

# **DHAS GRAMIN VIKAS KENDRA**

**ALIRAJPUR, MADHYA PRADESH**

**Annual Report 2011-12**

"Dhas Gramin Vikas Kendra" (DGVK) implemented a tribal rights programme in Alirajpur District of Madhya Pradesh in collaboration with the Bhil tribal mass organisation "Khedut Mazdoor Chetna Sangath" (KMCS) over the period from April 2011 to March 2012. The only funding partner was Edelgive Foundation, Mumbai. Apart from this local people and wellwishers made donations. The report of the work done is as follows.

## **1. Introduction**

Tribal Development in India has been problematical from the time of independence. This has been due to a conflicting situation arising from the opposition between the traditional community based subsistence economy of the tribals and the modern market based growth oriented thrust of the mainstream economy. The challenge has been to integrate the tribals into the modern economy in a manner that was beneficial to them. This has generally not been possible because the tribals have lacked the requisite skills for this and the government system for equipping them with these skills has malfunctioned. Moreover, in order to save on the costs associated with modern development the tribals have often not been recompensed and rehabilitated properly for the displacement that they have had to face as resources have been extracted from their traditional habitats.

Not surprisingly this has led to dissatisfaction on the part of the tribals. This in turn has given rise to outright political revolt, rights based New Social Movements (NSM) of tribals and also an emergence of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) for bringing about better tribal development. Decentralised and local community controlled development has been acknowledged as a major desideratum for tackling tribal deprivation. With the award of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences to Elinor Ostrom in 2009, even mainstream economics has come to acknowledge the importance of collective action for the management of common pool resources. This has also gained in importance because of the benefits in terms of mitigation of climate change that such communitarian natural resource management can achieve. The present report details the collective action undertaken by the Bhil and Bhilala tribals in Alirajpur district under the aegis of the DGVK and the KMCS to secure their rights and entitlements under various provisions of the Constitution of India and other legal statutes in the last quarter of 2011.

## **2. Work of DGVK**

The introduction of the special Panchayat Raj for Scheduled Tribal areas under the provisions of the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act 1996 (PESA) gave a boost to the work of the organisation. This act was enacted keeping in mind the provisions of the Fifth Schedule. The organisation was part of the national campaign to get this law enacted. The provision in PESA Act that the tribal Gram Sabha is to be the final arbiter on all issues of local development and that this Gram Sabha could be as small as a hamlet of a village made it easier for the organisation to implement development programmes. Often it is not possible to carry the whole village together on some development programme because the tribal hamlets of a village are situated at a distance from each other. Another law that promises to have far reaching consequences is the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forestdwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act 2006 (FRA) which gives rights to the land that the tribals have been cultivating and also community rights to the forests in which

they have been residing. Finally there is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme which if properly implemented can in addition to providing employment to the tribals also improve the natural resource base of their habitats.

The specific mobilisational strategies adopted by the organisation that have got the people to act collectively for getting their entitlements and the conservation of natural resources are –

1. Problem analysis workshops in which the people have participated in open discussions to pinpoint the problems they were facing.
2. Legal and rights training workshops in which the people were taught the basics of the liberal democratic framework.
3. Collective Action for assertive rights through public demonstrations and sitins.
4. Revival of traditional labour and resource pooling customs.
5. Special women's meetings to get them involved in resource conservation work and also public demonstrations.
6. Legal and policy advocacy to change the laws and rules in favour of the tribals.

### **3. Gaining Access to Forests and then Conserving them**

The organisation has protected the forest area prevented it from degradation. This has been done to counter the claim of the forest department that the tribals were destroying the forest. Consequently in all the hamlets of the study watershed social protection of the forests to ensure their regeneration was undertaken. Small groups patrol the forests by turns through a labour pooling system. This protection is taking place in more than fifty villages affiliated to the KMCS covering more than 10,000 hectares. The fodder generated from such protection is cut and bought by the members at the end of the monsoon season and the money thus generated is kept in a fund for carrying out plantation work. This forest protection has considerably increased the availability of fodder, firewood and non-timber forest produce in the study watershed and this has especially benefited the women and children who are the main collectors of forest products. It may be mentioned here that tribal children treat the collection of forest produce



as a playful activity and it is not labour for them. This is how they come to know their natural environment. Greater fodder availability has facilitated goat and buffalo rearing and so increased the supplementary incomes from animal husbandry which provides an insurance against livelihood shocks to the tribal households. It is not possible to quantify the increase in forest product availability because of a lack of records but people say that they now enjoy much greater forest product availability and have bigger herds of goats and cattle than earlier. Contrastingly the

landscape in villages which are not part of the organisation is barren and the forest product availability is low because no cooperative effort has been made for forest protection. This indicates the importance of community forest conservation and the crucial catalytic influence of a people's organisation in bringing this about. The picture of the regenerated forest is shown in Fig 1.

#### **4. Soil and Water Conservation**

The DGVK has organised the villagers into small groups of ten to twelve farmers each who then pooled their labour and cooperated with each other to perform their agricultural operations together and also undertake soil and water conservation activities. This was a revival of the traditional labour pooling custom of the Bhils called Dhas. In this system people work together to do agricultural operations on each others' fields, build each others' houses, and improve the quality of the farm fields through soil conservation work. However, this traditional labour pooling custom is dying out because of their integration into the mainstream money economy and the exploitation by the forest department staff.

