

## PARTICIPATION IN JOINT FOREST MANAGEMENT FROM WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE

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### Introduction

"Women constitute about fifty per cent of the total population of India and is therefore one half of the total work force available to the nation. The women of India have been, are and will always remain equal partners in the progress of the Nation," said Smt. Indira Gandhi.

The need to integrate women into the development process as an essential prerequisite for over all development has been acknowledged by the policy makers and development planners.

The status of rural women in India is ridden with paradoxes. Out of India's women population of about 406 million, a little less than 80% live in rural India and a majority of them are labourers in the agricultural sector and allied fields. These poor women have the dual burden of contributing to the family income besides shouldering the responsibility of looking after the family. To supplement their family income, besides their male members, they work outside the home for meagre earnings. As for her responsibility to look after the family is concerned, she spends long hours in husking, grinding, cooking, fetching potable water, fuel collection, rearing the cattle, taking care of the children etc. Though she performs more work than it is physically feasible she has to live below subsistence level with no nutritious diet. Thus the rural women

remain as embodiment of sacrifice surrendering all their comforts for the welfare of the children and other members of the family. Nevertheless, the socio-economic status of rural women remains poor in the village community.

Within the family the woman is socially dependent, controlled by the family in every aspect of her life. The social restrictions and constraints prohibit her from taking part freely in cultural and recreational activities. She does not get proper education for reasons like assisting the family in home and farm affairs, early marriage etc.

Women in general and those of rural areas in particular play an important role in maintaining the family and thereby improving the village economy and in turn the national economy.

It is often said that if a woman is developed, the entire family is developed, because it is only woman who is most intimately connected with the basic needs of her family, be it food, firewood or water. Thus, the woman as a mother in the household assumes the role of efficient manager and undertakes various functions for the welfare of the family.

### Dependence on Forests

The entire village abutting the forests actually depends on the forests for the tree

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based needs in the form of small timber, fuel, fodder, green leaf manure etc. Unlike the women in the urban areas, the rural women are solely dependent on the forests for their fuel needs to a very large extent.

It is the women who collect fuelwood and dried sticks for cooking purposes from the forests. Many women also collect fuelwood from forests for their sustenance through wage earning as they do not have any other alternative sources of employment. The rural women take care of cattle grazing in the forests. In many parts of the country women collect potable water from perennial jungle streams passing through the forests.

#### **Women's attitude towards forests**

The women's attitude towards forests has been changing conservation strategies at the National and State level. In the Himalayan region, rural men are very much interested in raising pine trees so as to enable them to get quick money at the time of harvest. On the other hand, the women are interested in raising broad leaved trees like *Quercus*, *Acer oblongum* etc., which improve the biodiversity and result in perennial flow of water in the mountain streams in the region and the women have succeeded in this sphere of activity.

In Gujarat the women prefer to protect the teak trees where grasses grown beneath the trees form a very good fodder to the village cattle whereas the men are interested in felling the trees for quick money. Thus the women are aware of the importance of the forests and the benefits derived for their subsistence from forests from sustainable management.

#### **Role of women in the Interface Forestry Programme**

Several programmes designed to rehabilitate degraded reserved forests with active cooperation of the user communities are being implemented in Tamil Nadu. The Interface Forestry Programme is one such scheme which paved the way for the active involvement of the beneficiary villagers particularly the women folk to improve the socio-economic conditions of the rural women. It is a programme of Joint Forest Management to be designed and implemented by the people. The rural women are involved in the planning, protection, maintenance of the areas and various distribution mechanisms among the beneficiary villagers.

#### **Role of women in the Village Forestry Council (VFC)**

The Village Forestry Councils (VFC) have been formed in the programme villages with a view to actively involve the dependent communities in the implementation of the programme. Fifty per cent of the Executive Committee members are from women which indicates that equal importance is given to the women folk. These committees are serving as a channel for promoting awareness on environmental issues. The need for sustainable use of forests, urgency for regenerating and protecting degraded forests etc., are emphasised at the Village Forestry Committee meetings.

In Sundamalai village of Dharmapuri District one woman member is the vice-president of Committee and she evinced keen interest in educating the other members about the importance of forests,

as well as planning, protection, maintenance of the treated areas in the village.

### **Role of women in Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)**

The women of the programme village have assisted the Interface Forestry Programme (I.F.F.) of the Forest Department in conducting the Participatory Rural Appraisal. As a grass root level functionary of the family, the women have helped a lot in collecting the data on base line survey of the village.

### **Role of women in implementation**

Women in I.F.F. programme have been offered employment like in most other programmes. But what makes I.F.F. programme distinct is that there are factors in it which facilitate women's total involvement, which are missing in most other programmes. I.F.F. programme has provided all possible incentives for women so as to make them participate wholeheartedly in the programme and make them real partners in implementing the scheme.

I.F.F. programme is being implemented in Dharmapuri, Salem, Periyar and Coimbatore Districts. These Districts are drought prone as well as affected by seasonal agricultural activities mostly relied on the erratic monsoon rains. Scanty and scattered rainfall has resulted in unemployment and underemployment in the villages both in the agricultural and allied sectors. Outside migration in the villages is a major problem for seeking employment for the subsistence. With highly fragmented agricultural lands that entirely depend on rainfall, productivity of the land was abysmally low, and men often found themselves without work after the first cropping season. In the past they

used to migrate to nearby towns in search of work leaving women and children to fend for themselves. The resulting insecurity and despair had all but destroyed the usual social fabric in the villages.

