



Participation of women in joint forest management in India

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Summary

This paper purports to discuss the role of women in joint forest management (JFM) in India. In actual fact, only a small proportion of the paper discussed women in particular in relation to joint forest management. By and large it is a historical perspective of forest management, leading up to the present day and the introduction of JFM. The different sections are briefly covered below.

About 97% of the forests in India are owned by the government. The importance of the forests is for environmental conservation, sustained agricultural production, and also as an important source of forest products that are crucial for the subsistence needs of a largely rural population. About 100 million people live in and around forests and for another 275 million people the forests are an important source of livelihood. They constitute an integral part of the social life of the tribal people and others living in the forest areas. In some parts of India, about 80% of the forest dwellers depend entirely on forests for sustenance needs and about 30% of the dietary needs and 30-60% of the livelihood needs of tribal people depend on forest areas. Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) collected from forests are estimated to provide 50% of the income for 30% of the rural population. Employment generated through forestry is in the order of 475 million person days; and women constitute about half of the labour force used in forest plantation activities. All of this is in addition to the importance of forests in meeting fodder and energy requirements. Forests also play an important role in rural health care because of the medicinal plants they provide. In addition to all of this, forests play an extremely important role in environmental conservation in terms of water cycles, soil conservation, climate, and so forth. Hence the degradation of the forests in India is of great concern to many parties.

The author examines how restrictions imposed by the Forest Department (FD) to save forests from degradation conflicted with the interests of local populations dependent on forests to meet subsistence needs. Whilever ownership and management of forests rested with the FD, the local people remained interested only in the exploitation of forest resources and not in their regeneration and sustainable development. This led to the realisation that conservation and proper management of forests needed the active participation of the local people and steps were taken to involve them. This approach became known as joint forest management (JFM), and it was implemented as a result of the National Forest Policy 1988. In 1990 a JFM programme was launched and women constituted the most important group in its implementation. Since women were the ones actively involved in gathering from the forest, and were most familiar with their products, it was realised that sustainable forest management was not possible without women's active participation.

The paper stresses the role of women in forestry at this juncture. It is re-emphasised that women spend more time collecting forest produce and to meet family needs than men, and that men are more interested in the commercial value of forests. About a third of all poor women in India are directly involved in forestry and related occupations. The author argues that this is the reason why it is women who have been at the forefront of movements like the Chipko Andolan.

Forest policies, it is stated, are nevertheless gender blind and only in the national forest policy of 1988 is their contribution recognised, as it provided for the creation of a massive people's movement to meet its objectives.

The rest of the paper deals mainly with forestry and the stages of forest policy in India. The goal of the 1988 policy was to keep a third of the land under forests—two thirds in mountain areas, whereas only 23.3% of the land is actually classified as forest and of that part of it is devoid of tree cover – 76.5 million ha have a crown density >10%), accounting for 19.1% of the country only.

The author dates the reasons for forest degradation and people's alienation back to 1894 when the rights and privileges of users were restricted and reserve forests established to increase government revenue. Rights of access were leading to such areas being used as common property resources. These forest laws were a focus of rebellion during the struggle for home rule and forests were set on fire, leading to further degradation.

Even after independence, the forest policy of 1952 deemed that the use of forest produce for domestic and agricultural needs should not be permitted at the cost of national interests.



All these are seen as having a negative impact on women. Degradation of forests means longer and more arduous journeys for fuel and fodder, and even water. Today the potential production of non-timber forest products is thought to be four times the current production given proper management.

In 1976 the social forestry programme introduced, following the recommendations of the national commission on agriculture (NCA), marked the beginning of people's involvement in forest management. Social forestry became the order of the day, and it is this concept that led to joint forest management (JFM) in the 1988 policy leading to the guidelines of 1990.

The provisions of national forest policy relevant to participatory management are given in the box below (Box 1) and the JFM guidelines issued in 1990 are given in Box 2.

In pursuance of these guidelines, state governments issued resolutions for implementation of JFM and quite a lot of progress has been made. One of the specifications of JFM was that it was about the protection of degraded forests, not forests in good condition.

Box 1

- i) The principal aim of forest management must be to ensure environmental stability and maintenance of ecological balance and the derivation of direct economic benefit must be subordinated to this principal aim and forests should not be looked upon as a source of revenue;
- ii) minor forest produce should be protected and its production should be enhanced;
- iii) local people holding customary rights and concessions in forests should be motivated to identify themselves with protection and development of forests from which they derive benefits; and
- iv) domestic requirements of tribals and other poor living within and near forests should be the first charge on forest produce.

