

Strengthening Institutions in Joint Forest Management: Systemic Approach to Forest Conservation

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ABSTRACT Institutions are the controlled mechanism to monitor the functions of the social system. Institutions and its activities contribute substantially to the cause of deforestation or afforestation. Reversal of deforestation processes need strengthening of the Forest Protection Committee (FPC) institutions which facilitates the effectiveness of Joint Forest Management (JFM) where the community and foresters work towards a common goal of forest conservation. The paper describes the problem and process of strengthening institution with illustrations from West Bengal JFM: The authors have used systemic approach to forest conservation where structured intervention made in a planned sequence has produced synergic action where the community has not only conserved forest but also made their own self help group.

INTRODUCTION

Resource management has been an endeavour of mankind since its origin. It is evident in case of human societies which promote mainly through socialization the capacity of their members to manage water, soil, vegetation, livestock and human resources too, keeping in mind the goal of achieving more output at the cost of less input. Human societies have evolved appropriate values, norms and institutions to procure, produce and manage material and human resources.

People require natural resources say, the forest products, for their livelihood, and also for other needs related to survival and satisfaction. With the evolution of society the pattern of the use of forest produce has kept on changing and in course of time there has been over exploitation of the forest resource by human beings individually and, sometimes, collectively. A time is come when the over exploitation of the forest in many parts of India seems alarming to the ex-

tent of threatening the human population. Interestingly, while its negative consequences on the size and quality of the forest are evident, there have also been encouraging signs in the reversal of the deforestation process. Now several issues have emerged from the perspective of social science research. Broadly, they can be categorized into two. First, how the control mechanism for the natural resource management got eroded causing loss of forest in human society. Secondly, and conversely, how the institutions may be reorganized to facilitate the process of afforestation by developing new norms and values and to benefit the people ecologically and economically (Malhotra et al., 1992).

Institutional change would, theoretically, proceed with a constant readjustment of change in each part of a socio-cultural configuration with changes in the other parts – in moving, actual equilibrium. The change, say deforestation, is more likely to occur in parts, rather than in the whole, at a time, of a social field. More often, there will be a steady change of magnitudes within and between institutions, until there is a sudden and radical transformation of form (Murphy, 1971, pp. 233). As such, in the realm of deforestation and afforestation there are two important landmarks. The first landmark can be distinctly observed after the forest, the abode of the tribal people, was declared as government forest and the tribals were alienated. Such alienation caused the loss of sense of belongingness by the people leading to increasing over exploitation of the forest resource. The second landmark is reckoned with in the framing of the national policy (1998) by the Government of India. Another Government Order was issued by Government of India (1990) encouraging State Forest Department to involve the community around forest as a partner in forest conservation

through a programme of Joint Forest Management (JFM).

The authors have conducted both quantitative and qualitative enquiry concerned with its (JFM's) applications in fostering changes that can improve the forest conditions as well as living conditions of the people. The authors under an action research project have studied JFM programme and carried out some experiments. They have studied the process how the villagers with different conflicting interest lost the vision of forest conservation, which fact caused deforestation. How the forest officials were, in some cases, indifferent and how the FPC as an association of villagers lost its character and worth in protecting forest became evident to the study team. Experimentation is not strange to the social sciences, of course, but thus far the results of these experiments have shed very little light on the working of societies in their natural settings. The social dimension is more complex than the organic and the inorganic, its variables being elusive of effective control. We have been able to make some predictions about what will happen in the experiment if it is done in a prescribed manner. The case studies will illustrate the concepts, the steps used and the result of such experimentations.

To understand the social systems and the institutions of the people or members of a community, we must study the practical action of their daily lives as well as the metaphor in which they express it. These are not the same thing on different analytic dimensions but systems in their own right, each of which must be studied. Whether the members of the Forest Communities view forest as their own resource or not has been the first question to be understood. The second question is related to *How?* i.e. the procedures.

Such research issues pose challenges in understanding the perception and notion of the people regarding the particular natural resource, viz., forest, in this case. They also call for understanding of the relationship between man and nature, between man and man, and of the order that obtains in nature as well as in human society, particularly, in the cultural and institutional realm.

The notion of order is a human notion and psychologically a most necessary one. In order

to use our environment and find our way about it we must credit it with a certain structure and describe it as an *orderly arrangement system*; indeed the selector mechanisms at the back of the retina which translate light and shadow into visual perception predispose us to interpret our observations as order rather than chaos. But the word "relationship" is concerned with the ordering as such, and it entails not only human observation but human creation; we do not use words to describe relationships, we create verbal categories which imply relationships, and such verbal categories arise as a consequence of our perceiving the world as an ordered structured system (Leach, 1967: 130).

