirements noted by Vinoba, only a few have been fulfilled in Mendha — and they too have only been partially fulfilled. Still we can see manifestation of the people's power in a significant measure. We can very well imagine the might and grandeur of the people's power if all the requisite conditions were to be fully fulfilled.

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Vinoba was gifted with the faculty of presenting his thoughts in the style of aphorisms. The booklet 'Swarajya-shastra' is in the same genre. Vinoba has noted many points therein which need intensive reflection. All of them cannot be mentioned here. One point, however, may be mentioned in the context of the process in the village community of Mendha.

Can a polity based on non-violence endure? Some of the points put forth by Vinoba in this connection are —

* *"Today politics touches every aspect of life. So the good and virtuous individuals in the society, the elite as well as ordinary men cannot afford to be indifferent to it."*

* *"If the masses have to take active part in politics, which has become so extensive, on their own strength, they cannot do so*

without the practice of non-violence as violence is not practicable to them."

* *"When the masses are weak and the good men become indifferent, the elite alone are saddled with the responsibility of reining in the evil elements in the society, and they can then see no other way of meeting violence of those elements other than counter-violence. But when the masses, the good individuals and the elite come together – and they have to come together in all-embracing political affairs – it is not impossible to fight the evil elements non-violently, howsoever organized they may be. And that alone is desirable too, as it leaves scope for destroying the root of the evil, that is, the evil tendencies in the minds of those elements."*

* *"The evil elements within the society can be effectively held in leash only if the masses, the good men and the elite combine together on the basis of non-violence; and they can never combine together except on the basis of non-violence. They should thus combine together, which will inspire awe in those elements and that awe will work as a severe deterrent for them. This is the main characteristic of a sound polity. If it is absent and all the other characteristics are there, it would be like a beautiful but lifeless picture."*

* *"When the choice is between a non-violent political system and preparation for a total war, non-violence is naturally preferred. However, a non-violent polity too needs organization and education of public opinion; and though a non-violent organization is bound to be different from that required for a total war, it will also have to be so extensive as to embrace everybody's life."*

* *"The public opinion that is naturally inclined towards non-violence will have to be made non-violent by conviction. Inactive non-violence will not do. Active non-violence, embracing all spheres of life, will be needed."*

* *"While thinking about non-violent resistance it is hoped that the aim should be secured without any harm to life and property. But no such promise could be given, even though non-violent resistance is right and worthwhile by any account. A little reflection will reveal that it will need readiness for self-suffering and for laying down life calmly without harming the opponent in the least."*

* *"There must be preparedness for battle even in non-violence. Even if non-violence is propagated throughout the world, need for preparedness will still remain. It will always be necessary to keep awake the power of resistance."*

* *"Had we been thinking in terms of superhuman beings, we would not have talked of resistance. When we talk of resistance, we are clearly talking with reference to ordinary men; only that we expect man's baser instincts, his animal nature, to remain under the control of his higher nature. We do not hope for their complete eradication from all the people. A non-violent order is thus definitely not impossible; in fact, no other order could be more sustainable."*

* *"While sacrifice of the highest order is expected in violence, non-violence is supposed to need little or no sacrifice. This would be a weak non-violence. It certainly would not be sustainable."*

Mendha is in the forest and tribal belt in the Gadchiroli district, surrounded by the state violence and the Naxalite violence. In terms of a non-violent polity, some salient points regarding Mendha can be noted.

* The study circle was, and is, of great help in convincing the public opinion, naturally inclined towards non-violence, about the efficacy of non-violence.

* The fight for gotul demonstrates what could be achieved if there is readiness for laying down life without harming the opponent.

* The fight with the Paper mill was more difficult than the fight with the forest department and the police, as all the groups believing in violence had come together against a tiny village. Still a small village community could overcome all their might on the strength of its aggressive non-violence.

* Fear and frightening are the main bulwarks of violence. The case of cock market shows how the community has got rid of fear, and fashioned creative forms of non-violent resistance.

* Selfishness is another companion of violence. The village community has demonstrated its creative non-violence in searching an effective remedy for corruption also.

* It is more difficult to oppose those nearer to us. The way the village let know its *sarpanch* (Chairman of the village *panchayat*) that he is not above the village was indeed novel.

* The interaction with Lekha, a bigger village in the neighbourhood, also deserves mention. First, Lekha strongly opposed Mendha; then complained that Mendha was looking after its own interests in building up its power, but not doing anything for its neighbour; and then started following in its footsteps—adopting the way of non-violence. This has become possible because of Mendha's non-violent polity.

It is this polity that has sustained the village community of Mendha and enabled it in successfully overcoming all odds and facing all threats from within and without.

(Translation of the article published in 'Samyayog-sadhana', 16th November 2004)

Answers to the Questions usually asked about Mendha (Lekha)

Devaji Tofa

The village in the past and present

Q. 1 : What changes have come about in the village in the recent past?

A. : Earlier the villagers would flee to the forest or hide themselves in their homes at the sight of any urban man wearing trousers or any auto vehicle. They would be frightened to come out. Now they are no longer afraid of them. The inferiority complex in them has been greatly reduced and they now deal with the outsiders on equal footing. Earlier they would rush to the contractors to seek work. This situation too has changed. There is a stone mine in the village. Outside contractors used to get mining contracts and the villagers had to work at the wages decided by them. Now the village has taken over the mining work through the DWACRA group, thereby putting a stop to their exploitation and helplessness.

Production, sale and consumption of liquor were widely prevalent. Now the village has put a complete ban on it. If someone needs liquor for any traditional ritual, he has to seek the permission of the *gramsabha* and he can distil and use only the specified quantity. If someone drinks outside the village, it is ignored if he does not create a scene in the village; but if he creates nuisance, he is fined.

People were dependent on outside moneylenders, shopkeepers or rich farmers for loans. The interest rates were as high as Rs. 100 p.a. or even more. Securing a loan also meant considerable wastage of time and loss of dignity. Government loans involve cumbersome paperwork. Now the *gramsabha* gives loans to the needy. No interest is charged for one year. After one year interest is charged at Rs. 2 p.a. only. The villagers

are thus now free from the clutches of the moneylenders.

