

# Livelihood, Conservation, and Resistance: Mahila Mandal in the Tribal Region of Odisha

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## Abstract

As the nation celebrates the presidential victory of one tribal woman from the northern district of Mayurbhanj in Odisha (Ms. Droupadi Murmu), this study attempts to analyse the dynamics surrounding collective agency of rural tribal women in the state with special reference to its south-western districts. In the tribal region of Odisha, women by and large have been accorded a secondary status with respect to decision-making and access to resources. They negotiate access to village common resources to sustain viable livelihoods. In recent times, the fragile ecology in this forest and mineral rich area has witnessed serious damages in the development process. While the impacts are felt across the communities, women are the most vulnerable section. This paper, drawing on extensive fieldwork, focuses on women's collective at village level, locally known as *mahila mandal*, as an initiative of a well known civil society organization, Agrabamee. Mahila mandal has played a critical role in collective action for natural resource management- in releasing unproductive wastes like degraded forest lands and wastelands from the control of village dominant groups for productive use and management. Further, it has led to considerable collective agency formation in the form of collective mobilizations and resistances by local women against some of the policies of the state directly affecting their livelihoods. Anti-liquor movement and hill broom movement by local women are good instances in this regard. Mahila mandal, however, is currently facing formidable challenges for its survival, especially owing to the rapid spread of self help groups (SHGs) in the region. At the same time, as my recent fieldwork shows, it is indeed experimenting different strategies to revive the old spirit and enthusiasm among local people. In these circumstances, it would not be inaccurate to say that mahila mandal is currently situated between hope and scepticism.

## Keywords

Civil society, collective action, collective mobilization, natural resource management, self help group

## I. Introduction

This paper examines the dynamics surrounding *mahila mandal* (women's collective) in the tribal region of Odisha in Eastern India and, thereby, aims to contribute to the wider discourse on women, natural resource management, and civil society intervention. The paper seeks to explore the importance of mahila mandal in the context of gendered power relations over resource access and control in the natural-resource dependent tribal communities in Western

Odisha. While doing so, it discards an essentialist view that women have fixed caretaker roles marked by a special bond with nature in favour of a more politicized view of gender. In this article, I argue that mahila mandal plays a crucial role in local natural resource management and local livelihood-based mobilizations, especially when it is strongly associated with a local civil society organization. At the same time, mahila mandal needs to critically reflect in order to overcome certain significant weaknesses and challenges.

Mahila mandal is one of the central thrusts of Non-governmental Organization (NGO), Agramee's strategy in the western tribal region of Odisha. Agramee's mahila mandal approach to rural development makes an attempt to integrate gender concerns into the whole development process. Accordingly, the organization underlines the critical role of women in collective action for natural resource management. The resources in question are primarily common pool resources such as pastureland, community forests, degraded forest lands, village wastelands, and others. Mahila mandal is a women's group at village level for the purpose of managing natural resources. It seek to address the issues surrounding women in tribal societies of the region. I have organized the discussion in this paper under a few broad headings. First, I make clear the theoretical framework and methodology for the article. Second, I explain the wider context for mahila mandal. Third, I explore the mahila mandal approach of Agramee. Finally, the paper makes an attempt to critically assess the achievements of and challenges for mahila mandal.

## **II. Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

This article is theoretically informed by gender analysis in natural resource management underscoring women's unequal access to information and resources. Gender analysis in the context of natural resource management reveals that there is major gender disparity in decision-making too. Certain developments in feminist political ecology and academic debate on 'commoning' in recent times have further enriched the analysis. Several attempts have been made by scholars to articulate gender as a more politicized, heterogeneous, and differentiated social category in environment-development debates (Harris 2006; Jackson 2006; Nightingale 2006; Cornwall 2007; Cornwall et al. 2007; Leach 2007; Elmhirst and Resurreccion 2008). There is a growing realization that we need to explore 'how gender subjectivities, ideologies and identities are produced, employed and contested within natural resource governance, and how gender discourses shape exclusions and possibilities within environment / development processes' (Elmhirst and Resurreccion 2008: 3). This is in line with a broadly conceived feminist political ecology that urges us to critically consider gendered subjectivities instead of having a simplistic understanding of gendered agency. Hence, the emphasis is on context-specific analysis of gender as a critical variable in natural resource management. Further, recent literature on commons studies have started engaging the concept of commoning (Lang 2014; Singh 2017; Turner 2017; Rap and Jaskolski 2019). Lang explains commoning as the effort to 'reimagine the commons beyond its traditional meaning as a collectively owned and managed natural resource... that considers commons through the practices which produce and maintain them' (2014: 852). The shift from commons as a noun to commoning as a verb suggests that the commons are not a fixed entity,

but a changing set of social relations (Turner 2017).

This study is methodologically based on case studies of mahila mandal in about 20 tribal villages of the districts of Rayagada, Koraput, and Kalahandi in Odisha where Agragamee has its major presence. The paper uses qualitative data collected through ethnographic study. I conducted fieldwork in these areas with the support from local resource persons in different phases between 2009 and 2019. I collected data through repeated field visits. For the villages remotely situated and inaccessible, I preferred longer stay with the local communities. I adopted participant observation as the chief research technique. So, I tried to observe the behaviour and activities of local people in their respective villages. In this process, my aim was to gain an understanding of people's viewpoints by directly interacting with them. To sum up, my research involved in-depth conversations, observations, open-ended questions, and focus-group discussions.

