

From Regulation to Facilitation? The Forest Department and Joint Forest Management in Tamilnadu, India.

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M. Jagannadha Rao and John Kerr
Dept of Resource Development
Michigan State University

1. Introduction and Problem Definition

Deforestation, leading to the loss of India's valuable natural resources and consequent deprivation of livelihood of millions of people, has been a major national and international concern. While this drastic deterioration in recent years exposed the limitations of government management, participatory management strategies that foster partnerships between government agencies and local communities are now regarded as vital not only to arrest this degradation but also to promote forest regeneration. India's joint forest management (JFM) program provides a remarkable example of this kind of institutional innovation and represents a major effort over the last few years to make this policy work for both forests and people (Saxena 1999).

There is now a growing body of evidence which suggests that forests can be protected effectively through cooperative action taken by Forest Department (FD) and rural communities (Samar Singh 1990, Poffenberger 1990, Dhar 1994, Bahuguna 1994, Kant and Nautiyal 1994, Jewitt 1995, TERI 1998, Sreedharan and Sarkar 1998, Datta and Varalakshmi 1999, Rangachari and Mukherji 2000, Sundar 2000, Ghate 2001, Hill 2002).

Unfortunately, although the concept of JFM as a policy measure has been adopted in about 20 out of 27 Indian states, JFM initiatives are not always successful nor are they widespread (Sundar 2000). In many instances they were pushed through ad hoc orders owing to pressure from donor agencies or interested individuals (Bowman 1998, Saxena 1999). For instance, in the state of Tamil Nadu, India, the emphasis to take forestry to the people is especially evident in foreign funded programs like SIDA, the World Bank and the OECF. Even in many states that adopted JFM as a major policy, its implementation is still confined to small-scale trials.

Scaling up of JFM is important not only to stem degradation and enhance ecosystem health but also to address India's growing biomass needs (Kerr et al.1997). For any real and meaningful impact of these greening efforts, the success and sustainability of JFM needs to be scaled up to increased levels. And this needs to be done not by "project replication", but through diffusive strategies influencing policy reform and bureaucratic transformation.

Transition to JFM, however, requires responsible and responsive forest departments as they are equal partners in this radical management approach. However, the "work culture", i.e., the systems and structures that govern the relationship between the agency and the community

established long ago on the lines of policing and industrial production, remain largely unaltered. Attention to reorganizing the functioning of the forest department that governs 98 per cent of India's forest resources is at least as important as reforming local institutions (Sundar 2000).

This paper presents some key issues and challenges facing the Forest Department bureaucracy in the implementation of JFM in Tamil Nadu, India. A detailed qualitative investigation conducted by a Forest Department insider provides the basis for preliminary conclusions about officials' attitudes toward JFM and perceptions of its prospects.¹

Role of the State in Increasing the Impact of JFM

Government remains the ultimate arbiter and executor of wider policy changes that are required for increasing the impact of a program and its involvement is multiplicative and diffusive (Edwards and Hulme 1992). Although individual experiments in participatory management have sometimes been initiated by bureaucrats, scaling up of these experiments and their conversion into legitimate programs has never taken place without the backing of the political arm of the state (Lele 2000). The state has a definite role in promoting and sustaining the social capital that is essential to provide participatory forest management (Lise 2000). Local institutions created by the state play a critical role in mediating the influence of structural and socio-economic variables (Agarwal and Yadama 1997). Moreover, villagers support the co-management process and want the FD to take the initiative in planning (Sinha 1999).

Lack of Systematic Information on the Bureaucratic Interface in JFM

Despite the critical role of bureaucracy in transforming forest governance to participatory management, most of the earlier studies on JFM have largely focused on community factors and processes involved. Among the few studies done on the organizational aspects of JFM in the forest bureaucratic system, (Bahuguna and Luthra 1991) and Baumann (1998) point out officials' lack of awareness of the latest developments and a mismatch between JFM objectives and the existing legal and administrative framework. Drawing from their vast JFM experience, Rangachari and Mukherji (2000) provide pragmatic suggestions on the needed organizational reforms in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

Personal, cultural, and historical dynamics, known only to other members of the service, often influence the decision choices of the forest staff (Robbins 2000). For example, failures are usually not reported, since "these are not accepted in the system" (Singh 1992). These subtle features and other difficulties associated with studying the internal structure of any government agency are among the reasons that little work to date has focused on these agencies (Kolavalli and Kerr 2000). Moreover, members within organizations often are hesitant to conduct such research for fear that such study may negatively impact their career prospects (Vira 2000).