In order to strengthen the unorganized FPC (Forest Protection Committee) members, some structured activities in the form of ordered and orderly social action may be initiated. But before any kind of intervention of this nature at FC (Forest Community) level one has to appreciate the concept of Bilateral Matching Institutions (BMI) (Roy, 1992).

The desired reversal of the earlier process of distancing the community into the task of forest protection by the Forest Department (FD) started with JFM in several parts of the country. West Bengal provides the most successful example of the joint approach (made by the FD and the Forest Community (FC) together) towards sustainable forest management. Though it has been recognized by all that some good work has been done in West Bengal, it is admitted at the same time that the experience gained initially offers opportunities to improve upon the past performance and to learn the ways of how to institutionalize the process of empowering the community or the people for JFM.

When one examines the actual process of management of natural resources by the members of a human organization, one finds that the access of each member to the resources is governed by the rights granted to the individual. Whenever one speaks of "the rights granted to the individual," one faces the question: granted by whom? There must be some authority - power which is accepted as legitimate - which grants rights to the individuals. This authority is society and politically and society works through institutions which are human devices designed to

channelise the society's resources into stable patterns of interactions that are intended to meet one or more social needs. One of the essential functions of institutions is to stabilize the activities of different individuals and/or groups into more or less predictable patterns in this context. Moreover, the role that the government plays in regulating human activities in relation to the management of natural resources has to be taken into account because no human group can ignore what may be considered the policy of the government, or powers that be, and its procedures of natural resource management.

THE HYPOTHESES

Bilateral Matching of Institutions has thrived on testing a series of hypotheses which are stated below.

1. There are two distinct institutions, the forest community and the bureaucrats, responsible for the protection and management of the forest and other kinds of village resources. Unless both the institutions have the same goal (to conserve the forest and village resources) and an agreed plan of actions, and similar socially and legally sanctioned procedures (institutions), there would be conflict instead of co-operation for achieving the goal.
2. The present norms and institutions, i.e., the established procedures, of the FC / Village Community and the FD/Government Department to protect the resources are not matching. Hence the community's and the bureaucrat's norms, behaviour and procedures have to be recast to develop institutions, which would be capable of coping with the difficulty of natural resource management.
3. This needs organizational change. The organization can be changed only when one (i) understands the organizational behaviour - which includes all the beliefs, prejudices and superstitions, principles, norms, values and ideologies; activities and procedures; rules, moral codes and customs; expectations regarding the ideal man and woman; methods of rewards and punishment for the people who together form the organization and aim to achieve the organizational goal. The sec-

ond step requires that one (ii) acts upon the culturally inherited knowledge, skills, techniques, methods of production and distribution, economic processes through endogenous development methods.

The above hypotheses which lay behind the attempt at *Bilateral Matching of Institutions* in case of the foresters and the forest community formed the Executive Development Programme conducted by IBRAD. The project aimed at changing the attitude, behaviour and institution of the foresters who are the governors and the forest community who are the governed.

The aim of the project has been to bring about such a transformation in the bureaucrats as would result in a meaningful dialogue between them and the Forest Community leading to empowerment of the forest community. The present paper is particularly concerned more with the ways of strengthening of the community institution than with the method of bureaucratic transformation.

The successful community involvement programme is expected to help the people to take the initiative to identify their own problems and find their solutions (voluntary), and also make effective decisions, and set priority in such a way that it helps the majority of the community members (mentally matured) in natural resource management on a sustainable basis. The community members will be involved right from planning to execution and monitoring of the programme. They will have the capacity to measure the consequences of their actions. They should be the decision-makers, and must be empowered to decide their own future with the help of the existing available resources and technology in a pragmatic way (Roy and Chatterjee, 1994).

What are the methods to be followed to strengthen institutions and what are the logical steps? They may be described below in their proper sequence.

METHODS FOR STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONS

Sensitization

Sensitization is a process of educating the people by feeding them with adequate information and knowledge. Its effect lies in the fact that

after sensitization, a person can take decisions based on realistic, dependable and complete information. This helps in strengthening a person's ability to gather, organize and evaluate any information more accurately. It may start with sharing ideas to work together and test the reality for future plans (Roy, S. B. 1991).

So the villagers are allowed to venture out and learn what the real world is and what they want out of it. They are encouraged to envisage what can be done. The villagers are further allowed to unfreeze and share their views with one another. This helps them in unlearning the (false) beliefs, prejudices and misinformation as well as in learning the new and requisite things, and changing the attitudes.

