
Actual Picture of JFM System: Field Study from Goalpara District of Assam

Bipul Kr Rabha

Department of Economics, H.P.B. Girls' College, Golaghat, Assam

ABSTRACT

Joint Forest Management (JFM) is a concept, which is based on the principle of rights of local communities in forests, a mechanism to manage the forest that is owned by the State but appropriated by local communities. It is also an approach involving the evolution of a very complex property rights regime to generate a sustainable interface between the Forest Department and the local community and it is a possible way through which the interests of people and of long term sustainability are harmonized in a mutually supporting manner. In this paper, it is attempted to explore the actual picture of the JFM system, taking five indicators: participation, management strategies, cooperation, benefit sharing and environmental effects. Based in the primary data collected from Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) of Goalpara district of Assam, it is argued that the actual picture of the system has not coincided with the existing JFM regulations.

Keywords: joint forest management, forest policies, forest regulations, forest resources.

INTRODUCTION

The Joint Forest Management (JFM) is a concept, which is based on the principle of rights of local communities in forests, a mechanism to manage the forest that is owned by the State but appropriated by local communities. It is also an approach involving the evolution of a very complex property rights regime to generate a sustainable interface between the Forest Department and the local community and it is a possible way through which the interests of people and of long term sustainability are harmonized in a mutually supporting manner (GoA, 2006). The objective of JFM system is to support the livelihoods of the forest fringe communities through improved natural resource management with community participation.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Proper management of common property resources (CPRs) like forest is a continuous debate throughout the world. Looking at the historical background of forest management system in India, it is found that forest was not a State property and forest use was vested with the community. There was no forest policy in India before the British came. At that time, the community enjoyed forest resources without any prohibition. Of course, there was no specific management system of forest resources.

Interest in conservation of forest arose primarily from the necessity of forest timber for industrial use and the depletion of forest resources in areas under British monarchy compelled the British administration in India to go for a conservative management in forest resource use. The British introduced forest policies in India and the policies impacted on local use of forest resources. The forest conservation policies (both before and after independent) have been trying to reconcile the conflicting objectives of using forests for economic development, ecological balance and livelihoods and rights of people dependent on forests (Guha, 1983). Right from 'The Forest Act of 1865' to the newly issued 'The India's Forest Rights Act of 2006', different forest policies have been implemented

**Address for correspondence:*

bipulrabha@gmail.com

in India to conserve the forest resources. (Guha, 1983; Kulkarni, 1987; Tucker, 1987; Haeuber, 1993 and Ramnath, 2008). It is found that the acts, which did not take into concern local people’s requirement of forest resources, were over and over again amended.

Over the three decades there has been ongoing nationwide debate on forest policy in India. The debate is fueled by the continuing social tension in the forest areas and evidences of deforestation all over India provided by satellite imagery. According to Guha (2006, p. 160), this debate has passed through three distinct phases with chronological overlapping. The first might be designated the “*politics of blame.*” Here, activist speaking on behalf of disadvantaged groups have held forest officials responsible of environmental degradation and popular discontent. The officials have insisted that growing human and cattle populations are the prime reasons for deforestation. The second phase might be called the “*politics of negotiation.*” In villages and state capitals, forest officers and their critics found themselves at the same table, talking and beginning to appreciate, if not fully understand, the other’s point of view. Concessions were made by each side, protest suspended by forest conservation activists and leases of forest produce that use in industry cancelled by forest officials. Introduction of Joint Forest Management (JFM) system is result of this phase. The third phase might be termed as “*politics of collaboration.*” In this phase, the previously authoritarian government officials joined with previously suspicious villagers to jointly manage forest. The forest department initiates action in its own, abandoning its traditional custodial approach by inviting peasants to cooperate with it. Villagers constitute Village Forest Protection Committees (VFPCs), each of which agrees to protect nearby forests in collaboration with the state. Guha (2006) has thought a fourth phase on the Indian forestry debate, the “*politics of partnership.*” There should be an inclusive democratic structure where the state listens to and learns from community and where the community recognizes and deals fairly with the inequalities within its own ranks. In this paper, it is considered the second phase to evaluate of performance of the existing system of forest management, since this phase has been implemented in Assam in the year 1999. So far 803 JFMCs have been managing 80,000 hectares forest area, as per State of Forest Report, 2009.