Earlier, government officials, contractors, traders or NGOs never consulted the villagers about any work they proposed to undertake in the village. Now they have to seek prior permission of the *gramsabha*.

Earlier, there was no participation of women in the *gramsabha* at all the stages of decision-making and implementation. Now they are equally involved in them.

People have all along been more dependent on the forest than agriculture for their livelihood. Before Independence they were free to get *nistar*—forest produce for their own use—, but they had to do forced labour for the *zamindar*. The forced labour was abolished after Independence, but the forests were taken over by the government. *Nistar* rights were forgotten, and bringing forest produce for own use came to be looked upon as theft, even by the people. People were thus alienated from the forests resulting in illegal felling and destruction of the forests. Now the people have become aware of the legal *nistar* rights. They have taken over management of the forest, in which they have *nistar* rights, by participating in the government's scheme 'Participatory Forest Management'. People have thus again established organic relationship with the forest, resulting in control over illegal felling and forest thefts.

Cutting trees for fruits, leaves or honey was widely prevalent. Now *gramsabha* has banned the same, and it has completely stopped.

Burning honeycombs for taking out honey was a common practice. That meant killing of honeybees and destruction of even their eggs. The honey so obtained used to be meagre in quantity and inferior in quality. Now the practice has been put an end to. Honey is taken out scientifically without hurting the honeycombs or the bees. It is better both in quality and quantity.

The government had given the contract of felling bamboos in the forest, wherein people had *nistar* rights, to the

Paper mill. Workers of the mill used to cut bamboos in pieces, depriving the farmers and the artisans of long bamboos they needed. It also involved degradation of the bamboo clusters. Now bamboo cutting is done jointly by the Joint Forest Management Committee of the village and the Forest Department. Bamboos are not cut into pieces. They are supplied to the farmers and the artisans on priority, and only the remaining bamboos are sold to the traders or the Paper mill.

Corruption was rampant. The villagers looked upon the government employees as enemies of the village, exploiters and plunderers. On the other hand, government employees looked upon the villagers as their enemies and as a selfish lot. They were keen on putting down the villagers. Now both of them respect each other and sit together to discuss different issues. The government employees provide information sought by the villagers. The improved relationship has also resulted in blunting the edge of exploitation.

Earlier the people had no consciousness of their strength; they believed that political leaders alone have strength. Political leaders too had the same belief. Now both the villagers and the political leaders at the *tehsil* level have realized that the leaders can never match the people in strength; and that the leaders can be strong only if the people are strong.

People believed earlier that all the NGOs raise money from within the country and abroad in the name of serving the people, but their work is hardly of any use to the people. But after seeing the work of NGOs like 'Vrikshamitra', 'SEARCH', and 'Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi' from close quarters they have changed their opinion and started working in collaboration with these organisations. This has resulted in the strengthening of both of them.

People in the neighbouring villages used to think that tiny Mendha cannot stand against the mighty government, and they would express this opinion time and again. Now they have realized that they were wrong, and even started

emulating the Mendha villagers.

The village organization was weak. There was no thorough thinking before taking any decision. The people were not united. Now they thoroughly study every matter in the study circle before taking any decision; and take the decision by consensus. This has strengthened the village organization.

Organization of the village : A Review

Q. 2 : Who took the initiative in building the village organization?

A. : The men and women who came together for the study project 'Forests and the People' and those having an inclination for study took initiative for the same.

Q. 3 : Why was the need for the same felt?

A. : People are dependent on the forest for their various needs. *Nistar* rights are like the umbilical cord uniting them with the forest. When it was realized that securing the *nistar* rights required a strong village organization; and the government, political leaders, bureaucracy, or the NGOs could not solve this problem, need for the village organization was felt.

Q. 4 : What were the difficulties faced in building the village organization? How were they overcome? How has the village organization been able to sustain itself?

A. : It was realized that the liquor and the lack of participation of women in the organisation were the main hurdles; and the ego, selfishness and ignorance in both the rich and the poor also create problems.

The line of action adopted to overcome these difficulties included discussions in the study circle, raising questions and searching their answers collectively, getting various issues clarified through deliberations, raising the level of self-esteem and confidence in the people, taking decisions by consensus and involving all in their implementation, and learning through experience.

When the need for the village organization was felt for securing the *nistar* rights, it was also realized that the partici-

pation of women was essential for the purpose. The matter was discussed with many women with the help of women involved in the study circle. They raised the question of liquor: "We too are desirous of coming to the village meetings. But what can we do? You men are always drunk; you even come to the meetings in such condition and speak incoherently under the influence of liquor, creating a scene; and the issues are sidelined. We can come only if this liquor menace is eliminated."

The liquor then became a lively issue for debate in the study circle as well as in the whole village. Yes, the liquor habit must be put to an end. But who could do it? It could not be done by those who did not drink or sell the liquor. So the matter had to be discussed with those who sold or drunk it. The study circle told them, "We do not ask you to stop this business. We only want to know whether it is beneficial or not. If it is found beneficial, let us all decide in the *gramsabha* by consensus that everyone should take up this business." Everyone was exhorted to speak his mind freely. Beginning was made with the biggest liquor trader. To the question whether the liquor was beneficial, he replied in the affirmative. He also described in detail the gains from this business. Everybody agreed that the business was indeed lucrative; but how many people in the village were so benefited? Only 4 or 5. Discussion then shifted to the losses. They were obvious: Hard-earned money of the poor and their meagre belongings become the property of the liquor-vendors; drunkards beat their wives, let their children go hungry, abuse others and quarrel with them, neglect their children's education, even indulge in stealing for the sake of liquor. Everybody had to bear the brunt of this situation, while hardly 4 or 5 persons were benefited. When the situation thus became crystal-clear, the producers and vendors of liquor were asked whether they should continue such business. They too agreed that it was better to discontinue it; but what else could they do? — that was the question. People reasoned with them that

it was not, after all, a traditional business; the forefathers of the vendors too, like others, depended on the forest for their livelihood or earned the same through farming or labour. The vendors agreed that the liquor business should stop. The same was unanimously agreed upon. The liquor menace became a thing of the past; and way was opened for the participation of women in the village organization.

