

## **Forest Policy and Environment Programme: Grey Literature**

### ***Putting 'social' into forestry?***

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Jack Westoby's challenge to the forestry world that 'forestry is not about trees, it is about people. And it is about trees only insofar as trees can serve the needs of people' (Westoby, 1967 cited in Leslie, 1987: ix) was first answered by social forestry. Its appearance on the international stage was as a response to the so-called poor-man's fuelwood energy crisis, the supposed eco-disasters of the 1970s and most importantly the growing realisation that industrial forestry was failing to deliver the claimed socio-economic benefits. All of this was to have profound consequences on the future shape of the forest sector. The history of these changes is an important part of understanding why and how social forestry evolved.

The post-war period from the mid 1940s to the late 1960s was a period of increasing prosperity, rapid industrialisation and full employment within the core countries of the Western world. Modernisation theories permeated all sectors, including forestry. Westoby in a seminal paper of 1962 advanced the argument that industrial forestry would stimulate development in underdeveloped countries (Westoby, 1962). He held that forest-based industries had strong forward and backward linkages with the rest of the economy because they furnished a wide range of goods and services and used mainly local inputs. The demand for forest products was forecast to rise rapidly following the rapid industrialisation of all economies.

These arguments provided the basis for forest policy development in both developed and less developed countries. They strongly influenced the form of forestry development promoted by the new international aid agencies such as the World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organisation. In India, the increased demand for forest products was met through heavy investment in plantations for the production of industrial wood-based products. Capital was invested in large forest industries supported by the raw material from plantations and intensively managed natural forests (Gadgil et al., 1983).

The boom in Western economies ended abruptly with the economic crises of the early 1970s. Inflation soared when the OPEC cartel of oil-exporting nations secured a four-fold increase in the price of oil. The economic crises led to a realisation that industrialisation did not necessarily lead to the economic or social development of underdeveloped countries (Griffin and Khan, 1978). Rural and urban poverty became the focus of development theory and practice with sustenance of 'basic needs' forming the objective of development policy (Streeten and Bucki, 1978; Ghai et al., 1979).

The focus on energy forced attention on the rest of the world where most people are dependent on wood as their main fuel for cooking and heating (Arnold, 1989). A series of reports highlighted the linkages between millions of people dependent on a rapidly disappearing forest resource and a projected ecological disaster of enormous dimensions (Openshaw, 1974; Earl, 1975; Eckholm, 1975, 1976; the World Bank, 1978). This scenario

of eco-crisis and livelihood degradation was well developed and has been highly formative in the construction of forest policy and practice in India. Thus this period was dominated by the 'fuelwood crisis' and strong statements that 'without massive new tree planting the current rate of use of forest resources will disastrously accelerate deforestation and will lead to a worldwide fuelwood scarcity' (Cernea, 1992:304).

Forestry, as a follower of development strategies evolved in wider fields, straggled behind the changing moods of development policy. The shift away from industrialisation as the vehicle for development slowly percolated through the forestry sectors of aid agencies. The late 1970s saw a spate of conferences and policy statements. These included Westoby's major rescindment of his 1962 paper on the merits of forest industrialisation. He looked back in 1978 at the policies of industrialisation and modernisation that he had so ardently advocated in the 1960s and found that '....very, very few of the forest industries that have been established in underdeveloped countries....have in any way promoted socio-economic development' (Westoby, 1978) At the 1978 Eighth World Forestry Congress ('Forests for People'), where he admitted his disappointment, he elucidated a new social role for forestry, a form of forestry which became known as 'social forestry' and embraced notions of communal action by rural people (Westoby, 1978).

This heralded the beginning of a major programme launched by FAO and the Swedish International Development Administration to help the development of community forestry programmes around the world. In the same year, the World Bank issued a *Forestry Sector Policy Paper* which also indicated a major change in direction away from support mainly for industrial forestry to forestry to meet local needs (World Bank, 1978). Forestry for local community development emerged as a new world-wide practice for forestry development, and was promoted by international organisations and sold in programme and project packages. Forestry was claimed to be the 'unique vehicle' by which the needs of local people could be met and the quality of rural lives enhanced (Richardson, 1978; Shah, 1975).

Social forestry had its formal birth in India, where several states pioneered tree-growing programmes outside the traditional forest boundaries (Gadgil et al., 1983; Wiersum, 1986; Arnold, 1989). For example, the state of Gujarat in 1970 set up a Community Forestry Wing in the Forest Department, and Tamil Nadu started a tree-planting programme for employment generation on tank foreshores and village wastelands as early as 1956 (Singh et al., 1989). After 1973, half of the proceeds from these plantations were given to local *panchayat*s and local people were allowed to collect fodder from the plantation areas (Eckholm, 1979, Wiersum 1986). At the same time the push for industrial timber production was underway and stated to be, by the National Commission on Agriculture in 1976, 'the *raison d'être* for the existence of forests (GOI, 1976), it also recommended that social forestry be recognised. The NCA further clarified this through its classification of forests as protection, production and social forests – where social forests were all those lands considered to be 'unproductive' and outside the state forest lands.

