

WHY JOINT FOREST MANAGEMENT (JFM) FAILED TO DELIVER? A CASE STUDY OF ARJUNI MOUZA, MIDNAPORE (WEST BENGAL, INDIA)

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Introduction

The present study shows as to why the local communities of Arjuni Mouza, (smallest revenue sub-division in Midnapore District of West Bengal) failed to protect the local forest under the Joint Forest Management (JFM) and reap its benefit in five-years time as per their agreement with the Forest Department. The study analyses the issue from different perspectives and arrives at approximate cause of failure which is related to the livelihood-food insecurity of poor people, including the tribals, in that depressed area.

The Issue

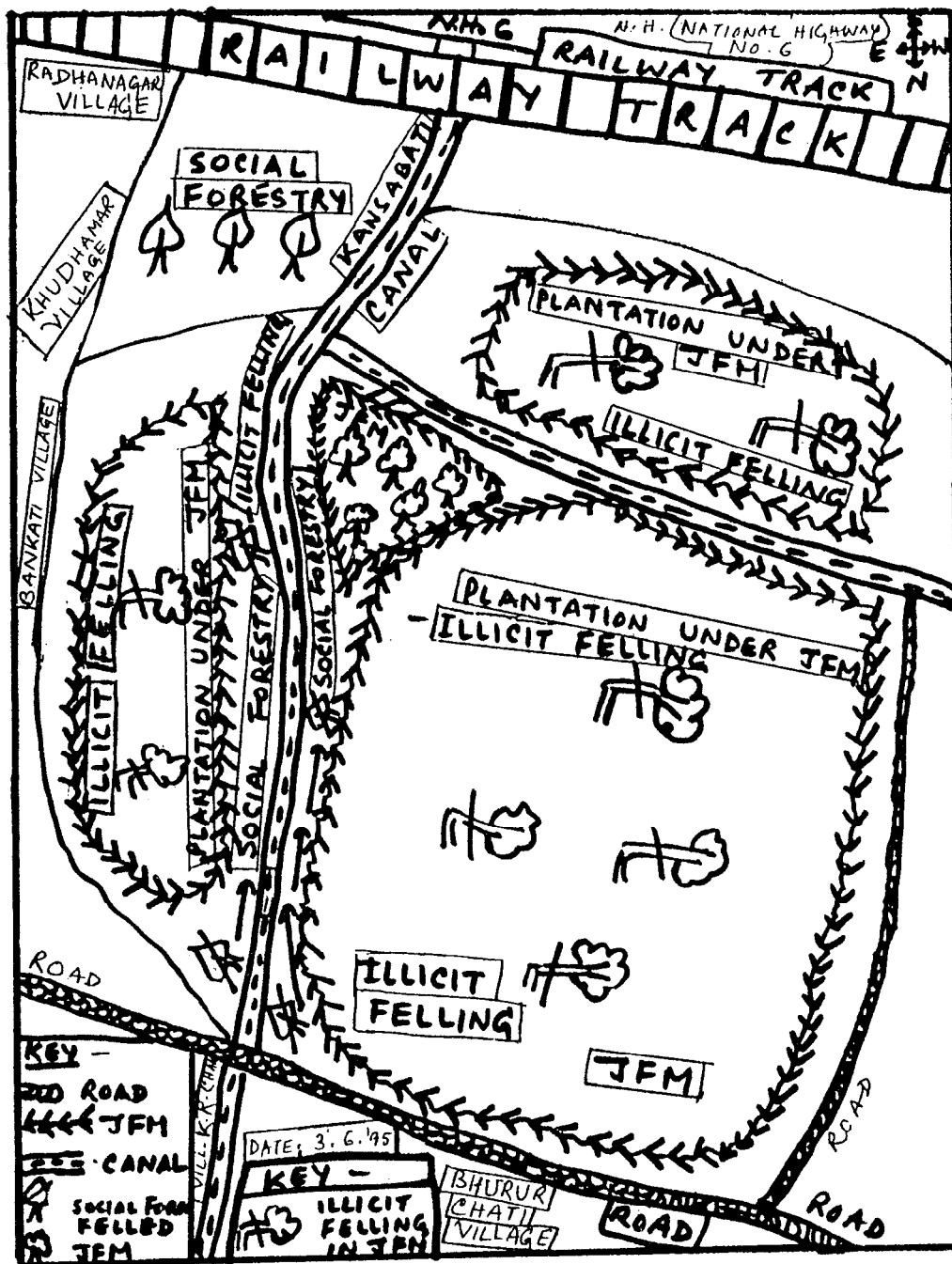
In the month of June, 1995, a visit to a tribal area in the State of West Bengal was undertaken to study the status of developmental interventions and their impact on the local people. This was in the context of panel data generation through Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) since 1991 on poverty and well being of tribals. The name of the sample village is Krishna Rakshit Chak in Arjuni which is a mouza (the smallest revenue sub-division) in Midnapore District of West Bengal. The area is a depressed one in terms of poverty and landless labour. The tribals of that area are engaged, amongst other activities, in Joint Forest Management (JFM) for