Discussions in small groups to search for truth at individual and collective level, making everyone realize the common interests, decision-making by consensus, refraining from imposing any decision on anybody and continuing to discuss the matter with him until consensus is reached – all this helped in arriving at the truth and strengthened the village organization.

Q. 5 : Do you take the help from political leaders, government officials and NGOs outside the village? If so, in what manner?

A. : Yes, we do take their help. Everybody is welcome in the study circle. We hear everyone, but take decisions in the *gram-sabha* by consensus. There is no question of deviating from this policy. Outsiders are not allowed to attend the *gramsabha* meetings.

Q. 6 : What is the study circle? How did it come about?

A. : The idea first came up in the course of the participatory study on 'Forest and People' during 1987-89. There, of course, were persons having inclination for study, but their flair for study was not benefiting the village.

The study circle is a structure that constitutes of persons, having interest in study, who debate every question threadbare and thereby help the *gramsabha* in taking proper decisions. No decision is supposed to be taken in the study circle; that is the exclusive prerogative of the *gramsabha*.

Q. 7 : How is the study circle constituted? Who elects or selects its members? Do women too participate in it?

A. : Nobody can form the study circle. Those with interest in discussing various issues come together on their own accord.

They include women too. Others, of course, have to see to it that the venues and timings of the meetings are convenient to them. In Mendha, men and women participants in the study circle are almost equal in number.

Q. 8 : What is the function of the study circle?

A. : The function of the study circle is to discuss the issues, on which the *gramsabha* has to take decisions, from all the angles. It takes into account all the possible doubts, thinks over them and resolves them. The discussions may go on in different localities and families, at all the possible places like the temple or the betel shop; on the bank of the river or besides the well or the tank; in farms or in the forest—whenever there is opportunity for the same.

Q. 9 : Does the study circle meet regularly? If so, when? Who convenes the meetings?

A. : It is not necessary that the study circle should meet at regular intervals. It can meet as often as the situation requires. The venues too may be different; but they should be convenient to all. No single person is entrusted with the task of convening the meetings. The date, time and venue of the next meeting can be decided in the previous meeting; otherwise anybody can take initiative in this regard.

Q. 10 : How is the agenda fixed? Who conducts the meetings?

A. : The subject important for the village automatically comes up; otherwise the agenda is decided through mutual discussion. No one is exclusively entrusted with the task of conducting the meetings. It is everyone's responsibility to ensure that the discussion remains centred on the subject concerned; that everyone gets an opportunity to speak and everyone participates; and that all the facets of the subject are discussed in depth.

Working of the *gaon-samaj-sabha*

Q. 11 : What is the difference between the *gramsabha* of the *gram-panchayat* and the *gramsabha* of the village? Is any quorum stipulated for the *gramsabha* meetings?

A. : *Gramsabha* of the *gram-panchayat* means the assembly of all the voters of the *gram-panchayat*. Mendha (Lekha) is a constituent of the Lekha *gram-panchayat* which consists of three villages—Mendha, Lekha and Kanhartola. The *gramsabha* of the *gram-panchayat* of Lekha, as per the *Gram-panchayat Act*, is the assembly of all the voters in these three villages, whereas the *gramsabha* of Mendha is the assembly of all the adult villagers in Mendha. To distinguish between these two, we may term the latter as *gaon-samaj-sabha*.

For the *gaon-samaj-sabha* of Mendha, attendance of at least one male and one female member from each household is compulsory. Of course, if there are only male or female members in the family, one of them only is expected to attend. If it is not possible for someone to attend on account of some important work or some other genuine reason, he/she has to inform the Chairman of the *gaon-samaj-sabha* or the *Mahila Mandal*. Fine is stipulated for non-attendance without genuine reason, and it has to be deposited before the next meeting.

Q. 12 : Who gives notice of the *gaon-samaj-sabha* meetings? Who chairs them? Can a woman too chair them?

A. : Date of the next meeting is often decided in the previous one; and then there is no question of giving its notice. Sometimes the study circle sets the agenda for the *gaon-samaj-sabha* meeting, and the village *pujari* (priest) informs all about it. Members of the study circle or the *Yuvak Mandal* or anybody else may be entrusted with this task.

Nobody is the permanent Chairman of the *gaon-samaj-sabha* meetings. Chairman of a meeting is elected by consensus from amongst those present. Women have also been so elected many times.

Q. 13 : Do men let the women speak in the *gaon-samaj-sabha* meetings? Do women speak their mind? Do their opinions get due consideration?

A. : Answer to all these questions is an emphatic 'Yes'. Women are positively encouraged to speak their mind; and

the points raised by them are not brushed aside simply because they have been raised by women. All pertinent points are taken note of.

Q. 14 : What is the normal attendance at the *gaon-samaj-sabha* meetings?

A. : It is never less than 50%, and sometimes goes up to 100%. Attendance of women is generally higher.

Q. 15 : How are the decisions taken in the *gaon-samaj-sabha*?

A. : By consensus. Even if a single person disagrees, discussion continues till consensus is reached—the disagreeing person may be man or woman, rich or poor. It is not the question of convincing him; it is genuinely believed that he/she may be in the right. If consensus is not reached in any meeting, the matter is deliberated in the study circle or in the next *gaon-samaj-sabha* meeting. But decisions are never taken by majority.

Q. 16 : Who implements the decisions taken in the *gaon-samaj-sabha* and how?

A. : When decisions are taken it is also decided who would implement them and the manner of implementation. For example, the Public Works Committee looks after the work of the construction of drains; and the Joint Forest Management Committee looks after any work in the forest.

Q. 17 : How many committees has the *gaon-samaj-sabha* constituted?

A. : They are the following —

- Joint Forest Management Committee
- Public Works Committee
- Justice Committee
- Grain Bank Committee
- Health Committee
- Education Committee
- Women Committee
- Water-distribution Committee
- Youth or Gotul Committee

- Village Fund Committee
- Sanitation Committee
- Agriculture Committee

Q. 18 : How are beneficiaries of different schemes selected in the *gaon-samaj-sabha*, and how is it ensured that they receive due benefits?

