Overview

India’s Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme is among the first and largest initiatives for collaborative forest governance worldwide. In JFM, the states, represented by the Forest Department (FD), and the village community 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 an effort to promote gender equity and social inclusion, seats are reserved on these committees for women and marginalized groups, such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Schedule Tribes (STs). Not only does this safeguard the inherent rights of these communities, but Agarwal (2011) and others have shown that women’s active participation in forest management committees can promote sustainable management practices, greater collaboration within JFMCs, as well as improved incomes from the forest. Yet, despite reservations, the ability of these groups to actively engage in JFM processes remains limited.

Research Questions

1) Do local people perceive JFM, as implemented in two Indian landscapes, as equitable and inclusive?

2) How can gender equity and social inclusion be improved in JFM?

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews in 6 villages in Uttara Kannada and 5 villages in Mandla between August and November 2015. Participants (n=86) were purposely selected, and included farmers from different socio-economic and ethnic groups, FD officials, VFC board members, municipal government representatives and NGOs. A gender balance was sought. Data underwent mixed deductive and inductive thematic coding using NVivo.

Results

Site-specific Participation

Place-specific factors, seen in historical perspective, favor JFM in Uttara Kannada and hinder it in Mandla (Table 1).

Gendered Participation

In both landscapes, women face constraints to participating in and influencing JFM, including:

- Socio-cultural norms: men dominate public fora, and women do not initiate their interests in public spaces
- Time constraints due to heavy workloads
- Meeting held at inconvenient times, e.g., evenings
- Lack of formal education and capacity
- Lack of self-confidence
- Limited mobility to attend meetings

Gender Exclusions

In Uttara Kannada, VFC representatives from marginalized communities generally feel that they do participate in and influence forest management. Nonetheless, in both landscapes, SCs/SCs/OBCs report barriers to actively participating in JFM:

- Compelling work schedules
- Lack of formal education
- Lack of self-confidence
- Physical isolation and communication barriers
- Discrimination and social stigmas

Conclusion

Findings underscore the necessity to reframe the issue of ‘women’s participation’ to capture differences among women and ethnic groups. The forest dependency, responsibilities and livelihood activities of different groups of women differ, as do their interests in JFM. Many women from the Havik Brahmin community have yet to see the relevance of JFM to their lives or the value of participating in JFM, especially when their husband is already participating. While there is reason to engage representatives from the female community in JFM, unless JFM is better tailored to address this group’s interests, the extent to which its participation increases will be limited.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen rights to and a local sense of ownership over the forest
2. Promote education and raise awareness of women and men from different groups
3. Publicly recognize the local ecological knowledge of marginalized communities
4. Explore differentiated interests and incentives participation through forest income-generating and other opportunities
5. Foster collective action
6. Support champions, role models and community resource persons who are women and/or from marginalized groups
7. Increase the number of extra-community resource persons (FD) from those groups
8. Maintain affirmative action
9. Create enabling spaces, where leaders ensure all members are treated equitably
10. Foster dialogue, cooperation and sharing of resources among different stakeholders within and beyond the community

Table 1: Place-based factors influencing JFM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Factors influencing JFM</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uttara Kannada</td>
<td>Home of Apikko environmental movement High local awareness of forest conservation Good local leadership and alternative generating activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandla</td>
<td>No local sense of ownership over the forest Discrimination by FD Inability to, and lack of knowledge of JFMCs Alternative generating activities</td>
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Unpacking ‘gender’ in India’s Joint Forest Management Program: Lessons from two Indian states

Marlène Elias, Alessandra Grosse

Project Landscapes and Peoples

The study took place in Uttara Kannada district, Karnataka, and Mandla district, Madhya Pradesh (Figure 1). Uttara Kannada is situated in the hills of the Western Ghats, characterized by a lush and biodiverse tropical rainforest. The population is composed of 70% Hindu Havik Brahmins, who are relatively less dependent on the forest, and Khare Vankulugas (Other Backward Class – OBC), who are highly forest dependent. STs, mostly Siddhis and Naiks, represent 2.4% of the population and are highly forest dependent. The district is hailed as an example of successful JFM.

Figure 1: Study Sites

Mandla district is located in central India. It 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, the Mandla landscape is drier and its people are poorer and have less economic and ethnic diversity. In Mandla, the Gonds (ST), Baiga, Vokkaligas (Other Backward Class – OBC), who are highly forest dependent. STs, mostly Siddhis and Naiks, represent 2.4% of the population and are highly forest dependent. The district is hailed as an example of successful JFM.

Figure 1: Study Sites

Gender Meets Ethnicity

Gender and ethnicity do not operate independently of each other to influence participation in JFM. 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, education, and socio-economic status, which condition livelihood strategies.

The experiences 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 VFC President observed that “It is even the women from the backward castes that are very active and participating.” In fact, women occupy some of the seats reserved for their communities even though it is not specified that these should be filled by women.

There are differences in participation across ST and SC communities. In Mandla, Baiga women are both highly forest dependent and most marginalized in JFM decision-making Initiatives. Participation also depends on the individual, as some women command greater respect in public fora than others, and some villages encourage women’s contribution to a greater extent.

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