

Conflict In Policy Implementation: A Case Study In An Exploited Forest Landscape Of South Assam



Management

KEYWORDS : forest policy, exploited landscape, conflict

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ABSTRACT

Forest management in the form of Joint Forest management (JFM) is a symbiotic associational approach of two major stakeholders – forest dwellers and forest department. In Inner Line Reserve forest (ILRF) large-scale plantations of timber yielding tree species like Tectonagrandis, Gmelina, arborea etc were undertaken without giving much importance to augmentation of diversity of NTFP-yielding plants that are effectively important for the livelihood of the forest villagers. In order to preferentially maintain the growth and health of a few commercially important target species the other naturally regenerating herbs, shrubs and tree were eliminated following classical silvicultural technique. Severe falling of tree species at premature stage regularly occurred in the plantation site of the forest department, predominantly in the plantation of JFM. This paper analyses policy assignment and conflict of interest among stakeholders in ILRF in the light of recent legislations on non-timber forest product utilization and the right of forest dwellers.

INTRODUCTION

In India most of the forest land are owned, administered and managed by the Government of India through the State Forest Departments (SFD) (Vemuri, 2008). Management of forest and its evolution in India can be dated back from very ancient time. Systematic forest management in India has come in to existence during Maurya empire and continued till Gupta empire (Gupta & Ghose, 2003). Shift of approach from conservation centric forest management to revenue centric forest management has been observed from medieval era, particularly during Mughal rule. During the period no balanced between conservation and revenue centric forest management has been noticed rather forest has largely been exploited to encourage food grain production and revenue generation which has largely effected the forest dependent peoples livelihood (Ribbentop, 1900) and this has been lasted till sepoy mutiny 1857 (Dwivedi, 1980; Mustafa, 2002). After sepoy mutiny in 1857, systematic scientific forest management has been initiated to get absolute control over forest resources. Nevertheless, scientific management of forest was also flag offed in British India through the creation of the Indian Forest Service in the year 1864 and an attempt to enact the Indian Forest Act in 1865 (Balooni, 2002). However Britishers approach towards Indian Forest was largely revenue-centric and generation of forest stock by applying modern silviculture practice. Emphasis in the forest was to produce more and more timber. The protection and production forests were designated as Reserve Forest (RF). The traditional rights of the people in the forest were restricted with limited permit to extract minor forest product and right to grazing as a form of special consideration and privilege (Balooni, 2002). The British government adopted administrative measures to keep people away from the reserve forests and restricting their use in permitted forests only. This approach of the government led to a conflict of interest between the two stakeholders, viz., the government, and the people living in and around the forest.

The first forest policy of India was framed and enacted in the year 1894, against the backdrop and conceptual framework of the unpublished Indian forest act, 1865. One of the major tenets of the policy was the regulation the traditional rights and restriction of privileges enjoyed by tribals and other forest dwellers (Gupta, 2009). Control over the forest was maintained in the strong grip of the SFD.

The first post-independence forest policy of India in 1952 was largely based on the British policy with greater emphasis on timber and revenue production in the management of forest, with less attention to conservation and ecological restoration or protection. After 1950, India witnessed large scale forest destruction for setting up infrastructural projects in forest areas. At the same

time, increasing demand for forest products to meet the livelihood requirements of an increasing population that was least concerned about forest protection due to the lack of ownership or at least usufruct rights resulted in large scale illicit feeling and indiscriminate destruction of forest (Singh et al 2005).

After 1980, emergence of joint forest management in India, adoption of more democratic approaches towards forest governance, and the creation of a separate Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF), led to some fundamental changes in the forest management approach. In 1988, the third forest policy gave a generous call for mass people's movement involving women in the protection of forest with a major objective of meeting the requirements of fuel-wood, fodder, minor forest produce and small timber of the rural and tribal populations. Close on the heels of the 1988 Policy, the MoEF issued the first policy directive to adopt joint forest management in 1990. The major objective of this programme was to involve the village communities and NGOs in regeneration of degraded forest (Ballabh et al. 2002; Vemuri, 2008). Subsequently, the 73rd and 74th amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1992 made it mandatory for all the States to introduce democratic decentralization of governance through the 3 tier structures of Panchayati Raj (Local Self Government) institution and *GramSobhas* to have decision making authority to promote participatory democracy. The 29 functions recommended for decentralization to the Panchayat Raj Institutions listed in the 11th schedule included NTFP and maintenance of community assets. Management of state owned forest lands was not included but could be specifically notified by individual State Governments. These objectives were to be implemented through the empowerment of the village level Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC). Finally, as the most recent addition to the recognition of the rights of forest-dwelling tribals and other communities traditionally living near the forest, the "Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006" was enacted in the Indian Parliament on 18th December, 2006, following prolonged debate on and modifications of the draft bill, which was introduced on 13th December, 2005. The "Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Rules 2007" was also notified on 1st January, 2008 (Sampath, 2009). In spite of the policy support towards participatory forest management, the SFDs in most states are still following the old strategies of forest management with emphasis on monoculture of timber-yielding species. The importance of NTFP in providing livelihood subsistence to rural people and forest dwellers as a whole (Belcher et al 2005) and its potential to build a protective network of tribals and other forest dwellers once the sense of proprietary care and involvement is instilled in their minds, continues to be ignored by most SFDs.

