Cambridge-Harda project

Summary of findings

1. Joint Forest Management in Harda

Since 1990, a nation-wide programme of Joint Forest Management (JFM) has been initiated in India, in which resource users have been given a role in the protection and regeneration of forest lands in return for rights over the use of certain forest products. The programme has the potential to have an impact on two distinct, though related, objectives: improving the quality and extent of forest cover in the country through better protection and regeneration; and, improving the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities, especially marginal and tribal groups.

The mechanism through which this new regime has been implemented is the creation of forest management committees at the village level. The Madhya Pradesh JFM resolution was first issued in 1991, and has been amended three times since (the most recent version dates from 2001). Over the years, the State has attempted to make JFM committees more inclusive, and now the entire *gram sabha* (village body) constitutes the general body for JFM. There are also special provisions with respect to the participation of women and disadvantaged groups of society.

This section summarises our findings relating to the views expressed by respondents on: the way in which JFM committees were functioning on the ground in Harda Forest Division; the roles and responsibilities of committees; and the impacts on forest protection and regeneration.

1.1 Formation and functioning of JFM committees

- Most of the JFM committees in Harda were formed in the first phase of the programme, by 1992-93. Our sample covered twenty JFM committees (6 Village Forest Committees, VFCs, and 14 Forest Protection Committees, FPCs). These were purposively sampled from the six ranges in Harda Forest Division.

- Respondents at the village level reported that there was very little active participation in the formation of committees. They also reported that meetings of committees were irregular. They suggested that the members of the Executive Committees, which have a key role in decision-making, were chosen by the Forest Department (FD). A number of women reported that they were unaware even about the existence of a JFM committee in the village, and felt they had no role in decision-making. Only one woman in all of our sample villages knew that she was a member of the Executive Committee.

- The Forest Department, on the other hand, argued that there was no interference

by their staff in the selection of the Executive Committee, and the villagers themselves directly selected the members.

- Forest Department respondents admitted that there had been limited success in securing the participation of women, since social customs prevented male departmental staff from acting as effective extension agents among women. The recent recruitment of women as forest guards in the state should partially redress this issue. Respondents from the Forest Department also felt that marginalised sections of the village community did not participate fully in committees, due to 'elite capture', especially in revenue villages.

- Members of Mass Tribal Organisations (MTOs) argued that the committees were completely under the control of Forest Department staff, and were not constituted democratically. They suggested that forest staff usually selected their favourites as members of the Executive Committees. They also claimed that committee meetings were infrequent, and that committees existed more on paper than as functioning village-level institutions.

- Members of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) at all levels felt that there was limited participation in the committees. This was partly due to entrenched elite domination at the village level, but also the perceived superior technical capability of the Forest Department to undertake forest management.

- The legislators' perceptions of forest committees were mixed. Some felt that these were being constituted through a democratic process by observing the guidelines. Others, however, believed that elections for committees were being influenced either by the Forest Department, or the political elites of the village, or both.
Most respondents agreed that committees had been captured by elites, but believed that this was inevitable given the social and economic conditions that prevailed in the villages.

1.2 Roles and responsibilities of JFM committees

- At the village level, respondents felt that JFM committees needed to develop their capacity for roles such as record keeping and maintenance of accounts. They also argued that there was very little financial transparency in the committees as they presently operated, since the financial records were kept with the Forest Department, not with the villagers. Our own research team found it difficult to get access to financial records of the JFM committees in the field.

- The field level Forest Department respondents felt that it was risky to keep financial records in the village, since the ultimate responsibility for these records still lay with the departmental staff. Committees themselves were not held accountable, in spite of getting funds for forest protection. However, they argued that committee members knew about financial transactions, details of which were read out during meetings. They said that although the department had administrative control, transactions could only take place with the approval of the villagers, as their signatures were required. In some 'powerful' committees, it was impossible to use funds without proposals being properly considered by the members. Respondents also felt that villagers were capable of undertaking a number of tasks related to the operation of JFM committees, but were unfamiliar with the required technical language.