### **III. The Context**

This article is set in the context of tribal societies in the districts of Rayagada, Koraput, and Kalahandi. These districts are tribal districts in Southern and Western Odisha. They come under the KBK (Kalahandi-Bolangir-Koraput) region in Odisha, a region where ecological degradation is intensifying. These districts are almost at the bottom of the list of 250 backward districts in the country identified under Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF). Tribal people in these districts have, for the most part, similar topography and life-styles, and they have more or less similar natural advantages and disadvantages. Women work in the fields and take part in all the agricultural activities except ploughing. Women provide a major share of the agricultural labour, and they quite often engage in wage labour off the farm to supplement their meagre farm incomes. Through these activities, women have their small independent income. Odisha Human Development Report (2004: 31) spells out the contribution of tribal women in the region:

*The tribal women perform several community and economic activities, such as collection of firewood, fodder, small timber, and various NTFPs (Non Timber Forest Products), and are also engaged in primary processing... They provide greater support towards forest protection and better management in order to secure sustainable livelihood... In fact, poor women- as gatherers, users, processors, and protectors- contribute substantially to their household economy and food security.*

Although the domain of work assigned to women is crucial in terms of sustenance of the family, they have relatively a low position in the hierarchy. Economic dependence of women on men appears highly pronounced in spite of the more egalitarian character of the tribal society in general. The division of work is heavily biased against Adivasi women- in addition to an equal or greater burden in the economic production processes, women have the sole responsibility of household chores. Child-rearing is their exclusive responsibility. This kind of division of labour places women in a disadvantageous position compared to their non-tribal counterparts (Sinha 2005). Women have little or no access to important resources. It would

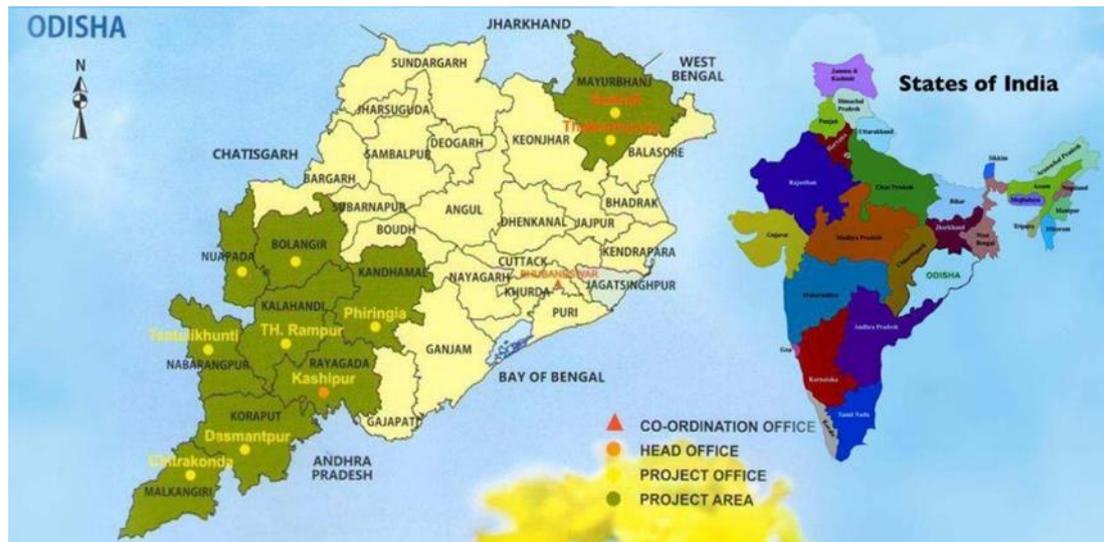
not be incorrect to say that in the tribal society of the region ‘a woman has no entitlements’ (Das and Das 1992: 1373). In addition, women have a limited participatory role in the formal decision-making process of their villages. Gender equity, thus, is missing from social and power relations that decide access to, use of, and control over village commons. There are several instances of people coming together at the community level to protect and develop land and forests or conserve and revive water source, but in such ‘indigenous community-level institutions, women by and large have been accorded a secondary status with respect to their role in decision-making and management of the resources, although in reality they may be active in different tasks related to the protection or conservation of the resource’ (Panda 2007: 61.1). Furthermore, women have been adversely affected by severe ecological degradation in the region resulting from the encroachments by vested interests.

