Participatory Forest Management Networks of Odisha
- Time for more recognition

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Abstract

Community-based forest networks of India and Nepal have been suffering from serious neglect and left at disadvantage due to lack of legal recognition. A brief review of literature on community-based forest networks found that they lack certain attributes that are necessary to be considered as equal partners in the activities aimed at forest conservation and livelihood improvement. In this review a brief on the informal community-based forest networks of Odisha and their status of recognition through Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 is presented. It was found that there are many studies conducted on Joint forest Management, community-based forest management, and recently on the impacts of FRA 2006, in Odisha. However, it was found that there has been very little or no research studies conducted on the impacts of FRA 2006 on community-based forest management networks of Odisha. It is thought that more research studies should be conducted on how FRA 2006 could strengthen community-based forest management networks of Odisha.

Keywords: Community-based forest networks, Odisha Jungle Mancha (OJM),

Introduction

The increasing importance of local community participation in the protection and management of forests among the scholars, environmentalists, funding organizations, and policy makers, is opening new doors to the concept of decentralization of natural resource governance especially in the developing countries like India. In this changing scenario the crucial role of the informal local community networks associated with natural resource governance had been recognized by all the stakeholders mentioned earlier. This is because networks in general provide an important platform for different actors to come together to exchange their ideas, share knowledge and information. Networks act as valuable spaces to enable building cohesion among different actors striving to achieve a common goal. This will in turn help them to work together more effectively.

Buck *et al* (2001) defines networks as platforms or avenues of social learning or collaborative learning, which is a framework for public policy. Britt, (2002) defines that networks represent "communities of ideas" where people interact on the basis of both common and conflicting interests. Bodin *et al* (2005) refers to the argument of Tompkins and Adger (2004) that social networks between stakeholders and actors can build community resilience and increase the adaptive capacity for environmental change. Community-based networks can play different roles, including the provision of a platform for discussion, as a connection between the grassroots and the state, and can empower and mobilize local communities.

Echoing the above definitions are findings of the study conducted by the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), on the Participatory Forest Management (PFM) networks of three Indian states. In this report Borgoyary (2006) mentions that community-based forest networks have played an important role in influencing the policy change process. According to the above report, networks provided a platform for the policy makers, field practitioners, and local communities, were able to come together to share and exchange information. The author mentions that this platform therefore managed to reduce the gap between 'evidence' and policy. Furthermore, it was said that the process of consultations between policy makers and other stakeholders, facilitated by these networks, has over time helped to some extent in reducing the earlier conflicts between them, enabling the policy making process to be more transparent and participatory (Borgoyary, 2006).

Furthermore, Borgoyary, (2006), mentions that PFM networks in India are emerging as 'connectors' with an important responsibility of connecting evidence based field realities to policy making in the area of forest management in India. As connectors, they have contributed to conducting research and providing useful and timely information to policy makers, lobbying and advocacy. The most important roles of these PFM networks by far have been that of 'connectors'. PFM networks in India are often credited to have provided a platform that brides the gap between evidence and policy making. (Ibid, 2006).

In Nepal, the neighbouring country of India, the networks of community-based forest management groups have been effective in mobilizing community participation through their

member groups. The community-based forest network of Nepal integrates the issues of social equity and poverty reduction in its work. The network encourages the participation of women and marginalized groups and works closely with the member community forest user groups to help them design and deliver programs for the poor (Khanal, 2007). Both the PFM networks of India and the community-based forest network of Nepal are found to provide the much needed platform for the local forest user groups to come together to exchange the ideas and share information and build cohesion among them to work collectively to achieve a common goal. Furthermore, these networks have acted as the sanctuaries to nurture the leadership qualities among the women and the marginalized segments of the society, thereby abridging the gender and equity gaps and promoting social and gender equity.

