

8.6 Joint Forest Management

8.6.1 Forestry in West Bengal

Forestry has been one of the most contested sectors of development, with its twin objects of production for commerce and conservation for protecting wildlife. The colonial forest administration resolved the apparent contradiction between these two objects by developing a 'scientific forestry' that sought to regulate timber production in an efficient and systematic manner, while maintaining a stock for 'public welfare'. While the production aspect directly served the agenda of economic development, the conservation objective of scientific forestry conformed to the civilizing mission of colonial rule and engendered progress. Both these objectives have been maintained in the post-colonial forestry in the South as a development regime. "More than agriculture, industry, and other key sectors of the economy, forestry in India, as was the case in many other European colonies in the nineteenth century, witnessed the most sustained efforts by both colonial and subsequent nationalist governments to establish direct control over an important natural resource" (Sivaramakrishnan 1999: 274). This control both symbolized and systematized the governmentality of the new state that emerged as the legitimate successor to the colonial ruler. This control was necessary both to establish the new government's authority over all sectors of public life and resources, and to ensure unhindered supply of materials to industry and commerce for development, which had been denied to the colony.

8.6.2 The Rationale of Forestry Prior to JFM

Soon after Independence, the rising demand of rapid industrialization mounted pressure on the forests. The demand seemed to exceed the supply of forest products from the stock maintained and protected by the state as 'protected' and 'reserved' forests. With an increasing pace of clear-felling (with shorter rotations) to meet industrial demands, India's forest cover rapidly decimated after the independence. Soon private and 'Unclassed' private forests were brought under State Working Plans. Large private forests, originally composed of multiple species of fruit trees, were brought in the early 1950s under Forest Working Plans. Owners of private forests were now required to submit such plans to be approved by the State forest department (FD), which aimed to enhance timber yield from these forest stands. The Zamindari Abolition Act of 1951, followed by Private Forests (Acquisition) Act and Estate Acquisition Act of 1953 in West Bengal had vested ownership of all private forests in State FD. This extension of state control of the forest patches that had remained outside the state's administrative jurisdiction served three purposes. First, it ensured supply of an additional quantity of forest products to feed industry and commerce. Second, it saved much of the reserved forests from being worked and thus maintained the conservation objective of modern scientific forestry. Third, by abolishing the *zamindari* ownership of large private forests, it established a more pervasive state control over natural resources. However, the last *zamindars* and their inheritors scrambled for the last vestiges of profit from their estates on the eve of vesting them in government, and rapidly exhausted their private forests by putting them on auction (Deb and Malhotra 1993; Malhotra and Deb 1998).

After cycles of harvesting and clear-felling by contractors, the forests soon degenerated into low-diversity stands. Villagers' gathering of brushwood and coppices from the denuded forests further degraded the forests. Notwithstanding several forest regulations and departmental policing, cases of wood theft accelerated in the post-independence decades. Local villagers, denied access to the forest resources through various colonial forest laws, had already considered state forests as the property of the enemy. After independence they felt free to exploit the 'free' state property which they saw was being plundered by contractors. The colonial land use policy had estranged local communities from the traditional resource management ethos and mechanisms, and the diaspora of independence from colonial rule in many areas corroded the forest department's legitimacy – why should the forest

officials, who are no longer British government employees, keep national resources out of access to the country's own people? All forests thus became victims of the Hardinian tragedy of open access resources.

With rapid clear-felling of forests for industries and emphasis on monocultures of commercial species, the species diversity of forests became emaciated. Commercial monocultures replacing the natural mix of species on which forest-fringe villagers depend for meeting their subsistence needs is a legacy of colonial forestry, which had prompted the Gond to consider hell as "miles and miles of forest without any *mahua* trees" (Elwin 1958: 13), *mahua* (*Bassia latifolia*) being a tree whose leaves, roots, flowers, fruits and seeds – are all useful. The silvicultural practice of monoculture and selection felling had cut down the availability of various forest products valuable to local village economies and cultures. It also proved inadequate in the 1950s to meet the growing demand of forest-based industries. To save the industry, post-independence forestry further intensified monoculture.