Aragamee’s mahila mandal approach needs to be seen against this background. The hierarchical values, which render the tribal communities at the bottom rung of the society, render women the worst sufferers within these communities. The fact remains that substantial and qualitative improvements of life can be made only by taking local people into confidence and involving them in planning for their own resource use. Aragamee believes that since women have been a neglected and exploited group in rural development, special emphasis has to be placed on supporting their role in redevelopment of agro-ecosystem, and keeping them at the centre of all development-related activities. Aragamee’s Vidhya Das told me that the mahila mandal approach is premised on the idea that women’s participation in community organizations managing natural resources is ‘a matter of equity as well as efficiency. Neglect of gender will make agricultural and environmental development policies and practices unsuccessful and potentially damaging to natural resources in the long run’ (interview in Kashipur on May 20, 2009). Let us now have a look at the nature of Aragamee before we turn to the mahila mandal initiative of the organization.

Aragamee is a quite well known civil society organization located in the KBK region of Odisha.<sup>1</sup> The organization was founded and continues to be run by Achyut Das and Vidhya Das. Achyut Das is the founder-director of the organization. Aragamee means ‘pioneer’ or ‘marching forward’, one who takes the first step forward. Situated in the tribal KBK region, Aragamee strives to engage with the question- what is self-sustaining development for the tribal people and the rural poor? The organization states, ‘over its nearly three decades of intense involvement in the tribal regions, Aragamee has sought to define what should be people-centred development’ (2010: 2). It was set up in 1981 as a branch of one of the noted organizations in the country, Social Work and Research Center (SWRC) of Tilonia, Rajasthan in northern part of India. In April 1987, the SWRC, Odisha chapter established its own identity by registering itself as a separate civil society organization called Aragamee. Aragamee initially worked in Kashipur block in Rayagada district of the undivided KBK region and then gradually expanded to other areas (see Figure 1).

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<sup>1</sup> I have borrowed several details regarding Aragamee for these three paragraphs from one of my papers: Tripathy, A. K. 2022. Shifts in the Relation between Civil Society and the State: Case of Aragamee in Odisha. *International Journal of Applied Social Science*. 9 (7&8).



**Figure 1 Presence of Agramee in the State of Odisha**

Source: Agramee: Where We Work?: <https://agramee.org/where-we-work/>, last accessed on January 10, 2022.

Certain conditions in Kashipur in undivided Koraput district of the state in late 1970s and early 1980s attracted the SWRC team led by Achyut Das. First, SWRC wanted to confine itself to a tribal Block in Odisha. In Kashipur block, tribal people and Dalits constitute about 70 per cent and 20 per cent of the population respectively. Second, the area was challenging on account of lack of communication, infrastructure, and other basic facilities. The region was marked by severe poverty and multiple forms of exploitation. The poverty-stricken were found eating mango and tamarind seeds as staple food, while the great amount and variety of forest produce in the region was conspicuous. The forest cover was declining, and fragile ecology of the region was getting disturbed. As a result, periodic and permanent out-migration was increasing. Third, SWRC focused on the tribal issues at this micro-level also because the administration had brushed aside interests of the tribal people, and the special agencies launched for them had not delivered the required benefits.

The SWRC Kashipur team carried out an in-depth survey or a baseline survey of the entire Kashipur block in order to have an understanding of the socio-cultural complexities of the locale and the historical moment. The Agramee vision emerges from its baseline survey findings. The principal bases of the Agramee vision are human liberation, participation of local communities, decentralization, tribal empowerment, and rights. As a part of its vision, Agramee adopted the rights based approach to the question of women and local natural resource management in the region. From this perspective, Agramee's approach to gender and natural resource management in the form of mahila mandal needs to be seen. Agramee considers its mahila mandal initiative in relation to its multi-pronged efforts- 'enabling provisions in empowering Acts like the PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act) addressing conflict areas, strengthening woman's groups, supporting actions for reclamation and rejuvenation of commons, and encouraging women to ensure *Gram Sabha* (Village

Assembly) sanctions.<sup>2</sup> I turn to mahila mandal initiative of Agramee in the next section.

#### **IV. Mahila Mandal Initiative**

Over the last three decades, Agramee has undertaken an enormously varied range of activities. The major developmental interventions of the organization include community-based micro watershed projects, grain bank, family farm, and mahila mandal. Agramee's mahila mandal initiative, as already noted, seeks to address the lack of gender equity and women's agency in resource access, control, and management in the region. Hence, mahila mandal engages with critical issues such as participation, inclusion and exclusion, decision-making, and power relations in the tribal villages. One of the objectives of Agramee is to have a mahila mandal unit in every village under its coverage, The process of establishing mahila mandal in a village begins with Agramee's mobilization of villagers through general meetings and training programs. Usually, directors of the organization attend the initial meetings, participate in the discussions, and address various queries of local people. Then, field staff of the organization, especially the trained animators, take up the responsibility of having close engagement with villagers in order to convince them fully about the necessity of mahila mandal. In this regard, I noticed that in a few villages the influential sections of people remain reluctant for a long time.

After the local communities get convinced, mahila mandal is formally established by Agramee in their villages. Contribution from each member of mahila mandal as well as contribution from Agramee constitute the initial capital for mahila mandal. Agramee encourages every mahila mandal to save on a regular basis and open an account in the nearest post office. 'Managing financial activities gives members of mahila mandal a sense of empowerment', said Vidhya Das (interview in Kashipur on February 13, 2012). Mahila mandal, in each village, also performs the necessary record-keeping function- documenting work undertaken and contributions made. Further, it has the responsibility to ensure equitable distribution of work and benefits and, thus, ensure that there is no free-rider. Every mahila mandal has certain office bearers such as president and secretary who play various roles as leaders. The office-bearers are usually elected in the general meeting of mahila mandal.

