India is a front-runner in developing policies to engage forest dependent communities in the management of their forest lands. Under India’s Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme, the state, represented by the Forest Department (FD), and the village community formally share responsibilities and benefits of jointly protecting and managing forests adjoining villages. The agreement is operationalized through JFM Committees (JFMCs) – referred to as Village Forest Committees (VFCs) in some states – where elected community representatives and a FD official make forest-related decisions in a supposedly collaborative manner. In some cases, when women participate in forest management committees, these institutions have been shown to enhance forest conditions (Agrawal and Chhatre 2006; Agarwal 2009), incomes from the forest (Upadhyay 2005), and cooperation in forest management (Molinas 1998; Coleman and Mwangi 2013). Yet, despite reserved seats on JFMCs for marginalized groups such as women, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Schedule Tribes (STs), these groups face significant barriers to active engagement in JFM processes (Agarwal 2010).

These are official government designations for various groups of historically disadvantaged peoples in India.
The local population consists mainly of native Hindus (70%) of different castes (hereditary social groups or classes in Hindu culture), with 8.1% of the population coming from SCs and 2.4% from STs (Census of India 2011). These groups show differences in terms of landholdings as well as in education, socio-economic and political opportunities. The larger landholders are from the Havik Brahmin Hindu community (highest social class in the ritual hierarchy), who are more privileged on the whole than the others. The small landholders and landless are predominantly from the lower castes and from ST communities—also known as Adivasis or ‘original inhabitants’. These groups show a different level of dependency on forests, with forest reliance being higher among the landless than among large-scale farmers. In the Uttara Kannada area, STs comprise various ethnic groups, including the Marathi, Naiks, Poojari, Sherugars, and Siddhi, who participated in this study.

The district of Mandla is located in the state of Madhya Pradesh, which has the highest amount of forest cover in India and the largest ST population living in the forest and in forest fringe areas. Compared to Uttara Kannada, Mandla is drier and its people are poorer and have less formal schooling. The majority (57.9 percent) of the district’s population is composed of STs (Census of India 2011). The state’s main ethnic groups include the Gondh (ST), Baiga (a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group – PVTG), Panchas (Other Backward Classes or ‘OBCs’), and Lohars (OBC), among others. These groups show different levels of dependency on the forest, but as small-scale or landless laborers they all depend on the forest for subsistence.

**Methodology**

In depth, semi-structured interviews about local forest governance were carried out privately with 45 participants in six villages—five that have a Village Forest Committee (VFC) and one that does not—in Uttara Kannada and with 41 participants in five villages in Mandla, all of which have a JFM Committee. Male and female participants, in nearly equal numbers, included local farmers from different ethnic, socio-economic and age groups, Forest Department (FD) officials, board members from the VFCs, VFC Presidents, members of the Panchayat (local self-government organization), forest conservation NGO staff, and women’s self-help group members. Data underwent inductive thematic coding using NVivo software to support the analysis.

**RESULTS**

**Site-specific Participation in JFM**

There are important contextual differences in JFM implementation across the two project sites. In Uttara Kannada, the forest is lush, livelihood opportunities are more readily available, and there is a history of environmental activism dating back to the Appiko movement. There, participants as well as the FD report some success with JFM. In contrast, interviewees in Mandla describe a severe lack of livelihood options, a sense of helplessness with respect to their forest’s degradation, and a dysfunctional JFM system. Few people really know about JFM and participation in JFM is low across ethnic and gender groups due to a lack of interest, incentives, awareness and influence. One (male) FD official notes that, “There is no interest. The secretary informs the people, but they aren’t interested.” This disinterest, which is reflected in the narratives of local residents, stems from a lack of faith in the system for many reasons described below.

1. **No sense of forest ownership**

Participants lack knowledge about the Forest Rights Act (FRA) (2006), which allows traditional forest dwellers (SCs and
STs) to claim for individual and community land ownership in the form of patta (land titles). Hence, one middle-aged Gondh man explains that people “are under pressure. [...] the Deputy Ranger tells us that; “the jungle is not your land and so you have to do what we say or else we will kick you out.” Lack of knowledge about their rights—and lack of formal rights to land—makes people reticent to truly engage, and express dissent, through JFM. Given the lack of incentives or sense of ownership over the forest and its management, a number of participants believe that they should be getting paid to monitor the forest or to be part of the JFM committee as “No one is going to work for free” (Gondh man, Mandla).