Although the role of community-based forest networks of India and Nepal sounds very interesting and impressive, in reality they have been suffering from serious neglect and are left at a disadvantage due to lack of legal recognition. In this brief review it was found that these community-based forest networks lack certain attributes prescribed by Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997), who argued that corporation managers respond to stakeholders who have three primary attributes: power, legitimacy, and urgency. In this brief, these three primary attributes of power, legitimacy, and urgency will be applied to community-based networks. Although the Forest Rights Act 2006 (FRA) of India provides an opportunity for these informal networks to emerge as legitimate partners in the forest conservation activities, however, it may take a little longer to achieve those prospects due to the difficulty of acquiring CFR rights. This review presents a brief on the informal community-based forest networks of Odisha, such as Odisha Jungle Mancha (OJM), and their status of recognition through FRA 2006.

**Community-based Forest Management Networks of Odisha**
According to Borgoyary, (2006), networks do evolve and function in situations where there are compelling demands or incentives for the dominant stakeholders. PFM Networks of Odisha at the grassroots level have evolved out of the compelling demand for access to forest resources by the resource dependent poor local communities. Ironically, they belong to the marginalized and derived segments of the society in terms of political power. However, the district level and the state level PFM networks such as the OJM were established out of the efforts of Civil Society

Organizations that have been actively promoting community-based forest management in Odisha. In order to study the evolution and functioning of the networks of the resource dependent communities, the case of community-based forest management (CBFM) of Odisha provides the best opportunity to observe the benefits derived from collaborative working and networking. Odisha offers a unique example of traditional forest management practice where self initiated forest protection groups have been protecting the forests for generations without receiving any support from the State Forest Department (Borgoyary, 2006). Many villages, especially of Western Odisha, voluntarily initiated forest protection during the 1960s, but the 1970s – 80s saw a huge trend - which, by now, had taken on the proportions of a veritable movement, spreading to other regions of Central Odisha (Pattanaik, 2002). However, as per the JBICI Discussion Paper (2006), Community-based Forest Management (CBFM) existed in Odisha as early as the 1940s. As per the estimates of NGOs and federations of forest protecting communities, there are no less than 8,000 to 12,000 village groups protecting some two million hectares of forest in the state now (Sarin 1994; Sarin 1995; Poffenberger 1995; Sarin 1996; Vasundhara 1996; Khare 1998; Pattanaik 2002; Sarap and Sarangi 2009).

The Participatory Forest Management Networks of Odisha, from here on referred to as Odisha Jungle Manch (OJM), is a network of community based forest protection groups formed into a federation on the self-initiative of communities themselves (Sarin *et al*. 2003, Borgoyary, 2006). According to Borgoyary, (2006) the concept of Participatory Forest Management Networks in Odisha evolved for the first time in 1982, when a group of 22 community-based forest management villages situated around Binjhgiri and Malati hillock in the Mayurbhanj district came together and formed a single people's organization, the 'Brukshya O Jeevara Bandu Parishad (BOJBP), to protect the forest and rehabilitate the hillocks.. In 1991, a district level forum emerged with the objective of creating a network platform for the villages involved in community-based forest management to meet and share their experience (idbi 2006). By 1995, the concept of district level forums spread to the other districts of Odisha and with the timely support from the donor agency Oxfam, the movement picked up momentum. The establishment of district level forums eventually led to the creation of the constitution of the state level apex federation, named the Odisha Jungle Manch, in 1999. OJM is now the apex state level forum constituting NGOs, individuals and Community based organizations, facilitated and supported by

the state level NGOs, namely Regional Centre for Development Cooperation (RCDC) and Vasundhara (Borgoyary, 2006).