#### **IVA. Collective Management of Degraded Commons**

In addition to organizing mahila mandal, Agramee's efforts are directed towards building capacity of mahila mandal members so that they can become owners and managers of the village common pool resources. Members remain involved at different levels of land development programs – planning, designing, implementing, and monitoring. They are trained and guided by Agramee for experimenting various land use and management practices in their villages. In consultation with mahila mandal members, commoning strategies are devised by the organization. This process includes three major steps: (a) identification of village waste lands using micro-plans and reports for the purpose of giving

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.agramee.org/reclaiming-the-commons.php>. last accessed on October 14, 2016.

the responsibility of development and use of it to mahila mandal, (b) proper planning for improvement in land use by mahila mandal, which incorporates identifying priorities, needs, feasibility, responsibilities, and time-plans, and

(c) mobilization of Gram Sabha to pass resolutions for institutionalizing such work by mahila mandal.

Aragamee annual reports as well as my field data indicate that the mahila mandal initiative has succeeded a great deal in realizing the objective of collective management of the commons (see Box 1, Box 2, and Figure 2). The initiative has resulted in releasing unproductive wastes like degraded forest lands and wastelands from the control of village dominant groups for productive use and management by mahila mandals and village community in general. For instance, reclamation of 336.5 acres of waste land has been taken up by 16 mahila mandals (Aragamee 2010: 32). The organization has made continuous support available through its field workers to these women's collectives for fencing, mixed plantations, and exploring ways for income generation. As compared to other villages, the villages having mahila mandal have been able to show remarkable improvement in management of degraded commons. It would not be improper thus to say that women perform better than men in preserving and managing local natural resources. This aspect, however, requires further research.

#### **Box 1: Story of a Successful Mahila Mandal**

This is the story of mahila mandal in Gumundisupel village near Kashipur as witnessed during my fieldwork from 2009 to 2012. Lachmai Majhi and Mangi Majhiar are principal office-bearers of the mahila mandal- both middle aged women seem to be dynamic and enthusiastic. Having received training from Aragamee, they mobilized local women for economically and ecologically productive collective work. In this remote village, villagers said, no plantation has been established by Soil and Horticulture Department. Long ago, plantation was done on local *Dongar* (hill) under a project sponsored by International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). However, the project did not succeed since local communities were not involved and follow-up measures were not taken. Under the effective leadership of Lachmai and Mangi, mahila mandal set up a nursery on the basis of site condition information. Other efforts worth noting include site preparation, large-scale plantation on Dongar, and fencing to protect plants from animals. Since grazing livestock is a major source of livelihood for rural communities, mahila mandal manages grazing land as well. These efforts of mahila mandal have raised self-esteem of local women. In an interview, Lachmai and Mangi told me that after these successes, they would like to spread awareness in the village about various government acts such as the Forest Rights Act and Right to Information.

Information Act.

#### **Box 2: Story of a Relatively Less Successful Mahila Mandal**

This is the story of mahila mandal in Gunner village also seen during my fieldwork from 2009 to 2012. Utta Muduli here mobilized women for collective work pertaining to management of local commons. Under Utta Muduli's leadership, village women have started cultivation of tuber crops and plantation on Dongar. However, Utta has to confront two major issues: 1. in spite of fencing, rabbits are able to destroy the cashew plants and 2. village women are not offering full cooperation since they have to devote much time to work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Although Utta is in a fix, she does not appear hopeless.

#### IVB. Collective Mobilizations and Resistances

The policies of the Odisha government concerning collection, sale, and processing of minor forest produce (MFP) were contested in the hill broom movement by mahila mandal in Mandibisi village in Kashipur block. This collective was an initiative of Agragamee in the early 1990s. For the forest-dependent tribal people of the region, collection of MFP is a vital economic activity. They collect *mahul* (*Madhuca longifolia*) flowers and seeds, tamarind, mango, hill brooms, *sal* (*Shorea robusta*) leaves, fiber, fodder, gum, and fuel wood from the forests. Among these, hill brooms, mahul flowers, sal leaves, and tamarind are collected in large quantities since they have a great market value. Collection of MFP is primarily the occupation of women. Also, collection of MFP is undertaken by the poorest sections of the villages as it is labour intensive with low returns.<sup>3</sup> Before the local resistance, tribal people were not allowed to stock, process, or sell the MFP in open market. While there used to be government control over these activities in the form of leases and permits, clear criteria for such control were missing. Additionally, there were no terms and conditions beyond the levy of a fixed amount of royalty. The government lease amounted, Das argues, ‘to a virtual sanction to exploit and loot the tribal people in tribal area with regard to the particular item of forest produce’ (1996: 3227).



**Figure 2 Work of Mahila Mandal in Gumundisupel Village**

Source: Photograph taken by author during fieldwork, 2009-10.

