

# JOINT FOREST MANAGEMENT: A NEW DEVELOPMENT BAND-WAGON IN INDIA?

*N C Saxena*

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## RESUMEN

En la India, el Manejo Conjunto de Bosques (JFM) está ganando mayor importancia. Sin embargo, en base a principios derivados de un proyecto que ha dado buenos resultados del este de Bengal, algunos forestales sostienen que en otras partes de India, el Manejo Conjunto de Bosques tiene una aplicación limitada. El autor analiza estos argumentos, y mantiene que, sin caer en un exagerado pesimismo, es necesario reformar las políticas gubernamentales para asegurar la aplicación de este modelo. Entre los aspectos que requieren más atención y aclaración están el mareo legal, la comercialización, el apoyo de las mujeres, la coordinación entre divisiones del Departamento de Forestería y la formación de encargados forestales. A un nivel más general, el autor sostiene que las políticas gubernamentales de ubicación de las diferentes estrategias de producción deben de ser invertidas. Durante los últimos 100 años, la forestería comercial Indiana se ha desarrollado en tierras de bosques, mientras que en las tierras privadas se ha incentivado una forestería de subsistencia. En cambio, el autor sugiere que los bosques y las tierras comunales deberían de ser utilizados para la producción de subsistencia, y la producción de madera para el mercado debería de provenir de las tierras privadas.

## RESUME

La gestion forestière commune (Joint Forest Management JFM) prend de plus en plus d'importance dans la foresterie de l'Inde. Basée en grande partie sur des principes dérivés d'un projet réussi de l'Ouest du Bengale, cette gestion commune ne peut, selon certains, être reproduite que de façon limitée dans d'autres parties de l'Inde. Dans ce document, on explore ces arguments, et l'on explique qu'il n'y a aucune raison de tomber dans un pessimisme excessif; néanmoins une réforme doit intervenir dans la politique du gouvernement qui jusqu'à présent a entravé les initiatives de gestion forestière commune. Les domaines qui exigent une attention toute particulière ou une clarification comprennent: le cadre juridique pour les accords de gestion forestière commune; les mesures commerciales; l'appui aux femmes; la coordination entre les divisions du Service des Forêts et la formation des agents forestiers. A un niveau plus large, le document fait valoir qu'une réforme radicale dans la politique du gouvernement est nécessaire en ce qui concerne l'emplacement des différentes stratégies de production forestière. Durant les cent dernières années en Inde, la foresterie commerciale s'est située sur des terres forestières, tandis que les terres privées étaient réservées à la production de subsistance des besoins forestiers. Au lieu de cela, il faudrait gérer les terres forestières et les terres communes avant tout à des fins de production de subsistance, et la demande de commercialisation pour des produits dérivés des arbres devrait être satisfaite en grande partie à partir des terres privées.

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## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Until recently, 'Scientific Forestry' on forest lands in India had meant raising trees in order to get sustained yield of timber for markets. Right from the colonial days up to 1988, emphasis was laid on the conversion of "low" value mixed forests into 'high' value plantations of commercial species like teak, eucalyptus and bamboo. As late as 1976, a high powered government commission, called the National Commission on Agriculture (NCA) recommended, "Production of industrial wood would have to be the *raison d'être* for the existence of forests. It should be project-oriented and commercially feasible from the point of view of cost and return". The commission however recommended fuelwood and fodder plantations through social forestry on village and private lands.

### **Social Forestry on Non-Forest Lands**

It is significant that social forestry was not generally tried on forest lands, as such lands were still sought for timber production. Social forestry was thus seen as a programme which would release industrial forestry from social pressures. The core objective for forest lands remained production of commercial timber. In order to keep people out of such lands, it was considered necessary to make them produce their subsistence tree product needs free of charge on community and private lands.

With some exceptions, the farm forestry programme succeeded only in the commercialised and monetised regions of India, and made little impact on the vast subsistence regions. Even in regions where it was successful in the early 1980s, it could not be sustained after 1986. Social forestry on community lands also ran into problems. Although it attracted most of the financial resources, the sustained management of such dispersed plantations by Forest Departments became doubtful.

