

**Challenges before Democratizing Natural Resource Governance:
Experience of Community Forestry network in Orissa:**



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Background:

The State of Orissa has been witnessing large number of self-initiated community institutions involved in forest resources management. These cases are unique in the sense that communities have developed their own mechanisms, strategies and institutions as per local specificities. Moreover, these initiatives were to stop forest degradation and regenerate the forest resources that were at stake.

Owing to several external threats and conflicts, the need for networking among these institutions was felt in many areas. In response to this, networks of forest protection groups have emerged at various levels. These networks have been playing an important role in conflict resolution, articulating the problems being faced by forest protection groups and negotiating with the state machinery. In many cases, NGOs played a vital role in facilitating networking and federation building process. In few cases, the FD has also aided the federation building process.

In the process, these institutions have gained varied experiences and matured to an extent in terms of handling a number of issues and problems relating to community resources management. Their capacities have also developed to address these issues over period of time. However the challenges seem to be endless and cover issues within these institutions and externalities. Some of the core issues includes democratization processes in these institutions, participation of marginalized, women's participation in resource management and livelihood security of resource dependent sections. These institutions have evolved in socio-political and economic context with complex inter-relationships embedded within.

The present paper tries to analyze the diverse nature of community networking process, challenges before these institutions and the strategies adapted to address these issues. It has also made an attempt to analyze the role of external facilitating/ support agencies and its impact on the community forestry efforts. On the whole the paper aims to combine the experiences at the grassroots with macro level scenario and putting forth critical issues for debate and discussion.

The experiences of NGOs in facilitating the federation and network building of forest protecting communities have been rich and diverse. In the process different federation and network have come up and raised their issues and concerns and created pressure on the government to take up proactive steps. Even though micro level issues have been effectively addressed macro level issues like related to policies have largely remained unattended. Considering the fact, a state level network of Orissa Jungle Manch was formed involving 222 representatives of various community forestry institutions and federations, networks, NGOs, and concerned individuals in 1999. However due to several reasons, the State Level Forum has not taken off as per expectations. The reasons lay in inter-organizational issues and role & approach of different facilitating organisations. An attempt has been made in this paper to understand related issues pertaining to community forestry in general and the federations/ networking process in particular.

Our experience on Community Forestry in Ranpur: An experiment of community forestry Federation in Ranpur in Orissa

Vasundhara (an organization working on natural resource management) started working with these community forest management groups in ¹Ranpur Block of Nayagarh District in the state of Orissa in 1995-96 and subsequently facilitated networking among these in terms of emergence (reasons for emergence) of *Maa Maninag Jungle Surakshya Parishad*, (hereinafter would be called as Parisad) a block level federation. The belief of the organization developed in the process of its involvement that forest resource could be sustainably managed by locally evolved community institutions. It worked towards a process where local community could assert access and control over the use and management of forest resources, which would significantly contribute in sustainable management, creating sustainable livelihood options for the poor and would lead to a process of democratization of natural resource governance. The process also saw women led protection initiatives in several parts. Currently at least six women headed forest protection and management committees are functioning.

In the initial period of federation building in Ranpur, efforts were made on conflict resolution, organizing cluster committees, and developing understanding on policy level issues. Subsequently thrust was on taking up livelihood issues, NTFP based enterprise building for women, regularize general body meeting and capacity building of the federation members on organic farming and nursery raising. Besides central women committee meetings & executive committee has been regularly organized. Kendu leave issue and Siali enterprise were discussed in the process and got prominence in the Parisad agenda. Efforts to revive traditional health care practices have been made in terms of organizing Baidyas (traditional medicine practitioner) and networking among them.

The general body meeting of the Parisad provided a common platform for the community forestry leaders to share their experiences, concerns and future course of action. This was a unique opportunity which also significantly contributed to the strengthening of the federation. In the course of dwelling upon on issue of future of forest conservation, community leaders were little bit concerned of the fact that youths are gradually getting disinterested and developing a different perspective on forest protection and management efforts taken up by their elders. Parisad is also been actively involved in working out strategies to evoke interest in the youth mass and seriously involve them in the process. This rightly indicates the farsightedness of community vision which definitely outreaches the vision envisaged by the State say, the forest sector vision-2020 (government of Orissa's vision only for next 15 years). It reflects the community wisdom to address the critical issues in totality and conserve the natural resources for next generation. Understanding and capturing community voices and expressions has been an integral part of our facilitation process which needs to be strengthened further more to intricately understand the socio-cultural underpinnings of the community forestry efforts and make these visible in terms of effectively influencing the policies/ vision of the State and set priorities.

