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The story of a principled chief conservator of forests in Bastar, Chhattisgarh

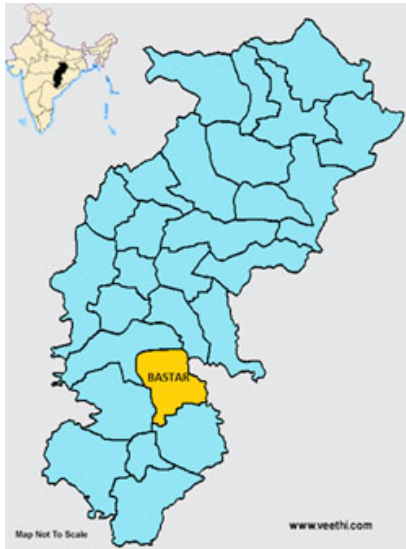
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While the forest department has been busy working forests for timber, a single man in Bastar holds hope for the many villages that have lost their natural forests



The real story, which we have grown unaccustomed to,... is chemically free of explanation. The story is always about something unexplainable. The art of narration declines as explanations are added.

Cesar Aira, Buenos Aires (1988)


By way of introduction

Sarkar theen parkar

Narpitana,

Jiyam Noipitana,

Adei Tindana (A Durwa saying)²

Map of Bastar District ¹
 [Enlarge View](#)

[2]

Over the last decade or more, the mere mention of Bastar has evoked stereotypical responses. Most people – those who are concerned or pretend to be so – ask me whether “things” are any better there. When I tell them that nothing has improved, that matters are perhaps worse, the conversation peters out. Anyone who knows that there is unrest in a large part of India – the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs³ lists 33 districts as naxal-affected in Central India, 7 of them in Chhattisgarh – should wonder why there is so little news from there. National newspapers rarely mention anything from Chhattisgarh except the sporadic “encounter” or “blast”, the periodic allocation of coal blocks to companies or, at another level, the efficiency of the Bharatiya Janata Party’s approach to governance.

The usual words and phrases linked to Bastar⁴, in alphabetical order, are: abuse, ambushed, atrocities, attack, beheaded, BSF, burnt, camp, combing operations, Communist, CRPF, dense jungles, destroyed, flushed out, human rights, infested, Jungle Warfare College, kidnapped, killed, land mines, Mahendra Karma, Naga Battalion, Operation Green Hunt, police, raped, Salwa Judum, surrounded, thana, and so on. Why would anybody, other than the BBC, Médecins Sans Frontières or the UN, want to be there? And is it not strange that they are not there anymore?

It is in the context of this region –which evokes dejection, fear and loss of faith for any citizen who seeks to know what is actually going on – that the village described below is located. It is situated in the Bakawand block of Bastar district, about 45 km north-east from Jagdalpur⁵, the district headquarters.

The setting

Because a thing is difficult for you, do not therefore suppose it to be beyond mortal power. On the contrary, if anything is possible and proper for man to do, assume that it must fall within your own capacity. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (Book VI.19)

Ever noticed how an adivasi moves in the forest? The easy stride, the bare foot placed confidently yet softly on the ground, a subtle swing of the hips? Any village with a good forest is reflected in the people who live in and around it, in their health and attitude to life, and in the way they walk and speak. Much of the following narrative is about the forests around a village in central Bastar, known as Sandh Karmari⁶.

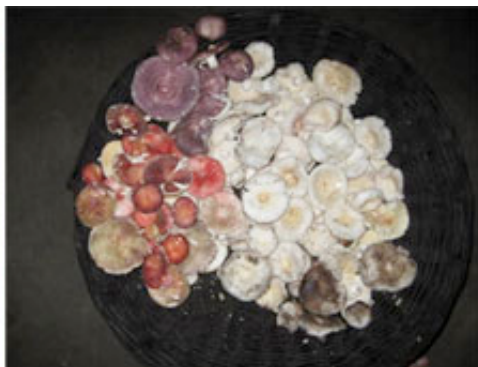
This easy movement quite disappears when the forest is not one's own, more so when the journey is to gather firewood or leaves or mushrooms from alien territory. Many strangers come into the Karmari forests and their walk is marked by stealth.

