

## **On the role of forests as Social Protection and Safety nets (SPSN) stemming from the discussions at Amantara Hotel, Udaipur on 3rd April 2024.**

Since the detailed report of the same will be provided by the organisers, I am only highlighting the important aspects which could not get sufficient attention at the meeting. Will shortly prepare another note of specific relevance to Rajasthan (for the group working on grazing ecology in Rajasthan) based on the notes taken by me at the meeting.

a. In terms of the selection of sites across six States according to the dominant livelihood practise in each State, it was pointed out that in the specific context of Rajasthan, there are two points of concerns when this is transposed onto a State platform.

- In terms of pastoralism, the major landscape for pastoralists are not the forests though they are a crucial part of the transhumant tracts, free access to the which determine the nature of dependance of pastoral communities to a landscape. The experience from the study showed that lack of access to forests/ degradation has led to lower herd size being maintained by communities. A representative from the forest department refuted this contention pointing out that entire tracts were not closed off, only patches were and that too in consultation with local communities. However this ignores the fact that National Parks and sanctuaries, hitherto frequented by pastoralists are now out of bounds to them. There is also the question of the differential importance of closures to large and small ruminants as also the impact of invasive species that render large tracts devoid of grasses.

- In the context of forests, pastoralism reflects only 9% of the forest area in the transition zone (where the study took place). There are the issues of forests in South Rajasthan related to tribals and North Eastern Rajasthan reflecting a different type of pastoral tract that has developed in a predominantly wetland region of the State.

The five policy briefs prepared for All India Forum for Forest Rights Struggles cover different forest typologies across the country and their relevance for the livelihoods of communities dependant on them

<http://ielaind.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/AIFFRS-Policy-Brief-1-Overview-of-status-of-FRA-and-Way-forward.pdf>

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[http://ielaind.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/AIFFRS-Policy-Brief-5-Perspective-on-Forest-Dependent-Communities\\_Case-study-of-communities-issues-strictly-not-coming-under-FRA.pdf](http://ielaind.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/AIFFRS-Policy-Brief-5-Perspective-on-Forest-Dependent-Communities_Case-study-of-communities-issues-strictly-not-coming-under-FRA.pdf)

The approach outlined here relates to the effort of IELA and its partner organisations making an attempt to develop a methodology that engages proactively with the local community and the knowledge they have (deeply embedded in the history and culture of development in the region) This has been developed to a different extent in the States of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Odisha and UP. These relate to the following (highlighted at the meeting).

- a. Significance of the ecosystem approach to land use and livelihoods and as a means to tap the wealth of traditional knowledge based on historical observations related to the relationship between climate, topography and demographics. This was very little understood/ or systematically ignored by the British focussing as they were on resource extraction and denial of the relevance of pastoralism and shifting cultivation, opting more for a sedentarized approach to land use.
- b. Relevance of renewable energy in the control of local communities for value addition.
- c. Relevance of women and children in building up a base programme related to environment awareness and the relevance of the local biodiversity in building up a programme for health and nutrition in the region.
- d. The relevance of Geo Spatial tools in facilitating real time research by local communities which can help in FPIC (Free informed prior consent), EIA and SIA done by local communities. In the specific context of Rajasthan, FES has developed an app that can help local communities map village resources.

The approach above is being taken up by the group on grazing ecology formed by FES where it has been proposed to have ten pilot studies across the five agro ecological regions of Rajasthan (two in each region: One covering the general characteristics and the other problems specific to that ecoregion. .

<http://ielaind.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Presentation-to-North-East-Indigenous-Peoples-Forum.pdf>

Further to my earlier communication, I have the following points related to issues emerging in the discussions yesterday.

a. Due to a number of reasons not fully explored (and perhaps out of the scope of the current discussion), there have been structural changes in the rural set up in general and its impact on forest dwelling and forest dependant communities in particular.

- Even in a remote tribal region of Nyafal in Odisha (Gond tribe), the youth are migrating in search of wage labour.

- In the study villages of Sadri, the youth do not find pastoralism profitable and have migrated in search of employment to Mumbai.

b. Structural vulnerability, includes violence on women. This includes violence related to deprivation of access and benefit rights and violence related to an institutional approach that denies 'equal rights; to women.this is in addition to physical violence, rape and other forms of torture. These have to be dealt with separately before conditions of equality can be achieved. It however has to be mentioned that forest dwellers and forest dependent communities face such violence/ brutality irrespective of gender, gender based violence a double edged sword to subjugate resistance of such communities.

c. Despite these structural changes and decline of dependence of local communities on the forest, the following point to its necessity in the life support system of communities

- The fact that Rs 15 lakh compensation is not enough to convince people to move voluntarily from the forest. A deeper study related to decreasing value of the Rupee and increasing cost of food (market) and other costs indicate that the market mechanisms do not factor in all the costs that commons provide to the local populace. Countries such as Canada and Australia have had to apologise to the local indigenous communities due to the fact that destruction of their habitat and traditional means of survival were not compensated for by 'development'.

- In Dahiya Ambasa region, it was pointed out that local communities were mobilising to prevent land mafia from taking over the forest and participating actively to put out fires in their region (based on fire alert messages provided to them).