The Third Five Year Plan (1962-67) drove forestry into the rigmarole of economic plantation. In the second year of the Plan, plantation of 'quick-growing species' (QGS) like *Eucalyptus* spp., *Acacia auriculiformes*, *Casuarina equisetifolia*, etc. began all over the country with World Bank support. By the 1960s, trials with *Eucalyptus tereticornis* on lateritic soils were successful, and *Acacia auriculiformes* was found to thrive well on a wide range of soil (Malhotra and Deb 1998). This QGS plantation program, consisting of a drive for monoculture plantation of these exotics, essentially increased production of wood for paper, match and synthetic fiber industry. With the enormous scale of QGS plantations, India retained its position of a major global exporter of pulpwood.

The Fourth Five Year Plan launched an aggressive campaign for greening the country with exotic QGS in the name of Social Forestry, which provided incentive to large-scale industries to clearfelled ecologically rich forest areas and common property lands for commercial plantations. Social Forestry, supported by the World Bank, USAID, ODA and other donor agencies, was promoted not only around farm areas but also along roads, canals, water bodies, railway lines, village wastes and community and corporate lands (Banerjee 2004: 47). Different species of eucalyptus and *Acacia auriculiformis* were found suitable for the entire Indo-Gangetic plains. (A semantic attempt of the Indian forest department to ease the acceptability of *Acacia auriculiformis* may be discerned in the popularization of its Sanskritised name "akashmoni", originally christened by the famous poet Rabindranath Tagore in the 1930s. The allusion to this Tagorean name did convey to many that the tree was an indigenous species.) The reasons that the FD chose these species is that primarily, they are capable of rapid growth; second, these species are in general not a preferred species as fodder, and hence remain protected from browsing cattle and goats from forest villages; third, the coppicing ability of these species kept the land perennially "under green cover" without much protection cost, and showed an increasing area on the map of India's land under tree cover. In a frenzy to raise non-browsable QGS plantations, the FD often extirpated root stocks of sal in degraded forest lands of southwestern districts, in favor of *Eucalyptus tereticornis* monocultures (Malhotra and Deb 1998).

Social Forestry promoted QGS plantation in private agricultural lands all over the country, with the intention of helping the poor by growing marketable eucalyptus poles. However, like most other schemes to 'help the poor', the Social Forestry campaign soon turned out to create more profits for the commercial-industrial sector than for farmers. *Eucalyptus* plantations in villages were planted on farms that had earlier been used for food crops, resulting in the disappearance of common lands and resources (Saxena 1994). After the first few years of rapid growth and proportionately high rate of uptake of soil nutrients, productivity of most eucalyptus plantations declined. Within a decade, an oversupply of eucalyptus poles created a market glut, farmers received decelerating economic returns from their trees than they had initially envisaged, and had their farm soil robbed of fertility (Gadgil and Guha 1995; Saxena 1994).

In spite of massive plantation drives, however, forest cover continued to dwindle. In the late seventies, forest revenues plummeted in many parts of the country, and the erosion of forest biodiversity

continued. Neither the mounting pressure from subsistence needs of an expanding population nor the open access nature of the forest resources suffices to account for this denudation of forest cover. New thrust on development projects to benefit the industrial-commercial sector has been relatively more decisive factors. The national drive for development placed heavy toll on forests. Until 1980, all Indian States enjoyed – and utilized – the legal power to sacrifice forest lands for non-agricultural purposes. “Various States earmarked large areas of forest for such purposes as irrigation and hydropower projects (which generate secondary deforestation far in excess of the amount of woodland directly submerged), industrialisation and mining, urbanisation, and road construction” (Flint 1998: 451). In West Bengal, the Damodar Valley project in Puruliya and Bardhaman districts and large industrial developments at Durgapur, Asansol and Chittaranjan – all have cleared large tracts of forest. In addition, the timber contractor-forester collusion often facilitated large-scale commercial timber extraction from the forest, leading to rapid degradation of the forest in many places, especially in Midnapore, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts.

