

# Who's Participating in "Participatory" Forestry? The Promise and Pitfalls of the Joint Forest Management (JFM) Model in India

Monica Vini Ogra  
< monica\_ogra@hotmail.com >

## *Abstract*

Included in the rhetoric surrounding today's concept of "sustainable" development of the less-developed nations is the notion of "participation." Participation of local communities has become a cornerstone of natural resource planning and management in principle, but whether this is evident in practice is a subject of some contention. How is the "success" or "failure" of a participatory resource management scheme defined? One may turn to quantifiable data in search of afforestation and regeneration figures, but social accounts need to be taken as well. Is there "success" in participatory management without community empowerment? Recent research about the JFM experience in India indicates that despite its potential to benefit local communities by bringing them into official forest management practices, insufficient attention to relevant gender and class issues has resulted in a system which may, in fact, undermine the goal of community empowerment. In many areas, JFM serves to reinforce existing power hierarchies both within communities and between local communities and forest departments.

The findings of the research are based on case study materials of JFM in districts of West Bengal, Gujarat, Karnataka, and Himachal Pradesh. The paper argues that the existing JFM model 1) has built-in gender biases and 2) fails to create equal partnerships between local communities and the state Forest Departments. Further, the use of JFM as the single "participatory" model for forest management fails to acknowledge that within each community, pre-existing traditions relating to the decision-making process are already present. In some cases, the introduction of JFM may encourage a shift towards more equity between dominant and minority groups within a single community. In other cases, however, the imposition of JFM management and benefit sharing provisions may disrupt relatively stable systems already in place. The paper concludes that JFM needs to have a built-in flexibility which would allow for communities to participate in the design of the program itself, on a site-specific basis. This would allow for communities to negotiate decision-making and benefit-sharing provisions in conjunction with the state Forest Departments. The program could be further improved by encouraging the association of local NGOs, which could facilitate sensitization about gender and caste/class equity issues in decision-making as well. Finally, sensitization within the ranks of the Forest Departments on the issue of "partnerships" with local communities must also be achieved.

## *Background*

In its attempt to achieve economic prosperity, the independent nation of post-colonial India has aggressively pursued a top-down, growth-oriented model of development based on intensive exploitation of its natural resource base. The "modernization" approach established by Nehru after independence emphasizes urban development and has been achieved largely at the expense of local communities in the outlying rural areas, for whom survival has traditionally depended on access to natural resources, particularly forests.

Environmental degradation in India can be traced to British patterns of natural resource management and unsustainable exploitation. The roots of the environmental crises in India today lie largely in the legacy of colonial legal and administrative systems, designed to exploit the natural resource base for the benefit of the Crown, not the local communities. Inheritance and perpetuation of this inequitable pattern of development,

which alienates local communities from their surrounding natural environments, has occasioned an intense debate regarding the validity of the dominant development model.

Throughout India, grassroots activists and NGOs have rallied together with local communities to demand a place in the planning process, encouraging the emergence of “participatory” approaches to development which promote the application of local resource management systems. International pressure has also played a role, resulting in a significant paradigm shift with regard to rural development, away from the “top-down” strategies typically adopted by government and donor agencies and towards “people-centered” approaches which provide a space for local ideas and development aspirations. Although this shift is still in the process of being implemented in India, and is, at present, essentially limited to participatory “projects” and “programs,” it bodes well for a future characterized by community-based resource management.

This paper analyses the practice of “participatory” development in the context of forest management through an examination of the government-sponsored program, Joint Forest Management (JFM). Case study materials have been examined in areas where JFM has been implemented already, as well as the experiences of self-initiated forest protection groups in some areas where JFM has not yet been introduced as a formal institution. While JFM has been implemented in many Indian states, the case studies are limited in focus to the experiences of villages in Karnataka, Gujarat, and Himachal Pradesh. Based on these materials, the findings are that in spite of adopting a “participatory” approach, top-down aspects of JFM continue to hinder the empowerment of local communities, particularly with regard to women and the poor, who often suffer disproportionate opportunity costs in these programs. Recommendations are offered for possible changes to the model.

### ***Critical Issues Raised by the JFM Model***

Given the tremendous variations of lifestyle across the Indian subcontinent, it is difficult to justify sweeping generalizations about motivations, behaviors, and aspirations of forest-dwelling communities. However, several themes do emerge from looking at case studies of JFM in practice. These themes echo the concerns raised by environmental feminists, who argue that natural resource management policies and practices are likely to impose significant, differential impacts on women and the poor (see esp. Shiva 1989, Sontheimer 1991, Agarwal 1992, and Sachs 1997).

It is important to note that the Indian National Forest Policy (1988) specifically calls for the participation of women and the poor in the task of reestablishing ecological stability of the forests, explaining that one of the “basic objectives that should govern the National Forest Policy” is the creation of “a massive people’s movement with the involvement of women” (GOI 1988, para 2.1). It further clarifies its position by stating:

The principal aim of Forest Policy must be to ensure environmental stability and maintenance of ecological balance including atmospheric equilibrium which are vital for sustenance of all lifeforms, human, animal, and plant. *The derivation of direct economic benefit must be subordinated to this principal aim...*

... The life of tribals and other poor living within and near forests revolves around forests. The rights and concessions enjoyed by them should be fully protected. *Their domestic requirements of fuelwood, fodder, minor forest produce and construction timber should be first charge on forest produce.* (GOI 1988, paras 2.2 and 4.3.4.3, emphasis added).

How has JFM, as a model response, measured up to this mandate? The findings of my inquiry, based on case study materials of JFM in districts of West Bengal, Gujarat, Karnataka, and Himachal Pradesh, are summarized below, and indicate a poor score:

- Women, as a group, are still generally excluded from the decision-making process.
- Women, especially poor women, suffer more and bear disproportionate opportunity costs in the protection and management initiatives undertaken by JFM Village Forest Committees (henceforth “VFCs”).
- JFM, itself, remains a departmentally driven, target oriented program which does not necessarily lead to village empowerment and/or increased control over forest resources.
- There are valuable lessons to be learned from the functioning of non-JFM, locally derived initiatives.
- Despite these shortcomings, there is still great potential for JFM to have positive environmental and social impacts.

### ***Exclusion of women from participation in decision-making***

There are many reasons why women may not be involved in the decision-making processes of the villages. In many cases, mandated participation may not be sufficient to ensure the participation of women in committee meetings. Another problem lies in the assumption that the household is a homogenous interest group. A related issue is the bias against female-headed households, ignored in the language of the JFM orders. A third and major key to understanding the widespread exclusion of women for participation is related to the cultural constraints of traditions which assign little or no value to women’s ideas and opinions. Finally, there is the discouraging data on women’s genuine lack of interest in participation, due largely to the perception that they are not stakeholders in the benefits of JFM. I will discuss each of these points below.

### ***Mandated participation of women***

In spite of their being nearly half the population of India, women as a group are perceived to be a minority interest group. This is reflected in policy around political seat reservations that seek to increase representation for minority groups. For example, while I was living in Delhi, an ongoing public debate was raging over the pros and cons of mandating one-third representation of women in Parliament. According to the National

Commission for Women, “Reservation of 33 percent for 50 percent of the population is the legitimate aspiration of women of all caste, class, and religion” (Asian Age 1998:9) In India, women are viewed as a minority interest group, included with “Scheduled Tribes” and “Scheduled Castes”, as for example in the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution, which mandates seat reservations for these three groups (GOI 1992, Part IX, para. 243D).

Examination of the requirements of the individual State Resolutions shows that women’s participation is mandated by the state in most cases (14 out of 20 states specifically mention the participation of women); however, in reality it is practiced only in token amounts. Further, it is unlikely that in cases where only one member is permitted per household, a woman will be selected for representation. For example, in a random sample study of 30 VFCs in West Bengal, for example, 10 had no women members at all, and in the remaining 20, out of 2411 total members, only 39 (1.6 percent) were women (Sarin et al 1998:48). As Madhu Sarin, of the JFM Sub-group on Gender and Equity has pointed out, “prescriptions of minimum numbers usually become the maximum numbers in practice” (1997:9). In Village Kuthain (Himachal Pradesh), for example, I observed that only 5 out of 16 Executive Committee members of the VFC were women, and that the Ranger was surprised when he was informed that the prescription for women’s representation was actually half, not one-third as he had thought.