On the whole, Vasundhara has focused on collectivization of the community forestry initiatives and facilitating enhancement of livelihood security of resource dependent poor through management of land, water and forest based enterprises.

¹ Ranapur block in Nayagarh district of Orissa is a drought prone area; and forest based livelihoods play a critical role in the lives of the poor, esp. adivasis and dalits. The block, has 231 villages and of these 187 villages are involved in conserving forests through community based arrangements for protection and management

Women's participation and Addressing Livelihood issues:

Women's involvement in community forestry and its federation was not encouraging in the beginning of the process. Concerted efforts were made to sensitize the male leaders on gender issues and creation of space for women. This had resulted in gradual involvement of women which had significantly increased over the period of time. The impact of involvement of women could be seen in terms of raising of livelihood issues relating to Kendu Leaves which had also brought in some success in terms of establishment of phadi house. In addition to this women had also taken steps to organize their Siali leaf enterprises. All these had received active support from the federation and these issues found an important place in the agenda of the federation.

Kendu Leaves and Local Livelihood:

Kendu leaf, leaves of Kendu bushes (*Diospyrus melanoxylon*) also known as Tendu, in other parts of India is an important source of livelihood for the poor –esp. during the lean period of summer months when there is no other sources of employment exists. The trade in Kendu Leaves (KL) was “nationalized” in the state in the year 1973 to protect the interest of KL pluckers by eliminating middle men, and to maximize state revenues from the trade. However there are areas like Ranpur where plenty of KL is available and around 3100 tribal and dalit women from among 15900 poor households of 125 villages critically depend on KL collection for sustaining their livelihood in the lean summer months. . But taking the plea of availability of poor quality leaves, government had closed down the phadies in this region. This provided an opportunity to Private traders who use to procure KL at half the official price.

Women KL pluckers raised this problem in the federation meetings during 1999-2000. The Parishad thereafter took up this issue. Following a demand for KL Phadis before the Chief Minister in 2001, the government's KL department was directed to undertake a survey for potential of KL phadis in the area. This survey ascertained a potential for 20 phadis. However, only 2 phadis were opened in 2002. The Parishad and women KL pluckers have been consistently pressing for setting up more phadis. Recently, women rallied for KL phadis; and then sat in front of the State Assembly in Bhubaneswar. As a result of the government was forced to establish another phadi in the area. Mobilisation of KL has not only led to economic benefit for the people but has significantly added to women empowerment process.

Siali plate enterprise and Livelihood

There are plenty of siali leaves in some pockets of Ranpur where tribal, dalit and other marginalized sections of the community critically depend on for around 9 months. Considering the potential siali plate enterprise were facilitated by the federation, which also arranged credit support to meet the working capital requirement. These groups were trained and linked to the market and each woman is now earning Rs. 400/- Rs/- 800 per month. On the whole, 88 households belonging to tribal and dalits community are involved in the enterprise.

At the same time, the same siali plate enterprise supported by DRDA has been proved a failure programme. This could be attributed for the reason of the withdrawal of government's support just after the business initiated. Here it is to be noted here that the department has extended the loan support to the tribal and dalit women and established market link for saling the produce. However there are no other support were available when these women faced after this period like thread, machine repair, also timely lifting the produces and regular payment. The most important thing is these vulnerable sections of women needs immediate support at the time of need.

The local resource based micro enterprise has tremendous potential in poverty alleviation which needs to be strengthened rather designing new poverty alleviation programmes and schemes which has a lot of seepage in the process. Policy makers and planners need to learn from the experiments of little investments. Moreover, soft ware service and inputs are essential to the process. The timely

service, logical support and facilitation of the collective trading of the groups need urgent attention for ensuring the success of the programme.

Bamboo and cashew issues:

Federation also extended support to the village communities to regain control over their forest resources when govt. had leased it out to the paper mill in Paiksahi. In another case communities also halted the process of privatization of cashew plantation by the state.

