

HOW STAKEHOLDERS PERCEIVE JOINT FOREST MANAGEMENT: A PERCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Parul Rishi¹

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the perceptions of forest officers/staff and local people about different dimensions of Joint Forest Management (JFM) and to assess the constraints to JFM as perceived by people and forest personnel of India. The study conducted a comprehensive investigation of 110 people from 14 village forest committees falling under seven forest divisions of two forest circles, Hoshangabad and Jabalpur of Madhya Pradesh State of India. Both forest officers and local people indicated a trend towards developing positive perceptions of each other and a significant improvement in the interrelationship between the two was found. Both groups perceive that JFM has encouraged a participatory approach in the functioning of forest department and committees to some extent. JFM has also improved the conditions of forests and is attempting to contribute towards village development and improving the socio-economic condition of the villagers. In this regard the Divisional Forest Officers and rangers are supposed to play the most crucial role in the success of JFM, as seen by local people. However, villagers' expectations of immediate benefits from JFM, their poverty, illiteracy and ignorance, the limited role of women, limited motivation of people and forest officers and caste conflicts were considered as major constraints to the effective implementation of JFM.

Introduction

Natural resource management has been a great challenge for planners, policy makers and resource managers especially in developing countries owing to the conflict in use and control of depleting resources. People's psyche is generally governed by social trap where they can just visualise the immediate benefits and not the temporal cost, which they have to pay because of those benefits, and which eventually becomes larger and larger. More so, Indian Psyche is basically marked with values for sociability, personalised relationships and group working. Rural people have remained in collaborative culture since centuries and are affiliative in nature. So, whenever the external pressure is enforced on them through bureaucratic system of forest department it inhibits the established equilibrium and energies are channelled in the activities off the common objective of forest management-never in the common interest and always with considerable emotional costs.

When National Forest Policy came into existence in 1952, use of forest by adjoining village communities was relatively restricted at the cost of national interests. Managing forests only in larger national interests and overlooking people's needs resulted in further degradation and forest department could not effectively protect the forest. Therefore, forest conservation necessitated active participation of local communities. Thus, **JFM was evolved from the conflicts that arose over local use rights, for subsistence, for commercial use and for the preservation of environment and ecology in National forest policy of India, 1988.** As a result, socio-psychological dimensions of work have started receiving systematic attention and participatory management approach is being proposed world-wide. Only a decade back, foresters and planners have begun to realise that their role of policing India's vast forest areas, was neither responding to the needs of nature, nor to the nation's rural communities (Palit 1996).

The establishment of Joint Forest Management agreements has allowed departmental field staff to redefine their relationship with the village people to regain their trust and alliance. The secondary literature search revealed that much of the JFM studies focus on ecological and economic dimensions. However, JFM utilizes the concept of HRD as a major component besides others where importance of behavioral dimensions in micro/macro level organizational effectiveness can not be denied. By now it is more than a decade after the introduction of JFM policy and it has been notified in many of the states of India including Madhya Pradesh. It is a high time to see what different actors think about Joint Forest Management programme? This perceptual analysis of foresters and local people was conducted with a focus on the study of perceptions of forest officers/staff and local people about different dimensions of Joint Forest Management and to assess the constraints to Joint Forest Management as perceived by people and forest personnel.

Materials and Methods

Study Site

The research focussed on a comprehensive investigation of 14 village forest committees (VFC) falling under seven divisions of two forest circles Hoshangabad and Jabalpur of Madhya Pradesh state of India. The study prioritised the perceptions of villagers and forest officers with a special focus on different dimensions of JFM like institutional, ecological and socio-economic. Constraints to JFM as perceived by people and forest personnel and suggestions of people and forest officers were also assessed.

Sample

The research focused on a comprehensive inquiry within 14 Forest Committees falling under Hoshangabad and Jabalpur forest circles of Madhya Pradesh, India. Partners in this research were forest officers and people from local communities. In total 45 forest officers of different levels and 110 local people representing all the seven divisions of two forest circles constituted the sample. From each division one or two ranges were selected in consultation with Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) taking into consideration the criteria of representing both the successful/effective committees and the committees which were not that much successful or effective. One or two committees from each selected range were taken in the sample following the above mentioned criteria.

Village Level Selection: From each committee, five to eight members were selected representing at least one women, one teacher, two Executive Committee Members, local leader, aged person of the village and some other villagers (two or more in number). It was also taken care of that selected sample should have at least some basic understanding about JFM and should be vocal enough to narrate his/her view points or concern. To suit the above purpose, purposive sampling technique was used.

