

## **Gender Justice in the Frame of Joint Forest Management in Indian Context: A Case – Study from Nayagram Block of West Midnapore, West Bengal**

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**ABSTRACT** Women in India were placed in oblivion right from the ancient times. The long episode of anguish and misery of the women met with optimism only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the whole of Bengal was bathed in the spirit of Renaissance, which of course helped the women- folk to come to limelight for the first time. After Independence, some space was made for the women folk in a constitutional way. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment made a revolutionary gateway open for women by reservation of 1/3 seats in the political platform. Though, in the urban areas women are slowly able to make their position firm both socially and economically, in the rural areas women are still living in a world of ignorance, superstition and obscurity. The forest- fringe people, who mainly formed the backbone of the rural community, thus naturally belonged to the backward category. The JFM regulations were formed in 1988 and one of the greatest strengths of the JFM model was the inclusion of women in the administrative set- up. But unfortunately, women were deprived of their rightful status and they still remained in their secluded den for a long time due to numerous hurdles. The present paper unfolds the problems and disdains of the women- folk in a rural set- up. At the same time, the paper uncovers an empirical study which tells the tale of gender upsurge in a JFM scenario through series of technological experiments, trainings and through courses of sensitization.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The position of women in India had been exposed to many vicissitudes of fortune from the very ancient times. Women had been the victims of multiple social evils and it was lack of education that hindered the progress of women in all spheres. Women could come out of their age-long subjugation and seclusion only after Independence. But the fate of rural women, particularly the forest- fringe women did not witness any major change as far as their administrative rights in the Joint Forest Management were concerned. The Joint Forest Management had been introduced both in the global and Indian scenario as a challenge against massive deforestation. The partners in the Joint Forest Management venture are the forest- fringe people, the Forest Department and the Government and Non Government Agencies. The women, who have a crucial role in forest affairs, are enlisted in JFM administrative regulations and they have been given a distinct right to place their opinions in the public forum. But unfortunately, women's role in this context also is being shaded by other circumstantial issues and the voices of women are still not vocal in the forest framework.

Provision for women's participation in JFM orders was laid down in late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Forest Policy of 1988 envisaged women's participation in the protection of forests. Since women play a major role in collection of food, fodder and fuel from the forests, their participation in forest affairs was felt necessary from both ends- the Forest Department and the community itself. The rules of the GOI Order, 1991, specified that at least 50 % women should be in every village management committee in the JFM programmes. In 1998, an Advisory Committee was constituted to promote the involvement of women in the forestry sector by the Ministry of Environment and Forests. It submitted a number of recommendations which would increase women's participation (GOI, 1999). Following these recommendations, it was decided that 50% of the members of the JFM General Body (GB) should comprise of women and the presence of at least 50 % of women members should be essential for calling a GB meeting. In the official JFM Committees in all states, established for the implementation of the programme, there is a provision for compulsory participation of a certain number of women from the concerned communities. However, it has been observed that in many cases due to social, cultural and economic con-

straints, the participation of women remains on paper only and they usually play a negligible role in the process of planning and implementation. The present paper deals firstly, with the factors or constraints affecting the participation of women in JFM programme. Secondly, it highlights some of the strategies used to ensure the involvement of women including one case-study from a particular Block of West Bengal.

The reasons for the lack of participation of women in the JFM programme can be summarized partly from primary source based on the empirical study, carried out by the Participatory Forest Management Project Unit of IIT Kharagpur, sponsored by the Ford Foundation and partly from secondary information.

**1) Lack of Information:** Women seldom know about the provisions, their own roles and responsibilities in JFM programmes. In addition, there is a lack of clarity about the applicability and gains of JFM, which often leads to a lack of interest among the female folk.

**2) Attitude of the FD Staff:** FD staff generally consider the involvement of women as a mere formality. Very rarely special efforts are taken to understand women's point of view and to seek their participation. Women's participation is desirable only as a less risky and more effective mechanism for persuading or coaxing intruders into stopping resource extraction from nearby forests. A major agenda during meetings of the Beat and Range level FPC Coordination Committees set up by the West Bengal FD highlights upon the increase of women's participation for this purpose (Raju, 1996). A WBRD Officer has stated "we would really like to increase women's participation as 90 % of our forest offenders are women". (Sarin, 1994). In addition, inadequate training and orientation of the lower FD staff ranks have left them ignorant about the ways and means of facilitating women's participation.

