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The Concept of Participatory Forest Management, its Rationale and Implications for Karnataka

by Sharachchandra Lele, on behalf of the Campaign for Participatory Forest Management in Karnataka, 9 October 2001

Background: The JFPM experience

The question of how forests should be managed has been one of the burning issues concerning rural livelihoods and the environment. About ten years ago, mainly due to the sustained and concerted efforts of activists, scholars and rural communities, the government of India accepted in principle the need for the participation of village communities in forest management. The concept was then implemented under various joint forest management programmes. In Karnataka, the initiation of Joint Forest Planning and Management (JFPM, as it is called) in 1993 coincided with the initiation of the Western iShats Forestry and Environment Project with British funds. Here again, a coalition of activists and scholars, led by FEVORD-K, was responsible for ensuring that the concept of people's participation was incorporated into the project. Subsequently, JFPM was also incorporated into the Eastern Plains Forestry Project executed with a loan from the Japanese Bank for International Co-operation.

The past eight years of experience with JFPM in Karnataka as implemented by the Karnataka Forest Department leaves much to be desired. While JFPM programmes have engendered significant interest and general awareness in forest management from rural communities in the project areas. JFPM has neither made a serious dent in forest degradation or deforestation, nor has it benefited focal communities significantly, whether in subsistence or income terms. The main reasons for this which have emerged from many rounds of discussions, studies, consultation with Village Forest Committees (VFCs) and independent reviews, are:

- (a) lack of clear and adequate rights over forest produce;
- (b) lack of sufficient autonomy in day-to-day management and no transparent guidelines for ecological sustainability;
- (c) lack of attention to existing rights and privileges leading to confusion and often aggravating infra-village inequities in forest access;
- (d) lack of security of tenure and sustainability of institutions due to the programmatic and project-dependent and funding-oriented nature of implementation;
- (e) focus on only degraded forest department lands leading to only partial coverage of the public

lands used by villagers.

Further, JFPM has not been implemented uniformly in all parts of the state and local communities are not in a position to ensure its implementation.

In short, it is not just the implementation of JFPM that is faulty, but also the very conceptual and policy framework within which JFPM has been set up needs to be thoroughly re-examined.) Thus, the time has come for us not just to demand Government's support for continuing JFPM and VFCs as they now exist but rather to revitalise the campaign for truly participatory, sustainable, equitable and economically viable model of people's participation in forest management. This campaign would have to begin by re-stating the basic premises of participatory forest management in the Karnataka context and pointing to the broad directions of policy change that are required. This concept note attempts to do so.

Basic Premises and Principles of Sustainable, Equitable and truly Participatory Forest Management

The essential rationale for participatory forest management, its basic principles, and its potential in the Karnataka context are summarized below.

a) Forests yield multiple benefits to society. These include tangible products such as fuelwood, timber, fodder, manure and minor forest products, intangible services such as hydrological benefits, soil conservation, climate change mitigation and habitat for wildlife, and other intangible values such as spiritual or aesthetic values. These benefits flow to many different beneficiary groups. Only some of these beneficiaries live in physical proximity of the forest. Others live downstream in the watershed, or in the whole region or nation or even world.

b) The basic problem of forest policy and management is that all benefits to all beneficiaries cannot be simultaneously maximised. E.g., if the forest is managed to maximise timber or softwood production, it will not yield very high quantities of fuelwood, manure or fodder, and will also not be a very good habitat for wildlife. Hence there is conflict amongst different beneficiaries as to how forests should be managed.

c) In this context, the people who use forests on a day-to-day basis should be considered as the primary stakeholders. Whereas the people live away from the forest ("off-site") and benefit indirectly from ecosystem services provided by the forest, such as soil and water conservation functions, climate change mitigation, or habitat for wildlife, should be considered as secondary stakeholders.

d) Primary stakeholders should have first charge on all forest produce, and they also have a basic right to participate in the management of forests they use. However, these rights are accompanied by responsibilities, viz.. (i) to ensure that forest access is equitably distributed amongst themselves, (ii) to ensure the long-term sustainability of the forests, and (iii) to ensure that a reasonable quantum of benefits continues to flow to the off-site secondary beneficiaries.

