

# In the Footprints of Baba Adhav and Madhav Gadgil, a Lesson That Change is Slow, People-Centric Work

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Gadgil championed science that respected local wisdom. Adhav fought to break the walls of caste and fear. Both believed change begins with people.



Left: Baba Adhav in his Pune Hamal Panchayat office. (Photo: Abhishek Bhosale) Right: Madhav Gadgil addressing Gram Sabha at Loni-Kh village. (Photo: Shantaram Pandhere)

India lost two important Maharashtrian figures this winter. In early December, the leader of the working class, a strong voice of the Satyashodhak tradition and an anti-caste activist, Baba Adhav, passed away in Pune. A month later, in early January, the ecologist Madhav Gadgil also passed away in the same city. They worked in very different fields, yet their journeys carried a similar spirit. Both trusted ordinary people and worked closely with them. Their influence remains alive in villages, forests and movements across Maharashtra.

I first moved from Latur to Pune in 2011 to pursue a postgraduate degree at Garware College. In the same building was the biodiversity department where Gadgil used to teach. I had heard many stories about his work from friends in that department

One afternoon, as I came down the stairs, I saw him walking up. He wore a simple kurta and had a gentle smile. He was the first scientist I had ever seen in person. Until then, scientists for me were only names in textbooks, imagined in suits. Seeing him broke that image. Over time, I heard him speak and began to understand how he placed people at the centre of ecology.

Anyone involved in social issues in Pune at the time also knew the presence of Baba Adhav. Rooted in the Satyashodhak tradition, he carried an authority built through decades of social work. At public meetings, worker rallies or discussions about rights, he was often on stage or sitting among the crowd. His work with the Hamal Panchayat, Rickshaw Panchayat and the organising of urban labourers kept his name regularly in the newspapers. Pune has always been a centre of social and political thought, and Baba Adhav was one of its most respected voices.

But I understood the true reach of both men only when I travelled across Maharashtra to study, report on and research socio-political movements. In tribal hamlets in Nandurbar, people spoke of Baba Adhav and Gadgil with familiarity.

Gadgil was a scientist, but never one who stayed inside a laboratory. I realised this while travelling through the Satpuda hills and later in the villages of Marathwada. His Western Ghats committee report had already stirred national debate years earlier. During my admission interview for the journalism programme at Savitribai Phule Pune University, I was asked several questions about that report. I still remember that experience.

The forests of the Satpuda hills in northern Maharashtra have been shrinking for decades. Because of this, the Pawra and Bhil communities often migrate across the Narmada River into Gujarat

for work. Their survival, traditionally dependent on forests, has come under strain.