The state government established Tribal Development Cooperative Corporation (TDCC) in the 1960s with the explicit purpose to facilitate marketing and ensure a fair price for primary producers or collectors. Thus, the key role of TDCC was to uplift and boost the tribal economy and to safeguard interests of the tribal people by means of providing a reasonable support price for their surplus agricultural products and MFP. Agragamee, nevertheless,

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<sup>3</sup> For details, see the study by NGO Vasundhra available on the India Environment Portal: <http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/feature-article/fighting-it-out>, last accessed on June 30, 2022. Also, see Tripathy, A. K. 2020. COVID-19 and Lockdown in India: Challenges for the Tribal Economy of Odisha. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research*. 2 (S) June.

noticed major problems with the functioning of TDCC. In principle, the procurement prices of MFP items were fixed by a price fixation committee formed by the government at the district level every year, and the agency having the lease was supposed to pay the prices so fixed to primary tribal collectors. In practice, however, primary collectors were selling most of the MFP items at rates less than 50 per cent of the fixed procurement prices. The actual price varied from one-third to half of the procurement price in case of hill brooms. Vidhya Das (1996: 3228-29) further explains:

*Most transactions with the primary collectors are made using approximate volume measurements. Standardized weights are almost never used... The TDCC's inefficiency in procurement has enabled the petty traders and the local businessmen to secure a major market, amounting to more than two-thirds for most part of the items held in lease by the TDCC... Government policies and their misuse is increasingly denying the tribals the access to their livelihood needs. As a sequel, the government has been able to ensure neither the due revenue nor the conservation and protection of the forest resources. All this amounts to a blatant violation of the human rights of these communities.*

In such context, Joint Forest Management (JFM) policy was also not of much help. JFM policy provided rights over MFP to village groups who formed *Vana Samrakshan Samiti* (Forest Preservation Committee). JFM also stipulated that village groups could collect MFP as and how they would like, but could dispose that off only through the authorized lease holder. Against this backdrop, in the year 1993, there emerged persistent struggles of tribal people and other marginalized communities across the state to access and use their forest and land resources. There was massive involvement of women in these struggles. And, women's mobilization in Mandibisi village for rights over hill brooms is widely considered as one of the most prominent examples of such struggles.

While hill grasses are so commonplace in the tribal region of Odisha, Rayagada forest range consisting of Kashipur is particularly favourable for producing the best quality hill brooms. Livelihood of most of the tribal people in this region is solely dependent on collection and sale of hill grass. It was a long drawn-out struggle of seven years for Mandibisi mahila mandal to achieve rights over MFP. In the early 1990s, *Ama Sangathan* (Our Federation) was formed as a registered society, and Mandibisi mahila mandal became a member of the Federation. It 'grew out of the efforts of 1225 women from Kashipur block', and 'Ama Sangathan society networks with 17 mahila mandals of different panchayats in Kashipur block.'<sup>4</sup> Mandibisi mahila mandal, Vidhya Das notes, 'started collecting the MFP item, hillbrooms by buying it from the primary tribal collectors assuring fair price and exact weighing to them. They thus effectively prevented exploitative private traders and crooked sub-agents of the TDCC from operating in the area and cheating the tribal people' (1996: 3227).

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<sup>4</sup> 'Innovative Value Chains Ensures Sustainable Livelihoods': <https://leisaindia.org/innovative-value-chains-ensures-sustainable-livelihoods/>, last accessed on June 7, 2022.

The PESA of Government of India now recognizes the critical importance of forest and forest based resources to lives of the tribal people and gives rights over MFP to *Gram Panchayat* (Village Council). The Odisha government, in keeping with the PESA, finally formulated an alternative policy document concerning MFP and gave the ownership of MFP to Gram Panchayat. This policy document stops monopolistic leasing out of MFP items to private interests and corporations, enables mahila mandals, village groups, and Panchayat level organizations to collect and sell MFP in open market for a competitive price, and prohibits entry of large-scale operations into those areas of processing of MFP that can be taken up by small- scale industries (Das 1996: 3229). Since then, with Agramee's support, Ama Sangathan in Mandibisi, as a strong federation of tribal women's organizations, is active in processing and marketing of tribal agricultural goods and MFP. In addition, it is generating employment and profits and ensuring better floor prices for raw products for the local tribal communities. 'This is something even governments have been unable to do,' Das said (interview in Kashipur on February 15, 2012).

After the hill broom movement, Mandibisi witnessed another important movement, namely anti- liquor movement. The agitation against liquor was led by Mandibisi mahila mandal with the active support of Agramee. This is generally recognized as a successful example of women's struggle against liquor at a local level. The movement raised wider questions of social and political importance inasmuch as it touched upon the issue of liquor- one of the central components of tribal life in the region. Local tribal men spend a major portion of their income on alcohol, with the women bearing most of the consequences. This needs to be seen in a wider context. Tribal women, on whose labouring shoulders the entire society in the tribal pockets seems to rest, get little returns and recognition. At the end of an agricultural season, major shares are taken away by the landowners and moneylenders. In this connection, Vidhya Das argued in a conversation that while government formulates employment generation and anti- poverty schemes, local contractors and liquor vendors defeat the purpose of such schemes. Contractors refuse to employ local people unless they agree to work for half of the stipulated minimum wage. Liquor vendors, by selling liquor, take away all the savings of the poor villagers. 'Curiously enough, the tribal men do not seem troubled enough by their condition of poverty to resist the temptation to drink. Thus, the vicious circle of poverty, borrowing, mortgaging, and waste continues' (interview in Kashipur on May 22, 2009). The following observation made by Shekhar Pathak in another context holds good for this tribal region: 'the liquor issue - like that of forests, mines, and big dams - is not an isolated one but intimately bound up with the social and cultural fabric of hill life... steadily eroding the socioeconomic viability of many peasant families' (1984: 1190).

