

Preface

The blind race for increasing exploitation of natural resources in the name of development has alienated human being from the nature physically as well as spiritually. It was found that this kind of practice resulted in emission of green house gasses, global warming and environmental degradation and thus hit at the very base of survival. Under these circumstances, to restore equilibrium between human beings and nature, new efforts were needed to redefine development as a concept as well as practice. Following the Earth Summit held in Stockholm in 1972, Brundtland Report, Published in 1987, sought to give a new direction to the process of development, commonly known as sustainable development by recognizing that the natural resources were not inexhaustible and insisted that the development process should be aimed at meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs. Therefore to fulfill the broad objective of sustainable development conservation orientation of natural resource governance has become accepted as a world wide phenomenon.

The Indian state did not lag behind in this global march for ‘paradigm shift’. With the support of the World Bank and bilateral donors the Government of India had adopted the National Forest Policy 1988, which made a significant departure in the management of India’s vast forest resources. It was claimed that a radical shift in orientation and attitude took place from economy to ecology, from revenue generation to conservation. The policy advocated for participation of village community in the management of forest resources with a view of satisfying their needs for development. Following the policy, the Government of India’s notification in 1990 “envisaged that the communities in lieu of their participation in protection and development of forest areas will be entitled to sharing of usufruits in a manner specified by the concerned state Forest Departments”. Hence after a century old alienation of the local people, the new resolution, at first recognized the role of

forest dwelling communities in restoring and conserving forests and made an attempt to integrate the modern knowledge and skills of the Forest Department with the traditional knowledge and experience of the local communities, and to evolve strategies for the joint management of forests. The principal features of this kind of participatory Forest Management Programme which should be implemented under an arrangement between the voluntary agency- NGO, the village community and the state Forest Department are; setting up village Forest Protection Committees (FPC's), establishing and monitoring of management plans by the forest department through them, confining them to local use of grass and non-timber forest products, and giving them a share of the income from the timber sold by the Forest Department. Though the J.F.M was primarily implemented from the 1990 onwards only in the degraded forest areas across the states but with the 2000 guidelines, Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF) extended the programme into the good forest areas also.

However the purpose behind this kind of participatory nature of forest management is to *empower* the forest communities in order to achieve the objective of sustainable management of forest ecosystem. The reflection of that purpose has been manifest in the Report of "The Expert Group on People's Participation in Forest Management" in 1993, when it advanced that "The need to involve people in development activities is being increasingly recognized by the government. The purpose is to make them own the process and product, and to empower them to manage it for their common good." But there are contending perspectives on this empowerment process through which people can exercise their control over the development process. One of the perspectives represented by the World Bank viewed empowerment as "the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes." Central to this process are capacity building of the agents by increasing their assets as well as by 'improving efficiency and fairness of the organizational and

institutional context.' The other perspective conceived empowerment as "the opportunity and means to effectively participate and share authority" (Bastian, Fruchter, Gittell, Gear & Haskins, as cited in Simon, 1987, p.382) ³. This process is characterized by delegating legal power or official authority which is seldom linked up with the ownership question. Between these two opposing perspectives in the context of participating forest management practices, Indian state adopted a mixed path of empowering forest communities. There can be no denying that the State largely followed the World Bank criteria of empowerment by capacity building initiatives and by delegating its legal or official authority to a little extent to the communities but did not provide any ownership right to them which is manifest in the various notifications & J.F.M's policy resolutions. This was the case up to 2006 when due to initiatives taken by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill was finally enacted and the possibility of ownership of land for the forest dwellers was given a concrete shape though implementation hazards and inadequacies are visible across the states. The present work deals with different aspects of this empowerment of forest dwellers and the health of the eco-system in the context of Darjeeling Region of West Bengal.

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