

## Cambridge-Harda project policy paper 04

### The Forest Department

The Forest Department plays a key role in decision-making and management of the forest sector in India. This role has changed over time, as sectoral priorities have evolved. The interface with local people has become stronger with the advent of initiatives like Joint Forest Management (JFM). This has led to changes in the way the department functions, as well as in the way other stakeholders interact with it. This paper summarises perceptions of our respondents on the role and functioning of the Forest Department.

#### Forest Department – people relations

- One source of resentment between the Forest Department (FD) and local people used to be the practice of *begar* (or forced labour), usually demanded of the people by local departmental staff. This practice appears to have stopped completely. Our researchers found no evidence of *begar* in any of the sample villages that were studied in depth.
- Our village level respondents argued that *begar* had stopped because they had become more aware and knowledgeable about their rights, both because of JFM and the presence of the local Mass Tribal Organisation (MTO), which had helped them in their efforts. MTO respondents claimed the credit for stopping *begar* in the region, while those from the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) suggested that this was due to the JFM programme.
- All the FD respondents at the state level and some of the respondents at the divisional level believed that the participatory approach in forest management had improved relationships between the department and local people. Whereas this relationship was earlier ridden with hostility, suspicion and antagonism, they argued that there was now greater acceptance by the FD staff of the rights of the local communities, and also a more cooperative effort from the communities. Some division level respondents argued that, contrary to what was generally believed, the relationship between the FD and the community had always been pleasant, and that this continued to be the case.
- Respondents from the MTOs, on the other hand, believed that there continued to be significant differences between the FD and local people. They argued that JFM had tilted the balance of power towards the FD, since departmental staff controlled and dominated JFM committees at the village level.
- The village level respondents, including some MTO members, felt that JFM had initially improved their relations with the FD. However, recently, the issue of ‘encroachment’ of forest lands had resulted in the relationship between the FD and some sections of the village population deteriorating.

- NGO respondents believed that JFM had helped to shift power in favour of local people and improved their relations with the FD. Some legislators agreed that the relationship between the FD and people had improved, but it was

still not satisfactory. The perception of local journalists was that many conflicts between the FD and people remained unresolved, despite the JFM programme.

## **Role and functions of the Forest Department**

- Senior FD respondents at the state level emphasised that most departmental resources were for the purposes of forest protection, although it was legitimate to use some of these funds on developmental works. As the participatory regime was implemented, cross-sectoral integration had become more important, and the FD had started collaborating with other rural development agencies of the government. Although the FD mandate was forestry and not rural development, respondents felt that the department could act as an implementing agency for government schemes due to its presence in rural areas and villages.

it was felt that the acceptance of peoples' involvement was increasing within the department.

- FD respondents felt that there had been a paradigm shift in their functioning, from working 'against the people' to working 'with the people', but some felt that this had been met with resistance from within the department. To overcome this resistance, training sessions, workshops, and exposure visits had been conducted. With the recent recruitment of additional field level staff,

- At the divisional level, some respondents believed that the transition to a people-based approach had led to changes in the work culture within the department, whereby senior level officials had become more accessible. Some divisional level respondents however, perceived this increased access as leading to 'indiscipline.' At the same time, other divisional staff did not see any change in the relationships within the department.

- Some FD respondents at the division level felt that they could not give sufficient inputs for the JFM programme because they had many other responsibilities. Hence, they felt that creating a separate team which could devote itself to JFM was essential.

## **Forest Department image – perceptions of other stakeholders**

- MTO members strongly felt that the responsibility for forest degradation lay largely with the FD due to its coupe felling activities, and some alleged that the FD was supporting illegal felling. In their view, the government was wrongly

blaming the tribal groups for the problems of forest loss. They felt that existing forest policies were a continuation of the colonial legacy of state control and exploitation of the poor, and argued that the law did not distinguish adequately between those

who conserved forests and those who were destroying it.

- NGO respondents were less critical, although they acknowledged the continued dominance of the FD at the local level, especially in their control of the JFM process.
- Most legislators believed that the existence of the FD was essential for managing forests. However, they felt that there was a lack of transparency in the functioning of the FD. They also argued that the FD had not made an effort to build relationships with local politicians, and suggested that face-to-face interaction and study tours to

showcase FD work and achievements could help to improve relationships.

- Respondents from the local media agreed that the FD could improve its communication with other stakeholders. Their own coverage tended to emphasise grievances against the FD, which could partly be because the FD itself rarely projected positive stories of its own achievements. Thus, they felt that even though the FD had initiated many positive developmental efforts through JFM, it had not been able to rid itself of the image of an exploiter.

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