

Participatory Forest Management in Karnataka

At the Crossroads

"[JFPM is] the fundamental instrument by which sustainable management of resources and benefits are sought to be achieved. This concept builds on practices already being developed by KFD and other forest departments in India, and seeks to provide a framework within which those practices can be improved and strengthened."

—Statement by KFD in proposal submitted to JBIC, 1996

"VFCs exist only on the stone boards erected outside the plantations"

— VFC representative in regional consultation in Belgaum, 2001

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Which of the above statements should one believe? On the face of it, Karnataka has taken major strides towards people-oriented forestry. In the late 1980s, the shortcomings of the Social Forestry programme led to demands for a more participatory and people-oriented approach. Following the central government's circular in 1990, the Government of Karnataka set up a Consultative Committee on People's Participation in Forest Management with NGO representatives. After lengthy discussions in this committee as well as parallel discussions between the British funding agency (now DfID), the forest department and NGOs, the Government of Karnataka promulgated a Government Order (GO) on Joint Forest Planning and Management (JFPM) in 1993.

For five years, the JFPM programme was implemented primarily in three districts of the heavily forested Western Ghats region of Karnataka with a Rs.84 crore grant from DfID. It was then expanded in a major way to 23 districts of the non-Western Ghats region of the state (which includes the transition zone and the eastern plains) under a 5-year Rs.598-crore project, primarily supported by a Rs. 506 crore loan from the Japanese Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC). As of March 2003, the Karnataka Forest Department (KFD) says, there are more than 3,600 Village Forest Committees in the state protecting approximately 3,00,000 ha of forest and other common land, almost half of which is

supposedly under natural regeneration and the rest under mixed plantations.

But have things really changed on the ground? Have villagers been actually mobilised to manage their common lands sustainably, equitably and autonomously? Has this resulted in reducing KFD's burden of protection and the state's expenditure on the same or increased its efficacy, while also improving the livelihoods of villagers, especially the marginalised communities amongst them? Has the conventional top-down, timber-focused and policing approach of KFD officials changed into a more participatory and socially sensitive approach focusing on multi-purpose forestry? Or is the statement of the VFC member from Belgaum district representative of the overall situation? What directions should the movement for participatory forestry take in the future?

In this article, I shall try to go beyond the official claims about JFPM as well as the simplistic assumptions about the potential of JFPM that activists often harbour to answer these questions. I shall use the findings of our recently completed study of JFPM in the eastern plains region (Lélé *et al.*, 2003), earlier studies for the Western Ghats region (Correa, 1996; Saxena *et al.*, 1997; Mitra and Correa, 1997; CAG, 2000) and information gathered from several regional consultations with VFC representatives and KFD officials organised by NGOs in Karnataka in late 2001.

