



Present challenges in Joint Forest Management in India: A review

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ABSTRACT

Joint forest management (JFM) in India is an initiative where people's participation in forest management and resource utilization has been undertaken for last 3 decades. The policy frameworks laid in the late 1980s and the follow ups in policy matters were aimed at paving way for a mutual partnership between the government or the forest department and the local communities for a mutually beneficial forest management. Today despite its popularity and larger advantages, JFM in India is at disadvantage from a varied number of factors ranging from governance and policy challenges to socio economic problems in local communities. If these challenges are properly understood and addressed, people participation is still a sharp tool for efficient forest management and sustainable resource utilization. A systematic understanding and evaluation of these problems and evolution of adequate solutions can make JFM an effective tool in climate change mitigation and biodiversity conservation by acting as a linchpin for REDD+ initiatives.

Key words: Forest policy, forestry, joint forest management, participatory forest management, rural participation

INTRODUCTION

India has been one of the pioneers in taking up local participation in management of forest resources. This was brought by a paradigm shift in the forest management policies which were brought up in the late 1980s. The Indian National Forest Policies (NFP, 1988) strategy was, both the recognition of failure in the exclusionary tendencies of past policies and the need to reverse its effects through an advanced people centric approach (Shylendra, 2015). The NFP of 1988 stated that the holders of customary rights and concessions in forest should be motivated to identify themselves with the protection and development of forest from which they derive benefits. Post the National Forest Policy, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (now the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change), Government of India (GoI), gave

guidelines in 1990 advising the states to initiate JFM activities by involving the local community and forming committees for management of degraded forest lands (Dhanapal, 2019). With a decade long review of the program, in February of the year 2000 and in 2002, GoI issued new JFM guidelines to include good forest area under JFM management and provide legal back up to the Forest Management Committees. 2015 data shows that there are 1,18,213 JFM committees in India, covering 2,29,38,814 ha of land area and supporting 1,45,18,219 families (FRI, 2015). Almost all major states in India have passed enabling resolutions to implement what is now popularly called the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programmes. These programs are likely to be the focus of future forest development projects funded by governments and donor agencies (Saxena, 1997). Participatory or

Joint Forest Management programs are so designed to accommodate representation from the poor and marginalised as well as the rural women. Women's memberships are fixed at 50% in the general body and 33% in the executive committee of FPCs (Nair, 2017). Benefit sharing in JFM activities are designed in a way that community is entitled to get 100% from NTFP and the revenue share from timber sale going to the local community vary from 25 to 75% between states (Sarker, 2009). With the implementation of JFM, GoI has made its attempt to create a sense of ownership among the local communities which encourages them to conserve the resources. India has some 200,000 forest fringe villages inhabiting a human population of over 275 million people (Nair, 2017). The lives and day to day activities of these people are dependant on and interlinked with their surrounding forests. Through JFM, attempts have been and are being made for providing better income and social upliftment of rural poor. Currently, JFM takes over 29.8% of forest area of the country (MMoE and CC, 2018).

As we have reached in time, three decades with the application of JFM, it is imperative that we look at the challenges that this celebrated program faces today, its shortcomings including institutional gaps, the heterogeneity in policy between states, lack of landscape level planning, problems in providing equal representation to the socially marginalised etc and the future prospects for its development in the eve of climate action through REDD+ strategies which involves a participatory approach of landscape level planning and management .

CHALLENGES FACED BY JFM

The three decade old JFM program is designed so as to have an amicable and mutually beneficial relationship between the forest departments and local people, but often times the relationship fails to be a positive one which results in poor or reduced local participation in such programmes (Paul and Chakrabarti, 2011). Relationship between the two key partners is often

weak due to the partnership being heavily loaded in favour of Forest Department (Nair, 2017). This is evident especially in the case of benefit sharing in JFM programs. In the case of revenue from non-timber forest produce (NTFP), though the communities are entitled to the whole 100% share, it is seldom profitable or satisfactory for them as they are limited to mere collectors of NTFP and the department is the seller (Sarker, 2009). In many states, in the case of revenue from sale of timber resources, the share of the fixed per cent of income is calculated on the net revenue which is calculated after deducting all the expenses incurred by the department, and not on the gross income actually received (Sarker and Das, 2008; Government of Madhya Pradesh, 2015; Government of West Bengal, 2016).