- Members of the MTOs were critical of the way in which JFM committees were functioning. They believed that the Forest Department controlled all the funds, and the villagers had little knowledge of transactions. They felt that there was little transparency, and that the department had become more dictatorial because of its control over committee funds. On the whole, they argued, the introduction of JFM was superficial and had done little to change the situation on the ground.

- Village level respondents felt that JFM committees did not have adequate powers to prosecute offenders, especially from neighbouring villages. MTO respondents argued that the introduction of JFM had increased conflicts at the village level, and between villages, especially in the context of meeting everyday livelihood needs (*nistar*) from the forest.

- The respondents from the Forest Department felt that there were few such conflicts, as areas for JFM were allotted after wide consultation at the village level. They believed that additional powers for JFM committees were unnecessary, as committees existed to supplement and assist the Department and not to replace it. They felt that there was no need to legally empower the JFM committees, and thought that there may be a risk that such legal empowerment would lead to corruption in the committees and dilute the sense of ownership at the village level.

- Amongst the legislators, most respondents felt that the Forest Department needed to work as a facilitator in empowering committees to manage forests, but their views on the level of intervention required for this varied. Some felt that the department needed frequent monitoring and greater direct support to the committees, while others felt that the department should not interfere with the working of committees. The perception of most legislators was that committees were currently not working very effectively. The main reasons identified by them were improper constitution of committees, elite capture, interference by the Forest Department and office bearers of the committees pursuing their own self-interest. Some respondents felt that the chairpersons of committees had started acting as liaison workers of the Forest Department, and not as representatives of the people.

1.3 Forest quality: protection and regeneration

- The project did not seek to measure the impact of JFM on forest quality, but discussed the condition of forests and forest protection with a range of respondents, to ascertain their perceptions on this issue.

- At the division level, Forest Department staff suggested that the density of forests had increased, and that this had also led to an increase in wildlife. Most departmental respondents perceived a definite improvement in forest quality and density on account of the local communities' assistance in protection.

- Legislators supported this view, and felt that the protection of the forests had increased considerably through the involvement of local people. Officials from Panchayati Raj institutions and reporters from the local media adopted a slightly different position, believing that while the status of forests improved in the early years of JFM, it had been static since then. The initial years had been characterised by substantial funding, charismatic leadership and a perceived incentive to conserve forest resources, while all

these had declined subsequently.

- On the other hand, most respondents from the MTOs felt that JFM had no significant positive impact on forest condition, with many respondents feeling that the condition had deteriorated. While some of our village respondents shared this perception, the overall picture that emerged from our village studies was that forest cover was believed to have improved in several villages while it was felt that it had deteriorated in others.

- According to the Forest Department, one major impact of JFM has been the involvement of villagers in control of forest fires. Over time, the official data suggests that the incidence of forest fires has reduced, and respondents from the department suggested that there were no more cases of deliberate forest fires. Our Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) respondents agreed with this official view, and suggested that this was a tangible positive impact of JFM. Similarly, officials from PRIs also felt that villagers helped control forest fires, and that the incidence of forest fires had reduced.

- At the village level, however, our respondents suggested that the destruction caused by forest fires had increased over time. The reasons given for this included collection of *mahua (Madhuca indica)*, forest burning to improve fodder yields or to remove weeds, and clearing of forest land for cultivation or surreptitious passage. The MTOs corroborated this view, and alleged that forest fires were being caused deliberately by local staff of the Forest Department to hide illicit felling of trees in forest areas.

- From our village studies, it emerged that the overall quality of participation under JFM had declined over time. While all households had earlier undertaken protection activities by rotation, this had now been replaced by a system in which protection was seen primarily as the job of paid watchers who were appointed by the Forest Department. Village women confirmed that their involvement in protection had declined, because they did not receive any payment from the department for fire protection and other activities.