protection of local forests. Recently, with large scale illicit felling of trees, such effort met with a big jolt in that area. Large areas of such felling were clearly visible from the approach road which leads to that area. This village was visited every two years starting from the year 1991. While reaching the village during the current visit, some villagers appraised me about the current conditions prevailing in and around the village. The issue of JFM was brought up as a major issue for immediate discussion by different groups of villagers during the course of interaction with them.

My natural bias towards community participation urged me to probe into the issue of failure of JFM so as to learn more about the proximate cause of such failure in the local contextual framework. This was also directly related to my investigations about the status of developmental interventions, poverty and well being. Since identification of major cause of such failure would help in enriching our learning in participatory natural resource management, I went in for intensive interactions with local community members. For it was they who were directly involved in joint management of forests and were in a position to relate their experience in explaining what went wrong. As major stakeholders to the JFM they had their local perspective which was important to

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Fig. 1



Status of Joint Forest Mangement

Arjuni FPC, Kalaikunda Beat, Manikpara Range, Kharagpur (West Bengal).

appreciate and understand for drawing lessons in JFM and community participation.

Description of JFM

Participatory management strategies in protecting forests for meeting local needs and also for preservation/conservation of bio-diversity are increasingly gaining attention in many countries of the world. The success of Arabari experiment in JFM in Midnapore District of West Bengal, is well known which is being replicated in other parts of the country and other countries as well. However, it is a sheer coincidence, that it is in the same district of Midnapore in West Bengal that JFM of Arjuni mouza had failed to deliver.

The plantation under JFM in Arjuni, the area under study, was around 76 hectares as per the local Forest Department while it was around 200 ha as per the villagers. The Arjuni forest protection committee formed in 1991 was entrusted to look after the plantation for five years as per the agreement, the official felling year being 1996. This is because the forest protection committee, as per the JFM agreement, becomes eligible to get its share of 25 per cent timber only when they protect the forest for a period of five years.

While probing into JFM, some villagers drew a map of the forest under JFM (Fig. 1) which we later used for a joint walk with the villagers to see selected places and assess the state of the damage done to the plantation. The map gave a broad idea of the forest areas felled illegally and the areas where the plantation under JFM was still in existence. Other areas where the local panchayat was harvesting trees under the Social Forestry scheme were also shown in

the map. Selected species under JFM at Arjuni mouza were as follows (Table 1).

Table 1
Selected species under JFM in Arjuni mouza

Name	Use
<i>Gmelina arborea</i>	Fodder and timber
<i>Anacardium occidentale</i>	Fruit tree
<i>Eucalyptus</i>	Fodder (when small), firewood and timber
<i>Acacia auriculiformis</i>	Fodder, firewood and timber
<i>Leucaena leucocephala</i>	Fodder, firewood and timber
<i>Albizia lebbek</i>	Firewood and timber
<i>Butea monosperma</i>	Firewood and timber
<i>Ocimum sanctum</i>	Firewood and timber

Process of JFM

The villagers described how members of the Arjuni Forest Protection Committee (FPC) went from door to door to request people to protect forests. They guarded the forest with great zeal and enthusiasm. Whenever they heard any noise in the forest or saw some disturbance, they ran to protect the forest and brought such incidents to the notice of the Forest Department. This continued from 1991 to the middle of 1994 when the Forest Protection Committee was effective in protecting the forest.

