

## Role of Women in Participatory Forest Management : The West Bengal Experience

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**ABSTRACT** This paper attempts to assess the role of forest vicinity women dwellers in forest protection, as was exhibited in Bankura district of West Bengal. The relative success of forest management programmes in the district of Bankura (as revealed from the discussion) seems to be because of favourable interplay of three factors first, the grassroots participation of women in the programme; second, a rational perception about the balance between forest exploitation and forest protection among the tribals who have been maintaining a symbiotic relationship with the forest around them for ages and third, the administrative support provided by the state government under the norms suggested by the National Forest Policy, 1988, regarding protection of natural forests.

The Government of West Bengal (a State of Indian Union) won the sixteenth J. Paul Getty Award for the year 1993. This prestigious award is given to successful persons/organisations for appreciable performance or opening up a new vista in preservation of world environment, forest and wild life. This award carries a sum of \$50,000 and a citation. Obviously this is an inspiring event in the country like India in which forests have been suffering from serious depletion over the years due to wanton exploitation of forest resources *viz.* fuel wood, fodder, timber and of course, wild animals. However, as noted by Mrs. Rashi Modi, a tribal Forest Protection Committee (FPC) member, and one of the members of the team constituted for receiving the award on behalf of West Bengal Government, the contribution of the forest vicinity dwellers who had performed ground work of this noble job of forest protection will probably remain unrecognised and unrewarded. The credit is likely to be monopolised by the Forest Department personnel who performed mainly the supervisory role and enjoy full security as

paid government servants. She further pointed out that it is quite impossible for hardly a dozen departmental workers (employed in a 'beat'<sup>1</sup> that covers on an average about 2000 hectares of forest) to accomplish the task without people's participation in general, and particularly the participation of women who have been maintaining living link with forests since time immemorial.

The present paper seeks to highlight the issue of participatory forest management with special reference to role of women in preservation of forest, as exhibited in Bankura district of West Bengal. The specific features of this district are a relatively higher proportion of degenerated/denuded forest area and again relatively higher proportions of tribals and semi-tribals<sup>2</sup> in its population. The paper is based on both secondary data and first hand information gathered by the author while observing the functioning of the FPCs including a few all-women FPCs in the district during the authors' several visits.

### BANKURA FORESTS

The forest area of Bankura covers about 19 per cent of the geographical area of the district. This proportion is relatively higher compared to the State average of 13 per cent but relatively lower compared to the all-India average of 22 per cent. The entire forests of the district fall under the category of protected forest, as defined by the Indian Forest Act, a few patches of reserved and unclassified forests being an exception. The forests are primarily concentrated in the northern and southern portion of the district (Table 1). The tree species of these forests consists mainly of *sal*<sup>3</sup> and in some cases,

**Table 1 : Forest area of Bankura district**

| Division      | Total forest area (ha) | No. of ranges | No. of beats |
|---------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|
| Bankura North | 73,688                 | 8             | 30           |
| Bankura South | 66,042                 | 10            | 34           |
| Total         | 1,39,730               | 18            | 64           |

Source : Forest Department, Bankura

sal with other indigenous species like *aasan*, *pea-sal*, *kurchi*, *dha*, *mahul*, *palas*, *bahara*, *kendu*, *sida*, *pial* etc. These forests occur in small patches with varying degree of tree cover depending upon the configuration terrain, interspersed with paddy fields, hamlets and barren/waste land. A sizable proportion of the forest area suffers from degeneration or denudation. Such lands have been taken up under plantation of various quick growing and indigenous tree species along with provision for growing intercrops like *babuigrass*<sup>4</sup>, *arhar*<sup>5</sup>, *tasar*<sup>6</sup> and lac rearing, etc., by the forest fringe population. Table 2 depicts the plantation activities in the district for the last five years (1988-92).

**Table 2 : Plantation activities during the years 1988-92**

| Year    | Area under plantation (ha) |
|---------|----------------------------|
| 1987-88 | 1945                       |
| 1988-89 | 1638                       |
| 1989-90 | 3046                       |
| 1990-91 | 3750                       |
| 1991-92 | 3660                       |

Source : Forest Department Office, Bankura

### Forest Management in Bankura District

Since the early days of British rule (1793) till the abolition of the zamindari system<sup>7</sup> in 1953, the forests of Bankura have suffered from mismanagement under the control of private owners, mostly the zamindars. The private owners used to exploit these forests as per their whims and fantasies. It is only after the governmental take-over in 1953 that the forests were brought under some kind of scientific management. However, even during the fifties and sixties, the forests of Bankura district suffered from serious depletion due to illegal alliance of old zamind-

ars, forest officials and traders engaged in timber trading. The increasing population pressure on forest land and lack of people's awareness about the system made the situation only worse. It is during the seventies onwards that the people were made conscious of the situation and were involved in developmental planning process through strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)<sup>8</sup>.

