

Bamboo Forest Protected by Paiksahi: Rights of villagers under Joint Forest Management?

A recent conflict over forests has brought to forth the fallacy behind the much touted Joint Forest Management Programme of the State. For villagers of Paiksahi it is a virtual shock. Paiksahi is a small tribal village of 75 households, in Tangi block in Khurda District around 12 kms from Tangi. The village has been protecting around 800 hectares of Patia Reserved Forest from 1990. The FD has formed a VSS in the village (under Joint Forest Management arrangement) and allotted them 800 hectares of Patia R.F. area for protection.

This forest area which had become completely degraded now has a good bamboo regeneration thanks to the efforts of Paiksahi and Kantasiri people. These people now find BILT (Ballarpur Industries Limited) on their doorsteps to harvest bamboo from their forests and take it away for paper production. The Range Forest Officer tells these villagers that this area comes under Bamboo Working Circle and has been given to BILT for bamboo harvesting and villagers have no right over bamboo which is a poor man's timber and which we have nourished through our own sweat and life-blood... Another leader from the village says why don't they just tell us that we committed a mistake by protecting this forest. Another youth says, they tell us we should just let BILT take this produce, it will prepare paper from this.... Why does the Department do this "tamasha" of "Joth Jungle Parichalana" (Joint Forest Management) if they have to just take unilateral decisions and do ask they wish without any consideration to local people.

Kabir, suffering from Malaria, told the local reporters, that we were told that under JFM you would have rights over forests, forests would be managed jointly, Is this joint Management? We find that on one fine day the Company people are here to take away our forests. We would not let this happen. The forest is ours the company cannot take it away. We know the resolution for JFM says 50% from any major harvest shall go to VSS. The Range Officer know says not even 1% would be shared with villagers. The Range Officer says let the harvesting take place and BILT take away the produce. The Range Officers says that in the next Working Plan, they can make changes to ensure rights to local villagers. Kabir pleads how can we let this happen.

The women in the village and also the nearby village of Godasahi are aghast. They say we would not let them take bamboo. We have protected forest as our child, they cannot snatch it away from us. But after a moment, shadows of doubt cloud their faces, and they say wistfully but what can be done, if “Sarkar” does this to us.... Please help us they appeal to outsiders who come to their village.

The neighbouring villages are joining in with Paiksahi in protest against the proposed bamboo harvesting by BILT. The leaders in Gadasahi a neighbouring village say that next year it would be our turn. If this happens in this case, it would happen in other cases as well. The neighbouring villages are joining in for a Joint-rally from Paiksahi to Tangi Range Office to protest against this on 9th November 1997.

In Orissa, many villages like Paiksahi have been protecting forests. In several cases, villages have been protecting forest from as early as 1930s. Majority of the Forest Protection efforts are more recent, starting from late 1970s and early 80s. Even the Government order of GOO for JFM acknowledges the presence of these initiatives. These community forestry initiatives are largely self-initiated prompted by concern for dwindling forest resource and resulting scarcity of forest products. These initiatives by villagers underline the strong dependence and linkage between forests and local communities and also point towards the feasibility of community based forest management systems. According to a study by the Social Forestry Project (1995), 2615 villages in Orissa are protecting over 300,000 hectares of forests. According to Maa Maninag Jungle Surakhya Parishad, a federation of forest protecting villages in the neighbouring Ranpur block, at least 6000 villages are protecting over 500,000 hectares of forest.

The Government of Orissa has made several efforts to ensure involvement of local communities in management of forests. Government of Orissa happens to be the first State to issue a resolution to involve local people for protection of forests in August 1988. This resolution was a precursor to what has gained prominence as the Joint Forest Management approach all over India. The Government of Orissa issued a more detailed resolution in 1993 adopting Joint Forest Management Approach. Under Joint Forest Management, the Forest Department and local villagers are to be partners in the task of protection and management of forests. Under this arrangement, Van Samrakshan Samiti (VSS) has to be formed and the

VSS has to be given specify responsibility over protection and management of a well-specified forest area to be allotted to VSS for the purpose.

Under JFM, all intermediate yield in shape of small wood, poles, fire wood etc. as may be obtained in silvicultural operations will be equitably distributed among the members (of VSS) by the executive committee (of VSS). Timber and poles as may be obtained from a major harvest or final felling shall be shared between the Forest Department and the Vana Samrakshan Samiti in equal shares. The executive committee on behalf of the Samiti will have the option either to distribute the said 50 percent of the total produce among the members of the Samiti in equal shares or to request the Forest Department to dispose of the same and make the net sale-proceeds available for distribution in cash among the members.

Thus, 100% of the intermediate produce and 50% share in any major harvest from the forest area allotted to the VSS is the rightful share of VSS under JFM.

What happens in this tribal village Paiksahi is going to determine the fate of FP efforts in the entire area. According to Maa Maninag Jungle Surakhya Parisad, the Tangi and Ranpur blocks around 150 villages are involved in forest protection and most of these forests have bamboo as the main crop. The other surrounding villages are going to cut down the forest within days if they see this as the outcome of years of voluntary patrolling by thengapalli.

Villages in Orissa which have on their own protected forests believe that forest is theirs but are now in for a shock with such cases coming up. In the initial years when the forests were in early stages of regeneration there were no conflicts, because there was virtually nothing available from forests. But now with forests reaching harvestable stage, the issue of whose forests and rights of local people have come up. In this particular case a VSS has been formed whereas there are numerous cases where villagers have been protecting forests but the FD has not recognized these efforts and has not formed VSS. What is going to happen to the rights of villagers in such cases. Are villagers to be blamed or need they suffer due to the administrative bottle-necks and reluctance to formation of VSS. The Forest Department till now has formed only 1100 VSS while there are over 6000 villages involved in forest protection. How would the rights of these villages whose informal Forest Protection Committee not recognized by the FD get protected when similar situations come knocking at their doors?