A. : Names are suggested in the meeting, and they are then examined closely to choose the most deserving one by consensus. If he/she does not get the expected benefits, the matter is discussed in the study circle and guidance is provided to the beneficiary in this regard. If need be, someone is deputed to accompany him/her to the concerned government office, and the matter is duly followed up.

**'We have our Government in Delhi and Mumbai;
But in our village
We ourselves are the Government'**

Q. 19 : This slogan by Mendha is now well-known; what does it mean? Who gave this slogan first, and how?

A. : 'In our village we ourselves are the Government' – It means that all decisions pertaining to our village are taken by us, all the adult men and women in the village, collectively; we do not delegate authority for the same to any representative. But when the issues relate to a number of villages, province or the country, we do delegate authority to our representatives to take decisions in their regard – that is what having 'Our Government in Delhi and Mumbai' means.

An old Madia Gond tribal was instrumental in the coining of this slogan; and this slogan was first raised in 1988 in the meeting of the representatives of 20 villages. We in Mendha learnt about it from Shri Mukund Dikshit of the Lok-Biradari project of Hemalkasa; and our *gaon-samaj-sabha* adopted and implemented it.

Q. 20 : You say, "We ourselves are the Government"; then do you implement the schemes of State and Central Government and take their money or not?

A. : The State and the Central Government are constituted of the representatives we elect; so their money, in fact, belongs to us also. You do not seem to have grasped what we mean. The State and the Central Government are not alien to us; we elect them. So it is the responsibility of the village government—our *gaon-samaj-sabha* which takes decisions by consensus—to ensure that our share in their money reaches us and is properly utilized.

Q. 21 : What is the attitude of the government officials and employees towards the village government?

A. : The attitude was of opposition because of misunderstanding. But when they saw the *gaon-samaj-sabha* studying the issues before it in depth, taking proper decisions by consensus and implementing them effectively, honest and efficient among them now wholeheartedly support the village government.

Q. 22 : Who framed the rules and laws of the village government, and on what basis?

A. : We believe that the Indian Constitution stipulates the following arrangement for framing laws—Parliament for the nation; the State Assembly (*Vidhansabha*) for the State; *gram-sabha* for the village *panchayat* and *gaon-samaj-sabha* for the village or locality where people live as a community. Therefore it is the exclusive prerogative of the *gaon-samaj-sabha*—the village community—which consists of all the adult villagers and which works on the basis of consensus, to frame laws and rules for itself. And the Mendha *gaon-samaj-sabha* has done so.

Q. 23 : What are the laws and rules framed by the Mendha *gaon-samaj-sabha*?

A. : * Cutting trees from the bottom for fruits, flowers, leaves or honey is strictly prohibited. Even big branches are not to be cut for this purpose. Disobeying this law will invite fine imposed by the *gaon-samaj-sabha*.

* Making and selling liquor is strictly prohibited. The seller will be fined Rs. 151, one who buys and consumes it will be fined Rs. 51, and one who drinks outside the village but

creates nuisance in the village will be fined Rs. 51 for their first offence. If the offence is repeated, the fine will be double. Liquor required for traditional ceremonies may be distilled and used with the prior permission of the *gaon-samaj-sabha*.

* The State Government, Central Government, contractors, NGOs, or any other outside agency will have to seek prior permission of the *gaon-samaj-sabha* for any work they propose to undertake in the village. If they fail in doing so, we will resist it non-violently.

* All of us will endeavour to contribute to the administration of the village affairs through consensus.

* Difficulty of an individual is the difficulty of the community and the difficulty of the community is the difficulty of the individual – that will be our motto.

* All the disputes in the village will be resolved in the village itself through consensus in the *gaon-samaj-sabha*. No complaint will be made to the Police Station and no case will be filed in any outside court without the permission of the *gaon-samaj-sabha*.

* Beneficiaries of all the government schemes must be selected in the *gaon-samaj-sabha*.

* We will not take any subsidy in the government schemes. The subsidy received by individuals from the government will be treated as loan to be returned to the *gaon-samaj-sabha* after receiving benefits from the scheme.

* Anybody is free to offer money, grains or any other thing as a bribe for getting his work done; but he must take receipt of the same. Otherwise he will have to deposit the same amount of money or the same quantity of whatever he has given in the *gaon-samaj-sabha*.

* If somebody visits the village, no one should go to meet him/her at the cost of the work in hand. If the visitor wants to meet you, he will come to you. Then also you should talk to him/her only when your work permits. Only those who have time to do so should attend to the visitors.

* The villagers who look after the visitors will be paid due wages by the *gaon-samaj-sabha*.

* *Shramdan* (Contribution of labour) will be undertaken only when all the families are ready to share the work equally. In no case should it be undertaken by a few families or individuals.

* We believe that all the living beings, along with the humans, have equal right on the natural resources. We will strive to use them without destroying them.

* Whosoever may own the land, water above or below it belongs not to him but to the *gaon-samaj-sabha*, and all the villagers have equal right on it.

Village Fund

Q. 24 : How was the village fund formed? Who was instrumental in its formation? How do you administer it to the satisfaction of all?

A. : The village fund was formed by the *gaon-samaj-sabha* on its own accord. It used to be collected in the past too; but its administration was not proper, and therefore it lacked credibility. A new system for the same was devised through discussions in the study circle, and it was finalised in the *gaon-samaj-sabha*. Its salient features are as under —

i) An account was opened at the State Bank of India, Dhanora in the name of '*Gramsabha, Mendha (Lekha)*'

ii) Two persons designated as Account-holder no. 1 and Account-holder no. 2 were authorised to operate the account.

iii) A third person was authorised to keep the Pass Book with him and give it to the Account-holders to withdraw cash in accordance with the decisions of the *gaon-samaj-sabha*.

iv) Those who are authorised to withdraw cash are not authorised for its disbursement/expenditure. That is entrusted to a different person by the *gaon-samaj-sabha*.

v) One who carries out the expenditure will not keep the accounts; it will be done by a different person.

This arrangement is working satisfactorily since quite a

few years, and has even gained in credibility.

Q. 25 : What is the contribution stipulated for the village fund?

A. : It is stipulated that everyone should contribute 10% of one's income in the form of cash or the farm produce in the fund.