We can observe that although many of the states require women to participate to some degree, in most cases, where specified, the actual numbers for inclusion in the Managing Committees is fixed at only two or three; this implies, as in the case of Madhya Pradesh, that the ratio of women to men is only likely to decrease, given the provision to include one MC member for every ten households. Sarin (1997:9) explains, as this section will support, that

creating space for a minority of 2 women in a total MC of at least 10 to 15 (including several nominated) male members is hardly conducive for soliciting such women’s meaningful participation in the MC’s decision making. Experience from other states indicates that symbolic women’s ‘representatives’ are often not invited to the meetings at all or, even if invited, they seldom open their mouths. Further, in the absence of any criteria for their selection, such women are often from non-forest dependent households, thereby not being in a position to ‘represent’ the interests of poor women forest users.

A related and common phenomenon is that of “puppet” membership of women in village political institutions. This occurs, for example, in fulfillment of the 30 percent minimum quota for women’s representation in the panchayat. While it is often assumed that women’s presence in itself is enough to guarantee representation of their interests, what often happens is that male members of the villages continue to dominate village politics “behind” their wives or other women who have been elected into position. Chatterji observed that in West Bengal, a widowed, female Panchayat representative “admitted that she was nominated to the Panchayat without her consent” and that “since her election, the [Communist] Party expects her to carry out orders and sign and sanction documents she cannot read” (1996:73). Regarding VFCs, this was also confirmed to me personally in various informal discussions during my year in India. For example, during a

field interview in Karnataka with one of the BCPP local investigators, I was told that one-third of the Panchayati Raj seats are held by women, but that “the voice is of the husband.” Further, the investigator said that women there “are not allowed” to hold more than the prescribed one-third of the seats. Thus, it should not be assumed that women committee members will always be true to their own interests, as they may be simply physically filling a seat.

*The myth that males are always the head of household*

Recent research has provided testimony to challenge the notion that all households include at least one man who may be considered “the head,” as it is estimated that one-third of all Indian households are headed by women. Widowed women are more than three times more common than widowed men: 25,767,260 women compared to 8,363,010 men in 1981 (Sarin et al 1998:41). Another cause for female-headed households is due to divorce or abandonment; though it is culturally acceptable for a man to remarry, in many areas women are denied this option. The female to male ratio for divorced/separated individuals in 1981 was 1705:1000 (Sarin et al 1998:41), a significant disproportion.

Female-headed households also arise because in many areas the phenomenon of massive male migration is consistently employed as a livelihood strategy, wherein females must assume the “head of household” position. This is a well-documented phenomenon in many parts of India, but is especially prevalent in the Kumaon region of Uttar Pradesh (Rawat 1995: 317), and in parts of Karnataka (Correa 1997:65).

These scenarios, however, are rarely taken into account by representatives of the various government branches seeking to implement village programs. In Correa’s 1997 study of JFM for the India Development Service, one of the first pieces of data she gives is that of all the thirteen study villages, “not a single promoter was a woman” and that in the process of soliciting members for the VFC, the foresters went “from house to house and in most cases *specifically* asked for the male head of the household” (Correa 1997:ii). Even the “Expert Group” on JFM set up by the National Afforestation and Eco-Development Board criticized the language of the State Resolutions, as “widowed households escaped mention altogether” (SPWD 1998:5).

In addition to neglect of the possibility of female-headed households, another important factor leading to the systematic exclusion of women from participation in VFCs is the consistent and misinformed perception that the household is a homogenous unit. This manifests itself in the practice of aid/program interactions nearly exclusively directed to a single, male “head of household,” premised on the assumption that he can and will represent the interests of the household in its entirety. This is problematic on two counts: First of all, the household is *not* a unified interest group. As the following example illustrates, “representative” men are often unaware of the needs or priorities of the women of their own households:

When [Village] Vena’s turn came, Phuli Behn’s husband talked about forest protection in their hamlet. When he had finished, the authors [Sarin and SARTHI] asked Phuli Behn about her views. Immediately, several men pointed out that her husband had already spoken. The authors insisted that as she was the only woman representative

present, she should at least talk about the impact of forest protection on the women (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:19).

Phuli Behn then related information about the time and energy the women were expending in order to meet the household fuelwood requirements, as they spend four to five hours collecting wood from distant open forests, in spite of local forests full of dense vegetation. She suggested that with the hamlet's small population, responsible harvesting nearby would take only thirty minutes, and would do little long-term damage. A discussion about the gender differentiated opportunity costs and benefits of forest protection took place. The need for new access controls and harvesting methods which do not penalize women so unequally was evident. The authors report, "Many of the men were amazed, but agreed. It was as if this aspect of their protection had simply not crossed their minds before" (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:19). Other such examples are related in the upcoming section, which discusses gender-differentiated opportunity costs and impacts of committee decisions.

### *Cultural constraints*

Cultural constraints on women's participation constitute another major obstacle. In many parts of India (though not all), women's exclusion from political matters is accepted as the norm. While it is important to respect local customs and relationships, it cannot be assumed that a reluctance to speak out in public is balanced out by having a voice in the home.

There are many reasons why a woman, despite her interest in forest-related issues and functioning of the VFC, would not participate openly. For instance, women may be reluctant to challenge the opinions of the menfolk of the village, who hold the decision-making power regardless. When Gujarati women were asked why they did not protest the closure of their forests, they spoke of their fear of being "beaten by thick, heavy *dundas* (sticks) if they didn't comply" (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:18). Here, they had the opportunity to participate, but the costs were too great for them.

Fear is a major disincentive to participation. Even if a woman wants to participate, she may not want to threaten her husband's sense of power within the home. An example from Karnataka will illustrate:

Mahadevi Shirdhar Naik, one of the Managing Committee members, became a member in the absence of her husband. She was elected by the men and the other lady member was proposed by women. Mahadevi Naik has attended all the VFC meetings. But when her husband came back from Goa [out-migration for work] before the last meeting, he forbade her from attending the meeting and threatened to hit her if she went for the meetings. However, she is interested in attending the meetings. The KFD [Karnataka Forest Dept.] informed her of the ODA [donor agency] visit, but she did not go as she is afraid that if she goes, her husband will beat her (Correa 1997:71).

Further, as a minority presence in the company of many men, few women feel confident enough to speak *at all* during group meetings. In Karnataka, one female member of the Managing Committee and the president of the Mahila Mandal (village-level

women's group) confessed that she is "afraid to discuss anything in the VFC meeting because she is worried about how the men will react and what they will think of her" (Correa 1997:71). This was seen again and again throughout the case study areas.<sup>1</sup> In some instances, speaking up risks inviting public humiliation, as occurred in one VFC meeting:

All the women (except Pandri Gowda) left before the Tamil Nadu contingent of DCFs and RFOs [FD staff] arrived. When the Karwar DCF was translating for the Tamil Nadu group, one drunk from the village said they should not talk so much in English among themselves. Pandri said that it was alright since the Tamil Nadu people did not know Kannada. She also said that as so many outsiders had visited their area since JFPM [JFM] had started, they could now catch a few words in English. The drunk yelled back, "Why don't you join them and talk to them in English?" He also made some other insulting remarks which left Pandri humiliated in front of so many people and she started crying (Correa 1997:33).

A major underlying issue relating to this reluctance to speak lies in the extremely low value accorded to women's opinions and ideas in the study areas. This is true both for men of the village and the FD, as well as the women, themselves. One Range Officer in West Bengal observed, "In our rural society, we seldom give any importance to anything said by women" (quoted in Sarin et al 1998:72).

It comes as no surprise, then, that many women are insecure about the value of their own opinions and ideas. Women from Kangod village reported that their husbands "scolded them" when they inquired about a recent government Minister's visit, told that "these are not issues women should concern themselves with" (Correa 1997:61).

Thus, both women who choose to attend and those who are coerced into attending may be there physically, but still not be involved in the proceedings. One woman member complained, "Since I do not understand what happens in the meetings, how can I inform other women?" (Correa 1997:56). Further, exclusion of women from active participation in the VFCs is not entirely incidental; often, they are not even told when the meetings are being held. Correa is scathing in her criticism of the Karnataka Forest Department's behavior on the task of including women in JFM, and with good reason. She reports:

Women do not know anything about JFPM [JFM]; they don't know the location of the forest land which has been given to the VFC. This holds true for the members of the women Managing Committee members as well. They say that their names were written in the list of Managing Committee members and they were told that their names were taken because of the legal requirement and that they need not take any responsibility, nor do they have to attend any meetings. This was told to them by the Department (Correa 1997:25).

---

<sup>1</sup> However, this should not be taken as a hard-and-fast rule. Correa documented two communities in which women were very active in the VFCs, because the men there were not very interested in joining the JFM program. Where women attended VFC meetings alone, they shared all information with their husbands after the meetings, but not vice-versa (1997:82, 94)

Similarly, when men of VFCs in Gujarat were asked whether village women had also participated in the discussions leading to the closure of the forest, their response was, “Women, what is the need to consult the women?” (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:17). Correa documented the perspective of one DCF who said,

Since women do not have knowledge and are ignorant about most issues, it is best that they are not on the Managing Committee. Even the two women who have to be there are only token members... (1997:105).