In crude terms social forestry could be seen to be the extension of the state forest departments control onto land outside their territory and also a way to reduce the pressure on the 'productive' forests to ensure the continued supply of industrial raw material. Social forestry as a means to alleviate pressure did nothing to prevent the emergence of vigorous local protest movements against the alienation of forests from local users. In Bihar, in 1978, local people protested in what has been called the 'Tree War' against the replacement of natural forests by teak plantations (CSE, 1982). In the Himalayas, the Chipko movement protested against the logging of the pine forests (Shiva et al., 1985), and in Madhya Pradesh protest managed to halt a World Bank project that was to turn 20,000 hectares of natural forests that supported the economy of tribal groups, into pine plantations (ibid.; Dogra, 1985; Anderson and Huber, 1988).

The formation of the National Wastelands Development Board (NWDB) in 1985 was one indication of the importance attached by government to the apparent problems of forest product supply for local people (GOI, 1999; Chowdhury, 1992). It also further solidified the creep of the state onto lands outside their formal jurisdiction. It signified a shift of focus from the Ministry of Environment and Forests and heralded the removal of sole control over all things tree and forests from the foresters and the beginning of a reduced influence by professional foresters on policy-making (Chambers et al., 1989). It marked the beginning of an increased 'projectisation' of funds, where foresters were expected to carry out activities in the context of projects (with prescribed targets) rather than planning holistically for the total management of forest resources. Social forestry brought a whole new series of actors on to the Indian forestry stage in the shape of international donors, notably Swedish Sida (with projects in Orissa, Bihar and Tamil Nadu) and also NGOs as facilitators of the community-level process (Verma, 1990). With the increasing donor interest in support for the forest sector to supply fuelwood and other basic needs, social forestry seemed to fulfil the necessary criteria. Over a 15 year period, US\$ 400 million were spent on establishing social forestry programmes (Poffenberger, 1990), and in a five year period between 1979 and 1984 it was estimated that over 2.5 million hectares of land had been reforested (Guhathakurta, 1984).

The initial remit of the NWDB was to reforest the so-called 'wastelands' of India. Its aim, as described by the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, was to afforest an ambitious 5 million hectares every year as fuelwood and fodder plantations (according to Chambers et al., 1989 this is equivalent to an extraordinary 10 billion trees, or about 17,000 trees per village per annum!). 'Wasteland' in India is of course non-existent but is a notion built on the colonial authorities practice of asserting sovereign rights over areas of land that fell outside the purview of conventional land management. Thus Baden-Powell (1874) was able to state that: 'There never had been any doubt that in theory, the 'waste' – that is, land not occupied by any owner or allotted to anyone – was at the disposal of the ruler to do what he liked with; in short was the property of the State'. In this way, large areas of land used by local people for grazing, collection of medicinal plants, etc. were alienated and placed at the disposal of the state to allot as it deemed appropriate. Throughout the nineteenth century much emphasis was placed on conversion of the 'waste' to more productive use, generally meaning its afforestation with commercially significant trees.

This general approach to 'waste' changed in objective, but not in practice, in the 1980s when wastelands were again identified as a target area for intervention but this time as the land on which to grow the nation's fuelwood supplies (Hegde, 1987 provides detailed technical guidance on the restoration of wastelands). This still ignored the existing user rights to these lands (Verma, 1990). The inevitable consequence of Rajiv Gandhi's target was the misappropriation of land that was under other forms of management – in particular, grazing – leading to the disenfranchisement of many villagers, and a trail of failed plantations (Jodha, 1995). The common experience of these externally funded social forestry projects on the wastelands was of plantation targets rarely met, and disinterested villagers who could see no benefit from participation (USAID, 1985; Arnold et al., 1990; World Bank, 1990). For example, in Uttar Pradesh a target of 3,080 hectares of woodlots was set but by the end of the World Bank project only 136 hectares had been established because the target group of poor villagers were unwilling to contribute labour to an enterprise that provided limited and uncertain benefits after significant labour investments in protection and maintenance (Cernea, 1992 citing a World Bank evaluation).

The farm forestry programmes, also supported under social forestry, did show evidence of success in the initial stages, as demonstrated by the demand for seedlings far outpacing supply (Blair, 1986). Private tree-growing was concentrated in a few regions of India and resulted in localised over-production of poles and a consequent depression in prices.

Perhaps because of falling prices and local surpluses, the initial boom amongst wealthier farmers slowed down by the mid 1990s (Saxena, 1990, 1994).

