The Netri Movement: Reclaiming Rights for Tribal and Forest-dwelling Women in India

A Power Up! Story

“Jal Jungle Jameen kiski hai? Humari hai, humari hai!” (Who does water, forest and land belong to? It belongs to us, it belongs to us!)

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THE NETRIS

ANJU[1]'S STORY — THE NIGHT

The air, thick and sluggish, mosquitos relishing our stationary tired arms and feet. We were fifteen or so women, clustered around the white plastic tables and a feeble light that cast shadows on our faces more than it lit them. Though our eyes were heavy with fatigue, every gaze was locked on Anju, hanging onto her every word. I had slipped into the storytelling session midway, having just rushed over from another meeting. Some of the others had already retired for the day.

Anju continued recounting how the village goon had threatened her, he had urged her to reconsider. She had not. She spoke not of a grand political destiny, but of quiet, relentless connection to the land and its problems: the rutted paths, the long distances people walked for simple errands, the bureaucratic tangles over land rights that broke families. She had a methodical, professional grasp of policy; she was already a *Netri*, routinely navigating the tedious, unresponsive government offices on behalf of the community. Her campaign had been built on this confidence, this genuine, articulated plan.

And it was undone in a moment by a false police complaint. She rushed to the local station, a place she was accustomed to visiting for other people's traumas, for the women who came to her with bruised arms and silent stories. The goon was there, weaving a vile, flimsy story of assault. It was a calculated move, meant to tear her from the election. Anju, however, did not crumble. She demanded proof, questioning the timing, forcing him to witness the flimsy lie. When she dared him, stating she should actually strike him for the fabrication, the man's control shattered. He launched into aggressive, caste-laced insults, words that were

Project Description

Tribal and forest-dwelling women are among the most marginalized — yet most vital — stewards of forest ecosystems. Despite legal recognition under the Forest Rights Act (2006) and PESA Act, their rights remain largely unrealized and their voices absent from governance spaces.

This project works with Adivasi, Dalit, and oppressed-class women in Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra to change that. By organizing women into collectives and building their leadership from a feminist perspective, the initiative enables them to claim their rightful place from the Gram Sabha to district and state machinery as rights-holders, decision-makers, and leaders in forest governance.

At the heart of this work is Netri - a reimagining of resistance. Netri finds the silent, working women of the forest and gives them the tools to know their own worth: not as invisible labourers, but as equal citizens, ecosystem experts, and farmers. It nurtures a shared courage rooted in deep, embodied knowledge, so that women can challenge patriarchal structures within their families, communities, and the halls of government, and claim their seats at every table that shapes their lives and their forests.

This initiative is supported by Power Up! a global feminist consortium funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands and comprising Just Associates (JASS), PEKKA (Indonesia), and Gender at Work, whose collective mission is to build the power of womxn, womxn's rights organisations, and LBQTI• groups that are most marginalised within their own communities and movements.

[1] Some names have been changed for privacy reasons

meant to burn her very skin. Anju did not flinch; she saw the moment not as a personal assault, but as a legal opportunity. She demanded a formal case be registered against him under the Scheduled Castes and Tribes Act[2], 1989.

By then, members of the *sangathan*[3] (the collective she was a part of) had flooded the police station. They did not arrive to a shouted command; they simply converged, drawn by the invisible, powerful thread of solidarity. They surrounded the station, a silent, unmoving sea of community pressure that made the police nervous. Faced with overwhelming public pressure, the police promised not to pursue the charges against her. The *sangathan* then escalated their demands, insisting on filing the case against her opponent. Realising how dramatically the situation had turned against him, the goon agreed to a compromise. He wrote a formal note of apology, apologised directly to Anju and the *sangathan*, and promised never to press any further false charges. It was a magnificent victory, the undeniable power of the *sangathan*. Anju hadn't even called them; their support was simply inherent to who they were. Anju was poised for her win.

The unexpected came on Election Day: Anju lost. Her opponent secured a landslide victory, as if Anju hadn't even been a contender. The strangeness of the result quickly dissolved as the truth emerged: the votes were bought. The opponent had offered most voters a combination of cash, jewellery, and promises of land rights. He ensured people from remote villages came out to vote, and in neighbouring areas, he spread the lie that Anju had finally agreed to collaborate and publicly endorsed his win. As a result, only the fiercely loyal *sangathan* members voted for Anju; the rest voted for the gifts, the fake promise of land, or the false belief that Anju had given her approval. To finance this victory, her opponent had sold a significant portion of his own land. Anju, still in the slow process of rebuilding her home from damage sustained during a capitalist clash years ago, could never have afforded such an exorbitant campaign. She had mistakenly hoped people would vote for genuine change.

One might expect Anju to be broken or resentful, but she sat there, relating the story not with anger, but with an unblinking, sustained focus, as if examining a difficult mathematical equation. She was now consumed with ensuring fifty-seven *Individual Forest Rights*[4] documents were correctly aligned for their recipients. Her determination was absolute. "I relish the resistance now," she shared. "I know I

[2]Under the Act is it unlawful to intentionally insult or intimidate with intent to humiliate a member of a Scheduled Caste or a Scheduled Tribe in any place within public view; or abuse any member of a Scheduled Caste or a Scheduled Tribe by caste name in any place
within public view:
https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/15338/1/scheduled_castes_and_the_scheduled_tribes.pdf

[3] Community-based voluntary unregistered collective

[4] Documents ensuring forest lands to individuals and families under the Forest Rights Act 2006

can weather it." She acknowledged that winning the election was one way to gain the power to create change but not the *only* way. "I can still do that as myself," she asserted. "I raise the same issues; I participate in the same advocacy. The post would have made it more legitimate. I would have been heard more easily, welcomed into more spaces, and got work done much more smoothly. I knew I was meant for it, and other women and girls would have seen how taking up space is possible and been encouraged. But my path is not deterred by this loss. I will continue my work. I simply learned that politics is a lot of strategy with intention. I was hell-bent on intention and being true to my word; winning would have required a lot more political analysis and strategic planning, even with the limited resources I had."

We were all transfixed. We were physically tired, but we were absolutely present because her story was simultaneously terrifying and incredibly inspiring.

Just before Anju, CK had finished. I caught only fragments of her story, something about a painful, unacknowledged struggle for respect within her own home. She confessed to feeling like a whole person only when she came to work. Here, she was valued, depended upon, her instincts trusted. She presented a capable, seasoned exterior, yet the deep pain beneath it was private, tender, and quietly fresh.

This was the quiet ritual of our evenings: women sharing the precise dimensions of their struggles, the personal cost of every accomplishment. The personal was indeed political because every breath, every whispered hope, every resource secured or denied, was tied to the larger, uncompromising world.

An Unexpected Beginning: Joining the Power UP! Journey and the Necessity of Friendship

Some stories truly begin long before one realises one is part of them. The Power UP! project was this kind of a narrative for me. Even before the official inception phase of the project, I had been listening from the periphery. The conversations within our team were already tinged with the familiar strain of administrative frustration: late responses, documents that refused to settle into a logical order, a certain opaqueness from our distant partners and even within our consortium. I had, unfairly perhaps, internalised the assumption that our partners were simply difficult. Our organisation was new to its own role in the structure, still learning to walk while negotiating the uncomfortable distance between the role we were assigned, to be a funder, effectively, and the one we intended to inhabit: a genuine learning partner. Secretly, I was relieved to observe from the sidelines. It sounded too difficult, too tangled. I did not yet know that my eventual involvement was merely a matter of time.