Thus, this is a crucial intervention on the part of the organisation that has resulted in huge investments being made in the form of labour in natural resource conservation in the watershed. A major feature of this cooperative soil and water conservation work is the participation of women in it. As has been well documented the ravages of natural devastation caused by bad development are mostly borne by women. Consequently it is not surprising, that when offered an opportunity to cooperate to reduce their drudgery, women come forward enthusiastically. The organisations have pro-actively sought the participation of women to ensure gender justice. This has not only ensured that women have participated in the community actions and improved their status in society but they have also as a result, changed the gender relations at home. A picture of women working on a gully plug to create a new farm out of the deep gully in a village in Alirajpur is shown in Fig 2 below.



**Fig 2: Women working on a Gully Plug**

The intensive soil and water conservation work and the forest conservation have together ensured that both natural and artificial recharge in the watersheds have increased considerably and as a result the streams are flowing throughout the year. The farmers have used this enhanced water availability to cultivate dryland varieties of wheat which require less water. The greater availability of animal manure has resulted in the farmers using treated organic manure in larger quantities and improving the quality of the soil. The soil and water conservation work has also ensured the greater availability of soil moisture and so double cropping has become possible even without irrigation in some of the upper fields where a crop of gram is taken. In some cases the kharif jowar crop after being harvested, regenerates to give a small rabi yield from the soil moisture.

## **5. Implementation of the FRA**

The FRA has been plagued with problems right from the beginning. Even though the Act was passed in 2006 it took another year for the Rules to be framed and passed by parliament. Even after that the Madhya Pradesh government was very tardy in setting in motion the process for application and verification of the rights of the tribals. The organisation has had to organise many demonstrations to first get the process started and then for it to continue. Even now the implementation is faulty and tardy and the organisation has filed a complaint with the State Level Forest Rights Monitoring Committee regarding the non-implementation of the Act. The organisation is also preparing a detailed list of eligible applicants and lease right awardees as part of a petition to be filed in the High Court of Madhya Pradesh. Nevertheless compared to the rest of Madhya Pradesh, due to the pressure created by organisation, the implementation is far better in Alirajpur where over 8000 claims have been accepted and the rejection percentage is only 5% as compared to 50% for other tribal areas as a whole. As many as 62 claims of Community Forest Rights have been accepted. What is most heartening is that the process is still under way. The organisation has also pro-actively used the MGNREGS to carry out soil and water conservation works on the lands for which the tribals have gained lease rights under the FRA.

A recent review report of the implementation of the FRA by a committee appointed by the Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs of the Government of India has also severely indicted the state governments and especially the forest department staff for very poor implementation. The major criticisms are as follows –

1. Most states have concentrated almost entirely on implementing the provisions for individual forest rights (IFRs). About 83% of these claims have been disposed of, and 35% claims have been approved, with titles issued for most of them. There are, however, major errors of omission. Even in states where implementation began more than two years ago, many pockets have not yet been covered, and many potential claimants have not managed to submit their claims.
2. The biggest problem is with the many cases of faulty rejections. Rejections are being done without assigning reasons or simply for lack of evidence or 'absence of GPS survey' (lacunae which only require the claim to be referred back to the lower-level body), or because the land is wrongly considered as 'not forest land', or because only forest offence receipts are considered as adequate evidence.
3. In an overwhelming number of cases, the rejections are not being communicated to the claimants and their right to appeal is not being explained to them and its exercise facilitated.
4. Community forest rights have not been recognised in most places and the lack of awareness about this among the tribals is even higher than for IFRs.

Overall tremendous success has been achieved in the last quarter of 2011 by this project which has mobilised the people through village trainings. **Children too have been mobilised through workshops held in each of the project villages and it has been ensured that they are going to school and the schools are running well.** The striking achievements are detailed below -

**i). MGNREGS** - The scheme has been plagued with corruption as has been reported earlier. This has led to constant friction between the workers of the organisation and the local Panchayat administration. The organisation then formed a plan to trap the Sondwa Janpad Chief Executive Officer accepting a bribe with the help of the Lokayukt organisation. So the husband of a Sarpanch who is not directly connected with the organisation was used as a decoy and when he approached the CEO for release of funds for his Panchayat the latter demanded Rs 4000 as bribe. A trap was set up after a complaint was filed to the Lokayukt office in Indore and a team from that office then caught the CEO redhanded accepting the bribe on 12th January 2012. This was a major achievement and was extensively covered by all local newspapers in detail. On another complaint from the organisation the accountant of the Janpad Panchayat in Sondwa was suspended for defalcating funds. In this way the local administration has now been put under considerable pressure and in the areas in which the organisation is active at least it is working well. Work is in progress in many villages where demand for work was submitted by the organisation members and pending payments also have been made in other villages. The most notable example has been that of Delwani village where ten villagers whose payments for work done in digging wells had been held up for over a year, received their pending payments at their homes. The most significant achievement is that the Bhoomishilp scheme has been implemented in Pujara Chowki village on the farm land that the farmers there have got title to under the Forest Rights Act. Thus, this is a very important synergistic implementation of the MGNREGS and FRA for providing sustainable livelihood support to the tribals. A picture of the villagers in front of the bunding work done on their farms is given below –



**Fig 3. Farm Bunds on land gained under FRA**

**ii. Public Action** – The organisation led a "Natural Resource Rights March" across the four states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan organised by Action Aid Tribal Rights team to stress the non-implementation of the provisions of the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act which empowered the tribals to conserve and use natural resources simultaneously. The organisation provided both the intellectual and mass leadership to this programme which started from Nandurbar in Maharashtra on 30th January and ended in Udaipur in Rajasthan on 20th February 2012. This march was a tremendous success. A public assembly was also organised in village Vakner to coincide with the visit of an appraisal team from Action Aid India in preparation for beginning funding from the next financial year.