How to Sensitize?

The different steps of sensitization are as follows:

- The field worker should be self sensitized and be an active listener.
- The field worker must clearly establish his/her own identity, strength and limitations.
- The field worker should create a positive and affirmative attitude among the target group. The field worker should avoid problem oriented questions.
- Ask the villagers how they may solve their problems.
- Never advise - just facilitate.
- Resource mapping of the village by the villagers.
- Presentation of successful case studies.
- Post case study discussion.
- Clear realistic plan of action.
- The field worker should be conscious at every moment that he/she is only a facilitator and that he / she can only provide an opportunity for solutions and not offer solutions.
- The ultimate goal of the field worker should be getting a commitment from the forest community to the plan of action.

Keeping in mind the above mentioned principles, we carried out extensive field work in the villages of some of the FPCs of Midnapore East Forest Division, Bankura North Forest Division and Panchet Soil Conservation Division, Bishnupur. The fieldwork involved the following sequence of activities.

- The villagers were brought together for group meeting.
- The villagers were requested to draw the map of their village as well as forest and their neighbouring villages and forests on a chart paper.
- The villagers were asked to classify the good forests and the bad forests.
- The villagers were asked to ascertain if their forest was good or bad.
- The villagers replied that their forest was not good.
- They were asked to specify why their forest was not good.
- The villagers replied that they were poor and as they needed fuelwood and fodder, they had to solely depend on the forest, which was why they could not protect the forest.
- Their problem was appreciated and they were asked to tell something about other villages with good forests.
- The villagers agreed that they, i.e., inhabitants of other villages also were poor, and needed fuelwood and fodder.
- They were next asked as to how the neighbouring villagers were protecting their own forests.
- The villagers admitted that the neighbouring villagers came and destroyed the former's forest.
- They were asked why they did not go ahead to cut trees of the forest of neighbouring villages.
- The villagers informed that the neighbouring villagers would not allow them to cut their forest as the latter were "protecting their forest very well".
- Lastly, the villagers were asked as to why they allowed the neighbouring villagers to cut their forest.

The Villagers then Start Thinking

- The villagers realised that they were not united and organized, and did not have good leadership and that their fellow villagers did not think that this forest was "their own".
- The villagers were asked whether they would allow this to continue or do something instead.
- The villagers modified their stand and decided that they would also protect the forest

as it was "theirs".

- They were next asked as to what their approach would be.
- The villagers decided to convene a meeting and planned out steps to patrol the forest.
- A series of questions like, "Who will convene the meeting? Where the meeting will be convened? What will be discussed in the meeting? etc. – were asked to the villagers.

The Villagers then Come up with a Clear Realistic Plan of Action

- Then some of the villagers came up to volunteer their names for patrolling the forest.
- They made a list of the volunteers. To give them recognition their photographs were clicked.
- For some time the field workers continued to keep regular contacts with the villagers for follow up and monitoring.

STRENGTHENING FOREST PROTECTION COMMITTEE: A CASE STUDY

FPCs of 8 villages, viz. Ghritagram, Tungadhua, Balivasha, Burimoul, Goadanga, Saibandh, Kusumdanga and Bhallukulla showing initially poor result in forest protection were identified and their common features were noted. The situation emerging from organization of FPCs was compared with the conditions obtaining in the previous state of affairs where FPC was non-functioning or malfunctioning. The results of the comparison are stated in a table 1.

But the question is how the change was brought about by convincing the villagers of the need for their organization for protection of their forests and formation by them of FPCs and related bodies?

DIAGNOSTIC SOCIAL RESEARCH APPROACH

Diagnostic social research approach applied in a structured manner revealed the following:

1. Cause

Lack of Identity and Belongingness

Symptoms

The symptoms pertaining to lack of identity

and belongingness were evident in the attitude of the people:

In response to the enquiring as to why the people did not protect the forest the women expressed that the forest was not "their" property and as such they could not check the so-called offenders. The men also voiced similar feelings and they too did not feel the urge to protect the forest. After all, it was not "their ancestral property", they opined.

The above remarks reveal the lack of awareness about the government policy and suggest that the villagers have not developed any sense of belongingness to the forest.

Remedy

In an effort to evolve a common remedy against the negative attitude of the people in all the villages, a joint meeting of the Forest Department, Panchayat and villagers was held. The FD officials brought themselves down to the same level with the people by sitting comfortably with them. This change in approach and the absence of one-upmanship on the part of the officials helped in empowering the villagers with self-esteem and confidence. The Beat Officer reminded the villagers that the forest was theirs and their future lies here whereas his was a transferable job and he did not belong to this place.

