
India: "Gachha bina. (Without trees) . . . jeevana nahi (no life)"

A conflict has arisen regarding 400,000 hectares of forest land in the Indian state of Orissa. Actors are the villagers who have recreated the forest from barren lands and government officials, who believe the area belongs to the state. Out of the total protected area, 60% are reserve forests and the rest are either protected or village forests. Sustainable forests management by local communities in the area started in the decade of 1960.

Now 2,000,000 people belonging to 10,000 villages spread in the region are fighting to obtain from the state government their legitimate rights over the forests. The villagers have formed the Orissa Jungle Manch (OJM), a state-level forum, whose aim is to force the government to recognise their territorial rights. Coming National Assembly elections are a good opportunity for them to put forward such a demand, so the forum is also lobbying political parties to include the community rights issue in their manifestos. As part of its strategy, OJM has decided to circulate a charter of six demands accompanied with a detailed note on the peoples' movement to all the political leaders, from village to state level. Such demands are:

- Rights of protection and management of forests to be given to the communities. This means that no forest department official should be appointed to institutions monitoring protection activities at present;
- Rights over collection, as well as over marketing and selling of non-timber forest products produce (NTFP) should be given to the communities;
- Rights over domestic use of timber from the protected forests, without the permission of forest department officials;
- Rights over fuelwood extraction from the village forests and to sell the extra fuelwood;
- Communities living inside reserved or protected parks/sanctuaries should be given joint management rights over the area and all other rights listed above;
- The government should survey all the forest areas and assign communities areas to be protected by them.

Neither the peoples' movements for the conservation of the forests nor conflicts on the ownership and management of natural resources are new in India. Local communities' struggle for the forests in Orissa already started in 1937. For instance in Dhenkanal, one of the pioneers in the community forest movement of Orissa, occurred a "prajameli" (peoples' revolution) for complete rights over forest resources and abolition of forest tax, followed by a "kandhameli" (tribal revolution) to demand the same. The movement spread to other princely states like Nayagarh, Daspalla and some areas of Sambalpur. As a result the king at that time declared an equal division of the forest produce between the government and the community and suggested joint management of the resources. The situation of indigenous peoples living nearby and in the Rajiv Gandhi National Park, in Karnataka State (see WRM Bulletin 20) as well as the struggle of traditional fisherfolk communities at Chilika Lake in Orissa (see WRM Bulletin 24) which recently obtained a commitment from the state government to present a bill that would give them absolute fishing rights, are two examples of ongoing conflicts for natural resources in that country.

When Joginath Sahoo, a 30-year old teacher in Kesharpur village in Orissa's Nayagarh district, enters the classroom his students greet him by saying "Gachha bina...(without trees)". And he completes the sentence for them, "... jeevana nahi (no life)". To assure life for local communities, forests have to be under their direct control.