These examples clearly point to the prejudice held against women by the men of their own villages, as well as by the FD officials who introduced the program in the areas.

### *Lack of interest*

Although the issue of needing “permission” from husbands or mothers-in-law to attend committee meetings often keeps women from attending (Correa 1997:25, 36), in many cases, a large number of women in Karnataka were still not interested in attending the proceedings, even with permission. Why? The case studies suggest a few possibilities.

One reason for a lack of interest in participation in the JFM program is that many women simply do not see themselves as stakeholders. The concept of “joint forest management” means little to them, as it is not perceived as something different from what past rural development programs have offered. Correa writes of Belgeri village:

Alcoholism in the village is the main problem the women face. All their earnings are taken away by their husbands, so they are not particularly interested in ‘yet another government programme’ since however much they earn, their lives do not change (1997:25).

Further, women perceive attendance at committee meetings as a waste of their already limited time. In some cases, because there is a requirement in the Government Order to include women, they are “forced” to join, as in the case of Girija Gaonkar of Belgeri village. She was not interested in becoming a MC member, as she has too much work at home. Instead of participating herself, her husband goes in her place (Correa 1997:24-25).

This “time factor” is key to the exclusion of women from participation in VFC meetings. As it will be shown, it is often the very functioning of the VFCs that preclude women’s participation, because of the gender-differentiated costs of protection. Sarin comments,

Ironically, they are unable to influence the rules of the forest protection group of their own village as they have no time to attend its meetings (Sarin et al 1998:12).

Thus, in this subsection we have seen four ways in which the lack of women’s participation in decision-making can be explained. These are all derived from a cultural bias that portrays women as dependent members of a household, whose opinions and ideas are not as important as their male counterparts. However, the fact remains that it is



women who bear the greater costs of environmental degradation. We now turn to the question of these gender-differentiated costs and impacts.

### ***Gender-Differentiated Opportunity Costs and Impacts***

The issue of opportunity costs is an important one.<sup>2</sup> When making the decision to close forest areas for species regeneration, certain questions need to be asked, such as, “What costs will be incurred due to species nonavailability for a given amount of time?” and “How will the potential losses be compensated?” Yet, in male-dominated committees, the issue of how closures and management practices will affect the workload of women often goes unaddressed. In countless cases, it is a point never even raised. The costs for women are many, and can be viewed in terms of decreased income, increased workload, impact on health, and psychological issues.

#### *Effects of VFC decisions on the income and workload of women and the poor*

A major component of most VFC management plans addresses the issue of grazing, which is a major use of the forests (Sarin et al 1998:15). Many state orders already prescribe a “blanket ban” on grazing (SPWD 1998:5). Obviously, for livestock-raising communities, this is a serious conflict of interests. This is particularly relevant regarding poor and landless women, for whom reliance on village commons and forests is a critical livelihood strategy. According to one study, the average annual incomes derived from use of village commons in various parts of India made up roughly 20 percent of total household income in poor households (defined as landless households and those owning less than two hectares dryland) compared to two percent of other households (Agarwal 1992:128). The inter-village conflicts that can arise out of committee decisions can be understood through a simple example: the decision to close commons for regeneration. Whereas members of the landed classes can afford to shift from open grazing of animals to stall feeding them with agricultural residues, this is not an option for the landless, who have no crop leaf fodder to substitute. Moreover, prohibition from the common pasture means that fodder must be purchased, an equally difficult option for the poor.

Grazing of animals, an activity undertaken by both males and females (often youths), is not the only pressure on village and forest commons, however. In order to understand why restricted access to forests and commons impact poor men and women disproportionately, it is necessary to explore the differences in the nature of what constitutes “women’s work” and “men’s work” in terms of forest use. It was reported in West Bengal, for example, that the collection of NTFPs is done in the proportion of three females for every male (SPWD 1992:33). The work of women, traditionally, lies in collection of fuelwood, fodder, water, and NTFPs (Agarwal 1992:135-136; Sarin et al 1998:7). Poor men are also dependent on the forests for the collection of firewood for sale (Sarin et al 1998:16). On the other hand, adult landowning men enter the forests with less frequency, generally to access timber for housebuilding and construction of agricultural implements (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:11). Thus, the stake of poor women

---

<sup>2</sup> Economists discuss the concept of Opportunity Costs in terms of potential losses incurred by choosing *not* to use a resource now, in favor of future benefits.

and men who rely on open commons is related to survival in a way that the economically better-off classes may not acknowledge in making decisions about management practices.

A clear illustration of how the decision to close a local forest for species regeneration can have specific, negative impacts on the incomes of poor women can be seen by looking at the change in the availability of NTFPs in protected *sal* forests of many areas of India. Sarin et al's 1998 study revealed several such instances. For example, due to the increasing height of the trees, the broad leaves used to create sal plates (an important source of income for women) increasingly grew out of easy reach. In addition, the shade provided by these unplucked leaves caused yields of *tendu* leaf (used to make *bidis*) to decline. Other NTFPs used by poor women and other marginalized groups include small twigs used to make necklaces, medicinal plants, herbs, seeds, climbing vines, and flowers -- which were all "destroyed" through silvicultural practices or rendered nonavailable through closure (Sarin et al 1998:27). Economic analysis showed that under JFM in West Bengal, the net worth of *tendu* and mushroom (collected by the poorest sub-groups within the villages) declined by 30 percent (Sarin et al 1998:27).

In addition to reduced income or loss of livelihood, the time and energy expended by women to meet domestic needs is increased tremendously by nonavailability of forests. An example from Chari village in Gujarat, where women reported that they were "simply informed" that their forests were to be closed, illustrates the point:

The women of Chari village said that whereas earlier they could make two short trips a day to the adjoining forest, each taking less than one hour to fetch a headload, now they have to leave at 4 am and return with only one headload three to four hours later. They now go to the still unprotected part of Bhatakpur village's forest 2 to 3 km away to collect firewood. To avoid additional trips, the women try and carry back heavier and heavier loads. (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:16)

There are many such examples of negative impacts specific to women throughout the literature, cross-culturally and within all regions of India. However, the significance of these reports lies not only in their testimony of the disproportionate burdens borne by poor women, in *quantitative* terms, but also as evidence of numerous *qualitative* impacts that often go unacknowledged. This is important to point out, because ultimately, it is the perception of one's life that determines happiness, contentment, or misery. The physical and psychological impacts cannot be understated when discussing the social impacts of environmental degradation.

#### *Effects on women's health and psyche*

In addition to the negative impact of increased workload in terms of time, income, and energy, there are serious health and psychological concerns as well. Agarwal (1992:140) has pointed out that studies in rural Bangladesh are "strongly indicative" and show that the total number of meals being eaten in poor households is already declining. She also notes that there are gender biases in the intra-household distribution of food, as well as recording some of the consequences of the declining availability of fuelwood on nutrition:

Efforts to economize induce people to shift to less nutritious foods which need less fuel to cook or which should be eaten raw, or force them to eat partially cooked food which could be toxic, or eat leftovers that could rot in a tropical climate, or to miss meals altogether...The fact that malnutrition can be caused as much by shortages of fuel as of food has long been part of the conventional wisdom of rural women who observe: "It's not what's in the pot that worries you, but what's under it" (Agarwal 1992:140-141) .

The changing and increased demands of women's time and energy have psychological effects as well, in terms of increased stress and tension. Agarwal (1992:139-140) reports that

the growing hardship of young women's lives with ecological degradation has led to an increased number of suicides among them in recent years. Their inability to obtain adequate quantities of water, fodder, and fuel causes tensions with their mothers-in-law (in whose youths forests were plentiful).

Additionally, there are safety issues to consider. I was told that in Village Nanj, it was only after women had injured themselves or fallen to their deaths from steep slopes (while attempting to cut grass for fodder) that the community came together as a whole to openly deal with the scarcity crisis that had ensued. I personally observed a woman cutting grass from a steep unprotected slope in the village, and later wrote about it in my field journal:

She was cutting grass from the bottom of an outcropping, hands above her head, on a slope so steep that were she to fall, the result would be very bad, perhaps disastrous. She looked so small against the mountainside. She was alone, and the only reason I had been able to notice her there was because she wore a bright yellow head scarf.

