

HARMONY IN CONFLICT

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Forests is one important common property resource in India. What essentially distinguishes our situation from that of developed nations in this field is that more than 50 million forest-dwellers largely depend on forests for their economic, cultural and ethnic survival. The socio-cultural practices of these people are interwoven with the life cycle of forests. On the otherhand with the passage of time nation's requirements of forests is demanding. In the Planning and management of forests as common property resource, conflicts between two interests local community interest and national interest are increasingly pronounced. In this paper attempts have been made to present a perception in bringing about a harmony between these conflicting interests, on the basis Indian experiences.

The 1952 National Forest Policy Resolution aimed at increasing the forest coverage in the country to 33 percent of the total land area which is at present about 23 percent. According to Indian Forest Statistics, the total forest area is about 75 million hectares. But in reality not more than 10% to 11% of

our lands have forests worth the name. Instead of repeating the known destructive elements of forests like, population pressure, cattlegrazing, unauthorised wood-cutting to meet the increasing demand for fuelwood, multipurpose irrigation projects, road construction etc. We should ask ourselves whether the rationale of the present forest planning is rational at all? It is an accepted fact that there is hardly any dearth of management expertise. To my mind, the basic reason for increasing denudation of Indian forests is the lack of proper perception of the socio-economic background in our forest planning.

Forest and Local Community

The dominant perception of forest planning is to plan renewable forest resources from the commercial point of view to generate maximum possible revenue for the state, to serve the larger interest of the nation. The local community interest has been denied any special significance, on the contrary local community interests are sacrificed in a number of ways in the name of larger national interest, the local people being treated simply as a burden on the forests.

In this perception commercial exploitation of forest resources occupies pivotal position. Its contribution to the national economy in physical and financial terms becomes the primary consideration, taking, of course, into account both short term

and long term interest. The system is conceptually similar to modern industrial planning with a difference that its operations are dispersed. There is no special relationship between the local community and the nearby forests. Local community is treated as the supplier of labour, as casual wage-earners. Tree mix is planned primarily on the basis of economic returns in terms of revenue. In such type of planning indigenous slow-growing species are replaced by fast-growing economic species needed for high revenue, without taking into account its acceptability by the local community in the local economic background, its usefulness interms of local requirements.

In the present perception of forest planning extreme commercialisation of plantation depriving the local community of their life-system have led to popular unrest in the tribal areas. The destruction of Teak nurseries and up-rooting of the planted teak trees in Gua in Singbnum district of Bihar or people's protest against pine trees in Madhya Pradesh are pointers in this regard.

The Tribal unrest is not new in this country. The first known uprising against what is called the modern forestry which implies commercialisation of the forests goes back to 1772. The British East India Company used infantry battalion to suppress the rebellion of Mal Paharias of the Raj Mahal hills in Santhal Parganae.

Santhal rebellion of 1855-57 and the Tribal revolt led by Bhagowan Birsa Munda in Chotanagpur, and many other tribal unrests in subsequent periods had their origin in the management of land and forest.

All the tribal uprisings in the past except Tana Bhagat Movement were put down by the British through armed repression and they were assisted by the then emerged Landlords and Money lending classes and the conspiracies of the Missionaries. But the present situation is quite different. Unless the present trend of deforestation which is the result of our 'scientific' forest management is arrested, the deprivation of the tribals in the country would continue giving birth to serious discontents among them which are being reflected in the seeming unrests in various forms and it may land our country in a situation for which all of us would have to repent.

There may be large immigration (seasonal) of labour in response to intensive forest-based economic activities, thereby disturbing the local demographic character, which in turn breeds tension and conflicts. Sophisticated capital intensive methods warranted purely on economic considerations are introduced in the more backward, sparsely populated areas. Both from managerial and economies of scale considerations, concentrated operations with

sophisticated technology are introduced in many backward areas. In terms of economic development, there takes place larger inflow of capital, larger deployment of man power, mostly from outside the local community boundary. The entire set of operations is designed with reference to higher economic returns and its operational viability. In the process the local community is left by the side of the road. The new demand for labour may be qualitatively different from the earlier slowpace utilisation of labour which was adjusted to the prevailing cycle of the economic activities of the local community.