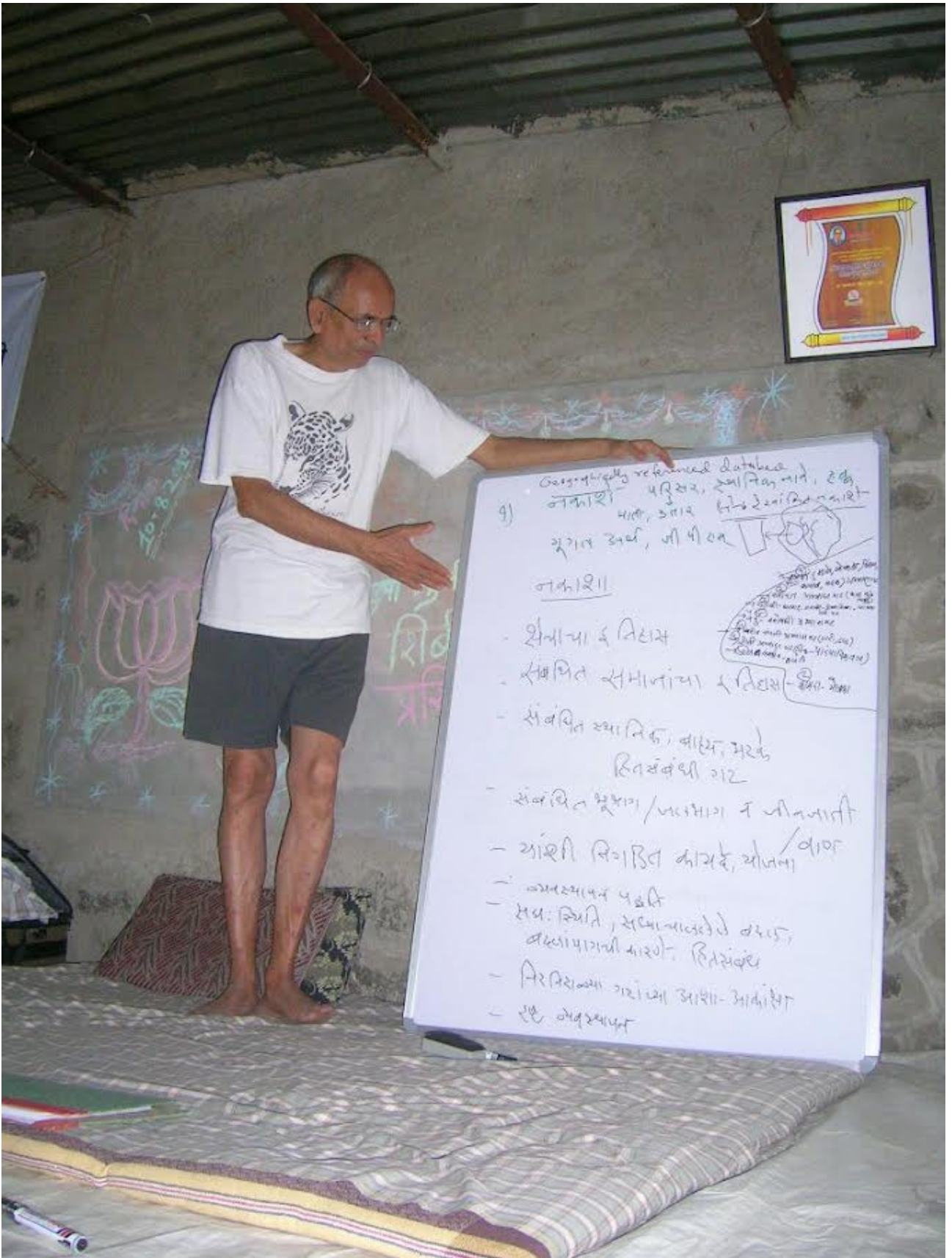
When this crisis became clear, efforts to revive forests began in talukas like Shahada, Taloda and Dhadgaon, and in villages such as Virpur, Dara Chinchola and Bhute Akaspur. People saw trees they had protected being cut down, yet they kept planting new ones and rebuilding the forest.

This struggle was local, but the scientific support came from Gadgil, who worked with villagers to understand their land and find practical ways of restoring it.

During my visit to Nandurbar in 2021, when writer Dinanath Manohar tried to draw media attention to the collective forest work in the Satpuda, Gadgil's name kept coming up in conversations with locals. Some villagers said he had visited their settlements.

The region has a long history of peasant and tribal movements. Leaders like Ambarsingh Maharaj, Kumar Shiralkar and others built strong struggles here in the 1970s. For people in these hills, saving the forest is directly linked to saving their own future. Elders still recall the battles of the 1980s, when the shrinking forests threatened their lives

To protect Maharashtra's biodiversity, the Maharashtra Gene Bank Project was launched under Gadgil's leadership. Its detailed vision was published in a booklet called Gotul. It explained how the Western Ghats, Satpuda hills and river valleys had lost most of their forests, and how tribal communities had historically been denied their forest rights. With laws like PESA (1996) and the Forest Rights Act (2006), new possibilities opened for forest-based communities. The project aimed to involve local people in studying biodiversity, preparing registers, restoring forests with mixed plantations and creating livelihood opportunities based on the sustainable use of forest produce.