Social Forestry and aftermath

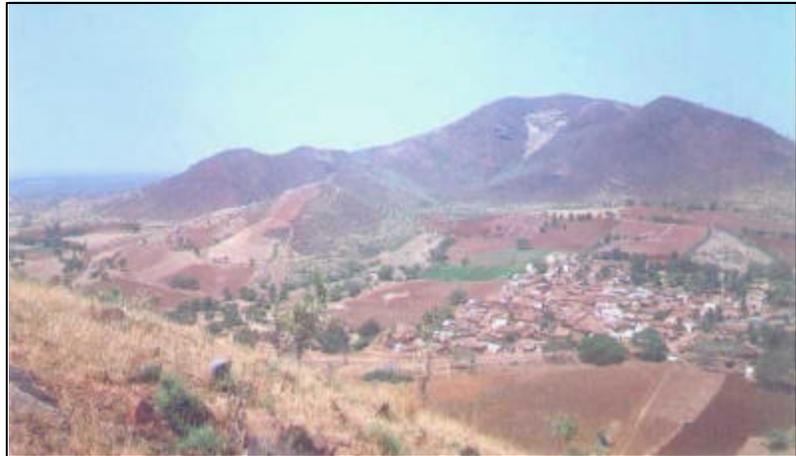
Karnataka was one of the states where the Social Forestry programme was implemented with foreign funding in the 1980s. In spite of its name, the programme completely lacked the involvement of local communities and consequently ended up propagating a model of “community woodlots” that was focused on eucalyptus and on planting up of grazing lands. These features attracted much adverse attention from academics, activists and, eventually, the donors. Largely impervious to these criticisms, KFD approached the British donor agency (now DfID) in 1988 for a renewal of funding, this time ostensibly to conserve the Western Ghats forests. However, several events coincided to force KFD to rethink its approach. NGOs from Karnataka protested vehemently against another top-down, technocratic intervention in forestry. British NGOs put pressure on DfID to respond to these protests. Simultaneously, Government of India happened to issue the now-famous circular on “people’s participation in management of degraded forest lands” in July 1990. Under pressure from all three fronts—donors, central government and civil society—KFD rewrote the project proposal in late 1990 to incorporate a clear component of people’s participation and got DfID’s grant sanctioned. The Government of Karnataka then issued its first Government Order (G.O.) on JFPM in 1993, after much pressure from DfID (as can be seen in the preamble to the GO).

Stumbling first step: the Western Ghats Forestry Project

At the outset, the linkage of the JFPM programme (which, on paper, was available to all villages in the state) to the DfID-supported Western Ghats project (which covered only one to three districts) meant that in everybody’s mind—villagers, NGOs and officials—JFPM implementation hinged on availability of funds. In the project area also, JFPM implementation was plagued by a number of problems related to both the framework provided and the approach of KFD. First, JFPM being limited only to the so called “degraded” areas (i.e., lands with less than 25% canopy cover) meant that

denser forested areas being used by the community were not brought under management. Second, the so-called degraded areas were very often the grazing lands of the village. Given the focus of the project on plantations (because that is what much of the funding was for), JFPM meant the planting up of these lands, causing hardship to poorer communities that had no other source of fodder. Third, the continued auctioning of valuable NTFPs to

Tokenism in JFPM activity: While the degraded RF on the hillocks of Kanivehalli village remains unprotected...



outside contractors meant that there was no shift in property rights on NTFPs and hence the income villagers derived from NTFP collection remained the same, and the ecological sustainability of NTFP extraction practices was not generally enhanced. Fourth, the process of VFC formation, micro-plan creation and VFC functioning was rather top-down and mechanical, and the VFCs lacked autonomy in functioning. Fifth, inadequate attention to community mobilisation and awareness

...the VFC is given a token 20 ha tamarind plantation raised on revenue land near the Forest IB, away from the main settlement.

(Photo: A K Kiran Kumar)

building meant that VFCs so formed could not generally free themselves from the inherent economic, caste and gender inequalities within villages.

Nevertheless, the project did result in some important, even if largely intangible, benefits. The sincere efforts of several officers, with help from NGOs and pressure from DfID, resulted in greatly increased interaction between KFD and local communities, reducing fear and hostility towards the department. It also seemed that there was increasing acceptance of the philosophy of people's participation in forest management amongst KFD staff at all levels. Simultaneously, KFD officials appeared to have overcome their initial mistrust of NGOs and began to collaborate with them. KFD even collaborated with FEVORD-K, the federation of rural development NGOs, to publish "Guidelines for VFC Formation" (KFD *et al.*, 1996)! In tangible terms, certain innovative efforts by some KFD officials led to formation of hamlet-level VFCs or NTFP-collector groups that began protecting dense forest areas in certain pockets. Similarly, through efforts of some NGOs, the marginalized communities had managed to gain a voice in the functioning of a few VFCs. An independent assessment of the project in 1997 concluded that although several issues needed to be addressed, "a very good beginning had been made".

