

JOINT FOREST MANAGEMENT: BUILT ON RURAL INDIA'S REALITIES AND CORRESPONDING SCIENTIFIC CONCLUSIONS – TIME TO RECONSIDER?

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Introduction

During the Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRA) and the establishment of Village Forest Management & Protection Committees (VFMPC) in JFM exercises conducted in Hazaribagh Forest Division, Bihar, some following facts were encountered :

- A social forestry plantation that was maturing had been cut by one of the VFMPCs, as they thought that it was theirs to take anyway. Other VFMPCs were angry and wanted to use the first opportunity to “harvest” the nearby plantations and forest produce in JFM area. On top of that forest staff was under pressure to prosecute the “offenders” for the loss of Government property.
- VFMPCs in some villages had assumed on themselves the complete charge of the Forests and were extorting “fines” from gullible villagers for the “offences” like taking fuelwood. The other predators had got interested.
- A VFMPC had protected a degraded Sal forest patch. After 3-4 years small

poles were visible and VFMPC wanted to harvest the crop as soon as possible. Any delay meant, VFMPC carrying out their task, as it was their need. The forest staff did not know what to do.

- Some influential/powerful miscreants were smuggling timber and the VFMPC, knowing that they could not dare to stop them, reached the forest staff. When the unarmed forest staff tried to nab them, they resisted with arms. Forest staff sought police help, but the police had their own priorities. The VFMPC was frustrated.
- Six people were found murdered in the forest and there was a viewpoint that the reason was to settle the supremacy in VFMPC.

Similarly, in pilot activities being done in India Eco-development Project funded by Global Environment Facility (GEF, World Bank), in Project Tiger Palamau, Bihar some factors encountered were :

- People's aspirations were high for eco-development inputs promised by the regular visits of personnel, experts,

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NGOs and World Bank team. There were PRAs done over and over again. The Project was delayed and finally did not take off. The mistrust on ideological conservation values grew further.

- An informer from a very active VFMPC was brutally murdered by poachers. The family wanted a permanent Government job to fill the loss of its sole earning member. The VFMPC felt it was the duty of the Forest Department. No Government provision existed.
- Absentee landlords dominated some eco-development committees

Perspective

India's population has already touched the 1000 million mark. Of this nearly 75 per cent (75 crores!) live in rural areas, facing unspeakable poverty, illiteracy, destitution, and caste or class problems. They are rendered idle, unemployed - depending directly on natural resources. Recent economic studies on reforms and the National Sample Survey (NSS) data 1997 suggests that the urban poverty index (people living below poverty line) has dropped by 12.3 per cent (33.08 % in pre-reform period - 1989-91 to 29.02 % in post reform period - 1995-97), thanks to reforms in industrial and service sectors. But the rural poverty index has increased by 10.16% (35.04 in pre-reform period to 38.6 in post-reform period). This translates into the number of rural people currently living below the poverty line, nearly 290 million.

Consequently, the country's natural resource base, the valuable biological diversity (ecologically, genetically, scientifically, recreationally and

aesthetically valuable, but from whose perspective - the urban people or elite, living away from these resources?) is decreasing. These are widely accepted facts.

What is rather not realised or blissfully forgotten and underestimated, while embarking upon Joint Forest Management experiments is that the people living close to forests are still facing fundamental problems like 'where are they going to get their next meal from?' These very people are supposed to participate in Participatory Rural Appraisal exercises that are designed by people not really participating at the location, supposed to be implemented with the help of implementers who again are lower functionaries - least qualified to understand the social, psychological issues. These same functionaries are also mandated to carry out the routine work of policing etc. An increasing number of exercises in JFM have been started in haste without reaching a level of understanding of the processes on the part of all sides - the planners, the implementers, and the people participating.

Statistics of JFM today run like the number of Forest Protection Committees created, number of the women members, and forest areas with JFM in a Division. Expenditures incurred in pump sets (for people not having cultivable lands), culverts, check dams, cows/buffaloes etc have become the yardsticks of achievements. Developmental work (micro-plans!) proposed by the FPCs are plagued by the vested interests of the most vocal section of the villagers - i.e. the money lender, the landlord, the comparatively rich farmer. Again the people are overwhelmed by the promises of these microplans, diverting them from the conservation issues. And if those aspirations are not

met, the very exercise may become counterproductive.