According to the villagers, the local forest administration was generally relaxed since the foresters thought that people had accepted responsibility for protection of forests under the JFM agreement. However, since mid-august 1994 the forest recorded a large number of illicit fellings. Such felling became so rampant that it could not be stopped until all timber trees near inhabited areas surrounding the forest were felled. The protection committee at the beginning caught several thieves but after a few days

the number was much bigger than what they could handle. Many were caught and fined but the spate of felling continued almost unabated and the Arjuni Forest Protection Committee became virtually ineffective. Amongst the offenders, some surrendered, some ran away while some others threatened the local guards with dire consequences and some were ready to attack them which de-moralised the zealous guards, who, on being questioned about their legitimacy, felt scared to venture further.

Once illicit felling started it led to demonstration effect where many more joined in felling of trees. The price of timber fell as a result of mass illicit felling and the timber was sold at a cheaper rate due to an over-supply position in the local market. The villagers described it as 'mass illicit felling' of trees where the local villagers were themselves involved. Many also described the breakdown of JFM as sad and painful and one which affected their credibility.

Seeing the 'mass loot' of the forest (a term used by the villagers) the Panchayat (locally elected lowest tier of governing body) of Arjuni decided to quickly fell its plantation under Social Forestry for Rs. 11,00,000. Such hurried felling of Social Forestry was pre-emptive i.e. to stop illegal felling in JFM areas from spreading to plantation by the Panchayat. The Panchayat had done parallel plantation with JFM on the banks of the local canal which had already disappeared with illicit felling under JFM. With rapid disappearance of trees under Social Forestry adjacent to JFM, the Panchayat decided to fell other areas of plantation under the Social Forestry scheme and reap the benefit of such a scheme at the earliest.

Of late in the middle of 1995, the felling was arrested due to two basic reasons as offered by different groups of villagers.

(a) One immediate factor was that the contractors, who were now felling trees under the Social Forestry programme of the Panchayat were alert and kept an all round vigil in the area concerned.

(b) Some little plantation of JFM (less than 25 per cent, as per the villagers) still remained. They were in the areas which were distant from the villages and hence not easily accessible.

Differing viewpoints

Both villagers and Forest Department were approached for discussion of the causes of failure of JFM.

Villagers, some of whom were also active members of the Arjuni Forest Protection Committee, formed in 1991, offered the following description.

(a) Some villagers, who foresaw dangers to the plantation under JFM with recurrent incidents of illicit felling, directly communicated with the Forest Department in the months of October-November, 1994 suggesting for immediate arrangements to be made by the Department for felling and sale of forest timber under the JFM. According to them the felling of trees under JFM was un-necessarily delayed by the Forest Department given the timber content of the forest and its valuation. The villagers were not worried about the five-year period of the agreement for protection of the forest. They were more worried about the dangers of illicit felling which was imminent and threatened the very existence of the plantation and rightly so. They could well

assess the situation when protection by the forest committee would be of limited use in preventing such illicit felling. However, the Forest Department was unable to come out with any immediate solution.

(b) One major reason repeatedly pointed out by a group of villagers was that of seasonal livelihood-food insecurity which plagued that area and led to conditions of semi-starvation amongst poor people.

For two to three years the JFM worked well. The Bengali month of Bhadra (August-September) in 1994 was quite a difficult month when livelihood-food insecurity was at its peak in poor households of that area. Such insecurity was pronounced in 1994 due to fall in employment opportunities for poor people. Some of them took recourse to illicit felling of trees and sold them in the local markets for Rs. 20/Rs. 25 per tree. This reflected a tendency for individual subsistence needs to assume greater importance than that of long-term community gains from the forest management.

