



VASUNDHARA



A VILLAGE WHERE FOREST CONSERVATION IS A FAMILY TRADITION FOR WOMEN

Presented by :
Nityanand Rai

MARCH 2024

A VILLAGE WHERE FOREST CONSERVATION IS A FAMILY TRADITION FOR WOMEN

The tired eyes of Chanchala Pradhan sparkle once she understands that someone is asking her about her days of *thengapali* or guarding the village forest. She is in her late eighties and struggles to walk and hear properly but once she understands the question, she replies in a shaking but firm voice with a sense of self-pride.

“Today’s generation doesn’t know what it took us to protect our forest in those days. We were confronted with timber mafias and forest officials to take control of our forest. It is because of our struggle that the forest has grown so dense today,” she says while proudly looking towards the hills with lush green forest that overlooks the village. Pramila Pradhan (45) shyly but respectfully nods to her mother-in-law's statement in affirmation.

It has been more than 25 years since Pramila Pradhan, a young woman from Kondh tribe came to Kodalpalli village after her marriage as the daughter-in-law of the village. At that time, she was in her early twenties.

Kodalpalli is a small village of 15 households in Surkabadi GP of Ranpur block of Nayagarh district. The village is surrounded by dense forest and a large part of this forest is covered by cashew plantations. Pramila Pradhan understood the importance of forest in sustaining the livelihood and subsistence needs of her family and other households of the village in her early days while trying to adapt to the new responsibility of being a daughter-in-law.



Photo – Pramila Pradhan with her mother-in-law Chanchala Pradhan who was one of the pioneers of forest conservation in Kodalpalli village

When forest started dwindling women came forward as saviours

Pramila Pradhan started going to forests to bring fuelwood, siali leaves for making leaf plates, mangoes, tubers, and other NTFPs daily with her mother-in-law Chanchala Pradhan. However, the forest on which the people of Kodalpalli were dependent for their livelihood and subsistence needs was dwindling fast due to the illegal logging of trees by timber mafias. Moreover, the people of Kodalpalli had very little control over the forest as mafias were very powerful and it was considered that the forest department was responsible for the protection and management of the forest.

However, when villagers started feeling that diminishing forest resources had started affecting their day-to-day livelihood needs, they decided to come together and take the responsibility of forest protection into their own hands.

In the year 1999, Kodalpalli and its neighbouring village Sinduria came together and decided to protect their forests through the *thengapali* system. In the *thengapali* system of community forest protection, every household of the village takes turns going for forest guarding duty with a *thenga* or stick which symbolizes their status of being *palia* or a person on forest guarding duty. This system of community forest protection is popular in many districts of Odisha, especially in the Nayagarh district.

When *thengapali* began in Kodalpalli, all the residents of both villages used to go to the forest in groups and confront timber mafias. The villagers confiscated their axe, cycles and other instruments and told them not to return to their forest again. In a couple of months, the forest was free from timber mafias after which *thengapali* started on a rotational basis.

When the discussion on rotational *thengapali* started in the village, a few village women came forward to take the lead. Male members of both villages supported this proposal as they knew from the example of their neighbouring village Dengajhari that women prove more efficient in forest protection than their male counterparts.



Photo- Chanchala Pradhan (in center) and other women pioneers of forest protection in Kodalpali

So, the women of Kodalpali formed a forest protection committee and eventually developed a set of rules and regulations regarding *thengapali* and the benefit distribution from forest resources. Most of the women who pioneered *thengapali* in the village were illiterate but all the rules and regulations regarding forest conservation and management are at their fingertips. These rules were never written on paper and the women-led forest protection committee keeps on adding or deleting the rules as per the need and changing times.

Forest conservation became a family tradition for women

Chanchala Pradhan was one of the pioneers of forest protection in Kodalpali village. She and other elder women of the village started going for *thengapali* daily. Young Pramila Pradhan also used to join her mother-in-law in forest protection duties. Gradually when Chanchala Pradhan grew old and was unable to go to the forest, her entire responsibility was taken over by the Pramila Pradhan. Similarly, other daughter-in-laws carried forward the responsibilities of their mother-in-law when they grew old.

Pramila Pradhan was appointed as the secretary of the forest protection committee of the village. She is leading a forest protection committee consisting of the second and third generation of women forest protectors.

Assertion of legal rights over forest resources

While the first generation of women forest leaders freed their forest from timber mafias and established effective community control over their forest, the subsequent generation struggled to get legal rights over their forest and its resources.



Photo -Pramila Pradhan with her fellow members of the forest protection committee of Kodalpali village, Ranpur

The struggle started with asserting legal ownership rights over the forest and cashew plantation which was earlier controlled by the soil conservation department and the forest department.

The cashew plantations were done by the Soil Conservation Department and Forest Department in the 1980s on agricultural land and forest land of the village with the promise that cashew plantations would be returned to the villagers after attaining maturity. However, when cashew plants started giving fruits it was not returned to villagers rather the departments started auctioning them to outsiders, and villagers were given only the daily minimum wage for plucking fruits from the cashew tree.

After the passing of the Forest Rights Act, of 2006, both the villages under the leadership of their women-led forest protection committee, started asserting their right over the entire forest land under their protection including the cashew plantation. The community applied for community rights (CR) and community forest resource rights (CFRR) under FRA in 2009. This turned out to be a long battle but their perseverance provided the result. After 12 long years, in November 2021, both villages got their joint CR and CFRR titles under the Forest Rights Act, of 2006.

Rights led to the strengthening of livelihood

After recognition of their rights, the village women took control of the entire cashew plantation. In cashew season one can see entire village women collectively collecting the cashew fruits in the plantation area but not as a wage laborer but its owners. Now both villages are earning more than Rs 2 Lakh per year with the sale of raw cashew nuts. They do

collective marketing of their product and the benefit is equally distributed within all the families.¹

Apart from cashew plantations, today Kodalpali and Sinduria villages also have a large tract of dense natural forest under their ownership and control. Today, the Kodalpali and Sinduria villages of Ranpur block, jointly protect a forest patch of more than 758 acres of land.



Photo- women of Kodalpali collectively collecting cashew fruits

Initiative for forest-related knowledge and responsibility transfer

Pramila Pradhan who learned the intricacies of forest management from her mother-in-law, understands it very well how important it is to transfer the knowledge and responsibility of forest management to the next generation. For this purpose, she initiated the concept of Jungle-kutir. Under her leadership, the village has constructed a small hut called 'Jungle-Kutir' with community contributions and collective efforts. This hut is a meeting place for the forest protection committee. The committee has decided to convert this place into an exhibition center to showcase the efforts of the village committee in forest protection and art and artifacts showing the rituals and culture of the village.

¹ Jha S (12 September 2022). After 40 years, Nayagarh villagers finally reap benefits of cashew plantation. Down to Earth.



Photo – Forest information center or Jungle Kutir of Kodalpali village. This hut is a meeting place for the forest protection committee of the village. The committee has decided to develop this hut as an exhibition center for their forest conservation efforts.

Way forward

The forest protection committee of the Kodalpali and Sinduria, though working efficiently but it is still a non-statutory body. The committee is thinking of converting it into a community forest management committee (CFRMC) under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, which will be a statutory body and can prepare a wholistic community forest resource management plan (CFRMP) taking care of forest and biodiversity protection as well as livelihood security of the community.