From managers to the marginalized: 
how can outsiders help in addressing equity concerns 

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Well before the government sponsored JFM Program in India began, thousands of villages throughout the country had developed vibrant institutions to manage their local forest resources. What happens when one of these local forest management groups has to conform to the state sponsored program to gain recognition? What are the distortions that arise as a result? How do inequities creep into local arrangements and how can these be resolved? What is the role of the forest department in ensuring equity and resolving village conflicts? This article looks at the evolution of one community forest management group and how the original organizers of forest protection have been marginalized over the years.

Orissa has one of the largest tribal populations in India and a correspondingly rich forest area that has been managed and protected by these tribal and other rural communities for generations/years. According to one estimate, more than 8,000 villages (of the approx. 12,000 villages close to forests, out of a total of 51,000 villages in Orissa) have developed their own rules and regulations to manage the surrounding forest (RCDC, pers. comm, 2000). Many of these Community Forestry Management (CFM) groups are very old (some began in the 1940s), and most have been functional for at least two decades, long before the State Joint Forest Management (JFM) Program began in 1988.

The state response to these CFM systems was to ignore their existence and try to have them conform to the national JFM Program. Common problems within the JFM framework include: inequitable power sharing, inflexible and uniformed rules, mismatch between local priorities and FD objectives, inability to address local livelihoods issues and needs of the marginalized forest dependent sections. For CFM groups, the problems are exacerbated since JFM is imposed upon these vibrant, local institutions. CFM groups have protested against the impositions they feel are unfair within the JFM program including:

- The provision of official members on the JFM committees undermining the local leadership
- Inflexibility of foresters to recognize the village as the primary managers and limits to the area that can be allocated to a JFM committee.
- Strong resentment over the benefit sharing formula. Fifty percent of revenue from the villagers’ labor, not only from the Reserved Forests but also from Khesra Forests (Village Forests) has to be given to the Forest Department (FD).
- JFM microplans focus primarily on managing forestland for timber which ignores the needs of interim products such as NTFPs which are a major source of livelihood for most villagers.

CFM groups show remarkable ingenuity in managing their forests, and the varied institutional arrangements, rules and penalty systems that they have evolved. CFM offers a viable alternative to state forest management. All CFM arrangements are by no means equitable and there are problems of the elite-dominance and marginalization of the weaker sections in the management process.

This case highlights the role played by the FD in supporting community-based forest management, but also raises serious concerns with regards to power balance and equity in resource sharing and management at the community level, and role of the FD as an outside intermediary. This case traces this shift in the locus of power, and looks at the role of FD in addressing equity issues.

Suruguda Village

Suruguda is a large heterogeneous village in tribal dominated Sundergarh District, Orissa. The village started forest protection in 1985. Since then it has received several awards and also considerable attention from the Forest Department. The initiation of forest protection was begun by the Harilans2. Ironically, despite being the initiators, the Harijans are increasingly becoming a marginal power in forest management decisions. The Agharias3, the dominate caste in the village, have been consolidating their position over forest management decision-making. The Forest Department has also been contributing to the shift in decision-making power by
aligning themselves with the Agharias and helping them to consolidate their position of power.

Suruguda is located 23 kms away from the district headquarters Sundargarh and 8 kms from Lephripada, the block headquarters. The Iccha river passes through the Alage with four of the ten hamlets of the village being on the other bank. Due to this segregation, even though these four hamlets are part of the Suruguda revenue village, they have a separate socio-cultural identity. These four hamlets have little ties with the main village and have not been involved in forest protection.

Suruguda has 13 different caste groups and the Agharia are the dominant caste-group in the village as they are the original settlers and the village Gauntia. During the pre-independence period, the village was directly under the king's administration. At the village level, the Gauntia with help of “Panch Bhalaloks” (Council of elder members from Agharia, Bhuiyan and Tel caste) was responsible for managing village affairs.

After independence, the institution of Gauntia weakened with the abolition of intermediaries. This was replaced by various community level institutions. However, the role of the Agharia has not diminished, and they continue to play a dominant role in these institutions. Various village affairs and even occasional conflicts are discussed and resolved in village meetings, which are attended by only men in the village. Women are not involved in any of the community institutions.

The main livelihood source is agriculture and agricultural labor. Apart from this, some households are involved in bamboo basket making, wood carpentry and construction. A few households are involved in leaf plate and cup making as a supplementary economic activities.

**Forest resources of the village**

The Bindha Reserve Forest (RF) and Bhalutungri Khesra Forest are close by the village. At present, Suruguda village protects 80 ha of the Reserve Forest and 40 ha of Khesra Forest. The forests is a mixed Sal forest. People depend on forests for a variety of products and ecological services. Farmers with relatively larger landholdings depend more on the ecological services of the forest, especially increased water availability and improvement of soil fertility in the agricultural fields at the foot-hills, while the economically poor depend on gathering NTFPs for sale and consumption.