Sandh Karmari is a Bhatra village. Rice fields interspersed with sal and mixed forests mark the landscape. The village borders Odisha on most sides, the boundary being defined by the Kurundi stream along some parts and by a low ridge in others. Some fields are contiguous with no obvious demarcation. Karmari is spread out and has a mixed population of about seven to eight different communities. About four or five Bihari families settled in the village a generation ago, all owning a fair amount of land, tractors and a tribal mistress or wife. The presence of a few Bihari and Oriya Brahmin families in villages along the Odisha border is consistent. Buying trees from the villagers and selling them outside; running mahua bhattis and selling quarter bottles of spurious whisky; breaking a hillside for stone; organizing the smuggling of plants from the sacred grove; running a kirana shop; masquerading as doctors and peddling allopathic medicine – these are some of their regular business activities. Inevitably, there is a close relative in some government department, an aid to the family's parasitic tendencies. The general calm that pervades a village with an all-adviasi population is not allowed to persist for long, and something always happens! I mention this knowing well the dangers of generalising; the option of remaining silent is worse.

In this part of Bastar and Odisha, the Alek Mahima sect (commonly known as buchia) is very popular. They wear saffron, apparently worship the formless, are vegetarians and drink no alcohol, eat before sunset, and often marry within their own sect. In tribal India, where all festive or religious occasions demand meat and drink, these people stand out for their sobriety. In addition, many of them, who also work just as hard as the others, suffer from anaemia, dizziness and low blood pressure, gastric ulcers and piles, perhaps a result of their lopsided diets.

Despite the extent of the rice fields, the village has many forest patches and is surrounded by numerous streams. From whichever direction one approaches the village, one encounters vast stands of mahua trees that dot and give character to the fields. During the spring and early summer months the strong fragrance of mahua blossom pervades the air. There are also hundreds of fish-tail toddy palms in the village and each morning the middlemen go from palm to palm, collecting their frothing fluid in large containers: much of the toddy drunk in the villages along the way to Jagdalpur comes from the palms of Karmari.

The monsoon months are synonymous with fishing - with nets, traps of various sizes, "bisar" (small platforms in the water where the fish climb up and are trapped), with hook and line. Every evening fish traps are laid in the rice fields, the spots chosen after studying the water flow. Before dawn the traps are retrieved to prevent the fish from being stolen. Stealing fish from other people's traps is common in most adivasi villages and not looked upon as a serious crime. But it is terrible when a trap gets stolen, as one has to go without fish until a new trap is fashioned!



Fishing in the rice fields (left) and a mushroom collection (right)

Fishing in the rice fields (left)

A lot of fish is available in the season. Only a part of the catch is cooked and the rest spread out on large bamboo mats and smoke-dried. Almost everybody in the village fishes; even some of the buchias eat fish. As the rice-fields in Karmari are not contaminated by pesticides or fertilizers - these are used in the drier lands where hybrid maize is grown - the fish are abundant and tasty. The few greens gathered from the fields during the monsoon (chunchuniya, bhaji⁷ and various amaranths, colocasia) are also a regular part of the diet. Other greens include Bauhinia purpurea, Celosia, etc. The sal forests around the village supply mushrooms and boda⁸ (various mycorrhiza with sal) and after sudden rains during a dry spell women go off to search among the leaf litter. About five kinds of yams (*Dioscorea* sp.) are gathered by most people seasonally, a practice that has declined in villages around the towns.

The legend of Kilwa Tarai

When a writer strives to present reality most faithfully he becomes convinced that untruth is at times the greatest truth. The world is so rich and so complex that the more one tries not to omit any part of the truth, the more one uncovers wonders that elude the pen.

Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind*

The leading clan of the Bhatra people in Karmari came originally from Kangar Balenga, near Juna Bastar. The Raja of Bastar employed them regularly to get him victims for the annual human sacrifice in the palace temple. After serving the Raja for several years they got tired of this job and ran away to Tungapalli, near what is now Jagdalpur. For a few years the sacrifices stopped and the Raja became anxious and sent a search party after the Bhatra people who had fled Kangar Balenga. They were found and brought back and the sacrifices resumed. After a few years they fled again, this time to Jamguda, where the Melia Dev⁹ resides, and hid there; the Raja's people pursued them and brought them back.