2. Rights issues in the forest

Rights over land, especially for cultivation, are an important and contentious issue in the context of forestry and livelihoods. This section summarises the views expressed by project respondents on three specific issues that are currently controversial in the forest and land rights debate in the country – the question of 'encroachment' on forest lands; the entitlement of tribals to usufruct from the forests for their domestic needs (also known as *nistar*); and the issue of conversion of forest lands to revenue lands.

2.1 'Encroachment' of forest lands

- The term 'encroachment' is used to describe the use and cultivation of forest lands by local populations without proper legal entitlement or *pattas* over such land. The

Supreme Court has taken a stringent view on this issue, and this has resulted in steps to evict tribals from such encroached lands. A recent order (December 2004) has asked State Governments to stop this process of eviction. However, opinion on the issue of encroachment remains divided.

- Our village studies from Harda suggested that local people felt that powerful villagers, who had the support of the Forest Department, were carrying out most of the encroachment.

- Opinion on encroachment was divided in the Forest Department. Whereas some respondents felt that encroachment had been limited, and had decreased due to irrigation facilities and increased awareness, others observed that it was still a serious problem, and was increasing because of policy initiatives to regularise encroachments.

- Forest Department respondents felt that the problem of encroachment was being aggravated because of vote bank politics and a lack of political vision and leadership. In the field, officials said that even village-based Joint Forest Management committees were unable to control encroachment, since the culprits were often well connected or related to the committee members, and were able to exercise influence at the local level.

- Amongst Mass Tribal Organisations (MTOs, or *Sangathans*), a majority of respondents saw the issues of encroachment of forests and land rights as the major causes of conflict in the area. The *Sangathan* members felt that forests belong to the tribal people as they had resided in the forests for generations and conserved them, they had strong cultural ties with forests and had been using the forest resources traditionally. All *Sangathan* members were extremely critical of the encroachment removal policy of the government and the way it had been implemented, and demanded regularisation of all encroached land through secure leases (*pattas*).

- For the MTOs, forests are not a stand-alone issue, but are part of a more general struggle for the recognition of tribal rights over water, forest and land resources (*jal, jungle, jamin*). An overwhelming majority of our respondents from this group felt that providing rights over land for cultivation would be an effective way of resolving conflicts in forestry. They demanded the allocation of 5 acres of land to all adults above the age of 18. They were convinced that their struggle would lead to an outcome in which tribal people would eventually enjoy unfettered rights over 'their' forests.

- The NGO respondents, on the other hand, felt that there was a need to balance both conservation and livelihood needs. While they were sympathetic to the cause of farmers who did not have ownership rights over the land they were cultivating, they did not agree with the demand of regularising all encroachments, because of pressures due to over-population. They proposed shifting groups to forest fringes, to reduce pressure. They also accused *Sangathan* members of promoting illegal felling in the forest areas in order to encourage encroachment.

- Most of the legislators argued that people, especially tribals, have the first right over the land, and that this needs to be recognised. They believed that encroachments should be regularised, but only after following a due process. In their view, existing settlements of encroachment were not being done properly, and some respondents were not happy with the demarcation of forest boundaries.

2.2 'Nistar'

- Rights to bonafide use of forest products (*nistar*) were admitted as rights in revenue records in Madhya Pradesh. These have been progressively diluted, first to privileges, and then to concessions, subject to the availability of material. Enactments such as the M.P. Protected Forest Rules, 1960, and M. P. Disposal of Timber and Forest Produce Rules, 1974, recognised the legal basis of *nistar* but regulated its practice as a privilege. Subsequently, the Nistar Policy and the Joint Forest Management resolutions of the state have further diluted these privileges to concessions and favours.

- Our village studies from Harda suggested that local people found that meeting their *nistar* needs was very difficult. They tended to avoid *nistar* depots, which had been set up by the Forest Department, because of distances as well as because of the poor quality of forest produce that was made available. There were also significant transactions costs associated with obtaining material for *nistar* from the depots.