Q. 26 : How is the fund utilized?

A. : It is utilised for different purposes like purchasing things necessary for the community, for developmental works, for helping the villagers, for giving them loans, for the education of students in accordance with the decisions of the *gaon-samaj-sabha*.

Gramdan

Q. 27 : What else are you contemplating for strengthening the village community?

A. : We are seriously considering the declaration of *gramdan*.

Q. 28 : What does *gramdan* mean?

A. : The salient features of *gramdan* are —

i) At least 75% of the landowners in the village surrender ownership of the land to the village community. Such land should at least be 60% of the village land.

ii) 5% of the surrendered land is distributed to the landless in the village for cultivation. Recipients of such land cannot transfer the same without the permission of the community. Rest of it remains with the donors; they and their descendants can work on it and reap the benefits. But they cannot sell it outside the village or to one in the village who has not joined *gramdan*.

iii) All the cultivators who have joined *gramdan* should contribute 2.5% of their income to the community.

iv) At least 75% of the village residents should join *gramdan* and undertake to contribute 2.5% of their income to the community.

v) If the abovementioned conditions are fulfilled, the

village is declared a *gramdan* village, and the Maharashtra Gramdan Act 1964 becomes applicable to it. The Act gives wide powers and responsibilities to the *gram-mandal* (which has been mentioned here as the *gaon-samaj-sabha*) for the administration, development and welfare of the village. It is expected to work on the principle of consensus.

Q. 29 : How did the villagers come to know about *gramdan*?

A. : They learnt about it from the Gramdan Study Group.

Q. 30 : Are the conditions for the declaration of *gramdan* not fulfilled as yet?

A. : Legally, there is no hitch in the fulfilment of these conditions, as around 75 to 80% of the villagers are ready for the same. But we believe that a majority decision may create problems later. We have also unanimously resolved to take all the decisions by consensus. So we are trying to evolve the consensus. The matter is being deliberated again and again in the study circle for this purpose.

Q. 31 : What benefits you perceive from the declaration of *gramdan*?

A. : *Gramdan* makes the village a big family; it no longer remains a group of scattered individuals. Land, which is really a means of production, should not be the private property of anyone. *Gramdan* paves way for the land assuming its true nature and role.

Forest, Gramvan (the Village Forest) and the Joint Forest Management Committee

Q. 32 : What are you doing to secure your rights on the forest?

A. : We are trying for the application of the provision for *gramvan* (the Village Forest) to our village.

Q. 33 : What does *gramvan* mean?

A. : Section 28 of the Indian Forest Act 1927 stipulates declaration of the forest around a village as *gramvan* and entrusting its management to the village community.

Q. 34 : What is the advantage of such declaration?

A. : The village community gets absolute legal right for the management of its forest. The principle, that everyone will receive benefits from the forest commensurate with the responsibility undertaken, comes into operation.

Q. 35 : How is *gramvan* different from the joint forest management?

A. : In the scheme of joint forest management, the forest department has more authority than the village community, while under *gramvan* it is exactly the reverse. Also, there is no law about the joint forest management; it is governed by a G.R. (Government Resolution). But *gramvan* is a legally sanctioned arrangement.

Q. 36 : Why did you form the joint forest management committee? Who told you about it? When did you form it, and how?

A. : The Mendha villagers were protecting their forest, from which they obtained *nistar*, on their own accord. They had not formed any committee for this purpose. We later came to know about the State Government's scheme 'Management of forests with the participation of villagers' from the NGO 'Vrikshamitra'. Our study circle studied the relevant G.R. of the 16th March 1992. We were able to manage our forest, but needed help from the State Government's forest department to check the forest criminals and encroachment from other villages. We also felt that its cooperation was necessary for forest-based employment-generation and development. So the *gaon-samaj-sabha* decided to join the scheme and form the committee in collaboration with the forest department.

Resolution of the *gram-panchayat* was necessary for the purpose. It was secured, and application was made to the Deputy Conservator of Forests. But he rejected it, saying that the scheme was for the degraded forests only and Mendha's forest was not so. Our study circle again studied the G.R. in depth, and found that it stipulated implementation of the scheme *primarily* in the degraded forests; it did not completely rule out its implementation in other forests. The villagers tried

to impress upon this fact on the officer, but to no avail. At last, the villagers told him to advise in writing that Mendha's application was being rejected because its forest was not degraded, and come to the village after 15 days; by that time they would have degraded their forest, so that he would not then have any problem in implementing the scheme in Mendha ! Meanwhile the said Deputy Conservator was transferred and replaced by Shri Anoop Wadhwa, who spoke to the villagers and accepted our contention. The Joint Forest Management Committee was duly formed on the 3rd August, 1992.

Q. 37 : Is the committee constituted by the village or by the forest department?

A. : It is a committee of the village, although it has been constituted by the village and the forest department jointly.

Q. 38 : What is the number of members of the committee, and who are they? Who selects them? How are the Chairman and Secretary elected? What is their term of office?

A. : The committee consists of one male and one female member from each family. Thus 84 women and 82 men from 84 families are its members. The family selects its representatives, and the general body of the committee gives final approval to these names. The general body of the committee elects the Chairman, and a forest officer is the ex-officio Secretary. The general body of the committee is a permanent body, but the term of the Chairman is 3 years.

Q. 39 : How is the patrolling of forest done? Do men and women from each family take part in this work?

A. : One male and one female member from four families do the patrolling every day. Two persons start patrolling from one end, and two persons start from the other end. They start patrolling in the morning after having their meals and return in the evening. They then notify those who have their turn on the next day. Men and women from every family take part in this work.

Q. 40 : Do you get adequate *nistar* (basic necessities of living) from the forest? Has the committee made any rules

in this regard? How are they made? What is done about the offenders?

A. : Yes, we do get adequate *nistar*. The committee has made rules in this regard. First the study circle debates about it and the general body of the committee gives the final approval. Offenders are fined. If someone opposes any rule, we try to understand his point. The study circle discusses the point. If it is found reasonable, process of changing the rule concerned is initiated. Otherwise, we try to convince the opponent.

Q. 41 : Were the forest department employees like the guards extorting grains, liquor, chicken etc. from you? What did you do about it?