The issue of personal safety in terms of this type of risk is compounded by the fear of physical or verbal violations by others. Local forest closures force women and girls to leave their villages in search of fuelwood and fodder, where they are at an increased risk for what they call "humiliation" by strangers. Sarin and SARTHI documented the concerns of Gujarati women who reported a case of two young women "being frightened and humiliated by an adjoining group's forest watchman" (1994:18). This raises the issue of inter-village relationships, where "outsiders" (like the young Gujarati women) may be increasingly viewed with hostility, generated in response to resource scarcities and territoriality.

Finally, perhaps the most disturbing finding of this inquiry is the phenomenon of increased violence among women occurring in male-dominated VFCs. In villages where males patrolling the forests fear accusations of molestation by women, they elicit women's "participation" through involvement in VFC forest protection activities as guards (Sarin et al 1998:17). A significant consequence of this is that the male-dominated VFCs can and do result in marked animosity between women of neighboring communities, literally pitting women against one another. This is illustrated by the comments of a male tribal leader, who said:

On seeing the women (of a lower status tribal community) cutting firewood from our protected forest, we sent some children to tell them to stop. Instead of agreeing, the women threatened the children who ran back in fright. We then went ourselves, caught the women, locked them up and went to bring the men from their households in their village. Then we got our women to beat the apprehended women in front of their men. We had instructed our women to confine the beating to below the neck (Quoted in Sarin et al 1998:18).

Similarly, it was found that in caste-heterogeneous villages, higher caste women less dependent on forests “are often mobilized to rebuke or pressurize poorer women of the same village to stop extraction” (Sarin et al 1998:18). This is contrasted with the community spirit which characterized many forest areas prior to resource scarcity, exemplified in this account by Walter Fernandez and Geeta Menon, speaking about life among tribal people in Orissa:

[T]he earlier sense of sharing has disappeared...Earlier women would rely on their neighbors in times of need. Today this has been replaced with a sense of alienation and helplessness... the trend is to leave each family to its own fate. (quoted in Agarwal 1992:142)

Once again, this points to the dual, gender-class bias that poor women face while struggling to survive their growing alienation from the forests -- and each other. Thus, while increased inclusion of women in protection activities can be viewed in a positive light, in some cases it has undermined hard won solidarity among women.

### ***Roles of the Forest Department in VFC functioning***

In the previous two subsections, we saw how cultural traditions of male-dominance are expressed through the issue of forest management. As has been established already, the JFM order specifically sought to address this bias through the idea of increased participation of women. In theory this was promising, but its implementation has left much to be desired. More generally, much criticism has been directed towards the role of the FD in the functioning of VFCs, with regard to both gender and caste/class issues (e.g., Chhatre 1995, Mitra 1997, Chatterji 1996, Sarin et al 1998, Sarin and SARTHI 1994). Based on the case studies considered here, the FD can be criticized on several counts:

- Failure to bring JFM communities together around forest management issues, reinforcing local, inequitable power hierarchies;
- Domination of VFC functioning, instead of facilitation;
- Failure to treat VFC members as partners with an equal stake in forest management, and perpetuating hierarchical relationships that do not involve accountability.

### ***Reinforcement of local power hierarchies***

The case studies suggest that JFM promoters from the FD reinforce local power hierarchies, both in terms of gender and caste/class. Instead of encouraging broad based participation, FD staff initiating JFM in the villages often approach the powerful and landowning members of society, and usually these are the ones who sit on the Managing Committee (MC). Often, these individuals are already known to the FD officials, through their occupations as timber contractors, local politicians, or important members of the society (Correa 1997:126). Subsequently, their wives or female family members are commonly selected to join them, in fulfillment of the mandated minimum quota of women's representation.

A good example of this comes from Nagarbastikeri Village, Karnataka. Though two hundred people attended the initial meeting, it was the Karnataka Forest Department (KFD) who nominated the individual who became President, "since he had worked with the KFD and they knew him well" (Correa 1997:63). Other members of the VFC were suggested by the President and seconded during the meeting. Both women members of the MC are from one family, members of the dominant community and relatives of important people in the village. People from the other communities said that this is why they were made members, despite the presence of three other women from different castes who were interested in joining the MC (Correa 1997:64).

#### *Departmental domination of VFC functionings*

The case studies also indicate that FD staff may influence functioning of the MCs to an inappropriate degree. While it is true that they are typically expected to participate in the VFCs as Member-Secretary, or may be entrusted with financial holdings of the VFCs, FD staff frequently misuse their role as documentor and facilitator of decision-making processes. Correa observed that the Forester-Secretary is entrusted with the taking of the minutes of VFC meetings, but that "minor issues or issues raised by less vocal segments do not get included" (1997:128). People have also complained that "all decisions have been made by KFD alone" and that "people's views are not at all considered" (Correa 197:46). At the end of her study, Correa observed that in spite of reports in the microplans that the VFC and MC members were unanimously elected,

more in-depth analysis showed that the entire process is directly or subtly guided by the KFD. At times people do not agree with the suggestions or nominations made by the KFD but do not have the courage to oppose them (Correa 1997:119).

It is important to emphasize the role of the microplans. When the initial agreement is made between a village and the FD, a JFM Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is drawn up and signed by the concerned parties. Subsequent to this, a microplan is conceived, wherein both the villagers and the FD set guidelines and ideas for how the VFC forest areas are to be managed. These microplans are supposed to reflect the villagers' priorities, and silvicultural practices are to be changed accordingly (Mitra 1997:43). However, in areas of Orissa and Karnataka, when one researcher asked villagers about it, they "had never even heard of the microplan" (Mitra 1997:43). Further, he observed, "In almost all the states, the microplans are written in English, a

language that the villagers generally cannot read, even if they can get access to the document” (Mitra 1997:43).

This manipulation of the JFM concept is a serious concern. Although it is supposed to be a partnership between local communities and the state FD, trust is a major issue from both sides. The villagers are wary of the stated objectives of the FD to include them in the benefits of JFM, while FD staff continue to look down upon the villagers with arrogance. For example, in 1984 in Kangod village, Karnataka, villagers were given a plantation by the FD, and promised 50 percent of the benefits. The KFD officer who made this agreement with the village was a trusted member of the community. Unfortunately, he was transferred<sup>3</sup>, and the new officer informed the villagers that since the plantation was raised prior to the formation of the VFC, it would not be possible to share the benefits after all. People felt betrayed and were upset by this. Reluctant to enter into a JFM partnership, they refused to sign the MoU until it was changed.

As Kangod was the first village in the state where a JFM MoU was to be signed, a high government official was scheduled to visit the area to witness the signing of the document. The villagers were promised their plantation, and agreed to sign a temporary MoU. After the minister left, however, the idea was dropped completely. One villager complained,

Today the KFD just simply denies that they ever promised such a thing. Why will they admit their trickery? And if you charge them, they will tell you that the whole MoU function is on videotape, so how could they ever get a blank MoU signed? (quoted in Correa 1997:58-59)

Critics of JFM have also pointed out that it remains a “departmentally driven, target-oriented” program (Mitra 1997:43), emphasizing the value of periodic, future timber harvests instead of a steady stream of benefits yielded from the forest ecosystem as a whole. For example, villagers in Gujarat engaged in self-initiated protection efforts vowed that they would only use small amounts of timber for their own use, as and when required, and insisted that they

were *not* regenerating their forests, with tremendous investments of time and effort and every household contributing grain or money from its pocket, just in order to cut them again. *They never want to fell the forests again* (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:15).

The FD, however, has different ideas on the matter. A central assumption of the benefit-sharing provisions is that timber from regenerated forests will be selectively harvested in the future. This is a “particularly objectionable” notion to the Gujarati villagers mentioned above, who offered up only the unpopular, thorny species planted by the FD, saying that “the FD is welcome to cut them as its share,” but that it has “no right

---

<sup>3</sup> During my interactions with various foresters, I was told that the frequent transfer of FD staff is a recurring problem for newly organized communities. It is also difficult for the foresters, who in many cases, have achieved great strides in establishing trust relationships with the local people. Frequent transfers were common practices under colonial and in the post-independence period, because it ensured that the FD staff would have no personal interest in the communities they were placed in.

to claim a share of the natural forests regenerated by the villagers” (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:16).

### *Equal Partners? Attitudes and accountability*

The concept of “partnership” is challenged by the picture that emerges from the field. If JFM is supposed to foster an atmosphere of mutual trust and participation between the FD staff and the local people, how then can the minimal levels of trust and participation be explained? Part of the blame lies in the state JFM resolutions, for many of the benefit sharing provisions do not offer an equal share in the returns from joint-management. Even a 50 percent share of timber and NTFP profits is an insult to communities which consider only the land as property of the FD, and feel that all harvested materials rightfully belong to the villagers who protect, maintain, and extract them (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:16). A second, but equally important aspect of the JFM orders involves accountability. Many state government orders give the FD power to dissolve the VFCs at any time, yet do not hold the FD accountable in any way to the participating villages. This can also be inferred from the fact that 14 of the 20 states empower the FD in this manner.

