

Role of Local Communities for Forest Management in India

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ABSTRACT

Forests are one of the key natural resources that have been facing continuous degradation due to over exploitation. This is attributed to absence of property rights. India has witnessed the rise of various community based management institutions for optimum utilization of natural resources. Government of India formalized the guidelines for an institution called Joint Forest Management, following the establishment of the National Forest Policy of 1990, to change the previously held role of the state forest department (FD) with the local communities along the forest areas from an authority into that of a facilitator. This institution aims to involve the active and voluntary participation of the local communities. It also emphasizes that in absence of this, the overall effectiveness of JFM in terms regeneration of degraded forests would not be gained.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper focusses on the one of the most essential parameter for the implementation of Joint Forest Management in India- the involvement and role of the communities surrounding the forest resources into the planning, protection and conservation in close collaboration with the institutional authority.

Participation of the communities is associated with the paradigm of inclusion of the most affected people in the decision making and planning dimension carried out by the institutions assigned to carry out JFM in an area,, (Agarwal 2001)

The paper will try and understand the policies formed in the context of JFM for ensuring a degree of participation of the local communities in the decision making process of the forest related issues. We will further dig deep to understand how effective is the process of participation in JFM and what are the key drivers of various level of participation. Also, we will analyze the overall performance of JFM after a minimal level of participation rate has been gained by the communities.

First we will discuss the policies formed under JFM by the Government for the enforcement of participation of communities, the decision making and implementation of various approaches in relation to institutional agency designated prior to JFM to address issues concerning the natural resource degradation. The next section will address the key determinants and their effectiveness observed under various studies for achieving a level of participation in the decision making and planning activities for joint forest management across the all sections of the local communities including marginalized groups, poor, women, landless labourers.

I. POLICIES UNDER JFM POST THE COLONIAL PERIOD

Colonial forest policy initially focussed on the optimization of timber production and total revenue extracted from the resources offered by the forests. This was in disagreement of the local communities and tribal groups since they felt it questioned their rights to meet local livelihood requirements from the forest resources. Even post-independence, National Forest Policy 1952 only focused on the needs for industrial development. The Forest Conservation Act in 1980 was not helpful in complying to the needs and rights attached with locals, It was primarily aimed to reduce the rate of conversion. The highlight was the landmark revision in the goals of forest policy in the country in 1988 by the government (Government of India[GoI]1988) that led to the removal of the rules imposed by the colonial forest policy. Main goals in the new forest policy focussed on the meeting of essential requirements of the local and tribal population, by involving them in the management of the forest resources. It stated “a primary task of all agencies responsible for forest management...should be to associate the tribal people closely in the protection, regeneration and development of forests”. (Lele 2014)

Following the successful community participation example of Arabari, Government of India came up with term

Joint Forest Management (JFM) which was based on the idea of collaborative management of resources of forests both by the State (Forest Department) and the local forest protection committees along with the sharing of rights and responsibilities over better use of forest resources. One of the main objectives stated was the empowerment of the poor, landless and marginalised groups, tribal and other vulnerable sections of the local community population by also ensuring a level of participation into the decision making and implementation process for collective management of forest resources. Additionally, protection and regeneration of the natural resource cover was a key objective (Behera and Engel 2005)

According to (Sarkar and Datta 2010), the genesis of JFM“ lies on the belief that the dominance of authoritarian institutions like the State forest departments (FD) was dealt with the appropriate sharing of rights and responsibilities between the local communities and FD for forest management. Also, JFM managed to invoke local participation into the decision making, planning and implementation of forest management and regeneration processes as it was considered that the locals have better knowledge based on their traditions and past experiences regarding the forest produce and this could in turn help in „countering ecological and economic vulnerability“ like soil erosion, forest degradation etc. He also laid further importance to involvement of locals along with the coordinated efforts of FD by emphasizing that micro-planning in matters of the “continuously decreasing rate of forest cover, regeneration of forest lands, conservation of important species of timber“ is essential for sustainable livelihood.