As a result, most Indian case studies pertaining to the bureaucratic approaches in Joint Forest Management are anecdotal, often drawn from personal experiences and observations (Vira 2000). This leaves an important gap in our understanding of JFM's implementation dynamics. And this lack of systematic information on the experiences gained and lessons learned in FD

¹ The primary author is on study leave from his post in the Tamil Nadu Forest Department.

could be the single most important stumbling block that is preventing JFM from reaching to sizeable scales.

2. Management Climate to Undertake JFM in the Forest Department

Some authors suggest that the government input to the “jointness” of management represented by the FD is relatively uncomplicated whereas the village component is difficult to define (Andersen 1995). While agreeing that the village side is definitely complicated, it is this village complexity, coupled with the problems inherent in a government functioning that make the transition to JFM even more complicated and difficult for the FD, the agent of change. In this section the issues and challenges involved in dealing with the new external environment, i.e., working at the village level, are briefly reviewed.

Challenges Involved in Working with a Diverse and Evolving Community

As rightly pointed out by Andersen (1995), it is the meaning and implication of the concept of “village” that potentially creates problems for the successful implementation of JFM. Indian villages show a high degree of heterogeneity in terms of caste, class, ethnic, political, gender, and occupational structures. This diversity is further complicated with people having different literacy rates, access to information, customary rights and privileges, formal and informal power statuses, resource endowments and interests. Several of these village level concerns in the implementation of JFM have been highlighted in a number studies.² In a survey conducted on the impact of JFM in West Bengal, it was reported that only 50% of the respondents joined JFM with more than a quarter of those not joining citing class differences as the main reason (Hill 2002).

People from different social strata of the society rely on forests for different purposes. The users are as diverse as their nature and magnitude of use. Even those apparent groups such as herders, bamboo cutters, fodder and NTFP collectors, all represent different segments of the society dependent on several nonexclusive resources options. Even if they all somehow unite and participate in conservation, there are several associated benefits such as increased moisture that benefits even non-participants. Also, it often becomes difficult to decide on how the management should involve the people hitherto engaged in “illegal” activities such as free grazing, firewood collection, timber smuggling and wildlife poaching vis-à-vis other genuinely interested but poor people.

There are also certain emerging socioeconomic issues and trends that operate at a broader level in the society that influence implementation of JFM at the village level. These are the global market dynamics and associated pressures that are bringing about fundamental changes in the community characteristics, values, traditions, and livelihoods. These factors greatly influence local people’s need, ability, vision, and willingness to be involved in issues related to common property management. The main interest of the villagers now is specifically economic (Hill

² These pertain to gender issues (Sarin 1995, Armitage and Hyma 1997, Locke 1999, Jewitt 2000); the question of territoriality and excludability (Corbridge and Jewitt 1997); the role of charismatic leaders (Jewitt 1995) and local leadership (Baker 1998); the level of community participation (Sundar 2000); and the issue of mismatch in institutional set-up (Andersen 1995).

2002). Especially, the youth in the villages have been observed to show a declining interest in environmental issues (Rastogi 1999). In tune with these developments, even those communities that are involved in forestry are observed to be gradually changing their interest to fast growing and commercial plantations (Sundar 2000, Yadama 1997). These interests and objectives may differ significantly from those identified in the JFM concept (Ligon and Narain 1999) or with those perceived as useful by the FD (Alavalapati 1990, Hill 2002). Sundar (2000) mentions how the FD has to persuade the villagers to go for NTFP species instead of species like cashew that villagers demand. (Of course, villagers are diverse and interests within them are likely to vary.)

Further, the 72nd amendment of the constitution of India has provided increased recognition and village-level governance powers to the panchayat, the democratically elected village level administrative body. It is, however, often possible that the boundaries of a panchayat village do not coincide with that of a forest village or hamlet, thus making it difficult to channel the funds apportioned to a panchayat. Moreover, those members who are dependent or interested in forest may be a minority in the panchayat. In some cases, forest management may not be the priority of a panchayat.

The implication of these challenges for the FD are that it is responsible for not only to devolve its authority over forest resources but also to successfully establish some village level institution that works with it on a long-term basis to implement JFM. Thus we see the creation of grass-root level institutions such as Village Forest Committees (VFC) or Forest Protection Committees (FPC) as the first step in introducing JFM in the villages. These are expected to resolve the intra-village conflicts, build coalitions, harness energy of the people and help them successfully engage in common property management. While nearly all of the FD personnel are well educated in technical aspects of forestry, few of them have the training or experience related to village-level social organization.