Ama Sangathan tried to confront the liquor issue in the region by organizing anti-liquor campaigns, awareness programs, and direct resistances. It succeeded in bringing the severity of the problem to the notice of the government through petitioning. With the help of Ama Sangathan, villagers told me, Mandibisi women took up this matter after the Gram Sabha resolutions failed to make any impact on the liquor brewers who were carrying on their illicit business in collusion with the local police and administration. Processions and meetings were

organized at different venues. Finally, the picketing of liquor was undertaken by women in spite of the strong presence of goons of the local contractors. For the tribal women, this was a major victory (see the main leader of the movement, Sumoni Jhodia, in Figure 3). The women participants 'broke the pots of the local liquor vendor and thus strengthened their hold over the tenuous village economy and initiated a chain of reactions for social action' (Das and Das 1992: 1373). The bold act of women in the anti-liquor movement in Mandibisi reminds Kancha Illaiah's apt remark in the context of anti-liquor movement in Andhra Pradesh in 1992: 'the women who never figured in the political discourse of the state suddenly found a definite place' (1992: 2406). Having looked in some considerable detail at the nature of the mahila mandal initiative of Agramee, it is now important for us to turn our attention to an assessment of mahila mandal.

## V. Critical Issues and Challenges

As stated earlier, Mahila mandal is an attempt by Agramee to encounter deeply embedded structural gender disparity in the tribal society at conceptual and organizational levels. It seeks women's cooperation in development activities and participation in political projects in a framework that has historically marginalized rural women by reinforcing their unequal access to resources and information. It perceives women as the agents of social and political change. And, through the initiative of mahila mandal, Agramee has attempted to provide local women access to common pool resources.



**Figure 3 Mandibisi Anti-Liquor Movement Leader (Sumoni Jhodia) in her Family Farm**

Source: photograph taken by author during fieldwork, 2019.

It is appropriate to look at the impacts of mahila mandal on the agential capacity of village women and on wider structural level to appreciate its proper significance. It is no exaggeration to state that mahila mandal, by actively involving village women with natural resources and ecological processes, has made a positive impact on the local social relations and unequal power structures. Indeed, it has provided women a distinct visibility and identity- a strong sense of self- as members of mahila mandal. Today, women have their own

independent organizational forms in the villages. Women are seen periodically assembling at the central meeting point of villages for discussions on activities done and future course of action. Women's unequal access to information is addressed by the trained field workers of Agravamee on a regular basis.

During my fieldwork, I witnessed mahila mandal members passionately engaging and succeeding in collective action pertaining to fencing on village Dongar, tuber crop cultivation, plantation, family farm, and agricultural production. In villages from Rasijhiri and Gumundisupel to Muskuta and Hatsil, mahila mandal members eagerly demonstrated their impressive work on large stretches. Sumoni Jhodia's family farm in Seriguda in 2019, for example, appeared amazing. Hence, it can be argued that tribal women have proved that they are efficient natural resource managers. Also, in their experiments, they have appropriately used the traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) available to them. Agravamee instructors and village women collectively take decision on the critical matters such as suitability of plants for a particular landscape, spacing between the saplings, nature of fencing, so on. This provides mahila mandal members flexibility that is particularly important in the entire process. Mahila mandal activities impart a sense of achievement, confidence, and joy to the members. This psychological impact is apparent in their spirit, enthusiasm, and behaviour as they respond in the conversations or climb up a Dongar to demonstrate their work.

In fact, mahila mandal has immensely contributed towards women's collective agency formation. We have already discussed the manifestations of such collective agency in the form of local mobilizations and resistances. In addition to achieving political agency, women in the tribal region have gained in terms of increased income and improvement in the livelihoods of their families. They exhibit strong awareness about the financial matters as they continuously maintain accounts and records of the collective. During fieldwork from 2009 to 2012, in about

15 villages, I found mahila mandal members discussing technical and financial aspects of common pool resources. They stated that the cashier of the collective in each village initiates discussions on the revenue and expenditure items in their meetings. I also saw them quite often discussing matters like market prices of various agricultural goods that they produce and nature of demand in the weekly markets. This awareness has resulted in a better understanding of household finances and an enhanced bargaining power in the market for the rural women.