**3) Women's Views are not Worth Considering:** Frequently men feel that it is useless to spend time in understanding women's views on issues such as natural resource management because, according to them women do not have any knowledge that would be of value.

**4) Lack of Wages:** Women, specially those belonging to lower income groups or who are head of the household, may find it difficult to attend JFM meetings as this would temporarily hamper their process of making profit from the daily finance schedule.

**5) Family Responsibilities:** Due to family and other chores, women find it extremely difficult to find time for attending meetings which are often organized at times and venues which happen to be inconvenient for them. On interrogation, it has been found that women take up the lion's share of family responsibility, like collecting food and fodder from the forests, cooking, looking after children, in-laws etc.

**6) Social and Cultural Restrictions:** In many rural communities women are not allowed to sit on the same platform with men and they are not expected to speak in front of men also. In general, unmarried ladies, women with two or three children and the elderly ladies can express their opinions more readily than younger married women who are restricted from speaking out because family honour may be found to be at stake. Generally, non-tribal women face far more restrictions than tribal women.

**7) Lack of Confidence:** Sometimes, a few women are aware of their possible roles and opportunities in JFM and want to participate actively. However, they often find themselves in the minority category and feel inhibited in raising issues concerning them only out of fear of being ridiculed or ignored.

**8) Lack of Security:** There is no provision to ensure security for the women taking active part in the conservation activities. Indeed, instances have been noted where women have been insulted or attacked by powerful men having vested interests that conflict with women's use / conservation of the forests. The PFM Project Team observes that women's participation in Protection Teams has much lessened than the earlier years (1993 – 96 ) due to this security problem.

**9) Very Few Direct Benefits:** Talks of direct benefits to women are seldom discussed in the FPC meetings and as such are not prioritized. The focus is generally on timber and not on fuel wood and fodder, both of which are crucial to women. In addition, the committees look down upon fuel wood collectors and often prohibit such activities in the protected areas. No alternatives are made for women who depend on fuel wood. As a result, women can easily become resentful of JFM.. According to N.C. Saxena, (Saxena, 1997) extent of added labour required from women of various socio-economic groups for project activities (such as, watering, weeding, protection) created extra harassment for women in the rural scenario.

Saxena is also of opinion (Saxena, 1997) that the new programme also brought about differences and potential conflicts between probable gains and losses for women and those anticipated for men.

**10) Lack of Female Staff in FD:** There is a general lack of female staff in the FD, particularly at the field level. In addition, those who are employed tend not to be involved in the meetings for extending JFM interests. Generally, the village women find it difficult to interact with the male staff, who equally find it difficult to approach women or even to understand and incorporate their concerns. The places where more women staff were present at the grass-root spot, for example in Himachal Pradesh or Haryana, the participation of women within JFM has considerably increased (Rawat and Bedi, 1996). In West Bengal, the number of women FPCs have increased to a considerable extent of late, which of course, is a redeeming feature in a gloomy scenario. The following table shows the number of women FPCs which exist in West Bengal (Table 1).

The above-mentioned FPCs are purely under the supervision of women. Given the sex-segregated and hierarchical nature of Indian society, separate women's organizations and staff are needed to work among women, to instill

**Table 1: Women FPCs in West Bengal**

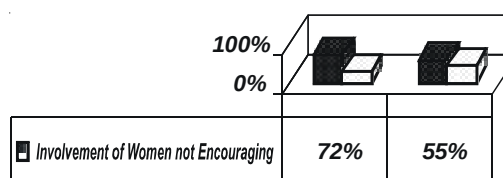
| S.No. | Name of FPC  | Division        | No. of families |
|-------|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1.    | Mohul bagan  | Bankura (North) | 42              |
| 2.    | Dhabani      | -do-            | 32              |
| 3.    | Agua         | -do-            | 23              |
| 4.    | Parerkunda   | -do-            | 22              |
| 5.    | Dundra       | Bankura (South) | 110             |
| 6.    | Dadoha       | -do-            | 87              |
| 7.    | Niljhora     | -do-            | 78              |
| 8.    | Jikhana      | -do-            | 110             |
| 9.    | Bagua        | -do-            |                 |
| 10.   | Hathisol     | -do-            |                 |
| 11.   | Bhalukdoba   | -do-            | 17              |
| 12.   | Maliora      | -do-            | 41              |
| 13.   | Patjora      | -do-            | 42              |
| 14.   | Coakan       | Panchet         | 113             |
| 15.   | Tribanka     | -do-            | 132             |
| 16.   | Gopal Nagar  | -do-            | 100             |
| 17.   | Brindabanpur | -do-            | 56              |

