

TIME TO THINK BEYOND JOINT FOREST MANAGEMENT

Himansu Kumar Mandal

Dept. of History, Sabang S.K. Mahavidyalaya

E-Mail : himansukumar1972@gmail.com

Abstract

Protection and regeneration of India's vast forest land needs a more democratic and multi-layered approach beyond JFM. While the government was trying to address the question of people's participation in forest management through JFM, the Supreme Court of India suddenly got involved in recent past through 'Godavarman case'. Neither JFM nor the Supreme Court intervention recognized an issue that precedes any discussion of forest governance: people cannot properly use or manage forests, if there right to live in and cultivate adjunct land. So it is the time to think beyond JFM.

Key words: JFM, Managed forest, Godavarman case, FRA

Background

The idea of Joint Forest Management (JFM) was taken on an experiment in Arabari in West Bengal, and suggested that sharing the yield from regenerated forests would be the way to get communities involved in forest management i.e. forest protection and regeneration. Initially, JFM was aided and supported by many international agencies and civil organizations, as it seemed to make a shift towards pro-people forest governance. Today, JFM covers all states and nearly one lakh communities involved in more than 22 million hectares of forest land. The higher authority claims that the JFM is a very successful attempt by government department to genuinely involve the people in the management of re-success.

For the foresters, JFM is simply a cheaper way of doing forest protection, or a way to get local people to cooperate in achieving the wanting of forest department, which is to produce commercially valuable wood or to deal with errant encroachers from the village, and to garner large foreign funds which prefer to support seemingly 'participatory forest management' initiatives. These objectives have been largely achieved.

Analysis

After all, JFM was a way of decentralization of decision making about forest by the FD and local communities towards sustainable development. There is the twist of the story. JFM is 'Joint' management practice meant control by the FD through its official who was always the secretary of the JFMCs, who controlled the flow of funds, the decisions regarding planting and harvesting, and other aspects. JFM has often meant managing only small part of the forest area used by villagers living other part unmanaged. And it usually does not change the rights to the harvest

and sell of minor forest produce. And as JFMCs are set up under ‘programmes’ and not by law, they have no security of tenure and seem to depend more on the availability of external funding.

As a result, possibly most JFMCs are no longer existing or functioning. Moreover were they are functioning ‘successfully’, they are implementing timber-focused forestry, thereby often hurting the poorer groups by denying them grazing or firewood. The setting up of district level Forest development Agencies and calling them ‘federations of JFMCs’, when they are chaired and controlled by foresters, has further highlighted the absence of any radical democratic thinking underpinning JFM. Thus, rather than clarifying rights of local communities and setting up democratic institutions to exercise those rights, the FDs have sought to micro-manage and so called participatory process to suit their own objectives.

While the government was trying to address the question of people’s participation in forest management through JFM, the Supreme Court of India suddenly got involved in recent past through ‘Godavarman case’. Driven by concerns about rampant and unregulated logging and conversion of forest in the north east, an activist Court passed a series of orders starting in 1996, whereby the Forest Conservation Act was held to be applicable even to lands that were not legally forest but were physically forested there by requiring central clearance.

Neither JFM nor the Supreme Court intervention recognized an issue that precedes any discussion of forest governance: people cannot properly use or manage forests, if there right to live in and cultivate adjunct land in the jeopardy. The Forest Right Act 2006 is a landmark. It has a detailed set of definitions and process guidelines, the FRA seeks to once and for all settle the habitat and cultivation rights of forest dwellers and it goes beyond the question of land rights of forest use and management to the local community, grants them a say in forest conservation, and tries to outline a more rational and fair procedure for identification of wildlife conservation areas and reduction or removal of people presence from them.

The report of MOEF-MoTA joint committee on the FRA shows the only provision of the FRA that have been implemented widely are those relating to granting land rights. Community rights to forest use and management have been claimed and granted in very few locations. While the FD like to claim that is because communities are stratified with JFM and do not see the need for the FRA, the fact is that most communities do not know these provisions in the FRA, and with the foresters bitterly opposed to such devolution of powers and to Act in general, most communities, are in no position to assert their claims.

Concluding Remarks

No doubt the FRA has limitations like land rights, forest management rights, forest conservation and wildlife conservation. But it is the time this ‘either or’ thinking, which option are seen in terms of either State management or community management is replaced with a more nuanced approach.

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