A. : Yes, that was the general practice till 1987-88, when we participated in the study on 'People and Forest' initiated by 'Vrikshamitra'. As a part of that study, we studied the *nistar* rights and the relevant laws in depth. We then learnt that the *nistar* rights that we enjoyed in the past were intact. We therefore decided in the *gaon-samaj-sabha* to stop the practice of giving liquor etc. to the guard with due intimation to him.

Q. 42 : How much forest is there under the committee's control? Is the control total? Do the forest department officials pay heed to what the village says?

A. : The committee controls 1809.61 hectares of forest in Compartment numbers 468, 511, 469, 470 and 471. The village has full control over this forest through the Joint Forest Management Committee. The village community and the forest department work in close collaboration with each other, and the department officials do give attention to the village's viewpoint.

Q. 43 : Do you cut trees in the forest and sell the wood, bamboos etc.? Do the villagers get any employment from the forest? Which type of employment do they get?

A. : Nobody can cut the trees and sell firewood etc.. Those who participate in the management of the forest can use the forest produce for their own use in accordance with the rules made by the *gaon-samaj-sabha*.

The villagers get employment in bamboo-cutting, collecting *tendu-patta*, work in the nursery, collection of minor forest produce, work of soil and water conservation etc.

Q. 44 : Do the villagers feel that the forest belongs to them? Do they resist illegal felling and encroachments? Do the forest department officials cooperate in this work?

A. Yes, the villagers do feel that the forest belongs to them, but the feeling in some of them has not matured into a conviction. The villagers do resist illegal felling and encroachments, and the forest department officials cooperate in this work.

Q. 45 : Do you allow the people from neighbouring villages to take *nistar* from your forest in case of need? Have you framed any rules for it?

A. : Residents of neighbouring villages seeking *nistar* for their needs from the Mendha forest are required to apply to our Joint Forest Management Committee. Trespassers are fined. The Joint Forest Management Committee examines the genuine need of the applicant and gives permission for a specified quantity. The applicants have to inform the committee before taking *nistar* and show that they are taking only what has been permitted.

Q. 46 : What difference has the committee made? Is there any growth in the forest?

A. : It is because of the committee that the villagers started to sit together for the work of forest management, for making rules and implementing them. The relations between the people and the forest department have improved. They have jointly started planning for employment. Cooperation between the people and the forest department has resulted in curbing illegal felling and forest thefts; and the forest has grown.

Q. 47 : What amount has the Joint Forest Management Committee received as its share in the income as stipulated? How has it been utilized?

A. : We have still not received this share, and are following up the matter. It has already been decided that the amount is

not to be distributed to the individuals; it will be utilized for the village development.

Q. 48 : What improvements are felt to be needed in the working of the Committee?

A. : We feel that efforts are needed to ensure that the jobs get completed in the stipulated period. More attention also needs to be paid to the planning of work.

Agriculture

Q. 49 : What is the position about landowning in the village?

A. : Everybody in the village has some land. Five of them have been cultivating encroached land although it is not legally theirs. Only one family does not have land in Mendha, but it owns land in another village and is cultivating the same. The land-holdings vary from 1 to 15 acres.

Q. 50 : Which crops are grown in the land?

A. : Rice is the main crop. Pigeon peas are grown by some on the farm border. A few farmers also grow different varieties of pulses.

Q. 51 : What is the normal production per acre? Is it sufficient for the annual consumption?

A. : Production of rice varies from 3 to 15 quintals depending on the quality of land and availability of water. 53 out of 84 families have production sufficient for their annual consumption. 31 families, however, have to purchase some rice from outside.

Q. 52 : What seeds are used?

A. : 50% of the farmers use local seeds. White Luchai, which has three varieties, is the favourite type. Pite hidusk, Kakeri, Ludhka, Dohur are the other varieties in use. Others use Sonam distributed through governmental agencies. RR 64, HMT 1010, Poonam are also used by some farmers.

Q. 53 : Is the same crop grown every year?

A. : Rice is grown every year, but the seed varieties are changed.

Q. 54 : Has there been any change in the farming practices?

A. : Yes. Practices like *molka* (throwing seeds in the mud) and *autya* (throwing seeds in the non-irrigated land before the rains) were widely prevalent. But now 80 to 90 % of the farmers plant the saplings.

Q. 55 : Are any changes in the agricultural practices contemplated?

A. : Last year (2006), a new experiment was tried by the Laxmi self-help group. Groups were formed, and the farmers in the group helped each other without any wages. The farmer, in whose field the other members of the group worked, provided meals to them. The idea appealed to others, and around 75% of the work was completed in this way. It was realized that this practice strengthened the organization, besides saving money. Those who were not otherwise interested in the collective thinking process also joined in the planning of the work. Because of these obvious advantages, the village has decided to continue this practice, with modifications in the light of experience. It has been decided to form groups of 10 to 15 families each. However, it was also noted that those whose sowing operations were finished earlier were not keen on working on the fields of others. This tendency will have to be curbed.

Q. 56 : How much land is irrigated? What is being done to provide water to the land?

A. : Irrigation from galiplugs, wells and tanks is sufficient for saving the crop sowed in the rainy season. The measures being contemplated include watershed development, deepening of wells and tanks, community well, lift irrigation and farm tanks. Till now we have constructed more than 1000 gali-plugs, 17 farm ponds, one forest tank and one community well.

Q. 57 : How could the forest tank be constructed?

A. : The villagers had a keen desire to have a forest tank, and they had also identified the location. But the tank could not be constructed because of the Forest Conservation Act 1980. The work could be undertaken by the Joint Forest

Management Committee, after its formation, under the Employment Guarantee Scheme. Only half the work could be completed because of insufficient budget. The matter of its completion was discussed by the study circle and a novel way was thought of : 'Eat the fish and complete the tank.' The fry were dropped in the partially constructed tank when it was full of water after the rains. After six months, when the fish were fully developed, the villagers went to fish in the tank. It was already decided that the fish were not to be sold. They were distributed for consumption as per demand. Each family dug one *nali* (10x10x1 ft.) clay and put it on the boundaries of the tank for each kg. of the fish taken. And the tank was completed without any additional expenditure.