The BO's words were not just a gimmick. The Government Order empowering the villagers with rights and duties over the forest was shown and explained in the joint meeting. The villagers felt assured. The process of developing a sense of belongingness started and all kinds of doubts in their mind that the forest belonged to the government, and not to the community, were gradually removed.

2. Cause

Lack of Organizational Effort

Symptoms

Only a few persons were found taking initiative in protecting the forest.

Remedy

Extensive group meetings were held after ascertaining the roles to be played by the people, and hamlet (Para) wise responsibilities were delegated to all of them who were recognized as the appropriate functionaries.

Table 1: Intervention of IBRAD at Khajra Beat, Midnapore District, West Bengal

Name of the FPC	Village Name	Before Intervention	After Intervention	Future Plan of action developed by FPC
Ghritagram	Ghritagram	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was no regular meeting about forest protection. • Involvement of women was totally absent. • No patrolling team. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men and women have formed groups to assist FPC executive committee. They have fixed hierarchy within committee. They sit together in regular meeting. They are maintaining the meeting minute book regularly. • This group patrols the forest regularly. • Constant communication with Beat Officer and Forest Guard. • Two self-help groups comprising ten and twenty-five women respectively have been formed. They have current deposit of Rs.600 and Rs. 1500 respectively. 	
"	Tungadhua	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was no regular meeting about forest protection. • Involvement of women was insignificant. • No patrolling team. • No common meeting place • No common fund of FPC • No literacy programme organized by FPC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men and women have formed groups to assist FPC executive committee. They have fixed hierarchy within committee. They sit together in regular meeting. They have a fixed meeting place (MILAN KUTIR) built by themselves using local resources, where they sit together in regular meetings. They are maintaining the meeting minute book regularly • Women also formed a Self Help Group where 15 women are depositing Rs. 10/- per month. They have opened a bank account in the name of the Group. • Villagers have started to monitor NTFP daily flow, where all the households are involved. Every household keeps the record daily whatever NTFPs they are collecting from forest. • They have started a literacy center voluntarily where almost 17 women are gaining literacy. 	Training on Pulse cake and Pickle making
Ghritagram	Balivasha and Burimoul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was no regular meeting about forest protection. • No patrolling team. • Involvement of women was totally absent. • There was no regular meeting about forest protection. • No patrolling team. • Involvement of women was totally absent. • No regular communication with forest department. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Villagers celebrated the Republic Day in the banner of FPC. • Men and women have formed groups to assist FPC executive committee. They have fixed hierarchy within the committee. They sit together in regular meetings. They have a fixed meeting place (MILAN KUTIR) built by themselves using local resources, where they sit together in regular meetings. They are maintaining the meeting minute book regularly. 	Self Help Group for women
"	Goaldanga	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was no regular meeting about forest protection. • No patrolling team. • Involvement of women was totally absent. • No regular communication with forest department. • They have a village development fund. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men and women have formed groups to assist FPC executive committee. They have fixed hierarchy within the committee. They sit together in regular meetings. They have a fixed meeting place (MILAN KUTIR) built by themselves using local resources, where they sit together in regular meetings. They are maintaining the meeting minute book regularly. • Villagers celebrated the Republic Day under the banner of FPC. 	Self Help Group for women

Table 1: Contd.....

Name of the FPC	Village Name	Before Intervention	After Intervention	Future Plan of action developed by FPC
	Saibandh and Kusumdanga	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was no regular meeting about forest protection. • No patrolling team. • Involvement of women was totally absent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men and women have formed groups to assist FPC executive committee. They have fixed hierarchy within the committee. They sit together in regular meetings. They have a fixed meeting place. They are maintaining the meeting minute book regularly. • Villagers celebrated the Republic Day under the banner of FPC. • They have formed a SHG (Self-Help Group) comprising ten women who deposit Rs. 20 on a monthly basis and currently they have a deposit of Rs.200.00. • Men and women have formed groups to assist FPC executive committee. They have fixed hierarchy within the committee. They sit together in regular meetings. They have a fixed meeting place. They are maintaining the meeting minute book regularly. • The villagers planned for reconstruction of village club. 	
	Ghritagram	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was no regular meeting about forest protection. • No patrolling team • Involvement of women was totally absent. 		

3. Cause

Absence of Clear Roles and Responsibilities

Symptoms

Complaints were heard that the people were not clear about their roles.