Kilwa Tarai Some years later the Bhatras escaped again and hid in Bairagiguda, a place now in the reserve forest. The Raja managed to trace them and made them do the job assigned to them. The Bhatras obeyed the Raja; they lived as Bairagis, with gourd vessels and coarse clothes to entice people, and brought sacrificial victims to the Raja for many years. Then they

escaped to Jadopodar, near what is now Potiyawand; then to Tumaguda; then to Siyadiguda, quite close to what is now Karmari, and then finally to Bhainkaguda, the Jungle Cat Hamlet, where the first settlers of this clan now live.

After coming to Bhainkaguda, victims for the sacrifices were regularly procured and sent to the Raja. Many years went by. One day, when they were searching for the next victim, a clansman saw a young man wandering near their camp. They captured him and took him to their camp chief who had an unmarried daughter for whom it was becoming difficult to find a groom. The girl happened to like the stranger. The clansmen discussed the stranger amongst themselves - he seemed to be a suitable boy for the girl - and decided to get the pair married. Various rituals were performed and messengers sent to the Raja to settle matters permanently with him; the Bhatras would no longer do the work of finding human beings for sacrifice.

The clan girl was married to the stranger and lived with him. One day she left for the Kilwa spring in the outskirts of the village to bathe and wash her clothes. When she did not return within a reasonable amount of time her relatives went in search of her. They found her atop a banyan tree that grew near the edge of the water. When the relatives asked her to climb down she refused. She insisted that her people give her and her husband a place of their own to live; she wanted a forest patch, and an area that could be cleared for rice-fields, and she wanted their own water. Her clansmen promised to give her what she wanted. The couple were sent to the Potiyawand¹⁰ forest, to a spot formerly occupied by the Bhatra clan during one of their hiding-stints. They were given the Kilwa spring for water; they cleared the forest near Jadopodar and created fields up to the edge of the Kurundi stream.

Gradually, a new clan emerged and grew in Potiyawand. Their kinship with the Bhainkaguda clan was that of mama-bhacha¹¹, they could give and take brides from each other. The Kilwa spring became a part of the Potiyawand people, the Bhainkaguda clan gave it up totally. However, over the last decade, this close relationship began to sour. The Potiyawand people finished off their forests and became dependent on the forests belonging to Karmari. Though their daily needs were tolerated, the Karmari people resented the felling of larger sal trees and the smuggling of timber, resulting in the present enmity.

Damodar

It is not at all infrequent to find the leader or chieftain of a tribe to be friendly, helpful, intelligent, trustworthy and dedicated; in fact, to encounter the opposite is a rare experience. The naturalist, interested in plants and animals... usually is immediately accepted with

excessive collaborative attention. These leaders are gentlemen, and all that is required to bring out their gentlemanliness is reciprocal gentlemanliness.

Richard Evans Schultes, Where the Gods Reign

When I went to visit Karmari some years ago I stopped at the Karpawand Police Station to mark my hazri¹², to comply with an unwritten code while travelling in Bastar these last several years. It was almost dusk as I walked in through the gates unnoticed and climbed up the steps to the veranda where a few policemen were chatting. My sudden appearance revved them into a panic and they grabbed their guns and pointed them at me, shouting Ruko, Ruko! Tum Koan Ho¹³? I realized that I'd only make matters worse if I told them who I was and so I said I was there to visit Damodar, the sarpanch of Sandh Karmari. It immediately settled everything, and I moved on.

Damodar had been the sarpanch of Sandh Karmari until 2009 when the seat was reserved for a mahila¹⁴. But he was still known as the sarpanch in the entire region. It would be strange if that wasn't so, as he had held that position for an unbroken 35 years, the years when he transformed the village from a near barren landscape to what it is now.

Damodar is always dressed in a dhoti and a white shirt and until recently rode an old bicycle. He is a small man but has a quiet and dignified air of authority about him. His face is pock-marked, the sign of an encounter with small-pox during childhood. "They tell me I almost died then," he recalls. "At another time I fell off a bullock cart and came under the wheel. And once a cobra bit me. I really shouldn't be alive." He usually speaks only when spoken to but never fails to amaze one with the range of information he has or the subjects that he has dealt with. Agriculture, fishing, law, religion, politics and the government are areas he deals with as a matter of course.