In this perception the local community-needs are not altogether neglected. There are provisions to allow a part of the forest produce, especially minor forest produce, for the use of local people. In the distribution of such benefits to the local community the reflection of a paternalistic attitude is obvious. Local community's rights in the forest, even though recognised by the law of the land in some parts of the country, are viewed as 'burden' on the forests and considered as an, impediment to the economic exploitation of the forests.¹

1. N.C.A. report part IX.

The Aryans drove away the original inhabitants from the plain and river bank areas and pushed them to inaccessible hilly tracts and forests during the early stage of Indian civilisation. Since then the original settlers of the region re-settled themselves inside the forest area and continued to use the forests as the owner. These original settlers came to be known as aboriginal Tribes or simply Tribes. They settled themselves in different hamlets within the forest area and as a community enjoyed the authority of ownership over the forest resources. Realising the value of the wealth and resources in such forest areas the British extended its control over the forest resources and to exploit them for their own benefit settled these with the 'Rajaa'. The local community, did not regain its authority even after the British rule came to an end. On the contrary, the authority of the state over the forests got consolidated in the name of better management and better exploitation of national resources. In the process decision making has receded further away from the field and from the local community. Paternalistic grants of any quantum does not prevent alienation of the local community. Without having any sense of belonging over the present forest resources, they try to grab as much as possible of the forest before the zero hour strikes and willy-nilly become an instrument of forest destruction and hasten their own economic ruin. So long as there are nearby forests belonging to no identified individual or community, they prefer to grab it by every means.

for their own survival rather than plant trees or protect the existing trees before some others harvest it.

The present perception is devoid of the above socio-economic history of the tribals and as a result the operation of the above perception for the last thirty years or more has not been able to preserve forest coverage, not to speak of proportionate increase of returns from investment. On the contrary, deforestation and denudation have been increasing alarmingly. Vanishing green has not only become the major cause of quicker cycle of flash floods and droughts but also has become the major cause of social and economic conflicts in the remote and backward regions of forest area of the country. Under the situation as depicted above, we should ask ourselves what is wrong in the present perception of forest planning.

Dissatisfied with the present day situation of quickly vanishing green one school of thought has been advocating a different perception of forest planning in which people get over-focused. In this perception forestry becomes the major input contributing to the local community development. Forest planning and development should be left entirely to the local community without any control, even remote, from outside according to this school¹.

1. 'CHIPKO' (Tree embrace) movement led by 'Sunderlal Bahuguna' reflects this notion.

In the early stages, the local community of forest-dwellers was subsisting almost entirely on the forest resources. Even now - a - days in the remote forest areas the local community depends primarily on forest resources. A recent study conducted in some parts of Chotanagpur plateau reveals that the local tribals get 60 percent of their annual survival requirement from the forests. According to Mr. Rai even the Oraons, Mundas and Kharias, who own more land depend on the forests for 46% of their survival needs, while the Malers of Santhal Parganas it was estimated to be 80% and for the Birhors it was as high as 84%².

In the early stages of development two interests local and national were in harmony. But with the passage of time increasing pressure of population coupled with larger demand on forest resources to meet the increasing developmental need of the nation without corresponding to appropriate changes in the forest planning perception, has landed the nation on the verge of vanishing green. While accepting the need of a new method of utilization of forest resources they insist on the full command of the local community over the forest resources. Its

2. 'Towards a new forest policy' Edited by Walter Fernandes and S. Kulkarni, page 12.

primary focus is on the development of the economy of the local community by inputs of forestry. By strengthening the local economy national economy would get strengthened. Hence the primary objective of forest planning would be to strengthen economic base of the forest-dwellers.

Herein lies the contradiction. The full command of the local community over the forest produced can be accepted if they acquire higher skills both technical and organisational in the context of the present day national need. Local community of forest-dwellers is primarily tribal. They are less keen to adopt to quick changes. Hence the pace of development is bound to be slow and gradual and induction of external technology and entrepreneurial skills have to be minimal. Such a local community is still in the non-specialised stage of the economy, in the modern sense. The local community depends on forest for food, fuel, fodder, shelter, and medicines. The conversion of local forest product mix by more valuable (in terms of revenue) species may not have any utility to them, while existing forest mix may not serve the developmental need of the nation.

It ought to be emphasised that the economic base of the local community is not static. As the pace of development quickens, the local community also becomes more responsive to changes and moves in the direction of lesser dependence on forests for survival. Such local community has the experiences and practices

of taking collective decisions in its own non-formal traditional panchayats. No planning of forests, however economically sound which is beyond the comprehension of the local community, can ensure community participation and involvement. Without the local community co-operation through its active participation, no forest can survive. In this perception, the primary focus of forestry development is to strengthen the economic base of the local community by accepting their usufructuary right over the forest produces.