The Challenge of Creating/Reviving Community Interest in the Forest

Another important prerequisite to successfully under take JFM is the element of the community's interest to participate in JFM. As Andersen (1995) observes, "the cohesiveness of a group would be determined by the benefit each individual member perceives to gain from such membership. Few organizations, committees, or cooperatives will evolve in a voluntary manner before it is known what will be gained by joining." Reaching a common understanding often requires attitudinal changes, and to facilitate such changes, new procedures and incentives need to be introduced (Rastogi, 1999). Several studies in the past have underlined the importance of introducing various incentives to moderate challenges involved in the implementation of JFM (Poffenberger 1990, 1995, Bahuguna et al 1994, Dhar 1994, Corbridge and Jewitt 1997 Sinha, 1999, Ghate 2001).

Basically all the JFM approaches provide two kinds of incentives to the villagers to create, revive, or harness their interest. These are 1) those that look at long term interests involving forest conservation and regeneration, and 2) those that provide short-term employment and income generation works. Short-term interventions are needed to compensate those weaker sections of the community that were earlier dependent on these resources for their survival but lose access due to forest closure, restricted grazing etc.

Some interventions are also provided to some community members who are interested and inclined to join forest management to compensate for their time and efforts, though they were not dependent earlier. These short-term measures also include promotion of subsidies, micro-credit structures, self-help groups, etc., which in turn are aimed at institutional building, another prerequisite for JFM, as explained in the above section. Some activities go beyond individuals or small groups and target the whole village. These are undertaken in the beginning of JFM and are commonly referred to as entry point activities or confidence building measures to bring FD and villagers closer.

The literature cited in this study implies that, for the sustainability of JFM, the ultimate interest should be linked to the forest based tangible benefits. The community should be in a position not only to witness the change but actually start benefiting from such change in forest condition. Visible resurgence of the forest provides not only tangible economic benefits but also a sense of satisfaction, belonging, and identity to the villagers. This can provide the necessary motivation for their continued interest and involvement. In addition, conservation efforts are more likely to be sustained with more widespread distribution of benefits among villagers (Kerr 2002).

Problems Associated with Working in a Complex and Uncertain Biophysical Environment

The management of a resource such as forest gets further complicated in view of its existence not only in a multitude of stakeholder environment but also in a diverse and uncertain biophysical nature. Firstly, this is because of the variability in productivity both in space and time, and the uncertainty and long gestation involved. Associated with this are the institutional problems involved in transaction, protection, harvest and marketing. Past studies have indicated that the protection systems, be they under state or local management, are particularly vulnerable to breakdown in times of scarcity (Hill 2002), or when surrounded by extremely poor and dependent populations with no other survival alternatives. Significant positive association between local collective action and improving condition of the forest was observed in a study conducted in Nepal (Varughese 2000).

Whatever the case, forest productivity considerations and potential interest and involvement of the surrounding people seem to entail two major implications for the FD to successfully undertake JFM. One, heavy investments both in forest and non-forest employment activities to improve the quality of the forest as well as to undertake institution building and interest creation activities in the community. Second, in order to meet non-forest developmental needs such as health, education, and commerce, the FD needs active support and cooperation of other government agencies operating in these areas (Bahuguna 1994, Ghate 2001).

Organizational Challenges in the Internal Environment

Governments all over the world are increasingly supporting democratization, decentralization, and collaborative natural resource management in the wake of rising environmental awareness and failure of previous hierarchical approaches. However, for successful implementation it may not be enough for a government to draw upon a benign policy. More importantly, the bureaucratic wing required to implement it should have the needed management climate. This may entail enhancing employees' knowledge and skill levels, bringing about some attitudinal changes, providing needed resources, and offering motivational incentives (Whisnant 1980,

Maxwell, 1990, Kitchen-Maran 1992, Schumaker 1995, Padgett and Imani 1999). All changes need to suit the changed task and work environment. Recognizing the problems associated with managing an almost open access resource fraught with several economic disincentives in a changing society, Bowonder suggested major changes in forest administration as early as 1983.

Poffenberger (1990) opined that in the implementation of JFM, while the primary constraint will be improving processes to establish functional community resource management groups, for forest personnel, the added difficulty lies in coping with both technical and socio-cultural changes which demand transformation in rules, procedures, and attitudes. He further states “given the opportunity, space, and conducive atmosphere, with assistance from appropriate resource people, field staff have displayed flexibility, commitment, and a willingness to change, often laboring extra hours and coping with additional responsibility”.

