

Joint Forest Management- A Step towards Decentralised Governance of Natural Resources in Karnataka

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ABSTRACT

The shift in control of forests from people to the state resulted not only in their alienation from their livelihood bases, but also degradation of the forest. For centuries forest dependent communities had shared a symbiotic relationship with the forest, around which their life and culture had developed. But colonial approaches to forest conservation and protection that alienated the inhabitants of forest lands treated them as intruders, rather than participants in management of the forest wealth. It was not until the Forest Policy of 1988 that the concept of co-management of forests was seen as a viable alternative to forest conservation. The Joint Forest Planning and Management (JFPM) programme was the outcome of the participatory forestry approach and was introduced in the country for the first time in 1993, as an alternative to the centralised governance of forests. The JFPM, as the name itself suggests gave an emphasis to the notion of joint management of forest resources by involving local communities, while at the same time giving them a share in forest resources. The Village Forest Committee (VFC) was envisaged as the institutional mechanism for operationalising the JFPM programme. In Karnataka as many as 5006 VFCs have been started under different forestry projects since JFPM was introduced in 1993. However, the VFCs have a long way to go before the intended outcomes of the programme are to be realised. This paper gives a brief historical background of JFPM by bringing out the shifts that have taken place in the forest policies and analyses the role that the programme can play as a mechanism of decentralised governance.

Key words: Joint Forest Management, Natural Resources, Decentralised Governance, Forest Policy, Village Forest Committee, Stakeholder

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INTRODUCTION

Land, water and forests have always been the most prominent natural resources in the world. The large scale expansion of industries has led to mindless destruction of natural resources that have been providing succour for human beings. Since the control over natural resources shifted from the people to the state and its agencies, there has been a virtual erosion of people's rights over natural resources. All over the world there has been a struggle by the stakeholders of natural resources to regain the rights of participation in natural resource conservation and development, but it is only in recent years that the movement for decentralised governance of natural resources has gained momentum (Chambers, 1999; Barmann, 2000; Barman and Farrington, 2003).

As centralised governance of natural resources did not really result in people's engagement, the state itself began to realise that involving local communities and local institutions in natural resource management was a step that had to be taken. It is common knowledge that local users will have an advantage over government agents for several reasons. First, local users have intimate knowledge of the resource. This is especially important where the resources are highly variable over space and time. By living and working in the area, users may also have a comparative advantage over government agents in monitoring resource use and rule compliance. Furthermore, because their livelihoods depend on the resource, local users are often assumed to have the greatest incentives to maintain the resource base over time. With growing pressures to use resources more efficiently, equitably, and sustainably, the optimism that communities or user groups may be able to

manage the resources more effectively than government agencies has formed the basis for many programmes that attempt to create or recreate local common property management regimes (Meinzen-Dick, Knox, Place and Swallo, 2002).

Forests are among the richest reserves of natural resources in the world. Though the bio-diversity of forests is maintained and protected by the rich flora and fauna, people who have inhabited the forest and its peripheries have always played a key role in sustaining the life support systems that a forest contains. Over the years forest dwellers as well as forest dependent communities have shared a symbiotic relationship with these rich natural resource reserves by nurturing them and also using them in a sustainable manner. But the gradual alienation of people, especially indigenous communities from the forests led not only to their degradation but also destruction. The most disturbing aspect of this destruction was the resultant natural disasters that claimed both economic resources and human lives. In the name of development, natural resources and those that have sustained them were both side-lined.

Indigenous Communities and Forests

Forests form an integral part of indigenous people's lives. Forest dependent communities looked upon forests as their life source. They depend primarily on minor forest produce for their livelihood. Until state intervention in forest management began, indigenous people lived in harmony with the forest, which was the core point around which their culture was shaped. Forests and indigenous groups sustained each other and the link between the two was symbiotic in nature. For centuries forest dwellers have been depending on the forest for their survival needs such as food, fuel, fodder and shelter. Herbs, barks of trees and flowers have sustained and protected them against illness. This pattern of existence led to the emergence of cultural values and practices that were oriented towards protecting forest resources.