Though the pace of development would be slow in this perception and for the time being the natural resources may not be optimally utilised but ultimately the long term gain of the nation would be large enough to offset the loss due to the slow pace of development during the intermediate stages. By assuring the local community needs as the commanding position over the forest resources and following the techniques of planning corresponding to the absorbing capacity of the local community namely the tribals, the pace of development may be slower in the intermediate stages but it is very crucial for the local community development since it is essentially a transitional phase. Any superimposition of faster pace of development than what the local community can assimilate is bound to be counter-productive.

There is a general consensus that in any programme of forestry development people's participation is an important element for its

success. "The future of our forestry movement depends on how far we would be able to carry the community with us. Unless we can create among the people a sense of belonging and make them realise the need of preserving forests both for the interest of the local community and the nation with all our good intention and expertise we may not be able to prevent the increasing denudation of our rich forest resources and our national target to cover 33 percent of the total area by forest would be a far cry."¹

Hence a number of problems is to be solved while planning large forests ; (a) the mechanism and institutionalisation of people's participation in the forestry programme, (b) synthesis of the local community interest with the large national interest, (c) making the two interests mutually complementary instead of being mutually exclusive. In the absence of clear policy decision regarding the above-mentioned problems, accommodation of two interests is rather difficult. The community has been asserting its rights depending on its relative strength mean while the government's effort to consolidate its hold over the

1. Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, Member Planning Commission, Seminar paper on "Indian Forestry at the Crossroads". November 20-22, 1980.

forest resources is getting firmer every day.

The answer to all the above mentioned problems lies in the understanding of socio-economic conditions of the local community, the different levels of economic development of the local community, finally the aspirations and practices of the local community.

Though the state has legalised its right over the forest resources, the local community, by and large, yet believes that forest belongs to them. The state asserts its right through formal legal actions while the local community asserts its right through traditional practices of harvesting forest and suffers from the press of the wheels of the law. The situation creates antagonistic relationship between the forest department and the local community leading to the destruction of the forests.

In some remote and backward areas, the state might have consolidated its position and might have introduced a commercial shape of the forest economy but the economy and the demographic character of the local community have been disrupted as a result and it has been drifted to a lower substratum of the new socio-economic structure.

The local community is having its subsistence requirement like food, fodder, fuel, shelter from the forests since ancient times.

Even in such a subsistence based economy whatever might be the cash requirement used to come from minor forest produces. Not being a static community, the consumption and livelihood pattern of tribals has been undergoing slow changes reducing its direct dependence on forest. In this changing process its cash requirement has also been increasing. The poor agricultural activities can provide only a part of its basic food requirements. Without having any alternative economic occupation, the local community cannot but fall back on forest to supplement its food requirements and cash requirements through minor forest produces. With the diversification of the end-use of the minor forest produces the money value of such forest produces has substantially appreciated. Government has started considering such minor forest produces as an important source of state revenue and the right of the local community over such minor forest produces is being restricted to strict 'nonafide' domestic use. The wrong presumption that the local community is still living in the pre-monetised subsistence economy, perhaps, has led to restrict the community right over such minor forest produces. Thus the local community which was once the 'king' of the forests is being driven away from the forests without any corresponding alternative to depend upon, commensurate with their requirements.

If minor forest produce is not viewed as a source of state revenue then the local community may be given full command over

the minor forest produces. All out efforts should also be made by the state to build a sound economic base for the local community with the help of such minor forest produces as important inputs. This is necessary as a transitional phase, for a leap forward to a stage when the direct dependence of the local community on forest would be minimal. In such efforts of developing minor forest produces the local community participation would be institutionalised in such a way that gradually the local community would become the grower of minor forest produces, instead of remaining a mere collector of the same.

The next important problem that needs solution is the antagonistic relation between the forest department and the local community, each claiming the other as the intruder. It would be impossible to maintain and preserve even the existing forest unless the local community gets interested in its preservation. The local community is unlikely to take any interest in its preservation unless they get a feeling that such preservation would strengthen their own socio-economic base. To achieve this a policy decision, however bold or radical it may look like, is very much needed.