Assam, with its rich cultural heritage and ethnic diversity, is home to 145 tribal group representing 12% of the tribal population of India (Ali & Das 2003; Dattagupta et al. 2010). The first Assam forestry regulation enacted in 1891 remained for a long time the main guiding force of forest management by the state forest department. The regulation had clearly defined forest produce such as charcoal, catechu, oil, resin natural varnish, bark, lack, myrabolamus, leaves, wild animal, wild animal skin, cocoons, honey, wax, rhinoceros horn and all other parts and products of plants and animals. The forest policy of Assam, 2004, recognizes the change in perspective from a revenue-generating to environment-protective role of forests. Assam has framed a forest policy of its own in 2004. Meeting the needs of NTFPs, sustainable management and enhanced production of medicinal and aromatic plants to generate employment and income opportunities, and to develop fodder, fuel wood, bamboo, canes and other NTFP resources, are among the major objectives of the policy.

Inner line reserve forest (ILRF) of North East India is the largest reserve forest of the region and part of the Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot. This reserve forest came in to existence vide gazette notification of British India in 1876-77 (Hunter, 1879). This reserve forest harbors tropical evergreen forest type (Champion & Seth 1968). Large scale destruction of the forest has been activated after the introduction of tea cultivation in the fringe area of the reserve forest and promotion of the timber based forest management advocated by governments of pre and post independent India. Declination of the forest resources and restriction on extraction of NTFPs from the forest has largely effected livelihood and subsistence of the forest dwellers. In 2004 Joint Forest Management has been introduced in ILRF to improve forest cover and address livelihood issues of the forest dwellers, giving special emphasis on NTFPs at policy level. In this paper, attempts were made to analyze the approach taken by the SFD towards NTFPs in ILRF, and the perceptions of the forest village dwellers as well as the forest officials about JFM and the Forest Rights Act 2006.

Materials and Methods

Theoretical approach:

Forest policies, acts and regulations in the national as well as Assam perspective has been collected since 1894 to 2006 and consulted in order to understand the underlying aims and approaches towards resource extraction and management.

Concrete approach

In the study area, Joint forest management (JFM) was implemented in six forest villages under the banner of six Joint Forest management committees (JFMC) under National Afforestation Programme. These were: Balichuri JFMC, Ekarthal JFMC, Nagathal JFMC, Borosalganga JFMC, Chotosalganga JFMC and Khulicherra JFMC.

Data Collection was mainly done through household (n= 486) surveys and focus group discussions. Collection of primary data was mainly through open ended questionnaires used for interviewing households of forest-dependent communities. Separate open ended questionnaire were used for interviewing forest officials. Special emphasis was given to interview the member secretaries of the JFMCs, who were mostly Forester I of the Forest Department, Government of Assam.

Result and Discussion

Forest dwellers of ILRF are largely dependent on the NTFPs for the livelihood subsistence. It was observed that 30.9% of the forest dwellers of ILRF is directly dependent on collection, consumption and commercialization of NTFPs available in the reserve forest, rest, partially depend on the NTFPs at lower degree. However a large portion of the forest dwellers (35.4%) who are

land less agriculture daily labour having seasonal work, particularly during the month of June – August to cater as agriculture labour in rain fed agriculture system practiced in the region, rest of the year depends on harvesting of NTFPs for survival (Fig 1).

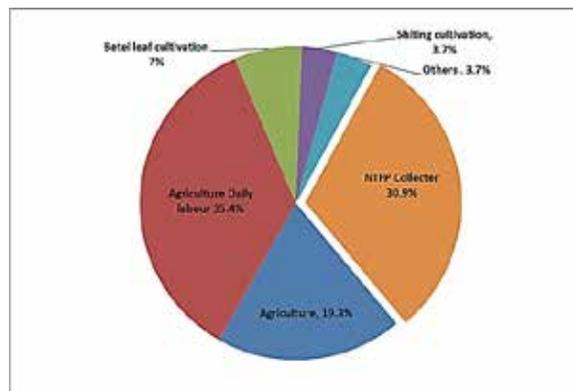


Fig 1. Occupational pattern of Forest dwellers of ILRF

In ILRF, JFM was introduced under the National afforestation programme in the year 2004 with a aim for artificial regeneration , natural regeneration , bamboo plantation , medicinal and aromatic plant plantation .As per the guide line of national Afforestation programme ,it is mandatory to form Joint forest Management committee (JFMC) in the project area, where all the households of the forest villages are the members of the committees. Every JFMC executive committee had an eleven member executive committee headed by a chairman, who is usually the 'Headman' (chief) of the forest village. The Member Secretary of the JFMC is the official of Sate forest Department and executive of the committee with financial power. It is mandatory to have at least two women members in the executive committee. Member of the JFMC are supposed to take decision on the selection of plants and other development projects such as entry point activity etc.

