REDEFINING COMMUNITY FORESTRY:

FOR A BETTER APPROACH & BETTER WORLD

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Community forestry is normally seen or defined as involvement of local communities in the protection and/or management of public forests. Such a perception doesn't distinguish between community forestry, participatory forestry, and other such related terminologies; and therefore ignores the legal-, social- and other aspects of the actual relationship. We need to realize that by entertaining such ignorance we may sometimes do injustice to the people who endeavour to save the precious forest resources with a spirit so close to their heart, and demand for no external interference in their relationship with their beloved forest patch. For instance, as per Revington's definition, quoted hereinafter, one of the essential parameters of community forestry should be clearly & legally defined boundaries; but if the Court of Law exclusively relies on this definition, then most of the indigenous communities in India would have to lose their rights because in their system the boundary is often defined by traditional access, and not by revenue/land records though there are exceptions. In fact, there are instances in which the legal boundaries recognized by the authorities significantly reduce the area under actual protection, and are not acceptable to the concerned community.

There has been differential evolution of people's involvement in forest protection & management across the world because the local factors differed from place to place and time to time whereas the level of maturity of the community to take up the responsibility also varied simultaneously. Generally, in almost all the cases the common situation was that the authorized agency (Forest Department) failed to protect the forest patch or otherwise found it to be more viable to involve local communities, which is why/how the communities took over the job. If they decided to accept this responsibility then it was chiefly because they realized the complications resulting out of forest degradation.

However, whereas this community involvement has been often successful in its objective, there are exceptions also. In some interesting examples in the author's home state Odisha in India, the same village community adopted differential approach for two different forest patches under their responsibility: they carefully conserved the one that they protected spontaneously, and did not bother much for the one in which the

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Forest Department (FD) involved them for protection and management under the Joint Forest Management programme. Hence the patches also show differential development. This is chiefly because they did not consider the patch under JFM to be their 'own', and knew that any time the Forest Department may decide to cut the forest for one or other reasons.

Defining 'Community forestry' properly is necessary to promote public forest governance, particularly decentralized forest governance. It is also pertinent because it is high time that we have to solve all concerned issues so that the precious forest ecosystem and biodiversity is conserved for the sustenance of the human civilization itself.

As per the definition given by Martel & Whyte(quoted hereinafter) community forestry is a village-level activity. Whereas this has been the reality in almost all cases, it would not be wise to confine community forestry only at the village-level because the potential of communities has also to be utilized in urban areas too, wherever feasible.

 Accordingly, we can define Community Forestry as a system wherein the symbiotic relationship of people with the forest makes them the managers and saviors of the forest helping sustain this relationship with or without direct commercial benefits. An essential element of this system is that it is nurtured under or itself nurtures a sense of actual or virtual ownership over the forest under protection, and if the legal ownership rests with any body else then that becomes secondary. And this element sometimes leads to conflicts to assert the ownership particularly when some external group/individual/agency (it may be the Forest Department also) attempts to use the same forest without the consent of the community that actually protects & conserves it.

Usually community forestry is concerned with public forests, but in a few cases it may have reasons to relate itself to private forests particularly when a patch under protection and public access is put under private ownership without taking the dependent/protecting community into confidence.

Citizen forestry is a system wherein citizens accept the responsibility for protecting/developing local plantations or natural forest patches for environmental & ecological reasons without even sharing a rich & diversified symbiotic relationship with the same. This refers particularly to community forestry in urban areas in some developed countries. However, in such cases the strength of community forestry is less concrete than that with a symbiotic relationship. An essential difference between community forestry and citizen forestry is that the former doesn't initiate itself with a sense of citizen's duty to national/public assets. However, some people have used the term citizen forestry to imply to community forestry; and it is good if community

forestry also develops this sense of duty towards national/public forests and doesn't confine itself to what it considers to be its own.

Participatory forestry is a concept or system which, without recognizing community ownership over forest, wants them to collaborate in forest protection and management in lieu of certain benefits. Normally this lacks the vigor of the spirit of community forestry though it may also happen that a community may consider it to be an honor to collaborate with the FD and hence may put good efforts to comply with the responsibility. This system of collaborative forest management has a potential to involve private forests also. Further, participatory forestry may evolve itself into community forestry if provided a scope .