2. Conflictual relations with the FD

Participants experience conflicts with the FD and feel that they lack influence over JFM so they see little point in attending meetings. As an older Gondh man explains, “The meetings are just for the people of the VFC, they are just a formality. Basically, the FD does all of the administrative stuff. Sometimes some of the village people say something, but the FD doesn’t really listen to them.”

Relations with the FD are particularly strained in Mandla, where the FD is highly discriminatory against STs.

3. Inactivity of, and lack of knowledge about, the JFMCs

Many villagers report that the JFMC in their village is barely active, if at all. When VFCs carry out meetings, many residents are not aware of them.

4. Competing priorities

Participants indicate that they have too many other problems to deal with, such as a water shortage and unemployment, and that those who do attend meetings make requests but “No one comes here to help” (Gondh woman, Mandla).

Gendered Participation in JFM

Within a given site, there are gender-specific constraints to participation in JFM. In theory, JFM is designed to encourage the representation and participation of women and of different ethnic groups. There are provisions for women on the board of VFCs. In the study villages, women are occupying seats reserved for them (at least 2 seats out of 10 or 11) and sometimes women of a particular ethnic group occupy seats reserved for their specific group. In Uttara Kannada, Havik Brahmin women occupy the seats reserved for women.

Yet, women are not typically nominated to fill non-reserved seats. Women from the SC, ST and OBC communities in particular are very involved in forest-related activities. In Mandla, they report having frequent confrontations with, and braving the FD when collecting fuelwood in the forest. An FD official from the Mandla landscape states that of all local user groups, Baiga women are the most dependent on the forest. Hence, their interests clearly need to be represented in JFM. In practice, however, a number of barriers hinder the active participation of women in JFM.

Aside from being on the VFC board, the main forum for having a voice in JFM is as a general VFC member. All adult women and men over the age of 18 who pay a symbolic fee are considered members. Most VFCs reportedly meet monthly or bi-monthly for board meetings and annually for the general assembly. Formally influencing the group requires attending, speaking up, and being listened to in VFC meetings, where women are largely outnumbered by men.

Opinions about women’s engagement at meetings are mixed, as some participants report that women are listened to and respected, but the majority indicates otherwise. Participants cite numerous barriers to women’s active participation at these meetings, including:

1. ‘Women are too busy’

“It is a combination of already having a day-filling workload and time constraints for participating in evening meetings. The same is true for women members of the VFC board. They will have daily responsibilities that they cannot just put down to attend a meeting” (male Khare Vokkaliga farmer, Uttara Kannada).

2. Meetings are held at inconvenient times

Women cannot easily attend meetings in the evenings, when they are busiest with childcare, dinner preparations and milking cows.
3. Limited mobility

Women “cannot ride motorbikes or cars so they are limited in moving around and coming to the meetings” (male VFC president, Uttara Kannada). Some participants also cited safety concerns related to women’s mobility.

4. Havik Brahmin women are “only little bit engaged” in forest activities

Perceptions in Uttara Kannada are that Havik Brahmin women are not commonly involved in forest product collection. They spend limited time in the forest and do not visit forest areas distantly located from the homestead. They are therefore reportedly less interested in forest-related issues.

5. Lack of knowledge and awareness about JFM and forest conservation

“We are most of the time busy with cooking and all the housekeeping so we don’t know exactly” (Havik Brahmin woman, Uttara Kannada). Low levels of formal education, inadequate communication channels and limited circulation of information regarding JFM and JFMC meetings, especially among those who do not have cellular phones, aggravates the situation.

6. Lack of formal education, confidence and capacity to participate in public fora

In Uttara Kannada, formal education (early years) is more common among Havik Brahmin men than others. In Mandla, a male Gondh farmer explains that, “[women] don’t speak a lot [...]. The women haven’t gone to school, they can’t read and write, they feel shy to go [to JFMC meetings].”