And so, a couple of years ago, I stepped in. I was still on the margins, standing at the edge of the information avalanche, trying to process the project's structure, our mandate, the current activities, and the identities of our partners. My first direct task was logistical coordination: supporting the Indian partners, Amhi Amchya ArogyaSathi[5], specifically the women, the *Netris*, to navigate the complicated journey to an in-person meeting in Pretoria, South Africa. This was my first moment of direct contact.

I approached these initial communications with a quiet anticipation, but also with the low, unspoken expectation of delay - the narrative of difficulty having settled around me like a thin film of dust. The surprise was the smoothness of my exchanges with the *Netris*. We collaborated intensely, focusing on the urgent, necessary task of securing a fast track passport and visa for one of the seasoned *Netris*, Kumaribai. We failed in that specific effort, a familiar bureaucratic failure, but we managed to ensure that at least one participant from India could attend the Pretoria meeting. Richa, a state chapter leader, stepped forward. This simple, successful transaction was the quiet beginning of my work with the partners in India.

It was during this logistical flurry that I first met Padma, virtually. Our working relationship, which began over documents and deadlines, blossomed quickly into a friendship. I took the initiative, a small, conscious effort, to openly ask about her challenges, to encourage her to share them without filtering, over WhatsApp, and long phone calls. The key piece of work in this early phase was establishing our identity: we (Gender at Work, G@W) were their *partner*, not a remote, demanding donor. While I suspect those more removed from our daily, shared communications might still cling to a perception of us as the funder, I believe I succeeded in establishing a shared, collaborative vision with most of the Indian partners. For this partnership to truly blossom, for them to see us for who we are and not merely what our budget allowed us to do, friendship felt necessary. And I am a seasoned friend (I say this both proudly and humbly). I have been a friend for three decades of my life, a duration that has made me, I would say, quite skilled at it. I needed to clarify, to repeat the obvious, that I was an equal stakeholder, that our desires were aligned: the strengthening of their work, the slow, difficult pursuit of social change. I find no weariness in building these connections; it seems to me the essence of life itself. How many people, I often think, are fortunate enough to do what they truly believe in? I count my blessings, quietly, instead of my frustrations.

This understanding, however, could not be completed through the disembodied exchange of emails and phone calls alone. I needed to meet them, to witness the

[5] Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi is a Gadchiroli-based organization rooted in the Sampurna Kranti movement, whose founders channeled grassroots protest into constructive community action, winning land rights, implementing employment guarantees, and building a self-help movement across marginalized villages since the 1980s. Guided by the philosophy of "find your own way," it works toward holistic health, sustainable livelihoods, and community empowerment, with justice and equity as its foundational commitments.

work firsthand in context, to speak to them face-to-face. This has been the solid, enduring lesson of my time with G@W. The more time I spend with the partners, the deeper my understanding grows of their work, their inner lives, and the contradictions that underscore how thoroughly human we all are. By sharing my own dilemmas, my private questions, my moments of hesitation, the partners see me as more approachable, removed from the pedestal of the donor, that elevated but isolated place. Consequently, they begin to see G@W itself more personally: not as a distant entity demanding excessive compliance documents, but as a feminist network genuinely trying to navigate what feminist grant-making could look like in this specific context.

After the Pretoria meeting, I met Richa again in Rajasthan, where she was leading the *Netri* work. The three or four days I spent visiting their office, the fieldwork sites, and speaking with various project members yielded a treasure box of knowledge that was overwhelming in its detail and deeply inspirational. It was there that I first met CK. She gave me a deep, necessary immersion into their work, brought me to *Netri* meetings, and encouraged direct interaction with the women leaders. I was truly amazed by how different the context was for the *Netris* preparing for resistance in each state, a stark reminder that even shared struggles are intensely local.

Soon after, I made plans to meet Soma and Padma in person. This was another meeting that offered a massive learning opportunity, revealing the depth and roots of their efforts, which stretched far beyond what we could have anticipated from any official document. Soma is the feminist voice of reason within the project. She does not look at the day-to-day mechanisms, but holds the essential feminist lens, regularly reminding the team of the core purpose of their work. I returned to my own team sharing how utterly amazing these women were, and the vast, quiet reach of their efforts. It suddenly made perfect sense why the numbers they were sharing were so large. It was not just the data; there was so much living reality behind it. I understood how important and necessary it was to constantly be in touch with Padma and others, so I could absorb more about their work.

The meeting I mentioned at the start was a review of the five-year journey of the Power UP! project for the Indian partners. It was held in Kurkheda, one of the project sites where AAAS has its office. The location was chosen specifically because Padma would not be able to travel with her months-old baby. It truly takes a village to raise a child, and in this instance, it took *Netris* traveling from across the country to Kurkehda to ensure Padma, the project's enduring anchor, was a vital part of the review. I can only imagine the conversation, the hesitant insistence it must have taken Padma to assert that her presence, even with the 'inconvenient', beautiful, demanding reality of a new baby was simply necessary.

THE MEETING

The journey of the Netri, the female leader, does not begin on a stage with a microphone or in a protest line. It begins in the deep, pre-dawn silence of the home. The first, most visceral check-in at the multi-state Netri gathering was a simple question that laid bare a political truth. Soma, the feminist anchor of the project, welcomed everyone and conversationally asked, with a face of smiles and bright curious eyes, *"What time did you wake up to prepare for this journey?"*

The answers were a collective, unspoken memoir of *taiyaari*; it translates to 'preparation', the invisible labour that is a woman's political tax, the cost of her presence.

The discussion among the women vividly illustrated the profound truth that the personal is indeed political, particularly when women from marginalised communities assemble for a leadership meeting like the Netri program. The partners in India call their *Power UP! initiative* the *Netri programme*. The entire Netri programme is a masterclass in strengthening women's leadership and policy participation. The core objective is to build women's leadership so they can articulate the assertion of their rights. Power UP! provided an opportunity to examine forest rights through a gender lens, evaluating their impact on women's access to and control over their bodies, their voices in decision-making, and their resources. Just to attend this first gathering, the women undertook a massive, unseen logistical effort, spending hours preparing the household for their absence. Their day began staggeringly early, with women waking up at 2 AM, 3 AM, 4 AM, and 5 AM to manage their domestic responsibilities. This preparatory labour included cooking food for their families, ensuring their animals were taken care of by cutting enough fodder for two days and arranging with neighbours for the remaining care, and tackling specific care tasks like a mother intricately braiding a daughter's hair, knowing her father will struggle to manage it.

Some husbands and fathers were actively supportive, one waking his daughter, providing hot water, making parathas, and driving her to the station, and another generally sharing household work. But most women narrated the story of hours spent pre-compensating for the absence of their labour for the subsequent 3 to 4 days. The effort extended to basic coordination, with one woman waking at 3 AM to book and manage the transport to ensure everyone, including the three grandmothers in the group, reached the station on time. For a young woman, the meeting was a major event, marking the first time she had been able to leave home since her father had stepped in to take over her role as primary caregiver for her sick mother. The discussion of this immense, often invisible, effort even including the children's demands for an urban souvenir like "a car or something" served as the powerful foundation for the meeting, framing the sheer effort required for their physical presence as part of their struggle as leaders.

These stories were not lucidly shared; often Soma had to 'harvest' the stories from the women. A common thread emerged: they would frequently gloss over their own work, the immense labour, and the sheer amount of time spent ensuring the household ran smoothly in their absence. It highlights how deeply ingrained the devaluation of this work is, even in the women's own narratives.

The *Netris* instinctively *live* this truth: for a woman to step into the public space, to fight for *jal, jungle, jameen*[6]*, and manav adhikar* (water, forest, land, and human rights), she must first perform a monumental, unseen act of domestic mitigation. The collective understood that their meeting began not with an agenda, but with a profound consciousness of their own unpaid work, making both structural patriarchy and domestic burden visible every step of the way.