In ILRF, from last century's timber based management system has been promoted by the forest department to generate more revenue for the government. Generation plantation of NTFPs producing plant has largely neglected which supports livelihood of the forest dwellers. As forest act and policy of Assam in particular does not provide right to the forest dwellers on ownership of the land and also on the biological and non-biological products forest dwellers are wholly dependent on the decision of the forest officials. Systems is continued from 19th century since modern forest department has been established.

In habitants of ILRF had a negative perception on approach of JFM implemented in reserve forest area with a continued emphasis on timber yielding plant species.

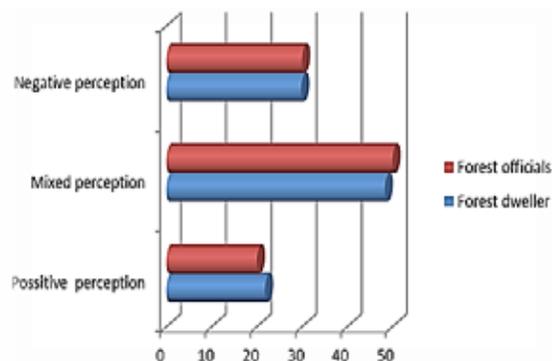


Fig 2 Perception of the forest dwellers and forest officials on JF

Timber based management approach of the forest department in ILRF, promoted monoculture of selected timber-yielding species such as *Gmelinaarborea*, *Tectonagrandis*, *Shorearobusta*, *Artocarpuschama*, *Toonacilieta*, *Mesuaferrea*, *Arronawallichietc*. On the contrary, plantation and restoration of NTFP-yielding plants that could provide support to the livelihood of forest dwellers were not given due attention. However forest dwellers of ILRF largely depended on NTFP either directly or indirectly. This had naturally led to generation and intensification of conflict among forest dwellers and forest department in connection with utilization of resources. This dichotomy in the approaches of forest dwellers and forest officials is also reflected in their perceptions of the "The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006", which was largely positive in the case of the ILRF inhabitants and diametrically opposite in the case of the forest officials.

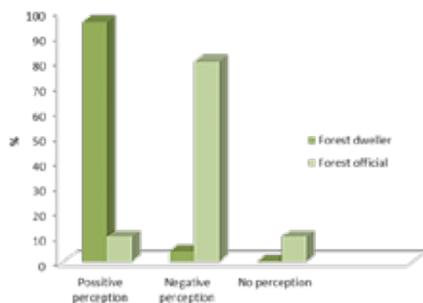


Fig 3. Perception of the forest dwellers and forest officials on forest right act 2006 in ILRF

There is need to resolve this conflicting perceptions through meaningful dialogue. Force full implementation of policy and rules in the reserve forest can lead to violent conflict for example forest fire in Uttarakhand, 1916 (Guha 1989) This conflict also perhaps led to continued felling of trees inside JFM areas, as the villagers did not feel any sense of involvement in assist-

ing the authorities to protect the forests, as the timber-biased policy decisions at the village level did not take care of their interests. This show the way of abuse of the forest resources by individual self-interest (Vemuri 2008) InArabari range of West Bengal, villager's plays significant role in protection of forest resources as sharing of benefit between two stakeholders is established. Timber-oriented programmes also did not help the women in solving their problems of procurement of fuel wood and other non-timber products. Thus the ground-level scenario was in total contravention of the spirit of participatory management along with involvement of women, as was envisioned in the 1988 National Forest Policy and the subsequent JFM notification. A comprehensive NTFP policy and common property resource(CPR) management in ILRF therefore, needs to be framed and adopted to strike a balance between biodiversity conservation in the forest and provision of livelihood security to the forest dwellers. It was observed that villagers has stopped cooperating forest department when conflict of interest between tow stakeholders has arises (Nadkarni et al 1994) Both in situ and ex situ cultivation and conservation of NTFP-yielding plants, and habitat protection and restoration for animals, might help in addressing the conflicting demands of conservation and livelihood in Inner Line Reserve Forest that still remains a rich repository of plant and animal NTFP despite the century old deprecation of its resources. In view of the recent developments and the overwhelming demand for the NTFP based raw material, some form of Eco-Certification system appropriate in the Indian and more specifically ILRF context could be evolved to improve the livelihood status of the forest villagers which in turn could lead to more efficient protection and participatory management of the forest resources (Shanley et al. 2008; Wilsey and Radachowsky 2007).

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