FDA and JFM vis-à-vis Parishad

Under National Afforestation Programme the forest department have launched FDA programme. In the process FD intended to bring the CFM group to their fold and lured the village communities with funds and brought two old community forestry groups under the programme. However the FDA programme has largely created disturbances in community efforts due to faulty approach and lack of transparency. The programme design has been supply-driven where there is hardly any role for community in decision making. Again it is a standardized approach for all communities whether it needs such programme or not. As a result of this, it has created conflict and misunderstanding within the community institutions.

Strengthening the cluster networks of community forestry groups

In the reflection process, it was realized that there is urgent need for strengthening the cluster committees of the community forestry federation. Subsequently it worked on this by reorganizing 5 cluster committees, including two women committees. The strategies followed were different from one cluster to another. The major thrust was to create space for genuine community leaders and concerned people and forest dependant poor in the federation building process. This process also created opportunity for women leaders to integrate themselves into the federation building process. Besides the gap between the apex body (Parishad) and village forest protecting group have been bridged to a large extent. Apart from this other issues has also been taken up by the cluster committees. One can take the example of Darpanarayanpur Cluster where consistent pressure from the committee members has forced DRDA to change Siali plate trader who has ill repute in the areas. In another case, through local level network formation like Surukabadi cluster committee, it has successfully over come the external pressure of timber mafia and powerful villages. One of the Outstanding effort of the federation is conflicts resolution. Efforts have often achieved success in checking the bloodshed and violence and resource degradation from inter and intra village conflicts relating to forest cases.

Efforts on other Natural Resources and wild life conservation

After 2002 federation's involvement expanded to other natural resources such as land, water and revival of organic farming practices. Community forestry groups have started involving themselves in management of land and water resources. There are cluster level networks where they have framed rules on against haunting wild animals in the forest.

Approach and role of Vasundhara as a facilitator

Vasundhara as a civil society organization believes a positive role in democratizing the forest governance in the state of Orissa. It plays a role of a humble facilitator in the networking process at different levels and address the macro level governance issues. As a facilitator it tries to make the process of inclusion of different actors and contributes towards strengthening the forest governance. One of the important roles felt in the process was the learning of the federation building of forest protecting groups needs to be fed in the larger process, so that the larger process of democratization of forest governance could be further strengthened.

Challenges ahead:

Though community has been managing the forest resources have been accepted in the state as a de-facto arrangement is yet to get the govt. recognition and encouragement

- Lukewarm attitude towards forestry sector. The state CM is holding the portfolio with pressing engagements; he has little time and pays no attention to the core and emerging issues in the sector. Virtually the state officials are undermining the community initiatives in forest governance.
- Dept. officials are in an impression of loosing control over the forest if it shares with power with community.
- Dept. is pumping funds when there are no such demands are made at grass root level.(FDA funding has negative impacts in the CFM process in the state).
- There is a paradox of community forest management in Orissa. When there are communities have come voluntarily to manage to conserve the forest resources they are not encouraged at the same time a parallel institution arrangement under JFM is ventured through buying participation of community with funding.
- Exploration of local resource based such as bamboo-based enterprise for resource dependent poor is already going on. Labour intensive effective technology has been explored and we are still in a process of exploring the market link up of the finished produce of agarbati sticks. Till date, bamboo-work is viewed as traditional occupation of people belonging to scheduled caste. Our efforts would contribute towards elimination of caste-based occupation and strengthening livelihood security of these deprived sections.

Conclusion:

Instead of strengthening the CFM/Self Initiated process which has a lot of strength within it, the government has consistently neglected it. These need to be addressed urgently through legal recognition and creating space for contributing to macro level policy and planning. Community participation has always been taken as a incentive- based approach in the State but the case of Orissa where community have already set successful examples of resource management were not given due encouragement. Thus a change in approach is required. Today the state policy and planning is totally influenced by the external stake holders with little concerns for community needs. The prime stakeholders are kept away from the process.

Self- initiatives are sustainable and hardly require external funding support and fund driven process often tend to disturb these sustainable initiatives.

Democratizing forest resource governance is a larger process. It needs to be strengthened in different levels and civil society actors have a positive role to play and contribute in a meaningful way. There is a long way to go in terms of strengthening the democratization process where the marginalized section and exclusively the resource dependent poor and forest protecting communities can be integrated and strengthen the process further.

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