CONTEXT

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES AROUND FOREST RIGHTS THAT THE *NETRIS* ARE STANDING UP FOR?

Imagine a family has a small farm. They know the land better than anyone else: where the best soil is, when to plant, and how to protect the crops. The PESA [Panchayats Extension to the Scheduled Areas] Act[7] 1996 is based on that same idea, but for the whole village. It says that the people who live in a village know what's best for it. PESA specifies that the provisions of local self-government (Panchayati System) are to be extended to "Scheduled Areas," which are regions with a high tribal population as defined by the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The Act was enacted to enable tribal self-rule, preserve traditional customs and resources, and ensure community participation in governance at the grassroots level.

Before PESA, a lot of important decisions about the village and its resources like land, water, and forests were made by people who might not understand the community's traditions or needs. The PESA Act changes that by giving a lot of power back to the Gram Sabha (the village assembly).

[6] Jal Jungle Jameen is a rallying cry and political slogan rooted in the indigenous/Adivasi rights movements in India. It captures the three core natural resources that tribal and forest-dwelling communities depend on for survival and identity. Adivasi and forest communities have historically had customary rights over water sources, forests, and land but colonial-era laws (carried forward post-independence) systematically alienated them from these resources. The slogan asserts their right to reclaim and retain control over all three.

[7] https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/PESAAct1996_0.pdf

Gram Sabha - The Village Council

The Gram Sabha is the most important part of this policy. Think of it as the village's own Council or Assembly. It's not a small group of elected leaders; it's made up of *every single adult in the village* whose name is on the voter list.

Thanks to the PESA and Forest Rights Act, the village meeting, or Gram Sabha, stopped being just a place to talk; it became the main authority, the most powerful body in the village. This means it's in charge of approving village plans, looking after the shared resources, and making sure all disputes are settled fairly, turning it into the central voice of local self-rule. It has the power to-

- Protect the culture: The Gram Sabha has the power to protect the village's traditions, customs, and unique way of life.
- Control natural resources: It gives villagers control over the resources that are most important to their daily life. This includes things like:
    - Minor forest products (like tendu leaves, bamboo, and medicinal plants)
    - Minor minerals (like sand or stone from local quarries)
    - Minor water bodies (like village ponds or small streams, fish)
- Stop land grabbing: Before any land is taken for a new project (like a road or a factory), the government has to talk to and get the permission of the Gram Sabha. This helps prevent outsiders from taking their land unfairly.
- Identify beneficiaries: The Gram Sabha decides who in the village should be prioritised for government programmes, like schemes for building houses or getting a loan. This makes sure that the right people get the help they need.
- Manage local matters: The Gram Sabha can also help with things like solving local disputes and controlling the sale of alcohol in the village, matters of violence.

Why is this Act so important?

The PESA Act is about self-governance. It is also an overdue acknowledgment by the State. It is the political assertion that the Gram Sabha, the collective voice, should have the first and final word on development projects, on the flow of money, on the disposition of resources.

In short, the PESA Act empowers the Gram Sabha to be the manager of the village's development, protecting the land, traditions, and way of life.

Now, imagine that a family has lived in or near the forest for a long, long time, not just in the village, but a village or in an area that is *in* the forest. The grandparents, the great-grandparents, move through the undergrowth, gathering medicine and food, grazing their cattle. Their lives are in ongoing co-existence with the forest. Yet for decades, because of laws inherited from a colonial past, the government treats them as though they are visitors, or worse, trespassers. They are considered *outsiders*, despite their long, steady, unbroken presence.

The Forest Rights Act[8] 2006 (FRA) does not grant something new; it simply confirms what has always been true: the forest belongs to the people who live in it, who know the scent of its earth, and who have cared for its deep, complicated life for decades. The Act attempts to erase the feeling of being perpetually unacknowledged, of living a life that officially does not exist, and to replace it with the solidity of a document, a piece of paper that finally matches the truth of their memory. It's like the government finally saying, "We were wrong. The forest belongs to the people who live in it and care for it."

What does the FRA Act do?

It gives the individual and the community important rights over the forest.

- **Land Rights (Individual Rights):** If the family has been farming a piece of forest land, the FRA gives them the right to that land. It's like getting a legal paper (a "title deed") that proves the land is theirs, up to 4 hectares. This helps the family have access to food and a stable life.
- **Resource Rights (Community Rights):** This is a huge one. It gives the entire village the right to use and manage the forest's resources. This means they can:
    - Collect and sell minor forest produce (like bamboo, tendu leaves, honey, or medicinal plants) without being stopped by the forest department.
    - Graze cattle in the forest.
    - Access and use local water bodies.
    - For the first time, the Gram Sabha (village Assembly) has the legal power to protect and manage the community's forest. This means they can make sure the forest stays healthy and doesn't get harmed by outsiders or by the forest department.

[8] https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/8311/1/a2007-02.pdf

How does it work?

The most important part of the FRA is the role of the Gram Sabha. The village assembly is the decision-maker here.

1. **Make a Claim:** The individual, family or community submits a claim to the Gram Sabha, showing that they have been using the land or a part of the forest for a long time.
2. **The Village Decides:** The Gram Sabha discusses and verifies the claim. Since everyone in the village knows who has been living and working where, this is the most honest and reliable way to do it.
3. **The Government Approves:** After the Gram Sabha approves, the claim is sent to Government committees at the sub-division and district levels for final approval and to give them the official papers.

SO, WHAT ARE THE *NETRIS* DOING HERE?

Netri is a reimagining of resistance: to find those tribal, Dalit, and oppressed-class women, the silent, working women of the forest and give them the tools to know their own worth. By guaranteeing their status, not as invisible labourers, but as equal citizens and the experts of the ecosystem, as farmers. By nurturing a shared courage that allows them to claim their rightful seats, from the seat of the Gram Sabha to the highest state offices.

The idea of Netri is to build up the women so they can lead from a place of deep, embodied knowledge, challenging every patriarchal shadow they encounter, within their families, communities and in the cold halls of Government offices. It is a work of feminist assertion. It is an act of profound self-love, a commitment to governance that is both environmentally just and fiercely gender-equal, ensuring that the deepest, truest voices of the forest are loud, proud and clear.

THE PILLARS OF NETRI STRATEGY: SANGATHAN, ADVOCACY, AND ALLIANCES

The *Netris* catalogue their work into three core strategic pillars:

1. Building Power: Building Foundational Structures and Identity

***Sangathan* (Collectives):** The foundational pillar. The architecture of the Netri's power is built on a history of organising. This is not a sudden emergence; it is the flowering of seeds planted decades ago. The earliest

structure was the Mahila Mandal[9] (women's groups), encouraged by the government in the 1970s through the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) to disseminate information on child welfare. This was the thin wedge that first brought rural women together.

Collectives are informal, community-based organisations formed in times of crisis or to address an agenda, be it mining, which threatens life and ecology, or individual instances of injustice or displacement**.** But the mandals (groups) truly transformed into Sangathans, a structured, intentional collective, when women recognised shared personal issues found political solutions. These Sangathans began developing their own structure: a minimal membership fee (often just a small amount of rice and vegetables to manage meeting food), a transparent system where all funds collected were fully accounted for and spent and no money was held in reserve. Initially, they kept the NGO-employee out of the core *Sangathan* leadership to ensure the collective's agenda and power remained uninfluenced. As the groups grew, they formed clusters, and the clusters then federated, demonstrating a natural, decentralised growth of democratic power.