OJM has a five-tier structure, viz., village-level committee, cluster or block-level committees and an overall apex state level federation named Odisha Jungle Mancha (OJM). OJM has a varying number of villages in its ambit and its representatives are either the members of the village, cluster or block level committees, who are either registered or unregistered. (Sarin *et al.*, 2003). The village, cluster or block level committees have their own by-laws, rules and regulations which are location- and situation specific and retain their own identity. (Ibid, 2003). OJM convenes an annual meeting to elect its 30 member executive committee (EC) through the secret ballot. The EC of OJM has representatives of Women, and Schedule Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The EC of OJM convenes bi-monthly to oversee the functions of the federation (Raju 1998). The objectives of OJM are: (a) To spread the idea of community-based forest protection to newer villages, building unity and cooperation in cluster committees; (b) Inter and intra network conflict resolution; if unresolved at the local levels; (c) Liaison and lobbying with the government and critiquing the State policies for necessary changes; and (d) Information dissemination through publishing a regional newsletter named *"Thengapali"* in the regional language as a service to provide information and links with its constituency (Raju, 1998).
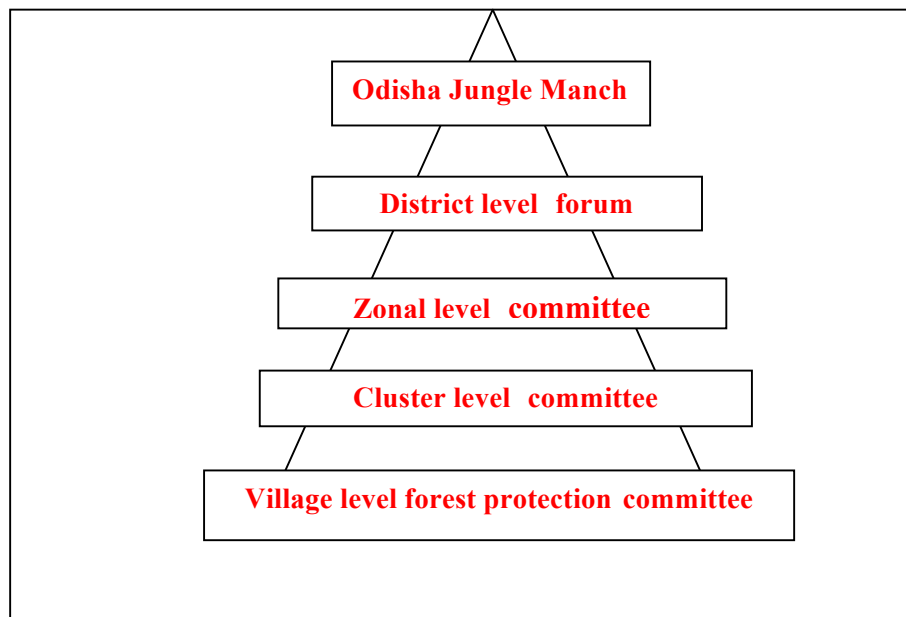
Another study conducted by Khanal (2007) on the Community-Level Natural Resource Management Networks in Nepal found that those networks have indeed been more effective with regard to key governance issues, i.e. *inclusive decision making*, *transparency,* and *accountability*. The study found that the networks of Nepal have also succeeded in influencing local environmental practices and supporting more sustainable livelihoods. They have been effective in building local capacity, enhancing service delivery, supporting informed policy development, and translating policy into action. Although the same achievements could be attributed to OJM in the context of Odisha, however, if we look closely into the institutional aspects of OJM then it becomes evident that OJM is operating alongside a much politically charged and institutionally powerful State-run bureaucratic system without any legal backup or State recognition. In this context OJM could be considered as an informal network without any legal or special political powers or privileges; hence, a perfect fit for the term "Institutional Entrepreneur networks", (Maguire *et al.* 2004; Garud *et al*., 2007). The term institutional entrepreneurship refers to the "activities of actors who have an interest in a particular institutional arrangement and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones" (Maguire *et al*, 2004: 657). Similarly, the members of OJM are actively participating in their day-to-day livelihood activities and bringing change in the process with their subtle yet prominent actions. However, all is not well, when it comes to the power dynamics that are in play within the realms of OJM. Even OJM is beset with its own problems and challenges of elite dominance, issues of gender and equity, lack of representation of the marginalized sections, etc to name a few.

