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A STUDY ON ROLE OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN COLLECTION OF FOREST PRODUCT AND JOINT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM IN INDIA

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I. Introduction

Since time immemorial forest has been the habitat of the tribal people in all the countries with tribal population. In India, almost all the tribal groups are found in their forest habitat. Forest is a resource, but not just a resource or collection, of trees. It is rather a reflection of the tribal life support system. Forests are their emotions. They are organic part of their life. Tribals have existed since historic times in symbiotic relationship, mutually reinforcing each other.¹ The tribal communities constitute around 8.2 per cent of the national population according to 2011 census. India is a home for more than 635 tribes, sub-divided into groups, spread throughout the national barring a few states, concentrated mostly in the hilly and forest region.²

As forests are the mainstay of tribal population since times immemorial, they depended heavily on forests, forest produce and hunt animals. The tribes had a firm conviction and feeling which remained so deep even today, that the forest belongs to them. It supplies them the fruits of all kinds in all seasons, nourishing roots and fish. It also provides them with material to build their homes and keeps them warm with its fuel and offers cool with its shade; their religious faith leads them to believe that there are many spirits living in trees and forests. Estimates show that 40 per cent of the tribes depend on forests but their participation in forestry is minimal. According to National Forest Policy, 1988 "Forest should not be looked upon as a source of revenue. Forest is renewable natural resources. They are a national asset to be protected and enhanced for the wellbeing of the people and the nation".³

¹ Sangita Gujrati, "Forest and Tribals: An Exploration into Relationship", in S.N Pawar, R.B Paul, (ed.) Sociology of Environment 109 (Anmol Publications, 2006).

² Vol. VII, Issue 6, Dr. B.Siva Rama Krishna, "Scheduled Tribes in India: A Right Based Approach" 19 (Orient Journal of Law and Social Sciences 2013).

³ National Forest Policy, 1988, Government of India.



People living in these forest fringe villages depend upon forest for a variety of goods and services. These includes collection of edible fruits, flowers, tubers, roots and leaves for food and medicines; firewood for cooking materials for agricultural implements, house construction and fencing; fodder (grass and leave) for livestock and grazing of livestock in forest; and collection of a range of marketable non-timber forest products. Therefore, with such a huge population and extensive dependence pattern, any over exploitation and unsustainable harvest practice can potentially degrade forest.⁴ Forest dependent households derive 30 percent of their income from unprocessed forest products such as fuel wood, fruits, mushrooms, insects, honey and medicinal plants.⁵

II. Role of Tribal Women in Collection of Forest Products

The struggle of women from the Adivasi and other traditional forest dwelling communities has been about democratic rights to enable them to live in dignity, and freedom to pursue a way of life and livelihood that is centered on a complex relationship fostered over generations with the entire forest landscape. The ancestral plural relationship that women hold with the forest space, is depicted by how this space is used in multiple ways: shifting cultivation, grazing, food production, foraging for wild fruits, vegetables, tubers and medicines, saving seeds and breeds, collecting fuel wood, forest produce and materials to build homes, worshipping their ancestors and gods and a space to celebrate and mourn.⁶

In a situation where forests surrounded the village, fuel was fetched by the women from about a furlong away when necessary. If a large amount of wood was to be cut for storage of fuel it was done mostly by men, while women pick up fallen branches, broken off smaller branches from trees and carried them to the village. Even in the collection of MFP, men participated equally with women. Men would climb the trees and shake the branches and the women wait below, waiting to collect the produce in baskets. During the pick fruit season March, April and May the entire village was engaged in collecting mango, mahua, kendu fruits, char, panasha, tamarind, jackfruit etc. During this period of hectic activity old women were left

⁴ Vol.5(8), Atrayee Banergree and Chowdhury Madhurima, Forest Degradation and Livelihood of Local Communities in India: A Human Rights Approach 125 (Journal of Horticulture and Forestry 2013).

⁵ Elisenda Estruch et al, Promoting Decent Employment in Forestry for Improved Nutrition and Food Security 13 (Background Paper for The International Conference on Forests for Food Security and Nutrition, FAO, Rome, 2013).