Two steps backward: JFPM in the Eastern Plains

In 1997, KFD initiated a much more ambitious Eastern Plains Forestry and Environment Project (EPFEP) covering 138 talukas spread over 23 districts of the state - constituting virtually the entire "non-Western Ghats" region. Agro-climatically speaking, this area includes the transition zone just east of the Western Ghats, the drier southern *maidan* zone around Bangalore and Kolar districts, and the almost semi-arid northern *maidan* zone (Gulbarga, Bijapur, Raichur, etc.). The stated objectives of the project included "the re-orientation of approach from traditional forest management practices". In terms of project implementation,

KFD swore complete allegiance to the JFPM process, as seen from the quote given at the beginning of this article. But our recently completed assessment of the JFPM process in the northern and southern maidan regions presents a very different picture.

Overall, the manner of implementation of JFPM in the eastern plains region indicates that KFD has not followed the basic concepts of *joint* planning and *joint* management. In a very large number of cases, plantations have been made first and VFCs afterwards, rendering the very notion of joint planning meaningless¹. Indeed, in many villages of the northern maidan region, although plantations have been created, VFCs may never get set up². Even where VFC formation has preceded plantation activity, the activity has generally not come out of any serious process of participatory planning. Villagers say they are told that by setting up a VFC, they can get a plantation done in their village and thereby get a share in the final harvest. They are not aware of the overall purpose of JFPM to protect and regenerate their entire common lands. They are not even aware of the contents of the management plan or the MoU.

Similarly, the notion of "joint management" is generally watered down to a situation where the actual job of protecting the plantation is done by the KFD-appointed watchman, and the villagers' role is a passive one - of letting the plantation grow unhindered³. This they are willing to do because the choice they are given is between letting their common lands remain in the current degraded state and having (usually a small) portion of the common lands planted up with the promise of a share in the final harvest. Cases of villagers being actively involved in patrolling the forest boundary against outsiders and regulating the use by insiders are rare. In such cases, KFD often failed to support VFC members when they attempted to stop clandestine extraction by outsiders. Several grassroots NGOs who have been involved in such efforts complain that KFD frontline staff seemed more interested in protecting the interests of the marauders than of the VFC.

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In terms of sustainable resource use, it is found that in most villages, the major portion of the common lands remain uncovered by JFPM, leaving them open to continued degradation. The median JFPM area (even by KFD's rather faulty dataset) was found to be only 30 ha!⁴ And in terms of orienting forestry towards meeting the needs of the marginalised, the results are actually negative. Cases of the poor communities being left out of the decision-making process and suffering the consequences of the closure of their commons are the norm; the plantations generate long-run cash benefits which do not solve the subsistence problems of the poor.

An examination of the process of JFPM implementation again shows a retrogression from whatever had been learnt in the Western Ghats project. The whole process of awareness building and community mobilisation for collective protection of the forest has been given short shrift. Typically, forest staff meet a few villagers (usually belonging to the elite class) and set up a VFC by jotting down names and "electing" someone as President on the spot! The President often pays the nominal membership amount on behalf of the members. Half-day PRAs are held, and management plans are drawn up without consulting the villagers. The VFC meetings, if held at all, simply go through the motions since they have really no major decisions to take—planting decisions have already been taken or plantations have already come up, and protection is to be done by KFD! Or they discuss irrelevant matters such as whether to spend the funds for "entry-point activities" on a bus-stop or improving the local temple. In some places, VFCs have languished without any MoU for two years, while in others, the entire process of VFC formation, PRA, management plan preparation and signing of MoU has been completed in a matter of a month or two. Indeed, the number of VFCs created shows a dramatic increase during the last 6 months prior to project closure in March 2002. Clearly, the process is target-driven, not focused on quality.

This perfunctory form of JFPM is particularly prevalent in the northern maidan region. Here, local NGOs have been kept completely out of the JFPM process, and external NGOs are contracted to carry out specific activities such as PRAs, micro-planning and MoU signing. The whole idea that locally-rooted NGOs can be long-term partners in the process of building trust and local capacity for JFPM has been given the go-by.