7. Culturally, men predominate in public fora

“It is traditionally the role of men to attend such meetings” (Havik Brahmin woman, Uttara Kannada) and “Women feel like they are in the wrong place in a VFC meeting. If problems are there, then women trust that men will come up with some solutions” (woman NGO staff, Uttara Kannada). Women are also silenced because they are thought not to have important ideas to contribute. In Mandla, a Pancha woman states, “when the women speak, the men tell the women ‘Shut up, you don’t know what you are talking about’, and they say ‘don’t speak in front of everyone’”. Speaking out at meetings, when women do attend, can be perceived as a sign of disrespect towards men. Attending meetings can itself be considered a sign of disobedience towards one’s husband.

Ethnic Exclusions in JFM

Ethnicity also strongly shapes participation in JFM. In terms of representation, there are seats reserved for marginalized communities in the VFCs, some of which are filled by women from those communities. In Uttara Kannada, the VFC representatives from ST, SC and OBC communities interviewed generally feel that they do participate and are heard in matters of forest management. Members of the Havik Brahmin community, including many VFC board members and presidents, share that opinion, especially as they indicate that the ST, SC and OBC communities have the largest stake in maintaining and generating income from the forest. Nonetheless, participants alluded to the many barriers these communities face in attending, participating in, and influencing the VFC board and annual meetings and decisions.

1. Competing work schedules

“For those [landless labourers] who are dependent on daily wages, they will follow their work first and not attend” VFC meetings (NGO staff, Uttara Kannada).

2. Lack of formal education and related insecurities.

“[T]hey are uneducated and often much more hesitant” (Havik Brahmin woman, Uttara Kannada). This barrier holds even more prominence in Mandla, where most of the participants and their communities have received little or no formal education.

3. Physical isolation and communication barriers

Landless families commonly live in more remote areas of the forest and many do not have cellular phones.

4. Discrimination and social stigmas

Decision-making authority is concentrated in the hands of certain groups (e.g. Havik Brahmin men in Uttara Kannada), making other groups feel uncomfortable speaking in public. In Mandla, there is a hierarchy of participation among marginalized groups in JFMC meetings. According to a male Pancha farmer, “The Pancha and Aheer talk more here. The Gondh and Baiga: they are the most illiterate, so they
don’t know very much. The Hindus [lower caste] and the Adivasis [Gondh and Baiga] speak less.” There is a latent insinuation that “they” (the ST and SC communities or specific STs) are to blame for cutting down the forest and that “they” lack education and awareness to meaningfully participate in JFM. In Uttara Kannada, the Havik Brahmin women interviewed state that the Khare Vokkaliga “have money problems so they cut the trees and are not taking that much care of the forests.” In Mandla, the Baiga are blamed by other ethnic groups, who cite their lack of formal education and poverty as reasons why they cut down the forest.

Gender Meets Ethnicity

Gender and ethnicity do not operate independently of each other to influence participation in JFM, however. On the contrary, participation is shaped at the intersection of gender and ethnicity, such that women and men from different ethnic groups have distinct experiences with JFM. Participation in JFM also varies according to other facets of women’s identity, such as age and stage in the life cycle (e.g. number of young dependents versus adult children), education, and socio-economic status, all of which condition workloads and livelihood strategies.

The experience of better off Havik Brahmin women who generally do not spend much time in the forest contrasts with that of women from other socio-economic and ethnic groups who are more involved in forest-related activities and in JFM. In the case of ST and SC communities in Uttara Kannada, women are particularly strong and active in JFM. One male Havik Brahmin VFC president observes: “it is even the women from the backward castes that are very active and participating.” In fact, ST women occupy some of the seats reserved for their communities even though it is not specified that these should be filled by women. Yet, Havik Brahmin women, who show less interest in JFM, are the ones occupying seats reserved for women. By homogenizing ‘women’, the system of reservations thus reproduces prevailing power relations and privileges. Differences in participation across ST and SC communities also reflect unequal power relations among different groups of women. In Mandla, Baiga women are most highly forest dependent but also most marginalized in JFM decision-making instances.