In the early 1980s, the government focused on raising QGS plantations for rotational harvest of poles, rather than old-growth boles, to secure a steady supply of raw materials for paper, match and allied industries. QGS not only removed indigenous species, but also suppressed undergrowth through allelopathic effect (Malhotra *et al.* 1993). This eliminated numerous forest species and a wide range of NTFP, and deprived forest villagers of the diverse use of the forest. In view of the fact that NTFP as raw material supports 90% of the women’s employment generated in forest-based enterprises (Palit 1996: 397), one can surmise the impact of the reduced NTFP stock on employment and income opportunities of millions.

The large-scale, nationwide replacement of native vegetation with exotics was carried out on what Shiva (1987: 49) calls the assumption of “ecological equivalence” – that all species and ecosystems are interchangeable, and that an aggregation of trees constitutes a forest. Thus, the lack of an ecological understanding pervading in Indian forestry continued to raise tree farms, by eliminating ‘minor’ species of biodiversity, to buttress the industrial-commercial sector, and created caricatures of the forest. In the past, a large diversity of NTFP was available from the forest composed of native species. After homogenized QGS plantations were raised in the forest lands, the forest villagers had little supply of fruits, fibers and fodder species to thrive on for subsistence, and therefore fell on the timber species to sell on market. Thus, the new afforestation drive in parts of India became as negligent of the subsistence needs of the rural poor as the continuing deforestation in other parts of the country (Shiva 1987). The post-independence forest policy, motivated by short-term industrial benefits, has justified commercial QGS plantations by the technocratic concept of “consumer needs”, which are effectively the needs of commercial-industrial sector, which Gadgil and Guha (1995: 193) identify to have been “the prime beneficiary of state forest management”.

Not only the new forestry decimated the NTFP stock of forests, but also created a black market of NTFP trade, thus further depriving the poor. In the Third and Fourth Five Year Plans, the government nationalized timber as well as non-timber forest products. Almost all NTFP commodities became nationalized in different States in the period between 1965 and 1979. After nationalization, villagers are legally required to sell the NTFP items only to government agencies, so that no trader could exploit the poor by paying unfair price. This arrangement has failed to protect the poor from exploitation, however, because “government agencies find it difficult to make prompt payment” (Saxena 1996: 49), and because the clerks at NTFP collection centers were delinquent. A National Commission’s investigation in Madhya Pradesh revealed that after walking a long distance to the office of the Forest Corporation to sell the NTFP, tribal women often find it closed, or are asked to come another day (Bhatt 1988). NTFP gatherers in the southwestern districts of West Bengal, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand also have shared this experience (personal field records).

8.6.3 The Genesis of JFM

The decelerating benefits from forests to villagers, in contrast to timber contractors clearing forests with FD license elicited disgruntlement and anger in the forest-fringe villages, to whom the forest had become the property of the enemy. With the vanishing concern of the poor for the 'enemy's property', wood theft became a widespread phenomenon. In southwest Bengal, the antagonism between the FD and villagers often took the form of whole villages participating in wood theft, physical assaults on FD staff and deliberate destruction of forest trees. With several foresters killed by angry mobs and continuing forest denudation, some of the forest officials understood that without villagers' participation in forest management, the State forests had no future (Palit 1993: 4). Villagers themselves were suffering from great hardships. In the late 1970s, many regions experienced an acute 'wood famine'. In the absence of fuelwood to cook rice, villagers in parts of western Medinipur district in West Bengal were obliged to soak rice in water overnight (Deb and Malhotra 1993). With such hard lessons, villagers became aware of the importance of the forest. This conjugation of the FD's need to win the villager's confidence and the villagers' willingness to save the forest led to the genesis of the Joint Forest Management (JFM).