HETEROGENEITY IN JFM

Another issue with the management of JFM groups arise when the community group is heterogeneous, when people of different ethnic and socio economic groups fall into the forest management committees, management becomes difficult as equitable benefit sharing tends to be non-equitable (Nair, 2017). Internal issues within department on management arises when there are different opinions within the officials about the program, the best example for this would be the case wherein certain officials view the JFM as a way to mobilize labor force. Institutional rigidities especially from the side of department in official procedures is another cause of concern on the effectiveness of joint forest management (Dhanapal, 2019).

Yet another issue relating to the governance challenges of JFM is the legal status of JFM bodies. Though there are provisions for registration of JFM committees, complexities arise in the functional and legal roles of the committees and the Gram Sabha (Murali et al., 2003). Problems also arise in different states where there are complexities in classification of land despite the Indian Forest Act 1927 (Nair, 2017).

INSTITUTIONAL GAPS IN JFM PROGRAMS

One of the most prominent and early criticisms of JFM is that it is similar to any top down approach where there is an asymmetric power relationships between the state functionaries and the people (Pathan et al., 2001; Sundar, 2000). This top-down approach often hinders the true sense of decentralization of forest management aimed through JFM approach. The participation in JFM is often criticized as rather a 'puppetish' act without the true sense of 'participation' (Ghate, 2008). The lack of legal status of FPCs makes JFM an institution of poor legal footwork, failing to provide guaranty to the rights (Upadhyay, 2003). Despite these criticisms, there are studies which have found JFM to be a model approach for increasing rural income (Shylendra, 2002; Tiwary, 2005).

There exist several institutional gaps in the implementation of JFM programs. The National Afforestation and Eco- development Board (NAEB) established in 1992, is mandated to perform the role of monitoring and evaluation at the national level of all afforestation programs. Currently over the years, NAEB has been functioning mainly on recommending the release of funds under NAP (National Afforestation Program) scheme after assessing proposed afforestation plans submitted by state Forest Development Agencies. A total of 79.43 crores were released under National Afforestation Program (NAP) and Green India Mission (GIM) from 2016-17 to 2018-19 (MOEF, 2019). Despite of this being done, there is no consolidated report available on monitoring and evaluation of the NAP projects for their performance. The lack of technical capacity, monitoring or supervision and reporting, and institutional weaknesses could hurt India's preparedness for REDD+ and could also hamper achieving the Indented Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) targets under the Paris Agreement (Dhanapal, 2019).

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN AND ETHNIC GROUPS

The implementation of JFM has been done in a way that it ensures the participation of women and ethnic minority groups in it. The reservations

of seats for women in FMCs have played its role in getting women's participation into social activities. But often in many states the participation of women rarely goes beyond these reserved seats and their participation in meetings is lower compared to men which is due to their lower confidence to participate in the public fora (Elias, 2010). In Gujarat and West Bengal (WB), only one-third of the membership positions (one out of every three seats) are reserved for women and tribespeople (Nandigama, 2020) or participatory forest management. In Gujarat, Sarin (1995) reported that women were often unaware of their positions and memberships due to the strongly prevalent patriarchy. Though the one third reservation is aimed to uplift women and ethnic communities, in everyday practices, upper caste men and community elders called the shots both inside and outside the FPC (Nandigama, 2020). Whereas in Andhra Pradesh (AP), this ratio of reservation is 50%. Also, in AP, the additional clause dictating that either the president or vice president of the Forest Protection Committee (FPC) should be a woman has given space for the participation of women in high level decision making (GO Ms. No. 13, 12.02.2002, Govt. of Andhra Pradesh). This has paved way for an increased participation of women in all levels of JFM. AP can thus be regarded as the state with most gender inclusive JFM Policy. Ethnic exclusions are a major challenge JFM activity in many states are experiencing. Even though JFM is aimed at their upliftment, due to factors like social stigmas and physical isolation, the participation of ethnic minorities in JFM is hindered in states like Karnataka and Maharashtra (Elias, 2010). Those men who are daily laborers tend to prefer a day's work than JFM activities, also lack of awareness and social insecurities force them away from JFM.

