

CHAPTER 6

6.1 Some Issues and Options

Like other areas in India, forest in West Bengal had undergone severe degradation and denudation due to Commercial exploitation, illicit felling and lopping, and mismanagement. To reduce the pressure on high forests and to regenerate, protect and manage the natural forests, "Social Forestry Programme" was initiated in West Bengal more than a decade ago through people's involvement and cooperation. And now it is a success story being replicated in many states in India and certified by the experts of World Bank- the donor agency of the programme. According to a recent statistics there are 2055 Forest Protecting Committee protecting and using 300,000 ha of forest land i.e., 26 per cent of total Forest area in the state (Wood Energy News-1992: PP21). However, experience of Social Forestry Programme has raised certain issues as has been identified during the course of my field survey. These are presented below:

Various problems are arising out of interactions between Forest Department and villagers, between Forest Protection Committees, (FPCS) and Government agencies like LAMP (which is the sole authority to purchase minor forest products), between FPCs and the villagers outside the committees and among members of the same protection committee. Most of the forest staffs and villagers are not sufficiently conscious about their social responsibilities. In our country forest staffs were trained and oriented to manage forest to earn revenue, ignoring the sentiments and requirements of the rural poor. The concept of participatory or joint management of forests are yet to dawn in their minds. On the other hand beneficiaries, villagers or members of the FPCs think that they are the poor, they are the destitutes, they are the sufferers. So as free riders they are only to take and give nothing to the society. They are not in a position to think about the impact of deforestation, about the vagaries of monsoon, about their future generation, as if they have no future. They will only expropriate what the Forest Department will give, what the Government will give. Both the Forest Department staffs and villagers are concerned with their respective direct economic gains only. In the case of joint Forest Management Programme, being a member -secretary of the

FPCs, the Beat Officer often tries to avoid to convene meetings of the FPC. Sometimes, they write resolutions of fictitious meetings to maintain official files and collect signature from the FPC members who usually come to "Hat" (local market per week) or office for other purposes. Many other works are done in the office campus by the Forest Department which are supposed to be done in the field. They create unnecessary troubles to the poor and ignorant committee members. Most interestingly, as villagers observed, foresters become more reluctant than ever before, in protecting the forest after the formal initiation and initial implementation of the Government Order of 1989 and 1990. Before the formation of FPCs, these forest lands were a kind of open access property and were used by all (though illegally) the neighbouring and distant villagers. But after the formation of FPCs/beneficiary schemes, the distant villagers who are not included in the committee, are creating problems and trying of denude it by hook or by crook. For example, in Sumaidihi FPC, the villagers of Tanra are creating problems. Again the relationship between F. D. and Panchayat is not always encouraging. Most of the Panchayats do not pay much attention to the programme except the compliance of the formal duties allotted to them by Government G.O. Rambani FPC in Purulia district under Kashipur Range has failed due to lack of initiative from both the FD and the Panchayat. The Rambani FPC was formed in 1990-91 with about 300 members from two adjacent villages, namely Napara and Rambani. This committee is adjacent to Bansraya and Gamarkuri FPCs and hardly 1¹/₂ to 2 Km. away from the Kashipur Range Office. Trees of Loginuari FPC under the Baramasia Beat, Humgarh Range in the district of Midnapur were uprooted by distant villagers of Anramara and were converted into cultivable land with the help of irrigated water of Kangsabti. On the other hand, most of the forest officials and other functionaries, at present, spent their time mainly on making official papers and vouchers and somehow manage to submit their returns in time. According to some forest officials, they have less scope to think about plantation. "Keep your papers ready" is the slogan in the Forest Department. There is a provision for meetings involving all forest staffs once in a month to discuss about problems, progress, prospect and future planning of Social Forestry Project. But at present it occurs once in a year and that too not very seriously. There are some extension workers but there is no proper job division for them. They have no power to take

any decision regarding any matter related to the S.F. Programme. They are losing their incentive to work. There is the provision for filling up "Micro Planning" form to collect grassroot level data for better planning and for better performance. But at present the F.D. is yet to fill up these forms either due to shortage of workers or due to mere negligence or administrative laps. It is a matter of great distress that the FD staffs lost their enthusiasm/motivation in S.F. Programmes as soon as flows of money (foreign) dries up. Thus provision should be made to organise and motivate both F D staffs and villagers towards their non direct economic benefits. A good rapport between FD and FPC members, between F D and Gram Panchayat, between FPC and outside villagers and between FPC and LAMP needs to be built up. Above all the traditional attitude of keeping people alienated has to change to ensure the survival and successful implementation of the programme. Further experiments with newer incentive structure and institutional arrangements need to be explored to replace conflict by cooperation.

