

## Participatory Forest Management: Collective Action Under Three Different Institutional Regimes

**Community forestry in India is characterized broadly by the presence of three different types of institutional structures aimed at promoting common property regimes – self-initiated efforts, NGO-promoted efforts and the government’s Joint Forest Management (JFM) program. However, is there one ‘best’ model that can sustain itself and realize the goals of economic and ecological security? A SANDEE study tries to examine the role of different institutional structures in the context of forest management.**

**The study reveals clearly that there is no single ‘best’ governance system that can ensure sustainable forest management. Self-initiated and NGO-promoted efforts reflect an improved understanding and awareness of institutional rules - local initiative’s leads to better acceptance and compliance. However, problems emerging from the absence of well-defined revenue boundaries, and inter-community socio-economic divisions are better tackled with State support. Technical and financial help from the State is another key factor that contributes to sustainability. The study recommends a mix of formal centralized strategies that can support informal decentralized approaches to forest management.**

**Rucha Ghate** examines the initiation and implementation of forest management in the villages of Dulegaon, Ranvahi and Markegaon in Gadchiroli district in Maharashtra. The study is a qualitative analysis of the factors that contribute to institutional sustainability.

### COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN INDIA

Forest dependent communities in India have historically co-existed with forests by designing vigilant rules about its use. Examples abound of well-developed community forestry strategies that evolved prior to and post-independence. While some of these institutional mechanisms are self-initiated and others have been promoted by external NGOs, they all chiefly aim at ecological and economic security through collective action. Nonetheless, British rulers and thereafter free India’s forest policies, treated tribals and forest communities as ‘intruders’ rather than ‘user-owners’ of forests.

Post-independence, forestry reforms initially focused on commercial forestry. However, the National Forest Policy of 1988 changed the face of Indian forestry. This policy resulted in the development of Joint Forest Management (JFM), a state sponsored program where the forest department sought the ‘involvement of village communities and voluntary agencies in the regeneration of degraded forests.’ Efforts to share responsibilities and benefits related to managing forests resource with local communities spread rapidly with nearly all the Indian states adopting JFM as a forest management strategy. JFM has since evolved considerably. Guidelines issued in February 2000 have increased legal support for JFM committees, extended JFM into rich forests, promoted women’s participation, conflict resolution and preparation of micro-plans, and extended official recognition to self-initiated forest protection groups.



## JFM STRUCTURE IN THE THREE VILLAGES

All three villages share some common governance mechanisms related to forests. This is partly because they all presently fall under the government's JFM program.

Each community group is comprised of a general committee made up of one male and female member from every household, and, an executive committee formed out of the former with 33 percent female members. General body meetings are held once a month, at which decisions are made related to daily wages for plantation work, punishments and fines related to infractions, local disputes etc.

The Forest Protection Committee (the general committee) in each of the villages is responsible for:

- Patrolling forests (done voluntarily by villagers) to fend off poachers and loggers from neighboring villages.
- Formulating decisions and rules relating to harvesting and distribution of forest produce (including determination of the quantity of forest produce that can be harvested).
- Monitoring conformance to rules and sanctioning of rule breakers.
- Interacting with authorities from the Forest Department.
- Distribution of revenues from contract work to villagers.

The Forest Department has responsibilities that include:

- Maintenance of all accounts and records by an official who is the ex-official secretary
- Monitoring of forest product collection and use by the villagers.
- Imposition and collection of fines for infractions by outsiders.
- Rights to dissolve the FPC if not satisfied with the committees activities.

Under the World Bank sponsored JFM program each village received Rs 50,000 as an incentive to join JFM. The villages used this money to set up community-level amenities (community halls, infrastructure etc.). Funds were also obtained from voluntary contributions and fines.

In India, many forest dwelling communities shared the responsibility of resource management much before the state formally invited them to become stakeholders through its Joint Forest Management Program. Rucha Ghate focuses on the evolution of proto-typical institutional structures in three villages that represent self-initiated, NGO-supported and government sponsored community forestry programs and compares the strengths and weaknesses of each institution. Using 'process analyses,' she draws some general lessons for forest governance. The communities studied, Deulgoan, Ranvahi and Markegoan, are forest dependent communities that are located in the midst of protected and reserved forests. They are situated in Gadchiroli District in Maharashtra, which is the most forested district in the state.

## SELF-INITIATED EFFORT: DEULGAON

In 1988, an important land survey was undertaken in Gadchiroli, which demarcated boundaries between villages. This survey indirectly empowered the village community in Deulgoan to assess and lay claim over the forests within its own revenue boundaries. Villagers took informal steps to protect forests within their borders. In 1989, the village adopted rules restricting its own usage of forest produce and initiated voluntary actions, such as patrolling, to protect forests from outsiders. Over the next ten years, community forestry evolved into a well-accepted part of rural life in this village. However, acknowledging constraints related to funding and lack of technical know-how on scientific forest management, villagers decided to interact with officials from the Forest Department (FD). Thus, in 1998, the self-initiated Village Forest Protection Committee became part of JFM.