- Current developments in renewable energy (Solar, wind) are destroying access to grazing lands.

- Mining is proving to be a danger for cattle.

- Fencing to keep out wild boar is injuring cattle, camels more.

- In the case of CFR, mismatch between the planning process of local communities focused on the local species and that of the Forest department focussed on commercial species.
- The concept of 33% devoted to forest is not based on any scientific evidence or history. It is preferred that the entire landscape is taken into account with the a historical understanding of the local biodiversity/ ecosystem and relevance to local communities.
- Concept of protected area as ICU agreed to but in whose control ? Examples of how local communities treated COVID at a fraction of the cost of the hospital set up indicates that anti nature/ anti people solutions are in a similar direction. People have historical knowledge about the relevance of nature for livelihood but these knowledge systems devoid of concrete practise are in decay and need to be revived by scientific assessment of their relevance which is easily verified by the local communities. This process of empowerment linked to historical and social memory systems can prove much more effective in providing social security and safety nets than doles. Crores of rupees have been pumped in to provide food security to forest dependent communities deprived of access and benefit from the forest nut they have failed to provide real solutions to malnourishment..

c. Misguided approach to plantations on pasturelands. Case of Panch Phala a case in point. Thanks to awareness created by FES, move to consider grassland regimes.

d. FES facilitated movement to have Asset registers in the Panchayat. Sarpanch etc not interested as it prevents illegal transfer of land, monitoring of encroachments etc. Nevertheless it is gaining acceptance as a viable way to go..

Finally the issue of the Rajasthan and Gujarat throwing up their hands to the placing of underground cables to save the remaining 120 Great Indian Bustards in the region (the State Bird of Rajasthan too) point to an entirely different paradigm of development.

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 Viren ji has listed a number of points which were raised during discussion very nicely .I think discussions during the seminar were quite useful and practical. I would like to bring up that we should have more thought on Environmental services , which are directly or indirectly impacting the community should be addressed properly.

Congratulations to study team for wonderful presentation and Team FES for coordinating  
 Looking forward

R P Yadav  
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Thank you for highlighting this point. It helps me make a point I raised much clearer

- a. The examples cited showed how the ecosystem services provided related to the specific ecoregion under discussion.
- b. I placed a poster of the work done by SPWD for the Sub Global Assessment programme undertaken worldwide. This exercise helped to develop tools for Ecosystem assessment, understand interlinkages and facilitate multilayering a technique that is now widely practised.
- c. Using this approach which we developed in Bharatpur, we examined ecosystems across the country and despite the lack of resources for the same with community participation we were able to do ecosystem assessments in different parts of the country.
- d. In our training programme in Ashankur in June 2023, we made a breakthrough regarding the methodology needed for participatory ecosystem assessments and the relevance of GeoSpatial tools for real time action research on the same. This report is attached. The approach has helped us with the preliminary module for community based ecosystem assessments, which we hope to be able to firm up over the next six months.

Unlike earlier approaches where Geo spatial tools are used for centralised monitoring of natural resources and in use by the Forest department and others (Mihir Bharadwaj referred to the forest fire alerts provided by FSI which are now being used by local communities in Dhaiya and Ambasa). We are talking of communities being able to assess their own resources and monitor the status of ecosystems services in their region with expert help. The importance of this lies in the following

- Need to make the micro planning process transparent to not only village communities but policy makers as well. The baseline documentation can be placed on google map to avoid subjectivity both by the village community and the planners sitting at the district level. A version of this is already in place in relation to watershed planning. We aim to expand this to look at aspects of importance for Climate Change, Ecology, Wildlife and livelihood support systems of local communities.

We face an uphill task related to the lack of funds for such work, however due to its relevance and importance to local communities we have been able to make slow but sure progress despite all the hurdles placed before us. That it is doable at community level is being demonstrated on the ground as mobiles (ubiquitously available now) can record the GPS locations with photographic evidence required for ground truthing.

In the case renewable energy technology can be put in the hands of people, Timbaktu Collective has experimented with solar panels on roof tops which are used to provide electricity supplied to the grid and can be drawn upon to power machines for groundnut oil extraction by producer cooperatives. Siddharth Vyas a marine engineer in Jamnagar has trained local 12th standard students to use lathe machines which have helped him to develop the machines required to process 50tons of biowaste of Jamnagar a day (producing gas sufficient to supply 30,000 households) and 60 tons of enriched compost which is supplied to local communities. Can these breakthroughs change business as usual? Can local processing facilities, indigenously designed help to reduce the necessity of unnecessary transport ? Not only a polluter but a guzzler of valuable foreign exchange as well.

Our contention is that the money which is available with panchayats (on paper at present) about rs 4 crores with 29 departments under the PRI system can be used to make this systemic change to decentralised governance provided local communities are empowered to do their own

ecosystem assessments and use this in the process of micro planning to be duly approved at the Panchayat level. Federations of local communities, area based and thematic, can be trained to look at ecosystem services of the landscape so that communities can meaningfully engage with the District administration.

regards

Viren