As women have emerged as public actors in the villages, the impact on gender power relations becomes evident both at the household and community levels. Simply stated, mahila mandal has contributed towards greater gender equity through women's participation and decision-making in common resource management. Village men acknowledge this without a doubt. In the village meetings, women now come forward to speak about various economic and even political issues concerning their villages. It is important to bear in mind that the process does not exclude men. In this connection, it has been repeatedly made clear by Agravamee that mahila mandal concept does not have a bias against men. Rather, this

approach to target and empower women considers gender in a relational way. Seen in this light, the aim is not to exclude men from the process of social transformation, but to underscore and address the ground reality- tribal women are deprived of the basic entitlements such as decision-making, land ownership, and control over natural resources. Vidhya Das told, 'in the tribal region, women are the ones most motivated to fight hunger, poverty, and exploitation by money-lenders and liquor mafias. So there is a need to change power relations in favour of the poor rural women' (interview in Kashipur on August 10, 2019).

Moreover, the significance of mahila mandal needs to be seen from the perspective of climate change. The most adverse effect of climate change is felt at the level of livelihoods of the communities dependent on natural resources and, especially, women in such communities. Hence, natural resource management becomes crucial at global, national, regional, and local levels. 'It is expected that with climate change,' Yanda et al. argue, 'Natural Resource Management at different levels will dynamically facilitate the design and implementation of mitigation and adaptation strategies that will enhance resilience and adaptive capacities of natural and social systems' (2010: 264). While working with mahila mandals in different villages, Agramee focuses on their capacity building on both natural resource management and climate change. Mahila mandals pay attention to large scale plantations, species richness, and water conservation measures as mitigation strategies. And, adaptive strategy includes careful selection of plants for a Dongar based on the nature of rainfall variation and loss of soil.

Let us now turn to the weaknesses and challenges. Actual functioning of mahila mandal demonstrates that women have uneasy negotiations with village men in the context of deep-rooted gendered power relations. First, the precondition is that the village community has to allocate a Dongar or a portion of Dongar to mahila mandal for cultivation. In matters like giving a huge piece of land, men still have the upper hand in de facto decision-making. Mahila mandal members in village Phatkimahul told me: 'allocation of Dongar was a much-delayed process. Village men took so much time to develop a consensus.' In several cases, it was quite difficult for village men to get convinced about the feasibility of mahila mandal. This clearly points to the prevalence of strong male bias in resource access and control in the region. Second, in order to prepare a Dongar for cultivation strong physical labor is required. And, for this, women remain dependent on men. When availability of men becomes difficult for various reasons, work of mahila mandal on Dongar gets disrupted. Mahila mandal members in Rasijhiri village argued, 'mahila mandal cannot work without help and support from men; for work like stone fencing and making stony field cultivable active involvement of men is crucial. Sometime, we have to wait for days and even weeks for the availability of village men for our work.' Even though mahila mandal is not directed against men, the tendency on the part of men in several villages to see mahila mandal as an exclusive women's group cannot be overlooked. Despite this, paradoxical it may appear, I observed strong cooperation between men and women for mahila mandal work in some villages.

A few other concerns are worth mentioning. First, plantations made by mahila mandal on the

higher reaches of village Dongar are completely dependent on rain water. The areas that experience rain deficit with 30-60 per cent below average rainfall or lack of showers bear the brunt. With a lower output or death of plants, mahila mandal has lost its initial enthusiasm in several villages. Second, in villages like Maligaon and Durkhal, women told that weakening of mahila mandal was explicable in terms of excessive consumption of home-made alcohol by local people. Consumption of home-brewed alcohol by all, including children, is a cultural practice in the region. I saw men and women drunk to the point of nausea on some occasions. Sumoni Jhodia, who led the anti-liquor movement, told me in a poignant tone in August 2019 that alcoholism has persisted in the villages. Third, mahila mandal members in Seriguda village have lost interest owing to, Jhodia said, 'death of some active members, irregular meetings, and apathetic attitude on the part of many' (interview in Seriguda on August 7, 2019). She appeared quite uncertain about the future of mahila mandal in her village. Fourth, in a few villages I noticed that tribe - caste divide was making it difficult for mahila mandal to reach conclusive decisions. Although villages do not report conflicts between tribal people and Dalits, one cannot dismiss tribe-caste divide entirely. Fifth, in some villages mahila mandal members complained about nonavailability of space for participation of women as most of the critical decisions are taken informally either by the village men or by the local project staff (mostly men) of the civil society organization. Consultation with mahila mandal members, in such cases, is no more than a ritual.

Further, mahila mandal work has suffered because of the withdrawal of Agravamee after winding up of projects. As a civil society organization with limited staff and resources, Agravamee finds it necessary to withdraw its active presence from villages after completion of the funded-projects. Not surprisingly, the most effective mahila mandals can be seen now in Mandibisi in Rayagada district and Dasamantpur in Koraput district characterized by a strong presence of Agravamee along with a heightened local consciousness. Gumundisupel village was a success story of mahila mandal earlier. However, during my visit in August 2019, I found completely a different scenario in the village- stone fencing was broken, most of the plants were dead, and mahila mandal member were not keen to discuss their activities. Village women told me, 'after withdrawal of Agravamee, mahila mandal lost interest in management of the local commons. In the absence of the support and inputs from Agravamee, it is so hard for us to continue in the same spirit' (interview in Gumundisupel on August 5, 2019).