In the southern maidan region, where the legacy of Social Forestry was particularly substantial in terms of old (mature) eucalyptus plantations, one also finds a more manipulative form of JFPM. Here, KFD has used the cash incentive of the returns from the felling of these plantations to "mobilise" local communities for JFPM. One finds greater acceptance of JFPM, but strictly as a means of augmenting incomes, not as a means of solving subsistence problems. Support for this approach is drawn from the village elite, who, in any case, are not dependent on the commons for their livelihoods. In one village (Thondala in Kolar taluka), the VFC President (who, not surprisingly, is the largest landowner in the village) is very enthusiastically protecting the vast area of old eucalyptus plantations in the village, while about 20 landless households that used to depend on cutting and selling fuelwood from these plantations have had to leave the village! Many other households in the village too are greatly agitated as they have had to confine their cattle grazing to a

Shri.B.M.Ramappa, President of Thondal VFC in Kolar taluka, who is almost single-handedly protecting the so called JFPM area, which is mainly a eucalyptus plantation. (Photo: A K

Kiran Kumar)



small area on the hilltop and share it with several neighbouring villages. They are not allowed to cut any fuelwood in the forest/plantation. Thus, JFPM becomes a tool for completely shutting out subsistence use of the forest (rather than *regulating* it) and growing cash crops such as eucalyptus or acacia auriculiformis. It should be noted that, under the current JFPM structure, the profits from the sale of all produce go to all VFC members regardless of who has contributed how much for protection or who has suffered the greatest loss from the change in the use of common lands.

In other words, local communities are being co-opted to serve KFD's agenda of growing commercial tree crops on forest and other common lands. That this agenda itself violates the National Forest Policy of 1988 does not seem to be a concern for KFD or the state government. On the contrary, the CCF-Social Forestry asks; "What is wrong if we plant commercially valuable species? How do we otherwise return the JBIC loan with 12% interest?" The question as to whether the state should have taken a loan in the first place to carry out this activity is, of course, not open to discussion - the grant and the loan are what have kept KFD afloat and indeed resource-rich. Thus, if the Western Ghats project represented a first step (however tentative) towards participatory forest management, the Eastern Plains project seems to represent two steps backward—local communities are either sidelined or the programme is manipulated to get their "cooperation"⁵ in furthering commercial forestry.

Some genuine constraints, but ...

One could argue that there are significant constraints in implementing genuinely participatory forest management in Karnataka that are beyond the implementing agency's control. These arise, on the one hand, from the limited framework provided for it and, on the other, from the prevailing socio-ecological conditions in certain areas. No doubt, the official framework for JFPM has several lacunae

(see Lélé, 1995; Saxena *et al.*, 1997; Lélé, 2001). First, it excludes denser forests from management by virtue of the 25% canopy cover restriction. Second, it gives limited and distorted incentives for participation. On the one hand, commercially valuable non-timber forest products (NTFPs) continue to be publicly auctioned and the royalty from this auction has to be shared with the KFD.⁶ On the other, timber/softwood production is given higher priority in silvicultural prescriptions than fuel wood, fodder or NTFPs. Third, the framework fails to recognise existing systems of forest rights that often conflict with the new system of village-level control proposed under JFPM. Fourth, and perhaps most important, it does not provide adequate autonomy to the village institution (e.g., the local forester is the ex-officio secretary of the VFC) nor does it ensure accountability of the forest department in discharging its role. Finally, the framework does not make it mandatory for KFD to respond to requests for VFC formation within a fixed timeframe, and there is no way villagers can force KFD to accede to their request (because the GO is not justiciable).⁷

Nevertheless, these limitations could not have been a major constraint for proper JFPM implementation *by KFD* in the eastern plains region. The canopy-cover restriction is not a problem in this region, where the forest vegetation is primarily scrub-thorn type having sparse canopy cover and most forests have suffered significant degradation. Historically prevailing individual forest privileges pose a serious obstacle to community management in the Western Ghats region (Srinidhi and Lélé, 2001), but such privileges do not exist in the eastern plains. In fact, some parts of the eastern plains region that were under the erstwhile Madras Province have a history of *Forest Panchayats* that were institutions of community management. And the problem of non-accountability of the forest department or lack of autonomy to the village is something that the department itself could easily address in its operations. Thus, even though far from perfect, the framework offers enough scope for the

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department to reach out and involve those communities that are interested in regenerating and managing their common lands. But, as shown above, this scope is not being utilised.