The forest was in full vigor in the 1950s, but became progressively degraded with subsequent coupe feelings for timber by the State. The last leasing for timber felling was done in early 1970s. The forest further degenerated between 1975-85. Since 1985, the forest has gradually regenerated under community care. At present the forest stand is quite dense but with reduced concentration of some of the trees. Bamboo was totally depleted, but has now reappeared.

**Initiation of Forest Protection**

The protection campaign began in 1985, prior to the official JFM program in Orissa and was initiated by the members of the Harijan community. Gradually, other groups and villages participated.

The protection effort initially started as a retaliatory step by the Harijans because they were denied rice at the ration shop in Jhariapalli. After this, the harijans called a village meeting in which a few hamlets of Suruguda participated. At this meeting it was decided to start "protecting" the nearby forests and deny access to the Jhariapalli people. Initially, the Harijan approached the local ward member (representative in the Panchayat or local government) for guidance and appointed him as the president of the Forest Protection Committee (FPC). The support of the then Sarpanch (elected head of Panchayat) was also sought. An application was sent to the Divisional Forest Officer seeking his approval to protect the RF. Soon after, the DFO gave his consent verbally and this encouraged villagers.

Though the incident with Jhariapalli provided the immediate trigger, there were other long-standing concerns that influenced the decision to protect the forest. These included: degradation of forest area, scarcity of forest products and difficulties faced in finding fodder and other essential items due to the state of the forest.

During initial protection period, people faced several problems, such as no alternative source of fuelwood. During that period the villagers were mostly dependent on leaves and Bhusee chullah (a locally developed stove wherein paddy husk is used as a fuel). For a few years they depended on the Amari (Ipomea sp.) branches from the riverbeds for cooking fuel. A few families developed the "Gobar gas" (bio-gas) system but
could not sustain them because they did not have required number of cattle.

Three months after the Harijans started protecting forests, two Agharia people were caught cutting poles from the protected patch and the offenders were penalized. After this incident the Agharias realized that they were being excluded from a potentially significant activity and resource. They then decided to join the FPC. A village meeting was called to discuss collective protection. One member from each household (all males) were present at the meeting. At this meeting, a seven-member committee was formed. Representation from all the hamlets was ensured in the committee. Since the Harijans and Bhuiyans were pioneers in the protection process two members were invited from each of these communities.

The Forest Department supported the efforts of the villagers by assisting them to form a Village Forest Protection Committee (VFPC) as per the Government resolution of 1988. After the JFM resolution of 1993, the FD once again assisted them to form a Vana Samrakshan Samiti (VSS) in 1994 to allow them to enter into the JFM Program.

**Dynamic evolution of the Forest Management Group**

The forest management group has evolved dynamically. Starting from the Harijan hamlet, the entire village got involved. Initially, Bhugrapada, the four hamlets on the other side of the river, was also involved. But spatial distance and low dependence on the forests, posed constraints to their continued association in this CFM system. Subsequently, Bhugrapada opted out of the CFM arrangement and the milupada became involved. Milupada is a tribal hamlet of an adjoining village which is located near by the forests, and the Milupada villagers also depend on these forests. It was hence considered strategic for them to be involved in the management arrangements.

Another issue involved conflicts with another neighboring village, Chettenpalli. Cordoning off a large section of the forest by Suruguda affected the Chettenpalli village, which was left with no forest for them to manage or use. The Chettenpalli began protecting a portion from the same patch. Perceiving future conflicts, Suruguda took steps for resolving the problem. They sought the FD's help in "reallocation" of areas and in demarcating the boundaries between the two villages. Chettenpalli village was given 56 ha (1 ha = 2.5 Acre) from the patch being protected by Suruguda and Suruguda retained 200 ha.

**Structure of the FPC**

The first FPC was comprised of 7 executive body members and 120 general body members. The General Body (GB) appoints executive body members. Presently, the number of members of Executive Committee (EC) has increased to 17. Members from all the hamlets are included in the EC. Residents of hamlets select their respective representatives. The important office bearers are the President and Secretary.

In the initial phase of protection, the EC met as frequently as once per week. Gradually, as the protection system stabilized, the frequency was decreased to one meeting per month. If required, additional emergency meetings can be convened. Meetings of the FPC (attended only by men) are generally held at night in the village meeting hall. It is mandatory for at least one person (male, head of the household) from every household to attend the GB. As per the 1993 JFM resolution, at least three women should be part of the EC, and at least one woman per household should be a member of the General Body. Despite, these norms, women seldom came to the meetings.

**Rules relating to Forest Management**

Protection started with "complete restriction on entering the forest." Initially, six persons patrolled the forest every day. Later, the number of Pallias (volunteers for patrolling) were reduced to four, and then two. Night patrolling was also done initially for a period of two years.

The GB decides on annual cleaning and thinning operations. These decisions are communicated to the DFO and the local Ranger. Under the joint supervision of FD staff and the Committee, members undertake cleaning operations. During these operations only the non-valuable species, dry and fallen branches, deceased tree branches and matured bamboo poles are harvested. No one is allowed to cut green trees. Different patches are cleaned on a rotational basis.