Social Traditions

Q. 58 : What is a gotul? How is it working today?

A. : Gotul was a unique institution among the Gond tribe. It was like a school imparting education for life in a cheerful atmosphere and producing good citizens. It was a living organization of teenagers and young men and women. Gotul was also the centre of the cultural activities in the village. Boys and girls would assemble in the separate hut of gotul, and would play and dance there. They would teach the younger children. The gotul hut was also used for the village meetings and as a temporary guest house. But the outsiders interpreted it in a perverse way; they found the free and healthy intermingling of young boys and girls objectionable and criticized the institution. Under the influence of this criticism, the newly educated young generation among the Gonds, in the name of reform, put an end to this great institution which, in fact, is worth emulation by others. The gotul huts were also pulled down. The Mendha villagers realized the significance of gotul through discussions in the study circle, and a hut for gotul was erected in 1989. But the institution has not yet been fully revived with all its characteristics.

Q. 59 : How are marriages settled and celebrated?

A. : When gotul was there, young men and women had opportunities to choose their life-partners. But now that the gotul is no more the practice of arranged marriages, which is prevalent among non-tribals, is catching on. Traditionally, marriages are celebrated at the bridegroom's place who has to offer *dej* to the bride. But with the spread of formal education and so-called reforms, the dowry system is spreading. There is a custom that invitees to the marriage bring with them rice, pulses, oil, and other necessary things like garlic and onion, thus easing the burden on the bridegroom's family. Now *gaon-samaj-sabha* has unanimously decided that such cooperation be extended to the brides' families as well.

Q. 60 : What happens when a boy and a girl want to marry each other but the boy's father is against it?

A. : Among the Gonds, wishes of the boy and the girl ultimately prevail. There is a tradition named '*haivar dayana*' or '*gharghusi*'. When a boy and a girl decide to marry, the girl leaves her parents' home, enters the boy's home and sits there. The boy's parents cannot ill-treat her. They have to inform the village community which then undertakes the responsibility of her security, conducts an enquiry into the matter and solemnizes the wedding.

Developmental measures

Q. 61 : What else are you doing for the development of the village?

A. : We have installed gobar-gas plant in every house, and connected it to the latrine. Work for the community water scheme is going on. Grain Bank is being established. We are also implementing the Yashwant Gram-samriddhi Scheme, and are also taking steps for the preservation of our bio-diversity.

Q. 62 : Government-sponsored gobar-gas plants have failed; Why did you then decide to go ahead with this programme, and join latrines to the plants?

A. : It was to ease the pressure on the forest, to get good

manure for the fields and to obviate inconvenience to the women.

Q. 63 : What provision has the community made for the supply of dung to those who do not have cattle?

A. : The government's scheme stipulates that the beneficiary of the scheme must own cattle. But our *gaon-samaj-sabha* decided that others should also benefit from the scheme. The study circle deliberated over the matter and the *gaon-samaj-sabha* finally decided that such families would get *akhar* and the dung on the lanes. Three of such families now have gas plants functioning well in their homes.

Q. 64 : Who will own water in the community water scheme?

A. : The *gaon-samaj-sabha* has decided by consensus that the village community will have control over the water in the village; landowners will not have control over it.

Q. 65 : What is the most salient feature of the community water scheme?

A. : It stipulates that everyone will have equal right over water irrespective of the land one owns; even the landless will have equal right.

Q. 66 : How will the disputes solved?

A. They will be solved by the *gaon-samaj-sabha* by consensus; no recourse will be taken to police and the courts.

Q. 67 : How much work of the scheme been completed?

A. : Only a big community well has been constructed. Proposal for 8 community wells has been submitted under the Human Development Mission programme.

Q. 68 : Is the grain bank scheme a government-sponsored one?

A. : No; we had set up the grain bank five years before the government's scheme was announced. After the announcement of the government's scheme government officials came to the village. They examined the record of our grain bank committee. The government then supplied twice the quantum of grains we had. The grain bank committee charges interest

@2% p. a., so the stock of the grains is growing. The villagers now no longer take loans from outside in the form of grains. Their exploitation has thus stopped.

Q. 69 : What is the Yashwant Gram-samruddhi Scheme?

A. : It is a scheme formulated by the Maharashtra State Government. Under it, the government gives 90% of the outlay of a developmental work if the village deposits 10% of the amount.

Q. 70 : It is said that the contractors themselves deposit the amount supposed to be the village's contribution. There are also complaints about large-scale corruption in the implementation of the scheme. What is the experience of the Mendha's village government?

A. : We duly deposited our contribution of Rs. 20000. No bribe was given. The government's contribution of Rs. 180000 was received after one and half years. The work was executed by the *gram-panchayat*. The village government (that is, the *gaon-samaj-sabha*) did the supervision. Drains were constructed. By the government's standards construction of 200 metres in Rs. 200000 is considered reasonable; we constructed 350 metres in Rs. 180000, and the quality of work was also good.

Q. 71 : What has been done regarding bio-diversity in Mendha?

A. : The Government of India made the Bio-diversity Act in 2002 and its rules in 2004. It provides for preparation of the People's Bio-diversity Register (P.B.R.) by the village's Bio-diversity Committee. For laying down the guidelines for it, a study was conducted under the leadership of Prof. Madhav Gadgil of Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. Mendha participated in that study. The Lekha *gram-panchayat* has now initiated the process of forming Bio-diversity Management Committees as provided in the Central Act.

What will you learn from Mendha and what will you do then?

Devaji Tofa

(1) Decisions should never be taken by majority. If they are so taken, groups are formed in the village. These groups are always thinking of running down each other and spend a lot of time and money in sterile political manoeuvres. But if decisions are taken by consensus, the unity and strength of the village receive a boost. Time and money are saved, and the intelligence of the villagers is directed along constructive channels. That benefits all—the individuals, the village, and the human society as well.

(2) We are under no illusion that everything has been achieved in Mendha (Lekha). We do realize that much remains to be done.

— All the decisions have not yet been fully implemented. For example, it has been decided that one male and one female member from each household should attend the *gaon-samaj-sabha* meetings, but the attendance is never 100%.

