

**Joint forest management in India with special reference to Darjeeling  
Himalaya**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Historically, India's rural economy was intimately related to forest resources and they have been part and parcel of our economy, culture and tradition. The use of forest resource was controlled by the community as a whole in ancient and medieval period and had evolved a pattern for the same. The communities both agrarian and tribal groups evolved certain cultural and religious practices to sustain the forest resource. These resources comprised substantial part of natural resource endowment and were used and managed by local communities presumably in a sustainable form through their own indigenous methods based on variety of cultural, social and religious ethos.

The advent of British and their subsequent rules, regulations and Acts with respect to forest resources in India radically redefined property rights whose priorities sharply conflicted with the earlier systems of local use and control. Such change in the control and management system as a result impacted perceptible changes in ecology and environment of forest ecosystem and the surrounding villages. It also acted as an agent in creating conflict between local community and forest department.

The first show of interest towards the conservation of forest resource, the reservation of teak forest in Malabar in 1806, was dictated by strategic imperial needs (Ray, C.N., 1998). This was the result of the depletion of Oak Forest in England and other western countries and the increasing demand for timber from ship building industry. Besides the pace of railway network in the later part of nineteenth century highlighted the fact that the hitherto dense forests of India were not inexhaustible.

It was however in 1865 when the first Indian Forest Act was enacted. It was the first step towards the formal state control of forest management. Its imperatives were, however, essentially commercial rather than for the sustainable use of forest resources.

## POST INDEPENDENCE FOREST MANAGEMENT

In the post independence period we were not free from colonial hangover and wanted to see India as a modern and industrialized nation (Khawas, V., 2001). Instead of evolving a sustainable management and development policies our forests policies and laws in the true sense strengthened the colonial system of management and were nothing more than mere extension of British policies. Numerous forest-based industries were introduced adding additional burden on the country's forest ecosystem. Such policy of the Indian government neglecting the interests of local communities and ecology, accompanied by consistently increasing number of people and their exploding appetite for consumption and poverty and illiteracy among large section of population has led to the continuous areal shrinkage, over exploitation, physical degradation and management collapse of our forest resources.

Although concerns were articulated in the 1952 National Forest Policy with respect to degradation and diversion of forestlands, little was done to present this at the implementation stage (Ray, C.N., 1998). The policy gave more emphasis on National interest rather than on the regional, local or rural interests. In other words, there was not much emphasis on people's rights over forests.

In order to look into the issue with respect to the dependence of tribals on forests a committee was formed in 1965. After the detail examination of the situation the committee recommended the need of forest policy to recognize rights of communities on forestland and adapt the right to reforestation efforts. In 1980 we enacted the forest conservation Act. It further enhanced the power of the center by prohibiting states from declaring any reserved forest or any position thereof as non-reserved without the prior approval of the central government. The forest bill of 1980 clearly spells out a number of prohibited acts in reserved and protected forests and the resultant punishments for committing these prohibited acts. The department of forest has adopted various measures to discourage encouragements, wide powers were granted to the officers including arrest and seizure of property to deal with forestry related offences.

Nevertheless, degradation and encroachment of forest resources continues unabated. Two important factors, which are often considered as prominent actors in forest degradation, are overgrazing and fuel wood collection beyond the carrying capacity of forest ecosystem. Nearly all forestlands in India are grazed: Rajasthan over 90%, Utter Pradesh 83%, West Bengal 70% and Sikkim over 75%. (Lal, 1992 as quoted in Ray, C. N., 1998).

## JOINT FOREST MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME

As better management of common property resources such as forests is considered vital for poverty alleviation, sustainable development with equity, ecological stability and preserving biodiversity, there is a constant search for alternative approaches necessitated by the fact that the usual options of state or market mechanisms are not advocated due to their inherent inadequacies (Naik, Gopal, 1997). The state control of forests so far, for example, has led to their unconstrained depletion as evident from the fact that nearly 43% of the forests are considered as degraded (Naik, Gopal, 1997). The management of forest resources in India has been one of the most challenging environmental issues in South Asia. Since 1951, degraded lands in India have doubled in size, reaching 174 million hectares by 1990. According to recent estimates, demand for fuel wood and fodder will triple within the next ten years. Large-scale reforestation and watershed-management programs conducted by the Indian government have largely failed.

This very fact was realized by the central government in the late 1980s. The National forest policy of 1988 outlined the scope for people's participation in Forest Management as one of its basic objectives, which reads as "creating a massive people movement with the involvement of women, for achieving these objectives and to minimize pressure on existing forests". Thus, the National Forest Policy of 1988 identified the importance of local community to a relatively larger extent. The broader parameters of people's participation were determined by June 1990 circular of the Government of India. In the 1st of June 1990 the government of India issued a circular formally unleashing a new system of forest management involving grass root institutions. This new system of forest management is popularly known as "Joint Forest Management" in India. In JFM the joint imply Forest Department, local level institution and to some extent NGOs (Ray, C. N., 1998). The subsequent policy resolutions of various states governments to promote JFM are considered as a bold step toward participatory development of Common Property Resources in India (Pattnaik & Dutta, 1997).