OBJECTIVE & METHODOLOGY

The objective of the paper is to evaluate the difference between the ‘*what should be*’ and ‘*what actually going on*’ in the JFM program. Five indicators: *participation, management strategies, cooperation, benefits sharing* and *environmental effects* have been undertaken in this study to evaluate the system. Since macro statistics do not fully provide a clue to the actual processes micro level studies of the forest of Goalpara have been undertaken for the study.

As the objectives suggest, this is an *exploratory* as well as *evaluation* type of research based on empirical data. The study site has been selected Goalpara district of Assam, because Goalpara is a district where forest and tribal economy play a crucial role and the Government of Assam has experimentally implemented the JFM system in this district and two other districts viz., Dhubri and Kamrup in 1999 (Deka, 2002). The districts selected for the implementation of the JFM system have registered a decrease in the forest cover (Dhubri-no change, Kamrup lost 20 km²; forest cover was 1,462 km² in 1999 and it is 1,433 km² in 2011). In Goalpara district, the forest cover was 389 km² (21.33% of total geographical area of the district) in 1999 and by 2011 the total forest cover has decreased to 337 km² (18.48% of total geographical area of the district).

Besides, in the current period the district has undergone economic, political and social change. The nature of this change has made conservation of forests a critical issue. Forest conservation is interrelated with the changing state policies, political mobilizations, social relations, with ecological changes, changes in livelihood sources and development of households struck in poverty.

Table1. *Details of Selected Forest Areas & JFMCs*

Sl. No.	Sample Forest Area	Area of the Forest Area (In hectores)	Name of JFMC	Area Under JFMC(in hectores)
1	Ganesh Pahar (PRF)	92.5	Ganesh Pahar JFMC	92.50
2	Chitolmari Hill (RF)	738.63	Pub Chitolmari Bananchal Samiti	738.63
3	Madang (PRF)	361.50	Madang, Bamunpara, Jalapara & Gulianpara JFMC	50.00
4	Ambuk (RF)	378.00	Kaimari Samuhik JFMC	65.00

Source: DFO Office, 2008 & Secretary of Respective Forest Area, December 2014.

INDICATOR-WISE EVALUATION OF JFMC

Indicator1: Participation

The indicator Participation, it has been considered involvement of local people and Forest Department official in both in General Body and the Executive Committee of the Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMC) of the respective village.

1. Ganesh Pahar JFMC

What should be	What Actually Going on
General Member	General Member
All Adults as general member. 50% women member.	All adults are not general member. One of the adult of a household is involved as a general member. Wives of all adult male members are regarded as women member of the JFMC.
Executive member	Executive member
President should be from the village	President is selected from respective village.
Secretary should be from Forest Department.	Secretary is nominated from Forest Department employee.
One member from Panchayat	No member is there from Panchayat
Six members from general body	Six members are there from general body
33% Women member	33% women member is there in the JFMC
one post office bearer should be woman	No woman involves as office bearer

2. Pub Chitolmari Bananchal Samiti

What should be	What Actually Going on
General Member	General Member
All Adults as general member. 50% women member.	All Adults are not involved as general member. One of the adult of a household is involved as a general member. 50% members are not women.
Executive member	Executive member
President should be from the village	President is selected from respective village.
Secretary should be from Forest Department.	Secretary is nominated from Forest Department employee.
One member from Panchayat	No member is there from Panchayat
Six members from general body	Six members are there from general body
33% Women member	33% women member is there in the JFMC
one post office bearer should be woman	No woman involves as office bearer

3. Madang, Bamulpara, Jalapara & Gulianpara JFMC

What should be	What Actually Going on
General Member	General Member
All Adults as general member. 50% women member.	All Adults are not involved as general member. One of the adult of a household is involved as a general member. Women are not regarded as member of the JFMC.
Executive member	Executive member
President should be from the village	President is selected from respective village.
Secretary should be from Forest Department.	Secretary is nominated from Forest Department employee.
One member from Panchayat	No member is there from Panchayat
Six members from general body	Six members are there from general body
33% Women member	There is no woman executive member in the committee.
one post office bearer should be woman	Since no executive member, no question about woman office bearer.