**Towards Disenfranchisement**
There has been a gradual but definite transformation in the institution from an informal to a formal institution. The FD assisted in the formation of VFPC in 1989, but it was only in 1994 that the committee received formal shape with the formation of the VSS. As the institution became more formal, the office bearers became more accountable to the external agency (the Forest Department) rather than internally to the General Body.

Initially, all sections in the village had an equal say in decision-making, but presently power is concentrated in the hands of the “upper-caste”. With the forest regenerating, the value of the resource and the perception of its value have gone up. As a result, positions in the FPC are viewed as positions of power, and there is struggle for these positions.

Earlier the benefit distribution from forests was equitable, but now there is increased appropriation of benefits by the elite. In the last cleaning operation, a few influential people grabbed the benefits. During a discussion in the village, the weaker sections, who depend more on forests, complained that their needs were not being met and they were not involved in decision making.

As far as the costs for forest protection is concerned, all the households contribute equally though not equitably. Each household contributes voluntary labor for patrolling irrespective of the family's financial condition and other constraints. We were told that a widow who lives in abject poverty still has to give money to her nephew to contribute for patrolling duties. Thus, even though the costs of protection are shared equally, the burden is unusually high on the poor.

While the committee has not put any restriction on NTFP gatherers, the recent trends indicate timber and wood benefits are being usurped by the wealthy. The last cleaning operation, distribution was done in an arbitrary fashion with few people reaping the benefits. The cleaning was done for only four days and after this it was abruptly stopped. As a result, only a few people (primarily the Agharias) were able to collect the cleaning material. This has been a major reason of recent tension in the village.

Requests for resources from the forests are being granted arbitrarily and in a non-transparent manner. For example, the committee turned down a request from a Harijan for wood to repair his house. On the other hand, an Agharia, who is presently the Secretary of the VSS, was easily able to procure wood for setting up an oil mill. These types of incidents are causing tension, and if the brewing resentment amongst the more forest dependent sections is ignored it could escalate and lead to break down of the CFM system.

**Role of the Forest Department**

The FD has been very supportive from the beginning. When some Agharia men were caught felling trees in the initial stage of forest protection, the FD supported the Harijan to penalize the offenders. Again in 1989, the FD helped to form the Village Forest Protection Committee. Even now the villagers are encouraged by the support they get from the present Range Officer.

While the Forest Department's role has been crucial in strengthening the CFM system, it is interesting to note that the FD has also supported the Agharias in consolidating their power. During a group discussion, we were told of a couple of incidences which corroborates this. For example, the village committee fined a Harijan for cutting some trees, and he paid half the penalty amount and promised to give the balance after some time. After this, he was additionally fined by the forester. The committee did not object to this. Thus, this man was doubly fined for the same offence. Alternatively, in several cases, Agharias involved in pilferage were let off easily. Such incidents are becoming common. In Suruguda, the FD prepared a micro-plan for management of forests with input coming only from the Agharias, and most villagers are not even aware of such a micro-plan.

At a time when tensions are surfacing due to perceived inequities in resource sharing, the FD has an important role to play in facilitating resolution of these conflicts, understanding the sources of these conflicts and working on more equitable power-sharing and resource sharing within the village. However, the FD staff have not displayed sensitivity to the needs of forest dependent sections and the changing power dynamics in the village.

In any community-based resource management arrangement, age-old hierarchies, power relations and socialization process make equitable resource sharing a difficult proposition. The higher castes, elite and influential, and men tend to dominate decisions on resource management. In such a context, many of us have placed hopes with external agencies as agents that could usher in greater sensitivity for the needs of weaker and voiceless sections. Government policies have also tried to address power imbalances and assist the poor to increase their relative power within the community. Provisions such as minimum representation in the Forest Management Committees of women and other politically weaker sections are expected to help the process. This case however raises serious concerns about the ability as well as inclination of the FD to play a role in addressing equity issues.
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Notes

1 This case-study is part of the research project taken up in collaboration with CIFOR on "Impacts of Devolution Policies: Creating Space for Local Forest Management", funded by IFAD

2 The terminology was formulated by Mahatma Gandhi to refer to the communities treated as untouchables as "children of God". They are part of the schedule caste goups.

3 The Agharias claim to originally belong to Kshetriya (Warrior) caste. But later on they adopted agriculture as their profession and were regarded as a cultivating caste. They are called Ashrias as they came to Orissa from the Agra region of Uttar Pradesh

4 Gauntia (Village headman) was an intermediary at the village level between the king and the people. His responsibility was to collect revenue on behalf of the king. In lieu of this service he was allowed to enjoy certain benefits like rent-free land, free labor, etc.

5 In this context Bhuiyan caste are non tribals and are major land holders. Locally the term bhu refers to land. Locally, "Tel" is the term used for "oil" and the Teli caste are the traditional makers of oil