### **Back to Forest Lands**

The limited success of social forestry on non-forest lands in India has led planners and donor agencies to shift attention to forest lands. These form the bulk of India's uncultivated lands capable of supporting vegetation. Fortunately, the Government of India revised the old timber-oriented forest policy in 1988 and requested the state governments to treat subsistence requirements of forest dwellers as a primary aim of forest production. In pursuit of this objective in June 1990 the Government of India recommended various State Governments to encourage the involvement of village communities and voluntary agencies in the regeneration of forest land. A number of Indian states have already accepted these guidelines in principle, and have initiated action to start what are now called Joint Forest Management (JFM) programmes. The new donor assisted forestry programmes in these states are likely to depend heavily on Joint Forest Management concepts. Thus funding support for forest lands is likely to be much better than it has been during the last fifteen years.

## THE EVOLUTION OF JFM

The guidelines issued by the Government of India are based on the success achieved in a pilot project begun in the 1970s in Arabari, in southern West Bengal. This project was based on involving communities in the protection of degraded forest lands dominated by sal (*Shorea robusta*). In return for protecting the sal forests, the Forest Department agreed to give villagers all non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and a 25% share in timber. This arrangement proved to be quite successful, the project demonstrating that with the aforementioned incentives, villagers would protect the natural sal forests from fuelwood cutting. It also demonstrated that with the benefit of this protection the sal would rapidly regenerate, due to its ability to coppice. In addition to the sal, a wide variety of productive species normally associated with sal began to flourish, resulting in a steady increase in income to women collecting non-timber forest products. Senior foresters in the state were so impressed with these results that by the mid-1980s they advocated extension of the project to similar ecological zones throughout South West Bengal. By the end of 1991 community-based forest protection committees were protecting approximately 200,000 hectares of land.

### Replicability of Joint Forest Management

Joint forest management is a fairly new concept in India. While it has been a big success in West Bengal, it is too early to pass a definite judgement on its implementation in other states. The critics of the programme point towards the exceptional conditions prevailing in South West Bengal. These are that:

- ! there is a favourable political climate;
- ! the commercial value of forests has been almost nil since at least the 1960s;
- ! the forests are dominated by sal, which not only coppices well but also gives useful non-timber products on a recurrent basis;
- ! the unusual topography of the forests makes each forest coupe identifiable with only one village and quite remote from other villages;
- ! the population in many villages is ethnically homogeneous;
- ! peoples' fuelwood demands are met from the eucalyptus plantations planted by them on private lands, thus reducing their dependence on forest lands.

On the other hand, supporters of the programme argue that there is no need to be unduly pessimistic about its likely success in other states. There are many instances throughout India where people on their own initiative started protecting forests; of these, *Chipko* and *Sukhomajri* are well-known examples. In a number of other areas, growing resource scarcity has spurred many communities to protect their disturbed environments to allow natural forest regeneration. This action has been independent of any government initiative. It has been argued that community participation is an empty slogan, that it can work only in very small

areas in exceptional circumstances, and that the rigid stratification of village society in India inhibits the development of institutions representing a common will. This view appears simplistic and over-stretched in the face of the positive evidence of community action from diverse agro-ecological zones. In each of the eastern states of Orissa and Bihar, for instance, more than 200,000 ha is under informal protection by forest communities. Even if it is assumed that the most effective local institutions develop in small communities where people know each other, it should be remembered that most forests in India are located in the hills, uplands and tribal regions which have ethnically homogeneous communities living in small villages of relatively low population.

### **Constraints of Government Policies**

Rather than trying to locate barriers to community action in structural and sociological factors, greater attention needs to be paid to government policy, which has often hampered such initiatives. Some of these are listed below.

### **Legal Issues**

The legal and organisational framework for joint management remains weak and controversial. In many states, villages distant from forest areas have settlement and use rights. The result is that a forest patch does not have a well-defined and recognised user-group. The rights of contiguous villages which are protecting forests may come into conflict with those of distant villages which have not agreed to forest protection, but still have usufruct rights. This kind of 'right-regime', which makes forests open-access lands, is clearly not conducive to successful protection. Therefore, at least in JFM areas, use rights should be reviewed in order to put them in harmony with the '*care and share philosophy*' which is the basis of JFM.

Another legal problem concerns the status of village communities. The state government resolutions recommend village level committees as functional groups. However, these committees have no legal or statutory basis, and it may be difficult for them to manage resources on a long-term basis. Their relationships with the statutory village Panchayats will need to be sharply defined.