4. Kaimari Samuhik JFMC

What should be	What Actually Going on
General Member	General Member
All Adults as general member. 50% women member.	All Adults are not involved as general member. One of the adult of a household is as general member. Wives of all male members are regarded as women member of the JFMC.
Executive member	Executive member

President should be from the village	President is selected from respective village.
Secretary should be from Forest Department.	Secretary is nominated from Forest Department employee.
One member from Panchayat	No member is there from Panchayat
Six members from general body	Six members are there from general body
33% Women member	33% members are women in the committee
one post office bearer should be woman	No woman member is working as office bearer

Indicator2: Management Strategies

1. Ganesh Pahar JFMC

What should be	What is actually going on
Boundary: tight	Open
Duty: always. Even night. With Forest Department	Not regular. Forest Department's duty too not regular
Punishment to offenders: handed over to Forest Department	Handed over to the Forest Department. Sometimes the committee itself punishes.
Bank Account: two. Forestry Account and Village Development Account	One. The Forestry Account.
Harvested Product: 50% should be reinvested.	Not reinvested.
Plantation: Regularly	Not regularly. First phase has not sustained. Second phase is in progress.

2. Pub Chitolmari Bananchal Samiti

What should be	What is actually going on
Boundary: tight	Open
Duty: always. Even night	Almost ban.
Punishment to offenders: handed over to Forest Department	Handed over to the Forest Department. But not dependable.
Bank Account: two. Forestry Account and Village Development Account	One. Forestry Account.
Harvested Product: 50% should be reinvested.	Not reinvested.
Plantation: Regularly	Not regularly. Plantation not succeeded.

3. Madang, Bamunpara, Jalapara & Gulianpara JFMC

What should be	What is actually going on
Boundary: tight	Open
Duty: always. Even night	Not regular. But, regularly do when illegal extraction is high. Even night.
Punishment to offenders: handed over to Forest Department.	Own. Both physical and monetary. Forest Departmental punishment is not dependable according to them.
Bank Account: two. Forestry Account and Village Development Account	One. Village Development Account.
Harvested Product: 50% should be reinvested.	Not reinvested.
Plantation: Regularly	No plantation so far.

4. Kaimari Samuhik JFMC

What should be	What is actually going on
Boundary: tight	Open.
Duty: always. Even night	Not always. Sometimes.
Punishment to offenders: handed over to Forest Department	Handed over to the Forest Department. Sometimes own. Both physical and monetary (Rs. 1000/-, for second time it is double, third time triple and so on.)
Bank Account: two. Forestry Account and Village Development Account	Two. Both Forestry Account and Village Development Account.
Harvested Product: 50% should be reinvested.	Not reinvested.
Plantation: Regularly	Not regular.

Indicator 3: Cooperation

To understand the cooperation in the JFM system, it was investigated the cooperation (a) among the executive members of JFMC, (b) between JFMC and Forest Department, (c) among the general members, (d) NGOs and JFMC, and (e) among the JFMCs.

The standard cooperation regarding the five points that mentioned above should be-