Thirtythree percent of the existing forest is "protected forest" over which the local villagers have some claims. In Bihar such

protected forests constitute 80% of the total forests of the state.¹ Such claims and rights have been recorded in some parts of the country as in Chotanagpur, in Khatian No.2. These protected forest are normally surrounded by tribal habitation. In planning and executing any forest development plan in areas surrounding the villages which are mostly 'protected' in nature, the local community can easily be made a partner as a definite sharer in the forest produce with the responsibility of the local community for the protection of the above forest. This would be some sort of 'social contract'. While the basic input, the land, would belong to the government, the community would only get a prescribed share of the produce in return for their pre-determined services.

The inaccessible forests without any human habitation in its surrounding which are generally earmarked as Reserve Forests, would remain as the exclusive domain of the forest department and would be managed on commercial basis without any local community rights therein. The above division would greatly reduce the local community pressure on Reserve forests and the larger national need can be served better.

1. See appendix on forest area.

Under the existing policy prescription, the entire forestry programme is departmentally planned and executed. The local community has no direct channel of communication with the forest department hierarchy to make the department aware of their needs, not to speak of, having any 'say' in policy decision. The local community, at best, is connected with the forest department as casual wage-earners from forest activities. Neither they have any stake at its survival nor they expect any future flow of income out of it. There is a feeling in the forest department that it provides employment to the local community which it considers synonymous with local community - development. Forestry programmes is no doubt labour intensive and the local community no doubt get some benefit out of it. If we analyse the nature of employment the forest department offers to the local community, it would be evident that such employment opportunity neither can strengthen the economic base of the local community nor can help in generating a sense of belonging among the local community.

The nature of employment it offers to the local community is purely casual in nature and mostly community is purely casual in nature and mostly seasonal. Moreover plantation activities take place mainly during the monsoon, when the local community who have adopted settled agriculture, remain engaged in their own agricultural activities. To execute the targeted programme forest department has to depend, on many occasion, on the labour

force from outside the local community. Thus the local community can not get even the full benefit of casual wage employment, on the contrary, the immigration of labour creates economic and social tensions. While in the off-season the tribals migrate to other regions or States for job. Even when the local workers get casual employment they get wages for the work done while the permanent assets so created by their labour virtually become the property of the urban elitists. Does this system strengthen the local economy on a permanent basis ?

The local community who consider themselves as the owners of the forest resources in the area are denied any share of capital assets which they create by working as casual labour on the same resources. Since the State ownership of forest resources is formalised, the forestry has come up as an organised sector. But because of the backwardness, disorganised and dispersed nature of the labour force, the local community is denied of the benefit of participation in the management or even a share of the value added to the capital asset. If any meaningful involvement of the local community in forestry is warranted, then the local community should not be treated as an army of casual labour whose services can be dispensed with at any time, rather should be treated as the co-producers of the forest wealth. As the coproducers they should get rightful share both of the new capital assets and of the surplus generated from it. If this concept is accepted then the mechanism


of Joint Management with the local community can be institutionalised. The principle of joint management and sharing of surplus from forest wealth would not only strengthen the economic base of the local community on a permanent basis but also increasing surplus would be available to meet the larger national interest. Meaningful involvement with a sense of belonging of the local community would be possible only if they take part in decision making.

Within the set-goal of forestry in Macro level planning, the local community may be associated in Micro level decision making at local levels. Because of uneven development of different regions, the basic need of the local community from the forests would vary, till all the regions attain a standard stage of development. Forest product mix and the cycle of forest activities would vary in micro planning. While planning at the micro level, plantation of trees should not be considered as the only forest activity rather a bundle of economic activities should be integrated in the planning of forestry. Such integrated forestry plan can be worked out for each small area, which would not be beyond the comprehension of the local community. Only with such a planning perception, active participation of the local community both in decision making and in executing the operational plan would be meaningful.

Instead of drawing a Macroplan for forest development based on macro average data neglecting the differences in the stage of development of different forest regions and in the perception of different local communities and their needs, what we need is to draw micro plans for different regions which will comensurate to local needs and perception of the local community. In such micro plans differences of local needs will not be lost in Macro average. Local community participation in different stages of planning and its is implementation can be institutionalised in microplans. All the microplans will ultimately be integrated in a Macroplan and not the other way round.

In this perception, development of the local community and the development of forest to meet the larger national interest would be complementary instead of being exclusive.

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* Local Community : Local Community, refers to the forest-dwellers.
Forest-dwellers are, by and large, tribals.