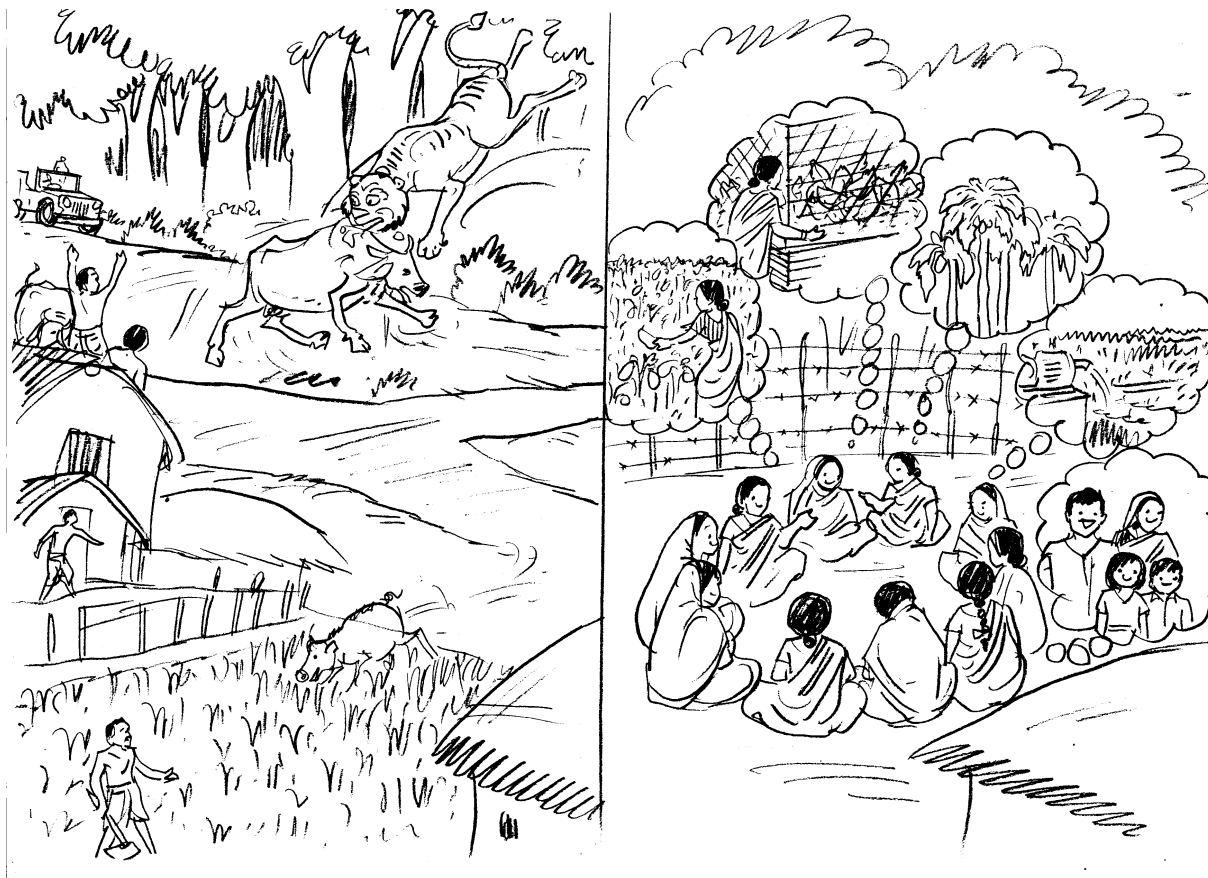


# Promoting Livelihoods, Preserving Forests

Navneet Naik



*To reduce the conflicts in the protected forest areas and lessen pressure on natural resources, it is important to intervene with multi-dimensional strategy. In such context, a mix of institutional development, technical assistance to strengthen the alternative sources of livelihoods and financial assistance is very important.*