With the implementation of Interface Forestry Programme the situation has changed drastically in the programme villages. Afforestation works in the form of raising nurseries and plantation activities like formation of germination beds, filling poly bags, watering the seedlings, shifting and grading, planting, weeding and soil working etc., have created considerable employment opportunities amongst the women in the programme villages. Strenuous works like pitting, construction of check dams, gully plugging, checkwalls, contour trenches, contour stone walls have been carried out by the men and in these works also women have assisted their male counterparts.

### **Role of women in protection and maintenance**

The plantations thus created and natural forests are being protected by the women by strictly prohibiting goat browsing and cattle menace and unauthorised removal of head load of fuelwood. The women are conscious of collecting dried sticks only for firewood purpose instead of cutting green trees as in the past.

It is a remarkable work done by the women, in assisting the male members, in constructing the small check dams in the ravines in Palaniapuram village in Salem District to arrest soil erosion and augment the ground water potential which have diversified cropping intensity in the agricultural land due to assured water supply.

**Benefit sharing mechanism and the women's participation**

Realising the importance of involving the villagers in implementing the various afforestation works, the Government of Tamil Nadu have issued orders streamlining the benefit sharing mechanisms particularly to the women in all its spheres. Nearly fifty per cent of the members are from women group, while constituting the Village Forestry Councils, preference has been given to the female members in identifying the beneficiaries, particularly the poor women, destitute women in the programme villages.

It is a noteworthy point to say that many women were benefited in Malayalapatty village of Salem District wherein each of them were given 10 kg of tamarind collected from the I.F.F. programme area free of cost. Similarly preference was given to women groups in collecting the forest grass, 'mahali' tuber from the I.F.F. areas.

**Other income generation activities involving women groups**

In Boothimuttulu village of Krishnagiri taluk in Dharmapuri District one women's basket making co-operative society has been formed primarily to benefit the women who used to collect green firewood from the forest illegally.

In Harur thirty two women members were identified and trained under tailoring for their earnings.

In Malayalapatty village of Salem District, one milk producers co-operative society has been formed. Fifteen members are from women group and this has benefited the scheduled tribe women in augmenting their income.

Similarly, in Jalluthupatty tribal village loan facilities with 50% subsidy have been arranged under DWCRA scheme (IRDP) for the purchase of milch animals (buffaloes) for tribal women. Consequent on this the milk production has increased and one milk producers co-operative society has been formed in the village. This has resulted in the increase of income to the women in the tribal village.

**Future strategies**

As the rural women are closely dependent on forestry activities, more of women should be involved in implementing the various forestry programmes. To achieve this goal women could be involved more intensively right from the planning stage onwards to assess the needs of the community.

Women groups can be formed in villages to enlighten them about the needs of environmental conservation including managing natural resources on a sustainable manner. These groups can also impart vocational training, in consultation with the Government departments and non-governmental organisations, to destitute women so that they can take up alternate income generation activities which need not be land or forest based. Various benefit sharing models may be chalked out in consultation with the women organisations like women tree growers co-operative society, women polythene bag manufacturing society etc. can be established to encourage women to participate in forestry activities.

More and more women may be recruited by the government departments and also non-governmental organisations to effectively implement the various programmes stated above.

## Conclusion

The Joint Forest Management programme has ensured the economic and social upliftment of women to enhance the welfare of their families and to improve their status in the family and community as a whole. A sense of responsibility and awareness has been created among the

members by way of involving them in planning, protection and management mechanisms through forest councils and "Mahalir Mandram" while the economic development is achieved by raising their level of awareness and fostering the confidence to strive for social change through organising them into strong and mutually supporting group.

## SUMMARY

Women can play a dominant role in the implementation of Joint Forest Management strategies because of their intimate association with forests. They depend on forests for various livelihood security services. They must get equal representation in the Village Forest Councils and have a choice in the decision making viz. in the selection of species and other silvicultural measures for upgrading the degraded forest's vegetative cover and biodiversity. Various women groups can be constituted to establish alternate income generation activities to ameliorate the living conditions of poor and destitute women dependent entirely on forest for their sustenance.

## स्त्रियों की संयुक्त वन प्रबन्ध में भागीदारी

गौतम दे

सारांश

स्त्रियाँ संयुक्त वन प्रबन्ध की कार्य नीतियों के क्रियान्वयन में प्रभावकारी भूमिका निभा सकती हैं क्योंकि उनका वनों से गहरा साहचर्य होता है। अपनी विविध आजीविका सुरक्षा सेवाओं के लिए वे वनों पर निर्भर हैं। ग्राम वन परिषदों में प्रतिनिधित्व और फैसला करने में विकल्प चुनने के अधिकार में उन्हें बराबरी मिलनी चाहिए उदा० व्यावसित वन क्षेत्रों का पुनःसंस्कार करके उन्हें फिर से हरा-भरा बनाने और जैवविविधता लाने के वन संवर्धन उपायों में वृक्ष जातियों का चुनाव करना। गरीब और निराश्रित ऐसी महिलाओं की जीवन दशा सुधारने के लिए, जो अपने भरण-पोषण के लिए मात्र वनों पर ही निर्भर हों, वैकल्पिक आय उत्पादन उपाय बनाने के लिए विभिन्न स्त्री वर्गों की स्थापना की जा सकती है।