The 1970s witnessed a dismal drop in forest revenues from southwestern districts, where the conflict between FD and villagers also rose to a peak, resulting in physical assault of a few FD officials, and even a murder. When the conventional custodial management through policing had failed to protect forests and generate revenues in southwestern districts of West Bengal, key officials of the State Forest Department (FD) concurred in a meeting in 1972 that without villagers' participation the State's forests had no future. A joint forest management (JFM) approach was deemed necessary to protect the forests (Deb 1993: 369).

In the same year, Dr. Ajit Banerjee, a Divisional Forest Officer in Medinipur district made an experimental arrangement with local villagers to manage a block of forest at Arabari – an experiment which was to become a watershed in concretizing the JFM approach. Banerjee offered the villagers free use of NTFPs and employment, and later on, a share of the profits from the sale of timber, in exchange for protecting a demarcated area of forest through the formation of an informal forest protection committee (FPC). Simultaneously, he lobbied within the FD to get this experiment accepted as a special 'Socio-Economic Project' (Joshi 1996). At around the same time in Purulia, another DFO, Mr. S. Palit, struck a similar joint management arrangement with villagers, although he promised the villagers neither full employment nor any share of the profits from the final harvesting (because he did not have the ability to deliver on those promises). He successfully convinced the villagers that keeping the forest was beneficial to themselves as well as the country (Palit 1996).

Villagers themselves were now able to find a causal link between the hardships they were facing and the vanishing forest cover. This realisation was consonant with the popular environmental awareness that was kindled by the contemporary Chipko movement. An inchoate environmental awareness, promulgated by various NGOs, enlightened youth clubs and schoolteachers, made villagers alert and willing to protect their resources. The most obvious cause of hardship had been a declining availability of NTFP, which the villagers reckoned must be reversed by allowing the forest to regenerate. Villagers in many places in southwestern Bengal took initiatives to form informal forest protection committees – beyond the official paraphernalia of registration with the FD. This subaltern story is often missing in the official stories of the emergence of JFM (Deb and Malhotra 1993).

Yet another subaltern force was in operation. Since the early 1970s, members of the West Bengal Subordinate Forest Employees Association, who mainly bore the brunt of villagers' wrath, took initiatives to promoting dialogues between the FD and villagers for a more collaborative style of forest management. The Association held annual seminars in each forest circle to discuss the need to involve villagers, and presented summaries of these meetings to the forest minister (Joshi 1996: 7).

In retrospect, the institutional process of JFM was evolving in West Bengal in a preparatory political background. The movements for grassroots participation and local self-governance found a fertile ground in this State, where the Naxalite movement of the 1960s had stirred up the demand for land reform, people's rights to land and water resources, and empowerment of the poor through participatory democracy (Duyker 1989). The Panchayat legislation in the late 1970s gave more political power to *panchayats* (village councils). In 1977 the Left Front, a coalition of left-wing parties, came to power in West Bengal and enacted a significant law of land reform to protect the interests of sharecroppers and agricultural laborers. A train of social movements from the 1960s through 1980s demanded participatory democracy through empowering grassroots institutions. The recognition of democracy at the grassroots seems also to have percolated in forest management, which was articulated in the new Forest Policy of 1988. This new Policy evinced a remarkable shift from the revenue generation priority of the original Forest Policy of 1952, in its emphasis on the fulfilment of needs of local communities, its orientation toward conservation rather than revenue generation, and a keener focus on maintaining the stock of NTFP than on timber. The JFM approach thus evolved in a considerably conducive milieu.

In the mid-1980s, Dr. Banerjee joined the World Bank, and drew attention of the Bank to the success of his innovative project in Medinipur. The Bank funded the West Bengal Social Forestry Project which was restructured in 1987 to include a JFM component (Joshi 1996: 6). The West Bengal Forest Directorate issued a Circular in 1989 to officially endorse the JFM approach, and in 1990, the government agreed to entitle the FPCs to a quarter of the net profits from the sale of timber.