For example, manifested in certain trees, bushes or mountains were their gods and goddesses, most often forest deities. These also protected species, which had great economic value for forest dwelling communities. Thus, the species, on which they depend the most were given a sacred status and preserved. Protected areas came to be known as sacred groves. For forest dependent communities, the forest symbolises life in its manifold manifestations, i.e., home, place of worship, food, employment, income and the entire gamut of their life (Indira, 2002).

Though indigenous communities used the forest and its resources for their survival, they exercised utmost care in ensuring that the forest did not lose its fertility or bio-diversity. To prevent degradation of forests and support regeneration of forestland, forest dwellers frequently shifted their residence and places of cultivation from one region to another. The entire community with their livestock and meagre belongings would move from one place to another so that the land was left fallow, making way for the forest cover to grow back. This, in turn would maintain the ecological balance. Most often, the ecosystem's protection symbolised the continuity of the group itself and hence was enforced with stringent social norms and customs. The cultural gearing of indigenous people for evolving a system, which helped them to strike a balance between their own needs and environmental protection, is most interesting (Indira, 2002). Studies have pointed out that indigenous knowledge is the most effective way of forest conservation. Indigenous method of forest use ensured protection of bio-diversity and natural resources were harnessed. The traditional right of indigenous people over forests, their livelihood sources and their healthy cultural practices were strongly threatened by the shift in the growth oriented economic policies of the British Government. The new approach to forest protection was not to treat the forest as a sustainable resource but as a commercially catering service. With the popularisation of railways, mining and quarrying, Indian forests began to be exploited for timber.

Colonial Forest Policy and Alienation of People

The colonisation of forests actually set the stage for alienation of local communities from the process of natural resource management. The British Government took formal control over India's forests with the setting up of the Department of Forests in 1861. Even prior to this, i.e., in 1855 itself restrictions were being imposed up on the rights of people to use forest resources. This policy gave the colonial government all the power needed to establish exclusive control over forests in different regions of the country. The colonial government "rejected any type of ownership, particularly community ownership of forest. Thus, a ban was imposed on slash and burn and shifting cultivation. This approach, which did not provide any alternate survival strategy for the forest dwellers very effectively, alienated them from forests. Limited use of only patches of forestland was allowed. The fallout of this colonisation of forests resulted in the reduction of indigenous people's access to land resources and the unconditional rejection of their secure usufructary rights and prerogatives. The colonial government's forest policies, which the colonisers declared as scientific management gave way only for monoculture. Timber based demand coupled with implementation of non-viable forest protection programmes resulted in deforestation and degradation. Such an attitude left the forest dependent indigenous people in a state of impoverishment and marginalisation. The impact of deforestation on forest dwellers was very severe. The approach of colonial rules towards indigenous modes of operation as unproductive and barbaric not only displayed a lack of sensitivity on their part but also a clear intention of exploiting the forest for commercial gains" (Indira, 2002).

Around the year 1855 the British government imposed restrictions on the use of forest by local communities. It claimed that forest laws actually protected the forests as well as the people. Local communities who had till then been using forests for their survival, and in the process, also protecting the forest experienced a sense of alienation. Since they did not have access to or knowledge of alternate livelihood strategies, they were totally

marginalised. The forest Acts of 1865, 1878, 1894, 1927 and 1935 were all repressive in one sense or the other. The Forest Act of 1865 empowered the government to declare any land covered with trees as government land. The Act also bestowed the forest administration with the power of judicial enforcement. Anyone who violated the conditions laid down by the Act could be punished. This Act claimed to have public benefit as its central goal. But at the implementation level it never displayed any such pro-people sentiments. The single most important agenda of the colonial government was revenue generation. It cannot also be forgotten that Indian forests served as suppliers of raw materials to many British industries.

The colonial rulers primarily saw the forest as a revenue generating source and a place which could be used for hunting. The 1878 Forest Act gave the government total control over all forestland. This Act also classified forests as *Reserve Forests*, *Protected Forests* and *Village Forests*. Such a classification gave the Forest Department additional powers to regulate and also, if required prohibit certain activities in the forests. The 1878 Act placed restrictions on easy access to forest and its produce. The Indian Forest Act which was passed in 1882 brought under the control of the Forest Department all those forest areas, which were hitherto being managed by various civil departments and declared them reserve forests. Passing of these Acts gradually increased the forest area under state control, and hence brought more timber-based revenue to the government.