The Bandhavgarh National Park is located in the state of Madhya Pradesh and covers a part of Vindhya Mountains of central India. The Park consists of a core area of 105 sq. km. and a buffer area of approximately 448 sq. km. Its topography is characterized by steep ridges, undulating forest and swampy meadows. Bandhavgarh National Park is known for the White Bengal Tigers. It has the distinction of harbouring the highest concentration of tigers per unit area of forests. There are 14 villages within the park area and 70 more in the fringes. Village communities depend on subsistence agriculture, cattle rearing and non-timber forest produce (NTFP) collection. The average landholding is one to two acres. The agricultural land is undulating and crops like paddy, maize, jowar, wheat, kodo, kutki, etc. are grown in rain fed conditions. Although seasonal and perennial streams exist, irrigation infrastructure is not yet developed. Subsistence agriculture does not generate enough income to invest in

infrastructure. Village communities also face constraints like lack of access to multiple markets for better price realization, absence of financial institutions, and also dysfunctional village level institutions.

Bottlenecks like poor quality breed, non-availability of feed & fodder and absence of vet-care services constrain the development and realisation of potential of cattle rearing as a major livelihood option. The milk produced is largely for household consumption. The NTFP collections do not generate enough surpluses due to restrictions imposed by the Park authorities.

The landless households accounting for 20% of total households earn their livelihoods from wage labour, *Mahua*(*Madhuca latifolia*) flower and *Tendu patta*(*beedi leaves*) collection. National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) has failed to provide the envisaged 100 days of work to these families due to weak local governance in panchayats.

The cumulative result of all these factors is increased pressure on the National Park resources. Villagers also face the problem of herbivorous animals (e.g. spotted deer, wild boar etc.) entering the agricultural field and damaging crops. Occasionally, they retaliate and kill animals, at times even tigers, by poisoning them. These factors have resulted in an atmosphere of tension between the park authorities and village communities.

## Intervention

To reduce the dependence of the local community on forest resources and consequent pressure on the National Park, Royal Bank of Scotland Foundation India (RBSFI) and Indian Grameen Services (IGS) initiated an action research project in forest fringe villages of Bandhavgarh National Park and Tiger Reserve in 2010. The goal of the project was to directly strengthen alternative sources of livelihoods for more than 450 families. Eight fringe villages of the Park coming under the district Umaria were chosen as the pilot area. The intervention adopted a three pronged strategy of institutional development, livelihood financing and providing technical services to promote and strengthen livelihoods.