Source: JFM Cell, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Govt of India.

confidence, so that they can fight to establish their own rights. Therefore, whenever there is recruitment, more women need to fill the gap in the Forest Department. The village-level committees should have adequate representation

of women. Forestry staff should be sensitized to comprehend gender issues through orientation programmes. As women in many societies still remain in veiled garb to express themselves in mixed gatherings, each committee should have a separate women's cell for increasing their awareness and improving their skills. The quality of women's participation and the control they exercise over decision-making processes is deemed more important than the sheer number of women present in such bodies (Saxena, 1997).

**11) Lack of Adequate Sharing:** Another problem is of providing an adequate share to women in management responsibilities in JFM committees. Women's rights and entitlements have been almost overlooked. For instance, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Tripura provide for membership of only one representative per household; Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra have left the matter open; Punjab has no provision for a general body at all; and in Jammu and Kashmir, it is uncertain whether a man and a woman can represent a household (Table 2).



**Fig. 1. Involvement of women in JFM administration**

### Some of the Strategies Used to Ensure the Involvement of Women

Being state agencies, FDs are in the advantageous position of being able to introduce progressive changes in traditional attitudes, practices and organizational norms by issuing that priority is given to gender and equity concerns in all aspects of JFM. By creating legitimate space for women and other marginal groups within local institutions, they could not only minimize the danger of ignoring women's needs, but also initiate a progressive transformation of all male, often elite dominated, community institutions. Women of each household have been designated as joint member of FPC / EDC. But this did not prop up their degree of involvement in FPC / EDC working. Some FPCs are exclusively controlled

**Table 2: Representation of women in JFM committees**

| <i>State</i>      | <i>Eligibility for membership in general body</i> | <i>Minimum number of women in managing committees</i> | <i>Benefit-sharing entitlements</i>     |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Andhra Pradesh    | 1 female and 1 male per household                 | 3 out of 9-13 members                                 | Unspecified                             |
| Bihar             | 1 representative per household                    | 3-5 out of 15-18 members                              | MC to decide                            |
| Gujarat           | Any interested person                             | 2 out of unspecified total                            | To be "suitably" distributed            |
| Haryana           | All adults                                        | 2 women; all could be women                           | Equal access to loans for men and women |
| Himachal Pradesh  | 1 female and 1 male per household                 | 2-3 out of 9-12 members                               | For all villagers                       |
| Jammu and Kashmir | 1 female or male per household                    | 2 out of 11 members                                   | Institute to decide                     |
| Karnataka         | 1 representative per household                    | 2 out of 15 members                                   | Among "beneficiaries"                   |
| Madhya Pradesh    | 1 representative per household                    | Not specified                                         | Equitably among members                 |
| Maharashtra       | Unspecified                                       | 2 out of 11 members                                   | Among members                           |
| Orissa            | 1 female and 1 male per household                 | 3 out of 11-13 members                                | Equally between households              |
| Punjab            | No general body                                   | 1 woman                                               | Per household                           |
| Rajasthan         | Not specified                                     | Not specified                                         | Equal shares for members                |
| Tripura           | 1 representative per household                    | Not specified                                         | Distributed among members               |
| West Bengal       | Joint membership of husband and wife              | Not specified                                         | Either husband or wife                  |
| Tamil Nadu        | 1 female and 1 male per household                 | 50 percent women                                      | Basis unclear                           |

Source: Sarin, 1994

by women - groups and their positive participation has changed the complexion of working of FPCs in localized areas. The spread of such groups with the help of Care India and scheme funded by NABARD has been planned to be implemented over the next few years. Participation of women is going to get a boost on adoption of a proposed modification of the existing Govt. resolution, which proposes to raise the number of women to 30% of the total number of the Executive Committees. Many Self - Help Groups having representation of women tended to take on the mantle of leadership in such areas. This approach was in fact adopted while developing Haryana's JFM Programme from 1989.