When have we stopped to think of what is happening in the rural areas and correspondingly to the forests and wildlife – particularly the most precious dense forests? Where and how much of the forest cover has increased due to JFM experiments and if yes then what are the real causes? What are some universal critical criteria to be understood and met, before attempting to launch JFM at a particular site? What are those indicators/markers, which can show to the not-so-expert forest staff, in simple terms that the situation is ripe for JFM? Whether the capacities and capabilities have been developed at implementers' level? What are the real crucial issues to be addressed before we increase the statistics? Our statistics need to answer these issues.

Are we simply being swayed by the ignorance, pretensions or self-illusions, wanting the understanding of harsh rural realities. The practice in mobilizing Gandhiji's last man needs what he stated in these following words :

"Indian economy should be built from the bottom by a posterior method of securing rock bottom facts and drawing therefrom, by the most rigid process of reasoning, scientific conclusions which no amount of juggling could controvert".

Joint Forest Management Scenario

A glimpse of historical lessons from Bihar :

It is a matter of great interest that the experiment of associating people with

Forest Management of Bihar was started way back in 1958 in the Forest Division of Ranchi (now Ranchi West Division) and Latehar Forest Division of Chotanagpur tribal Districts of Ranchi and Palamau. The JFM circular by Forest Department of Bihar came out in November 1990, following the Government of India circular of 1st June 1990. A concept paper to this effect titled "Experiment in Associating Gram Panchayats with Forest Management in Bihar" by Shri J.N. Sinha the then Chief Conservator of Forests, Bihar, was introduced at the meeting of Standing Committee of the Central Board of Forestry held at Mussoorie in September, 1958. The Board recommended circulation of the experience gained, for guidance and such action as States might deem fit.

Before this, in the late 1920s, in Madras sizable parts of reserved forests were simply handed over to uncontrolled bodies called Panchayats (not statutory bodies then). The result was the destruction of those forests. But in the case of Bihar the experiment was launched on May 24, 1958 only for associating the Panchayats with forest management and with all necessary controls and safeguards. It was based on three premises :

- Those who chiefly derive benefits from forests should reasonably take a hand in its protection and management also.
- Due conservation of forest will be possible only if the local people regard it as their own property and actively help in protection.
- When every activity in the locality is eventually to be the charge of Panchayats, how can forests alone be kept away from them?

The experiment :

Forests covered by 11 Panchayats (8 in Ranchi District and 3 in Palamau District) with a total area of 37.5 square miles were selected. The salient features were :

- No legal position was neither altered nor any new financial commitments were entered into.
- In every Panchayat, a forest committee with a sub-committee in each constituent village for patrolling and protection of forests (Van Raksha Dal) was formed. The patrolling party consisting 6 to 8 villagers on rotation were going on rounds along with the forest guard.
- The offence cases started going

through the Panchayats with their recommendations to the Divisional forest officer for his final decision.

- Special vigilance was maintained by posting a Gazetted Officer for the experimental zone to organize the committees, to solve local problems, and seeing to it that the given opportunities are not misused and people get gradually trained in forest conservation.
- If any time any of Panchayats was found intractable, the entire management was to be taken back.

After one year, the experiment yielded some encouraging results in terms of surplus forest produce in right-holders coupes due to economical removal, lesser

Table 1

Land use and deforestation in 1980-1990 - Indian situation in world scenario

Country	Rural population density/km ²	Annual Deforestation 1980-1990		Forest land use change % of land area 1980-1994
		'000 km ²	% change	
Australia	6	0	0	+3
Bangladesh	1026	0.4	4.1	-4
Brazil	82	36.7	0.6	-2
Canada	15	-47.1	-1.1	0
China	910	8.8	0.7	-6
France	86	-0.1	-0.1	-3
India	404	3.4	0.6	0
Indonesia	738	12.1	1.1	-2
Japan	702	0.0	0.0	+2
Malaysia	508	4.0	2.1	-9
Pakistan	400	0.8	3.4	-3
Philippines	569	3.2	3.5	-2