This being said it’s important to understand that despite the establishment of goals laid out in favour of involvement of communities, there haven’t been many positive outcomes in the real time implementation of various types of participation levels. According to (Behera and Engel 2005), participation of local forest user has a high impact on the successful working of JFM in region and even after years of implementation of JFM there is still no clarity on the degree of achievement in securing participation for local forest users in a community. (Agarwal 2001) There are different existing views on account of the appropriate definition of participation which can be used by one and all. Participation of the communities can be achieved at various level depending on whom to work with, expected results from the collaborative effort, what kind of work will be required.

Definition of participation can be given in both narrow and broad terms. In the narrowest form, participation is defined in terms of “nominal membership“ elucidating its effects on increasing the efficiency. On the other hand, in its broadest terms, participation is defined in terms of a “dynamic optimization process“ where the marginalized groups of forest users can exert some power in the decision making and influence the planning, implementation issues to ensure the equity, efficiency, empowerment of the vulnerable sections and sustain the environment. A typology of participation can be explained using the table given below-

Table1: Typology of participation

Form/Level of participation	Characteristic features
Nominal participation	Membership in the group
Passive participation	Being informed of decisions <i>ex post facto</i> ; or attending meetings and listening in on decision-making, without speaking up
Consultative participation	Being asked an opinion in specific matters without guarantee of influencing decisions
Activity-specific participation	Being asked to (or volunteering to) undertake specific tasks
Active participation	Expressing opinions, whether or not solicited, or taking initiatives of other sorts
Interactive (empowering) participation	Having voice and influence in the group’s decisions

Source: (Agarwal 2001)

We will discuss the factors that affect the dynamics of interactive processes through which the locals attend the committee meetings and eventually have a voice in influencing the decisions there in section 2. We also examine the determinants affecting the participation of community members to ensure a successful implementation of the JFM.

II. DETERMINANTS OF VARIOUS LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION IN JFM

In this section, we discuss the factors determining the level of participation of the local forest user consisting of marginalised groups, poor people, women, tribals etc in the decision making processes of forest management and planning by the FD. Various papers have documented, based on their work in this context, the key determinants affecting the various levels of participation by any community and this literature seeks to put forward their views on the same.

(Behera and Engel 2005) The determinants of various levels of participation at the household level can be explained by raising the fundamental question of who attends the meetings, where the crucial decisions of JFM are taken and who influences the decisions taken in the executive meetings?

While existing literature has primarily focused only on the „attendance of meetings or membership in organizations as indicators of participation“, this doesn't guarantee that the locals will have a influencing power over the decisions taken in the meetings and this in turn undermines the success of JFM by declining the rights of empowerment for the marginalized groups. (Behera and Engel 2005)

a)SOCIO-ECONOMIC INDICATORS

These indicators decide the extent of households participation in the JFM decisions making process. In any community, there is always a heterogeneous mix of castes, cultures, religions, income levels etc. Since India is for long known for its age old caste divide, unequal distribution of wealth, gender bias and social hierarchies in the form of religion therefore it is imperative to introduce policy implication which help empower the vulnerable populations by involving them in the decision making and thereby improving their livelihood. (Behera and Engel 2005).

On the basis of a study carried out across Indian states of Bihar, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh to examine the factors affecting participation, social indicators were the most contributing factors to the analysis of participation levels than economic indicators. It was also found that the voluntary participation of people is driven by the level of dependency on forests and good forest quality. Behera also mentions about a study carried out by Maskey et al on the community forest management in Nepal where socio economic parameters and the benefits derived from the forests influenced the participation levels in the management activities. (V Maskey June 2003) (Behera and Engel 2005)

Therefore, it can be concluded that in order to ensure successful implementation of JFM ,there must be an equal participation rate by all levels of the communities irrespective of the social and economic profiles so that they too can extract the benefits from the forest resources.