The true energy source of the *Sangathan* is care and commitment. Building this kind of collective identity requires time, patience, and persistent relationship building, a process that is not instantaneous. In the Netri program, the state chapter leaders, seasoned activists who understand the precise pulse of their communities, undertake this critical, foundational labour. They are the ones who bring women together, fostering a group identity based on common issues and guiding the collaborative search for solutions. Before the *Sangathan* identity is internalised by its members, a leader must initially hold the space, nurturing the delicate process of shared identity emergence.

Women's collectives are essential for disrupting entrenched patriarchal norms, which rely on the premise that women's primary roles are to listen and follow. By creating an internal structure defined by equality, transparency, and shared work, the *Sangathan* profoundly increases the members' confidence, their participation in decision-making, and their ability to articulate their own needs.

The true definition of the *Sangathan* lies not just in its structure, but in its internal practice of radical love and equality. This ethos is what enabled them to successfully dissolve deep-seated social barriers, as exemplified by their celebration rituals, which transcended caste. The collective is not merely a political entity; it is a place of care. It is where women find both energy and friendship, standing together through joys and sorrows. This foundational, mandated connection, where tasks, equality, and risks are all shared, is what

[9] For more information read here- https://www.cwds.ac.in/wpcontent/uploads/2024/11/GrassrootEmpowerment.pdf

sustains their engagement through long struggles and allows their external political manifestation to be so unexpectedly strong.

2. Transforming Power: Policy, Resources, and Governance

Advocacy on Policy and Laws: This involves actively raising and influencing policy and policy gaps, particularly around forest rights, the GPDP[10], food security, and the MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act)[11]. The programme introduced a gender lens to ensure the work moves beyond generic community issues to focus on issues specific to women. This led to victories like securing land rights documentation in the names of women in the different states, a transformation of legal identity and property control. They transform women's power over resources by securing Individual Forest Rights (IFR) and linking women to economic schemes like MGNREGA and the Mahila Kisan Credit Card (Women Farmers' Credit Card). This establishes local livelihoods and significantly reduces unsafe migration. Furthermore, actions like advocating for forest collection money to be transferred directly to women's bank accounts grants them direct financial control.

3. Organizing and Mobilising Power: Action and Visibility

Alliances with other Collectives and Movements: Alliance-building proved to be a major strategy. Their successful collaboration with the MAKAAM network has already influenced groups in Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and Jharkhand to either consider a State chapter or adopt a feminist lens in their existing forest rights work. The Netris plan to continue this, socialising with other movements and seeking support from those who cannot be visible, such as lawyers, judges, and media, universities, academics. Their mobilisation relies on creative, engaging, and culturally relevant methods and tools like rallies, posters, slogans, songs, banners, theatre, and pamphlets. This visibility ensures their demands are amplified and engage the wider community and policymakers. Netris who are part of other projects or campaigns bring up the issue of forest rights with a gender lens at different platforms. The Netri state chapter heads have been strategically collaborating with National Coalition for Natural Farming (a multi-stakeholder platform, including NGOs, researchers, and government bodies, aimed at scaling up natural farming across India) and Revitalising Rainfed Agriculture Network (a collective of civil society organizations and practitioners focused specifically on rainfed areas-which make up about 60% of India's cultivated land) to integrate forest-based

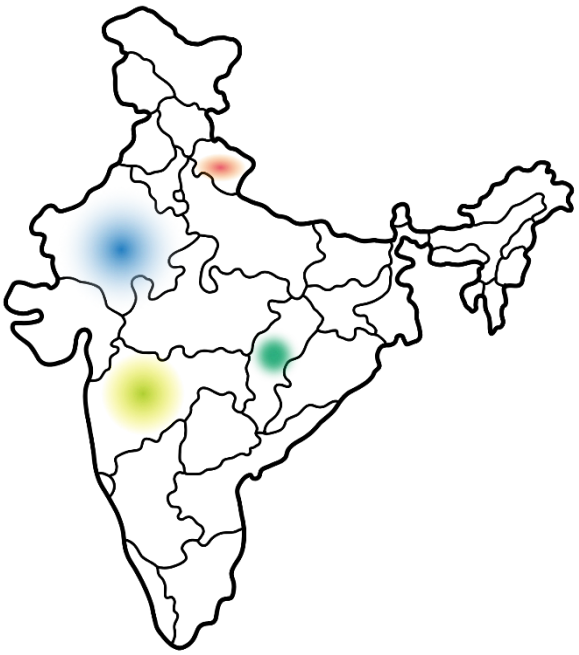
[10] GPDP – the Gram Panchayat Development Plan is a comprehensive and participatory plan created at the local level to promote economic development and social justice within a Gram Panchayat, a village-level self-government institution. The Plan involves the active participation of citizens to identify and prioritise local needs and development requirements.

[11] An Indian law that aims to guarantee 100 days of wage employment per financial year to every rural household whose adult members volunteer for unskilled manual labour.

livelihoods and a gender lens into the national agroecology programme. It focused on developing a gender-transformative roadmap through stakeholder consultations, ensuring that lead partner organizations internalize these equity-driven agendas.

THE MAP OF INDIA DEPICTING THE PRESENCE OF NETRIS

The Blue is Rajasthan, Red is Uttarakhand, Yellow is Maharashtra and Green is Chhattisgarh



STATE CHAPTERS

Sangharsh and Nirmaan: The Architecture of Resistance and Rebuilding

The Netri story is one of dual action: *sangharsh* (struggle/resistance) against injustice and *nirmaan* (rebuilding/construction) of new systems. This dual power is vividly expressed in the work of the collectives.

Rajasthan: Deepening Connections and Intergenerational Power

The work in Rajasthan is an essential example of leveraging the inherent social value of women to dismantle economic patriarchy and enforce local governance accountability. CK shared a transformational experience at the meeting: "From feeling like just someone wrapped in 5 meters of a saree, not counted in the many who were like me, today, I identify as a Netri. This is not a project; it's a process, a *manch* (platform) that will sustain."

The Netri program in Rajasthan engages primarily with the Bhil and Garasia communities, two significant Scheduled Tribes who share the challenging, forest-rich landscape of Southern Rajasthan's Aravalli range. The Bhil, one of the oldest and largest tribal groups known historically for archery and culturally for their vibrant Ghoomar dance and Bhil paintings, live in scattered houses called *Ku* that form villages known as *Tapra* or *Pal*. The Garasia, often closely related, derive their name from the Sanskrit word *gras*, meaning sustenance, and rely heavily on settled agriculture, animal husbandry, and the collection of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP). Dependent on the forests for their sustenance, these communities often faced violence from forest department officers for accessing what should have been rightfully theirs.

In their traditional social sphere, women hold a relatively superior and autonomous position. They possess the right to choose and reject partners, and the financial burden of the traditional marriage falls entirely on the groom's family, reinforcing the high value and agency accorded to women.

However, this social autonomy is severely undercut by the regressive practice of Aata Sata, a barter custom rooted in avoiding dowry or securing a bride for a male relative. Aata Sata (literally "this for that") is an exchange marriage practice where two families swap brides. Family A gives a daughter to Family B, and in return receives a daughter from Family B for their own son. It is rooted in economic logic: avoiding dowry payments or ensuring that a male relative secures a wife.

The problem lies in the linkage. Because the two marriages are treated as a single transaction, they remain bound to each other even after the ceremonies. If one marriage breaks down through conflict, separation, or divorce, the woman in the *other* marriage is held accountable, as though she is collateral for her family's "side of the deal." She may face abuse, neglect, or pressure as retribution, despite having no role in the other couple's problems. In this way, Aata Sata reduces women to exchangeable units in a social contract between families, stripping them of any real choice in marriage and leaving them permanently vulnerable to the fate of a union they have no control over.