8.6.4 The Spread of JFM

JFM has proven to be a fruitful way to implement the new Forest Policy objectives. The approach was endorsed by different Government Circulars (see SPWD 1993 for a compilation). Soon after the Union Government's adoption of the national JFM Resolution in August 1990, many States adopted the JFM approach. By 2004, all the States of India have adopted JFM as an official policy directive, although the benefit sharing arrangements are different in different States.

Within a decade since the first Government Circular of 1989, more than 1600 FPCs were formed in Bankura, Puruliya and West Medinipur districts, with over 19 million members registered (Deb and Dutta 1993). The number of FPCs has exceeded the 2000 mark by the year 2001, although several FPCs have also become non-functional in the same period. The complexity of social factors shaping the site-specific peculiarities of JFM is evident in the processes of fission and fusion of several FPCs in southwestern districts. Fission occurs when an FPC is composed of several villages and fails to protect a large stretch of forest due to conflicts of ethnic and/or political interests. Conversely, converging ethnic and political interests may urge two or more FPCs to conjointly protect a contiguous forest patch shared by neighbouring villages. For example, Shankhahar FPC in Jamboni Range of West Medinipur district was formed in 1991 as a conglomeration of seven FPCs that had previously formed (*unpublished field record*, 1991). The social and political dynamics of such fission and fusion of FPCs are an important research question for social scientists.

8.6.5 Achievements of JFM

The implementation of JFM has shown positive results in many States. A decline in the incidents of wood theft is an important consequence. After years of protection by villagers, the coppice forests of West Bengal regenerated, from what was a degraded scrubland, to its multi-tier structure. Canopy cover and crop height have improved to a considerable extent. Biodiversity also improved with the age of protection (Malhotra and Deb 1992). The success of JFM through involvement of villagers may be measured by the increased flow of NTFP – the very motive of villagers to protect the forest. A

survey in West Medinipur district estimated that NTFP accounted for about 20% of the total annual household income (Malhotra *et al.* 1992). Joshi (1996: 5) has summarised the points of achievement in West Bengal:

“Forest cover has increased, timber production has increased, conflict between foresters and communities has decreased and the yield of NTFPs has increased. According to satellite surveys, the forest cover in West Bengal increased by 4.5% between 1988 and 1991. Of this increase in forest cover, 67% has occurred in South West Bengal, the region that contains the largest number of FPCs, although it has only 37% of forest land. The number of forest personnel assaulted is another broad indicator – this has decreased from a high of 60 in 1982-83 to 18 in 1994-95. Similarly the number of forest offences (cases of illegal extraction) of timber has decreased.”

The success of JFM seems to drive home the lesson that the essential prerequisite for conservation of natural resources is that their management lies in the hands of the users (Deb and Ghosh 1999). After the overwhelming success of JFM in Protected Forests of a large part of southwestern districts, an enthused FD sought to replicate the model in the other category of forests – the Reserved Forests, to which local villagers have the most restricted access and user rights. The FD proceeded in the 1990s to form Eco-Development Committees (EDCs) in the reserve forests in north Bengal and in the Sunderban by involving local villagers. In exchange for preventing wood theft and poaching, the villagers would receive various benefits from the forest department – roads, wells, and in some cases monetary aids to EDCs for employment opportunities, which have proved effective to contain poaching.

The 1990 Resolution entitled the head of every household to be a member of the FPC. Subsequently, a Government Order of 1993 entitled the wife of the head of every household to become a member of the FPC. This was meant to encourage participation of women and to entitle women to have a share in the net sale proceeds. Because women are the principal gatherers of NTFP, participation of women in forest protection has proved decisive in southwestern districts. However, most FPC meetings are held without women, who delegate the menfolk to attend the meetings. There are exceptions, of course, where women decide on the roster of forest guarding duties for FPC members. The Joypur FPC in Puruliya district is an all-women FPC, where male members have only a secondary role in forest protection.