- Villagers felt that the overall availability of material for *nistar* had reduced. Women, in particular, stated that they were facing an acute shortage of fodder, fuelwood and water in many villages, and the time that they spent in collection had increased. However, in some villages, our respondents suggested that there had been a marginal improvement in availability.

- At the local level, the forest committees were now controlling everyday access to the forests, and this meant that villagers were facing fewer restrictions on access for meeting their *nistar* requirements. The decrease in the number of Preliminary Offence Records (PORs) was cited as evidence that the Forest Department was adopting a more permissive attitude to *nistar*. However, some respondents suggested that conflicts within villages and between villages were increasing because committees were restricting access for some users.

- Women also reported that they were often involved in conflicts relating to *nistar*. However, they argued that their association with the local Mass Tribal Organisation (MTO) had helped them overcome some of the harassment which they had earlier experienced at the hands of the Forest Department staff while meeting their *nistari* needs.

- The Forest Department agreed that *nistari* rights had been converted to privileges, but argued that this was primarily because there was an imbalance between the demand and supply of forest produce for such needs.

- The MTO respondents argued that over time, forest policy had resulted in increasing restrictions on people's access to forests. What had been taken away was very substantial, but what had been given back to the people was very limited. They cited increasing difficulties because people were no longer allowed to load *nistari* materials on bullock carts, and had to make repeated trips to the forest. They also argued that *nistari* depots were inconveniently located, resulted in higher costs, and the material available was of poor quality.

- Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and legislators argued that there was an urgent need to make the Nistar Policy more people-centred.

2.3 Conversion of forest villages to revenue villages

- In Madhya Pradesh, there are a number of "forest villages" which exist within Protected and Reserve Forests. These are administrative categories, not falling under the jurisdiction of the Revenue Department, and are thus deprived of various developmental inputs. In these villages, the Forest Department takes the lead in developmental activity. In Harda, there are 45 such forest villages. There are diverse perceptions on the need for converting such villages to revenue villages, and the implications of such conversion.

- Most village respondents supported the conversion of forest villages to revenue villages, as they felt this would bring them more benefits. Some villagers had a different view, arguing that conversion may lead to a loss of employment from forestry operations, and that they would be subject to greater harassment from government departments. They argued that under the current regime, they only had to satisfy the demands of the Forest Department, but after conversion they would have to deal with many more departments.

- The field level Forest Department staff perceived differences in the challenges of working in revenue and forest villages. In the case of forest villages, since these were completely dependent on the Forest Department for their developmental needs, the department felt a sense of 'ownership' and 'responsibility' towards these villages. Moreover, they argued that the forest village community was attached to the Forest Department. In the case of the revenue villages, however, the dependence on the Forest Department and the resource was believed to be lower, which made them more difficult to work in.

- Many *Sangathan* members felt that all forest villages should be converted to revenue villages, because people in forest villages did not have secure land rights, and the Forest Department was not taking good care of the people (they cited an outbreak of malaria in a forest village, which had killed many young children, as evidence). Some village level *Sangathan* members, however, did not want conversion due to the fear of increased harassment by government officials, and loss of employment opportunities (in forestry works).

- Some NGO respondents were of the opinion that conversion of forest villages to revenue villages would result in an increase in population and lead to greater forest destruction, and should not be encouraged.

- The legal analysis shows that the process of conversion is lengthy and tedious, and there is no guarantee that it would automatically result in more secure land claims. Any such process would also be subject to on-going proceedings in the Supreme Court on forest-related issues.

3. Forests and livelihoods

India's forest policy states that the needs of poor and tribal communities living in and around forests constitute the 'first charge' on forest produce. In recognition

of this, the Joint Forest Management programme promises benefits to village communities in return for their contribution to regeneration of forests and protection activities. These benefits are generally seen to be an important incentive for local communities to collaborate with the Forest Department in forest management and protection. The Forest Department has also invested in a range of rural sector interventions to create more stable livelihood options, especially for the poor. Local populations also access a range of non-timber forest products from the forest, both for self-consumption and for sale. This section summarises the views of respondents on the relationship between forests and local livelihoods in Harda.