In the present scenario, globally the concerns over infringement of forest dweller rights and land ownerships is a major point of concern in REDD+ debates (Larson et al., 2013). Inconsistency in carbon tenure and land rights (Vergara-Asenjo et al., 2017) and exclusion of community rights of tribals (Hiraldo and Tanner, 2011; Luttrell et al., 2013) have caused problems in REDD+ implementation and success.

If stakeholders do not perceive the benefit sharing as fair, the legitimacy of REDD+, and support for the mechanism, it will be weakened. In this paper Luttrell et al. (2013), drawing on data from CIFOR's Global Comparative Study on REDD+, analyzing national policy processes in 6 countries and the expected benefit-sharing arrangements in 21 REDD+ project sites, the major rationales that could be put forward the processes associated with benefit sharing were identified. These included ideas ranging from actual carbon emission reduction to the reduction in cost for emission reduction. There were rationales which dealt with providing a legal right to the benefit received or making steps for poverty reduction or rewarding systems of PES (payment for ecosystem services) model.

It can be deduced that with such a wide distribution of ideologies associated with REDD+ programs, there should be a clear definition on what the term "benefit" represents in each of the community associated programs that are taken up. If given the right push with proper policy frameworks, JFM will be the best tool at our disposal for REDD+ programs and achieving our NDC targets.

JFM should act as a strong framework upon which REDD+ can be implemented successfully in India, for this there should be a strong coalition of all the stakeholders involved in sustainable local forest management.

LANDSCAPE APPROACH IN JFM

A landscape approach was proposed by the Green India Mission for developing additional forests that could also provide other co benefits to the local communities. The Mission targets at improved ecosystem services, including biodiversity, hydrological services and carbon sequestration from an estimated 10 m ha of forest/non-forest lands and increased forest-based livelihood income for about 3 million households living in and around the forests (GOI, 2014). However, many states are yet to identify landscape-level plans for afforestation and JFM plans, and at the national level both the Green India Mission and NAP have not identified priority landscapes and

areas for JFM. Though implemented as a linchpin for India's REDD+ initiatives, the GIM lacked an institutionalized decentralized investment and benefit sharing mechanism restricting its move toward synergistic and locally centred governance (Vijge and Gupta, 2014). The Forest Rights Act and the Biological Diversity Act have not supported well the idea of JFM despite their huge potential for reshaping the forest and forestry activities. The provisions of these acts if implemented in right methods can make immense additions to improving biodiversity, socio economic status of the forest depended communities and the forest wealth (Dhanapal, 2019).

DISCUSSION

When JFM is reaching three decades of its implementation we should address the issues on challenges in JFM on stakeholder engagement, micro planning, sustainable harvest and marketing of timber and NTFP and benefit sharing with local communities. Institutional weaknesses and gaps in legal provisions are major challenges in JFM. To address these, landscape level planning and cooperation should be taken up in designing JFM activities, this will help in better conservation of biodiversity and forest health. Measures should be taken to foster better cooperation between the forest department and local stakeholders by reducing the rigidity of laws which are currently in favour of the former. To ensure a wider reach and better implementation, JFM activities should be encouraged through Green India Mission and NAP and the sanctioned projects should be subjected to evaluation and monitoring their success. Different sources of investments should be ensured from public and private funding, Payment for Ecosystem Services model can be explored as a JFM programme in areas facing threat of high human pressure. Better technical capacity, monitoring and reporting, could also help in achieving the INDC targets under the Paris Agreement. JFM still holds the potential to uplift India's forest dependent communities, the policies and planning should change with the need of time for utilizing this potential.