Changing resolutions is one thing, but changing attitudes is another. The long history of villager/FD relationships is marked by mistrust and competition, and such attitudes are not changed overnight. One particularly pessimistic FD senior officer from Karnataka was of the opinion that the whole JFM effort was a waste of the KFD’s time and money, complaining that the villagers do not appreciate the KFD’s efforts to improve their lives, arguing that they are “not ready to change their lifestyle” (Correa 1997:106). Further, many members of the present generation of senior foresters have inherited the “sahib” mentality<sup>4</sup> from their colonial counterparts, and often continue to interact with the villagers in an openly patronizing manner:

The seating arrangement during the VFC meetings in most villages reinforces the hierarchy between the KFD and the villagers. The KFD staff sit on chairs at a table in the front (at times with the VFC President and the NGO representative). The villagers sit in a semi-circle on either low benches or the floor. In fact, some people genuinely believe that the KFD has given furniture besides seed money so that the latter have a decent place to sit during the meetings. The atmosphere in the meetings is often similar to a school where the teacher addresses the students (Correa 1997:125).

Such examples point to the reluctance of senior FD staff to rescind some of their power and control over local communities. It is understandable, given India’s long history of subordination by outsiders, as well as the localized sense of power that is reinforced within the ranks of the FD itself. Correa observed the “arrogance” with which senior KFD officials spoke about their junior staff in front of the villagers. She asks, rhetorically,

---

<sup>4</sup> *Sahibs* were the masters, in the colonial master/servant hierarchy. Once the British left India, most of the government officials kept the privileged *sahib* position for themselves.

“Since the hierarchy within the KFD continues to persist, how can one expect them to treat the villagers with respect?” (1997:107)

Aside from the tendency for those who have power to want to keep it, I think the Forest Departments’ lack of respect for villagers is due to the unequal power relationships sanctioned by the JFM resolutions. They speak of the National Forest Policy (1988), but do not really do anything to transfer power back to the villages. As we saw in an earlier example, villagers were not even allowed to prune the *tendu* bushes, the leaves of which are used for making *bidi*. Benefit-sharing provisions fall far short of the National Forest Policy’s grant of “first charge” on forest products to the communities living in and around the forests (GOI 1988, para 4.3.4.3). Further, the idea of creating a “massive people’s movement with the involvement of women” (GOI 1988, para 2.1) is equally understated in practice. A final criticism is that JFM serves to co-opt villagers into providing protection to the forests that the FD could not otherwise maintain, thus assisting the FD achieve their own departmental objectives of raising timber. As village leaders in Gujarat observed, “If the FD had such capacity to [protect the forests], the forests would not have been destroyed in the first place” (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:9).

In this subsection, we have seen that the role of JFM Forest Department staff is still perceived to be that of master. In practice, the goal of facilitating capacity-building within the VFCs has been secondary to departmental management objectives. Even the benefit-sharing provisions of the individual orders support this. Given these criticisms of JFM at present, analysts (including myself) wonder, Is JFM really an effective model for the empowerment of forest dependent communities? Several communities, when faced with that question, have answered, “No.” At this point, it will be useful to consider the experiences of non-JFM protection groups, and explore the possibilities they offer for lessons to feed into the JFM process.

### **JFM-VFCs Compared to Other Village Forest Protection Groups (FPGs) in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh**

This section outlines the major structural differences between FPGs and JFM-VFCs of Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh.<sup>5</sup> Continuing my analysis of gender issues, I will examine the considerable variety of female participation across the sites. Of particular significance is the noticeable difference in the participation of women in the informal institutions of Himachal Pradesh, as opposed to the formalized committees functioning under JFM there.

It is important to keep in mind that strong traditions of self-organized resource management systems exist all over India, encompassing not only forests, but also grasslands, inland water bodies, and coastal areas. There are thousands of forest protection groups (henceforth “FPGs”) in Orissa, Bihar, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh, operating independently of JFM (Mitra 1997:44). Other sources document the presence of such groups in Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal (Chhatre 1995; Rawat 1995; and Chatterji 1996, respectively).

---

<sup>5</sup> The data is drawn from Sarin and SARTHI (1994) and my own fieldwork in Himachal Pradesh.



These groups have various origins. In many cases, such activities point to the respect accorded to traditional, local level institutions (e.g., *devta* committees, which are associated with sacred groves and temples) and in other instances, initiatives by NGOs played an instrumental role in bringing about local protection efforts (e.g., organization of Mahila Mandals). Whatever the case, when the forest departments are seeking pilot locations for the introduction of JFM, the presence of existing protection groups is an attraction, the idea being that such groups can easily be registered as JFM-VFCs and become eligible for the benefits under the state order. However, as will be shown, the ultimate benefits of inclusion of self-initiated FPGs in the JFM program are still debatable.

With the formalization of locally controlled groups into JFM, the potential arises for a shift in power relationships, as a new stake is created in the monetary benefits offered by JFM. While in some cases, benefits are deposited into a Village Development Fund, in many VFCs, members are entitled to individual shares (in cash or kind) of the benefits. Feminist theory suggests that the traditional exclusion of women from financial gain and property rights will manifest itself in such a scenario, effectively reducing the role of women in VFC functioning and benefit-sharing. How, if at all, does formalization of FPGs affect VFC functioning in practice? As comparative data was not easily available, tentative conclusions have been drawn from the case study materials used throughout the paper, specifically relating to the FPGs of Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh. Based on these materials, the following sections will argue that formalization of FPGs can have negative effects on the status of women.

#### *Membership Composition, Activities, and Benefit-sharing Mechanisms of FPGs in the study sites*

On the surface, the basic functioning of self-initiated FPGs is similar to the JFM approach, that of a committee which takes decisions on behalf of the whole village on forest related issues. However, unlike most JFM-VFCs, Sarin and SARTHI noted that, in terms of caste/class equity, most of the FPGs in the Gujarati villages they visited were “fairly representative and democratic” groups (1994:3).

One explanation for the greater caste/class equity of self-initiated FPGs lies in the approach taken with regard to defining the constituency that the committee represents. As was seen in the BCPP, the concept of “user group” as an organizational unit allows for greater precision in addressing the areas of conflict and consensus over a shared resource. This is because user-groups are social units, rather than administrative units such as “revenue villages.” This perspective facilitates positive inter-village relationships, as neighboring communities are brought together on the common issue of shared forests, instead of divided through competition over protecting each’s “own” forest.

For example, in Gujarat, the physical proximity, degree of dependence, and social relations between users of shared forests were used to identify which people use which areas, and established the membership composition of the FPGs (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:11). However, forcing the FPGs to change their organization to conform with revenue village divisions “is likely to create havoc”:

Not only could it lead to the break up of organically evolved and effective forest protection groups, but also exclude residents of villages like Chari from JFM benefits, simply because their village

happens to have very little forest area within its administrative boundary. Besides increasing inter-village inequity, enforcement of the FD requirement could also create inter-village conflict threatening the survival of both the forest protection groups and their regenerating forests (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:14).

Another major difference between JFM-VFCs and self-initiated FPGs involves membership responsibilities and benefit-sharing mechanisms. Whereas the FD agrees to provide the initial “seed” money to finance the VFC, self-initiated FPGs fund and monitor their own activities. For example, as with the Gujarati villages, households contribute cash or grains to pay for a forest guard (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:15). In other cases, “social fencing” is employed as a strategy -- for example, where volunteer patrol duties are rotated among all participating households.<sup>6</sup> This ensures that everyone has an equal stake, and decreases the temptation to violate the rules for fear of alienation from the community. This is particularly effective in small, localized, interdependent communities, where the societal pressure to obey restrictions would be high, and the penalties imposed attract public attention.

I observed an interesting account of such practices during a visit to the Naukuchiatal villages of the Uttar Pradesh hills. In this case, the Forest Department was not involved with this community’s decisions to protect the forests, and the guard was a local villager who had taken up protection duties. As we approached to regenerated patches, the forest guard explained how in the past, reckless burning to stimulate grass growth combined with widespread fellings for quick timber sale, had destroyed much of the area’s forests. More than 25 years ago, his father had realized the impending crises of deforestation and organized the villagers into protection and afforestation activities. Walking along tall trees he had planted as a boy in 1980, the guard told us that in the past, if any person was found responsible for lighting out-of-control grass fires, the punishment was afforesting the area *personally*. Though the offender would have the assistance of the village in the tedious task of hand-seeding new forest, the offender was responsible for caring for the saplings and protecting them from foraging animals. Generally, the cost in terms of time and effort were significant disincentives to would-be offenders, and forced people to take more responsibility for their actions. This contrasts with the JFM-VFCs, which typically use less-effective fines or cancellation of membership in the committee as a punishment for offenders (SPWD 1998:193).