To address such injustices and violence, and transform invisibility into a powerful collective voice, the leaders use strategic methods of engagement. Recognising that women needed permission and time, they started spending time with them in their workplace, in the fields, foraging in the forests, allowing conversations to naturally deepen during work hours. Initially, these meetings would be to get to know the women better, build relationships, and get them to think about what they wanted to improve in their lives. Eventually, some of the informal meetings focused on appealing topics like nutrition and access to government schemes that would benefit the entire family, making it easier for women to convince their families to attend some of the gatherings in the village.

The informal sessions soon evolved into structured *baithaks*: gatherings designed, quite deliberately, to weave an intergenerational fabric of solidarity. Women were specifically asked to bring their daughters-in-law and granddaughters. This fusion was not accidental; it was a tactical necessity. The older women arrived carrying the vast, heavy weight of experience and traditional ecological knowledge, lending legitimacy and historical depth to the collective's claims on the forests and resources. The younger women, in turn, brought their education, their swift, modern literacy, and the crucial ability to use tools like Google Forms, a strange, necessary instrument, to organise data and manage policy demands, giving the group a contemporary voice.

To accommodate the relentless burden of domesticity, some of these gatherings began to be held at night. These meetings were often 'agenda-less', simply allowing the women the rare, public luxury of assembling time together, deepening a bond that was otherwise fragmented by daily labour. They gathered in the courtyard of one of the members, eliminating the issue of mobility and distance. It was an act of claiming space, but more profoundly, it was an act of claiming the night itself, a time that had historically belonged only to their husbands and the quiet, domestic void. They said "This is a precious resource we now have: time."

Here, on the soil of the courtyard, they created the *River of Life*, mapping their narratives with sticks, leaves, and their own hands. For the first time, their experiences, the very unfolding of their lives, was placed at the centre. Conversations on consciousness-building, leadership training, forest rights, and the harsh reality of gender-based violence were seamlessly integrated into the sharing.

Richa took me to one of these nocturnal gatherings. I spent the night at the home of a local leader, and the women simply appeared, flowing from the darkness of the surrounding houses, each one carrying her journey. It was a marvellous, simple thing to witness; women moving around freely, exchanging stories in the dim light. Years of intentional effort had delivered this reality.

They had begun, recently, to invite the men, husbands and sons, to these night *baithaks* so they might begin to understand the seriousness of what was important to the women, slowly developing a lens of gender awareness. Dinner was served at the local woman's place. I watched as her sons, alongside their wives, served us hot *rotis* straight from the fire. The taste was startling, a profound simplicity. They explained that this was the flavour of fresh produce, untouched by the bitterness of pesticide. I was deeply moved by the warmth of that meal.

A thought persisted, heavy and difficult: I still struggled to imagine women of this age achieving such freedom in urban cities, especially in tier two cities[12] like my hometown, Ranchi. Moral policing and internalised patriarchy have their city counterparts convinced that 'good women' simply do not step out after dark. And where they do step out, no safety mechanisms exist. City women often lack the power to decide where a streetlamp should be placed, nor do they have access to simple information needed to contact local authorities and raise such concerns. There was a wealth of practical wisdom the *Netris* hold that women in the cities of India could learn from, but the stubborn rural-urban divide continues to uphold the falsehood that valid knowledge resides only in urban spaces.

The following day during that visit, Kamala, Richa's colleague, led me to a daylight *Netri* meeting held beneath a great, sheltering tree. At first hesitant because of my presence, the women slowly opened up when a young *Netri* enthusiastically encouraged them to speak of what had changed in their lives. As one voice found strength, others followed, and a gush of testimony filled the space. They spoke of their victories: not having to wear the veil constantly; the simple, physical freedom of walking around the village without fear. They spoke of increased autonomy over their bodies and choices, of seeing their husbands not as distant authorities but as partners, even daring to call them by their given names, one of them shared chuckling. The weighty decision of when and how many children to bear had shifted from the extended family to a choice discussed and claimed by the couples themselves. These spaces, they shared, had also become their educational centres. Older *Netris* recounted the stories of the forest, knowledge the younger generation had nearly lost. Here, they learned again that the forest was theirs, instilling a sense of belonging, ownership, and responsibility they had felt but could not previously name.

It was during this meeting that a leader pointed to a young girl and asked about her grandmother. I learned that the girl's grandmother had been one of the first women to participate in the earliest *Sangathans* Richa and her team had led years ago. The granddaughter had essentially grown up on the periphery of the movement, participating in the small drawing and writing competitions organised to keep children occupied. For her, women's organising had become a way of life. Her grandmother had ensured she received government benefits and pursued education as far as she could go. She was now married and expecting a child and, having completed her Master's degree, she was planning to embark on a teacher-training course. She was already teaching students in the local village, bridging the gap left by absent teachers. She planned to apply formally to be

[12] Indian cities are informally categorised into tiers based on size, economic activity, and infrastructure. Tier 1 cities, such as Mumbai, Delhi are major metros with large, globally connected economies. Tier 2 cities are significant regional centres with universities, hospitals, and growing industries, but without the scale of the metros. The distinction is significant: resources, investment, and policy attention remain heavily concentrated in Tier 1 cities, with Tier 2 cities often serving as the bridge between metropolitan centres and rural hinterlands

assigned to that school upon certification. She was a *Netri*, she said, because being a *Netri* meant finding ways to lead everywhere in life.

Some spoke of holding positions in various local governance bodies; others were scheduled to undertake training so they could contest formal elections. The immense commitment of this political life was clear: when women left for a week's training for these decision-making roles, their families now shared the housework in their absence. The organised collective has become a potent force in practical governance. The women began taking the lead on policy engagement; they created the Nazari Naksha (local visual maps). Their power was cemented by their ability to bring hard evidence (like geographic on-site verification) to policy meetings. This capacity for rigorous data collection and provision of on-site proof compelled government officials to revise their decisions regarding land use in their forest areas, demonstrating a new level of power and non-negotiable accountability; a critical assertion of their voice.

The women prepared lists for government schemes like Prime Minister Awas Yojna (government housing scheme that provides subsidized homes to low-income families) and actively participated in the Gram Panchayat Development Program (GPDP- A mandated annual planning process where each village government/Panchayat maps its needs and creates a development plan, covering everything from roads to health to livelihoods), registering over 250-300 women, and the new generation of *Netris* took the lead on crucial Forest Rights Committee (FRC) registrations. These efforts translated into major victories secured for the community. *Netris* coordinated to build new roads, a school boundary wall, and a hostel for girls, actively deciding where infrastructure, like streetlights, should be placed. All of this was done while actively applying a gender lens. They also ensured the correct names were on documents for schemes like rural job programs such as MGNREGA[13],(putting financial resources directly into women's control.

The shifts in perception are not just in the public sphere but could also be felt in the intimate space of the family. This newfound autonomy had translated into significant, palpable changes in how the *Netris* were viewed within their own homes, and more profoundly, in the decisions they were now able to make concerning their own bodies. Sitting in a circle beneath the vast, still shade of a great tree, they spoke of a husband's grudging acknowledgement, a mother-in-law's rebuke silenced; the slow, difficult process of commanding one's own space. The Sangathan, they confirmed, was not merely a political body; it was their strength, a collective, breathing foundation that held them steady. And conversely, each woman's resolute presence was the strength of the Sangathan.

[13] **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act**- India's flagship rural jobs program that legally guarantees 100 days of paid manual work per year to any rural household that wants it, functioning as a social safety net and rural infrastructure builder. However, a new Bill has replaced it recently after 2 successful decades.