The launching of a pilot project at Arabari (in the neighbouring Mindapore district) in 1971-72, aiming at regeneration of forests in wasteland with the help of forest-fringe people, was the first step that paved the way for people's participation in forest management. The social forestry project came thereafter in 1981, which again acted favourably in strengthening the ties between the people, the forest officials and the panchayat bodies. It is in this background that the concept of participatory management of forest was translated into reality through formation of FPCs. In the light and spirit of the National Forest Policy Resolution 1988, the Government of West Bengal issued orders to the Forest Departments explicitly defining the structure and functions of FPCs and usufructory benefits to be made available to the members against their services. The status of such FPCs in Bankura district during 1991-92 is shown in table 3. It indicates that about 56 per cent of the forest area was

**Table 3 : Present status of FPCs in Bankura District 1991-92**

|                              |          |
|------------------------------|----------|
| Total No. of FPCs            | 736      |
| Total Area Protected by FPCs | 77875 ha |
| Total No. of Members of FPCs | 87,086   |
| Total No. of S.C. Members    | 26,422   |
| Total No. of S.T. Members    | 22,535   |
| Total Women Members          | 3,368    |

S.C. = Scheduled Caste, S.T. = Scheduled Tribe

Source : Forest Office, Bankura

covered under FPCs by that year. Since then, the institution has become even more wide; many registered FPCs have been added and still more are in the process of registration. It is expected that the entire forest area of the district would be covered by FPCs in near future.

### Women in Participatory Forest Management

Women have generally been neglected all through the development planning process in India. Generally, a family is considered as a basic unit in the development programmes. On that basis, it is assumed that once the benefits reach the family, it will be distributed within the family members irrespective of sex-bias. But, in practice, such a thing does not happen. Secondly, the prevailing customs, values, traits that have cast huge responsibilities on the rural women make it impermeable for them to enter into the outside world – which could provide the opportunities for work and exposure and, thereby, raising their level of consciousness. These imposed traditional norms are responsible for lower participation by rural women in development programmes.

While designing the schemes for forest protection through people's participation, women's involvement was not taken into account initially. Even though the male members of the forest fringe areas knew well that women are more concerned with forest, they did not raise the issue. Women's participation in forest management was taken into account only when a band of organised labouring class women of the forest-vicinity areas, with the inspiration of some NGOs and progressive women leaders, raised their voice before the government through panchayat bodies.

In 1981, some NGO activists started organising forest-fringe labouring women workers of Bankura, mostly belonging to Scheduled Castes (S.Cs) and Scheduled Tribes (S.Ts). With their efforts over the last fifteen years, they were capable of organising 19 labouring women's organisations with more than 1600 members. These organisations have now been networked under the apex body, known as Nari Bikash Sangha (NBS) with a permanent headquarters at Jhilimili. These organisations accomplished an ambitious project on 'Waste Land Development through Women's Organisation' funded by International Labour Organisation (ILO), Danida, and Waste Land Development Board, Govern-

ment of India. These organisations, in total, have acquired about 350 acres of waste land,<sup>9</sup> and brought it under plantation with about 7.5 lakhs *tasar cocoon* rearing host trees. Many of the members are also now earning a good income through *tasar cocoon* cultivation. Some have exhibited their organisational capabilities by getting elected in panchayat bodies. All these have led the panchayat body at the district level to percolate this message of gigantic success of the rural labouring women to other panchayat bodies. Here again, NBS workers had acted as motivators in such campaign programme.

The secretary of NBS, who recently returned attending Rio World Summit on Environment, said that "Before our status as migrant labourers was disregarded not only by the government and forest personnel but also by the so called upper section of our neighbouring people. Now the situation has changed, we are respected everywhere even in our families. We are now capable of protecting women's interests by involving them not only in FPCs but also in other development programmes. It is our success story that has given birth the idea of forming FPCs exclusively by women in our district".

At present there are five registered FPCs in the district, exclusively run by the women members. Some more are in the process of registration and, if the current momentum continues, many more would emerge in near future. A brief description of these registered FPCs is given in table 4. It may be seen from the table that the existing women FPCs have been constituted with the women belonging to Scheduled Castes

**Table 4 : Registered women FPCs in Bankura District**

| Range     | Village    | No. of Members |      |        | Forest Area     |      |
|-----------|------------|----------------|------|--------|-----------------|------|
|           |            | S.C.           | S.T. | Others | Total Protected | (ha) |
| Matgoda   | Gilakhana  | -              | 35   | -      | 35              | 5.0  |
|           | Niljora    | 26             | 35   | 2      | 63              | 7.0  |
|           | Bheduasole | -              | 34   | -      | 34              | 2.5  |
| Ranibandh | Chilagara  | 191            | 83   | -      | 274             | 25.0 |
| Indpur    | Mayurnacha | -              | 84   | -      | 84              | 50.0 |
| Total     |            | 217            | 271  | 2      | 390             | 89.5 |

S.C. = Scheduled Caste, S.T. = Scheduled Tribe

Source : Forest Department, Bankura

and Scheduled Tribes, who constitute weaker section of our society.<sup>10</sup> For the forest-fringe village women, the forest is considered as a place for grazing cattle, collecting firewood and edible minor forest produce and also a place for entertainment for their children. Except during extremely hot summer and rainy days, the normal life of women and children is spent in close association with the forest in day times. They recognise every tree specie, medicinal plant and herb. They know their use in their day to day life.