From the management perspective, the JFM experience has elicited the realisation that the success of forest protection crucially hinges on the villagers' willingness and participation. In many places, JFM has gradually dissolved the age-old antagonism between the FD and the forest villagers, and many forest officials have recognised the ability of villagers to protect the forest. Willing participation of villagers has also set some new records. In Puruliya district, a group of lepers came forward to constitute a FPC. Within the departmental hierarchy, JFM has brought the organisational skills of rank-and-file forest officials into recognition and appreciation of higher officials. Forest stands tend to enjoy better protection where beat officers and range officers keep better rapport with FPC members.

8.6.6 Pitfalls and Problems

The FPC model has not yet solved the conservation problematique. A number of FPCs have become non-functional, and many are not functioning very well. There are several reasons for such failures of FPC functioning. FPC meetings are not frequently held, arranged on an ad hoc basis, and attended by only a few members. Some of the members are not very sure of their duties, responsibilities and rights. In some forest beats, many FPC members are not kept aware of the government orders and circulars regarding their share of the net sale proceeds from rotational pole harvest. Because the Beat Officer and the Range Officer head the FPCs and keep all FPC accounts, villagers often are intimidated by the conventional official high-handedness, and find it difficult to override departmental

decisions. The share of the sale proceeds seldom reach the hands of FPC members in time, and the FPC members are kept in the dark regarding the exact amount accrued to the FPC.

The “incentive” of 25% share of sale proceeds has also turned out to be a disincentive in at some FPCs. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to justly determine the amount of work the villagers share, and the returns they deserve. Within a decade of institutionalisation of JFM, villagers in many forest beats became disillusioned, de-motivated or even felt cheated when they learned that they would receive only a quarter of the net benefits to be accrued from the sale of forest trees after 10 or 12 years of protection. They felt cheated because the trees they would be protecting over a decade of night watching would all the same be lumbered and sold out to contractors, despite their motivation and labor for forest protection over years. In Lodhashuli of West Medinipur, a forest stand was destroyed by villagers in frustration, when they heard about the “incentive”: they felt the amount was a pittance as remuneration for the hard work they had to undertake for ten years (*unpublished field record*, 1991). Indeed, after deduction of all operational costs and being divided among all FPC member-households, the quarter share of the net sale proceeds is not as attractive as it appears to be on paper. Furthermore, as the rotational pole harvest occurs at intervals of 8 to 12 years, the incentive is not strong enough for those who are too poor to wait that long for the prospective share of proceeds (Deb and Dutta 1993). From the conservationist point of view, felling of a regenerated forest stand after 8 to 10 years of protection by itself erodes the long-term conservation objective; in addition, the system of monetary incentive for protectors from the periodic sale of logs reinforces the priority of the market value of the forest over its indirect use value and intrinsic value.

A shabby legal status constitutes a basic uncertainty underlying the JFM model: a stroke of the bureaucratic pen could any day abrogate all rights and benefits of FPCs. A whole series of FPC regulations and Government Orders and circulars notwithstanding, the absence of any legal status of the FPCs has incapacitated the FPCs to take any positive decision regarding forest management. The existing legal framework does not recognize any rights of forest-dependent communities on collection and sale of NTFPs, except in some specific cases where tribals have been allowed usufructory rights to collection of certain items of NTFPs. In contrast, State governments are empowered to declare any forest produce as specified, on which the State government has a monopoly of trade. The state monopoly over NTFPs as well as timber subsumes the designated forest products found in private lands and non-forest government lands. Thus, “the interests of primary collectors dependent on NTFPs have been ignored in this regard for the sake of safeguarding the State revenue” (Palit 1999: 25).

With the legal framework unaltered, FPC members are incapable of taking any active role in the sale of pole harvest, nor overseeing the procedure of disbursement of their share of the sale proceeds. They cannot postpone or stop clear-felling of a forest coupe, even if that would cause an abrupt break in the NTFP flow and consequently, affect the household economy. Nor can they decide on plantation of the species of their choice; they have to accept what the range officer or the beat officer gives them. This arrangement seems to reiterate what has conventionally been the official definition of participation: “I do, you participate.” By denying people any role in management in any real sense and the legitimate share in the forest produce, it has reduced the concept of people’s participation “to a mere rhetoric” (Saxena 1996: 58), and continues to uphold revenue generation as the primary purpose of forestry. Despite a growing evidence of the magnitude of success in JFM being proportional to the extent of participation by local villagers, many FD officials seem to consider JFM as a threat to their traditional authority and power, which they are unwilling to shed (see Box).