Social forestry, unlike other forms of community-involved forestry that evolved around natural forest ecosystems, involved communities to protect and manage plantations of even non-indigenous species like Eucalyptus in village wood lots and in areas other than forest lands, so far the Indian experience goes. Although in principle many may like to see it as a form of community forestry, but practically it has had quite different implications. Despite huge investments many such plantations hardly survive now. Further, having dominated by non-indigenous species these could not establish themselves in conformity with the local natural forest ecosystem; and hence neither there were bee hives nor bird's nests. Undergrowth diversity was also absent. In short, we can say that the community did not feel the sense of forestry in it though there might have been exceptions.

Let's now examine some of the definitions previously available from various researchers and analysts.

Alistare Sarre quotes some of these definitions in a note 'What is Community Forestry?'(http://www.rainforestinfo.org.au/good_wood/comm_fy.htm) as under:

"Community forestry is a village-level forestry activity, decided on collectively and implemented on communal land, where local populations participate in the planning, establishing, managing and harvesting of forest crops, and so receive a major proportion of the socio-economic and ecological benefits from the forest."

- Martel & Whyte, 1992

"Successful community forestry requires... genuine popular participation in decision-making... Experience has proven time and again that participation is more than a development cliche; it is an absolute necessity if goals are to be met. But working with people rather than policing them is a new role for many foresters."

- Eckholm et al, 1984

"Community forestry has the following characteristics: the local community controls a clearly and legally defined area of forest; the local community is free from governmental and other outside pressure concerning the utilisation of that forest; if the forestry involves commercial sale of timber or other products, then the community is free from economic exploitation of markets or other pressure from outside forces; the community has long-term security of tenure over the forest and sees its future as being tied to the forest"

- J. Revington, Rainforest Information Centre, 1992

"Community forestry, social forestry and rural development forestry are more or less equivalent and reflect Abraham Lincoln's view of democracy - government of the people, by the people, for the people."

- J. Burley, Oxford Forestry Institute

"The political dimension of community forestry makes it a venue for people's struggle against domination and exploitation of the community's resources by 'outsiders'. Ecology, equity and social justice are part of this struggle."

- Rao, 1991

We can see that whereas that of Rao and Eckholm *et al* are actually explanations than definitions, Martel & Whyte attempt to give a definition whereas Revington's has more substance in it. However, despite its apparently loose constitution the statement of Burley holds the key to forest governance.

A FAO webpage on Community Forestry provides us with the following definition:

Community forestry was initially defined, by FAO, as *"any situation which intimately involves local people in a forestry activity. It embraces a spectrum of situations ranging from woodlots in areas which are short of wood and other forest products for local needs, through the growing of trees at the farm level to provide cash crops and the processing of forest products at the household, artisan or small industry level to generate income, to the activities of forest dwelling communities"* (FAO 1978). Thus, community forestry was perceived as encompassing activities by individual households, women and men farmers and other people, as well as those involving a community as a whole (http://www.fao.org/docrep/u5610e/u5610e04.htm).

This definition gives emphasis on the differential dynamics of the evolution of community forestry, but uses a key word 'intimately' that has a lot of significance. It is this intimacy that is hurt when somebody else asserts rights over the resource. And it is also this intimacy that has implications for gender & equity since in the rural scenario of developing and underdeveloped countries rural women share a more intimate & delicate relationship with the forest because of their day-to-day activities

and requirements, than men. Similarly, the tribals and other disadvantageous groups/individuals are more critically dependent on forests that others. However, critical dependency doesn't necessarily mean a spontaneous support for forest conservation because conservation & protection activities may require reduction in this dependency which people may not find easy to accept. In fact, conflicts caused because of this reason have also been documented; and there are cases in which forest protecting communities have therefore provided for special concessions to such groups/individuals so as to avoid the risk of conflicts and also to strengthen the unity.

In a recent attempt, Carter(2010) has 'broadly' defined community forestry as "an approach to forest management that actively promotes the rights of the people living in & around the forest to both participate in forest management decisions and to benefit(financially and in kind) from the results of the management"(see 'Introduction' by Jane Carter in 'How Communities Manage Forests', available at http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/files/How%20communities%20manage%20forests.pdf). This definition seems to balance many relevant things suggesting to the evolving nature of community forestry. However, true community forestry asserts the rights of the people rather than promoting it since it has a sense of ownership. The promotional attitude may be there, particularly for communities who have not been able to get their rights recognized despite valuable contribution; but it is secondary. Carter's definition therefore corresponds more to a good version of participatory forestry.

Community involvement in natural resource management has interesting dynamics and a great potential. It is high time that we understand this dynamics properly and make optimum use of this potential for facing challenges like climate change.

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