⁶ Vol XLIV no 44, Sagari R Ramdas, Women, Forest spaces and the Law: Transgressing the Boundaries 65 (Economic & Political Weekly 2009)



to look after small children while pregnant women were not encouraged to do heavy work.⁷ The living standards of tribals inevitably face a decline as traditional sources of firewood and minor forest produce became increasingly scarce. The women, deprived of a regular income are forced to take on wage earnings, either in the homes of wealthy families or in towns. Very frequently women get paid less for the work they have done and find themselves helpless in the face of exploitation. Middlemen and petty traders also took full advantage of women when they buy or sell the goods.⁸ Generally, the male engage in the collection of timber, bamboo, hunting, collection of honey etc. the works like the collection of fuel wood, fodder, edible fruits, vegetables etc are done by the female and child only. Apart from the day to day household work, varied farm activities and other domestic responsibilities, women particularly in this tribal society spare a substantial time for common property resources based activities. They collect various minor as well as major forest products for their day to day requirement. Carrying of heavy loads of fuel wood either on head or with traditional basket by women is a long practice in the tribal society in the traditional tribal society. Women were dependent on forest for food, fibre, fodder, medicine, raw materials for producing small items like leaf plates, mats etc, for use at home or for selling them in markets. Apart from their dependence on forest lands as gatherers of forest produce, the women were also employed by forest department and contractors to work as unskilled labour. Women were supposed to participate in community forestation programmes and were also involved as producers in farm forestry programmes. Hence, four roles which women played in forestry are gathering, wage employment, management and production.⁹ Women play the most prominent role in the collection and processing NTFP. This was especially observed where women and men along with children go to forest for collection. As far as shigekai is concerned, while men beat the vine, women collect the fruits. Women also train the children in process of collecting, cleaning, sorting and drying of the pods. Women all the time carry heavy loads of collected material, men when they carry, invariably have an advantage of loading the material on a bicycle. The siddi society however, is dominated by men and women's participation is marginal. Women prefer working with hands. Weaving of mats is taken up by women, while cane baskets are made by men. The sales

⁷Mario Zenteno, *Livelihood Strategies and Forest Dependence: New Insights from Bolivian Forest Communities* 12 (Forest Policy and Economics 2013)

⁸*Ibid*, p.19.

⁹ Ram Krishna Mandal, *Employment Generation and Gender Dimension in the Common Property Resources Based Activities of the Monpa Tribal Women in Tawang District of Arunachal Pradesh, India* 17, 20 (Research Journal of Forestry 2013)



are taken up by both men and women. Women play major role in collecting and processing of NTFP like shigekai, mango, tamarind, muttala leaves, bidi leaves.¹⁰

III. Joint Forest Management in India

Joint Forest Management (JFM) is a new system of forest management based on the co-operative interaction between Forest Department and local communities to protect forest lands from degradation which is taking place at an alarming rate. In this system of managements the Forest Department and the local communities become equal partners in protection, regeneration, management and benefit sharing. The strategy is to create employment opportunities for the local communities through resource building activities and sharing of benefits.¹¹

A number of factors attribute to the successful functioning of JFM but most important among them are the co-operative interaction between the Forest Departments and local communities, and the preparation and implementation of an effective micro plan. India's forest policies date back to over hundred years. Under British rule, the state established monopoly control over forests, reserved large tracts for timber extraction, severely restricted the customary rights of local populations to these resources and encouraged commercially profitable species at the cost of species used by the local communities. There was also large scale clearance and felling for railways, ships, bridges, tea and coffee plantations, irrigation projects and crop cultivation to increase the governments land revenue base and so on. After independence, state monopoly over forests continued with the extension and strengthening of British policies. While forests continued to be exploited for commercial gains the local people's rights to Non-Wood Forest Products (NWFPs) were further curtailed and they were considered a main hurdle towards forest conservation.

¹⁰ P.G. Dandavatimath & ors, A Study on Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) in selected vilages of Uttara Kannada District, Karnataka 27 (Janapara Vignana-Tantragnana Samsthe 1997)

¹¹ Vol-1, Manas Chatterjee, Tribes in India 148, (RBSA Publishers, 2005)