3.1 Benefit-sharing under Joint Forest Management

- Under Madhya Pradesh's Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme, forest committees are entitled to the forest produce obtained from the thinning of timber coupes and clearing of clumps in degraded bamboo forests, as well as a share of the forest produce obtained from final felling of timber coupes, and final felling of bamboo coupes, after deduction of harvesting costs (the shares vary depending on the type of forest committee).

- The field research revealed that there was very little knowledge of the benefit-sharing mechanisms at the village level, and a lack of clarity about the 'formula' for benefit sharing. Although some money had been distributed to forest committees, members were unaware of any direct links to improved protection and regeneration under JFM.

- The Forest Department respondents argued that there was no additional revenue from protection under JFM, so there were no benefits to share at this stage.

- Some village level MTO respondents felt that village people had initially accepted JFM because it had brought in employment and some usufruct benefits. However, they felt that the Forest Department had benefited more from the JFM programme, while the condition of the local people had become worse. They often compared JFM to a cow, whose anterior part was with the people (to feed) while the Forest Department controlled the posterior part and captured all the benefits (milk and dung).

- Amongst the Panchayati Raj institutions, opinion was divided on this issue. At the village and block level, respondents perceived the current benefit-sharing mechanism to be skewed towards the Forest Department, which was seen to be reaping the benefits of forest protection provided by the villagers. Benefits of JFM were seen to be restricted to the provision of opportunities for wage labour. On the other hand, at the district level, officials of the Panchayati Raj institutions believed that the benefit-sharing mechanism was equitable. However, they also suggested that the actual transfer of these benefits was often undermined due to the lack of awareness among the community and unaccountability on the part of the Forest Department.

- Knowledge of the benefit-sharing arrangements was very low amongst legislators. Some respondents also stated that the Forest Department did not explain the benefit-sharing formula to local people. They felt that people did not know their existing rights, and that it was the duty of forest officials to make them aware of their rights.

3.2 Other forest-related livelihoods

- All our respondents agreed that the most significant impact on livelihoods in Harda district in the last decade had been because of the advent of canal irrigation. However, the canal had not reached most forest and forest-fringe villages.

- Even though villages in and around forests had not benefited from the canal, here too irrigation had been critical in improving livelihood opportunities. Forest Department officials, especially at the division level, claimed that many of these irrigation benefits had been delivered to such villages because of the intervention of the department, through wells, pump sets, lift irrigation and check dams. Although the mandate of the department was not rural development, a number of its entry-point activities when JFM was introduced had a significant impact on livelihoods. NGO respondents agreed that significant improvements in irrigation infrastructure had taken place on account of JFM.

- At the village level, our respondents agreed that the irrigation infrastructure had improved, but suggested that JFM was only partly responsible for this. In some of our sample villages, the *Jeevan Dhara* scheme had provided wells that had enabled double cropping and improved livelihoods. In other villages, because of poor land availability, irrigation had a limited impact.

- Respondents from the MTOs agreed that irrigation facilities had improved, but argued that benefits had been cornered by the village elite, and there was limited impact on the livelihoods of the poor and marginalised groups.

- Forest Department respondents suggested that the other significant impact of JFM on livelihoods had been through the provision of wage employment from forestry works. They argued that these activities had demonstrated a direct link between participation in the JFM programme and the realisation of financial gains by the villagers.

- Employment on Forest Department work was attractive, especially to women in the villages as they received equal wages to men in such work (unlike in agriculture and other private activities). However, women felt that there had been a decline in such work over time, and this had led to increased migration of women in search of other wage labour opportunities.