## BENEFITS

- Villagers have the right to harvest non-timber produce.
- An 85 hectare plantation of species desired by villagers has been planted.
- Rules being self-made, they are clearly understood by the villagers.
- The proceeds from timber sales are to be equally shared between villagers and the FD.

## WEAKNESSES

- Communication and coordination between the village and the FD is poor. Poachers from neighboring villages are dealt with by the FD without consultation or sharing of penalties with Deulgaon.
- Revenue boundaries continue to remain ambiguous leading to disputes.
- There is no system of auditing community forestry related financial records.
- Villagers have lost autonomy of decision-making beyond decisions related to patrolling and harvesting/distribution of forest produce.
- Female role and participation in decision-making is low .



### NGO-PROMOTED EFFORT: RANVAHI

In Ranvahi, since 1995, an NGO called Amhi Amchya Arogya Sathi had helped create self-help groups that addressed a variety of social problems. With the guidance of this NGO, given local dependence on increasingly scarce forests resources, Ranvahi decided to become a JFM village. Continued NGO support resulted in the village community disciplining its usage of forest produce, developing its own rule structure, and even protecting forests from neighboring villagers. In 1998, a Forest Protection Committee (FPC) made up of a male and female member from every household was established. The FPC was formally registered under JFM in 2001.

#### BENEFITS

- Flexible rules that are perceived as fair and legitimate.
- Grazing is permitted freely except for the 60 hectare plantation area set up under JFM.
- Poachers from outside are dealt with by the forest office and fines imposed are shared with the Ranvahi association.
- Improved awareness on rights, responsibilities and knowledge systems.
- Confident dealings of the community with the FD; the community has even managed to secure income-generating activities such as forest nurseries with buy-back guarantees from the FD.
- More formal and equitable structures in place allowing for greater participation by women.

#### WEAKNESSES

- Growing burden of dependence of the community on the NGO.



- NGO approach of placating all groups in the village leads to poor adherence to and implementation of rules in the absence of strong sanctions.

### JFM PROGRAM: MARKEGAON

Markegaon is a sparsely populated tribal village with abundant forests and forest produce. Thus, unlike the other two communities, there were only a few people in Markegaon who felt that forests could not cope with the pressure exerted on its resources by population increases in surrounding villages. There were also additional problems of conflicts with intruders over harvesting forest produce and the presence of a corrupt Forest Guard. However, partly as a result of a demonstration effect caused by a neighboring village which was benefiting from JFM, and partly because of the perseverance of an individual leader, Chatur Halami, Markegaon created a forest protection committee in 1997. This Forest Association was registered with the forest department in 2000.

#### BENEFITS

- Forest related work or contract employment serve as a source of income.

- Open grazing is allowed for three-fourths of the year except in the plantation area.
- Funds are made available for developmental work by the forest authorities.
- Legal backing to the villagers' collective action has meant that boundary earmarking is clear and intruders can be legally tackled.

#### WEAKNESSES

- Rules and mission objectives are largely taken from the Government of India Forest policy of 1988 and the World Bank funded Government of Maharashtra JFM program. Hence, community has limited understanding of what the rules and regulations are.
- FD plays no role in framing of rules, fixing of penalties or dealing with infractions. However, community makes few routine decisions without seeking the approval of the FD, leading to delays and inaction.
- Meetings of the Association are rarely attended by any representative of the FD or even by the Forest Guard. Consequently, the meetings are irregular.
- Penalties are not strictly imposed.



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## THE ROAD AHEAD

While there is no 'best' model among the three representative cases studied, there are lessons that can be learnt from each. For example, local leadership emerges as an important factor contributing to institutional change in all three cases. A current common problem is the lack of coordination between neighboring villages. In all three cases, each village community is trying to protect its own forests, but without equitable access to forests across all villages, sustainable forest management is unlikely to succeed.

Self-initiated efforts appear to lead to better compliance of rules and regulations. However, such endogenous institutions are not always inclusive and cohesive. Economic and social divisions have often resulted in participation that is less than 'equal' and distribution that is not 'equitable'. Thus, state-backed rules and regulations are important from this perspective. NGO support seems to make the understanding of social and non-technical aspects of resource management easier. But, technical and financial problems can best be addressed only with government assistance. Further, in the absence of tenure and legal backing to resolve disputes and infractions, sustainability of self-initiated and NGO-promoted efforts will always be problematic.

The Joint Forest Management program is essential to managing India's forests; however the freedom to formulate internal rules should be the domain of village communities. While JFM introduces techniques for improving resource use and provides robust financial backing, it also straight jackets communities by promoting a uniform approach. Clearly, 'local initiative' is important in establishing new institutions and for sustaining interest in activities. Geographical variations, socio-economic inequalities and cultural differences make a cookie-cutter approach less feasible in the long-run. Thus, while the state reduces its control over forests, it must allow for stronger tenure rights to village communities.

Forest management in India will continue to be an immense challenge in the years to come. A simplistic 'either'/'or' choice between state-sponsored and non-state institutions does not make for sustainable processes. The need is for complex multi-level arrangements where formal centralized and informal decentralized strategies yield sustainable and inclusive results.

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