The gradual alienation of people from the forest in the name of protection and conservation gave way to strong people's movements. The Forest Policy of 1894 only reinforced state control and approved the Acts that had been passed earlier. It justified the action of the government in the name of forest protection and scientific management of natural resources.

Along with other aspects of forest protection for self use (timber) the policy also highlighted the need for effective management of forests. Forests needed to be administered in view of being declared public property and in order to protect and conserve this public property, laying down certain

regulations and restrictions was considered essential.

Further, issues of protection of the climate and ecosystem were also stressed and in this process, forests and hill-slopes were brought under state regulation. The policy also very clearly mentioned that as states needed revenue, those forests, which possessed valuable timber reserves had to be managed on commercial lines to fetch revenue for the state. This gave the colonial government unlimited powers of control over forests, besides bestowing on them the right to suppress resistance by people.

In 1927 the government amalgamated all the provisions contained in the Acts hitherto passed and envisaged the passing of a comprehensive forest act. The question of imposing a duty on timber collection was also considered. The Forest Act of 1927 thus became an all encompassing piece of legislation, and after nearly 70 years of independence the provisions of this Act are largely invoked in forest management even to this day. That timber was the main target of the British Forest Policy was evident. Indian forests became regular suppliers of raw materials to British industries. The colonisation of forests led to systematic alienation of indigenous people, whose very survival was interlinked with forests. Soon they were reduced to a state of utter helplessness.

Forest Legislation in Independent India

This situation more or less continued and at times worsened, even after independence. The adoption of the National Forest Policy of 1952 was a clear indication that the colonial attitude of regimentation was continued. Regulation of the rights and privileges of forest dwellers was seen as a necessary step for forest conservation. The non-involvement and non-recognition of the needs of people who were a part of these forests are very clearly reflected in the approach of the National Commission on Agriculture 1976, which upheld the right of the state to regulate the forest produce and prevent people from using forest resources for survival. The Commission was of the view that the "... free supply of forest produce to the rural

population and their rights Have brought destruction to the forests and so it is necessary to reverse the process...” The Commission gave the highest priority to production of forests rather than social forests (Chhatre, 1996; Patnaik and Brahmachari, 1996).

Though forests have for long been considered as Common Property Resources (CPR), the series of forest Acts which were enacted right from the time the British took control of the forests did not recognise the concept or practice of common property regime. The forest acts that were enacted in independent India such as the Forest (conservation) Act 1980, the withdrawn Forest Bill 1982, the Forest (Conservation Amendment) Act 1988 and Wildlife (Protection) amendment Act 1991 went a long way in evolving a broad strategy of conservation, which meant great control, greater centralisation and concentration of power in the hands of the state. It was only after the Forest Policy of 1988 was formulated that people’s rights over forests came to be recognised.

National Forest Policy of 1988

A new National forest policy was adopted by the Government of India on 7th December, 1988. Its principle aim was to ensure environmental stability and maintenance of ecological balance including atmospheric equilibrium, which is vital for sustenance of all life forms, human, animal, and plant. Increasing forest and vegetable cover, conservation of total biological diversity, provision of fodder, fuel and pasture for areas adjoining the forest to prevent forest depletion and protection and improvement of minor forest produce for the sake of tribal people are the essential attributes of forest management envisaged under the national policy.

Recognition of the symbiotic relationship between the indigenous people and forest was a major development that took place when the new policy was laid down. The laws had hitherto failed in this regard. But the new policy made a sincere effort to restore the old rights to indigenous people and recognised their effective role and association in the protection of forests.

The tribals were given responsibility for the maintenance of trees together with ownership rights over trees. The policy also suggested a solution for the removal of illegal felling leading to deforestation i.e., the replacement of contractors by forest dwellers. It envisaged that family oriented schemes and development programmes must be devised to meet the needs of tribal economy and to raise the status of tribal beneficiaries.