Damodar

The giant siyadi climber and

Near Damodar's house is a huge siyadi¹⁵ climber, festooning the Ficus and sal trees around it. As it was the only siyadi I'd seen in the village I asked Damodar about it. I learned that as a young man he had visited a neighbouring village and brought back two seeds. One seed he had roasted, feeding the kernel to his little daughter; the other he had sowed behind the fence. Now, fifty years later, its shade called out to the children who played under it during the hottest days of summer.

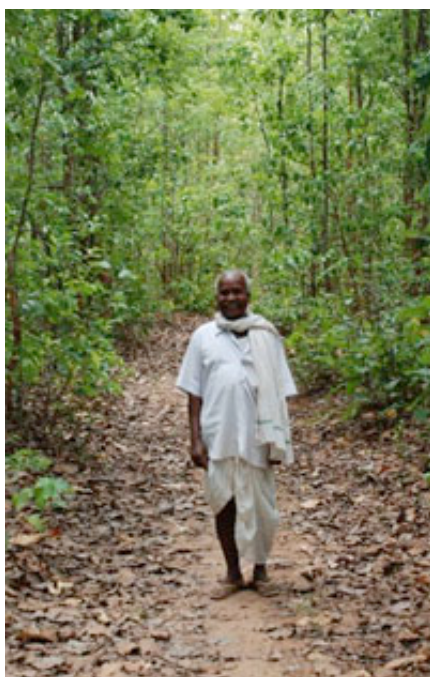
As a boy in the 1950s, Damodar grew up in Karmari and went to the primary school in Jaithgiri about seven km away. The few boys who went to school walked through the dense sal forest, returning home just before sunset. After primary school Damodar was sent for further studies to Jagdalpur where he stayed in the hostel and returned home for good in

1971. This was unusual, as the trend, then as now, was for educated men to drift outwards from the village. In many villages they were the first generation of literates and became forest guards or schoolteachers. They settled in the towns they were posted in, coming home only for festivals or functions in their families.

On his return he was shocked to see that the forest which had infringed upon their backyard – deer used to come for the discarded leaf-cups after dinner – had now retreated far away. Most of the large trees in the forests had been felled in the forest department coups (the money from the sale of timber was split between the people and the FD in a 30-70 per cent deal) and the people had been reduced to digging up the roots for fuel-wood!

It is rather ironic that the forest department plays a prominent role in the unfolding saga of forest loss in Bastar, and almost none in restoration. The department's 'working plans' are guides to the periodic extraction of timber and fuel-wood, and of bamboo. In all forest districts the onset of the dry season is awaited eagerly as the felling and loading, and the taking away, has to be done before the monsoon sets in again. Large climbers like the siyadi and the duma-dira¹⁶, which allow for movement of civets and flying squirrels along the canopy, are cut down to prevent them from strangling the timber trees. Many of the climbers are valued by the people who use them for several purposes – thereby unintentionally managing the timber – but there has been no effort to by the department to understand what the forest means to the people. There have been phases when all crooked bamboo in a tract of forest were cleaned up; the entangled and matted base around the clumps, where shrews and hares can hide, have given way to four or five erect lengths of bamboo, suitable for harvest and sale. Dirt tracks sufficient for jeeps have to be black-topped and black-topped roads have to be widened.

The impact of these “projects” of the Jungle Depart, as the adivasi unknowingly but correctly refers to them, has rarely been monitored. No part of the state is free from a project or potential projects whose logic defies the other stated purposes of the same department! Only the people living in and around such forests see and feel the effects such management. And it is obvious that the people of a place do not figure in the Jungle Department's plans, neither in the premise nor the conclusion.



Damodar in Badla Kot This was the apathy that prevailed undivided Bastar when Damodar decided to take up the task of nurturing the forests around his village. It is a scene that prevails in many villages within a 40 km radius of Jagdalpur, the seat of power in the district. Of desolate villages without shade, of people who burn plastic cement bags to cook a meal or to keep warm, and suffer summer and winter in turns.

“This had happened even in the village nistar¹⁷ forests,” Damodar explained. Sab kuch bech ke kha diye¹⁸! Wherever he went he saw tree-stumps. He was troubled and decided to act. When the elections for sarpanch came by in '76-'77 he stood and won and took up the task of restoring the landscape around the village.