- Respondents suggested that there had been a significant decline in grazing over time. At the village level, it was suggested that this had initially been due to more effective protection and closure, but was now largely because of a decline in fodder availability caused by factors such as weed infestation. This had contributed to a decline in the cattle population, as well as in the productivity of cattle. As a result, trading in milk and milk-products had declined, and this was having a negative impact on livelihoods of cattle-rearing communities. Women from these communities, in particular, felt that they had become more vulnerable, and had been forced to turn to wage labour.

- Forest Department respondents suggested that grazing had reduced because of effective protection by the committees. MTO members argued that such closures were unnecessary, since villagers did not allow cattle to graze in forest plantations. NGO

respondents agreed that a scarcity of fodder had led to a decline in the number and productivity of cattle.

- In Harda, a scheme had been introduced for the regeneration of areas affected due to the flowering of bamboo. This Bamboo Beneficiary Scheme had helped the household economy of beneficiary families, but had a mixed impact on the development of bamboo forests (positive in some areas, but not others). MTOs were critical of the scheme, arguing that only those who supported the Forest Department had been made beneficiaries.

3.3 Non-timber forest products

- The important non-timber forest products in Harda are *tendu (Diospyros melanoxylon), mahua (Madhuca indica,* flower), *gulli (Madhuca indica,* fruit) and *achaar (Buchnania lanzan)*. Of these, *tendu* is nationalized and marketed through state channels, while the rest are sold in the private market.

- There was considerable variation in the dependence of sample villages on NTFPs, mainly due to access. At the household level, on average, poorer households were more dependent than wealthier households on NTFP.

- Village level respondents felt that there was a declining availability of NTFP at the local level. Women respondents, who were largely responsible for collection, suggested that *mahua* availability had declined and the number of collection days for tendu had also reduced. They suggested that JFM committees had not been able to improve the availability or sustainable harvesting of NTFPs, and that the Forest Department had not made an effort to promote NTFP plantations. This view was endorsed by JFM executive committee members.

- Respondents from the Forest Department agreed that NTFP availability had not increased, but suggested that this was because of unsustainable harvesting practices, as well as natural factors such as the lack of rainfall. Some also suggested that the destruction of forests due to external instigation by some MTOs had resulted in the destruction of NTFPs.

- On the issue of marketing, villagers believed that the state monopoly on trade in *tendu* was generating good returns. However, some felt that restrictions on quantities that were bought at the local (*phad*) level were unfair, as they did not always reflect local availability. In some areas, quantities collected were not being correctly recorded, and the local clerk (*phad munshi*) was appropriating the 'extra' collection. In some areas in Harda, women had been introduced as *phad munshis* and respondents felt that they were less likely to indulge in such corruption.

- For non-nationalised NTFPs, local villagers felt that middlemen were an essential part of the marketing chain, since they reduced transaction costs and were able to meet immediate needs for cash. Market traders paid better prices, but villagers found it difficult to bargain with them. They also tended to demand larger quantities, which local villagers could not supply.

- Although middlemen did have a tendency to cheat, local communities felt that they were getting more aware of market prices, and better able to negotiate with middlemen (partly due to empowerment through JFM). In response, some middlemen were beginning to cheat on quantities (weights) rather than prices.

- The middlemen agreed that communities had gained some bargaining power, but felt that villagers did not fully understand the operational costs of the middlemen, which prevented them from offering better prices. They also said that they often found it difficult to obtain the bulk amounts that traders wanted.

- Traders also felt that community awareness about NTFPs had increased, but that there was a poor understanding about market dynamics and the impact of product quality on prices amongst villagers. They felt that middlemen were generally helpful as they reduced transaction costs and supplied bulk amounts, although there were some exceptions. They suggested that profits in the NTFP trade were relatively small, and most traders bundled the NTFP trade with trade in other commodities.

- MTOs believed that the entire marketing chain (Forest Department, middlemen and traders) was set up in a manner that was exploiting local tribal people, who needed to be given full control over NTFPs.