b)BEHAVIOUR OF GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS/ FOREST DEPARTMENT WITHTHE LOCAL COMMUNITY

It has been observed that only ensuring the attendance of the locals in the decision making procedures taken up in the executive member committee under JFM does not guarantee that participation levels would beenhanced. There are many accompanying ways to induce local community people into participation by taking care of their livelihood needs and fundamental rights. (Behera and Engel 2005). So apart from attendance issues, how the government agency and institution assigned to implement the JFM in acommunity interacts with the local population ie how they deal with their issues of concern is also a key factor that affects the decisions of the people to participate more in the forest management activities. This reasoncould be linked with the basic fundamental that JFM is co-management practice between the FD and the local community incorporating sharing of benefits and revenue (Behera and Engel 2005)(Vira 1999)(Arora 1994)

c)ALLOCATION OF PARTICIPATORY LABOUR UNDER JFM

Three modes for allocation of participatory labour by villagers in the community can be summarized for successful implementation of JFM. (Sarkar and Datta 2010)

1. Investment of labour in forest guarding , monitoring and protection activities

2. Gathering of non- timber forest products like fuel, fodder, food from larger patches of the forest land in tandem with the constraints imposed on nearby areas of land under JFM rules.
3. Regeneration and plantation of forest lands associated with long term economic benefits can be practiced with participatory labour activities.

Often, villagers deal with the challenges in terms of proper allocation of their labour hours between agricultural work and forest participation activities. This is due to the low level of agricultural land holdings, seasonal benefits from agricultural outputs which are for their own consumption mainly. But its important to note that forest participation activities can majorly sustain their livelihood. So, it was imperative to build a framework where villager can allocate his optimal labour hours between agriculture activity and forest participation activity. Using the results from the theoretical model, a set of desirable quality and quantity determinants of participation were found and the degree of their influence on the participation was calculated as shown in table2.

Table2: Desirable quantity/ quality determinants of a participation

Determinants	Qualitative/quantitative requirements influencing high degree of participation
Size of agricultural land holding	Low
Quality of agricultural land	Poor
Quality of irrigated land	Low
Quality of forest land	High
Leadership in the village	High
Family size	Large
Employment opportunity	Low
Extent of forest dependence	High
Satisfaction about the work of F.D	High
Perception of threat of eviction	Low

Source: (Sarkar and Datta 2010)

Further these determinants and their respective degree of influence on participation was calculated for forest dwellers in each of the surveyed villages whose perceptive and possession feature was classified as low/medium/high corresponding to each determinant. This forms a determinant index reflecting the efficacy of JFM in terms of participatory intensity along with the interaction of the aforementioned socio-economic and cultural indicators. (Sarkar and Datta 2010)

Apart from understanding the key indicators of participation, we must also pay attention to the reasons given for involving local communities. According to (Lele 2014) there are different versions of participation under different normative judgements so we need a notion of why to invoke the participation as well-

1. Local need and sustainability goals can be met conveniently as locals understand each other's requirements given their common ecological knowledge. Also, division of responsibility to the locals gives them a sense of entitlement and ownership.
2. Individuals have a fundamental right to self-governance and optimally manage their resources on their own in

their environment.

3. Cost effective and efficient- the regulation and monitoring activities become easier in implementation as the resources are being used by the local forest users. This regulates the cases of free ridership because the resources are being managed collectively the community and the state agency

X. CONCLUSION

Participation among the community members around the forests in the protection, conservation of forest resources is one of the key principles guiding the successful outcome of JFM. This provides direction to economic benefits for not just the state agency established by the government but also for the community by providing them with a sustained livelihood and abundant employment opportunities. Also, inclusion of the community population into the establishment of JFM in a region ensures equal distribution of benefits from the regeneration activities, empowerment of the marginalised sections of the society like women and poor, landless labourers. We also observed the household participation level in the JFM related meetings and found that merely attending the meetings does not determine the level of participation but the degree of influence they can exert on the decision making process under JFM is also a determining factor. Apart from this, socio-economic indicators such as caste, culture, religions, wealth endowment, gender have been considered another important determinants and discussed extensively by various authors. Primarily, because the presence of these factors lead to the inadvertent dominance by the richer and powerful elites making the voices of concern raised by the weaker and vulnerable locals go unheard and lowering their influence on any decision making processes. So, JFM needs to heed to the empowerment and developmental issues of the marginalised groups and channelize a better communication plan for the institutional agency under JFM so as to devolve more powers and rights to the locals and invoke them for a genuine participation.

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