Madhav Gadgil imparts training at village Parala. Photo: Shantaram Pandhere.

From the northern Maharashtra region, the organisation Janarth, led by Vikram and Ranjana Kanhere, based in Shahada, was

chosen for the project. The idea had circulated since 2008, but the actual work began in 2014 and continued until 2019 under the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. Under the project, surveys were conducted, a People's Biodiversity Register was prepared, mixed plantations were developed and experiments were done to process forest produce so that families could earn without harming their environment.

Much of this inspiration came from local leadership, but also from Gadgil's steady guidance, where villagers were treated as partners and holders of ecological knowledge.

Although previously in Dhule and now Nandurbar district is a tribal-majority region, caste discrimination has also existed here. The caste conflict in Prakasha on the banks of the Tapi River is widely known. The shramik chalwal in the region opposed caste inequality, yet such incidents continued.

Whenever people discussed resistance to caste discrimination, the name of Baba Adhav surfaced. His Ek Gaon, Ek Panvatha (One Village, One Water Source) movement had reached many villages in the region. Launched during the centenary of the Satyashodhak Samaj, its aim was simple: to end separate wells for different castes and make the main water source open to everyone.

This campaign spread across the state – from Chandrapur to Ratnagiri, from Kolhapur to Dhule and Nandurbar. In Satpuda villages like Prakasha, Taloda, Mod, Dhanora, Pusand and Sangarkhede, people still remember his visits.

Baba Adhav documented this work in his book Ek Gaav, Ek Panvatha, an important record of caste realities, the Dalit movement and class struggles in the 1970s and '80s. The book also captures the lives of youth groups like the Dalit Panthers, Yuvak Kranti Dal, Dalit Yuvak Aghadi and various working-class organisations. Journalist Anil Awachat often travelled with Baba and wrote about caste violence and resistance, helping these stories reach a wider public.

A Dalit elder in Beed once told me how Baba had visited their village when caste tensions were high. Upper-caste groups had stopped Dalits from collecting water. Emotions were rising. Baba sat with everyone, listened first and then spoke. His message was simple: water cannot be restricted, and a village cannot be divided at a well. The elder said that his visit reduced the possibility of violence.

Even though Babasaheb Ambedkar had led the historic Mahad Satyagraha in 1927, social boycotts around water continued well into the 1970s. One such example was in Khalwat Nimgaon in Beed district. A young Dalit from a village named Madhav More, studying at Milind College in Aurangabad, faced discrimination in village school during a Republic Day function because he was Dalit. In protest, he collected water from an upper-caste spring, after which the Dalit community was boycotted. Such incidents were common.

The Dalit Yuvak Aghadi, formed by youth in Milind College Aurangabad, often travelled to villages to support affected families. Adhav's movement strengthened their efforts. Youth activists sometimes struggled to initiate dialogue with upper-caste groups, but Baba could. He explained that caste was not a Dalit problem but a responsibility that the upper castes must address. In many places, his presence prevented violence.

These struggles also raised questions of livelihood. When a community is boycotted, survival becomes the immediate issue. In Marathwada, Dalit families began cultivating unused gairan (common grazing) lands. In Mang Wadgaon in Dharashiv (formerly Osmanabad), collective farming on gairan showed promising results. But the community lacked basic tools and resources. An activist associated with the Dalit Yuvak Aghadi, Prakash Sirsat, recalls how Baba mobilised support through the Hamal Panchayat in Pune to send bulls and tools for these efforts. Mang Wadgaon later became a key centre for the Dalit Yuvak Aghadi.

When the Pardhi community faced violence in Dhoki village, a large gathering was held in Mang Wadgaon, where Baba spoke. His presence lent strength and helped bring attention from media in Pune and Mumbai.