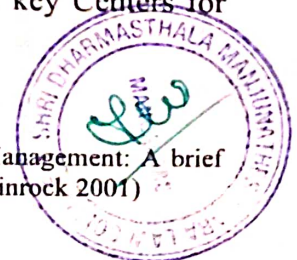


People's participation was restricted to the forestry programmes and sharing of fringe benefits. The forest communities considered the forest officials as usurpers of their legitimate rights. Thus, misunderstanding and conflicts continued and the rift between the forests officials and the local communities widened. JFM anticipates a totally different approach from the forest officials as well as the local communities; stress is given for opening new communication channels between the two and establishing mutually beneficial cooperative activities. Apart from restricting government policies and adoption of a new benefit sharing formula, mass education and environmental awareness programme should be provided to the local communities.¹²

JFM and the alleviation of poverty holds a particular relevance for India, where predominantly state owned and managed forests were subjected to rapid decline in the decades before and after Independence in 1947. One of the main reasons cited for this decline was the supposed "apathy" of local forest users, which allowed many forests to be turned into de-facto open access regimes. In an important policy shift, the Indian National Forest Policy, 1988 underscored the need to involve local communities in the management of forests. In a follow up document issued in 1990, Central government issued guidelines to all State governments to implement "Joint forest management" systems in order to regenerate forests and reduce rural poverty. These guidelines suggested that the State governments may devolve everyday forest protection, management and development responsibilities to local community institutions (co-operative or committee-based) at the village or panchayat levels and prescribe benefit-sharing arrangements following regeneration. Accordingly, 26 of the 28 Indian States (including the newly [in 2000] created States of Jharkhand, Uttaranchal and Chattisgarh) have formally resolved to implement JFM, making it one of the largest programs in the world. As on March 31, 2001 there were 44,943 official JFM groups, Village Forest Committees (VFCs) protecting over 11.63 million hectares of government-owned forests, or 15.5% of the recorded forest area of the country.¹³ The program is still expanding: it is expected that tens of thousands of informal or voluntary forest protection committees will soon be included in JFM. In addition, there is a suggestion by the government to extend JFM to well-stocked forests too. The JFM orders of various State governments recognize the special role that forests can play in the economic life of the rural poor. This recognition was given empirical support by several key Centers for

¹² *Ibid*, p.149

¹³ Borgoyary, M., India's Commitments to International Treaties on Sustainable Forest Management: A brief Review from the Perspective of Participatory Forest Management 14 (International India, Winrock 2001)



Policy Research (CPR) studies in the 1980s and 1990s, including those which established that trees are both a source of savings and security for the poor and which showed that apparently unproductive village wastelands are an important source of livelihoods for many rural communities.¹⁴ It has also been shown, for example, that despite a large variation in the per capita availability of forests in Udaipur District, Rajasthan (ranging from 0.087 to 4.27 ha) the forest-related incomes of surveyed households varied over a narrow range (2.2–3.6% of total household income), suggesting that forests remain important across a broad range of agro ecological systems.¹⁵ In another set of studies, the share of forest income to total household income has been found to be significantly higher for landless poor households as compared to cultivating non poor households across various Indian States.¹⁶ In recognition of this fact that the rural poor depend disproportionately upon forests. The JFM orders of various State governments have created right-regimes with respect to forest produce that favor participating communities. Under the most liberal JFM orders, such as in Andhra Pradesh where JFM has been linked to the *Janam Bhoomi program*, there is an assignment of cent-per-cent produce of JFM forests to Village Forest Committees (VFCs). In addition, in some States the net income from the sale of Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) is shared with the VFCs. This is true for kendu leaves (used to roll country cigarettes) in Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, and cashew nuts grown in West Bengal's forest plantations. These directives assume that a direct benefit sharing arrangement with VFCs and tackle the issue of growth with equity, and thus contribute significantly to the broader objective of rural poverty alleviation. That policy makers see JFM as a key tool for enhancing rural development is further evident from the fact that many State government orders require a percentage share of the net benefits accruing to VFCs (cent-per-cent in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh; up to one-third or one-half in Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan) to be spent on community development schemes. In recognition of the prospective role of JFM in rural development, there has been a renewed interest among major donor and funding agencies that forestry projects in India, "have the potential for alleviating poverty by building the grassroots capacity for forest protection and regeneration in the communities adjacent to forests". This is so because large percentage of these (forests) communities are made up of India's 75+ million tribal people, who are among the most

¹⁴ Vol. 21, No.26, Jodha, N.S., Common Property Resources and Rural Poor in Dry Regions of India 1169 (Economic and Political Weekly 1986)

¹⁵ Volume 13 Issue 4, Kinhal, G. A., & Narayan, K. R., Tribal dependence on forests: case studies from Rajasthan 527 (Journal of Rural Development 1994)

¹⁶ Volume 29 Issue 4, Beck T. & Ghosh, Common Property Resources Access By Poor And Class Conflict In West Bengal 187 (Eco & Pol. Weekly 1996)



disadvantaged sections of Indian society in terms of economic opportunities, literacy, nutrition and healthcare, and other socioeconomic indicators.