4. 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. This has led to changes in the way the department functions, as well as in the way other stakeholders interact with it. This section summarises perceptions of our respondents on the role and functioning of the Forest Department.

4.1 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.

4.2 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.

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

- 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.

4.3 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.

5. Other stakeholders in the forest sector

While the Forest Department has been responsible for forest-related issues in India since colonial times, in recent decades a range of other actors have become visible in the sector. This section summarises perceptions of our respondents on the role of these actors and organisations in the forest sector, taking into account the ground realities in Harda district. It focuses on the roles of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Mass Tribal Organisations (MTOs), Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) and international donors.

5.1 Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions in forest management

- In 1992, the 73rd Amendment of India's Constitution empowered Panchayati Raj institutions to perform a role in the management of local natural resources (including forests) at the village level. Madhya Pradesh is one of the leading states in the country in implementing the constitutional mandate of the Panchayati Raj system, and has also extended the provisions of its Panchayat Act to Scheduled Areas in the state. Harda district has no areas that are classified as Scheduled Areas, so the provisions of the Extension Act are not relevant to the field analysis.

- Our legal analysis of the state's Panchayat laws and their subsequent amendments shows that the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) do not play a significant role in the management of forests, although there are legal spaces available which could be utilised to empower the Panchayats in this regard. The analysis highlights the need to develop linkages between the PRIs and the Joint Forest Management (JFM) committees, as there could be potential conflicts regarding jurisdiction, power and roles for these two institutions in forest management. The issue is significant because while PRIs are constitutional bodies, JFM committees originate out of government policy resolutions, which provide weaker legal support.

- Linkages between the Panchayats and JFM committees have been superficial, but these were strengthened when the state JFM resolution was amended in 2001. The new resolution states that the *Gram Sabha* or village assembly under the Panchayati Raj system also constitutes the general body of the JFM committee. This allows for a more explicit linkage between these two decentralisation initiatives.

- Contrary to the constitutional position, village level respondents felt that PRIs had no role in forest management at the local level. JFM committees were recognised as independent institutions, which were supported by the Forest Department. There was a clear understanding that the role of JFM committees and that of PRIs was distinct, and that each had different functions.

- The exception was one village in our sample that was both a forest village and the Panchayat headquarter. The special *Gram Sabha* meetings which are held here are well attended, and JFM-related issues are discussed in the presence of relevant officials from the Forest Department. All the assets of the JFM committee have been transferred to the Gram Panchayat, which is responsible for maintaining and monitoring the use of these assets.

- Forest Department respondents at the divisional level felt that the Forest Conservation Act precluded the PRIs from playing any role in forest management. For instance, in forest villages, most developmental work that is proposed by the Panchayat requires clearance from the department. At the state level, officials from the department argued that forests were not under the legal purview of the *Gram Sabha*, so PRIs could only play a role in forest management through the existing JFM committees.

- Respondents from the Mass Tribal Organisations (MTOs) argued that PRIs were corrupt, so had no role to play in forest management. They felt that it would be inappropriate to confer additional responsibilities on the PRIs, since they were not even fulfilling their own responsibilities.

- Respondents from the PRIs at all three levels agreed that they should have a limited role in forest management, at best in a monitoring capacity. The stated reasons for this view varied slightly at the different levels of the PRI structure. At the village level, respondents suggested that corruption and lack of transparency in the functioning of Panchayats limited their role. They further suggested that PRIs had limited capacity for forest management, in terms of funds, functionaries and technical knowledge. At the block level, the same reasons were cited, but respondents also argued that PRIs were not an effective means to promote social justice, because they were dominated by local elites,

and inevitably were caught up in bigger political agendas. At the district level, the lack of capacity was seen to be an important issue, but respondents also felt that there was no real institutional conflict between JFM and the Panchayati Raj system.