Selection of Forest Officers: It was planned to execute the study on forest officers starting from the designation of CF to the forest guard. All the Conservators (CF's), Divisional Forest Officers (DFO), Assistant Conservators, Sub Divisional officers, rangers, deputy rangers and forest guards of the selected sampling areas/Committees were included in the sample. In total, 45 forest officers/field staff of different levels constituted the sample.

Tools and Techniques

✓ **Perception of JFM (PJ):** This scale attempts to measure the perceptions of forest officers and village people both towards different dimensions of JFM through a common 8 item five point Likert type rating scale divided in 4 sections like Institutional Aspect consisting of three items that seek the perceptions of villagers and forest officers about institutional aspect of JFM. Participatory aspect of this section consists

of items that assess the inclusion of participatory approach in the functioning of forest department with reference to JFM. Ecological and Socio-economic aspect assesses perceptions about ecological and socio-economic aspect of JFM.

✓ Constraints of JFM (CJ): JFM is relatively a new beginning in forest department and still a challenging task to succeed. There are various possible threats that may inhibit forest/village development. This scale consists of various such constraints that have been listed on the basis of experience of different researchers/forest officers and the available literature. Eleven such constraints have been listed for example:

- Poverty
- Political interference
- Pressure of rich/influential people
- Limited participation of women
- Limited freedom of forest Staff to work, etc.

Both villagers and Forest officers/staff are expected to give ranks from 1 to 11 or lesser in the order of significance of the possible constraints. At the end, they are also expected to give suggestions for the success of JFM programme in their area as per their perceptions.

Procedure

Data was collected in three stages. In stage one, a focused group discussion with about 40% of the households, was organised to explain the purpose, establish rapport and indirectly assess and infer their perceptions through discussion. In stage two, in-depth perceptual analysis was conducted by using the pre-designed structured questionnaires/rating-ranking scales as mentioned above. Participatory techniques and different variations of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) were used to suit the need and obtain the reliable information. The sample of six to eight persons was purposively selected to represent different categories of people. Randomisation at this stage was not possible because in perceptual analysis, expressiveness of the person is very essential to assess the perceptions, which was limited in the villages because of illiteracy, ignorance, inhibitions and several other reasons. In stage three, data was collected from local forest staff of the concerned committees and forest officers of the respective division. Secondary data was collected from the circle, divisional and range offices as per need to substantiate the obtained information.

Results

Perception of JFM was assessed using an eight-item scale with three sub sections, i.e., institutional aspect, and participatory aspect and ecological/socio economic aspect. This scale was commonly used for forest officers and local people to see what they perceive about different aspects of JFM. Results of perceptual analysis of villagers and forest officers are presented in Table 1 in a comparative manner.

TABLE 1: Scale Average of PJ For Villagers (V) and Forest Personnel(F).

| Sub sections | Items | Scale Average (V) | Scale Average (F) |
|----------------------|---|-------------------|-------------------|
| Institutional Aspect | • Success of JFM is dependent on personal interest of forest personnel. | 1.84 | 1.46 |

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|------------------------|---|----------------|----------------|
| | • JFM has been developed as an institution. | 3.14 | 3.45 |
| | • In the coming years, future of JFM is uncertain. | 3.53 (2.81) | 3.51 (2.84) |
| Participatory aspect | • Participation in the internal functioning of forest department has also been incorporated due to JFM. | 4.24 (4.24) | 4.26 (4.26) |
| Ecological/S.E. Aspect | • There has been satisfactory improvement in the conditions of forest because of JFM. | 4.16 | 4.38 |
| | • The benefit sharing from JFM is not very clear. | 3.23 | 3.79 |
| | • JFM has led to satisfactory improvement in the socio-economic level of villagers. | 4.10 | 4.23 |
| | • It is difficult to make JFM successful without joining it with village development. | 4.18 (3.92) | 4.33 (4.18) |
| Scale Average | | 3.84 | 4.06 |