The National Forest Policy 1988 took due care in ensuring that forest dwellers were associated with protection and management of forests. Providing means of subsistence to forest dwellers was another key aspect of the National Forest Policy of 1988. The customary rights and concessions of the forest dwellers had been declared to be protected and maintained. The policy stressed that local communities must be motivated to identify themselves with the protection and development of forests from which they derive benefit. The policy statement categorically expressed a strong desire to tune forest administration with the aspirations of forest dwellers (D'Souza, 2000).

Joint Forest Planning and Management - the Emergence of an Alternative

The National Forest Policy of 1988 recognised people's involvement in the development and protection of forests. It was realised that until a viable alternative to the existing confrontation oriented forest management strategies was devised, the forests would further suffer. In the growing divide between state agencies and people, the forest was the worst hit. Conditions had so emerged, where the Forest Department and the forest dwelling communities were proceeding on parallel lines and in the process, contractors and their agents, timber merchants and poachers were gaining an advantage. Taking people into confidence was the only alternative and it was this aspect which was recognised and accepted by the National Forest Policy of 1988. By 1992 the Government of India had issued guidelines to implement the Joint Forest Planning and Management Programme (JFPM). The main objectives

of JFPM were as follows:

- Protect and maintain the fast depleting forest and water resources.
- Regenerate the already degraded forests.
- Offer forest dependent population a means of subsistence and income generation.
- Empower local communities to take decisions regarding forest use, management and also to ensure their share in forest resources by bestowing upon them usufruct rights over forest lands. The Joint Forest Management experiment indicates a clear shift towards sharing both responsibilities and accountabilities between Forest Department and local communities in the management of forests.

Joint Forest Planning and Management (JFPM) in Karnataka

The Government of Karnataka conveyed its approval to the implementation of the Joint Planning and Management programme in 1993. The JFPM, which was to become operational in the state of Karnataka had the following schemes:

Setting up of Village Forest Committees (VFC) to oversee such aspects of forest management and development as planning and implementation of forest management strategies, protection of forest areas, harvesting and sharing of produce and also creating a Forest Development Fund.

To intensify the activities of JFPM for better protection, development and management of degraded forest lands and other government wastelands the Government of Karnataka passed another order. This order strengthened the VFCs and gave them more powers to share the benefits not only from VFC plantations but also natural forest and plantations that existed prior to the formation of VFCs. The order also laid down guidelines for sharing of forest produce between VFCs and the Karnataka Forest Department as under:

The total proceeds derived from the sale of forest produce shall be shared between Government and the VFC as follows:

- 1 Non-Timber Forest Produce: 10% to government and 90% to VFC.
- 2 Other Forest Produce: From the assets created with the help of VFC- 25% to government and 75 % to VFC.
- 3 From the assets created prior to formation of VFC including older fuel wood, fodder and small timber plantations but excluding teak plantations- 50% to government and 50% to VFC.
- 4 From the natural growth prior to formation of VFC excluding valuable species of VFCs viz., Sandalwood, Rosewood, Teak, *Honne*, *Matti* and *Nandi* subject to the provision of working plan prescriptions-50% to government and 50% to VFC.

Out of the share of VFC under the arrangements mentioned above, a minimum of 50% is for the Village Forest Development Fund (VFDF) and the balance would be shared by the members of the VFC as dividends or will go to the VDF as decided by the VFC.

Tree-Patta Scheme: Rights over trees on road sides, canal sides and other similar areas, including urban areas are issued to adjoining land holders or Village Forest Committees by charging a nominal fee of only one rupee per annum. The right over the trees entitles the Patta holder to share the forest produce with the Forest Department. Beneficiaries under the scheme are eligible for 100 per cent usufructs. The final harvest shall be shared between the individual/ institution and the Forest Department in the ration of 75:25.

Scheme of raising Trees on Lands belonging to Institutions, Communities and Government Departments: This scheme is for protection and management of trees on lands belonging to institutions, communities and government departments and is operated on a system of mutual consent. The cost of raising, initial protection and maintenance of plantations for the first three years will be borne by the Forest Department.