Box 2

The guidelines stated that

- i) the JFM programme should be implemented under an arrangement between voluntary agencies, the village community (beneficiaries), and the state forest department (SFD),
- ii) no ownership or lease rights over the forests should be given to the beneficiaries or voluntary agencies,
- iii) the beneficiaries should be entitled to a share in usufructs subject to conditions prescribed by SFD,
- iv) access to forest and usufruct benefits should be only to the beneficiaries who are organised into a village institution,
- v) the beneficiaries should be given usufructs like grass, lops and tops, MFP, and, if they successfully protect the forests, they may be given a portion of the proceeds from the sale of trees,
- vi) areas to be selected for JFM should be free from claims of any person who may not be a beneficiary,
- vii) the selected site should be worked in accordance with a duly approved working scheme,
- viii) the JFM area will be properly protected,
- ix) no agriculture should be permitted on forest land,
- x) along with other trees, beneficiaries may be allowed to plant fruit trees, and
- xi) the benefit of people's participation should go to the village communities and not to commercial or other interests.

Notwithstanding, the term 'degraded' is loosely defined: for example, in Karnataka, 25% of the forests were defined as degraded.

The author continues with a description of village-level organisation of joint forest management. The responsibilities of the village-level organisation and the corresponding duties of the Forest Department are given briefly in Box 3.

Box 3

The duties and responsibilities of a VLO include the following:

- i) maintenance of the details, including nomination forms, of beneficiaries;
- ii) ensuring the active participation of the members in the protection and management of forests;
- iii) protection of the JFM area from grazing, fire, encroachment, and illicit felling;
- iv) informing the Forest Department (FD) of any trespass or violation of rules and to assist the FD in apprehending offenders;
- v) resolving inter- and intra-village conflicts;
- vi) ensuring equitable distribution of usufructs among beneficiaries;
- vii) to ensure that usufruct rights allowed by the government are not misused by members; and
- viii) preparation of a micro-plan for the JFM area with the assistance of the FD.

In return the responsibilities of the FD are as follow.

- i) to provide assistance in forming the VLO and the managing / executive committee;
- ii) to provide technical and administrative support to JFM;
- iii) to allocate forest areas, provide funds, and to ensure that the work connected with the rehabilitation, management, and harvesting of forests is carried out in a timely and proper fashion;
- iv) to ensure that the terms of the memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed between the FD and VLO are not violated;
- v) to arrange harvesting and sale of forest produce where sale proceeds are to be shared with the beneficiaries; and
- vi) training and reorientation of the FD staff to handle JFM work and also to arrange training for VLO members in matters relevant to JFM.

Conclusion

There are now 11 million ha under JFM in India and its popularity is growing.

JFM groups are organised along the lines of self-help groups and there is a provision for a village development fund to meet forest conservation needs. Nonetheless, and despite government provisions concerning how many women should be included in decision-making bodies of the VLO, the question remains whether women have really benefited or not? The popular opinion is that women have greatly benefited from collection of NTFPs; for example it is cited that, in Madhya Pradesh alone, the value of NTFPs collected by women was valued at \$700 million annually, but the fact remains that collectors get a very small percentage of the sale price, so it is certainly



not women who realise that value – most of the profit goes to middlemen. Other examples are given by the author and it is pointed out that, since women receive an unfair share of the income from NTFPs and since women are known to have a better record for re-investing incomes into families than men, special efforts are needed to help women establish processing units for NTFPs. The inputs envisaged are related to technical knowhow, financing, and marketing.



On the whole the participation of women in JFM, especially in decision-making, is viewed as unsatisfactory. This is attributed to the predominance of men in decision-making roles and the fact that women are constrained by social customs-many village women still follow a purdah system and don't mix with men. They shy away from meetings or, if they do attend, they huddle together in one corner. In their turn, even when questions are put to women, the men take it upon themselves to answer, or at one extreme, the men don't even inform the women about meetings. As a result, many women are not convinced about the efficacy of JFM. The author suggests involving women from the very beginning or holding separate meetings for women 'to get their views'.

This latter suggestion seems not to be the way to go. From an outsiders' perspective, it is very clear that women have a different approach entirely to forest management than men. While women see forest management as a prerequisite to sustainable and continual availability of non timber forest products, not only for adding value and generating income but for the well-being of the family, men principally focus on the cash crop aspects of commercial forestry. The only way to reach a satisfactory compromise and ensure the success of JFM is to bring women in on an equal footing with men. This seems not to have happened.

