



## **SOCIAL FORESTRY NETWORK**



### **THE MANAGEMENT OF PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY FORESTRY: SOME ISSUES**

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The Social Forestry programme has now attained a new significance in the overall effort to promote rural development in India. At present planned social forestry programmes involving Government investment of about Rs5,141 million are in progress in twelve states in India. They aim to establish about 1.2 million hectares of plantations in private, communal or government waste lands in the rural areas. Unlike traditional production or protection forestry, the responsibilities of raising, protecting and maintaining social forestry lie with the people, with technical and institutional support from the forest department.

The Social Forestry programme is being implemented through the establishment of plantations under various schemes ranging from road-side plantation, canal bank plantations, and afforestation on degraded forest lands, mostly under government initiative; plantations on community or government waste lands with community participation; and farm forestry in individual farmers' fields.

### People's Participation - A Vital Component

The success of social forestry programmes, irrespective of the models, depends largely on effective people's participation at various stages of their implementation. Above all, of course, the question of people's participation is most vital in community forestry and farm forestry. In these two cases the people's direct involvement in the programme is necessary right from the project formulation stage where decisions are taken regarding selection of site and species, mechanism of protection and maintenance, distribution of benefits and marketing of forest produce.

The forest department should play a catalytic role in motivating the village community so that they themselves can manage their plantations. In consonance to this requirement, the states have already initiated a process of creating a separate social forestry wing either within the forest department or as an independent organisation.

As everyone knows, farm forestry turned out to be of great interest and benefit to big farmers and industrial houses. Contrary to expect-

tations, the interests of the weaker sections of the rural population were not especially addressed by the programmes. Indeed, the commonest charge levelled against the farm forestry programme is that it has been cash-crop oriented, rather than aiming to supply subsistence fuel, fodder and timber.

Community forestry on the other hand in most of the states has by and large failed to muster the participation of villagers in the implementation of the programme. The general pattern of planting and implementation of the programme across the country has been the acquisition of panchayat<sup>1</sup> land or government waste land by social forestry departments and raising, maintaining and protecting the plantations for a few years at the cost of the department and handing them over to the respective panchayats after the expiry of the period for further management of such plantations, including deciding on the distribution of benefits among the villagers. As a matter of fact, our experience shows very little involvement of people in the various activities of establishment, and management of the plantations during the initial period when they remain under the custody of forest department. Thus they never view the plantations as their own, rather they consider them merely as a forest department activity wherein they find some scope of employment as wage labourers. Lack of extension effort comes in the way of creating a sense of tree-consciousness among the people.

#### Individual Incentive - A Missing Link in Community Forestry

Thus the basic difference between the two models, farm forestry and community forestry, lies in the element of individual profit motive. The promise of individual profit has encouraged participation, one result of which can be seen in the large scale tree plantations in private agricultural fields in states like Gujarat, Maryana, Punjab or UP. The common allegation is that only the big farmers are benefiting from farm forestry programmes. But when we see marginal far-

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<sup>1</sup>The panchayat, the village committee, constitutes the lowest level of each State's administrative framework.

mers and landless tribal beneficiaries of the laterite tract of West Bengal allotted absolutely marginal land on lease, yet actively contributing their labour for planting and maintenance operations in the evening even after a day of hard work, the conviction grows that the social forestry programme can be a means for economic upliftment. The 'Tree-Patta' scheme of Andhra Pradesh is also an attempt in the same direction, wherein the beneficiary is given ownership right of trees on lease for a period of 20 years. On maturity, the harvest is fully utilised by the beneficiary who also has usufruct rights during the intermediate period.

Community forestry on the other hand does not promise any direct individual benefit, other than uncertain access to fuel, fodder and timber, the extent of requirement and existing method of procurement of which vary widely among the differing sections of the rural populace. Moreover the methods of distribution of such commodities being not very clear, the common man is not sure about his share from such a communal asset. There is an argument that people would realise the importance of community forestry and participate increasingly, when they would start getting the benefits out of such plantations. But even then, under the present mechanism, with panchayats as custodians of community plantations, it is quite unclear how these bodies propose to serve the interests of the various segments of the rural population, specially the weaker sections. At present, it has been observed in many cases that there is lot of confusion regarding the mechanism of distribution. Thus, in some States grass growing in the community plantations is seen being auctioned and sent out of the village, while the money thus obtained is used to purchase some panchayat assets. This in no way can be thought to be serving the individual interest. Such kinds of factors might have been contributing to the growing feeling among people that the community plantations should be subdivided either individually among the villagers or among the economic or caste categories of the village. All such factors lead us once again to the individual incentives motive. So long as community forestry cannot offer each individual incentives either in the form of cheaper way of procuring forest products (especially fuel) than the presently adopted method, or hold

a promise of direct economic benefit or both, the chance of securing people's participation in the programme will continue to be low. Till then the farm forestry programme will continue to have an edge over community forestry.