As a result of June 1990 circular, the JFM programme was launched in 22 states by 2000. They include Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Jammu & Kashmir, Kerala, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, Maharashtra, Nagaland, Orissa, Rajasthan, Punjab, Sikkim, Tripura, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Goa, Manipur and Meghalaya are yet to implement the JFM programme. So far no Union Territory has opted for JFM.

The programme is being monitored by a Joint Forest Management Cell in the Ministry in the Forest Protection Division and according to the information compiled by the JFM Cell in the Ministry as on 1-1-2000, 10.24 million ha of forest are being managed through 36130 JFM committees in 22 States.

JFM Cell has recently issued fresh landmark guidelines on JFM on the following Issues:

1. States have been requested to provide legal backup to the JFM committees.
2. Extension of JFM in good forest areas: The distance from the village should be the primary criteria for initiating the joint forest management and the new guidelines suggest that program should be extended to both degraded as well as good forests, except the wildlife area network. In good forests, JFM should be started within 2 KM. of village boundary.
3. Increased participation of women: It has been suggested that at least 50% members of the JFM general body and at least 33% membership in the Executive committee should be filled up by the women members. One post of the office bearer should also be filled up from amongst the women members of the committee.
4. Recognition of Self-Initiated Groups.
5. Contribution for Regeneration and Forest Resources.
6. Conflict resolution.
7. Integration of Micro plans with the Working plan.
8. Monitoring and Evaluation of JFM.

**Table no. 1 progress of Joint Forest Management in India (as on 1.1.2000)**

Sl. No.	STATE	NO. OF JFM COMMITTEES	AREA UNDER JFM (ha.)
1	Andhra Pradesh	6575	1,632,190.00
2	Arunachal Pradesh	10	5,285.00
3	Assam	101	3,060.00
4	Bihar	1675	935,065.50
5	Gujarat	706	91,071.28
6	Himachal Pradesh	203	62,000.00
7	Haryana	350	60,735.00
8	Jammu & Kashmir	1599	79,273.00
9	Karnataka	1212	12,800.00
10	Kerala	21	4,000.00
11	Madhya Pradesh	12038	58,000,000.00
12	Maharashtra	502	94.727.99
13	Mizoram	103	5,870.00
14	Nagaland	NIL	NIL

15	Orissa	3704	419,306.00
16	Punjab	89	38,991.42
17	Rajasthan	2705	235,634.00
18	Sikkim	98	2,191.00
19	Tamil Nadu	599	224,382.00
20	Tripura	157	16,227.30
21	Uttar Pradesh	197	34,589.36
22	West Bengal	3431	490,582.00
	TOTAL	36075	10,247,959.41

Source: [www.envfor.nic.in](http://www.envfor.nic.in)

Shaded rows refer to the states that are covered fully or partly by Indian Himalayas

JFM follows the following premises:

- Sharing of both responsibilities and accountabilities between FD and communities in managing the forests;
- Without the active participation and willingness of local communities no programme would succeed to arrest the depletion of forests and regenerate already degraded forests;
- Make the local community realize that right over forest is accompanied by the duties to protect and manage forests;
- Sharing of products and decision-making power over forestlands between FD and user communities.

In short, the major premise of JFM is that given the power and compensation for their opportunity cost and making them aware of the fragility of this resource the local communities can regenerate and protect the degraded forestlands.

Thus, the spirit of JFM is to take on the issue of micro-level planning through participatory development. It encompasses the programme to manage the CPRs in an optimum way wherein both people and government come together to participate (Pattnaik & Dutta, 1997).

The primary idea behind JFM is to transform the traditional and authoritative policing role of the government into that of a facilitator. It means not only protecting and augmenting the traditional forestland but also wasteland, common land, private land etc and seeks to serve several purposes:

*Environmental:*

- To protect and maintain the already existing but fast depleting forests and other resources having close relation to forest resources,
- To encourage regeneration of the already degraded forests land and increase the green cover.

*Economic:*

- To efficiently manage the local forest land and related resources;
- To offer the directly forest dependent population a direction and means of subsistence and income generation.

*Socio-Political:*

- Empowerment of the local communities for decision making in forest resource by bestowing upon them their usufruct rights over forest lands.

This new management system has put the forest dependent people at the centre. Although there are certain variations in the resolutions across the states in terms of category of forest allowed for JFM, type of participants, size of management unit, composition of executive committee, power of forest department and the share of members in the forest product the major focus has been to protect and regenerate forest through involvement of local people.