“One of the first decisions was to appoint people to guard the forests around the village.” To pay for this, every household was made to contribute. People who had 10 or more acres (one acre equals 0.4 hectare) of land paid 5 measures of grain annually:

square or a hectare) of land paid 3 measures of grain annually, those who had 6-9 acres paid 4 measures; less than 6 acres meant 2 measures; and those who had no land paid 1 measure. The degraded nistar forests were allowed to grow – it is now called badla kot, nurtured forest – and the people refrained from grazing their cattle there. Fortunately the seeds of most of the species in a sal forest were still available and in the protected environment they flourished and grew – mango, sal, mahua, bija, adan, amodi, chironji, bhelwa, shatawri, dhaur, jamun, amla, safed musli, kali musli, the whole lot of them! Today, after about 35 years, this 215-acre patch of forest shows what a people can do if motivated.



Inside badla kot the few large trees in the new forest

Another asset of Karmari people is the Mauli Kot, the large sacred grove of Mauli Devi, a 100-acre patch of old forest that hosts langurs and flying squirrels and a variety of birds. The range of plants includes many that are medicinal or rare. The sacred grove gives an idea of what the vegetation of the region would have been like in the past, before the administration eyed the sal, and the adivasi people levelled the forest to grow rice and millets. When Damodar took over as the sarpanch, the weekly haat (bazaar) was located at the edge of the grove. Though it was convenient – located centrally and near a pond – it also meant unnecessary disturbance to the grove. Outsiders who came there would take away plants, even harvesting them in large quantities for sale to traders. Gradually, a path emerged and cut the grove into two, joining different parts of the village. In front of one's eyes the grove thinned and shrunk.

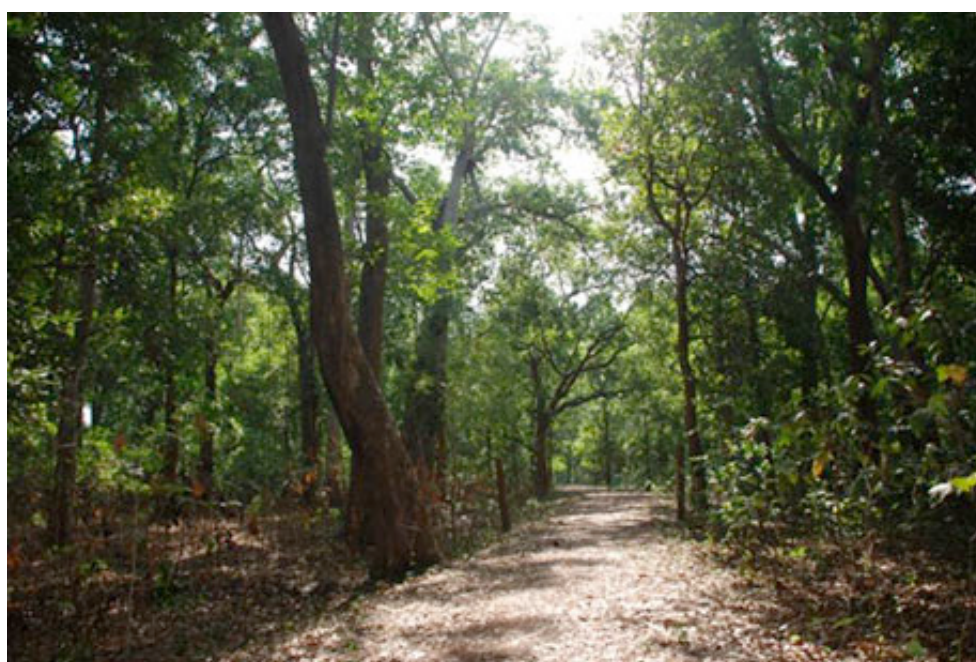


A ceremony that culminates at the Mauli Kot

About 10-12 years ago Damodar made the difficult decision of putting an end to the haat. So when Damodar called the people together one morning and explained why he was making this move – to save their sacred grove – they were surprised but agreed with him. This was an unusual decision as adivasi people are proud of having a haat “happening” in their village. Other rules prevented further paths across the grove and any stealing of plants from that space. The people took turns to guard the grove until it grew in stature again. Over the last few years even the areas immediately around the grove have been left uncultivated for the grove to expand and regain its earlier size, the one that their grandparents had spoken to them about. The grove is the largest in all Bastar and probably in Chhattisgarh. On every occasion, whether to resolve disputes between people in the village or to discuss matters that concerned everyone, Damodar brought up the importance of the grove.