This collective functioned as an immediate safety net. When a woman was faced with violence or any other form of gender-based cruelty, the collective did not hesitate. It intervened instantly, moving with a speed that the formal legal system could never match.

This unwavering, quiet commitment to protecting the individual dignity and physical autonomy of its members demonstrated the true measure of their resilience. It suggested a continuity far beyond the current project cycle. The *Netris*, standing together in this circular strength, would indeed sustain their fight for rights, for recognition, and for the freedom to be themselves.

Uttarakhand: The Battle for Recognition and Survival

Uttarakhand is almost entirely nestled in the Himalayas, and the region is a geologically young and highly active zone, constantly being shaped by the collision of the Indian and Eurasian plates. This continuous tectonic activity makes the region highly prone to seismic events and combined with heavy rainfall, results in frequent landslides and slope instability. Every year, the *Netris* are involved in major relief work in some part of the state affected by heavy rainfall, landslides and massive destruction. The Netri efforts in Uttarakhand centre on communities defined by extreme and historic isolation, making their struggle a battle for basic existence and documentation. Foremost are the Raji community, one of India's Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Historically known as the *Banrawats* or *cave dwellers*, their remote forest-dwelling life has long excluded them from mainstream society, leaving them without basic amenities, and often forcing residents to travel many kilometres just to reach a health centre or school. The crisis is existential: the young face hardships due to early marriages and lack of support, while climate change has reduced edible sustenance and dried up major water sources. As one State Netri chapter leader, Kheema, sombrely shared, without urgent advocacy, they might cease to exist.

Compounding this is the plight of the *Banthongia* people. This term refers not to an ethnic group, but to victims of a colonial system: the *Van Taungya* (Forest Taungya) system. Introduced by the British, this was a form of agroforestry where landless peasants were compelled to provide free or extremely cheap labour, planting commercial trees for the Forest Department in exchange for a temporary right to cultivate food crops. This system resembled bonded labour. Because the Banthongia lived in Forest Villages, distinct from legally recognized Revenue Villages, they were denied permanent land rights and access to essential government services like schools and healthcare. Today, their lack of documents leaves them vulnerable to deportation and violence, without State protection.

The first line of action for the *Netris* was addressing the core issue of survival and documentation. Through camps and persistent efforts, the Netri collectives helped families claim Individual Forest Rights (IFR) and secure housing under schemes like Atal Awas and PM Awas (government housing schemes). This work

was vital, as ensuring proper residence in the hills helps reduce poverty, homelessness, and vulnerability to animal attacks, all of which can give rise to feelings of powerlessness among the men, drive them towards alcoholism, and eventually result in violence against women and children.

However, the political and systemic roadblocks are immense. The State government's non-recognition of the PESA Act continues to delay the approval of Community Forest Rights (CFR) claims. Furthermore, there's a mandatory 8th-pass rule[14] to contest village elections, which excluded many strong Netri leaders who were denied education due to gender discrimination, forcing them to find a male proxy despite the existence of reserved seats for women. In the face of this resistance, the *Netris* developed ingenious strategies: four families secretly kept their successful IFR claims private, built their homes, and then leveraged that success to encourage 87 more families to apply, using proof of concept to bypass political apathy and demonstrate collective voice and resilience.

Kavita, one of the *Netris* of Uttarakhand had taken centre stage to present. She was inspired by the exposure meeting of the MAKAAM network in Pune and committed to taking up space whenever she subsequently had a platform. Soma shares how Kavita wouldn't step forward to present despite doing immense work in the field. In the last few months, they have seen an inspiring shift in her. Kavita spoke with confidence, outlining the current issues and the specific struggles the *Netris* were addressing. She listed the progress achieved, the small, hard-won victories on paper. Heera, the State lead then took up the narrative, drawing a direct line from this present moment to the historic resistance of Helang[15], explaining the lineage of their fight.

It was later that Neetu confided the details of Kavita's morning. Kavita's distressed sister had arrived at her doorstep at dawn. She had travelled over fifteen kilometres in the dark, on foot, traversing the uneven terrain of the hills, seeking refuge. Her husband's brutality the night before had driven her from her home. Kavita's partner assured her he would manage the situation, that the sister would be cared for, and Kavita, after a pause that must have held an enormous weight of worry, agreed to leave for the meeting.

Neetu offered this not as a tragedy, but as a common narrative that defined their struggle. The *Netris* fought this precise battle every day in their own homes: the casual, sustained violence fuelled by alcoholism. It was a matter of basic survival and well-being for these women to be part of the movement, to make their

[14] Women need to be educated up to high school Grade 8 to contest elections.
[15] A corporate hydropower project had taken over community grazing land, and when local women tried to exercise their traditional rights to collect fodder, the state used force against them, on the very day the government was publicly celebrating environmental protection. To know more: https://countercurrents.org/2022/08/spirit-of-chipko-echo-in-the-cry-for-justice-in-helang/

region free of both alcohol and violence, a need that was as urgent and essential as securing their forest rights.

The end goal for the *Netris* is complete self-reliance, recognising that livelihoods grant women autonomy, the ability to take their own decisions, financial rights, and property in their name (including cattle, which serves as a form of credit). This principle led directly to the formation of a women-led dairy cooperative. By making and selling buttermilk and milk, they not only created their own food and income but used the profit to strengthen their collective, making their village happier and more secure. Radha was leading the cooperative. Radha's story is illustrative: once a school sports champion, her life was compromised by circumstance. After losing her father, she agreed to a conditional marriage, her family's economic stability in exchange for her hand. Her husband supported her education, supporting her to pursue a diploma and graduation. But with scarce opportunities in the hills, she couldn't do much with all that she had, until she was approached by Heera to be a part of the collective. Radha shared that she was probably preparing for this day since her childhood, to be a Netri. She feels it comes to her naturally and she wouldn't give it up for anything. The *Netris* pushed for E-Shram and Sharmik Cards, providing formal recognition and benefits to women as workers and farmers, a vital acknowledgement for a demographic historically invisible in official records.

One of the landmark achievements is that the Banthongiya people received Malikana Haq, which means that they have transitioned from being an informal occupant to a formal, legal property owner, giving them full legal rights over their land because of the persistent effort of the *Netris*.

To combat the climate crisis and the loss of traditional knowledge, the intergenerational *Netris* of Uttarakhand, launched the "Ek Mutthi Beej" (Handful of Seeds) campaign. Drawing on the expertise of Adivasi women, they trained others on storing and planting seeds appropriate for soil health and forest replenishment. This is a powerful, proactive conservation movement led by the women whose lives are most impacted by the changing environment, demonstrating how the *Netris* are transforming a personal burden into a political force that fights for rights, recognition, and a sustainable future for their communities.

The story of the Uttarakhand *Netris* is testimony to the fact that when marginalised women secure documents and land rights, they are not just gaining resources, they are gaining a political voice to protect their bodies and their very existence.

Chhattisgarh: The Battle for Identity and Land

Chandrika and Anju proudly share their PowerPoint presentation. Their chapter of the Netri focused on solidifying the second line of women's leadership over the

last 5 years. They had strategically expanded the work in the villages. It started with 20 villages, and currently they have reached 50 villages in the area. When a model works, they said, "You replicate". The number of local management committees (*prabandhan samitis*) has gone up from 4 to 25, increasing the number of core *Netris* from 100 to 200. They came prepared with their data from their regular monitoring and evaluation practice. The number of panchayats had gone up from 13 to 45; women's collectives from 68 to 170!