### **JFM IN DARJEELING HILLS**

In the Darjeeling hills, the Joint Forest Management (JFM) scheme was initiated in 1990-91 when a number of informal forest protection committees (FPCs) were set up with the help of the local NGOs. These were formally registered between 1993 and 1995. At present, 73 FPCs are functioning in the Darjeeling hill covering an area of 19406 ha, which constitutes about 30% of the total forest area in the region. Simultaneously effective steps were taken to curb illicit felling and the writ of the Forest Department was consolidated inside the forests. The efforts were also made to boost the sagging morale of Forest staff, which had touched its nadir during the Gorkhaland agitation. The basic necessities inside forest locations, which were destroyed or damaged during the Gorkhaland agitation, were restored. Regular training and workshops were organized for the staff to prepare them for participatory forest management.

Before formally registering FPCs, motivation camps are held to explain to the local people the basic concepts of the JFM scheme and the role of FPCs. The point that was sought to be driven home is that ecological restoration of denuded forests is linked to their economic well being. Besides training, a host of support activities aimed at providing economic security to the people are also undertaken. They include eco-development works like construction of new village roads, culverts, ponds, ring wells, school buildings, etc. and the repair of old ones. Vocational support and training in bee keeping, mushroom growing, pisciculture, and floriculture are also imparted. Inter-cultivation of fodder grasses, medicinal and other economically useful plants are allowed between main tree species in plantations. All such activities are community-

oriented and eco-friendly in nature. Training in knitting and sewing are organized to improve the women's economic status. Employment by the Forest Department is a part of the income generation programme. As support activities, the laboratories for production of mushroom spawn have been set up in Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sukna. They cater to the needs of mushroom growers. Firewood and small timber centres have been set up in different parts of Darjeeling district to meet the local people's needs.

The JFM's success reflected in the quality of plantations and the reduction in the number of forest related offences. There is distinct attitudinal change in the people. An officer of Darjeeling Forest Division reported in 1995-96 that "the hostile attitude of the people towards the forest has changed to that of care and protection because of transparency during discussion, meetings and execution of various forest related works including support activities by the staff of the division. The people's participation in management and protection of forests has turned out to be spontaneous and immediate. Positive impact has been felt in the sphere of illicit felling and survival of plantations. The reduction in illicit felling and theft of forest produce can be attributed to the joint efforts of the staff of the division and the forest protection committees".

Though the JFM scheme has been taken up in earnest in the hills and plains of Darjeeling district, considerable study and work needs to be done in view of the prevailing social, cultural and political complexities of the area. Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, which controls about 70 sq. kms of protected and unclassified state forests in the hills, is yet to bring its forests under the JFM umbrella because of the constrains of staff and resources. In the final analysis, it is in the interest of the people of Darjeeling district to make the JFM scheme a success and conserve the valuable forests of the region. (Statement of A.K. Syangden, (now retired) Forest Officer, Government of West Bengal).

**Table no. 2 Division Wise Forest Area in Darjeeling Hills (Sq Kms)**

District	Sub-division	Forest Area	Total
Darjeeling	Kurseong	338	1204
	Darjeeling	310	
	Kalimpong	556	

**Table no. 3 Division Wise Distribution of Forest Protection Committees in Darjeeling Hills**

Forest Division	Number of FPCs	Area Protected (ha)	Total No of Members	Forest Land Per FPC Member
Kurseong	10	1169	848	1.38
Kalimpong	25	6515	798	8.16
Darjeeling	16	2647	631	4.19

*Source: State Report on West Bengal Forest, 1995:8 as quoted in Pattnaik, B. K et al, 1997*

## **CONCLUSION**

Joint Forest Management although regarded as an innovative way of micro level resource planning and that it gives due respect to the locals in the decision making process at the local level making them major stake holders in the process is, however, not free from loopholes. Some of the important negative points (but not exclusive) that this system carries with it and which need to be taken care of to make the system efficient, effective and sustainable in the long run may be highlighted as below-

1. Forest Protection Committees are not statutory bodies and operating only under administrative order. Lack of legal standing deprives them of their legitimacy, which often leads to legal disputes questioning their rights over areas being protected by them.
2. External pressure in the form of threats from timber smugglers and others accompanied by inter as well as intra community conflicts often play negative role and puts FPC under severe pressure.
3. The notion of community to show that what may be successful community forest management from the viewpoint of sustainability and efficiency can be far from democratic or equitable.
4. The male dominance or predominantly upper caste constitution of the forest protection committees make them unrepresentative of the needs of the community as a whole.
5. The effective JFM in the current context requires a complete over hauling of forest and tree related rules so as to allow communities the autonomy to take responsible decisions for them.
6. Merely, working together of different communities (and forest departments) does not highlight the true spirit of JFM; the programme has to involve women and the weakest sections of the society fully and efficiently.

There is a fine line to be trod between encouraging local autonomy and responsibility and ensuring that this is democratic - and it is not clear as to who can really do this...

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