e) Therefore, the main role of the state is to identify and enforce broad forest management norms and monitoring/enforcement mechanisms for ensuring local fairness, long-term sustainability and protection of minimum off-site benefits. This can be achieved through different institutional models. The conventional model has been fully "hands-on" management by the state forest department on behalf of a stakeholders, primary and secondary. But this paternalistic model has lead to inefficiency, inequity and unsustainability. Hence the search for better models, broadly coiled participatory or joint forest management models.

f) Currently, "joint forest management" has meant that the government bureaucracy is involved in a!! day-to-day decision-making about forest management at the village feve!. But this is neither necessary nor desirable. In areas where there are sufficient people able and willing to take up the rights and responsibilities associated with participatory management, the state agency has to shed its present role of daily, hands-on management. Government: must first finalise the spatial assignment of forests and legitimise the broad institutional structures that will operate within these boundaries. Its main responsibility then would be to lay down the management norms through o consultative process and enforce them, to provide supplementary support in forest protection, silviculture, credit and market information when needed by the local community, and to resolve conflicts.

g)Similarly, "participatory management" does not necessarily mean management i by only community institutions in collaboration with state agencies. Ecological, economic and sociological factors could favour models where day-to-day management vests with individuals and the state does the monitoring/enforcement.) Thus, existing individual-based forest rights regimes (such as soppinabetta, kumkis and baanes} are in fact examples of joint or participatory management. But currently, these regimes usually create severe infra-village inequities in forest access. For instance, large soppinabettas are given to old betelnut cultivators. If these inequities are removed and monitoring of these regimes strengthened, they could co-exist with community-controlled forest management.

h) In forests used by people, "forest" means all types of uncultivated vegetation that provides a variety of biomass products. These vegetation types, which include open forests, secondary

forests, tree savannas, grasslands and even shrubs, are crucial sources of fuelwood, fodder, leaf manure and NTFPs for local communities, especially the poorer sections. Moreover, maintenance of biodiversity and watershed services is compatible to a significant extent with these vegetation types, provided they form a mosaic with other (denser) vegetation types. Hence, the forest management norms must permit management regimes that result partly in open forests or savannas or even grasslands, as long as the overall forest used by a community is sustainably managed.

i) Similarly, villagers extract resources from and use all public lands, not just forest department lands. Hence, a meaningful participatory management institution must cover all public lands. This is particularly important in the Karnataka context, where very substantial areas of forested or otherwise uncultivated public lands are with the Revenue Department. j) If clear and adequate extraction and management rights are given to local communities, it is possible for them to derive very substantial economic benefits from forests even while ensuring forest sustainability. In other words, environmental soundness is not necessarily incompatible with economic viability,

Broad Policy Implications in the Karnataka context

If participatory forest management is to be adopted as per the outline given above, fundamental policy changes are required. Broadly speaking, these include:

a) Villagers must be given full (100%) and sole rights over all extractable forest produce, including autonomy in marketing payments to government should be only for support services rendered, including in protection, credit, marketing, etc.

b) Within villages, subsistence needs must be met before produce is marketed; sharing of benefits must be in proportion to personal labour contribution.

c) Village-level bodies must have full autonomy in day-to-day decision-making regarding all aspects of forest and public land management

d) Sustainability norms, especially those meant to ensure flow of off-site benefits, must be clearly identified a priori through a participatory process, and then monitored and enforced in a transparent manner.

e) Village-level institutions must govern all public lands that are used for extraction of biomass resources by the village community and which the villagers are willing to manage together, including degraded and undegraded FD lands, gomaals, Assessed Waste Lands, pa/saris, other revenue department, Panchayat and other common lands. The necessary survey and settlement for demarcating use areas and their users and re-notifying them must be carried out rapidly.

f) Existing forest rights and privileges such as soppinabettas, kumkis and baanes should be brought within the ambit of participatory forest management, but clear mechanisms for removing or balancing infra-village inequities created by these rights and privileges need to be worked out in a context-dependent ' manner.

g) Village-level institutions and the forest rights conferred on them must have proper legislative support to ensure their justiciability and security, to make participatory forest management a part of the system of governance of natural resources.

h) Responsibilities and actions of all participants (villagers, government departments, etc.) and their disputes must be adjudicated by independent multi-stakeholder bodies.

The details of these policy changes and their implementation through legal, fiscal and administrative measures would of course have to be worked out carefully. But if Karnataka is serious about conserving its forests and about people's participation in natural resource management, the broad directions as outlined above need to be understood, accepted and acted upon.