### **Working Plans and JFM**

Most government resolutions envisage the preparation of a village plan. As a forest patch for which a microplan is developed will also be part of a particular forest block, range and division, there is a need to dovetail microplans to Working Plan prescriptions. The integration of village plans with Working Plans will require changes in the philosophy and contents of the Working Plans, which at the moment are steeped in the old philosophy of maximising production of timber rather than of biomass suitable for local needs.

### **Marketing Aspects of JFM**

The JFM programme is oriented towards the subsistence needs of local communities. Nevertheless, once the produce of forests increases through proper protection there is every likelihood of production surpassing that which can be consumed within the village itself. Marketing will thus become important. Almost all NTFPs are nationalised, that is, they can be sold only to government agencies. Nationalisation reduces the number of legal buyers, chokes the free flow of goods, and delays payment to the gatherers (government agencies finding it difficult to make prompt payment). This results in contractors entering 'from the back door'. They inevitably operate with higher margins, these being necessary to cover uncertain and delayed payments by government agencies, and to cover the cost of ensuring that the police and other authorities ignore their illegal activities. This all reduces forest dwellers' incomes, and their incentive to collect.

It is therefore argued that the Government should not have a monopoly in for marketing NTFPs, as in the long run nationalisation does not help gatherers. A Government purchasing monopoly requires sustained political support and excellent bureaucratic machinery. It is difficult to ensure these over a long period, and hence nationalisation has often increased the exploitation of the poor.

### **Women as JFM Motivators**

Given the gender segregated and hierarchical nature of Indian society, separate women's organisations and staff are needed to work among women, to instil confidence in them. Thus they will be able to fight for their rights. More women need to be recruited to the Forest Department for this purpose. The village level committees should have adequate and equal representation of women. Forestry staff should be sensitised on gender issues through orientation programmes. As women in many societies still feel inhibited when expressing themselves in mixed gatherings, each committee should have a separate women's cell for consciousness raising and for improving their skills. The degree of women's participation and the control that they exercise over decision making processes is more important than the sheer number of women present in such bodies.

### **Balance of Power Between the Forest Department and Communities**

In many states the Forest Department can cancel or dissolve the Forest Protection Committee (FPC). The mechanism of this dissolution needs to be worked out in more detail so that the order does not appear arbitrary. Whilst Forest Departments must have the ability to dissolve the management agreement if their community partners fail to uphold their responsibilities under the JFM programme, it is also important that the user group is respected. The need for autonomy and a democratic process at the community level is currently not reflected in the state resolutions.

### **Coordinating JFM with other Departments**

The relationship between JFM and the Social Forestry Programme has to be spelt out. Within one forest department there are likely to be separate divisions for social forestry and territorial

forestry. Since JFM is under the jurisdiction of the territorial division alone, it is possible that two different rangers and their respective staffs could be working in the same village with different mandates; JFM on forest land, and social forestry on non-forest land. One would like to advocate a merger of the Social Forestry and Territorial Divisions, since there are clear links between their areas of responsibility. Mere protection of a not-so-degraded area may transfer pressure to some other area. Therefore production of biomass through quick growing shrubs, bushes and grasses must be undertaken on more degraded lands, to meet people's demands in a sustained manner. At the same time, forest lands will be protected in anticipation of more valuable NTFPs and forest products. The issue of how to meet the economic needs of the people for the first few years (during which they have to reduce their dependence on the protected land) must be faced squarely. It is impractical to expect people to give up grazing or reduce their consumption in the "national interest" without any tangible gains in return.

### **Administrative Ethos**

The problematic relationship between JFM and social forestry is only one of the reasons for making the forestry bureaucracy itself a topic for study programming. One aspect of this bureaucracy which demands greater understanding is its 'culture' - something that is highly relevant to the success of JFM. For example, while the principle of JFM assumes a participatory/consultative framework, the government bureaucracy that is charged with its implementation operates in a decidedly non-participatory/ non-consultative fashion. Bureaucratic regulations regarding budget release, physical targets, and the development of working plans all act against the more flexible adaptive process needed for the successful implementation of a JFM programme. What is needed is an effort to identify the key points of leverage through which the forestry bureaucracy could be moved toward more open working practices.

