

Cambridge-Harda project policy paper 05

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 paper 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.

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.

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.

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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