In terms of benefit-sharing, under JFM, the FD generally retains the right to 50-75 percent of the returns from the sale of forest produce. High value NTFPs (e.g., bamboo, fibrous grasses, nuts) which had previously been considered collectable under established usufruct rights, are now sold, with the “benefits” shared between the VFC and FD. For example, in West Bengal, whereas poor gatherers once collected cashew nuts by right, now they are entitled to only 25 percent of that income, the rest being “shared” with the FD (Sarin et al 1998:23). Further, under JFM, “bonafide needs” are understood to be

---

<sup>6</sup> ‘Social Fencing’ is a term used to describe a strategy where people rely on each other to discourage anti-community behavior, often using moral or social pressures (as opposed to monetary penalties alone).

exclusively domestic, ignoring the fact that the poorest men and women rely on the collection, processing, and sale of NTFPs for their livelihood (Sarin et al 1998:26).

Locally controlled FPGs have been more sensitive to the actual needs of the various users of the forest, themselves having a tremendous stake in sustainable use practices. In some Gujarati villages, for example, villagers have negotiated informal agreements with the local forest guards, who are willing to recognize and validate the role of the FPGs in forest regeneration. For example,

The 'deal' they have worked out is that when any member needs timber for house construction, the group informs the forest guard when construction is begun. When the house is completed, the guard is invited to count the number of poles used and calculate the penalty payable. The guard, in turn, gives a 50 percent 'discount' by recording only 50 percent of the poles/timber actually used. This is in recognition of the villagers' contribution to forest protection (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:10).

As the authors observe, "Essentially, this is a *locally controlled*, unofficial form of JFM devoid of complex bureaucratic procedures, rules, and written agreements" (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:10). This simplicity avoids the previously discussed problems associated with partnerships with the FD as a whole. In this case, as the relationship is with single, individual guards, the interaction is more of a "partnership" in the true sense, than another master/servant relationship.

Finally, although it has been argued that such self-initiated FPGs are characterized by the same gender biases as those formed under JFM (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:2), a notable exception is found in the mountain state of Himachal Pradesh. In my time there, I observed both informal FPG meetings as well as JFM-VFC meetings. I was impressed by the number and dedication of the grassroots activists I met, both male and female, organized around natural resource management issues. In my observations of both informal FPGs and JFM-VFCs, I was impressed by the open participation of women in the former, and disappointed by the near absence of women in the latter.

For example, in the village of Nanj, the FPG meeting which I observed was attended by 12-13 villagers, in roughly equal numbers of males and females (4 adult women, 2 adolescent girls, 1 young boy, and 5 or 6 adult men). The *pradhan* (elected leader) is a woman, while the "vice president" is a man. I observed as they all took turns speaking, each one receiving the full attention of the rest. This FPG had organized in response to the extreme fodder shortages, and the growing problem of village women injuring themselves in the process of cutting grass from steep slopes. The local scarcity was so severe that women were leaving the village together to journey to distant forests and grass meadows, where they would leave early one morning and return the following evening. In-between, the men would bring them food and return to the village with the first day's collection. This was addressed as a community effort to solve a community problem, not merely a "women's issue."

A similar scenario took place in Sahaj, a village located in a naturally dry area situated atop a mountain ridge, when the villagers were called to discuss incorporation into the JFM program. In this case, it was the women of the Mahila Mandal who had organized around the acute fodder scarcity issue, closing patches of grass, and planting

trees and grasses. The area around drinking water sources is also protected, and is being afforested. The men helped the women in this effort, but did not take over. For the last five years, the women have been managing the forests and meadows in this way.

The entire village made an effort to attend: 16 adult women, many young girls, 12 adult men, and many boy children were present. The discussion was dominated by an older man, and the adult woman who received and hosted us, the leader of the Mahila Mandal, but others also spoke up. When the idea of joining JFM came up, they were apprehensive about uniting with the FD, and visibly concerned for a loss of control over the management practices in which they were already engaged.

One specific concern they had was regarding accountability. They pointed out that when Panchayat funds are used for public works, they are subcontracted out with kickbacks, leading to sub-quality work. They felt that the allocation of funds related to village activities should remain under the control of the village, pointing our attention to the additions on the nearby schoolhouse, which was built by the villagers, themselves. They said that knowing their own children were going to be sitting inside ensured that the construction would be sound and the materials used properly.

These stories illustrate the important point that the management of local forests and grass meadows are community concerns, not the exclusive domain of elite individuals who stand to gain, personally, from healthy forests. In these communities, the populations are small enough that if one family is suffering from scarcity, it is likely that all are. The problem arises when the suffering is limited to the female members of society and it goes unnoticed or unacknowledged by the male members. This is made almost inevitable if women are not a part of the diagnosis and solution to community, resource-related management issues. Such exclusion (or near exclusion) was evident in my observation of some JFM-VFC meetings.

In Village Kautola, for example, the “active and executive committee members” -- about 40 men -- were called for a meeting. This VFC was formed last year, and there had been no existing protection efforts in the village. Prior to the meeting, the Range Officer told me that each family in the village has two representatives, one male and one female. However, only 50 percent of the general house is required to be present for a meeting to be held, and it appeared that this was the case here. I watched as several women passed by the gathering on the porch of the FD rest house, all in the process of carrying out work responsibilities. Just as the meeting began, one woman joined us. She was not very vocal, though.

Similarly, in the meeting held for communities participating in the Ecodevelopment<sup>7</sup> program at Largi (the headquarters of the Great Himalayan National Park), villagers traveled 10-20 km just to meet the bus which would bring them to the meeting. Not surprisingly, it was attended primarily by men. The following day, another meeting was held at Neuli, a village situated inside the park. As no travel was involved for these villagers, this meeting was attended by both men and women. However, I noticed that the women sat together in the back of the room and were, at times, easily distracted. I recorded my observations later that day in my field journal:

---

<sup>7</sup> This was a FD initiated meeting for Ecodevelopment, not JFM. However, the approach is the same, as Eco-Development was envisioned to be a “JFM-style” program for Protected Areas.

After we broke for lunch, it took a lot of effort for me to communicate to the women that it was important to return to the group inside, and I felt very disappointed at how totally uninterested the women were in the proceedings. From my seat on the floor in the back where I sat with them, I could see that. They weren't even paying attention and it felt like even if they wanted to participate, they were too much on the fringes of the group to be involved, unless they chose to physically get up and go see what was going on, as I did when medicinal plants from the upper alpine valleys were being passed around the inner circle. And an "inner circle" it seemed to be, as even the men seated in the back seemed totally peripheral. From there, you could barely hear anything, even if you wanted to.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge the possibility that women who do not openly participate in VFC meetings may be expressing their concerns through their husbands or male relatives. As Correa noted in Karnataka, this is one way women can make their opinions known without questioning traditional roles within the family (1996:118). More importantly here, the consultant who was leading the fieldwork was repeatedly insistent on the point that women in Himachal most definitely *do* have the physical and cultural space to make their opinions known, and that they use it.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, in Village Tunna, where a conscious effort by the FD staff was made to elicit women's participation, there was a noticeable difference in the group dynamic. This visit was unique for two reasons: One, because PRA training exercises were being conducted by a cadre of students from the Forest Training School, Sundernagar; and two, because a woman FD member was also present.

This meeting was attended by both women and men, and all participated in the mapping exercises as well as the discussion about use patterns and management priorities. A lively discussion took place, with one older woman dominating much of it. As the meeting was breaking up, she started walking away, saying that it was time to get back to her work and that that was the end of the meeting. The meeting simply adjourned. What followed was quite comical: The student guards kept calling her back, trying to elicit a promise from her to return the next day at the agreed upon time. She kept pushing the appointment back, smiling, as if on a whim! They finally negotiated a time with her as she was walking off, laughing, and teasing the student foresters about the meeting time for the next day, pretending that she would try to be there. The foresters shook their heads, sighing, half smiling, and seemingly slightly bewildered at how easily she determined the course of things to come. After the meeting was over, I was amazed at the obvious respect she commanded from within the village, as well as from the student guards.