Thus the sustenance of people's participation in social forestry programmes which establish plantations under farm forestry or community forestry, largely depends on their economic interest in them. While the question of distribution of produce is vital for community forestry, the mechanism of marketing of produce is more relevant for plantations raised under farm forestry.

### Problems of Management of Community Forestry

#### 1. Creation of participative environment

One of the most vital problems being faced by the community forestry programme is lack of people's participation. The very mechanism of raising, maintaining and protecting the community plantation during the initial few years should be examined carefully while dealing with this problem.

The basic step for any participatory development programme is to build up awareness about the programme and its utility for meeting various needs of the community. This is so with the community forest programme also. Awareness-building around the issues confronting the villagers in their day-to-day life, an overall understanding of the responsibility of the villagers in the matter of planning, creation, maintenance and protection of the plantation and subsequent benefit to the community are vital pre-requisites for the success of any community forestry. But mere attempts to arouse awareness about the programme do not pay unless simultaneous steps are taken to elicit the 'felt needs' of the people.

It is our common experience that the process of motivation in development programmes becomes easier once the villagers are made to realise their needs which the programme aims to satisfy.

The present practice of planning and management of community forestry in the states hardly attempts to fulfil the above conditions of par-

ticipatory programmes. Villagers are rarely consulted at the preplanting stage, and the preparation of a feasibility report, and selection of site and species is generally done by the local forest officials. The village panchayat or similar agencies offer the land (often with no or half information to their members) for plantation activities by the forest department. During the initial years till its hand-over to the panchayat, the villagers do not have any responsibility but to remain as passive watchers. Generally, protection against poaching and browsing by cattle is only taken care of by the villagers after the plantation is handed over to the village panchayat.

The situation, thus, leads to the basic questions: what kind of participation is expected from the people and what will be the role of Government departments in creating a participative environment? Two possible alternatives for management of community forestry with people's participation emerge from the concept of social forestry.

One way is to look at the major operating tasks in community forestry and see at what stage people can participate in it. The operating tasks are (a) nursery raising, (b) land preparation (digging of pits), (c) watering, (d) weeding, (e) fertilisation, (f) protection, and (g) exploitation. The people's participation in these task dimensions is only in the form of wage labour with no scope of involvement in the decision making process relating to the management of the plantation. The forest department contributes the decision making and management of such plantations, while people's contribution is restricted only to diversion of their communal land and labour against wages.

Another way of looking at the creation of a participatory environment is to involve people in all the major management functions of community forestry right from the planning stage. These are (a) selection of land, (b) planning and deciding what to raise, (c) organising planting operations, (d) managing (maintenance and protection) the plantation, (e) distributing the produce after exploitation, and (f) marketing of surplus, if any. These functions have to be carried out by the people themselves with forest department's contribution mainly in the form of technical assistance.

While these two forms of participation lie at two extremes of the decision-making process, the present mechanism of management of community forestry being practised envisages a match between them. During the first few years, establishment of the plantations under the custody of the forest department is done with very insignificant involvement of people. They are then handed over to the panchayat with complete freedom of decision making regarding maintenance, protection and exploitation of the established plantation. But since, in the early stages, the people are not provided with the opportunity of joint responsibility with the forest department in the process of establishment of plantations, they view the programme activities as merely a method of wage-earning like numerous other government welfare measures. Thus, they fail to develop a sense of belongingness to the plantations and do not perceive them as their own assets designed to solve some of their felt needs. As a result, it is seen in many cases that either the panchayats are hesitant to take up the responsibility of their subsequent management, or the established plantations are destroyed after hand-over due to unsystematic exploitation by the villagers.

In view of such problems, it is necessary to devise a mechanism by which the forest department should play a catalytic role in educating people and in initiating establishment and management of plantations by the people. This should enable people gradually to take complete charge of decision-making regarding management of plantations with only technical assistance from the forest department.