There is scant official recognition of the fact that with an increasing number of stakeholders, forestry is no longer the exclusive preserve of the FD. The tasks involved in effective management of the forests with the people was shared by NGOs in many districts. As Palit (1999: 35) observes,

“NGOs have contributed toward the growth of JFM in a number of ways. But looking at their number and strength, it is felt, their actual contribution has been way below the potential. This is despite the fact that some of the NGOs have developed specializations and quite a few of them have highly qualified and dedicated workers.... The basic problem here has been a lack of trust between the forest bureaucracy and the NGOs. Although at the policy level NGO role is lauded everywhere, in practice, the required degree of collaboration is seldom evident.”

The Bureaucratic Inertia

After the official acceptance of JFM, FPCs are formed and registered as a formal requirement. However, many forest officers simply refuse to believe that villagers could help in forest protection. In the initial years, many forest beat officers believed that Government Resolutions concerning JFM are ephemeral, and soon will be revoked to reinstate the unilateral authority of the state forest department (FD). Many of them did not bother much to brief the FPC members about their usufructuary rights and the arrangement for the quarter share of sale proceeds of pole harvest. Many forest officials remain suspicious of the participatory approach to management and the ability of villagers to protect the forest from the razing fuelwood demand. As one of the engineers of JFM reviews the situation,

The FD continues to dominate over the FPC based on two undercurrents. One is that the FD personnel do not like to shed their powers voluntarily. Second, there is a perception among forest personnel that indigenous knowledge about forest management is insufficient and that the technical direction of the FD is essential. In some FPCs, the leader or the E[xecutive] C[ommittee] has usurped the power of the FPC.... (Banerjee 2004: 53)

As a consequence, the much-extolled participatory approach has in most areas degenerated into a consensual formality of obeying the FD's directive. In the case of plantation, for example, it is the forest Beat or Range Officer who decides where to raise the plantation, how many saplings of which species to be planted, how many workers to be employed, and so on, without seeking any advice or approval of villagers. Official forestry operation schemes and programs have seldom reflected villagers' needs, although many such “need-based afforestation programs” have been undertaken under the banner of JFM. Plantation programs have continued to raise QGS, to the negligence of the NTFP stock and the diverse economic needs of the villagers.

Nevertheless, JFM in a large area of southwestern districts of West Bengal and western Orissa showed good results, because of the significant attitudinal change among the FD staff. Wherever these foresters have been successful in building bridges of cordiality and shared authority of management with villagers, JFM has achieved marked success. In these areas, JFM's success is marked by the flourishing diversity of native species, improved canopy structure, and an increase in availability of NTFP in the forest (Deb and Malhotra 1993).

The institutional failure of the FD to share the decision making power with villagers in forest management *in situ* seems to have facilitated departmental corruption, which in the initial decade was largely removed through the grassroots vigilance of FPCs. The resurgence of official high-handedness has resulted in illegal felling of trees – either in collusion with a few powerful Executive Members of the FPC or in connivance of FPC members who simply are not aware of their rights in such matters. A recent instance of this has been notified by a Public Interest Litigation against the FD (Debal Deb vs Union of India 2005) for illegal felling by the FD of more than a hundred mature *sal* trees on a private land.

Politicisation of FPCs also has adverse consequences on the outcomes of JFM. It is common observation that the interests of the rich farmers subjugate the interests of the rural poor, whose motive for protecting the common pool resources is undermined. Usurpation of participatory democracy by the vested interests of the rural elite is a formidable obstacle to both Panchayat

governance and participatory forest management model. The rich and the elite holding the Panchayat portfolio often wield enough power to influence FPC operations, not always promoting the conservation objective of JFM.

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