Views of the local Forest Department

Forest Department representatives informally expressed that they were aware of what was happening in that area and its implications in terms of JFM. However, any move from the normal agreement with local communities was severely limited. They could not arrange for immediate felling of trees in the latter half of 1994, as requested by many villagers since the JFM agreement, for a period of five years was still to be completed. As per the agreement, the beneficiary community was not entitled to the long-term benefits of JFM in terms of realisation from forest timber before a five year period.

(a) According to the Forest Department representative, JFM was problematic in those areas which were closer to towns (not all villages in Arjuni mouza were close to town) since illicit felling and selling of trees became much easier. He also said that the Village Forest Protection Committee had members who tacitly encouraged such illicit felling. Such felled trees were sold easily and it was difficult to stop them. Arjuni mouza was an area where such offences registered were relatively high.

(b) The representative also pointed out that local offenders engaged in illicit felling when caught were being protected by members of the Forest Protection Committee for various reasons such as local political patronage, kinship etc. It was becoming difficult to overcome such forces.

(c) According to the Forest Department representative, the problem was triggered by a sequence of two cases of theft from the JFM area in which differential fines were imposed on two culprits caught felling trees. Since the two culprits were fined at differential rates for the same offence, it aroused adverse local reactions and the case with a smaller fine was interpreted as one of political favouritism. This triggered felling of trees on a large scale which started getting sold in the local markets. Protection committee also become relatively inactive with differences cropping up amongst its members.

Proximate cause of failure

After listening to the views of the two stake holders to the JFM, the local villagers and the local Forest Department, it was found that the causes offered by the Forest Department such as nearness to markets and political favouritism appeared

superficial for they failed to explain why in the years prior to 1994, JFM agreement was strictly honoured by the community. There was a change in the elected leadership at the micro level, however, the causal link appeared to be much deeper as indicated by the villagers. Even if it is assumed that there was some tacit support of the governing body for such illicit felling the question still arises as to what was the underlying cause and who gained and how much.

Having cue from the villagers that there was a structural problem beneath the failure of JFM, I decided to probe into the root cause as suggested by the villagers which was to do with their livelihood-food insecurity. The period and timing of such illicit felling was closely linked to the period when such insecurity was at its peak. Both groups of men and women were approached to understand more about such insecurity.

On further discussion with a group of women about food availability and livelihood, they did a food calendar on the ground which highlighted critical results. There was a strong factor of 'seasonality' in livelihood-food insecurity of poor people in this area. However, in 1994, the poor community was faced with periods of acute livelihood problems and food shortage which were much more pronounced as compared to earlier years.

From the discussions based on the food calendar it was clear that from 'Baisakh' (mid-April to mid-May) to 'Srabon' (mid-July to mid-August), the poor people in that area worked hard and did farming work for better off farmers with which they bought food and also saved a little for the difficult months which followed. In 'Srabon' there was greater availability of work due to buoyant farming activities when almost all

members of households were generally occupied.

The worst part of it was during 'Bhadra' to 'Kartick' (mid-August to mid-November) which were critical months since no agricultural or other work was available except for catching of fish and selling it in local markets. Such livelihood strategy was quite uncertain and risky since opportunities for catching fish were not available on a daily basis and such catch and its sale price differed from time to time. Some villagers pointed out that during mid-August of 1994 insecurity of food and livelihood was relatively acute as compared to other years and some of those people who were at the brink of starvation resorted to illicit felling of trees and sold them in the local markets for meagre amounts. Such felling culminated ultimately into mass felling in a short period of time when the forest became virtually free for all.

The food calendar indicated that whereas some work was available for the poor in 'Agrahyan' (mid-November to mid-December) in nearby villages, when both men and women found employment, the month to follow 'Poush' (mid-December to mid-January) was good only for men's work. The poor households did some savings in both the months of 'Agrahyan' and 'Poush' and also bought corn at cheaper prices and stored it for the difficult months which followed. In 'Magh' (mid-January to mid-February) the poor caught fish and sold them as a livelihood, while in 'Phalgun' (mid-February to mid-March) they sold firewood and were able to earn a meagre living. However, in 'Chaitra' (mid-March to mid-April) life became more difficult when income earning opportunities were practically nil and hence purchasing power for food was in short supply. Whatever remained of JFM was also threatened which

led to a second round of illicit felling.

