

ABSTRACT

TITLE: SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF FOREST VILLAGERS IN ALIPURDUAR DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL

There is no doubt that management of forest resources is extremely important in developing and underdeveloped countries for providing sustainable management of livelihood to forest villagers as well as fringe people. In countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India, improper property right, economic insecurity, regulation violence and failure, poverty and heterogeneity in socio-economic characteristics of households had often led to unsustainable management of forest resource and deforestation. So protection of forest resources is one of the precaution and preconditions of taking sustainable benefit from forest resources, particularly in countries where forests fulfilled livelihood needs of million forests villagers.

This study tried to generate the information of impact of forest on forest villagers' socio-economy, and other forest related issue that need to be addressed. Here the study of forest villages and dependency of villagers on to forest has been summarized on the basis of data and information collected from the field survey of sample households. For this study, face-to-face survey was conducted amongst 878 head of forest village households of the 39 forest villages in the Alipurduar District of West Bengal. It is noticed that forest plays an important role to get shape of villagers separate socio-economic as well as cultural life. The site and location of forest villagers' has a profound impact on livelihood which they have been adapted according to their capacity and needs. So the manner, customs and behaviour related to forest environment as well as forest based economy have been studied to observe livelihood adaptation power and economy of forest villagers in locality of the study area. It is also investigated that villagers are primarily depend on forests for number of forest resources and needs like fodder, fuel, fruit, timber, flower, tubers, roots, leaves, medicines, firewood and minor forest products etc. The effort has been made to show the details of collection of forest resources such consumption of Non-Timber Forest Product (NTFPs), fodder, timber, fuel wood as well as time spent and distanced covered for collection of these resources and it is notice that there is a negative relation between consumption of fuel-wood and distance.

For the purpose of assuring a healthy forest resources management, there must be contribution of idea of local inhabitants mainly forest villagers who have close interaction with forests along with their attitudes, perspectives, suggestions and ideas concerning sustainable forests protection on their locality. Based on a participatory approach, the prime aim of this study was to identify villagers' perception about change in forest cover in the years, period of tree felled, perception about present and future forest stock, about forest values as well as environment related views such as perception about the effect of forests on ecological changes, reasons for shrinkage of forest area, destruction, its responsibilities and solutions. It is noticed that villagers were consented about the influence of forest on the environmental vulnerability such as increasing normal temperature and decreasing amount of normal rainfall over last few years, the river bank erosion and landslides in the high altitude area, and large scale tree felling as the single reason for forest destruction and shrinkage. Villagers also opined that more and more afforestation is one and only good way of solution of environmental and other forests related problems in the area. The study indicated that forest villagers preferred more economic value as well as ecological values of forests than social values. Respondents believed that the ecological values of the forests is being very relevant in present days due to phenomenal change of local environment, and predicted that the forests cover will have increased for their livelihoods, health and future generation.

It is also identified that different anthropogenic activities such as changes in land use pattern, jhum cultivation, tea garden extension, conversion of forest cover area into agricultural and habitat lands etc. has become a primary issue for loss natural corridors of animals and are the main causes for man-animal conflict in this area. Man-animal conflict has over the few years become a major concern for wildlife management in North Bengal-Duars region. The conflicts of villagers with elephant, tiger, leopard, monkeys, gaur, wild boar, and rhino have become a regular feature. So immediately Government should ensure proper amount of compensation for victims and take up effective preventive measure against conflicts. Besides, forest authority must take steps to enrich trees of animal food as well as corridors to reduce crop raid and animals attack.

The study also highlighted the coherent relation between socio-economic conditions of forest villagers and their participation in different programmes of the Joint Forest Management (JFM) as well as different important activities of JFMC programs such as horticulture, NTFPs processing, nursery of small plants and medical plants, cleaning of forest, sal and teak plantation of felling area, seed handling which are related with forest villagers' socio-economic condition and participation through sustainable management. But it is noticed that JFMC members are not properly appointed to work in these working circles and less number of members sometimes had been engaged in these schemes. The EDCs, FPCs and other communities' leadership is not observed more in number. It is also observed that only 13.48 % women were engaged as JFM member where JFM aims is to involve 50 % women as major actors in forest management participatory programme, so there is a clear gender disparity occurred which should be eradicate to success the aims of the JFM project. Besides the JFM members are getting less interest as there is no regular source of income and employment opportunity in this programme. Although JFM project opened up many avenues for forests as well villagers development but a number of difficulties and issues have been identified that is need to be addressed by the Government and the non-governmental organization to overcome the problems. Lastly they are convinced that only central and state forests organizations are not successful enough in terms of forest protection and sustainable development. So in terms of managing and protecting local forests, it has been understood that forest villagers are more willing to protect forest resources through participatory and cooperative approach with central and state forests organization.