The socio-ecological conditions prevailing in the eastern plains region do pose significant challenges to widespread and rapid implementation of participatory forest management. This is particularly true of the northern maidan portion covering the semi-arid districts of Bidar, Gulbarga, Bijapur, Raichur and Bellary. Ecologically, the maidan regions are covered largely with scrub thorn forests. These are likely to regenerate more slowly and be less rich in timber or NTFPs than the moist forests of the Western Ghats and the dry deciduous teak- or sal-dominated forests of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. The distribution of forests and other common lands also is very scattered—they occur in only small pockets of the northern maidan, and certain talukas of the southern maidan. Socially speaking, again unlike the central Indian forest belt, forest-dependent tribal communities are present only in small numbers. Economically, dependence on common lands is not uniform or constant. For instance, households in a canal-irrigated village are much less dependent upon their common lands than households in a village without any such irrigation (Lélé *et al.*, 2003). Canal and borewell irrigation technologies lead to a dramatic change in cropping patterns, generally increase availability of agricultural wastes and hence of fuel or fodder, and also increase in employment in agriculture. Under these circumstances, households in such villages are less likely to be interested in putting too much effort into regenerating their common lands.

But again, these obstacles do not prevent implementation of JFPM entirely. What they call for is better strategising on the part of the implementing agency. Clearly, villages or clusters of villages that contain large areas of common lands that are less developed agriculturally and contain higher fractions of tribal or other poor communities need to be identified and chosen

as the initial sites of JFPM implementation. In addition, the services of committed grassroots voluntary organisations could be used for identifying villages that would be conducive to JFPM. Unfortunately, this has not happened.

The crux of the problem

The root of the problem seems to lie in the official attitude towards JFPM, which is either one of apathy or a mercenary one. The problem starts right from the top: the present Forest Minister of Karnataka believes that people are not to be trusted and so JFPM has to proceed very cautiously. He also seems to treat farm forestry and JFPM synonymously. Most of the top officials of KFD are similarly sceptical about the need for and feasibility of JFPM. One of the senior-most officials said “JFPM is not a priority for us... Our task is to conserve, plant and protect the forest and to catch the offenders. If we get some time to spare, we will carry out JFPM”. Others expressed concern that “if we (KFD) go through the JFPM process, we will never be able to achieve the physical targets of the project”. Or “how does it matter if plantations come first and VFCs afterwards?” Clearly, JFPM is not seen as a “core process” for project implementation, but as a parallel activity. VFCs can be organised after the plantations have been created because the role of the local community is seen as only co-operating in protection of plantations, not in determining the overall strategy for common land regeneration and use, including whether and when to plant and what to plant.

That this position completely contradicts the position taken by KFD in the Eastern Plains project proposal (see the beginning of this article) does not seem to be a concern. Apparently, JBIC is much less concerned about the gap between proposal and practice than DfID was. This may, in turn, be partly related to the fact that the former sanctioned a loan whereas the latter gave a grant. And with an emaciated or co-opted NGO sector on the one hand and politicians who are enthralled with the idea of taking the state into the 21st century on the back of the IT boom and liberalisation policies

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on the other, there is no pressure on the bureaucracy to stick to the grand promises made in the JFPM GO or official guidelines or project documents, let alone to innovate more appropriate models.

