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Evolving Patterns in Forest Management in South Asia

Looking at the forestry scene in different countries, it can be argued that a major shift has been occurring in the way forest management work is being pursued in most of the countries in South Asia. The evolving patterns in participatory forest management (PFM) in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal are summarised in the following.

Social Forestry in Bangladesh

Participatory forestry management (PFM) began in Bangladesh in the early 1980s under the name social forestry (SF). The aim was to develop and manage forests in a sustainable way by involving local communities and to reduce poverty by generating additional income through planting of trees on marginal lands, riverbanks, road strips, hill slopes, wetlands, and in degraded sal (*Shorea robusta*) forests. Participating farmers, who protected existing trees effectively and planted trees in surrounding areas received a share of the revenue from the sale of any final products produced by the trees. They also received benefits from twigs and fuelwood resulting from thinning and pruning of the trees and were able to consume or sell the fruit from fruit bearing trees (SFR 2004). Social forestry also involves non-government organisations (NGOs) who act as intermediaries between the Forest Department (FD) and local people to facilitate participatory management.

The first SF project in Bangladesh was implemented in the north western districts with financial support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). After completion of this project in 1987, the FD initiated another project in the degraded sal forests of Mymensing and Tangail districts. More than 23,000 households have benefited from the revenue generated by the final felling of different social forestry plantations (Muhammed et al. 2005). By 2005, more than 40,000 hectares of land was being managed under SF and was covered with a variety of trees and agroforestry. In addition, 50,000km of strip plantations were created alongside roads, railway lines, and canal embankments (Muhammed et al. 2005). Social forestry has now become an integral part of official forest management in Bangladesh (Khan and Begum 1997), and the government has recently codified the rules and regulations regarding social forestry under the Social Forestry Rules, 2004.

Community Forestry in Bhutan

PFM started in Bhutan in 1979. In Bhutan, PFM encompass both SF and community forestry (CF). SF involves the promotion of plantation activities on individually owned agricultural land (agroforestry) and other private land (woodlots). Community forest is defined as “any area of Government Reserved Forest designated for management by a local community in accordance with the provisions of the Forest and Nature



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Social forestry has great potential for success in Bhutan: a typical village in Bumthang

Conservation Rules 2003". At present, 31 community forest groups are managing about 2,700 hectares of forest benefiting more than 1,500 households. Another 20 community forests are at different stages of preparation and approval (Tempel and Beukeboom 2006, p.1). Although the PFM process has been progressing slowly in Bhutan since 1979, in the 9th Five Year Plan (2002-2007) PFM has become a broad development strategy and there is a growing interest in participatory forest management (Phuntsho, K., former head of Social Forestry Division, Ministry of Agriculture, Royal Government of Bhutan, pers. comm. in May 2007).

Joint Forest Management in India

PFM began in India in the late 1970s following the 1976 report of the National Commission on Agriculture. In its report, the Commission recommended growing trees on land accessible to village people in order to reduce the pressure on production forests caused by mounting rural demands for fuel, grazing land, and other forest products. As a result of this report, different social forestry projects were introduced in different states using various institutional arrangements. One of the arrangements was to establish woodlots on non-arable communal land to be managed collectively by the user community through the panchayat system. Most of the states implemented the projects in the 1980s under different bilateral and multilateral funding agreements. In the light of the success achieved by this project in terms of greening the countryside, the 1988 Forest Policy was developed and provided strong support to the social forestry project. The Forest Policy also recommended the involvement of the private sector in providing market linkages.

PFM in India gained momentum after the implementation of the joint forest management programme (JFM) by different states, pursuant to the national policy introduced in 1988. However, the rationale for and evidence supporting the 1988 Forest Policy was the experimental JFM informally initiated in the early 1970s in the state of West Bengal. The JFM programme gained impetus and official endorsement when the Government of India announced that JFM would be the bedrock of the Central Government's Forest Policy, which would emphasise the need for the meaningful involvement of local people in forest management. Following the spirit of the new Forest Policy, the Government of India issued a circular in June 1990 asking for the involvement of local people in forest conservation and management through village level organisations (GOI 1990). The Forest Policy also provided guidelines for the sharing of usufruct and the net proceeds from their sale. It was a major shift in the management of forest resources in India – a change from the state-owned, state-managed, and state-appropriated forest management regime founded by the British Colonial rulers, to a state-owned but largely community-managed forest regime (Singh 2006, p.4-5). Institutional arrangements such as village forest protection committees (VFPCs) were created for the protection and rehabilitation of degraded forests through benefit-sharing mechanisms. In different states, VFPCs are called different names, such as joint forest management committees, village forest management committees, and village forest development committees. In this paper, joint forest management committee (JFMC) is used as a generic term to describe all of these.

Although initially JFM was implemented only in degraded forest classified as having a crown canopy of 40% or less, the Government of India's recent circular (GOI 2000) recommends that joint forest management should also include standing forests (crown canopy above 40%), but not the protected area network (national parks and wildlife sanctuaries). The 2000 circular also makes the representation of women on JFM executive committees mandatory (at least 33%). In addition, the benefit-sharing arrangement has been extended from non-timber forest products only, to timber in cases where the committee has 'satisfactorily' protected the forest for a minimum period of ten years (GOI 2000). All the states have issued resolutions setting ground rules for placing degraded forests under the JFM system and for sharing usufruct and net sale proceeds between the FD and the local people through village forest protection committees (Mukerji 2006, p.21).

The JFM system has now spread to 28 states in India. By March 2005, some 99,868 VFPCs had been formed managing 21.44 million hectares of forest (Mukerji 2006, p.21). About 14 million families (some 75 million people) are involved in this forest management system (Mukerji 2006, p.21). JFM is passing through the phases of experimentation, evolution, and expansion. Based on experience gained and challenges faced during implementation, most state governments have modified their government orders to address specific issues such as access and benefit sharing for non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and other forest products, both in reserve and protected forests (Roy 2006, p.291).

Community Forestry in Nepal

The most remarkable changes have taken place in forest management systems in Nepal. New policy and actions towards the decentralisation of forest control began in



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The author with members of Kabhre FUG, Nepal

the late 1970s and since then CF has become a major thrust in forest management. The forerunners of the current community forestry programme were the Panchayat Forest Rules of 1978 and the Community Forestry Programme of 1980. The Master Plan for the Forestry Sector prepared in 1989, the Forest Act of 1993, the Forest Regulations of 1995, and the Forestry Sector Policy of 2000 were developed and implemented to support the community forestry programme.

Since 1980, about 14,000 forest user groups (FUGs) have been formed and are managing more than one million hectares of forest (about one-third of the total forest area), benefiting around 1.2 million households (about one-third of households in the country) (Nurse and Malla 2006). About one-fourth of Nepal's national forest is now managed by more than 35% of the total population. Forest user groups develop their own operational plans, set harvesting rules, set rates and prices for products, and determine how surplus income will be distributed or spent. There is evidence of a marked improvement in the conservation of forests (both increased area and improved density) and enhanced soil and water management (Karki 2003). Communities are playing a major role in forest management and the government has been regulating activities and facilitating the process. Both the area of forests managed by local user groups and the number of these groups have been increasing rapidly. Forest user groups are being established at an increasing rate and are building steadily on the authority they have acquired through legal control over forest resources. CF is now active in 74 of the 75 districts in Nepal.