Source: World Development Indicators 1997, World Bank.

complaints against forest staff, minimization of bitterness for prosecution of offenders by the Forest Guard operating with Raksha Dal produced acceptable evidences. But as the study itself suggested that the period of one year was too short for assessing the results of an experiment, specially in such a long term business as forestry, somehow the experience did not extend to entire Bihar and even later on did not continue in the experiment sites. This was the time when forests to population ratio was atleast twice what it is today, if we simply keep the growing stock as constant for explanation. And consumption pattern of the society was remarkably low compared to what it is today. It seems the premise that the people who drive benefits from the forests should take a hand in its protection and management also, was not that easily achievable.

For most developing countries the loss of forest land is a major issue. Closely linked to changes in land use are changes in protected areas and in biodiversity. The extent of protected areas and their management reveal how a country is protecting its biological resources. Table 1 above shows that during 1980-94, compared to other developing countries, including the Asian Tigers (fast developing Asian economies), India has been able to safeguard the diversion of forest lands in much better manner. This may be attributed to the successful protection given to forest lands by the State Forest Department under Forest Conservation Act, 1980.

Among populated countries, except Japan, India's annual deforestation was distinguishably lower during 1980-90, a decade when even JFM had not taken roots. The point emphasizes the crucial importance of effective legal enforcement,

which should not be made an outdated truth in the hasty enthusiasm of completely changing the system. Developed countries added to their forest wealth. This indicates that the growth and development supported with strengthened protection may improve the conservation of the biodiversity, even in populated developing countries.

A thought on the present status of forests at National level

The *State of Forest Report 1997* (Forest Survey of India) data on forest cover assessment of 1997 and 1995 reveals that the total forest cover of the country has decreased from 6,38,879 km² to 6,33,397 km² – a net loss of 5482 km² (Table 2).

Table 2

*Forest cover changes 1995 & 1997
assessments (km²)*

Category	1995	1997	Difference
Dense forest	3,85,037	3,67,260	-17,777
Open forest	2,49,309	2,61,310	+12,001

Source: State of Forest Report 1997 - Forest Survey of India, Ministry of Environment & Forests, Govt. of India.

Out of this loss of 5482 km², Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh accounts for 3969 km² and 3822 km² respectively. Positive changes are mainly from Maharashtra (2300 km²) where it is mainly from non-forest, 1803 km² changed to open forest, and from scrub, 1250 km² changed to open forest. The losses in the forest cover and particularly in dense forest cautions to look into the controversies of success and failures of participatory forest management. One school of thought may declare this as inability of JFM euphoria to

contain the loss of forests, while the other may argue that the situation would have had been worse without JFM experiments. And there are other puzzling statistics also like growing rural dependence on forests, social tensions, politics of rural life and lack of location specific real life case studies of the rural life. The need is for securing the rock bottom facts and drawing scientific conclusions.

Forest areas with and without JFM

A glance through Forestry Statistics India-1996 (ICFRE) and FSI data from 1995 and 1997 reports shows that the State of Andhra Pradesh which has the largest number of Forest Protection Committees (2350), has lost 3966 km² in 1997 assessment as compared to 1995 assessment. Similarly Madhya Pradesh, the largest State of the country with a population density of 149.39 per km² only, as compared to most populated States like West Bengal - 773.61, U.P. - 473.17, Bihar - 496.40, has lost 3,969 km² forests. This is despite Madhya Pradesh having comparatively homogeneous tribal communities, and some often quoted successful JFM examples.

A closer look given in SFR 1997 at the District-wise loss/increase of forest cover in this State shows that there is hardly any remarkable difference between the forest areas with successful JFM examples and the forest areas without JFM. In fact in some cases it seems that the former have lost forest while in the latter cases some areas either in the vicinity of these success stories or having similar variables have remarkable increase in the forest cover. Incidentally as per Forestry Statistics of India 1996 (ICFRE) Maharashtra as on 31-3-1996 had no Forest Protection

Committees and highest gain of forest (2300 km²) as per State of Forest Report 1997 (FSI).