In spite of these examples of such open and broad-based community participation, the long-awaited benefits of sustained conservative use practices (often strategized and undertaken by women alone) may be jeopardized by formalization into JFM, which typically results in men dominating the decision-making processes. I suggest that this is true because as soon as an economic stake is perceived (as with upon registration as a

---

<sup>8</sup> While I observed this to be true in the informal FPG meetings of Nanj and Sahaj, this was not the case in Kautola, Largi, or Neuli, where, in my opinion, women were not actively solicited for participation by FD representatives.

JFM-VFC), a new system of benefit-sharing and member responsibilities is imposed, one that diminishes the value of women and denies them equity.

For example, I was told about one Himachali village where the women, frustrated with the hardships of fodder scarcity, got together and decided to close a particular patch from grazing. They had worked out a system so that once the grass had regenerated, each family would be allowed to send in one person at a time, who could go and collect as much as needed, limited to one trip at a time. However, after the regeneration, the men of the village decided that *they* were the ones who should decide how to manage this closed commons. They parceled it up into equal units, and each family was allowed to use the grass inside as and when they wished. Unfortunately, as some families needed more and some needed less, grass decomposed and went waste lying in the forest. In the meantime, women were struggling to procure sufficient amounts of fodder elsewhere. This case points to the gender issues implicit in the introduction of new economic stakes, such as might occur when communities engaged in self-initiated forest protection decide to join JFM.

This is also a clear example of the individualistic temptation to privatize village commons, even at the expense of the community as a whole. In this case, given the future possibility of encroachment or conversion to cash-cropping, the assignment of defined patches to individual families would effectively guarantee individual men a claim to the land. This example also illustrates the lack of interest for women's issues that is often displayed by male-dominated groups, as well as the tendency to exclude women from the decision-making process, especially when an economic stake is involved. It is interesting to note that prior to regeneration of the grassland, when it was just a "degraded" patch, the men of the village had no interest in it at all.

In another case, in 1992, the Mahila Mandal of Village Thalli took up a patch for protection and successfully regenerated it. Three years later, one of the Mahila Mandal members was elected as *pradhan* of the Gram Panchayat. In 1997, the informal FPG of the village registered itself as a VFC under JFM with the DFO. However,

the VFC members were chosen arbitrarily, the women were sidelined, and the men took over. The informal process of transparent decision-making in an open meeting attended by all was replaced by a few members of the committee taking decisions for all. This has led to the breakdown of the protection mechanisms devised by the Mahila Mandal, resulting in overexploitation of the regenerating forest. The Gram Panchayat has no role to play in protecting the forest, so it doesn't help that the *pradhan* is one of the Mahila Mandal's own (Chhatre 1999b).

This brings us back to the question of formalizing FPGs that are functioning well independently. As we have seen, gender issues, benefit-sharing issues, and ecological issues are all important considerations in the assessment of the "success" of JFM as an institution. However, in practice, the role of the FD in perpetuating their ideas about VFC functionings cannot be overlooked. Thus, there can be distinct advantages to maintaining the integrity of FPGs as they exist, rather than transforming them into JFM communities. Although it would be an overgeneralization to assume that formalization

would *necessarily* undermine the strength and consensus-approach of all existing FPGs, it is important to point out the potential for such changes.

On the other hand, the formalization of VFCs under JFM mandates the consideration of gender and equity, issues that might otherwise be overlooked simply by “tradition” in some communities. As was seen in the Gujarati FPGs, there is no guarantee that FPGs would be broad-based to begin with. Is there a middle ground? How might JFM, still evolving, respond to these issues in the future?

### ***Lessons from the Comparison of FPGs and JFM-VFCs***

What can be learned from the discussion surrounding these findings? On the positive side, it was seen that generally in the informal FPGs of Himachal Pradesh, women were extremely active -- even the initiators of the groups -- and as such, ensured broad-based participation, which brought communities together instead of creating divisions or increasing social tensions.

However, the process of formalization of FPGs into JFM raises some concerns about the role of women in the new VFCs. The fact that, with the creation of an economic stake (e.g., either outside JFM control, or more commonly via the potential income from benefit-sharing provisions under JFM), women’s status *still* seemed to decrease even in the relatively equitable hill societies of Himachal Pradesh is troubling. As we saw in Village Thalli, for example, when the Mahila Mandal led FPG was registered under JFM, broad-based participation was replaced with male dominance. This supports the idea that, in spite of government mandates to include one or two “token” women in the group, women’s status within the plains’ societies (e.g., Gujarat) is not likely to increase, given the more rigid sexual division of labor, the traditional exclusion of women from participation in decision-making, and the caste/class divisions characteristic there.

A major insight that can be drawn from the case study, as well as anthropological theory in general, is that even deeply embedded, traditional attitudes and behaviors are changeable, especially given the opportunity to learn by example. It will be recalled from earlier sections of this paper that in both Gujarat and West Bengal, a key to the rapid spread and widespread interest in the creation of FPGs lay in the example set by the initial communities for the surrounding areas. People witnessed surrounding villages prospering through their self-intervention, and were encouraged to join a movement.

People all over India have historically found power in numbers and through the philosophy of collective action, and continue to do so today. Though traditions persist, they are constantly evolving to adapt to the challenges of a changing world. When broad-based participation is elicited and the results successful, others may be inspired to reexamine the notion that exclusionary practices are superior to widespread inclusion. This is already happening. Sarin and SARTHI documented the perspectives of male FPG members, who agreed that increasing the role of women in community decision-making processes is an important change that the village must undergo. They report,

More important than the numbers are the *processes* that the focus on gender equity has set in motion among the villagers. Among the men, it has generated conscious reflection on the desirability of making

progressive changes in the age old tradition of women's exclusion from community decision making forums. The more progressive men have attempted to persuade the more resistant ones to accept such change. The few men who have gone on exposure visits to other groups already participating in JFM have played a particularly important role in this. They have shared what they learnt from interaction with the other groups' women and men, and how their effectiveness had increased after they started involving women in their functioning (Sarin and SARTHI 1994:23).

It is important to note that this is *not* the result of Western feminism forcing "liberation" onto peasant women, but rather, a local response to a changing physical and social environment.

Similarly, even in the ranks of the FDs attitudes are changing, albeit slowly . Whereas just two years ago at a meeting of the JFM Subgroup on Gender and Equity, when the participants were asked to explain what the term "gender" meant to them, responses included "a non-issue blown out of proportion" (quoted in Sarin 1997:15). Two JFM consultants also reported to me that in their opinion, gender issues were not understood well enough by the majority of bureaucrats, such that those projects ended up "shelved" for lack of interest. Yet sympathetic foresters like A.K. Banerjee (who started the JFM program in West Bengal) are followed today by the men and women foresters whom I met and interacted with on the subjects of JFM, equity and "participation." I think the DFO, Seraj, Mr. PL Chauhan, articulated the position of the "new" generation of foresters the most clearly. I recollected that day, when

in his office, PL Chauhan had a nice chat with us about JFM and the villages. At one point, he corrected himself from "we" (meaning the FD) to "the people." Smiling, he added, "That's what we've been taught now, there's no more 'us' or 'ours' -- now, it's about 'the people' and using a participatory approach." (field journal entry)

An important key for the success of JFM lies in the sensitization of both FD staff and village communities to the gender-differentiated realities that forest management practices involve, and policy prescriptions which seek to reverse institutional biases against women in particular. Only as gender and equity issues continued to be identified and raised, will responses at both the bureaucratic and local levels be elicited.

Clearly, at this point, any findings are limited in scope. The tremendous geographic and cultural variation found across the Indian subcontinent do not easily lend themselves to generalization. However, there are lessons to be learned from these case study comparisons. My findings and recommendations are summarized as follows:

1. The participation of the FD in the functioning of forest protection groups (FPGs) and village forest committees (VFCs) can be an impediment to gender and caste/class equity, and perpetuate the traditional exclusion of women from participation and decision-making in village institutions.

Recommendation: Sensitization of FD staff to this issue can help to encourage broad-based, equitable participation and benefit-sharing in the JFM communities.