The institutional framework of forestry in the Indian context can be traced back to the 19th century, as early as during the onset of British colonial forestry, to meet the demand for timber by maintaining India's natural forests (areas not falling under "continuous cultivation" or "permanent settlement") as a resource for the colonial state. Since then, Forest Acts have been formulated and modified from time to time recognizing the State as the sole proprietor of classified forest land, defined as Traditional Forest Practices, including grazing, forest-based gathering and restricting the private property rights for rotational agriculture. Forest management policy of Independent India is broadly guided by the 1927 Act.¹⁷

In an important policy shift, the Indian National Forest Policy of 1988 underscored the need to involve local communities in the management of forests. In a follow-up document issued in 1990, Central government issued guidelines to all State governments to implement joint forest management systems in order to regenerate forests and reduce rural poverty. The JFM orders of various State governments recognize the special role that forests can play in the economic life of the rural poor.¹⁸

Joint forest management (JFM), which has encouraged the trend of voluntary forest production by villagers with the help of local forest officials, is extremely desirable both from the environmental and development perspectives. It has the potential of providing an effective solution to the problems of depletion and degradation of forest and of village development.¹⁹

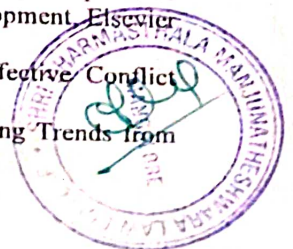
Forests, dense or degraded, serve as an important source for meeting some of the basic biomass needs of people like fodder, fuel wood, fibre and fruits. The quality of livelihood of those living close to forests depends largely on the adequate availability of these forest produce. Regeneration of forests is expected to ensure increased availability of various biomass helping poor in attaining self-reliance. Fodder is a very crucial biomass needed by the households for maintaining their livestock.²⁰

¹⁷ Sheeladitya Paul, Socio Economic issue in Forest Management in India 56 (Forest Policy And Economics 2011)

¹⁸ Vol. 30, No. 5, Sanjay Kumar, *Does participation in common pool resources management help the poor? A social cost-benefit analysis of Joint Forest Management in Jharkhand, India* 765, (World Development Elsevier Science Ltd, 2002)

¹⁹ Umesh Chandra Tripathy, *Joint Forest Management in Orissa: Creating a Space for Effective Conflict Resolution* 22, (Mainstream 2001)

²⁰ Vol.II, No.2, H.S. Shylendra, *Environmental Rehabilitation and Livelihood Impact Emerging Trends from Ethiopia and Gujarat* 63 (The ICFAI Journal of Environmental Law 2003)



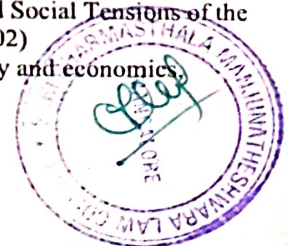
The forest region is a homeland of various tribal societies with distinct cultural diversities. More than 70 per cent of the population of the tribes still clings to their traditional occupation of shifting cultivation which helps them to remain with the subsistence economy without much economic and social mobility and development. Politically they are independent under their respective tribal chiefs and a form of territorial administration was controlled by them.²¹

Although India is the seventh largest country in the world, only 1.8% of the world's forest is found covering approximately 23% of the geographical area. About 360 million of India's population lives in or around the forest area, exerting tremendous pressure on limited forest resources. Of them, a large percentage constitutes the most disadvantaged section of the society. Series of policy measures have been adopted since independence towards arresting the factors considered relevant for forest depletion. Joint forest management is considered to be one of the successful regimes, currently in force in all the states of India, as it incorporated the forest user groups in the decision making process of forest management. However, it was also not devoid of lacunae as it failed to take into account the socio-economic factors of these stakeholders, which may have a serious bearing on successful outcome of managing the forest resources.²²