In an area facing recurrent cycles of livelihood-food insecurity, one relevant question is why then the forest remained intact prior to mid-1994. The village women helped in explaining the same through the help of the seasonal food calendar and compared it with an earlier one that they had done in 1993. Locally growing wild food provided a safety net to the poor people in the difficult months when both work and staple food were at their rock bottom. Earlier, wild food was freely available from farmers' land and other common property resources and provided food security to poor people in the lean seasons. Free access to such food had dwindled especially since 1994, leading to increase in food insecurity, at higher levels than other years. As far as farmers' land was concerned, the wild food had started getting sold in the local market by the farmers, causing a phenomenon of 'marketisation' of wild food, to hedge against rising food prices for protecting their real income. The following were some items of such wild food and their market prices at the time of visit to that area as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2
Items of 'wild food' and their market prices
(June, 1995)

Items	Local Price
<i>Marsilea minuta</i>	Rs. 6.00/kg
<i>Mitragyna parvifolia</i>	Re. 1.00/3 small bundles
<i>Centaurium roxburghii</i>	Rs. 2.00/kg
<i>Hydrocotyle asiatica</i>	Rs. 10.00/kg (dried ones more expensive)
<i>Caesalpinia crista</i>	Rs. 3.50/kg

Apart from private lands wild food was

also available from common property resources. Of late, with degradation of such resources, availability of wild food from common property resources had shrunk to a large extent and had become negligible. Rural women who were the primary gatherers of food were forced to walk long distances for the same. With shrinking supply of wild food their capacity to hedge against food insecurity of their households was enormously strained. Hence poor people in that area were either forced to reduce their consumption of wild food (which was earlier free) by going hungry or buying them (or their substitutes) from the market by generating additional income. However, livelihood opportunities also declined in that year and the food prices were one of the highest during that period. Hence, survival needs became of utmost importance and as an alternative to starvation, many found their way in contingency sale of JFM plantation to feed their stomachs and maintain their day to day existence.

Impacts

Some of the impacts from failure of JFM were described by groups of villagers.

(a) With depletion of local forests women were being forced to go to other forests for fuelwood etc. where the Forest Protection Committees of those forests were posing a major hindrance. Hence the women were facing great difficulty in procuring Minor Forest Produce (MFP) for their day to day household activity. Poor women's burden of finding MFP in a degraded environment had intensified.

(b) Locally, an acute scarcity of fuelwood and fodder was expected in the coming years. The women would be the major group to be severely affected in the process and

their daily routine would become problematic to that extent.

(c) The protection committee has lost its share of 25 per cent timber entitlement under JFM. The village Forest Protection Committee which looked after the forest for more than three years lost its entitlement to community benefits. In the process of JFM failure it had also lost its courage and confidence, and, in their own words, their credibility as a community.

Learning points and selected policy implications

We can draw some learning points for policy reforms in JFM as indicated below:

(a) JFM does not operate in vacuum. It is influenced by local socio-economic, political, cultural and ecological variables in the areas concerned. If these forces are not reckoned with then a 'blueprint' for participatory management of natural resources remains naive and unrealistic and becomes unsustainable in the long run. The cross-currents of such variables can make or mar community participation and it is important to recognise the major forces so as to take steps to integrate them into JFM or minimise their distortionary influence over time. Again the communities concerned are the best judge of such factors and it is they who can be approached for evolving locally viable strategies for community participation.

(b) Survival needs of poor communities need to be recognised on a priority basis as pillars for strengthening community participation. In depressed areas with higher levels of poverty, day to day existence becomes uppermost on their agenda for living. The most urgent need of the community at Arjuni is that of alternative means of livelihood

during lean seasons with agriculture being the mainstay in peak seasons. The villagers cope with acute seasonal food insecurity due to livelihood problems. Options for supporting seasonal livelihood strategies planned by village community and/or by Forest Department or other agencies can strengthen the base for community participation. Unless survival needs of food and livelihood are met, participation for natural resource management would always remain threatened. Of what use is timber benefits to a community, many of whom are trapped in subsistence living?

