

Conflict Management

A historical case study in Gonduribari



Gonduribari is a secluded village amidst the forest fringes of Nayagarh Odisha surrounded by villages like Lathipura, Gombhani, Sonkeyee, Notar, and Kendudhipi. The residents of this village have been entirely dependent on the forest around them for their livelihood and sustenance for a very long time.

Gonduribari has been one of those villages protecting and conserving the forest for more than three decades now, from long before the forest rights act came into existence. At that time, the constitution did not even identify the role of indigenous and forest dwelling communities in forest protection and conservation.

The history of this conservation dates back centuries, but the official protection committee was formed in 1987-1988. The need for a forest protection committee came from the fact that at that time, these people had no rights over the forest land (this was the pre forest rights act era), and the forest department had a monopoly over their land. The forest department auctioned off bulks of forest land to the corporates and wealthy mafia contractors, leading to rapid overuse,

overexploitation, and degradation. The overall forest cover around Gonduribari and its neighboring villages had decreased immensely. It also increased the competition for available forest resources amongst neighboring villages, increasing conflict.

At this time, the people of Gonduribari village found an immediate need to form a forest protection committee, which would represent the dependency of the forest dwellers on forest resources, and protect the people in the village against the many conflicts it was facing at the time.

This decision came as a democratic one in unison with all the senior advisors in the village who had inherited years of traditional knowledge. After that, the village president, Arjun Pradhan, finalized a Forest Protection Committee, which was to be presided by Manas Pradhan.

At that time, the committee was constituted solely of male participants, and primarily catered to protecting the forest from random strangers, neighboring villagers, or mafia groups who entered the woods and committed theft and deforestation.

This protection committee was functional and carried out most of its duties by guarding the forest and finding the perpetrators. By the end of the 90s, the accessibility of neighboring villages to the forest had reduced, leading to more conflicts. In 1998-1999, Gonduribari and its people faced many challenges getting access to markets, schools, and medical institutions. They were blocked, isolated, and disliked by many neighboring villages, who claimed they were allegedly reducing the accessibility of other villages to their forest.

This conflict climaxed one day when a male villager from Gonduribari went to the Darpanarayan market where a group of angry and aggressive people blocked him. It soon turned into an intense physical fight amongst a group of opposing men. Gonduribari villagers soon realized that this conflict resolution was the need of the hour, or else it could jeopardize their lives.

In 2000, the village committee, through democratic decision-making, came up with a unique solution. They dissolved the male forest protection committee and formed a women's forest protection committee. In this model, women-led, women strategized, and women handled conflict. It had the support of most of the men in the village. Most decision-making areas would ensure active participation and support from men. Men continued to guard the forest at night while women took up the responsibility to protect the jungle from the morning till the afternoon.

The forest grew over time through the committees' contribution, but soon enough, the conflicts among the villages decreased. Meetings and joint discussions also resulted in resolving physical violence. Sustainable strategies were formed by sharing forest resources and treating them like a common resource pool. The committee also decided on various price points for surrounding villages to acquire NTFP sustainably. Gonduribari shares peaceful relations with most of their neighboring villages with occasional issues arising from individual action. In such circumstances, committees of both villages come together and arrive at an appropriate compensation for resolving the matter.

The women's protection committee, currently presided by Rama Pradhan- a very senior member of the women's protection, talks about the overarching forests back from when she got married 50 years ago. The forest had significantly depleted for twenty years before the 1970s. The interference and exploitation by the forest department and the corporates had exhausted most of the forest land, endangering the lives of forest dwellers and wild animals. She proudly says how the village has come a long way to protect what was given to them by god. They all share the dream of regrowing the forests so that their children can inherit God's gift and continue the legacy.

One of the most prominent reasons for such conflict management strategies to have worked in Gonduribari was the potential of the management technique to be adaptive and emergent. It also needed the shifting and distribution of power in a way that is most effective and efficient. It even required the redistribution of socially accepted structures. The evolution and rapid adaptation of the villages to newer challenges explain how clear their goals were. The focus was always on protection of forests, and everything that needed to be done to ensure this protection. The world deals in various forms of conflict management and negotiation techniques, but it comes right out of real-life problem solving for these communities.

Story consolidated from- Nilamani Mahapatra (CFM management and Governance- 30 years of field experience)

Case Study prepared by - Christi Kesh (Biodiversity Conservation and Governance)

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