## Institutions Development Process

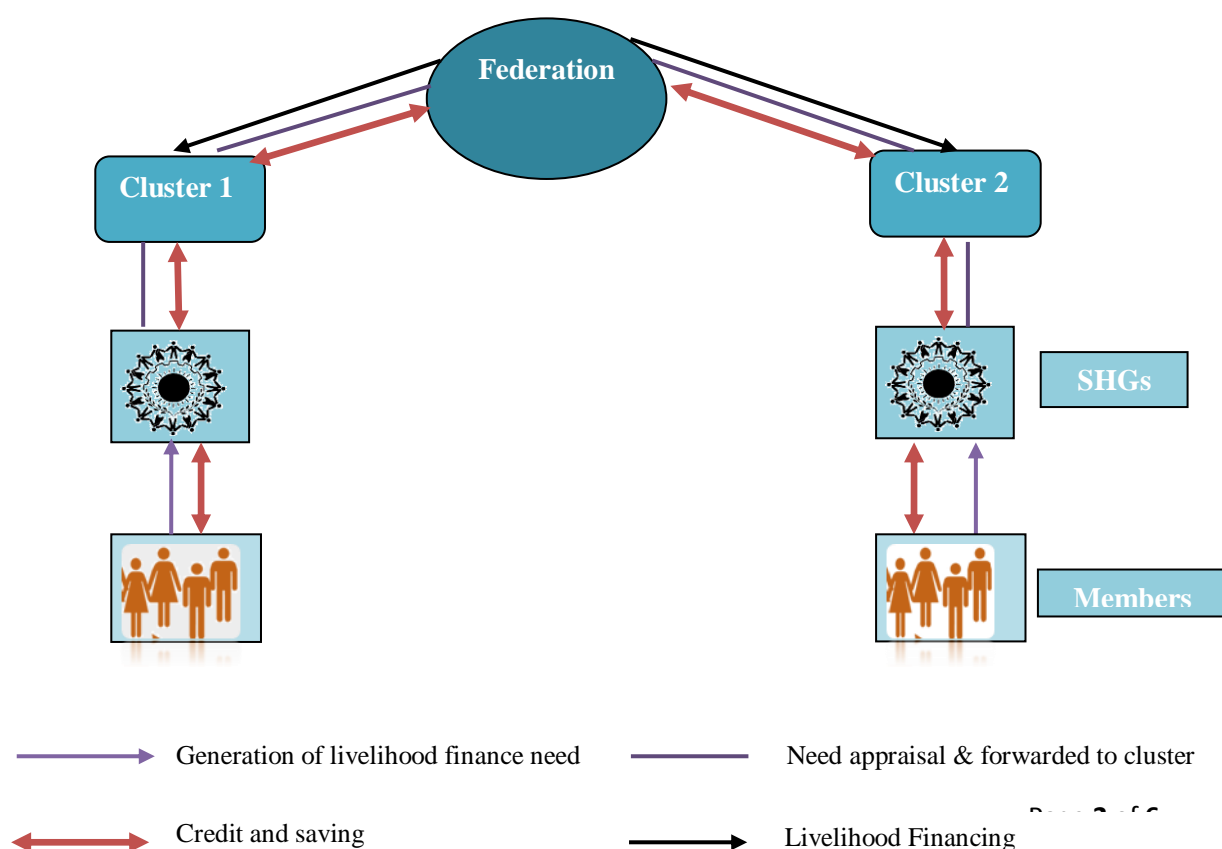
To extend livelihood finance in project villages, a three tier community based institution was formed. Women were mobilized to form Self-Help Groups (SHGs) at village levels. They were trained on accounting at SHG level. Further, SHG representatives of four villages came together to form a cluster, leading to formation of two clusters encompassing eight project villages. These two clusters were subsequently federated to form a SHG federation. Its members were

imparted training on financial documentation, loan process guidelines, loan appraisal and sanction, etc. Detailed roles and responsibilities of various tiers are given in table 1.

**Table 1: Roles and Responsibilities of Various Tiers**

SHGs' roles	Federation's roles	IGS' major roles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishment/ amendment of norms/ bylaws</li> <li>Implementation of norms</li> <li>Collection of savings</li> <li>Disbursement, monitoring and recovery of loans</li> <li>Access financial assistance from their own Federation and on-lend to its members</li> <li>Participates in social development and Livelihood Finance activities</li> <li>Support Federation in implementing various activities viz., insurance, land and water development, agri, horti and agri-allied activities, marketing, social issues, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Policy making &amp; quality control</li> <li>Monitoring and assuring the quality of performance of Cluster/Village/SHGs.</li> <li>Liaison with various Govt. departments and other development agencies</li> <li>Taking up various livelihood promotional issues</li> <li>Maintain books of account</li> <li>To create and utilize revolving fund at optimum level.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide need based support strengthening of Cluster and Cooperative</li> <li>Establish Convergence with district level line departments.</li> <li>Support federation to address various social issues</li> <li>Implementation of Livelihood Triad Services.</li> <li>Design and implementing the CB activities</li> <li>Liaison between projects implementing agency.</li> <li>Reduce dependency on forest and man-wild life conflict through livelihood finance and promotion</li> </ul>

## Livelihood Finance Process



SHGs were given the responsibility to identify livelihood opportunities for investment. Once identified, it was forwarded to the respective clusters. Clusters were made responsible to facilitate the process of livelihood finance. In addition, they were also entrusted the task of coordinating between SHGs and the federation. Federation would invite applications, appraise and sanction loans. The federation was provided grant to meet the loan requirements emerging from SHG members.

By the time the case was being written, SHGs were doing collective savings in regular monthly meetings. As on Dec 2011, 25 SHGs had saved an amount of INR 126, 350 and disbursed credit in excess of INR 244,034 by using the savings to their members. These SHG level loans have been taken mostly for purchasing food, meeting emergency health care needs, purchasing gas cylinder and marriages.