The first of these strategies was to insist on the principle that the maximum number of village women must be present for all JFM related discussions. This was on the ground that the HFD desired everyone's participation in improved forest management. The FD field staff were instructed to clearly communicate the need for women's presence while intimating the villagers about a meeting. This in itself conveyed a strong message both to FD male staff and the village men about the necessity of women's participation in JFM affairs. When no women showed up, meetings were cancelled by informing the men that there could be no discussion on participatory forest management with half the population absent. The men often attempted to bypass the

resolve by saying that women were busy with cooking, livestock or child-care, often questioning the need or use of their presence. However, if the JFM team remains firm, the men would themselves call the women. (Sarin, 1996).

External facilitators such as NGOs can play a catalytic role in ensuring women's rights in access to common pool resources. One NGO which has been able to achieve this fairly successfully, is SARATHI - an Indian Organization. They managed to persuade several exclusively male Self-Initiated Forest-Protection-Groups (SIFPG) in the Panchmahal District of Gujarat to accept the equal rights of all adult women as well as women in becoming independent members of the groups. The leverage was provided by the group's interests in gaining formal recognition under JFM.

### **A Case Study from West Midnapore, West Bengal**

In this context, it may be mentioned that an unique set of strategies have been innovated and implemented for enrolling women in the JFM camp in a remote Block of South-West Midnapore, namely, Nayagram. This programme in a miniature has been initiated by the Participatory Forest Management Unit of IIT, Kharagpur, sponsored by the Ford Foundation. Women enlistment in the JFM programme has been performed in a number of novel ways.

1. The PFM Unit of IIT, Kharagpur has taken up the gigantic task of surveying 100% Forest Protection Committees (FPCs) of Nayagram Block in order to assess the socio-economic status of the Forest Institutions and also to find out the role of women in these Institutional Bodies. Women sensitization, in this connection has been also taken up as an important agenda by the PFM Team members. The following Bar-Diagram shows the participation of women in regular activities of FPC meetings in 1993-94 and in 2001-02, after PFM support in the study area of Nayagram. ( See the Bar- Diagram at the end of the paper).
2. Massive efforts have been undertaken to impart different kinds of trainings based on Non Timber Forest Produces (NTFP), namely, Sabai grass (*Eulaliopsis binata*), Sisal (*Agave sp.*), Sal leaf (*Sorea robusta*), Bamboo (*Bambusa tulda*) Atari (*Combretum decandrum*), various plant parts, Mushroom, Honey etc in order to enhance the economic standard of the tribal forest- fringe people of this region. After taking training in different crafts, the women are engaged in making multiple products of ethnic character and design, especially from Sabai, Sisal, Bamboo, Atari etc. Women, in this part of the country have come out of their age – long slumber and superstitions and it is a surprising feature that among the trainees , 90% of them are women and they are showing extraordinary skill and excellence in technological work- pattern.
3. Motivation and sensitization of women in this backward Block are almost complete in the sense that women are not only undertaking trainings and producing excellent export-quality products of Sabai, Sisal and Bamboo such as bags of marvellous designs, coaster-boxes, carpets, flower and fruit baskets, bottle-holders, door-mats, ottomans (three legged stools ), shoes, hats, even sofas and tea-tables etc. with zeal and exuberance, they are also playing the role of women entrepreneurs by giving shape to at least 20 Self Help Groups (SHGs) of different crafts with the assistance of the PFM Project Unit.
4. This entrepreneurial quality has a direct bearing on the changing role of women in the JFM administration also. Women now naturally find themselves in a socially firm and economically secure position, which not only give them more incentive for work, but also reflect their personality in a different colour both in household and in forest- related matters. Women in every family of Nayagram earn Rs 3000 / to Rs 3500 / per month by selling the host of NTFP products through the NTFP Developer's Consortium and can give a robust financial support to their respective families. Not only that, the PFM Project Unit has also arranged the Bengal State Aid to Industries (BSAI) loan of Rs. 10,000 / from District Industries Centre (DIC) under Directorate of Cottage and Small Scale Industries, Midnapore every year for 15 artisans and among the 15 artisans, at least 12 are women. FPC women are also being exposed in Melas, Exhibitions, Competitions, EXPOs etc. for display and sale of their products and some of the tribal ladies have also won awards for producing excellent forest products in District level Competitions. So, in this way, women from different FPCs of Nayagram have come to limelight and are playing pioneering roles in all spheres of life including JFM administration. (Dasgupta et. al., 1996).
5. As women themselves are the collectors of NTFPs from forests and they play a major role in feeding the hungry mouths of their families, their characteristic role in forest affairs cannot be ignored. The very feeling, that they have their own voices and say in forest as well as family affairs have given them a new spirit of self-reliance and self-respect – the qualities which were in dearth for a long time. Women in this sphere have been given special responsibilities for protecting their own forest timber from intruders of other FPCs and they have been also entrusted with the responsibility of Sal leaf collection, Mushroom and Medicinal Plants collection from forests for meeting the purpose of family necessities. Apart from that, they participate in the NTFP trainings conducted by the PFM Project Unit. Men also in this remote, rural area have come to realize of the crucial role of women in forest meetings and decision – making matters. No longer, the women in this region are ignored or overlooked by their male counter-parts. Sometimes, it so happens that the male members are becoming quite dependent on the female – folk because of the steady flow of income that they are able to bring to their respective households through sale of forest-based products. After analyzing the impact of