However, protection from the beginning till harvest is the responsibility of the concerned institution or community or department with the co-operation of the Forest Department. The usufructs shall be wholly belonging to the institution/community/departments. The net income from the final harvest of trees raised under this scheme will be shared in the ratio of 50:50 between the Forest Department and the concerned institution/community/government department.

Joint Forest Planning and Management (JFPM) in Uttara Kannada

The JFPM programme was first implemented in the Uttara Kannada district in Karnataka. Uttara Kannada is considered the richest forest district in Karnataka state. It has four distinct types of forest, these being Evergreen Forests, Semi Evergreen Forests, Moist Deciduous Forests and Scrub and Thorny Forests. The Western Ghats has divided the district into two parts. Of the 11 taluks in the district five taluks are in the coastal belt and the other six are on the ghats. The district has a land area of 10300 square kilometres. Of the total land area forest accounts for 80 percent. According to the 2011 census data, the population of Uttara Kannada district is 14, 37,169.

The district is divided into six forest divisions- Dandeli, Haliyal, Honnavar, Karwar, Sirsi and Yellapur. The Joint Forest Planning and Management programme was implemented for the first time in the Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka under the aegis of the Western Ghats Forestry Project in the year 1993. In all 575 VFCs have been formed in Uttara Kannada district in the five forest divisions of Haliyal, Honnavar, Karwar, Sirsi and Yellapur under the aegis of the JFPM programme. The first Village Forest Committee in the state of Karnataka was formed in September 1993 in Talagadde village of Ankola Range in Karwar forest division.

Table -1
VFCs formed under JFPM in the Uttara Kannada District

SI No.	Division	WGFP	CSS	EKAP	KSFMBBC	Total
1	Dandeli	0	0	0	0	0
2	Haliyal	52	1	0	40	93
3	Honnavar	81	-	-	47	128
4	Karwar	56	-	-	47	103
5	Sirsi	103	-	-	60	163
6	Yellapur	41	-	-	47	88
	District Total	333	1	-	241	575
	State Total	475	160	3149	1222	5006

The Joint Forest Planning and Management (JFPM) programme in Karnataka is two decades old. In the period that has gone by four people centric forest development programmes- Western Ghats Forestry (ODA) Project, Centrally sponsored Schemes (CSS), Eastern Karnataka Afforestation Project (EKAP) and Karnataka Sustainable Forest Management & Bio-diversity Conservation (KSFMBBC) Project have been implemented. As many as 5006 VFCs have been formed in the state, the highest number being in Uttara Kannada.

In Uttara Kannada district where JFPM was first implemented only a few VFCs have been able to justice to the core idea of JFPM ‘Care and Share’ till date. All the VFC members actively took part in JFPM activities during the first two years of the project period but in the succeeding years the participation decreased considerably and in certain VFCs it has touched the zero level. Two typical examples are the VFCs at Shindoli in Jagalbet range and Piregali of Tinaighat range in Haliyal division. In the beginning both the VFCs were considered role models for others and received awards from the Chief Minister of Karnataka for their performance. Such activities as creation of forest plantations, protection of forest from fire, NTFP collection and marketing with support from Karnataka Forest Department were started with great enthusiasm but today the VFCs have virtually become defunct

because of bureaucratic apathy. The promises made to the people during the days of VFC formation were not realised and the VFCs could not sustain the impact of their initial enthusiasm. Since JFPM plantations engulfed common property resources such as 'gomals' in many villages, VFC members started experiencing a sense of deprivation. Women's voices were generally sidelined in decision making and they did not really experience a sense of involvement. The atmosphere today is not one of great positivity.

CONCLUSION

The JFPM programme no doubt was a step in the direction of decentralising governance of natural resources, but as it has happened in the case of many development initiatives due to a lack of co-ordination between local communities and state agencies, the programme is still far away from meeting its desired end. It is now an appropriate time for the Karnataka Forest Department to evaluate the performance of JFPM and initiate a proactive programme of harnessing the strengths of this people centric initiative.

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