JFM : A WAY FORWARD

Good forest governance should aim to promote the judicious and sustainable management of resources, to guarantee continued existence of ongoing ecological processes, simultaneously creating economic and social benefits (Lammerts van Bueren, 2015; Maraseni et al., 2019). There are studies which show better biomass accrual in JFM managed forests compared to non JFM management (Murali et al., 2002). Proving the potential of JFM in acting as an important tool in meeting climate change mitigation attempts through carbon sequestration in tree biomass. Aply the REDD+ strategy of India stresses on JFM as an important instrument that will have play in reducing desertification and forest degradation (MoEF and CC, 2018). Community management of forests creates a sustainable relationship between the forest and people and thereby plays a role in conserving the endemic biodiversity and ecosystem health (Banerjee, 2019).

Presently there are around 1,73,000 forest fringe villages in the country (MoEF, 2006), depending on forests for various resources, energy, nutrition, fodder, grazing, construction material, NTFP, traditional medicines, etc. furthermore more than 25% of the population depend on forest for direct and indirect benefits (Singh and Kewat, 2021). With such high rate of forest dependency, India needs proper planning and implementation for achieving REDD+ target of reduced forest degradation. This can be made possible only through value-addition of the forest produce, increasing awareness and creation of alternate sources. This can be made possible through landscape approaches in participatory forest management.

The primary change to be incorporated into future JFM activities is that of landscape level planning. IUCN has recognised landscape level planning and cooperation between different stakeholders as the key to achieve sustainable forest management through the model forests approach (IUCN, 2020). An example of landscape level planning in community managed forest is that of Balkhila Model Forest in the state of Uttarakhand managed under National Mission on

Himalayan Studies (NMHS) of the Government of India (IUCN, 2020). Landscapes that are facing high degradation, forest fragmentation and higher forest dependency could be prioritized for PFM when brought under landscape level management, our forests can be made more adaptable and climate resilient (Dhanapal, 2019). Along with this, the objective of JFM should be to maintain healthy forests and improve degraded forests with restoration practices and to improve biodiversity and other ecosystem services to support livelihood of forest dependent communities. This is very essential given India's biodiversity challenges and to achieve mitigation targets like that of INDC. JFM models should explore potential revenue generating options like taking up plantation in wastelands, especially energy plantation options, promoting sustainable production and marketing of NTFP that can be shared with the communities and developing appropriate value chains and market for timber, bamboo and other NTFPs. JFM will have to evolve as a system where local communities take a higher or complete responsibility for management of the local forests as in FRA (2006).

Pilot projects should aim at attracting investments from private sector particularly for the management of forests in and around industrial and urban areas in India. For financing JFM, available monetary resources like REDD + CAMPA (Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority) can be utilized (Nair, 2017) also the chances of availing private investments should be explored in addition to GIM/NAP. Payment of Ecosystem Services (PES) models can be adopted to finance JFM in areas with human pressure on forests.

Measures like providing better awareness and education to lower income groups and creating a sense of ownership in the community will help in attaining a better participation in JFM activities (Elias, 2010). The forest right act if implemented in the right sense can cater to these needs. Other than monetary benefits, other incentives that JFM can provide like a larger and better market for NTFPs available as a group can attract local participation in JFM. With scientific forest management having

immense potential to be a major player in our efforts to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss, JFM has a greater role to play than ever in the past. If properly implemented with a landscape level approach, a combination of scientific approach and rural participation together will pave the achievement of India's pledged contributions to the global efforts in climate change mitigation.

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