In addition, the Federation had disbursed loans worth INR 0.85 million to 76 households. These loans have been extended mostly for productive purposes such as purchasing buffalo, water pumps and accessories, bullocks, provisions for Kirana shops and establishing flour mills. General purpose loans have been provided to repay high cost debts. A brief summary of loan disbursements is presented in table 2.

**Table 2: Summary of loan disbursed to households**

Sl. No.	Product	Primary Purpose of loan	No of proposals	Amount (in INR)
1	General Purpose	To repay past loan to money lenders	8	61,000
2	Agri. Allied	Buffalo Purchasing, Poultry	18	167,000
3	Agri. Investment	Water Pump and accessories & Bullock	31	256,000
4	Micro Enterprise Development	Construction , Kirana and flour mill etc	20	362,000
<b>Total</b>			<b>77</b>	<b>846,000</b>

Initially, women were not very forthcoming to assemble at a common place. Though they were willing to get organised under an institution, they required resource persons to facilitate the process and make them part of the development in their village. Provision of credit and emphasis on institutions development spurred the villagers to actively participate in the project activities.

### **Productivity Enhancement Guidance**

A total of 133 households were provided technical assistance on agriculture and allied activities in the form of productivity enhancement guidance. It included vegetables, paddy, maize, dairy, fodder cultivation, Nade<sup>1</sup>, papaya and poultry farming. Vegetables included chillies, tomato, onion, garlic, coriander, potato, cabbage, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> It is a structure to produce organic compost fertilizers. When it is created inside the land, it is called Bhoo Nade



**Food grains:** For the first time in the region, training on System of Rice Intensification (SRI) method of paddy cultivation, a widely accepted method to enhance productivity while reducing input costs, were given to 75 farmers. About 45 farmers were able to follow the entire process and they have experienced 100% increase in yield in comparison to the traditional method. Convergence with state agriculture department meant that the farmers were provided cono-weeder, markers and Tricoderma (fungicide), important inputs required for SRI, at a subsidised rate.

Under maize cultivation, 64 households have been imparted training in row and line method of sowing, a practice now widely recognised for productivity enhancement. All households have used early variety certified seeds from research agencies.

**Fruit Plantation and Vegetable Cultivation:**

Taiwan-Papaya, a high yielding variety, along with its scientific method of cultivation was introduced in the region with 13 households. A total of 281 trees were planted.

Improved varieties of vegetables like chillies, tomato, onion, garlic, coriander, potato, cabbage etc. were introduced. During last Rabi season, 16 households harvested 3,252 kgs of vegetables in 37.25 decimal<sup>2</sup> of land. It was largely used for self consumption. The produce from 0.25 decimal of land fetched a net profit of INR 1,698 when sold in the market.



**Fodder Cultivation:** Fodder cultivation was promoted with introduction of barseem and Rachka variety with 15 households, so that milk production level of their cattle could be maintained even in summer season.



**Nadep/ Bhoo Nadep:** The households have harvested more than 52.5 tons of compost (organic fertilizer) from 25 Nadep and 5 Bhoo Nadep units established in the project villages. Apart from being environment friendly, this has reduced dependence on inorganic fertilisers.

**Poultry Farming:** In the project areas, landless families generally

belong to Gond and Baiga tribes. Backyard poultry is being promoted as a livelihood option for these sections of people.

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<sup>2</sup> 100 decimal of land is equal to 1 acre

## Results

Small but encouraging developments in a short period of time since the beginning of the project indicate that the intervention has the potential to bring in long term changes in the livelihoods pattern of forest dependent population of Bandhavgarh. Some of them are:

- Members of four households got freed from bonded labour after repaying the old high cost debt.
- Households have now access to cheaper finance against an interest rate of 5% per month with collateral in pre-intervention period. Loans through SHG savings bear an interest rate of 2% per month, and through SHG federation is available at 8%-12% per annum
- Repayment rate of federation loan has been 100% till date.
- During the last *kharif* season, 45 households harvested approx. 575 quintal of paddy in 20 acres of land.

Although, it is early to draw any conclusion, importance of strengthening alternative livelihoods cannot be understated to achieve conservation of forests.

### *About the Author*

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