### **Need for Training**

Change in bureaucratic structures takes time and continued support; it cannot be imposed from outside but must evolve from within. However, the evolution could be accelerated with appropriate training. Whilst innovative courses are being run by a few NGOs for forest officers, the National Forestry Academy and the Rangers Colleges responsible for the education and training of foresters continue to teach a curriculum that has changed little in the last 100 years. Until these institutions modify their curriculum to incorporate the teaching of social skills and of evolving silvicultural and administrative concepts, forest officers will continue to have to be re-trained for Joint Forest Management.

### **Peoples' Preference - A Share in Management or an Increase in Livelihood Goods?**

Of the estimated 30 million ha of degraded forest lands in India, roughly 12 million ha has good quality root stock, which could be regenerated through protection. The rest will need some enrichment planting in addition to protection. Even in people-protected areas, a share in final produce (obtained after several years of waiting) may not be sufficient in itself to enthruse a community to embark on protection, as they need seasonal incomes. In the long run, it is not

management which attracts people to forests, nor rights in forests, but the lure of obtaining livelihood products (which sal and its associated species give on a continuous basis in West Bengal). It is the drastic increase in income through enhanced supplies of NTFPs which is likely to induce people to give up grazing in forest lands, or invest their labour in its protection. Thus, in order to seek peoples' cooperation, it would be better if they could be guaranteed more output from forest lands.

This can be achieved if social forestry is extended to reserved and protected forest lands by changing species selection from teak, eucalypts and pines to usufruct based trees, such as neem (*Azadirachta indica*), mahua (*Madhuca indica*), Karanj (*Pongamia pinnata*), sal and palmyrah. These should be supplemented with grasses, shrubs and bushes to yield fuelwood and fodder in the shortest possible time.

This requires a complete and explicit reversal of the recommendations of the National Commission on Agriculture, 1976, which favoured commercial plantations on forest land, and trees for consumption and subsistence on private land. Instead, it is recommended that subsistence and consumption should be met from forest and common land, and market demand should by and large be met from private land. Using private land for short rotation products will permit the large area of forest land to be used for long gestation trees, which enrich the environment and provide a range of products to the poor. "Scientific" forestry should therefore mean that wild fruits, nuts, MPFs, grasses, leaves and twigs become the main intended products from forest lands, with timber being a by-product from large trees like tamarind, jack and sal. The reverse has been the policy for the last 100 years.

Although the above suggestion has been accepted to some extent in the new Forestry Policy, its implementation relating to a change in the choice of species by the states has yet to begin. In none of the states are commercial species being discouraged on forest lands; 'business' seems to be as usual in state governments. Sharing management of forest lands with the people is an important goal, but the process will proceed at different paces in different conditions. In the meantime, what is essential is to develop usufruct-based trees, shrubs and grasses on degraded forest lands to meet their livelihood needs. Where a large number of people have claims to forest products, solutions involving low levels of management and low value (but high biomass) output, have perhaps a better chance of success. Practical considerations of the political economy suggest that technology is easier to change than institutions.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

One problem with over-promotion of JFM is that it can lead to massive donor interest and funding support, which may exceed the absorption capacity of the forestry department. JFM may indeed have been promoted beyond the present capacity for implementation. Apart from the lack of institutional capacity, the technical skills to develop different silvicultural systems (to fulfil the varied objectives of management) are also insufficient. For instance, research on the economic and ecological impact of protection shows that although people's main concern is with fodder, protection beyond six years tends to close the tree canopy and reduce grass production. Perhaps a much wider spacing is called for to maintain grass production (this being one of the major incentives for community protection and management). Similarly,

most silvicultural research in India so far has been conducted on commercial species, and techniques for the large scale regeneration of multi-purpose species such as mahua and neem are still to be developed.

Care will need to be taken to ensure that JFM does not just become the next development band-wagon. JFM is process-oriented, and does not lend itself to becoming a target and product-oriented programme. In India, there may be a need to consolidate experience with JFM to date. Along with the expansion of the programme, the capacity of institutions to support it should be critically evaluated and improved.

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## **Credits**

**Network Coordinator:** Dr Gill Shepherd  
**Editors of this paper:** Dr Jane Carter  
Edwin Shanks  
**Abstracts:** Dr Elvira Belaunde (Spanish)  
Ms France Duserre (French)  
**Layout:** Ivana Wilson

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