Undoubtedly, Mandibisi mahila mandal remains an outstanding example of local women's organization and mobilization. As we saw in the discussion on MFP, Ama Sangathan in Mandibisi received the licence to buy, purchase, and market hill brooms in 1995 after a prolonged struggle. In 2000, the Government of Odisha granted rights over 65 MFP items to villages in tribal areas. Since then, Ama Sangathan has been consistently dealing in hill brooms, sal leaves, cereals, mustard, turmeric, and processing of a variety of dal. Nevertheless, demonetization implemented by the Central Government in 2016 adversely affected Ama Sangathan since it runs on cash as a small enterprise located in a remote area. The fundamental objectives of demonetization were to curb black economy and forbid

counterfeiting currency. However, 'the micro enterprises of the country do not have an association with both... they run on cash.'<sup>5</sup> There was major disruption in the sale of hill broom, the most popular item produced by Ama Sangathan. Vidhya Das admitted in a conversation that 'demonetization resulted in severe financial loss for Ama Sangathan. Earlier, everyday around 30 women would come to Ama Sangathan centre in Mandibisi to make brooms, and now most of them are without work. It has yet to recover from the shock of demonetization (interview in Kashipur on August 6, 2019). Since Ama Sangathan provides hope to numerous women of the region, its strong recovery is of fundamental importance for several mahila mandals.

Finally, the greatest blow to mahila mandal has come from self help groups (SHGs) in recent years. Owing to the rapid spread of SHGs in the region, mahila mandal membership and activities have drastically gone down in various villages. SHG, as a development intervention, targets women as the desired beneficiaries and extends loans to them on the basis of their membership in self-regulating borrower groups. This microcredit concept is 'another arm of neoliberal development policy that effectively devolves responsibility for securing economic opportunity away from the state and onto individuals cast as agents responsible for their own well being but without challenging issues of resource distribution' (Elmhirst and Resurreccion 2008: 13). It actively promotes individualism and competition in the tribal societies and results in, what Katharine Rankin calls, 'constructed subjectivities with local cultural ideologies and social processes' (2001: 18). In villages from Piplipadar to Gumundisupel, mahila mandal has almost disappeared. In 2019, when I interviewed women in the villages where once mahila mandals were vibrant, they rather tried to tell me about particular issues related to the SHGs operating in their villages. They spoke as women entrepreneurs rather than political subjects. Agragamee takes a strong position against the concept of SHGs. Achyut Das argues:

*The tribal communities living in villages have ethnic cohesion. Dividing them into small groups of 10s and 15s in the name of good management is the most damaging thing ever done to the tribal societies. This is what the big donors and their blind supporters have already caused in the name of economic development. The best way to reverse the process is to abandon the so called SHG concepts and start bringing the communities together into the framework which is natural to them...*<sup>6</sup>

## **VI. Conclusions**

To sum up, mahila mandal along with grain bank, family farm, and micro watershed are the principal strategies of Agragamee to achieve the core objectives as per its vision-strengthening local managerial capacity to restore harmony to environment - society relations and to ensure sustainability of the developmental process and empowerment of the local

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<sup>5</sup> 'Demonetisation: Indian SMEs Suffered a Blow, Still Struggling to Find their Footing', *The Economic Times*, November 7, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Achyut Das in Sustainable Development group on the networking site LinkedIn: [in.linkedin.com](https://www.linkedin.com/in/achyutdas), last accessed on April 24, 2016.

communities. An important impact observed is the strengthening of women's collective agency and women's bargaining power to independently negotiate in the public domain. Mahila mandal has addressed, to a great extent, the lack of access to information and resources on the part of rural women. As a result, mahila mandal has positively impacted the under-representation of women in decision-making. This initiative, thus, has the potential for causing social, economic, and political empowerment of rural women. Hill broom and anti-liquor movements have been documented as truly inspiring tales.

While villages in the coverage area indicate several success stories of collective action and resistance associated with mahila mandal, there are nevertheless critical concerns pertaining to the sustainability aspect of mahila mandal as an initiative by a civil society organization. Insufficient attention to the complexity of gender in the commoning strategies, withdrawal policy of Agravamee, and vigorous promotion of SHGs are the most important challenges for the initiative currently. A question arises here; can there be the revival of mahila mandal? Revival of grain bank, another important initiative of Agravamee, in recent years offers a positive signal. And, much hope lies with the prominent tribal women leaders like Sumoni Jhodia. Of course, I found her tone alarming in my last conversation with her in August 2019. But, she did not rule out the revival of mahila mandal in her village and neighbouring villages. She, moreover, pointed to effective persuasive strategies that could be employed in this regard. With the adverse psychological and socio-economic impact of Covid-19 in rural areas, there is a new set of challenges. Finally, it becomes critical for Agravamee to evolve stronger mechanisms in order to have mahila mandal activities in a sustained way even after its withdrawal from a particular area. At the same time, the process invites mahila mandal to work out effective strategies in order to have negotiation and coexistence with SHGs in the region.

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