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518 NORTH PARK  
INDIANA UNIVERSITY  
BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA 47403-5188

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JOINT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES : SOWING SEEDS OF HOPE IN THE COMMONS

G. RAJU  
VIKSAT  
Thaltej Tekra  
Ahmedabad - 380 054

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## JOINT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES:

### SOWING SEEDS OF HOPE IN THE COMMONS

#### Abstract

During the last two centuries the Indian State took control of the management of common property resources (CPRS). This period also saw the emergence of commercialised resource exploitation. These two factors account for the highly degraded condition of most CPRs throughout India. Social controls over CPRs have broken down and the benefits from CPR exploitation are inequitably distributed. The rural poor have been the worst hit by resource degradation. Their access to and control of CPRs has been eroded and with that their access to resources necessary for survival.

The Indian Government has recently awakened to the inability of state institutions to address the interlinked problems of CPR degradation and rural poverty. The development of local, decentralized institutions that can ensure people's control over CPRs and people's participation in their development is the new strategy being proposed. Joint Forest Management projects in Gujarat, Haryana and West Bengal are an example of this strategy. This paper uses the Joint Forest Management case to take a critical look at the emerging strategies. It analyses their strengths and weaknesses by drawing on practical experiences gained in project work. It also suggests ways to overcome the weaknesses and reinforce the strengths. It is argued that equity has a positive correlation with the ability of local groups to manage CPRs.

#### **JOINT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES : SOWING SEEDS OF HOPE IN THE COMMONS**

##### **1.0 Introduction**

The restoration of India's degraded forest lands has a socio-ecological dimension. Any strategy that is conceived for restoration should be borne out of a historical perspective. The last two centuries have witnessed the state taking control of management of forest land, resulting in the breakdown of community management. In the process forest communities have been alienated and the forests have become degraded. The alienation as such has to be abolished and people must become partners in the restoration process. Certain critical issues need to be dealt with, as discussed below.

The paper also discusses the emerging Joint Forest Management (JFM) strategy and how this addresses the equity issue.

## 2.0 Historical Issues

### 2.1 Community Needs and Rights

The issue of community rights has to be viewed in a historical context, for there are many lessons to be learned. In the pre-British period, two systems of resource use prevailed, namely, the tribal system and the agrarian system. The tribals had a real stake in the security of the resource base of their territory and evolved a number of social traditions to ensure resource exploitation in a sustained manner. The agrarian system retained the practice of community-controlled "supply forest" and religiously protected "safety forests" (sacred groves) attached to each village. This system even now prevails (Gadgil, 1989). The essential features of these two systems were: (i) community control over the common property, and (ii) renewable resource utilisation basically by way of usufructs, which was sustainable.

The British began the process of privatization of common property resources around 1865. They achieved this by creating numerous permanent settlements on common property lands, declaring many areas 'reserved forests', 'protected forests' and 'revenue land'. The laws enacted by the British many are still in force today realized total state control over the CPRs, thereby destroying the earlier system of community management. Further the laws never mentioned 'reserved' or 'protected' against whom or in favour of whom. History reveals that it was 'reserved and protected' for Britain. The material flow of British India was totally in favour of the colonial masters and was meant for their use during the First and Second World Wars. The process of unequal distribution of wealth arising out of common property resources set in motion by the British continues until today, with the only change being that the British have been replaced by the urban elites (Singh, 1986).

This historical evidence has been the root cause of poverty of our tribals and other forest dwellers and is also the basic cause of many of our ecological problems today.

Inequalities in access to, and in distribution of, resource benefits form the crux of the problem of management of our forest resources.

This happened in spite of a Gujarat State Resolution allowing for lease of degraded forest land to such cooperatives for reforestation. However, due to Indian Forest Conservation Act, 1980, the prior permission for dereservation of forest land even for afforestation had to be obtained from the Government of India. When the proposal was sent to Government of India, it was rejected.

### **3.2 Coordination with Different Government Departments:**

In the case of registration of the cooperatives mentioned above, VIKSAT had to coordinate with the Cooperation and Forest departments. The Cooperation Department required a certificate of land transfer to the cooperative. When we approached the Forest Department, we were told land could not be transferred to unregistered bodies. The age-old question of which came first, the chicken or the egg? The problem was solved by convincing the Forest Department to issue a provisional certificate to enable registration.

For funds to implement afforestation activities we had to approach the Rural Development Department.

Such coordination caused tiresome delays and demotivation especially of the communities.

### **3.3 Access to Technical Know-how/Training:-**

Village communities and even a large number of Non Government Organisations experienced difficulty in getting access to technical know-how or training that is so vital for reforestation programmes. Choice of species, appropriate technologies for soil and moisture conservation, nursery raising etc. are activities that require technical input.

### **3.4 Top-Down Planning**

As plans for afforestation programmes are made at headquarters of the Forest Departments, they are often inappropriate at local levels. Participation of communities in local-level planning is essential in any restoration strategy as the communities have the best knowledge about their natural resources, obtained over years by observation and use of their resources.

Having identified the above critical issues let us see how the emerging joint forest management strategy tries to address these issues.

## FOREST MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

### Past

### Emerging Scenario

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. Emphasis on scientific forestry (hardware) | Emphasis on social/ community forestry (software) |
| 2. Harvesting cycle, clear felling            | Continuous harvest of usufructs                   |
| 3. Focus on major forest produce              | Focus on non-timber forest produce                |
| 4. Commercial orientation                     | Sustenance orientation                            |
| 5. Policing approach to conservation          | Social fencing approach                           |
| 6. Keep out people                            | Involve people                                    |
| 7. Protection the rule of law                 | Protection by community understanding and efforts |
| 8. Narrow range of species                    | Diversity of species                              |
| 9. Strong authority                           | Empowering community and sharing authority        |

JFM directly address the critical issues of the past raised earlier in the paper. The success of JFM will, in fact depend on the extent of rapprochement which the Forest Department establishes with the community. A major attitudinal change is now needed in the Forest Department personnel. In India today, there is a move towards de-beauraucratiation and deregulation which augurs well in terms of bringing about such a change.

JFM approach also addresses the current issues raised earlier in the paper. The changing scenario under JFM is presented in figure 2.

The evolution of JFM in Gujarat in the last two years has sown seeds of hope for the regeneration of forest resources. The significant events are as follows:

- June 1990 : Guidelines from Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India, endorsing JFM approach for regeneration of forests.
- August 1990 : NGOs and some senior forest officers come to Gujarat to initiate JFM in the state. Informal working group constituted.
- September 1990 : Draft JFM resolution for Gujarat prepared and discussed.
- October 1990 : Resolution submitted to Government of Gujarat.
- November 1990 : A joint tour of forest officials & NGOs to see success stories in Gujarat.
- January 1991 : A joint tour of forest officials to Haryana where JFM is being implemented.
- February 1991 : A state level training programme on JFM for NGOs & forest officials.
- March 1991 : Government of Gujarat issues JFM policy.

This was followed by formalising the working group which meets periodically to discuss issues related to JFM and provides guidelines. The implementation procedure has been worked out. This covers aspects like the application form, the approval form, action plan format, agreement to be signed between communities and the Forest Department. The level of decision-making has also been clearly spelt out. Several training programmes have been conducted to make both foresters & NGOs appreciate JFM. A positive change of attitude is becoming visible.

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