This simplistic analysis is not to conclude JFM as a failure, but is meant to highlight that the policies formed on the basis of "thin sampling" of JFM cases should be revisited in-depth to ascertain the processes, outcomes, and lessons for strengthening the cause of conservation. In fact it indicates the further research needs to strengthen the JFM institutions.

People's participation in Panchayati Raj

Since 1992 India through 73rd Constitutional Amendment has embarked on the process of empowering people through Panchayati Raj institutions.

The recent field studies indicate categorically that participatory planning at Gram Panchayat levels is hampered by a number of factors such as :

- Lack of awareness among people in villages
- Lack of capabilities in elected members at Panchayat levels
- Influence of individuals in the Gram Sabha meetings
- Poor participation of women, due to interference by their family members etc.
- The meetings have poor or only physical attendance due to lack of actual participation by individuals or entire sections of different caste or class groups.

- These meetings are restricted to narrow agenda of discussion, serving the vested interest of the influential sections or individuals. There presence, and audible shouts are wrongly taken for the rural opinions (people's participation), by the planners on short visits to the villages from cities, having no rock bottom facts at hand or too engrossed in their own pre-notion agenda.
- How SFDs can trade off forestry interests with rural people, and play the role of arbitrators to safeguard the rural interests in biodiversity and therefrom trickling down of commercial benefits to them.
- The identification of the needs of psychological re-orientation and of the resources (intellectual as well as material) that Forest Department must have to tackle such issues.

Discussion and Conclusion

This, brings us to the urgent need, to examine in-depth issues like :

- The field status and sustainability question of JFM exercises undergoing.
- Political aspirations of the people involved.
- Differentiation of the causes of degradation and sources of degradation.
- Who are the actual target groups to benefit and does the benefits really reaching to them.
- Revisit the success stories, largely and temporarily visible by high inputs made and the related premises. Conventional thinking in pouring more funds may strengthen the JFM cause.
- The cause of success or failure on large representative samples are to be analyzed in the light of other interplaying factors as good supporting agriculture areas, areas already devoid of forest cover of above 10%, good forest areas with high market stakes.

It is the part of democracy like ours to provide opportunities to the people. But as per the findings of world famous Welfare Economist and recent Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, due considerations are to be given to the facts that "the lack of capabilities deprives an individual/group to take advantage of opportunities, and it is education that can facilitate in participation in the development process at the grass roots level". Without meeting these criteria the same opportunities are likely to be squandered or misused by influential vested interests.

The fact remains that it is not possible to conserve India's forests, which is unlocked property spread over the vast areas, without "active" co-operation of the local people. And also of the urban people by helping in a morally and materially sound attack on poverty, inequality, and unemployment -in the words of Gandhiji The "convergence of interests" among the rural and urban people is desired, instead of ideological alignments forced upon rural masses, in the name of conservation.

The problems of environment and development are interrelated and any approach to solve either of the two, the

others should be taken care of. JFM approach also depends upon gradually developing the capabilities of rural people, to take advantage of opportunities being provided to them in the form of the power to decide about the use of their natural resources; and gradually acquiring sufficient sense of responsibility. The development of "sound" JFM institutions is like the formation of any organization which can only be a slow process, as change-over from one system of values to another can't change people and their general attitudes in short time. This will require a massive programme of awareness building and training of rural people and of the implementing functionaries forming the institution.

Forests and wildlife have evolved over centuries, and are vanishing fast. Till Indian society reaches the desired level of equality, awareness, and sense of responsibility

among different sections to protect the vanishing forests and wildlife, the legal enforcement capabilities of the Forest Departments, essentially need to be strengthened.

This will not only be, a check on the dominating vested interests, but will also be an essential precursor, to the success of the equitable Joint Forest Management programme, while greater understanding of the system and its objectives is reached, and the gradual and positive participation of every person at village level in JFM institutions, is ensured.

