

## The Emergence of Joint Forest Management in India

In India, the scenario was, and remains even today, quite different. In contrast to Nepal, where government control of the hill forests was only *de jure* and never really *de facto*, 95 per cent of India's forest land is owned and managed by state government forest departments (Singh 1990). India's forest estates have been extensively managed, even in many of the remote areas, for the last 100 years. The forest department field staff have been continuously present in most of the forest areas, and even though their main function may have been custodial in many areas, the separation of government forest lands from community lands was complete in the minds of both local communities and the government.

This situation is the result of a series of laws and policies evolved over a century previously, beginning during British colonial rule, which have nationalised community and private forest lands and, gradually, eroded the rights and concessions of surrounding forest communities. Complex layers of rights, concessions, powers and duties underlie the forestry laws. Forestry in India is a concurrent subject, which means that there are both national and state level laws and regulations governing use and control. The Indian Forest Act of 1927 and the State Forest Acts, based largely on colonial legislation, provide the legal basis for the custodial forest management which has characterised Indian forestry. Apart from the Wildlife Protection Acts, the only new forestry act to have been passed since India gained Independence is the Forest Conservation Act of 1980 (amended in 1988), which is barely one page. This act exerts central control over the transfer and allocation of forest department land to anyone for any purpose other than forestry. A series of Government policy statements outline evolving government perceptions of forest administration and management. The social forestry initiatives of the early 1970s owe their origin to the National Commission on Agriculture report. This report called for community needs to be met by non-forest lands, while forest lands were to be reserved for industrial needs and conservation.

Charged with the protection of nearly a quarter (75 million hectares) of the country's land, a historic mandate to maximise revenue and protect the environment, and faced with a continuously-expanding population of forest dwellers and forest-dependant communities alienated by their custodial control, India's foresters were unable to manage their forest estate sustainably on their own. Forest-dependent communities, many of whom are members of the country's 52 million strong tribal groups with strong traditions of forest use and management, have periodically rebelled against the forest authorities. They were driven by circumstances to treat the forests as *de facto*, open access resources and have also contributed to the slow degradation of the forests along with unscrupulous contractors and ravenous livestock. As a result of this over-exploitation by the forest department and their continuous open access status, less than half (approximately 35 million hectares) of India's officially gazetted forest lands, or 10 per cent of the total area, remains under closed canopy forests (40% canopy cover).<sup>2</sup> The remaining forest lands are in various stages of degradation.

Curiously enlightened forest department officials and a number of local communities began to respond to the desperate state of forest resources in a similar way in the 1970s and 1980s. A few forest officials in West Bengal, Gujarat, and Haryana began to realise that the help and involvement of local communities were essential for forest protection. As a result, forest protection committees of different kinds were introduced in each of the three states, beginning with Arabari in West Bengal in 1972. In each case, village forest protection committees (FPCs) were given the responsibility of protecting degraded forest land from illegal cutting, fires, overgrazing, and encroachment. In return, they were granted access to a range of non-timber forest products. In the Arabari case, the state government sanctioned the sharing of the coppice pole wood harvest of regenerated sal (*Shorea robusta*) forests, giving 25 per cent of the net returns to the

---

<sup>2</sup> SOURCE

village protection committees involved. In Haryana, following the success of the experiment in Sukhomajri village, hill resource management societies (HRMS) were formed in proximity to earthen dams, made to store rainwater for irrigation. The need to protect the once-forested watersheds was recognised. Following contour-planting of *khair* (*Acacia catechu*) trees and grasses, including bhabbar (*Eulaliopsis binata*), villagers were given the first option to take out a lease for this grass, which is used for rope-making and as pulp for paper mills. In some villages, regeneration was rapid enough to allow them to take out leases and generate income within the first year.

Concurrently, forest protection movements developed within forest dependent communities in a number of regions, including the famous 'Chipko' movement in the Uttarakhand Himalayas, and hundreds of tribal forest protection committees of various kinds emerged spontaneously in parts of Bihar and Orissa. These committees responded in different ways to increasing shortages of essential forest products. Forest protection and utilisation are closely connected to tribal lifestyles. New political movements, such as one for a tribal state to be called Jharkhand in eastern India, have made this one of their platforms.

As a result of the successful experiments in these states, the national government issued an order on June 1, 1990, requesting all states to undertake participatory forest management along these lines and encouraging the involvement of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as intermediaries and facilitators. As of December 1993, 14 states<sup>3</sup> had passed their own orders outlining rules and regulations directed towards a new form of joint forest management undertaken in partnership with local communities, thereby reversing decades of confrontation between forest departments and local communities.