- (a) There should be strong cooperation among the executive members of the respective JFMC. Strong cooperation in the sense, the attendance in the executive members should be very high in every meeting and they should active in decision making process. It is seen complete cooperation among the executive members, as their attendance is very high and they are very active in decision making process. It is same in all the selected JFMCs. Of course, the timing of organizing meeting is different for different JFMC.
- (b) As the name indicates, there should be a good cooperation between JFMC and Forest Department Officials. But in practice, it is found that cooperation of Forest Department is very poor in the sense that their cooperation in vigilance duty with the village duty group is not regular. The financial assistance to the JFMC is not regular and it is nominal. Even some of the JFMCs do not know the JFMC regulations which are very important for successfulness of the system. The secretary of the JFMC is nominated from the Forest Department official who is found not interested to inform the regulations to the village people. When the village people catch offenders and wish to hand over to the Forest Department, they show so many excuses e.g. they have no lock up, filing process is very complicated etc. They advise the JFMCs to take the decisions in their own when offenders are caught. Besides, one executive member should be selected from Panchayat, which is not seen in any of the selected JFMC.
- (c) It is expected good cooperation among the general members, between the general members and the executive members in the JFM system. But in practice, it is found that attendance of the general members, in meetings, in some JFMC is seen very poor, basically in the Pub Chitolmari Bananchal Samiti. To understand this, it was examined the attendance registers of the JFMC. Out of 200 households, the attendance in general body meetings are just between 5 and 20 members, including executive members.
- (d) As per regulation, NGOs take important role in JFM system. But, in the four JFMC that have been studied so far is found-no cooperation between NGOs and JFMCs. There is no any member from any NGO in any JFMC. Of course, it is seen some NGOs that are independently protecting forest areas.
- (e) There should be cooperation among the JFMCs. But they are found independent. They are not interested to share ideas regarding forest management mechanism.

Indicator 4: Benefits Share

As per JFM regulations, (a) all non-timber forest products should be benefited by JFMCs, (b) full share of planted products should be benefited by JFMCs, and (c) share in proportion to period of management in high forests managed by JFMC.

The non-timber forest products have been benefited by JFMCs. The question of planted product is not applicable, in the sense that the plantation program has not been harvested in all the JFMCs. Whatever planted products are available, basically in Ganesh Pahar JFMC, although negligible, its full share is benefited by the JFMC. It means, regarding benefit sharing of planted products, it is implementing the JFM regulations.

Indicator 5: Environmental Effects

It is expected to (a) increase flora and fauna after introduction of JFM system in the respective forest areas, (b) soil erosion, basically in hill forest areas should decrease compare to other areas.

All the forest areas lost their numbers of flora and fauna before the village people had formed the JFMCs. It has not been done surveys by any of the JFMC to know the exact figure of flora and fauna in their respective forest areas. However, it was asked overall ideas of the respondents that it has not increased number of flora and fauna. On the contrary, they opine that in has seen decreased, and some of the species are totally lost from their forest areas.

Regarding erosion control, it has been observed that it has been controlling the problem of soil erosion in Ganesh Pahar PRF. But in case of Chitolmari Hill RF, it has been observed numbers of stone quarries which have not been able to control by the JFMC. So, the hill is observed continue to erode which decreases productivity of the nearby paddy lands. This problem is not seen in the other two forest areas, because of plain area.

CONCLUSION

The participation in the JFMC is ‘not going on’ what the system ‘should be’. There is no any member from Panchayat in all the JFMCs. Although one woman member should be one of the office bearers, practically it is not seen in the committee. The management strategies of the committees are not sufficient. Boundaries are not tight, duties are not regular, and JFMCs have one bank account except one JFMC, although two accounts should be there. Harvested products are not reinvested and plantation is not regular. There is good cooperation among the executive members. But the cooperation of general members, cooperation between JFMC and NGOs, cooperation among the JFMC are not good. The cooperation between JFMC and Forest Department is not sufficient. The non-timber forest products have been benefited by JFMCs. The JFMCs have no idea about increase or decrease of flora and fauna in their respective forest area. They do not think it is their work as a stakeholder of their respective forest area. Therefore, it can be argued that the actual picture of the system has not fully coincided with the existing JFM regulations in Assam.

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AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY



Bipul Kr Rabha did his Post Graduation in Economics from Gauhati University and M Phil in Environmental Economics from University of Hyderabad. He joined as an Assistant Professor in Economics in Jengraimukh College, Majuli in 2011. Currently, he is a PhD Research Scholar in Dibrugarh University and simultaneously he has been working as an Assistant Professor in Economics, H.P.B. Girls’ College, Golaghat, Assam.