## 2. Fulfilment of villagers need for fuel, fodder and timber from Community Forestry

The basic assumption underlying community forestry is that there is a crisis of fuel, fodder and timber in the countryside and the people will participate in the programme as it promises to fulfil those basic needs (specially fuel); and that this will generate additional employment particularly among the rural poor in various plantation activities. However the validity of such assumptions remains to be examined in the light of various reports related to the consumption

pattern of such items.<sup>2</sup>

It has been observed that although people have their requirements for such commodities, they invest very little cash expenditure on them. While the richer section fulfil their requirement mainly from their own fields, the poor in the forest fringe areas manage to utilise the forest and adjoining areas for such purposes and those who are in non-forest areas look for such items from the village common lands, agricultural fields etc. Their utilisation of such commodities particularly fuel, is actually extremely limited. In case of fodder, most of the villagers are dependent again either on forest and village grazing lands or on the crop residues produced in their fields. Since most of the cattle population in the countryside are low-grade, there is also no immediate need for high quality fodder. Moreover, the class of people who really need firewood, small-timber and leaf or grass fodder are the people who own little or no land, but even they do not look upon providing voluntary labour on a community plantation as a profitable proposition as they are not sure if ultimately they will be allowed to reap the harvest. Thus there is little motivation for the villagers to come forward and put in joint labour on a venture which does not promise to give them anything worthwhile or that they cannot do without.

It is also reported that the community plantations by way of occupying community/government waste lands create conflicts of interest in various segments of rural society. The Shepherds who generally utilise such lands for grazing their cattle, are against such plantation programmes as it will reduce their earnings from tending village cattle. Even in the case of coastal shelter belt plantations, where land was otherwise used by the fishermen for drying their nets and other accessories, attempts to destroy the plantations are very common.

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<sup>2</sup>Sen, D; Das, P K and Purandare, A P: Case studies on successful implementation of social forestry, unpublished report, NIRD, Hyderabad, and Bhatia, C L and Mishra, D N "Social Forestry in States - Uttar Pradesh", Rural Social Forestry, Papers and Proceedings of the National Workshop, NIRD, Hyderabad. 1982.

There is thus a need for strengthening the extension effort on the one hand and projecting the programme as a means for economic gain on the other. Experience drawn from other rural development programmes suggests that tangible immediate gains to individuals, particularly the rural poor, are the motivating factor for participation. Under such circumstances, there is a need to decide on issues like devising appropriate species mix with a promise of both economic as well as usufructuary benefits to the rural people and then drawing of extension strategy to popularise them in their situation.

### 3. Credibility of Panchayat vis-a-vis interest of weaker-sections

As the current mechanism employed in implementation of the community forestry programme the panchayat, as the formal social organisation, has a central role to play in managing the established plantations, after their hand-over, by mustering people's participation. But till now people's participation is the weakest link in programme implementation. It might be argued that people would realise the importance of community forestry and participate increasingly, when they started getting the benefits out of such plantations. But even there, there remains an important question which relates to the power structure in the countryside. The panchayats tend to concentrate power in the hands of rural elites and it is anybody's guess what opportunities they provide to the poor to make demands or air grievances. Although there are exceptions, the general observations regarding Panchayats are that the benefits are manipulated in favour of the elites, affecting the interests of downtrodden people. The example cited earlier of auctioning grass outside the village shows the way in which the interest of common villagers, specially the rural poor, is neglected. This leads to the basic question, how to ensure the flow of benefits of community forestry to the rural poor? Will the delegation of legislative control to the forest department, be able to restrict such manipulation effectively? The experiences of IRD programmes, where inspite of all checks and corrective measures the benefits do not always flow to the deserving beneficiaries, pose serious doubts even over such measures. Under such circumstances many people think in terms of abandoning the idea of handing over the

plantations to panchayats, and keeping them under the control of forest department. But then it becomes one among numerous government programmes without people's involvement, and also the feasibility of controlling such huge numbers of plantations needs to be analysed. However, the question relating to the credibility of the panchayat in the creation of community forestry plantations, and the distribution of benefits with social justice, still remains unanswered.