The edge of Badla Kot



Path in Mauli Kot leading to the shrine

Day-to-day affairs

Why is it that our common language, so easy for any other use, becomes obscure and unintelligible in contracts and wills, and that a man who expresses himself so clearly, whatever he says or writes, finds in this field no way of speaking his mind that does not fall into doubt and contradiction?

Michel de Montaigne, Essays (Book III.13)

Being an ex-sarpanch of a large village like Karmari, Damodar is constantly on his feet. All village disputes that are difficult to settle require his presence¹⁹. As an elder he advises on religious matters and the setting of dates for festivals and ceremonies. Local officials of the various government departments – agriculture, forest, revenue – also meet him before they venture into implementing any scheme in the village. “I am still regarded as the sarpanch though officially I am not.” But what takes much of his time and effort today is the constant pressure on Karmari’s forests from the people of 15-20 villages in Odisha’s Nabrangpur district and a few villages in Bastar. These villages have eucalyptus or acacia plantations which are felled and the wood sold every five years. The women come into the Karmari forests for all their nistar needs. This is largely tolerated by the people of Karmari but every so often, there is pilferage of a much larger scale and a quarrel erupts. Large trees of sal or bija are felled and sawed into planks and are smuggled out in the night.



Degraded lands and herds of cattle along Odisha



Village along the border in Odisha with plantations and maize

That is not all. Once, a group of thakurs from Bastar had begun to quarry the hillock between Karmari and Saloriguda, in Odisha, for the stone. Damodar rushed home from his journey elsewhere and prevented further damage; he retained the stones and had a bridge built across a seasonal stream. At another time a trader and his accomplices were in the sacred grove harvesting the akash bel²⁰ and loading them in their vehicle. Damodar and the village people stopped that. They informed the forest department that had the plants confiscated and auctioned.

While mapping the forest boundary of Karmari, I came across a wizened old man along the Kurundi stream. He was attired in a scant pink loincloth and armed with a curved pickaxe with which he was attacking the Bastar edge of the stream. He attempted to broaden the stream into Bastar; as a result, more of the streambed on the Odisha side would remain dry and which the old man intended to cultivate. All one needs to change the shape of a country is a pickaxe and some patience. When I mentioned this incident in Karmari, the people said that it was nothing new: the old man does this each year and remains there until they chase him away. Despite these regular instances that have almost become routine, it is the incident with the people of Potiyawand that brought matters to a head and got Damodar thinking of a long-term solution to end the tension.



The Kurundi stream between Odisha and Bastar and a man altering the state map

As mentioned earlier, Potiyawand was the village that was established some generations ago to please a girl from Karmari. It had its own water and forests not long ago. But after the

to please a god from Karmari. It had its own water and forests not long ago. But after the mid-'70s, by which time the zamindars, the forest department and the traders finished off the timber, nobody came forward to restore the forest. The departments on both sides of the border have been concentrating on exotic plantations and not the kind of reforestation that makes sense to the people. For more than 30-35 years the people of these villages have depended on Karmari's forests and the feelings of kinship gradually withered and led to a growing animosity.

This uneasy situation was further aggravated by the forest department a few years back when it engaged the Potiyawand people to work in the forest protected by the people of Karmari. Small trees had to be cleared for a "plantation". The people from Karmari were enraged, mainly as they had not even been consulted, and tried to prevent the Potiyawandias from entering their forest. People came to blows and a free-for-all ensued in which the Potiyawand people as well as the forest guard who was supervising the work were beaten up. A case against the Karmari people was registered²¹. The dismissal of the case required more than two years of appearances in court, bail applications, village-level meetings, bribes and other expenses. At the end of it all, nothing had really changed in terms of the forest, the pressure on it, for the people who look after it, or for the people who trespass upon it. Damodar was the backbone of the peace-making process between the villages that took place simultaneously with the procedures of the court.