Remedy

Group meetings were held and commitments pronounced. The volunteers stepped forward to offer patrol duties. Rules for penalizing offenders were framed and unanimously agreed upon.

4. Cause

Absence of Leadership

Symptoms

The absence of proper leaders with clarity of thought, promptness in action, assertiveness and trust in others for delegation of power was regretted. The existing leaders always postponed activities that involved risks.

This feeling of inadequacy was reflected in the exasperation shown in the following way:

"Nobody listens to me. How can I organize the Forest Protection Committee (FPC)?"

Remedy

The natural leaders were identified. Responsibilities were given to them who were vocal and interested in sharing the work. The existing leaders were not side tracked but trained and motivated to work jointly with the natural leaders. The void of natural leadership was thus plugged in.

5. Cause

Lack of Clear Values and Norms

Symptoms

No one condemned the offenders. On the contrary, people sympathized with them.

Remedy

Meetings and discussions on the positive values were held, and suggestions were put forward to inculcate the values through social functions, rituals and other traditional devices as well as collective pressures.

6. Cause

Absence of Reward and Punishment

Symptoms

The offenders were not ashamed of unauthorized felling.

Remedy

The Forest Protection Committees began to socially recognize the work that was in tune with the rules of forest protection, as well done. At the same time the offenders came to be publicly condemned.

7. Cause

Lack of Symbols and rituals

Symptoms

Efforts were hardly made for holding meetings, group discussions, and singing songs based on forestry in order to facilitate interaction and awareness among members.

Remedy

Van Mahotsav - or tree planting ceremony came to be organized at many places. The foresters became students and sat with the villagers on the same physical level preferably on the ground or under a tree. He recognized the good things in the village or villagers.

8. Cause

Socialization

Symptoms

The existing practices of socialization and education did not include forest conservation norms. Children as well as the adults did not know the usefulness of good forest. Consequently they did not see the destruction of forests and resources to be dangerous.

Remedy

Meetings and seminars were organized mainly for the women and children. Social awareness programmes were taken up through relevant tailor-made songs and social functions. Quiz programmes were specially organized to create awareness of the rules, regulations, roles and responsibilities relating to forest protection.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the following series of changes in the perception and action of the villagers in relation to protection and development of forest through the formation and operation of FPCs and other related bodies constituted through the villagers' own initiative may be noted. Of course, the changes were facilitated

through Systemic Approach for bilateral matching of the institutions of Forest Community and Forest Department. One finds that *after intervention* through the FPC and communication between Forest Community and Forest Department.

Forest condition has started improving. In many cases regeneration of forest has been strikingly evident. Illicit felling has been reduced. Both men and women have formed groups to assist *Forest Protection Committee's* executive body. They have fixed hierarchy within the committee. They sit together in regular meetings. They are maintaining the minute books and are recording the proceedings of the meetings regularly.

In several villages, the villagers have a fixed meeting place (*Milan Kutir*) built by them using local resources.

The villagers are patrolling of the forest. The patrolling groups have in several cases caught the offenders who work against the laws and rules of forest protection red handed. In certain cases women too have participated in patrolling particularly during the collection of NTFP and caught hold of the offenders. Constant communication with Beat Officer and Forest Guard is maintained. This show the relationship has in certain cases improved significantly.

Self-help groups (SHG) have been formed in quite a few villages where FPCs are working in concert with Forest Department. In certain villages *women too* or it is the *women only* who have formed self-help groups. Several such self-help groups have built up common fund based on monthly contribution by the members and have opened accounts with the local branches of the banks.

Literacy centres have started working. In certain cases it is the women who have started literacy centres and quite a few women are gaining literacy in such centres. In several villages, the members of the FPC and Literacy Centres have organized quiz, sit-and-draw competition and sports related to forest and environment protection.

Villagers are actively involved in Vegetation Monitoring for several years to measure the growth rate of their forests, to observe the seasonal variation in the availability of forest species and to build capacity for resource management.

Meetings have been held to facilitate yield assessment by the villagers of *sal* leaf so that they can use the forest resources in a sustainable way. Training on Nursery techniques and use of tools has been imparted to selected villagers to provide them with an alternative means of livelihood.

Villagers are found to celebrate the Republic Day under the banner of FPC. Several villages arranged and/or participated in the rally on World Environment Day to create awareness regarding environment and forests.

The success story above using the concept of BMI and Systemic Approach highlights how BMI and facilitation of structured Social Action initiated by the villagers after intervention have helped the growth of FPC from non-functional group to association and then its transformation into a viable institution in the life of village communities near or around the forest.

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