Local level politics has become a serious impediment in the implementation of the Social Forestry Programmes in the state. Each and every S.F. Projects whether it is FPC or beneficiary schemes is under G.P. Which is controlled by political parties. And to a political party vote is more valuable than a forest. Voters (villagers) are taking the advantage of such opportunity. In beneficiary schemes Government involved the G.P. in determining beneficiaries. But political considerations in determining beneficiaries create conflicts instead of co-operation. As for example, a large portion of eucalyptus plantation of Bansraya FPC in the district of Purulia under Kashipur Range were looted before the last Panchayat Election. Formation of FPCs have become an assiduous task due to adverse local politics. In the district of Bankura, the Ranger of Khatra has failed to register Banbedia FPC due to political opposition from Panchayat Pradhan (head) (BANANI, 1994). Teskona FPCs has failed to protect its forest due to political rivalry among the villagers who are strongly divided into three political parties. Teskona is adjacent to Suribanka FPC in the district of Midnapur under Amlasoli Beat. Rangiladihi and Panrashol FPCs under Kashipur Range in the district of Purulia have failed due, again, to political rivalry and disputes among the members of the executive committee. G.P.s are very much involved in the implementation of

their own programmes and are not showing enough interest in S. F. Programmes.

Uncertainty about the benefits from the social forestry schemes become a problem in the implementation of the S.F. Programme. Rural people hesitate to participate and it stems from their suspicion that once you make a good forest, whether it is on private, on government land or on degraded forest land the F.D. will take it over subsequently. The initial acquisition of private forest land by the Government and their subsequent deterioration into degraded lands and the strained relation and distrust between FD and local peoples over several decades are the main factors behind such attitude of the people. For historical reasons they are not in a position to believe that they will really get 25 per cent share from FPCs. Even if some one raises good plantation on private or government land, he may not be able to sale his trees freely due to various restrictions on "transit permit"¹. It is a compulsory requirement for any transaction of forest products (as per Indian Forest Act 1927). It is quite impossible for a layman to complete the process. Most of the village people consisting of landless labourers, small & marginal farmer, economically and socially backward people are unable to go through such hazards. Vehement opposition are also coming from the people who have lost their rich forests due to Forest Acquisition Act of 1954. They are resisting the formation of FPCs and saying that "The Government is fraud, the Government has cheated us. The Government did not pay our legitimate compensation." To resolve this type of problem more and more communications and discussions with communities are required. Other income-generating schemes

1 To get, a transit permit first one have to apply to Range Officer for a transit permit, 2) then one have to produce a sketch map of the plot where plantation has been raised by a requisite surveyer, 3) One have to show a no objection certificate from BLRO, 4) One have to show a approval letter from Bon-o-Bhumi Sanskar Sthayee Samitee of the local Panchayat, 5) One have to produce a no-objection certificate from co-sharer certified by the concerned G.P. 6) Then with all these documents one have to fill up a form and Beat Officer will assign a value of the tree and at last FD will humbering (seal) on the trees for passing it from one place to another

for rural development need be offered. A clear-cut and transparent policy regarding share of benefits, transit of forest product should be offered by the FD to seek peoples involvement and participation at large.