The firewood trail

The new face of Panchayat Raj

When a law is made, the cunning that finds loop-holes goes to work. One cannot deny that there is a certain slyness among younger players, a slyness which, when rules are written to prevent slyness, makes use of the rules themselves.

Yasunari Kawabata, The Master of Go.

The new methods of contesting the Panchayat elections, the reservation of a mahila seat in select areas, and the split in villages along regional party lines have all brought vast changes in village administration. The candidates in the fray are young, travel in SUVs and campaign aggressively. Bribes, liquor and promises are currencies used along with money. Few local leaders walk through their forests to ascertain the state they are in and what is available to the people. The poorest still depend for many daily essentials on the forest. What the new leader is interested in is the kind of schemes, loans and subsidies that come into the Panchayat.

Where can new cement roads be laid? Where can another talaab²² be commissioned, even if the site chosen defeats the purpose.



A pond in an improbable area, dry even in the monsoon!

About three and a half years ago, the seat for the sarpanch for Karmari Panchayat was declared a “mahila seat” and Damodar’s long haul came to an end. We hardly know the lady who has taken over – as is the case in most of rural India – but we do see her husband in meetings and around the village, usually on his motorcycle. Much of his wealth can be traced to his years in the timber trade and more recently to his brick kilns, the two activities that directly deplete our forests – the new “acting” sarpanch lacks all moral right to stop them. He does not appear for any discussions concerning timber smuggling or for improving village forest protection. The few times he did attend meetings to resolve a conflict, he kept silent.

In most day-to-day village matters such as land disputes, elopement, theft and religious ceremonies for births or deaths, it is the traditional village council that makes decisions. But the sarpanch today is essentially outward looking and concerned with government schemes that bring in money and its distribution. Many of them have pump-sets installed in their lands for a double crop; some buy vehicles; some tractors that are hired out to other farmers. One innovative sarpanch has bought himself an instant photo device with which he takes and prints pictures on the spot. With so many applications for so many schemes, all of which require a photograph, the side business flourishes! The big and obvious question is whether these young sarpanchs in Bastar can be convinced about the importance of forests, and whether they have the time to consider these matters; or whether we have lost them to the mainstream – along with its desires, appearances and business schemes – to the detriment of adivasi society.

The future

There was a possibility, moreover, that giving an inch meant giving a mile, and a possibility too that the slackening of spirit in giving the inch would mean defeat.

Yasunari Kawabata, The Master of Go.

One winter afternoon Damodar and a few of us were sitting in the kothar²³ near the siyadi climber. We saw a long line of women appear from the forest with head-loads of firewood. As they passed by, I called out to them and asked them to sit with us and rest a little – they were

from Saloriguda in Odisha – before proceeding. They were reluctant at first but Damodar put them at ease by saying, “We were just talking about how far it is for people from your village to come here for wood.”

They sat down with us, each by her pile of wood. The oldest among them spoke. “It is far, we left home after an early lunch.”

“How long will you keep coming to Karmari? Won’t these forests finish?” Damodar asked.

“I guess it will,” the woman replied. “But what can we do? It’s our job to go out and get wood.”

“What do you think we should do? Wouldn’t it be nice for everyone to have their own forest?”

The woman was obviously interested in the discussion. She said, “Where I grew up in Odisha, in Bolangir district, our village had a lot of forest. We had everything close by. Only after I was married into Saloriguda did I have to go to another village for firewood. It’s like that for many of us now – we grew up in villages with forest and get married into villages with nothing. The men say to us: Go get firewood! And we come to Karmari. Why don’t you ask the men what to do about this? They are the ones who created the problem, not us!”

We chatted awhile after that and the women left. Damodar was quite struck by the conversation and we stayed back in the kothar after our companions left. “She was right, we should call the men from the nearby villages together and talk to them.” The idea that was taking shape in Damodar’s mind was a plan to restore the forests and groves in all the surrounding villages.



big meeting

Cooking preparations for the



Mohri-baja music

Whatever development projects and schemes are prepared and implemented by the government there is no substitute for the availability of proximate forests. The majority of people require firewood to cook; seasonal foods such as mushrooms and fish are collected without cost; wood for construction is a regular requirement. When people do not have their own forest they have no option but to stray into their neighbours' forests. Much of the tension between adivasi villages in Bastar and elsewhere can be reduced to the fact of "strangers" exploiting a patch of forest conserved by the people of one or two villages. The increasing pressure on resources alters the dynamics and the relations between people. Usually, good forest patches are the result of an intact traditional system of forest use, often combined with a person or a community that is conscious of the circumstances and makes an effort. In journeys along the Odisha border near Karmari, I did meet a few such sarpanchs.