Joint forest management guidelines were issued in 1990 to facilitate the involvement of local communities to the management of forests. Since then 10000 forest protection committees have been constituted across the country which manage 28 per cent of the total forest area. The National Environment Policy 2006, recognized that forest laws and formal institutions have undermined traditional community rights and disempowered community rights and disempowerment has led to the forests belonging open access in native, leading to their gradual declaration in the classic sense of tragedy of commons. The Policy advocates recognition of traditional rights of communities to remedy a serious historical injustice. FRA 2006, seeks to rectify some of the anomalies that have resulted from the notification of tribal and other lands as state forests without settling of rights. It has been reported that the October 2009, 2.49 million claims have been filed under the Act, out of which 0.56 million titles have been

²¹ Vol. XLVIII. No.3, R.K.Bhadra, Administrative Responses to the Identity Problems and Social Tensions of the Tribal Communities in North-East India 390 (Indian Journal of Public Administration 2002)

²² Sheeladitya Paul, Socio Economic issue in forest management in India 56 (Forest policy and economics, 2011)



distributed. As Reducing Emission from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD) proposal and projects gather momentum indigenous peoples, forest movement and forest policy experts emphasis that effective and sustainable policies on forests and climate change mitigation must be based on the recognition of forest right, respect for the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent and requirements for progressive forests sector tenure and governance reforms. At Bali meeting the decision on REDD did not contain explicit recognition of the need to respect the rights of indigenous people and local communities. While the cop decision did not mention human rights instruments or important intergovernmental commitments like the UN declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, in India majority of forest resources function as life support systems for nearly 400 million people and also act as safety nets. In spite of heavy dependence of people on forests these resources are used in a sustainable manner due to certain indigenous forestry practices of forest fringe communities which reduce the extraction and dependency load on forests and thus help better management of forest carbon.²³

There are about 48 million forest dwellers in India for whom forests have continued to be an important source of livelihood and survival. Previously, despite legal restrictions on the rights of people to enter forests, people continued to subsist on forest goods. They used to extract minor forest produce which included many forms of food, including nuts, wild fruits, honey and oil seeds, leaves, gums, waxes, dyes, and resins and raw materials like bamboo, canes and bhabar grass. Very often conflicts between the forest department personnel and the collectors of resources ended in loss of life and communal tensions. Most forests are located in regions with poor soil where agriculture is not very productive. By the mid-seventies it was clear that if people's demands are not met, forests could not be saved. A programme of social forestry in village and private lands was planned. But due to many reasons like non-involvement of local people, bad selection of species etc. this programme also did not work properly.²⁴

²³ Vol. 1, No. 1, Dhulasi Birundha Varadarajan, REDD, Climate Change and the Right of Tribal Communities in India 17,18 (Journal of Studies in Dynamic and Change 2014)

²⁴ Vol. 34, No. 7/8, Tapan Kumar Misra, Scientist Forest Policy and Deprivation of Forest Dwellers in Independent India: The Story of the Baidharas and Other Forest Dependent Communities 23 (Social Scientist 2006)



The JMF orders of various State Governments recognize the special role that forest can play in the economic life of the rural poor.²⁵ Forest resources have always been an important part of subsistence as well as livelihoods for forest dwellers and rural communities.²⁶

IV. Conclusion

On above discussion it can be concluded that, more than 1.6 billion people depend to varying degrees on forests for their livelihoods, e.g. fuel wood, medicinal plants and forest foods. Approximately 300 million depend on forests directly for their survival, including about 60 million people of indigenous and tribal groups, who are almost wholly dependent on forests. Forests play a key role in the economy of many countries. Forest has been the ancestral lands and the habitat of generations of forest dwellers. In fact, they are inseparable from the ecosystem, including wildlife and cannot survive in isolation. Besides the forest dwellers, to a vast majority of the tribal population, forest is one of the main sources of subsistence.

²⁵ Vol. 30, No. 5, Sanjay Kumar, Does participation in common pool resources management help the poor? A social cost-benefit analysis of joint forest management in Jharkhand, India 765, (World Development, Elsevier science Ltd, 2002)

²⁶ Vol XLVII, No.52, Jyotsna Krishnakumar et al., Non-Timber Forest Products Livelihoods and Conservation 132 (Eco & Pol. Wkly 2012)