(c) Meetings of Forest Protection Committees and Forest Department have become a ritual. The villagers of Krishna Rakshit Chak exclaimed that they were too many meetings with too little outcome. It is important to look back on the results of the numerous meetings and think of ways to make them more effective. Since the number of meetings does not ensure the sustainability of JFM.

(d) Roles of Forest Department and village communities require clarification and may need to be re-defined so that forest protection becomes more effective. There can be several groups within the same community and it is important to recognise their identities for they influence community decision-making and the quality of protection. At present, it often happens that everyone's responsibility becomes no one's responsibility.

(e) Charges of nepotism, favouritism also need to be seriously reflected on. The issue of credibility of the people in the protection committee and Forest Department are equally important. It is necessary to look into the checks and balances in the system to minimise nepotism and favouritism. Questions of legitimacy of protection

committee have also been raised by the villagers. This calls for further empowerment of protection committee on legitimacy and appropriate checks and balances to be created in consultation with the local communities.

(f) Seasonal protection of forests needs to be intensified in consultation with villagers especially during lean seasons. Protection can become more effective with seasonal strategies to support livelihood, income and food.

(g) Women's participation is negligible and need to be strengthened since, as shown by the Arjuni experience, women become the worst sufferers when JFM fails.

(h) One lesson which comes straight from the Arjuni experience of JFM is that greater scope for flexibility needs to be created in the memorandum of understanding. Agreement under JFM can be made more flexible depending upon the situation. For instance decision for felling of trees under JFM in Arjuni mouza could have been hastened when responsible members of the local community sensed danger to JFM. Just because the period of the agreement was not over, such official felling was ruled out. Inflexible rules came in the way of jointly managed natural resources whose timber harvest could have been immediately marketed with profit to the community and the Department.

(i) Speedy replication of JFM without proper nurturing of community participation and institution building is open to all kinds of problems. Many local people were not convinced about the benefits of JFM. They expressed that there was not really any ownership of natural resources involved

nor payment for protection done from day to day. Effective communication, dialoguing and sensitising of both Forest Department and people are important. More thoughts are required on ways of community institution building since weak and fragile institutions can play havoc with the future of JFM.

On a related issue of strengthening community participation, I often come across Forest Department officials who blame local communities for lacking initiatives for JFM. It is easy to blame the community on this account but the crux of the matter lies in the conditions under which communities participate for management of natural resources. Facilitating community participation requires community friendly attitudes, tact, training, broad vision and years of field learning with different communities.

Success and failure cases in community participation are worthy of in-depth investigations and reflections both by local communities and outsiders. This helps in understanding the roots of such success/failures and appreciating them in appropriate contextual framework. The failure stories reflect major learning points for policy-making which can be highlighted with the help of communities and gainfully utilised in planning for future strategies for community based natural resource management. The Arjuni experience in JFM goes a long way to show that, survival needs are of prime importance and can easily destabilise community rights and benefits to resource management. Any JFM strategy which does not recognise the significance of sustaining livelihood-food security at the local level has a doubtful future and is unlikely to be sustainable.

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SUMMARY

The study discusses the issue from different perspective and arrives at approximate cause of failure of Joint Forest Management in Arjuni Mouza in Midnapore of West Bengal.

संयुक्त वन प्रबन्ध से काम क्यों नहीं चल पाया ? अ
जुनी मौजा, मिदनापुर (पश्चिम बंगाल, भारत) में किया गया विशिष्ट अध्ययन
नीला मुखर्जी
सारांश

इस अध्ययन में समस्या का विभिन्न पार्श्वों से विश्लेषण किया गया है और मिदनापुर, पश्चिम बंगाल के अर्जुनी मौजा में संयुक्त वन प्रबन्ध की विफलता के संभावित कारणों पर पहुँचा गया है।

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