This is the same Anju with whom we began this story. Apparently, Anju was a shy and timid woman who would occasionally attend Netri meetings and make notes about the information shared during the meetings. Rajim could see a fireball in her; rightly so. Years ago, when there was a major land-grab attempt in their village, Anju, along with others from the sangathan, stood at the forefront to repel that attack. It led to Anju losing her home, and everything else because it was all burnt to the ground to scare them. Having lost everything, Anju was still not deterred and continued to stand up against the corporate land grabbers using all the knowledge from the Netri meetings to challenge them and push them back. The village won the fight. Rajim made sure she mentored Anju through and through because Anju was 'a born Netri' and she was awakened through the struggle to protect the land. The Netri chapter in Chhattisgarh is focused on a right-based movement. They have an unapologetic approach to claiming things they are legally and morally owed. They boldly hold duty-bearers (governments, corporations) accountable and centre the agency of their communities, individuals.

The driving force behind the Chhattisgarh chapter is Rajim, a fierce, lifelong leader with a history of struggle for the rights of marginalised communities. Rajim is a rebel at heart. Growing up with a single mother and multiple siblings in rural Chhattisgarh, she was immersed in social movements from the young age of 17, experiencing multiple jail terms for her activism. Rajim sees organising as the singular key strategy to bring about change, firmly stating that: "Sangathans sustain, NGOs might not." Her unwavering personal courage, even in the face of threats, is clear in her chilling, yet powerful, statement: "What's the worse they could do? Kill or rape me, right? I am afraid of neither."

This fierce outlook is rooted in how Rajim grew up, dancing and singing and learning the way of life in Ghotuls, the unique social institution of the Muria and Gond tribes where she grew up. Rajim explained that the Ghotul served as a communal "living university" where young boys (*Cheliks*) and girls (*Motiaris*), often from ages 7-17 or until marriage, were socialised in a dedicated space outside the village. The Ghotul taught essential life skills, community values, and discipline. It fostered an environment of open acceptance of companionship and pre-marital intimacy based on mutual consent. Children born out of wedlock in the Ghotuls were readily accepted without any shame or ostracization. This cultural context is at the centre of Rajim's advocacy. She views the strict gender policing and

suppression of women's rights in mainstream Indian society as *deeply colonial* and not part of their traditional culture. This perspective fuels her unwavering focus on violence against women (VAW), insisting that: "Everyone needs to understand what violence is."

To achieve their goals, the *Netris* employed a clear, two-pronged strategy focused on building foundational power and breaking down cultural barriers. They strategically used self-help groups (SHGs), which are tied to saving money (*bachatgath*), as a low-resistance entry point to organise women. Since SHGs involve money, families offer less initial objection, allowing these financial groups to become safe spaces where the real work, on rights, collective issues and violence, could begin.

The *Netris* directly challenged deep-seated patriarchy, including unspoken cultural rules. For example, they persistently engaged in subtle practices and conversations to break the village hierarchy that forbade daughters-in-law to sit in the front during Gram Sabhas, in the presence of male elders. A dedicated focus on VAW was maintained through extensive trainings, posters, and wall paintings to ensure the *Netris* and the broader community were highly aware of this critical issue. Though a community-wide helpline was established, it later ceased to exist due to the unfortunate lack of funding support to grassroots organising and rights-based work.

The collective struggle in Chhattisgarh embodies a two-pronged approach - resisting (sangharsh) dispossession through the MAKAAM network while simultaneously rebuilding (nirmaan) power and economic security through the *Power Up!* initiative, weaving together resistance and renewal into a single, unified movement.

The Chhattisgarh *Netris* successfully secured Individual Forest Rights (IFR) for 17,000 people and strategically linked their members to schemes like MGNREGA and the Mahila Kisan Credit Card. Securing land rights documentation in the names of women was a transformative act, providing a tangible source of power by acknowledging women's legal identity, property, and ownership. This provided a steady source of income, which led to a significant reduction in unsafe migration to hazardous workplaces like brick kilns, allowing families to achieve sustenance in their home region.

Netris also leveraged their traditional knowledge to become effective environmental and legal advocates. They conducted detailed surveys of forest produce, documenting *when*, *where*, and *for how long* fruits, seeds, and other non-timber forest produce were available. This crucial evidence was used to challenge industrialist encroachments on the land in court. Informed by their survey findings, they also actively reforested their land by creating and throwing seed balls. They initiated the *Bin Boi Fasal* (un-irrigated/un-sown crop) campaign,

which champions the forest produce they forage as the legitimate produce of women forest farmers, asserting their rights to and in the forest.

When I visited the field location, *Netris* asked us not to come too far into the village as the road was completely immersed in water and the car would get stuck. These were villages in the forest; hence the roads were not concrete. And yet, it hasn't stood in the way of the *Netris* travelling miles to stake their claims and assert their rights. We walked the rest of the distance to assemble at one of the houses. The *Netris* shared stories of their resistance over tea and casually moved on to discussing strategies for the upcoming court case, in which they were claiming Individual Forest Rights. Whether advocating to end sexual violence, fighting industrialists in court, or organising to acquire basic infrastructure like fresh water and new roads, the *Netris* have emerged as fierce, powerful advocates, firmly rooted in the belief that their collective identity is non-negotiable.

Maharashtra: The Ascendance of Confident Voices

The structural centre of the *Netri* program resides in Aami Amcha ArogyaSathi (AAAs), based in Kurkheda, Gadchiroli, Maharashtra. Since their founding in 1984, the organisation's work, initially focused on health, hygiene, and nutrition, soon shifted to the essential task of organising the Sangathans (people's organisations). AAAs recognised that the collective was the one true unit that could not only initiate change but also sustain it once its roots had deepened. The meeting I attended was held in their lush green regional office. The region's history of forest rights activism, originating in Gadchiroli, remains a site of vigorous, community-driven transformation.

Padma works here, closely with Shubhada, who carries the weight of forty years of transformative labour. Over tea, a moment of shared warmth that slows the relentless pace of work, Shubhada shared the transformation over forty years, since she first arrived in Kurkheda, Gadchiroli. Showing me the area, she recalled a barrenness; my immediate, urban anxiety prompted the question, "Was it safe?" She simply chuckled and confirmed it was. She and her partner, a doctor, had made a deliberate, life-altering decision, immersing themselves in the JP Movement[16] and the profound necessity for change. For them, the boundary was thin: the political was personal, just as the personal was political.

[16] The **Jayaprakash Movement**, also known as the **JP Movement** or *Sampoorna Kranti* (Total Revolution), was a watershed moment in post-independence Indian democracy, led by the veteran socialist and Gandhian, **Jayaprakash Narayan (JP)**. The movement began in the early 1970s, triggered by student unrest in **Bihar** and **Gujarat** against escalating corruption, price rises, and unemployment under Indira Gandhi's government. Students appealed to JP to lead their non-violent agitation in 1974. JP agreed on the condition that the movement transcend simple student protest and become a call for Total Revolution. This was a holistic vision for systemic change, encompassing political, social, economic, cultural, intellectual, educational, and spiritual spheres. It demanded a radical overhaul of the entire socio-political framework, advocating for genuine decentralised democracy where power was vested in the people at the grassroots level.

Shubhada spoke of the extensive, patient time required to cultivate trust, to build a relationship that allowed AAAS to be considered part of the community's own fabric. It began with awareness campaigns and the simple, frequent offering of remedies for common ailments. Seeing the transformed villages years later offered a deep lesson: democracy, in this context, is not a rapid transaction. It requires the slow rhythm of consultation and discussion before any commitment is made, reinforcing the idea that patience is a necessary precursor to lasting effort.