Conclusion

Findings from the study underscore the necessity to reframe the issue of ‘women’s participation’ to capture these intersecting social differences. The forest dependency, responsibilities and livelihood activities of different groups of women differ, as do their interests in JFM. Many Havik Brahmin women in Uttara Kannada have yet to be convinced of the relevance of JFM to their lives or of the value of participating in JFM, especially when their husband is already participating. Yet, they—rather than the more forest-dependent ST women—occupy the seats reserved for their gender group. Engaging Havik Brahmin women in JFM in Uttara Kannada will require a different approach than needed to motivate Baiga women in Mandla, for example, who lack faith in the system and are doubly discriminated against by the FD and fellow villagers based on their gender and ethnicity.

Recommendations

Enhancing the equity of JFM will require multi-pronged efforts and measures:

1. **Educate and strengthen awareness**

   Education goes hand in hand with awareness, knowledge, self-confidence and capacities and underlies all other measures proposed. Knowledge can be reinforced through various channels, such as theatre plays, music and radio. The VFC can play a central role raising interest in the forest and its governance.

2. **Strengthen a sense of ownership of the forest**

   Interest in sustainable forest management is heightened when local people—men and women—have a sense of ownership over their forest. At the heart of the matter in Mandla is villagers’ understanding of their rights to the forest and more secure tenure over land and forests, such as through implementation of the Forest Rights Act.

3. **Value local ecological knowledge and spirituality**

   Role models, such as spiritual leaders, traditional healers and elders must engage in maintaining and transmitting knowledge and appreciation for the forest and its material and spiritual resources to younger generations, and can work with the VFC to integrate these dimensions into JFM. In Mandla, elder Baiga women and men, who are discriminated against, hold extensive and specialized knowledge of the forest. Public recognition of their knowledge can also help reduce discrimination.
4. Explore differentiated interests and incentivize

Improved incomes may not be the only incentive for local people to participate in JFM. Finding out what the VFC and JFM more generally can bring to different groups can encourage their engagement. Havik Brahmin women in Uttara Kannada called for more knowledge of markets and prices for the forest products they process. Women and men farmers also requested better market access and more favorable marketing arrangements for producers. Facilitating these through JFM can create interest in the programme.

5. Foster collective action

Bringing people together around a common interest can be particularly important in a place where houses are scattered and residents have few opportunities to interact. Strong collectives—both single-sex and mixed-gender—can promote social learning, healthy social pressure, and confidence among members. Collective action in other areas of daily life can have ripple effects and lead to enhanced collective action in JFM, and vice versa.

6. Support champions, role models, and community resource persons

Successful collectives and collective actions require strong leaders and resource persons. Role models can inspire women and marginalized groups to envision themselves another way: gaining confidence that it is possible for them to adopt certain behaviors because others like them have already done so.

7. Increase the number of FD officials who are women and from marginalized groups

Having FD officials who are women and/or from similar ethnic backgrounds as villagers can help reduce discrimination and conflicts with the FD and create common ground for collaboration.

8. Maintain affirmative action

Although not sufficient in and of itself, reserved seats for women and marginalized communities—and women of marginalized communities—can improve these groups’ opportunities to participate in JFM. Reaching a critical mass of members from these groups can help improve conditions of their participation.

9. Create enabling spaces

In one VFC in Uttara Kannada, a young female Khare Vokkali board member explains: “The president will ask individually each member of the VFC board to express his or her opinion. Everyone will get a chance to talk. He values the suggestions and ideas of everyone a lot. He gives respect to the labour class as well as to women. All members are treated the same.” Measures to allow each member a space for participation, and the positive example of leaders such as the VFC President, can set the tone for more equitable participation.

10. Foster dialogue, cooperation and sharing of resources among actors

Creating an enabling environment for participation requires working not only with marginalized but also with more privileged groups. This implies working with both women and men from different ethnic groups to create normative change through dialogue and awareness raising activities. Engaging with present and future FD officials (i.e. in training) to dismantle their prejudices can help redress the skewed and conflictual relations they often have with local people.

11. Invest in change

Achieving all of this requires buy-in and innovation from the bottom-up and adequate external support and resources. With time, these efforts may foster the equitable partnership among villagers and with the FD that JFM is intended to be.

References