Traditional FD systems, however, involve hierarchy, elitism, and corporate structures (Rastogi 1999). Bureaucratic rigidity and administrative bottlenecks continue to challenge those who would like to innovate radically with community organization, participatory planning, budgetary allocations and benefit sharing (Campbell, 1996). Jeffery et al. (1998 cited in Lele 2000) note that despite a lukewarm and occasionally hostile response to JFM by foresters, several states are vigorously pursuing JFM. On the other hand, some authors report positive changes in foresters’ attitudes with the adoption of this new conservation strategy (Dhar 1994, and Hill 2002) and an ongoing “construction of needs” (Sundar 2000).

While Baumann (1998) points out an apparent mismatch between JFM objectives and Forest Departments’ existing legal and administrative framework, Saxena (1999) calls for radical changes in Forestry Departments’ centralized planning for the Departments to be able to work with a large number of diverse and scattered local institutions. He further observes that the foresters charged with implementing the policy find their traditional roles ill-equipped to cope with recent changes. Ghate (2000), concluding a recent study on JFM in Buldhana, Maharashtra, states among other factors, coordination among various development agencies in the area, devolution of authority within the FD, and introduction of the element of flexibility and continuous learning, as the factors responsible for success. She further adds that the leadership, dedication and commitment of the District Conservator of Forests in charge of JFM and the sincere efforts of a group of forest staff under his leadership helped not only in making this case succeed but also enabling it to spread to nearby areas.

To complicate matters further, the Forest Department, which reigned over forests for over a century, has been given the responsibility not only to decentralize its authority over the forest but also to successfully implement the transition to JFM. The twin responsibilities, i.e., the ownership of the forest as its custodians on behalf of the state, as well as the responsibility to successfully transition to JFM make the FD staff tread carefully in this arena. They fear that responsibility without strong authority may lead to negative results for which they will be blamed.

Thus, it can be seen that the situation in the FD is as complex and perplexing as that of a village; and even if there is sincere interest and enthusiasm to advance JFM among FD personnel, these complexities and uncertainties present a formidable challenge for them to transition to JFM.

3. The Case of Implementation of JFM in Tamil Nadu, India

As has been mentioned in section 1, much of what has been reported with reference to JFM bureaucratic interface is anecdotal, often drawing from authors' personal experiences and observations. This underlines the need for a systematic study to understand the dynamics of implementation of JFM. The study of JFM in Tamil Nadu is especially interesting in view of its promotion in predominantly degraded forests and non-tribal communities, whereas in other Indian states it has been introduced mainly in abundant forest areas populated by forest-dependent tribals. The Tamil Nadu is more typical of India as a whole and so may offer widely applicable lessons as governments consider expanding JFM.

From the bureaucratic side, the study will address the research question: *What enables or constrains the FD to successfully undertake JFM?*

The approach is to look into the perceptions of foresters of various ranks to know as to what they think of management of forests with villagers, the problems associated with it, and their suggestions for improvement or modification. Since no previous systematic information is available, an exploratory study employing qualitative data collection and analysis techniques is used to gain an understanding of the system in a holistic manner. In order to understand employees' work from the perception of employees themselves, these qualitative inquiry techniques enable the researcher to enter into the practice world of the employees and thus gain access into their conceptual world (Bowers and Becker 1992). Thus, it is endeavored to bring forth several organizational dimensions that are crucial to the performance foresters in a changed work environment.

Specific themes and concepts developed at the organizational level from the qualitative study are those related to behavior (change in attitude), resource, structure (decentralization etc), leadership, capacity building (training and skill development), and motivation (recognition and reward). The analysis brings forth the organizational issues and other incentives involved in implementing JFM by various categories of forest personnel and at various stages. This information is useful to specifically target the employee group as well as the organizational system for policy level prescriptions.

4. Preliminary Findings

To be completed.

5. Conclusions

This research provides useful information on the respective perspectives of field personnel on JFM and thus an ability to develop pragmatic strategies to improve forest management. The research also brings to light some major problems at the village and forest department level

perceived as hampering the adoption of JFM - a crucial information to place the JFM on a stable ground and to make the movement sustain itself. The systematic information on the bureaucratic interface in JFM is the first of its kind and will help state agencies and policy makers to accelerate and expand their efforts in JFM and thus bring government closer to people.

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