- Most legislators agreed with the view that PRIs should not take an active role in forest management, because they perceived them to be corrupt and politicised, with little capacity to protect forests. However, some suggested that it was important that PRIs were involved in the management of natural resources, in order to fulfil their constitutional mandate and to avoid the creation of parallel institutions at the village level.

5.2 Role of MTOs and NGOs in the forest sector

- Since at least the 1980s, civil society organisations have been active in contemporary forestry debates in India, as well as on the ground in the implementation process. In some cases, these organisations are critical of the state and its functionaries, and adopt an activist stance. Others seek to collaborate with the state in the implementation of policy, often acting as intermediaries between the government and the people. In Harda, the research team classified organisations into two principal categories: mass-based organisations that seek to expand their influence through mobilisation of tribal communities, generally known as Mass Tribal Organisations (MTOs) or *Sangathans*; and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which serve as intermediaries or perform service-delivery functions in a range of sectors, including forestry.

- MTOs have emerged as important actors in Harda. They have mobilized local people, especially the tribals, and have sought to represent them politically by contesting elections at all levels (local, state and national). Our village respondents suggested that the main role being played by the MTOs was articulating local issues, keeping a check on corruption and increasing awareness among people.

- Women, in particular, felt empowered because one of the MTOs had a charismatic woman leader. Those who were active said that they participated in meetings and rallies to support their cause and to raise demands.

- For the Forest Department respondents, across the board, the MTOs were perceived as troublemakers. It was suggested that these organisations were more interested in getting political mileage rather than solving the problems of poor tribals. This view was shared by some legislators, who were annoyed by the style of functioning of some activist groups in their areas.

- A majority of NGO respondents considered MTOs as important stakeholders in the forestry debate, reflecting the key role being played by the *Sangathans* in Harda. The entry of MTO leaders into mainstream politics (in the state and national elections) was supported by a majority of NGO and MTO respondents, who felt that the participation of *Sangathans* in the political process was essential for bringing about change. Some commented that there was a progressive blurring of the distinction between the MTO and the political party, which could prove to be problematic.

- Senior Forest Department officials felt that NGOs had a role in community mobilization and as a bridge between the department and the people, while division level

officials were more skeptical. The field level staff were apprehensive of NGOs as they felt that these organisations tended to leave their work incomplete.

- There was no consensus about the role of NGOs among MTOs. While a majority of the village level members of *Sangathans* felt that NGOs should be involved in the forestry sector as they implemented developmental works, a few top level leaders of these organisations expressed the view that NGOs were generally pro-Forest Department and money oriented, and were not concerned about the rights and welfare of the people.

- Most of the MLAs from the forested districts felt that there were not many NGOs working in the forest fringe villages. Some respondents felt that local NGOs were usually better than outsiders.

5.3 Role of donors in the forest sector

- Since the 1980s, donors have been increasingly interested in supporting activities in the forest sector. In Madhya Pradesh, the World Bank financed a major forestry project during the mid-1990s.

- For Forest Department officials, the role of international donor agencies was considered important in the forest sector to provide resources, and also to bring in focus and accountability. However, there was some concern about the hidden agendas of these donors, and that the bargaining position of the department was weak because of the pressure to get funds. Some respondents felt that the need for foreign funding was becoming less urgent because of the availability of more domestic resources from the state and national governments.

- The top-level leaders and active members of MTOs were strongly opposed to donor involvement in the forest sector. Some felt that donor funds were being misused for non-essential purposes, while others were ideologically opposed to all types of foreign funding. They argued that international funding agencies were controlled by rich countries which had vested interests in gaining access to the resources of third world countries. Some believed that there was an increasing interest in forests as a source of raw material for the international biotechnology industry.

- The NGOs, on the other hand, felt that donors had been investing in programmes like JFM to ensure greater people's participation in forest management and to promote improved livelihood security of poor forest-dependent communities.

- Most legislators felt that support from donors had boosted participatory forest management in Madhya Pradesh.

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