Time lag between the formation or plantation and the returns from the final harvest become a problem. People prefer to convert their lands into agricultural ones for immediate gain (within 3-4 months only) rather than to regenerate, protect and wait for several years. In the coppicing sal forests of South-West Bengal, normally, it takes 10 to 12 years to obtain benefits. According to Government Order 1989, members have to wait and protect forest for at least 5-10 years to get usufruct or other benefits from the protected forest. Since most of the people are very poor in the rural areas they can not wait for such a long period. In the absence of complementary non-forestry sources of income, poor participants can not desist themselves from taking the advantage of free access and engage themselves in felling and lopping. Thus the immediate need is to provide the rural poor with complementary sources of income and employment on a sustainable basis. For the purpose greater integration and coordination among the different Govt. and non-govt Departments (Like Agriculture, Horticulture, Irrigation, West Bengal Tribal Development Corporation, Zilla Parishad, Panchayat Samities, Village Panchayats etc.) are required.

Field (local) level committees under the different S. F. schemes are facing problems as no powers commensurate with their duties and functions have been delegated to them. They have no power to settle any dispute or conflict, to penalise the offenders, to participate in planning or decision-making agenda regarding the scheme. Forest offices are far away from the acting committees and even forest officials are not available in time. As a result of these facts they feel helpless and highly demoralised when in the remote area they face reality. There is therefore a need to empower the committees with necessary powers and full support from the F.D. so that they can protect and manage their forests effectively and smoothly.

Processing and marketing is a great problem of S.F. projects for both the wood and non-wood forest products. In case of river banks and farms forestry extraction cost is very

high due to backwardness of site. People who grow their plantation in such backward sites do not get fair prices. People are also not getting fair prices for their non-wood products. For example, the only marketing agents LAMP is running under complete pandemonium in the state.

Being the sole purchaser of minor forest products (Government order 1989, Clause 4-iv, PP4) LAMP is quite absent in many areas or even where present, is present for a few days throughout the year. Even in many cases members have not been paid the sale prices. FPC Members are frustrated with the functioning of the LAMPS. Therefore, to overcome the situation small scale economically viable processing units need be set up, transport facilities in backward sites need be developed. Forest producers' cooperative marketing societies may be organised and the existing marketing arrangements through LAMPS need be rectified and strengthened.

Sometimes operation and functioning of S. F. Schemes become ineffective due to lack of sufficient funds. Fund available is always less than proposals. In most cases, FD can't keep their word for developmental works in the region/village (like well, ponds, jorbandhi, road or culvert construction) due to lack of funds. Since social forestry provide positive externality to the society Government need to provide sufficient fund for the purpose.

In certain cases, though not generally, caste differences among the people of the same village create problems in the formation and protection of S. F. projects. In such situations upper caste people (mainly Brahmins, Kayastha, Khatriya) are not willing to work jointly with lower caste people (mainly, Bauri, Shayer, or other tribals). It has led to subdivision and fragmentation of forest land. In some cases, for example, the F. D had to form more than one FPC in the same village, in some cases the F. D had failed to form any committee and all due to this factor. Again, inter committee or intra committee conflicts arise out of the functioning of more than one FPCs in the same zone. For example, in Kashipur village under Khatra Beat and Range in the district of Bankura, the FD has failed to form FPC due simply to Caste antagonisms. The upper class Utkal Brahmins are not willing to work together with the lower caste Bauri or Shayer. In Keshia village under Keshia Beat and Khatra Range two FPCs based on caste are operating simultaneously (Banani, 1994 PP.6). This is a long standing social problem and

the F. D alone probably cannot solve the problem.

In our traditional poor village society women are more responsible than men in a family. As women have to cook for her family, usually they have to collect fuelwood. Generally they also collect minor forest products, fodder etc. As a matter of fact, their suffering has increased with the degradation of forests and have greater stakes in S. F. programmes than men. It is interesting to note that in many instances wives present their drunken husbands as offender at the Beat office for punishment where FPCs are operating. Unfortunately, the FD have failed to involve women in S. F. projects. So it is an urgent need to include more and more active women as members in the schemes.