— Tasks are not always completed within the stipulated time.

— All are not equally sincere about forest patrolling.

— Everyone wants to fulfil one's needs by bringing necessary articles from the forest. But when it comes to taking responsibility, all do not evince adequate enthusiasm and interest.

— People attend meetings of the *gaon-samaj-sabha* when they need something—for example, if someone wants grains or money from the village fund, he/she would not mind sitting throughout the meeting however long it may take; but all do not actively participate in the discussions about village affairs. If one does not speak one's mind, misunderstandings cannot be entirely ruled out.

— Some persons are not keen in timely repayment of loans taken from the *gaon-samaj-sabha*, even if there is no genuine

reason. That sets a bad precedent.

— The *gaon-samaj-sabha* has therefore now decided to give loans not to individuals directly, but to self-help groups which would then disburse loans to individuals. It will be the responsibility of self-help groups to recover them and repay the loans taken from the *gaon-samaj-sabha*. This decision has also increased participation of people in the self-help groups.

— Women do participate in the *gaon-samaj-sabha* meetings, but still there is no perceptible rise of leadership among them. Efforts are needed even now to persuade them to speak.

— The youth have come together in the *Yuvak Mandal*, but they do not lay their issues before the *gaon-samaj-sabha*. What is going on in their minds does not become clear. As a result, some of them are falling prey to addiction.

— Although liquor is banned, marriage parties of brides sometimes bring liquor with them. Liquor is also smuggled in surreptitiously at times.

— The institution of *gotul* has not yet been fully activated, because of lack of proper understanding of its significance.

— Male mentality is not completely subdued. Men are not therefore as keen in ensuring the participation of women and youth in village affairs as they should.

Finally, a word of caution. Believe in yourself only. Do learn from others, but do not try to emulate them. Always stand by the decisions taken by consensus in the *gaon-samaj-sabha*, for therein lies your good and the good of your village. Consensus decision-making is the key. It is this process which has enabled Mendha to forge ahead despite occasional reverses, to build the people's power to some extent, and to go from strength to strength.

Why Consensus Decision-making?

Mohan Hirabai Hiralal

It is true that it is difficult to evolve consensus. But when all decide to adhere to this process, the necessary mentality automatically takes shape. It must be borne in mind that even a single individual in opposition may be right. Every alternative has positive and negative features. It is not that the majority opinion is entirely flawless. When a matter is studied and discussed from all the possible angles, different opinions come to light and the logic behind them becomes clear. This is the core of the decision-making process.

It is important to know why some individuals are opposing the proposal. When a matter is honestly discussed for the solution of a problem, for searching the alternative which is good for all, opposition for the sake of opposition is no longer there; the grounds of opposition are then discussed and there is a healthy exchange of ideas. Sometimes there is compromise; those in the minority show readiness to take a step backward in the hope that others will be equally accommodating in the future. This strengthens social relationships and enhances the social unity. There are then no obstructions in the implementation of the decisions taken.

Decisions are not supposed to be taken once and for all. Situation too undergoes change. It is not that those in majority will always be in majority. It is consensus decision-making which, being inclusive in nature, can accommodate all and safeguard their interests. When this is realized, putting this method into practice will not be as difficult as it appears.

Consensus decision-making appears to be time-consuming. But actual experience tells a different story. For most of the matters, evolution of consensus in the *gramsabha* does not take much time. Some issues do take more time; but then the implementation of decisions is swifter. Wastage of time during implementation, which is much more costly, is obviated. Implementation is also then much more satisfactory.

Some obstructions in implementation are natural, but they are not artificially created ones. Consensus decision-making strengthens the capacity of the people to take right decisions, and thereby develops the will and capacity to overcome those obstructions.

If participation, transparency, accountability and empowerment of the weaker sections is our aim, consensus decision-making in the village communities is the only way.

(From the discussion quoted in the book 'Vikasachya Vata' by S. G. Tapaswi)

Appendix:

Mendha's Independence

Anil Agarwal

A village meeting in Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra. Tribals from neighbouring villages have gathered in strength to discuss self-governance. A visiting expert gives a slogan, "Our own government in our village." As the meeting progresses, an old tribal asks, "But if we demand our own government in our village, then whose government is there in Delhi or Mumbai?" The old man's query made everyone sit up. Obviously, there was something wrong in their logic. After a lot of discussion a new slogan was coined: "Our own government in Delhi and Mumbai. But we ourselves are the government in our village." Taking this message to heart, the village of Mendha in the district, earlier this year, declared "independence".

This discussion amongst these villagers of so-called primitive tribes, admirably describes the difference between representative democracy and participatory democracy. And this powerful message must spread widely if villagers are to manage their own village affairs, especially their village environment. Indian *netas* and bureaucrats can wax and wane as much as they want in the U. N. or elsewhere about India's democracy. But the fact is that there is no democracy at the grassroots worth the name. All decisions are taken by politicians and bureaucrats; these percolate down to govern our villagers and their environments.

X X X

Even in the early stages of these village republics, there are some interesting results and lessons. For instance, one problem that is emerging is in the relationship of this village forum with the official village institution, the *panchayat*. The village *panchayat* in the case of Mendha covers three separate revenue villages with the *sarpanch* belonging to one of the

other settlements. Recently, the villagers of Mendha found that the *sarpanch* had given permission to a local contractor to quarry stones from within the boundary of their village. When the villagers resisted, saying that under their village resolution the use of all natural resources would be determined by their *gramsabha*, the *sarpanch* refused to accept their authority staking his claim as the official leader of the villages. A confrontation took place; villagers obstructed the trucks carrying the stones, even as the contractor threatened police action. The argument of the villagers was simple: "You say the *sarpanch* is more important than the village, but actually the *sarpanch* is made by the village and not the village by the *sarpanch*." Finally after much heat and anger, the *sarpanch* gave in. The villagers had asserted their authority.

Mendha had a lot to teach all of us. But are our *netas* and officialdom ready to learn?

(From an article written in 1991. Source: Anil Agarwal Reader 01; p. 48, 51)

We have our government
in Delhi and Mumbai,
but in our village
we ourselves are
the government.



Vrikshamitra
Chandrapur / Gadchiroli