If JFM has to succeed further, there must be a well-conceived capacity building programme for all participants- people, NGOs, and foresters, supported by earnest scientific case studies, based on rural realities.

SUMMARY

The rural poverty has increased by 10.16% (1991-1997) meaning the number of rural people currently living below the poverty line, are nearly 290 million. While embarking upon joint forest management experiments it is important to realize that the people living close to forests are still facing the fundamental problems like where they are going to get their next meal from. "Thin sampling" of JFM cases should be revisited in-depth to ascertain the processes, outcomes, and lessons for strengthening the cause of conservation. In fact it indicates the further research needs to strengthen the JFM institutions. The lack of capabilities deprives an individual/ a group to take advantage of opportunities, and the same opportunities are likely to be squandered or misused by influential vested interests. Forests & wildlife has evolved over centuries, and that is vanishing fast. To protect it, legal enforcement capabilities of the forest department are also strengthened to check the dominating vested interest while the greater understanding of the system, and its objectives, and the gradual and positive participation of every person at village level in JFM institutions is ensured. And, if JFM has to succeed further, there must be a well-conceived capacity building programme for all participants- people, NGOs, and foresters, supported by earnest scientific studies based on rural realities.

संयुक्त वन प्रबन्ध- भारत की वास्तविकताएँ और वनसंवर्धन वैज्ञानिक निष्कर्ष -

पुनर्विचार करने का समय

आशीष रावत व बी.एल. चौधरी

सारांश

ग्रामीण निर्धनता में 10.16% (1991-1997) वृद्धि हुई है जिसका अर्थ यह है कि इस समय गरीबी रेखा के नीचे रहने वाले लोगों की संख्या 29 करोड़ है। संयुक्त वन प्रबन्ध के सम्परीक्षणों पर चल पड़ते हुए यह समझना महत्वपूर्ण है कि

वनों के निकट रहने वाले लोग अब भी आधारभूत समस्याओं से जूझ रहे हैं जैसे कि उन्हें अपना अगले दिन का भोजन कहाँ से प्राप्त होगा? संयुक्त वन प्रबन्ध के संकरे न्यादशों का गहराई से इन की प्रक्रियाएँ, उनके परिणाम, संरक्षण के मजबूत बनाने वाले पाठों को जानने के लिए निरीक्षण किया जाना चाहिए। वास्तव में यह सूचित करता है कि समुचित वन प्रबन्ध संस्थाओं को मजबूत बनाने के लिए और अनुसंधानों की आवश्यकता है। योग्यता का अभाव रहने का व्यक्ति/समुदाय अवसरों का लाभ नहीं उठा पाता और वही अवसर प्रभावशील निहित स्वार्थों के हाथों में पड़कर या तो बरबाद चला जाता है अथवा उनका दुरुपयोग किया जाता है। वन और वन्य प्राणि अनेक शताब्दियों के उपरान्त विकसित हुए हैं और अब तेजी से लुप्त होते जा रहे हैं। इन्हें बचाने के लिए वन विभाग को कानूनों को लागू करने की अपनी क्षमताओं को मजबूत बनाना होगा ताकि वे प्रभावशाली बनते जा रहे निजी स्वार्थों की रोकथाम कर सकें तथा संयुक्त वन प्रबन्ध कार्यक्रमों में ग्रामीण स्तर पर प्रत्येक व्यक्ति की क्रमिक और सकारात्मक भागीदारी सुनिश्चित बनाई जा सके। और, यदि संयुक्त वन प्रबन्ध को आगे चलकर सफलता मिलनी है तो इसमें भाग लेने वाले सभी लोगों के लिए भली-भाँति सोचा-समझा हुआ क्षमता निर्माण करने वाला कार्यक्रम होना चाहिए। लोगों, गैरसरकारी संगठनों, और वानिकों सभी के लिए जिसे ग्रामीण यथार्थ के आधार पर अच्छे मन से किए गए वैज्ञानिक अध्ययन द्वारा सहायता भी मिलनी चाहिए।

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