

Joint Forest Management and Community Forestry in India: An Ecological and Institutional Assessment. N. H. Ravindranath *et al.* Oxford and IBH Publishing Co Pvt Ltd, 66 Janpath, New Delhi 110 001, India. 2000. 326 pp. Price not stated.

India is one of the 175 countries that are signatories to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). CBD requires that the signatories prepared action plans for the conservation and sustainable management of their respective biological resources. Consequently, in 1999 the Ministry of Environment and Forest, Government of India, which is the nodal agency for the effective implementation of CBD, prepared a National policy and Macro-level Action Strategy on Biodiversity. This document identified and projected broad policies, gaps and strategies needed for the conservation and sustainable use of India's biodiversity.

Following the Macro-level Action Strategy on Biodiversity, the need has been felt for the preparation of detailed action plans at sub-state, state, regional and national levels. To this end, the Ministry of Environment and Forest has accessed funding from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to prepare a National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) during the years 2000–2002. Amongst other things, NBSAP envisages the assessment and stocktaking of biodiversity-related information at various levels, including distribution of endemic and endangered species and site-specific threats and pressures. A key feature of NBSAP includes an emphasis on gender-sensitive decentralized planning and the use of interdisciplinary working groups to involve all sectors concerned with biodiversity conservation.

India's long history of community involvement in the management of its forests has attracted world-wide attention. Early forms of Community Forestry Management (CFM) while continuing to exist in some parts of the country, have paved the way for a more bureaucratized and publicized system of forestry called 'Joint Forest Management' (JFM). In fact, the latter is, an initiative of the state forest departments – first in West Bengal and now more or less throughout the country, aimed at achieving greater par-

ticipation of local communities in forestry through a gender-sensitive and socially equitable process. It is therefore timely that the book under review has come in as a comprehensive analysis of this very important conservation initiative.

The book is a synthesis of the studies conducted by the Ecology and Economics Research Network, a part of the National Support Group on JFM. It consists of 15 chapters written by a number of researchers working in Karnataka, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Jammu and Kashmir, West Bengal, Tripura, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. Besides, the book provides an appendix giving details of the methodology, including mathematical formulas used in calculating characteristics of vegetation in the different study sites. The important policies relevant to participatory forestry in India have been briefly reviewed too. The key aspects of the Forest Policy (1952), National Commission on Agriculture (1976), Forest Conservation Act (1980), Forest Policy (1988), June 1990 Guidelines and Guidelines on JFM 2000 are discussed.

The book has traced the history and evolution of the system of participatory forestry in India. It talks about the rapid loss of forest cover (to the tune of 20 million hectares between 1950 and 1980) thanks to the 'grow more food campaign'. It also discusses the emergence in 1976 of the National Commission on Agriculture and the establishment of Forest Corporations for the promotion of monoculture plantations. Rapid loss of forests during this time had led to a major resource crunch amidst forest-dwelling human communities. The primary motivation for initiating community forestry practices throughout India has been the depletion of forest biodiversity. Results of studies from Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, West Bengal, Tripura, Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Karnataka discussed in the book together point to this fact.

While the book is full of very useful data on the various aspects of CFM and JFM in India, it raises a number of questions in the minds of the readers. Firstly, the readers may be astounded by the range of management systems between self-initiated CFM, where there is no involvement of the state forest departments and JFM, wherein the forest departments still exercise unilateral powers in sustaining or abolishing the rights of access of the local communities to the

forests. How exactly can these be integrated into the country's broader biodiversity conservation and sustainable use programmes? There are of course legal instruments such as Forest Policy of 1988, which for the first time formally recognized the need to involve people in the management of forests and the JFM Resolution of 1990. Inspired by the apparent usefulness of JFM during the 10 years starting from 1990, the Government of India has also circulated JFM Guidelines in the year 2000.

How effective are these policies and guidelines? For throughout the book the following issues repeatedly emerge: skepticism amongst people on the role and involvement of the forest departments, lack of fair and authoritative involvement of women in the Forest Protection Committees (FPC) and lack of equitable participation of all castes represented in the community. And while it has been suggested that legal status be attributed to FPSs by making them full-fledged societies, whether this alone could improve matters is not at all clear.

Despite the publicity given to CFM and JFM, many have had doubts about the overall usefulness of these systems, especially the latter in managing India's biodiversity not only sustainably, but also equitably, in a decentralized fashion with the involvement of women and all caste groups. In fact, I picked up this book eagerly hoping to find some convincing prospects and future direction in Indian forestry. I have unfortunately been left disappointed. This is certainly not to do with the book or the authors, despite their monotonous style of writing interspersed with numbers that makes reading quite difficult. The disappointment is more to do with the overall success of CFM and JFM. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the Ecological and Economics Research Network has done well in making an effort in compiling the outcome of well-executed case studies, bringing out the strengths and weaknesses of one of India's much publicized systems of forestry.

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