Way ahead: Dual challenge

It seems like the wheel has turned a full circle. The period of conflict and polarisation over Social Forestry was followed by the emergence of the concept of joint management in the early 1990s. As the Western Ghats project proceeded, JFPM seemed to have slowly gained acceptance within the bureaucracy. But this has proven to be a false dawn—conventional, top-down, industrially-oriented forestry is very deeply entrenched. Any let up of pressure from the NGO sector and the funding agency means that the bureaucracy reverts to this mode of thinking and operation. In fact, forest officials have now also learned how to use the jargon and tactics of JFPM to meet their conventional objectives. In spite of all the claims about the number of VFCs and the area protected, nothing much has really changed on the ground. In fact, a more retrogressive form of participation is taking root in some areas.

What could be the way forward? A three-pronged approach seems necessary. First, one needs to recognize the fundamental shortcomings of the concepts of joint management in general and JFPM in particular. Karnataka, with its highly differentiated and largely non-tribal rural society, high variability in forest dependence both within and across villages, emergence of horticultural crops such as coffee as much more lucrative land-uses and pre-existing systems of forest rights in the high forest areas, pose a serious challenge to simplistic notions of community-managed forestry based on the core assumptions of forest dependence and of the existence of open-access or community-controlled rights regimes. A more sophisticated concept of participatory forest management, which envisages the involvement of all stakeholders—local and regional—in a transparent process of decision-making will have to be articulated. Innovative approaches to balance livelihood and income needs with

subsistence and environmental needs will have to be developed.

Second, rather than attempt a wholesale shift to participatory management throughout the state at once, a start could be made in *clusters of villages or areas* with favourable characteristics: where forest dependence is high, communities are relatively homogeneous, and older systems of individual rights do not come in the way. KFD is likely to be more willing to give truly participatory management a serious try in such areas, and the learning from these areas would help subsequent implementation elsewhere.

But none of this can happen through debate in academic or policy circles alone. Also needed is strong support from the grassroots—something that was missing in the first round when (in hindsight) JFPM was adopted largely at the behest of the funding agency. Such support can only be generated by the coming together of various constituencies: rural development organisations, panchayats, farmers, tribals, women's groups and conservationists. A social movement that combines concerns for decentralised governance, progressive reforms in resource ownership and ecological sustainability will be required to generate the political pressure for a major policy shift in favour of participatory forest management.

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Notes

¹ For instance, out of 47 villages in Kolar forest division for which the plantation register data could be matched with the VFC formation data, in 37 villages the date of the MoU (and often date of VFC registration also) is later than the date of plantation. The cases where the VFCs were given existing old plantations are excluded. This problem was also pointed out for at least 70 villages in the Western Ghats project (CAG, 2000, para 3.2.8.7).

² In Gulbarga territorial forestry division, of the 93 villages where any plantation activities have been carried out under the EPFEP, only 37 villages had VFCs as of March 2002. The situation in Gulbarga Social Forestry division

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is even worse: only VFCs had been formed in only 6 out of 42 villages with plantations.

³ Out of 54 villages sampled in our study, in 26 villages there was no JFPM activity whatsoever, and in another 24 villages the involvement was in this passive form.

⁴ This is from a macro-level dataset of 1036 villages provided by KFD, from which villages showing 0 JFPM activity area have been excluded, leaving a sample of 315. In half of these villages, the JFPM area was less than 50% of the total common land area. The picture from field visits was worse: only 6 of 28 villages had a JFPM activity area (on paper) of more than 50% of their common lands, and 3 of these again turned out to be cases of misreporting.

⁵ One does not underestimate the problem of determining what constitutes a "truly" open-ended consultative process, nor do one preclude the possibility that at the end of any such process, the entire village community might still favour commercial forestry over other silvicultural models. But the study did not find any evidence of any serious and systematic attempt by the KFD to generate any such process of consultation.

⁶ The revised June 2002 GO clarifies that 90% of total sale proceeds of NTFPs shall go to the VFC. It remains to be seen how and when this provision gets implemented.

⁷ See JAV (2002) for a statement of the core concept of truly participatory forest management.

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