steady money flow on each household, it has been found out that the women are able to meet some of the basic needs of the household. They can now afford to buy clothes and shoes not only for themselves, but for other members of the family as well. They are also able to spend money for the education of the youngsters and buying medicines for the diseased ones. There are instances of renovation of old houses and making of new ones. In this way, the women are sharing responsibilities with the male partners. The male members are now convinced that women can create a definite base for the economic survival of the entire family (Dasgupta and Chattopadhyay, 2003).

6. The forest functionaries, like the Range Officers and the Beat Officers are also being trained by the PFM Project Unit for becoming aware of the usages and utilities of different kinds of NTFPs for the livelihood generation of the forest – fringe people. These Officers, who were not much enthusiastic about the role of women in NTFP management and the preservation of the eco – environment, have now become totally assured of the significant role played by women in forest – related matters. They also, after their PFM field visit to Nayagram Block, West Midnapore and Bundwan & Manbazar Blocks in Purulia District, West- Bengal have come to believe that women really can shoulder a stupendous task of innovating designs and applying eco-friendly dyes in the Sabai based products by exploring the forest species with an experienced and matured outlook. Not only that, the women in this part of the country have developed extraordinary skill and acumen regarding NTFP related matters and they have also made the villagers realize the prospects of maintaining a higher economic standard through marketing of these NTFP products. Even the men sometimes cannot compete with women as far as forest – based knowledge and experiences are concerned, because as told earlier, women are the protectors of the forests from women intrusion as well as the collectors of food and fodder for feeding the family members and the cattle. So, in the long run, the forest officials also cannot ignore the rights established by women themselves in forest affairs and the voices that they can

now raise in JFM set – up. The forest functionaries are now to a certain extent sensitized about the role of women in JFM areas, particularly in the PFM zone.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it may be said that the above - mentioned reasons for lack of participation of women in JFM programmes can be avoided to a fair extent if a schedule of simple and low- cost technology based training programme is initiated in some of the forest areas under JFM regulations, where women participation can be availed by following some of the said strategies. This micro-level experiment of PFM Project Unit of IIT, Kharagpur can be cited as an example, where some simple yet novel and lucrative strategies have been applied to enlist women membership in the JFM fold. The Nayagram experiment has shown both a dismal and a glowing picture in the gender scenario-dismal in the former and glowing in the later phase. The number of hurdles that have been mentioned above, stand in the way of gender participation in JFM programmes, like, lack of security, lack of confidence, social and cultural restrictions etc. These can be to a large extent eliminated by following the PFM work model. The total thought and experiment can be a model study of gender issues and gender enlistment in reality in the morrow.

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