

Mr. Mohan Hirabai Hiralal

**Recipient of the Award for Outstanding Contribution in the field of
Constructive Work - 2016**

Born: December 31, 1949

Mohan Hirabai Hiralal an active member of Jayaprakash Narayanji's Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Wahini and a believer of Gandhiji-Vinobaji's thesis of people's power, set up Vrikshamitra in 1984 in Gadchiroli District, Maharashtra. The objective was to propagate the cause of environment, forest livelihood and self-rule.

Mohan Hirabai Hiralal plays the role of selfless Sahyogi Mitra, an activist, a knowledgeable worker who propagates the concept of Gram Swaraj effectively. During his search for unanimous decision making villages and study on 'People and Forest', Mohan Hirabai Hiralal came across Mendha (Lekha), a tribal village in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra where mutual co-operation existed amongst its people. As a Sahayogi Mitra (Collaborator friend), he guided and facilitated the people of Mendha (Lekha) with the process of effective and systematic adoptive management broadly emphasizing three major aspects, viz. forest conservation, sustainability, equity and security. Mohan Hirabai Hiralal helped villagers to focus on women's participation, alcohol prohibition, forest conservation and rights, fight against corruption, cultural rights, youth empowerment, sustainability, equity and security.

Mendha (Lekha) Gram Sabha and its achievements: Mohan Hirabai Hiralal's knowledge and direction helped the people of Mendha (Lekha) in making the Gram Sabha more inclusive, participatory and active. There are study circles here who primarily study the issues with various perspectives. Sahayogi Mitra Mohan Hirabai Hiralal and other like-minded people participate in these discussions. The findings are then submitted to the Gram Sabha for decision with consensus. The villagers were enlightened on their traditional Nistar rights (forest produce rights for domestic consumption) and supported by Mohan Hirabai Hiralal in their fight to acquire them.

Women involvement and Alcohol prohibition: Women expressed that if the Gram Sabha is inclined to have their participation, then the liquor menace had to be stopped. Hence, Mohan Hirabai Hiralal addressed this concern. Alcohol being part of the adivasi culture, could not be completely banned. After a series of discussions in the study group and Gram Sabha, it was unanimously resolved that the sale of alcohol be banned; and if liquor is required during any traditional rituals and functions, prior permission of the Gram Sabha has to be taken. This opened the doors to the women for full-fledged participation in the Gram Sabha meetings and work jointly for the development of the village. This movement laid the foundation of self-rule that Mendha (Lekha) symbolized. Participation of women in Gram Sabha has further empowered them and their village.

Forest rights: Mohan Hirabai Hiralal generated awareness among the villagers about their legal rights over the forest. This helped in popularizing participatory forest management at local, state and national levels. The factors resulted in conferment of Community Forest Rights to the villages Mendha (Lekha) and Marda by the Government in 2009 under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006, popularly known as Forest Rights Act. Mendha (Lekha) has been in news in recent years after becoming one of the two first villages in the country to win community rights over their forests and wresting the rights over bamboo from the Forest Department. In 2011, the Government also handed the Transit Pass Book to Gram Sabha, Mendha (Lekha) to exercise the power to issue transit passes to bamboo purchasers. The villagers now manage, protect, conserve and generate income from the forest produce.

Mere regaining this right is not enough. What is necessary for such a village is to take stock of its resources and plan on their basis for giving full and gainful employment to all the villagers in particular and for all-round economic development of the village in general, even while protecting,

nurturing and improving its environment. A manual has recently been drafted by Mohan Hirabai Hiralal and his associates for this purpose, through a participatory process.

Youth and development: The village youth who are educated are actively involved in the development work of the Community Forest Resource & Biodiversity Management.

The work started with the preparation of Village Bio-diversity Register. This includes in-depth study and evaluation of the forest and its rich resources. They demarcate the forest-land with the guidance and inputs of the seniors of the villagers. The forest area is also being linked to the global positioning (mapping) system. Types of trees, bamboo plantation zones, water bodies, prospects of watershed management and rainwater harvesting at various locations, crop yield, animals, birds, terrain and various other features are studied and categorized according to the forest location by the village youth. They are also in the process of setting up computerized data management system for storing and managing information on the village resources, activities, administration for effective governance. Vocational skill training program in bamboo processing and product making with the support of the Government, is organized to train the youth in treatment process, value addition, nursery techniques, craft and furniture making, housing and construction.

Village women have formed Self Help Groups since 1993; and set up micro activities like ration shop, kerosene shop, tractor renting and forest reservoirs maintenance.

Other features and developmental measures:

- The villagers have successfully carried out anti corruption work. If there is demand raised by anyone, the villagers offer to give the money subject to getting the receipt towards the payment. When the villagers are entitled to receive money under any scheme, they visit the Department in groups, check the documents with due diligence to ensure they receive the entitled amount, etc.
- Revolutionary slogan of Mendha (Lekha) 'In Delhi and Mumbai we have our Government but, in village we ourselves are Government', exemplifies the spirit of the village and its people. They implement it successfully.
- For every decision taken in the interest of the village, there is 100% consensus of the villagers.
- 10% of each village member's income is contributed to Village Fund (Gram Kosh) of the village.
- The village community work is considered as an individual's work and each village person gives his/her time, labour and resources for the village.
- Each house in the village has a bio-gas unit along with a toilet.
- Grain Bank is set up to take care of crisis situation.

In 2013, after persistent efforts of Mohan Hirabai Hiralal and the villagers, all legal formalities of Gramdan of Mendha (Lekha) were completed and the village was declared a Gramdan village under Maharashtra Gramdan Act 1964. It was duly published in Gazette of Government of Maharashtra. It is the first village in the country to become a Gramdan Village after thirty five years.

An important aspect of Mohan Hirabai Hiralal's work is to creatively and effectively utilize the laws that are beneficial to the villagers in their quest for self-rule. He created Study Groups and initiated discussions which resulted in villagers arriving to valid conclusions and solutions with purity of means and non-violence.

Mendha's Gram Sabha is a manifestation of dormant potential present in human beings, which can be replicated. Shri Mohan firmly believes that constructive work and Satyagraha are inseparable and villagers of Mendha (Lekha) are now well versed in both. He combines faith with the knowledge and revolutionary thoughts. When a village community unanimously decides to take decisions by consensus, a different structure comes into existence, even though the members of the community remain the same; and this structure is powerful in the real sense. To enable the evolution of peoples' power, two things are necessary from village level to the global level.

This village is now showing path to other surrounding villages. The architect of this is, of course, Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, but the power and wisdom of the villagers has successfully transformed the

community.

Mohan Hirabai Hiralal laid the foundation of his Sarvodaya work following Gandhiji's thought of welfare of human, lies only in the welfare of mankind and society. Gandhiji had seen constructive work not as a temporary relief measure but, as a tool for achieving what he called 'Poorna Swaraj' – complete freedom to local communities in all respects and authority to them to look after their own affairs.

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