The idea that Damodar took forward was to bring together, in a larger meeting, the people of all the villages that came into Karmari's forests. Over months he prepared the ground for such a meeting. He started by first taking the youth of the village to visit – in twos and threes – each village near Karmari to explain to the people what the planned meeting was about. Each village was asked to discuss and think about its specific problems and select representatives to come and voice them in the larger meeting. These initial interactions, started by Damodar through local youth, went on for about two months.

The first big meeting was held in Badla Kot in March 2013, and was attended by about 200 people and hosted by Damodar. The youth of Karmari made all the arrangements, including cooking for and serving the guests, along with providing local music. Each village representative got a chance to speak, there were some informal group discussions, and one could feel that it was an issue that evoked emotions. Some decisions have been made: all the sacred groves in the villages will be restored; there will be large scale planting of native trees; each village will raise and protect its plants. Saplings of useful and native species are to be made available locally as well as from a nursery run by the Legal Environmental Action Forum (LEAF) that has a centre in Jagdalpur. The meeting lasted most of the afternoon and it was obvious that the circumstances were more or less the same in each village.



The first meeting in Badla

Kot

As the discussions came to an end, Damodar stood up and thanked everyone present. Then he asked them whether anyone could volunteer to host the second meeting. The sarpanch from Amdiguda agreed to do so and formally invited everyone to come and continue the discussions after three months. A trend has begun. Between meetings there will be efforts to plant, protect what is planted, exchange plants and seeds between villages, and carry out visits. It is hoped that the youth will learn much from their elders through their role in this ongoing process – it will take at least three years for all the villages to host at least one meeting – and that Karmari’s forest will merge with the forest of the neighbouring villages.

Is the forest department listening?

1. <http://bharatdiscovery.org/india/%E0%A4%9A%E0%A4%BF%E0%A4%A4%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%B0:Bastar-District-Map.jpg>
2. The three qualities of the sarkar; to frighten, to make the heart ache, to beg.
3. tribal.nic.in/index2.asp?sublinkid=480&langid=1
4. Incidentally, the word Bastar comes from bans (bamboo) and basta (bamboo-shoots).
5. See map; Sandh Karmari is about 7 kms further than Jaithgiri, along the border with Orissa.
6. Sandh refers to the fact that it is located in “one corner” of Bastar to differentiate it from other Karmaris’.
7. Marsilea quadrifolia
8. Astraeus, Gaester, etc.
9. Deity of people who look for sacrificial victims
10. The term “Potiyawand” has its root in the Bhatri word “potey”, to send, referring to the clansmen “sending” their daughter to a new place. The couple in the story are the first people of Potiyawand village.
11. Father-in-law son-in-law, as against kaka-bodu; giving and taking of brides was allowed in this relationship. Hindi: mama-bhanja
12. attendance
13. Stop! Stop! Who are you?
14. Woman; certain positions were reserved for women to apparently encourage women’s participation in local governance
15. Bauhinia vahlii; a giant climber with large velvety pods. The seeds are roasted for the kernel; some people also cook the kernels in

porridge. The leaves are two-lobed and used for platters. (Hin: mahul; Tel: adda; Ori: mahuli)

16. Derris scandens; a climber whose roots are used to stun fish. In Halbi, duma refers to spirit/ghost, dira means a climbing plant.
17. Village community forests where people gathered daily essentials (leaves, datan, fibre, etc.; very often two village share a nistar patch between them.
18. They sold and ate up everything!
19. Many of these cases have been recorded in Nag.A., and Ramnath. M.,: Village Justice: Stories from adivasi Bastar, Chhattisgarh; Conoor Printing Press, 2008.
20. Tinosporia cordifolia
21. A fuller version of this incident is narrated in "Is it a Crime to Protect Our Forest?" published in Indigenous People & Forests in India: View From A Network; ed Madhu Ramnath; NTFP-EP-India Network Secretariat; 2010.
22. Pond or tank
23. Threshing ground

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