After the emergence of FPCs and their success, the government has also come forward in recognizing their valuable experience which they (women) have gathered since time immemorial. Many of these illiterate or barely literate women are now not only conscious of the importance of scientific forest management, but are exceptionally vocal in expressing their ideas. The convenor of Gilakhana FPC, said that, "To protect forest under the disposal of our FPC, we roam around the forest area throughout the day in groups. We plan out roster duty each evening for the next day. Guarding the forest at night is a difficult job for us. For this we seek help from our male members." Most FPCs manage their respective areas with the same technique. An active member of Mayurnacha women FPC is of the opinion that, "Had the Forest Department provided some gainful employment throughout the year in the locality, we could have performed still better. We have to go outside during the lean seasons for employment. During that time the forest is guarded with less care". An another member of Bheduasole Women FPC expressed her deep anguish over felling of fruit-bearing trees. She said that, "Even before the formation of FPC in our village, we had tried to protect these valuable trees". One of the executive committee member of Niljora FPC considers trees as favourite as their own children. She said, "We cannot think of cutting trees for sale in the market when we have enough of food to eat. We are instigated by starvation to cut trees for sale. While cutting trees, our hands tremble as if we

are chopping the hands and feet of our own children". The convenor of Chilagara FPC, pointing her finger towards a denuded hillock besides her village, said that, "See, we have been given the responsibility to protect this forest without any tree cover. We can never be held responsible for its denudation. Our demand from the forest is limited. Moreover, our relation with the forest is not inimical, rather sweet. We take several produce from forests and in turn we give them care. The unholy tie between greedy contractors and forest officials are responsible for this social menace. It is not merely the hardship caused due to fuel/fodder crisis that has compelled us to take part in forest management, but also to save this earth from environmental hazards like draught, flood etc., which may occur due to destruction of forests".

As all these women FPCs have been formed within the last one or two years, it is probably not the time to assess the impact of women's role in joint forest management. However, on the basis of the evidence gathered during the initial period, one may say that the initiative taken by the women through FPCs solely managed by them, have been yielding better results as compared to those managed by the male members or those with mixed membership. The relative success of forest management in the district seems to be because of favourable interplay of three factors - first, the grassroot perception of women in the programme; second, a rational perception about the balance between forest exploitation and forest protection among the forest-fringe women population, who have been maintaining a symbolic relationship with the forest around them for ages, and third the administrative support provided by the State Government under the directives of National Forest Policy, 1988.

No doubt, the realisation of the government that the momentum of depletion of forests in the State of West Bengal can never be checked without people's participation (and specially women's participation) in forest management and its endeavour in formation of FPCs at the

local level, has been based on the objective reality and thus praiseworthy. Unfortunately, we found that the activities of the Forest Department personnel in the programme seems to be more official and having lack of vision to involve the people at large in it so as to make it a people's programme. Unless the programme emerges in the forms of a people's movement, it can never achieve its successful culmination.

### NOTES

1. In the hierarchy of forest administration, a 'beat' is in the bottom. A beat covers a specified forest area having its office known as 'beat office' and a officer in-charge known as 'beat officer'. Range office or Ranger is the immediate higher body or officer in forest administration.
2. Semi-tribals are those who are not tribals but lead their lives like those of tribals. Unlike the tribals they also follow traditional cultivation techniques, depend heavily on forest produces and follow old customs, habits, and are also less exposed to the modern society.
3. Sal is a tree specie that produce valuable timber.
4. Zamindari system was a form of administration prevalent during the British period in India to control the land and forest resources. The Zamindars were entrusted to manage the land and forests at the local level and collect revenue on behalf of the British Government.
5. Babui grass is used for rope making. This rope is used by the rural people in several purposes.
6. Arhar is a pulse variety that grow even in waste land.
7. Tasar cocoons produce is a kind of yarn like that of silk which is used to produce warm clothes.
8. Panchayati Raj Institutions are the lowest form of Government Institution in our democratic form of Government. A few village within a certain radius and population constitute a panchayat. The panchayat body is formed by people's elected representatives. A few panchayts form a Panchayat Samiti at the block level and a few panchayat samities from a zilla samiti at the district level. In the light of 73rd Amendment of Indian Constitution (1992) - the West Bengal Government has made provision of 33 per cent reservation for women in various levels of panchayat bodies.
9. Acquired land have been transferred permanently to the Committees through registered deeds. Through such transfer the women (in groups) have gained property rights which is normally uncommon in the male-dominated society like that of India or in state like West Bengal.
10. The Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other Backward Castes people belong to weaker sections of our society as they do not have adequate means to control over their resources or capacity to appropriate their just share in the development programmes.

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