Another possibility lies in making community forestry programmes weaker-section-oriented. In such cases beneficiary-level organisations may be put in charge of the management of the plantations. This question merits proper attention as social forestry is conceived as one possible form of intervention in the amelioration of rural poverty. In view of this it will not be out of context if the target group of community forestry is specified as the rural poor, as in other rural development programmes. In the existing strategy for community forestry involving all sectors of village population, it has by now been clear that the undemocratic power structure in the countryside, and the diverse interests of different sections of people are the major impediments in the successful operation of community forestry. If distributive justice is to be achieved under such circumstances, the need for projecting community forestry as a means of economic development of the rural poor cannot but be over-emphasised. In the light of this it might be necessary to organise the beneficiary-oriented group action around the community plantations.

#### 4. Mechanism of distribution of benefits

The success of a programme like community forestry is directly correlated with the efficiency with which it can ensure the benefits to various sectors of rural population. The perception regarding the extent of benefits flowing from such plantations will influence the people to participate increasingly in the programme. In view of this, the question of distribution of forest produce is very vital, the mechanism for which should be decided without any further delay.

Benefits in the form of forest produce from community plantations may be conceived primarily as fuelwood which is obtained from the main

tree as well as twigs and branches through periodic lopping etc. Besides, there may be some other products like fodder, fruits and other minor forest produce. It is commonly observed that there is no clearcut procedure for the distribution of such produce from the community plantations. Neither the social forestry personnel, nor the panchayat has any definite idea about the probable mechanism to be followed. It is commonly argued that the product out of a community plantation, specially fuelwood, should be equitably distributed according to the requirement of the villagers in general. In such cases the economically weaker sections may not be able to procure them by paying the price. As a solution to such a problem it has been recommended that the weaker section should get their requirement at concessional rate. As discussed earlier, the villagers, specially the weaker section generally procure their fuelwood from forests, agricultural fields, village common lands etc free of cost. Even if concessional rates are offered to them, whether they be would be ready to incur cash expenditure for such commodities needs to be assessed.

Besides, there is also no guideline for the utilisation of the sale proceeds from the plantation. Assuming that the panchayat would be in charge of such funds, and utilise them for their developmental activities, the question remaining to be answered is how this is going to provide the much needed tangible incentive to the people whose participation largely depends upon it. Moreover, it is also necessary to recycle a portion of the fund in developing and maintaining the plantation, whose mechanism however has not yet been decided.

In order to enforce the appropriate distribution mechanism, many feel that there is an imperative need on the part of forest department to exercise some kind of control over the panchayat. The question which remains to be answered is whether under the existing legal framework the forest department can exercise such control. If yes, what is the extent of such control and how they can be executed? A realistic assessment should also be made regarding the possibility of providing the needed manpower on the part of the forest department to exercise such control on numerous community plantations likely to come up in the near future and also the costs involved in it.

A possible alternative in the light of establishment of community plantations exclusively around economically weaker sections also warrants serious consideration. In such cases the community plantation would be economic ventures for the benefit of the rural poor. This will necessarily introduce a profit motive and the beneficiary group would decide how to meet local demand for the forest products. However, in such cases also there should be very close supervision on the part of forest department in deciding on ways forward.

### Some Emerging Issues in the Implementation Process of Community Forestry Programme

In view of such critical analysis of the problems of implementation of community forestry programme at the field level, certain basic issues emerge, which require immediate attention. Unless they are taken into consideration while formulating future strategy for social forestry programmes, the large majority of community plantations established so far will continue to be departmental activities or will be extinct, in the absence of people's active involvement in their maintenance and protection. Thus the future policy for the implementation of community forestry programme in the country should aim at resolving the following basic questions in an effort to make it a people's programme.

- a. Whether the present practice of raising plantations by the forest department, and transferring them to Panchayats is desirable in the programme, where people's participation is sought on a sustained basis? If not, what should be the mode of departmental intervention in the process of decision-making and executing the plantation operations?
- b. Whether community forestry should exclusively be viewed as a source of usufruct or should it also be projected as a means of economic upliftment for drawing people's participation? If so, what should be the mechanism?
- c. Whether the present panchayatiraj institution is capable of managing the community plantations and sustaining the interest

of various categories of villagers? If not, what is the validity of making community forestry a target-group-oriented rural development programme and what should be the modalities with respect to organisation, management and distribution of benefits in such an endeavour?

- d. What should be the appropriate mechanism for the distribution of benefits from the community plantations so as to satisfy the requirements of various segments of the rural population?



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