2. There are important implications in the language of the JFM orders issued by the states. Women are inappropriately categorized as a ‘minority’ interest and, as such, guaranteed only ‘minority’ representation.  
Recommendation: In the continuing evolution of the JFM program, future resolutions may address this issue by changing the language to emphasize the importance of equity in the involvement of women and marginalized caste/class groups in VFCs.
3. There may be significant changes in gendered power relationships when an economic stake is introduced into a village commons, such as occurs with the introduction of JFM to a community operating under self-initiated strategies.  
Recommendation: Sensitization of FD staff about this issue may help to ensure that participation and benefit-sharing within the JFM communities remains broad-based and equitable.
4. Self-organized systems of forest protection and management may offer valuable lessons which JFM staff may not explore when registering FPGs as VFCs. In such cases, JFM may function to undermine hard-won gains of solidarity among user-groups of different communities and genders.  
Recommendation: Site-specific sensitization of JFM field staff to existing patterns of forest management could enhance the relationship between local communities and the FD, and may offer valuable insights into the improved management of the forests, overall.
5. The collective organization of women around resource issues can yield positive and powerful results.  
Recommendation: The Mahila Mandals are a valuable vehicle for such organization. Female foresters may also play a leading role in changing attitudes and organizing women where Mahila Mandals are not in place.
6. When “women’s issues” are viewed as “village issues,” broad-based solutions are more readily arrived at, which benefits both the local society and environment.  
Recommendation: The spread of efforts to raise awareness similar to those of the NGO, SARTHI should be encouraged and implemented.
7. “Traditions” are not immutable; “Culture” is a constantly evolving adaptation to changing circumstances. Gender and equity sensitization in the villages and within the Himachal Pradesh FD is already making a tremendous difference in the way men and women perceive the contribution of one another’s roles in decision-making about resource management.  
Recommendation: Forest Department officials need to support the political changes that empowerment of local communities calls for. The overall JFM experience would be enhanced by field staff taking a lead in the support and encouragement of gender and caste/class equity in decision-making and benefit-sharing.
8. People are hesitant to enact a partnership with the FD, due to negative impressions of benefit-sharing and accountability issues. The criticism that JFM is not empowering the villages, but instead co-opting villagers into providing cheap labor for the FD, is a valid one.  
Recommendation: JFM would benefit from a built-in flexibility which would allow for

communities to participate in the design of the program itself, on a site-specific basis. This would allow for communities to negotiate decision-making and benefit-sharing provisions in conjunction with the state Forest Departments.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I began this inquiry with the idea that JFM might serve as a participatory model for achieving both forest conservation and community development objectives. However, my findings lead me to conclude that at present, JFM as a model is inadequate. I have shown that it does not promote equity, particularly along the lines of gender and caste/class, and suggested that the overall conservation imperative remains secondary to departmental objectives of raising timber and harvesting valuable NTFPs. Based on the case study materials, I must conclude that JFM's timber-focused approach does not adequately address the needs of forest-dependent people, whose traditional subsistence strategies revolve around dense, mixed-species forest ecosystems.

Further, the research indicates that the greatest value of "participation" lies in its use as an approach, not a model. The use of JFM as the *single* participatory model for forest management fails to acknowledge that within each community, pre-existing traditions relating to the decision-making process are already present. In some cases, the introduction of JFM may encourage a shift towards more equity between dominant and minority groups within a single community. In other cases, however, the imposition of JFM management and benefit sharing provisions may disrupt relatively stable systems already in place. In the same way that national level management prescriptions are inappropriate for such a large country, state-level prescriptions cannot take into account local-level cultural and economic variations.

JFM needs to have a built-in flexibility which would allow for communities to participate in the design of the program itself, on a site-specific basis. This would allow for communities to negotiate decision-making and benefit-sharing provisions in conjunction with the state Forest Departments. The program would be further improved by encouraging the association of local NGOs, which could facilitate sensitization about gender and caste/class equity issues in decision-making as well. However, for sensitization and empowerment to occur, there must be a willingness to rescind power on the part of the dominant groups, be they Forest Department staff, government bureaucrats, or elite men of the villages. This will not come about easily, but is necessary for long-term stability of forest and human resources. Without the support of the most forest-dependent users, the long-term sustainability of any forest management policy has to be seriously questioned. If broad-based participation can be shown to restore the renewability of degraded and threatened forests, even resistant parties will eventually have to accept that.

### **References**

- Agarwal, Bina  
1992 The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India. *Feminist Studies* 18(1):119-158.
- Ahal, Rajeev  
1996 The Unfulfilled Vision: An Account of Village Forest Cooperative Societies of Kangra District, Himachal Pradesh. Kathmandu: ICIMOD.
- Andersen, Kristin Ewers  
1995 Institutional Flaws of Collective Forest Management. *Ambio* 24(6):349-353.
- Asian Age  
1998 "Concern Over Bid to Block Women's Bill" 7/24/98, Pp. 9.
- Bhatt, Chandi Prasad  
1994 Foreword. *In All About Draft Forest Bill and Forest Lands: Towards Policies and Practices as if People Mattered.* S.R.Hiremath, S. Kanwalli, and S. Kulkarni, eds. Bangalore: Citizens for Democracy.
- Center for Science and Environment (CES)  
1985 The State of India's Environment: Second Citizen's Report. Delhi: Center for Science and Environment.
- Chambers, Robert; Saxena, N.C.; and Shah, Tushaar  
1990 To the Hands of the Poor: Water and Trees. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Chatterji, Angana P., in collaboration with Allison Schwartz and Arabari Communities  
1995 Community Forest Management in Arabari: Understanding Sociocultural and Subsistence Issues. New Delhi: Society for Promotion of Wastelands Development.
- Chhatre, Ashwini  
1999 Transforming Local Politics: Women in the Panchayati Raj in Himachal Pradesh. Down to Earth.  
  
1995 Joint Forest Management: Beyond the Rhetoric. *In Drafting a People's Forest Bill: A Forest Dweller-Social Activist Perspective.* Walter Fernandez, ed. Pp. 112- 120. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute.
- Correa, Mariette  
1997 Gender and Joint Forest Planning and Management: A Research Study in Uttara Kannada district, Karnataka. New Delhi: SPWD.
- Fernandez, Walter, ed.  
1995 Drafting A People's Forest Bill: A Forest Dweller-Social Activist Alternative. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute.
- Gadgil, Madhav and Guha, Ramachandra  
1995 Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India. London: Routledge.

Government of India (GOI)

- 1992 The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act , Part IX “The Panchayats.” *In* JFM Update 1998. New Delhi: SPWD. Pp. 259-266.
- 1990 Circular No. 6-21/89-P.P. *In* All About Draft Forest Bill and Forest Lands: Towards Policies and Practices as if People Mattered. S.R.Hiremath, S. Kanwalli, and S. Kulkarni, eds. Bangalore: Citizens for Democracy. Pp. 251-255.
- 1988 National Forest Policy. *In* JFM Update 1988. New Delhi: SPWD. Pp. 242-249.
- 1988b Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 Amended. *In* All About Draft Forest Bill and Forest Lands: Towards Policies and Practices as if People Mattered. S.R.Hiremath, S. Kanwalli, and S. Kulkarni, eds. Bangalore: Citizens for Democracy. Pp. 256-260.
- 1980 National Forest Policy. *In* All About Draft Forest Bill and Forest Lands: Towards Policies and Practices as if People Mattered. S.R.Hiremath, S. Kanwalli, and S. Kulkarni, eds. Bangalore: Citizens for Democracy. Pp. 223-236.
- Mitra, Amit
- 1997 Joint Forest Management: Case Studies. New Delhi: Yojana, August issue.
- Mukherji, S.D.
- 1998 Is Handing Over Forests to Local Communities a Solution to Deforestation?  
New Delhi: Wastelands News (May/July 1998): 22-28.
- Pandey, R.R.
- 1998 JFM in West Bengal: Ground Realities. New Delhi: Wastelands News (May/July 1998):40.
- Pathan, R.S.
- 1998 The Community Action In Development Leads to Sustenance... Let Us Prove It. New Delhi: Wastelands News (May/July 1998):34-36.
- Rawat, Ajay
- 1995 Deforestation and Forest Policy in the Lesser Himalayan Kumaon. *Mountain Research and Development* 15(4):311-322.
- Sachs, Carolyn E., ed.
- 1997 Women Working in the Environment. Washington, D.C.: Taylor and Francis.
- Sarin, Madhu
- 1997 Meeting of the Group on Gender and Equity in Joint Forest Management, Sept. 29-Oct 1, 1997: Report of the Proceedings. New Delhi: SPWD.
- and SARTHI
- 1998 Who is Gaining? Who is Losing? Gender and Equity

Concerns in Joint Forest Management. New Delhi:  
SPWD.

----- and Ray, Lipka; Chatterji, Mitali; Banerjee, Narayan; and Hiremath, Shyamala  
1994 The View From the Ground: Community Perspectives  
on JFM in Gujarat, India. New Delhi: SPWD.

Shiva, Vandana

1989 Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development. London: Zed Books.

Sontheimer, Sally, ed.

1991 Women and the Environment: A Reader: Crisis and Development in the  
Third World. New York: Monthly Review Press.