It was a striking moment to observe the second-line leaders, seeing the quiet reflection of the founders . Like Shubhada, Padma had also pursued a Master's in Social Work, driven by the intellectual desire to create tangible impact in the field she had studied. Her partner, though from a different State, had chosen to settle in Kurkheda with her, seamlessly finding his place in her life and the organization.

Padma was the AAAS anchor, holding it all together. I wondered why we had not known more about her sooner. Perhaps age plays a role, that subtle, invisible hesitation young women often feel before taking up space, especially in formal settings. Padma is the project's Programme Manager. She ensures the documents arrive on time, manages the budget with diligence, compiles the necessary reports, checks that work plans align with thematic requirements and, critically, filters everything through a feminist lens. She is a young Aadiwasi woman who studied development at a leading university in the country. She grapples with the myriad questions that young feminists working in both organisations and communities face daily, questions she raises, seeks answers to, and uses to evaluate her own efforts, all while trying to balance her post-graduation professional commitments with a private life she is still defining.

I finally met Padma for a longer duration when Gender at Work's partners convened in Kigali, Rwanda, during the penultimate year of the Power Up! project. We – Gender at Work - strongly advocated for her to participate in the Kigali meeting; she was the sole representative of Power Up! in India and needed to be in the room for any serious discussion concerning the work in India. Her contribution to the meeting was invaluable. She provided the necessary historical context of the project, articulated their current intentions, and shared their hopes for the future with a sure, quiet authority. Padma had a baby during the last year of the PU! project. Even during her maternity leave, she could not entirely detach herself, ensuring things remained in alignment and even participating in the external evaluation processes.

I was legitimately curious when I asked why AAAS needed the Netri programme when they had already accomplished so much. *"To introduce an active gender lens to our existing work, and to expand the work to other regions"*, Padma urgently responded. Initially, when documenting village issues, the women's concerns were simply the muted echoes of the community's demands. AAAs recognised

the necessity of a gender lens to articulate issues specific to women, both private and communal.

Netri was meticulously planned, using the bodies, voices and resources framework. It would be a phased process: Inclusion —> Representation —> Active Participation —> Leadership.

It was a process that demanded the long, silent patience of cultivation. It took the organisation nearly a year to simply identify and gather the nascent *Netris*. In a previous review meeting, one *Netri* shared her experience that contained a slice of history of the movement: she would not have been there had it not been for Padma's persistence and patience. Padma chuckled and elaborated on the sheer difficulty of ensuring regular participation. *Netris*' lives were densely packed with domestic and social responsibilities; fixed meeting dates were an organisational impossibility. Some were still students, torn between exams and duty; many carried the heavy, constant weight of childcare. So, the sangathans welcomed the children along with their mothers to make sure they could participate.

It required sustained effort, a careful, continuous holding of the space, to draw them together for discussions and to forge that vital collective identity. Over time, they built capacity, holding workshops on topics ranging from alternative economies to the brutality of gender-based violence, and mostly on forest rights. They prepared the women for public participation, rehearsing mock sessions of the *Gram Sabha*, organising pre-meetings so their voices would not falter when the moment to speak arrived.

The tangible rewards of this strengthened leadership were astonishing. Within the *Gram Sabhas*, the *Netris* achieved an economic transformation. Their collective income from forest produce skyrocketed from ₹5,000 to ₹81,000 over the last few years, a seismic shift that completely eliminated the necessity of unsafe migration. Women now controlled their income, and they entered the marketplace themselves. Having reclaimed a renewed sense of forest ownership, they used creative knowledge to process produce and sell it, completely bypassing the exploitative middlemen to directly negotiate with the *Tendu Patta* buyers[17].

The victory over the Tendu Patta buyers was not just an increase in revenue; it was the assertion of economic dignity. For generations, the women harvested the leaves, their hands performing the patient, arduous labour, yet the final price, the true value of their effort, was decided by a distant male middleman or went to their husbands. The middleman was the keeper of the ledger, the one who

[17] The Tendu leaf is considered "Green Gold" in many parts of India, particularly in states like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha, because of its massive economic impact. While the tree itself is valuable for its hard timber, the leaves are famous for one specific purpose: they are the primary wrapper used to make **bidis** (traditional hand-rolled Indian cigarettes). In India, the trade of Tendu Patta (leaves) is a **state-monopolized** business. This means the primary "buyers" are the state governments, who then sell the leaves to private industries through auctions

determined what their effort was worth, pocketing the surplus, the very cream of their toil. But with their collective strength fortified, the *Netris* took the unprecedented step of entering the marketplace themselves. The marketplace, once a forbidden space of male negotiation and guarded whispers, became their claimed territory. To directly negotiate the price of the *Tendu Patta* was to perform a public act of economic sovereignty. It meant looking the buyer in the eye and stating the value of the leaf, and thus, the value of their own labour, without apology or mediation. This took years and a lot of leadership building. By eliminating the middleman, they were not just optimising profit; they were closing the gap between effort and reward, transforming the leaf from a raw commodity into a tangible, controlled expression of their own power. With financial control secured, funds advocated for and successfully deposited directly into women's accounts, the *Netris* turned their gaze to other injustices in everyday life. They launched a campaign against the harassment women faced on buses, tackling the most basic barrier to their mobility and safety.

Their emergence was defined by Sangharsh (resistance). When the District Collector repeatedly denied them an appointment, their collective strength did not allow for surrender. Instead, they marched fearlessly into his office. This audacious advocacy, rooted in their fortified collective, became the undeniable signature of their new leadership.

The Netri movement's energy also echoed from a different region of Maharashtra: Raigadh. The story of one new *Netri,* Amita, perfectly encapsulated the programme's effectiveness. Her trajectory was a familiar, beautiful curve: she moved from a shy participant in local meetings, guided by a *Tai* (older sister), to a confident leader. She began by mastering the small, crucial task of connecting people to government schemes. Her growing competence led her to the *Gram Sabha*, where she actively contributed to a landmark proposal: the establishment of a new forest committee comprising six Adivasi Women and five Adivasi Men, as the forest belonged to their community. Amita was another one of the women whose life had been immensely impacted by the exposure visit to Pune, like Kavita. Witnessing women from other States confidently present their work was a pivotal moment. "I felt I can also talk about the work we are doing at Raigadh at other platforms," she recalled. The experience was a profound lesson in the power of peer-to-peer inspiration. Inspired by their training, these women submitted memorandums, fighting to ensure fair compensation for their forest produce (*jadibuti*) from the *Van Dhan Kendras*.

CONCLUSION

The *Netris*' presentations during the final internal review meeting of PU! were not just reports; they were acts of capacity building, challenging women to occupy

spaces and use their acquired skills to articulate complex policy, build consensus, experiment with presentation skills; everything that patriarchal society denies them. The experienced leaders provided historic context, connecting the dots between decades of struggle and current policy wins and gaps.

Each State Netri group had a list of plans for the next 5 years. I was amazed to see that they did not treat it as a concluding meeting even though the Power Up! project cycle was coming to an end. Despite facing a critical constraint to the availability of funding, the *Netris* have a clear, defiant plan: to move from 4 to 8 states and build a National Collective. The funding makes possible the training, travel for advocacy, and spaces for exchange that are the very lifeblood of the collective. They will look for resources to fund these, but they were not dejected. That is the difference between movements and projects.

I was beyond impressed and motivated by the time the meeting ended. The Forest Rights Act (FRA), which acknowledges historical injustices and accepts that people are the natural custodians of the forests, is not just a law. It is the legal scaffolding for a women-led movement that is defining its own path to autonomy, dignity, and a sustainable future. The Netri Program is, therefore, a dynamic movement built on radical love, strategic alliances, and the unyielding collective power of women who have walked from their kitchens into the rooms of power.