

Not just bamboo, big gains from Forest Rights

Classifying bamboo as a grass, and big strides in the use of non-timber forest produce have helped local communities

IN 2013, THE unanimous decision of 12 *gram sabhas* in Odisha's Kalahandi and Rayagada districts—following a Supreme Court order to the state to ensure the *gram sabhas* got conducted—scuttled Vedanta Aluminium's proposal to mine the Niyamgiri hills in the state. It meant thousands of jobs in one of India's poorest states would never come to fruition and significant revenue earnings for the state would go unrealised. Given the provisions of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act gave the Dongria Kondh tribals of the region to choose their religious beliefs over an economic opportunity of tremendous potential, it can be safely said that the Forest Rights Act (FRA) is a serious impediment to growth. However, a recent report in *Down to Earth (DTE)* forces some nuancing. FRA which safeguards forest dwellers' individual, community and community forest resource (CFR) rights, has economically empowered forest dwellers in an unprecedented manner—the last two classes of rights have had the greatest impact. Add to this, the boost to bamboo cultivation with the government classifying it as a grass instead of a tree.

As per *DTE* calculations based on a study by Institute of Economic Growth, the per hectare value of non-timber forest produce (NTFP) works out to ₹2,859—that means a gross value of over ₹9,800 crore, which is greater than the sum of the budget allocations to the tribal affairs ministry and the ministry of environment, forests and climate change. Forest-based communities are also starting to realise some of this potential value, aided by relevant FRA provisions. Panchgaon village in Chandrapur district of Maharashtra sold bamboo at the rate of ₹2,545 per tonne in 2013, *DTE* reports. Once the village's community and CFR claims were recognised, the people of the village managed to collectively bargain for better prices for bamboo, even bringing in competitive bidding by traders, and realised ₹5,242 per tonne in 2015. The village, which has just 60 households, has earned more than ₹1.4 crore between 2013 and 2017, from just selling bamboo, and has paid ₹8 lakh in taxes. Backed by CFR rights, it has also ensured that bamboo is not indiscriminately harvested in the CFR area. There are many such examples of FRA success and ground-up empowerment—from another Maharashtra village nearly doubling the rates it realised from *tendu* leaves, a major NTFP, in just four years to Gujarat villages creating many jobs from bamboo processing. Two examples from the *DTE* report stand out, and both are from Odisha. While tribal women in the state's Kandhamal district have managed to negotiate an export deal for *siali* leaf plates with German concerns, realising ₹100 for 100 plates vis-a-vis ₹10 for 80 plates in local sales in 2013, tribal communities from six villages in Kalahandi have managed to wrest the trade of *tendu* leaves from the monopoly of the Odisha Forest Development Corporation, a state forest department concern. As opposed to the ₹2.40 the state corporation was offering them for a bundle of 60 leaves last year, they got ₹7.50 from direct sales to traders.

There are, according to *DTE*, 150 million forest dwellers, and so far, just 4.2 million individual, community and CFR claims have been filed of which 1.7 million have been recognised. Thus, the scope from FRA implementation could be huge. But, as the Vedanta Aluminium instance shows, in some cases, trade-offs could have debilitating economic impact. The need, thus, is to bring in both perspectives while considering the recognition of forest rights over a particular area. Such a balanced approach would help liberate the forest dwellers from the over-bearing state forest departments.