Forest Rights Act 2006 and the need for legal recognition of Networks

Borgoyary (2006) in the report on Participatory Forest Management Networks of India published by the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), mentions that in "the case of Orissa,

there was increasing conflict between the Forest Department and the community-based forest protection committees/OJM. While the Forest Department was refusing to accept the traditional community-based forest protection communities, and wanted to implement the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme all over the state, the community organizations/OJM was refusing to accept the JFM programme. Currently, attempts are being made to reduce this conflict and the role of the Odisha Jungle Manch becomes vital at this point." (p. 18).

The Scheduled Tribes and other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, has been implemented in India since 2008. This Act provides for the legal recognition of rights of the tribes and other forest dwellers on forest land which has been under their cultivation as well as provides statutory space for community management of forest resources through community based forest rights (CFR). This Act, popularly known as FRA, believes that redistribution of forest tenure is indispensable to redress the historical dispossession of forest/land ownership and rights of the people by the State. The transfer of tenure to forestland and connected resources is the key strategy to overcome people's exclusion from forest management. Support for tenure transfer has long originated from grassroots organizations, civil society organizations, and researchers, whose demands have only recently been heeded by national governments. Nevertheless, the transfer of tenure to forest people has now gained significant momentum in many parts of the world, particularly in Eastern Europe, East Asia, Latin America, and most recently in India (Sunderlin *et al.,* 2008).

Linking the above scenario of the Participatory Forest Management network's lack of power of decision making to the social movement theory, it is interesting to refer to the article on Social Movement Perspective of Stakeholder Collective Action and Influence (King, 2008), where the author refers to the argument of Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997), who argued that managers respond to stakeholders who have three primary attributes: power, legitimacy, and urgency. Lacking those attributes, stakeholders have relatively little influence over the inner workings of a corporation. Although the above article dealt in the context of stakeholders in the corporations, if applied to the general context of the Participatory Forest Management network's lack of decision making power, the lack of power, legitimacy and urgency is apparent. This brief has illustrated that acquiring legal recognition for these community-based forest management groups and their

networks is necessary in order to encourage their involvement and strengthen their role in forest resource management and natural resource governance.

Conclusion

In reality however, the networks of these community-based forest groups, especially in India, are considered nothing more than a mid-wife in the forest governance and management. As mentioned by Borgoyary, (2006), community-based forest groups are emerging as 'connectors'. However, the designation 'connector' is not the same as 'decision makers', which can make a marked difference for these communities in managing the resources on which they depend for their subsistence and survival. Despite of their dependence on forests and the vast amount of indigenous knowledge accrued over generations on management of forest resources, these networks consisting of forest community groups have been kept at the periphery of forest governance without any role or power in the decision making process. This is because of the fact that these Participatory Forest Management networks represented by community-based forest protection groups don't have any legal recognition or legal ownership on the forest patches that they have been protecting for generations. Such lack of legal recognition has not only left the community-based forest communities at a disadvantage but also relegated the Participatory Forest Management networks to an "informal network" status without any decision making power in forest conservation and governance.

Borgoyary (2006) points out that in the last decade or so as the acceptance of 'community-based forestry' as an important strategy for implementation of forest policy has gained ground. In this scenario the participatory forest management networks were also gaining significance and attracting the attention of the policy makers, researchers, and in many cases, being actively promoted by the donors. Many studies have been conducted on the community-based forest management groups of Odisha, impacts of JFM on CFM, and recently on the impacts of FRA 2006. However, a brief literature review found that there has been very little or no research studies conducted on the impacts of Forest Rights Act 2006 on participatory forest management networks of Odisha. There has also been little research conducted on how Forest Rights Act 2006 could strengthen participatory forest management networks of Odisha to bring this issue into the mainstream forest governance discourse. Further studies should be conducted on the

links between Forest Rights Act 2006 and participatory forest management networks of Odisha in order to improve our understanding of the community-based forest management networks in the post Forest Rights Act 2006 scenario.

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