The critics of social forestry at this time started a major debate that had profound consequences across India and elsewhere about the nature of tree species being promoted (Shiva et al., 1981, 1982; Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, 1982). In this case eucalyptus became the focus for a major and sustained protest against the state in its promotion of a tree that was seen to only meet commercial needs, was detrimental to the farming system, was anti-poor in the sense it did not meet the immediate fuelwood and fodder needs and was displacing other forms of agriculture that were more diverse and labour-intensive (Shiva et al., 1981; CSE, 1982).

Thus by the mid-1980s social forestry was already mired in controversy. Assessments of these social forestry programmes which had been running for over a decade revealed significant problems in terms of process and outcomes (Arnold, 1989; Box 1). At this stage, external funders of forestry projects justified the funding on the basis of poverty alleviation and satisfying basic needs particularly of fuelwood, where forestry was seen to be an appropriate entry point to reach the more marginalised groups (Magrath, 1988). But the poverty focus of the social forestry projects was not to be achieved, in many instances poorer groups were dispossessed from the land they had been using, particularly those groups whose livelihoods were dependent on access to grazing lands (Foley and Barnard, 1985).

#### Criticisms of the social forestry era

- **Homogenous communities:** local people were assumed to be a non-stratified homogenous group represented through the *panchayat*, and thus access to benefits would be equally distributed
- **Skewed participation:** participation was limited to discussions between senior *panchayat* officers and the Forest Department
- **Representation of interests:** It was assumed that the *panchayat* would represent the interests of its diverse constituencies
- **Loss in livelihoods:** planting of common lands replaced other existing uses of the land and led to local losses in livelihoods (particularly of poorer households)
- **High costs:** costs of protection (borne by Forest Departments and projects) were too high and unsustainable
- **Uncertain benefits:** benefit-sharing was unclear and determined through the *panchayat*
- **No local ownership:** survival rates were very low as plantations were considered to belong to the government rather than to local people
- **State acquisition of non-state land:** land brought under social forestry schemes was reclassified as protected forests, and thus it became a forest offence for local people to collect products from the plantation areas
- **Commercial species:** fast-growing species were preferred by Forest Departments because of their ease of production. Although the high market value was of interest to certain local groups (particularly wealthier farmers), many of those previously using the plantation areas were interested in access to non-commercial biomass
- **Access to intermediate products** such as twigs and grasses was often denied to local people
- **Not pro-poor:** the very people, social forestry was supposed to benefit – the poor – were demonstrated to have gained little or nothing from the programme

Source: Alvares, 1982; Shiva et al., 1982; Shiva and Bandyopadhyay, 1983; Mahiti Team, 1983; Olsson, 1986; Sen and Das, 1987; Arnold et al., 1987 a and b, 1990; Brokensha, 1988; Singh et al., 1989; Verma, 1990; Arnold and Stewart, 1991; Pandey and Jain, 1991; Poffenberger and Singh, 1992; Saxena, 1991, 1992; and derived from Pathak, 1994

The mix of objectives ascribed to social forestry aimed at communities, doomed the programme to difficulties from the outset, with a multiplicity of target groups to be reached but only two models – that of woodlots or farm forestry. One of the common factors identified in their failure was the absence of people's participation in planning and management. This led to poor survival rates of trees established on land already under other uses, and reluctance by communities to take over responsibility for the management of plantations that were seen to be forest department assets on community lands, with unclear benefit-sharing (Verma, 1990). This was compounded by the drive within forestry departments which were essentially using social forestry as a means to transfer pressure on forests used for commercial production to newly created woodlots outside the forest estate; effectively a way to secure the forest boundaries against local users.

Furthermore even though social forestry was intended to reduce pressure on forest lands through creating alternative sources of fuel, fodder and forest products, degradation of natural forests still continued, since the woodlots could not replace the multiple benefits from natural forests. The intense focus of funds and energy to private and common lands redirected attention away from investment and management of natural forests (Arnold et al., 1987a and b; Arnold, 1990; Chambers et al., 1989; Chaffey et al., 1992). Thus social forestry became a practice that remained outside the mainstream with separate divisions of social foresters dedicated to its implementation and driven by planting targets that provided a stream of perverse incentives and failed plantations.

Although social forestry did herald the beginning of a new set of relationships with local people, it also released mainstream foresters to continue with their form of forestry which did not have to take any notice of the 'social' which happened on lands outside the state forest areas, and therefore had little or no effect on their ways of working. Ultimately, however, this was the beginning of a change in relationships which brought foresters out of the forest and into the villages and farms. This legacy laid the foundations in India for a profound, but still contested, shift inside forest departments towards local people. It led to some acceptance of their limited role in forest management with the advent of joint forest management and the shift onto state forest lands and formal arrangements between state and society to share the management of forests.

Note: The references with an asterisk (\*) are included in the ODI Forest Policy and Environment Programme's *Forestry Grey Literature Collection*: [www.odifpeg.org.uk/publications/greyliterature](http://www.odifpeg.org.uk/publications/greyliterature)

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