In the North, in contrast to the South, my study concentrates mainly on farm forests. Thus social forestry programme becomes less significant to the people of the projects whose primary occupation there is agriculture. The main season (June to August) of agricultural activities coincide with the main season of tree plantation (June to 1st week of August) under social forestry programme. People who are completely dependent on agriculture remain very much occupied with the agricultural activities. They do not have enough option to pay much attention to plantation of trees. Very often they do not plant any seedlings even though they collect these from nursery. It is only after the completion of all agricultural activities that they usually plant trees which by that time become almost damaged or weak. As a consequence the survival rate of the tree seedlings is normally very low. Thus it is necessary to convince the rural people that in terms of allocation of time tree plantation and paddy cultivation are not substitute but complementary. It is a fact that since traditional natural forests are still existing in the region people are not interested in S. F. and they have no perceived crisis of fuelwood or timber. However, for self help and partial recovery of cultivation tree plantation may be highly important. Non availability of project land is also a major problem in the North Zone because land is rapidly becoming scarce. Influx of people from neighbouring countries and tea gardens are creating pressure on Government vest lands, wastelands, riverbanks or beds and roadsides. Land reform measures initiated by the Government is also creating problems in getting the waste or vestlands for S. F. projects.

Pricing of seedlings by the F. D. for farm forestry is a problem to the poor rural people even if they provide some concession to economically disadvantaged sections of the rural population. But it hampered the process in two ways : first, people become lukewarm when price is introduced for seedlings in place of free distribution. Secondly, economically disadvantaged sections of the rural people getting the seedlings at a concessional rate, instead of planting the seedlings on their own land resale them to others at some higher prices to earn some quick money. Again, it has been observed that marginal farmers and disadvantaged class of our society are so poor that they are not able to purchase the seedlings even at a concessional rate offered by the F. D. No evaluation has been made so far to see the impact of pricing of seedlings over the programme. The F. D. need to re-evaluate this price policy.

Another problem experienced by the S. F. programmes is the absence of fenced boundaries or watch ward. People neglect it as they do not have enough money to spend on boundaries or enough time to spend on watchward. In case of the F. D, watchwards are paid only if funds permit. It is a real constraint where cattle population is high and indiscriminate grazing is a recurring issue.

6.2 Lessons And Implications

This study concentrates on sample survey over six districts covering the three basic models of Social Forestry Programmes out of twelve models (GOWB, 1982). Thus it would be misleading to draw any general conclusion. However the following important lessons can be drawn on the basis of the experiences gathered from the select FPCs, River bank projects and Farm Forestry in the State:

i) Regeneration, protection and management of degraded forest land and establishment of other social forestry projects are possible through the new challenging concept of people's participation even under the prevailing constraints. This method is cost-effective and equitable.

ii) It is also evident that if-special weightage in decision making, a long-term exclusive rights of use over the forest resource, certainty of getting a share in the sale proceeds from the harvest of timber or pole, alternative source

of income and employment are given to local people, they are more likely to cooperate and participate in establishing, regenerating, protecting and managing forests.

iii) Successful implementation of the S. F. Projects through people's participation largely depends on the political will of the Government, change in the traditional attitude of forest management by F. D. staffs, faith in the local people's ability to identify and solve their problems, decentralisation of management of forest resources through empowering and strengthening the local democracy like G. P., and changes in the objectives of the forest policies of the Government.

iv) Unless there are monetary incentives built into S. F. projects for the local committees to take over their management after establishment or regeneration, projects will continue to remain as ventures of the FD without people's participation and hence they may never become self-sustaining. To involve people in such schemes it is essential to ensure and that the private benefits from the projects be substantially higher than private costs of participation.

v) Management of the common property resource like forest through people's participation is only of recent origin, compared to over 125 years of traditional forest management. Therefore it is obvious that it will take some time to get a concrete shape and root and to emerge as a new institution.

vi) For better establishment and regeneration, protection and management, local organisations (executive committee of the FPCs or beneficiary schemes) need be controlled and governed by its constituent members (who must live in the same locality) only and be accountable to the society. It should be empowered to frame, enforce its own rule; monitor and impose penalties on offenders and violation of norms. This idea is well recognised in WCED (1987). The Government will only provide technical information and guidance and at the same time ascertain that these organisations will not be captured by a few vested interests. To ensure this it is necessary to develop a new model where the administration of Gram Panchayats can be merged with the Forest Department's technical experience. Certainly this is a necessary condition but not sufficient. The sufficient condition is that there must be a firm political commitment or will of the ruling Government to implement such programmes.