In July 1974, Babhalgaon near Latur witnessed the murder of two members of a Dalit family named Mhaske. Baba visited the village with playwright Vijay Tendulkar and journalist Awachat. Tendulkar later followed up on the case with the then-minister Sharad Pawar. Such bridge-building defined Baba's work – meeting the affected, speaking to the powerful and ensuring justice was not forgotten.

The university renaming movement in Marathwada brought new social tensions. Many socialists and left groups were divided over renaming Marathwada University after Ambedkar. Baba Adhav took a clear stand in support of the renaming. Those were difficult years, marked by violent attacks on Dalit settlements and hateful slogans. Committees like the Namantar Hinsa Virodhi Kruti Samiti and the Apatgrast Dalit Sahayata Samiti were formed. A long march was organised. Baba participated actively, helping ensure that the movement did not remain confined to one community.



Baba Adhav (left, with mic) at the launch event of the Kharda Long March at Phule wada in May 2014.  
Photo: Abhishek Bhosale.

In Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar (previously Aurangabad) district, the organisation Paryay worked on land rights under activists Shantaram Pandhere and Mangal Khiwansara. Gadgil chose Paryay as a partner for the Gene Bank Project and stayed in villages like Parala, Thakarwadi and Vaijapur. Pandhere recalls how natural Gadgil was in rural life – swimming in wells, climbing trees and swinging from banyan roots. His connection with nature was lived, not merely academic. Under his guidance, People’s Biodiversity Registers were prepared and forest rights workshops were held.

Pandhere says, “We fought for land as a question of caste, livelihood and dignity. With Gadgil, we learned the link between land and biodiversity. We did not go to a university for that. The university came to us in the form of Madhav Gadgil.”

One important lesson from the Gene Bank Project is Gadgil’s belief in community-centred work. Many projects depend heavily on government departments, but Gadgil insisted that local people

must lead. They know their land and forests best. He selected about ten independent organisations from across the state and ensured that data collection was done by tribals, farmers, cattle herders, etc. People who lived close to nature became researchers of their own environment. Science grew from their lives, not above them.

Across Maharashtra, the visions of both men came together. People wanted to stay on their land with dignity. They wanted their forests restored and their wells open to all. They wanted knowledge and rights to be in their own hands. Gadgil championed science that respected local wisdom. Adhav fought to break the walls of caste and fear. Both believed change begins with people.

Many memories remain with me. In Pune, I often saw Baba on stage. He spoke slowly, with experience behind every word. Gadgil carried a similar warmth. He had the curiosity of a young student, even in old age, searching for answers in the field rather than in lecture halls. During my journalism interview, when I faced many questions about his committee report, I realised how a people's scientist often stands at the centre of political storms. He never stepped away from that responsibility.

The Ek Gaon, Ek Panvatha campaign showed that society can change what looks permanent. A simple idea, carried with commitment, can shift the practice of hundreds of villages. The Gene Bank Project showed that science can be democratic. A woman herding goats can count birds and identify plants. The best science walks the fields, not just the corridors of research centres.

Even today, if you visit villages in the various corners of Maharashtra, people will share stories of Baba's visits and Gadgil's guidance. They speak of plantations that grew from small beginnings, and show registers filled with careful notes and drawings of leaves. They speak of meetings where decisions were made together. The footprints of both men live not only in books but in these stories and in the confidence people now feel.

Both men are gone, but their work continues. Their lives remind us that Maharashtra's strength lies not only in its cities but in its villages, fields and forests. They remind us that a scientist can walk with a shepherd and learn, and a leader can sit by a village well and listen. Change is slow, patient work done in the company of people.

Their footprints guide us not to a single monument but to many living sites – a village well open to all, a field where new trees grow, a union office where a worker finds support, a workshop where a farmer learns her rights. In these places, the spirit of Baba Adhav and Madhav Gadgil continues. It is a spirit that trusts ordinary people and believes in their ability to build a fairer and greener world.

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