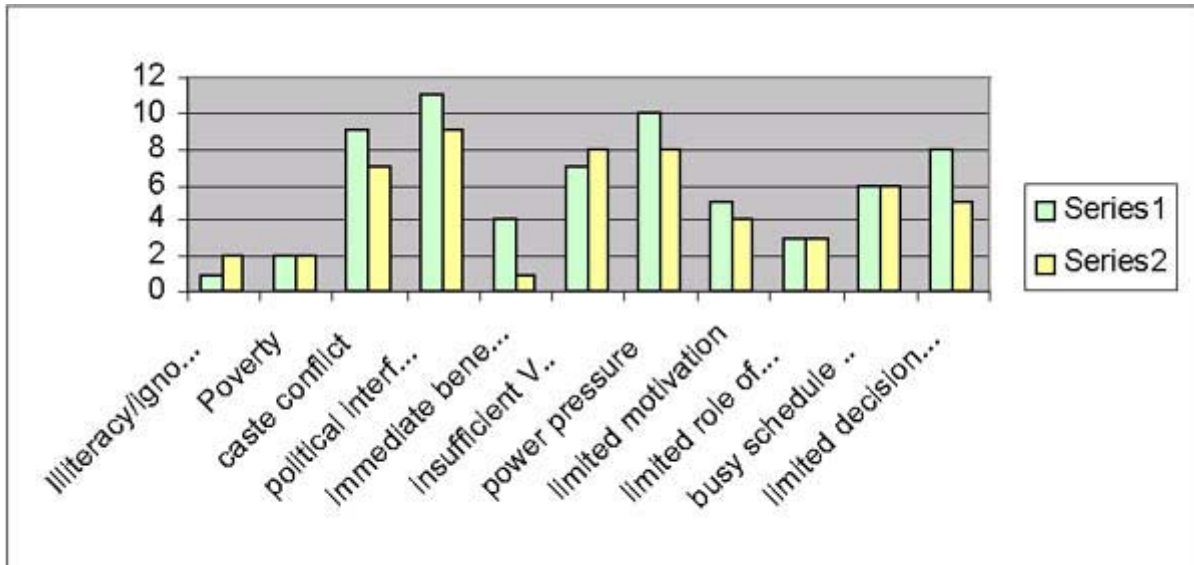
To reconfirm whether forest personnel and village people share the common perceptions about JFM as evident from the results, chi square test for association was used. The obtained results (chi square = 3.23 < 9.488, df = 4, p.05) indicated that the groups of forest personnel and local people share the common perceptions about JFM and the difference between the two is just because of chance factor and is statistically not significant.

The above results clearly indicate that over all forest personnel and local people have the positive opinion about JFM. However, both disagree that JFM has been institutionalised (scale average = 2.84 & 2.81 < 3.00, the neutral scale point.), rather it is in the process of institutionalisation and the period of one decade is too less for a new programme to be institutionalised. Earlier studies also indicate that speedy replication of JFM without proper nurturing of community participation and institution building is open to all kinds of problems (Mukherjee 1997). However, the positive approach regarding ecological and socio - economic contributions of JFM clearly shows the trend towards its encouraging future (Roy 1997).

The observation and discussion with villagers indicated that forest guard, the lowest in the hierarchy of field staff is not perceived positively by the people because he was the person with whom they had the most negative relations at the time when Joint Forest Management was not there. Similarly, local leader and Sarpanch are also perceived negatively because of their image of being the power centres and thus having exploitative attitude. However, people expressed that Divisional Forest Officer and Range Forest Officer play the most crucial and critical role for any committee to succeed. The observation of many other sites also confirmed that wherever these officers were quite active and were having good personalised relations with local people, committee was quite successful and people were having positive perceptions about the officers and the people's institution as a whole.

In regard to constraints as perceived by forest officers and local people, both experienced various problems and constraints which they encounter time to time while implementing JFM.. These constraints were ranked by them in order of their seriousness. Figure 1 graphically presents the comparative picture of forest personnel and local people regarding constraints to JFM in a ranked manner.

FIGURE 1: Ranking of Forest Personnel and village people regarding constraints to JFM.



Series 1-Local People, Series 2-Forest Personnel

The figure indicates that forest personnel and village people commonly consider poverty, limited role of women and busy schedule of forest personnel, thereby less time available for JFM works as similar level of constraints to JFM. Regarding other constraints, differences of 1 to 4 ranks were found among the two groups. Especially, forest personnel viewed villagers' desire for immediate benefit from JFM, political interference, caste conflicts, rich/power pressure at local level, limited decision power of lower forest staff and limited motivation of people as few of the constraints for JFM for which villagers gave somewhat less importance.

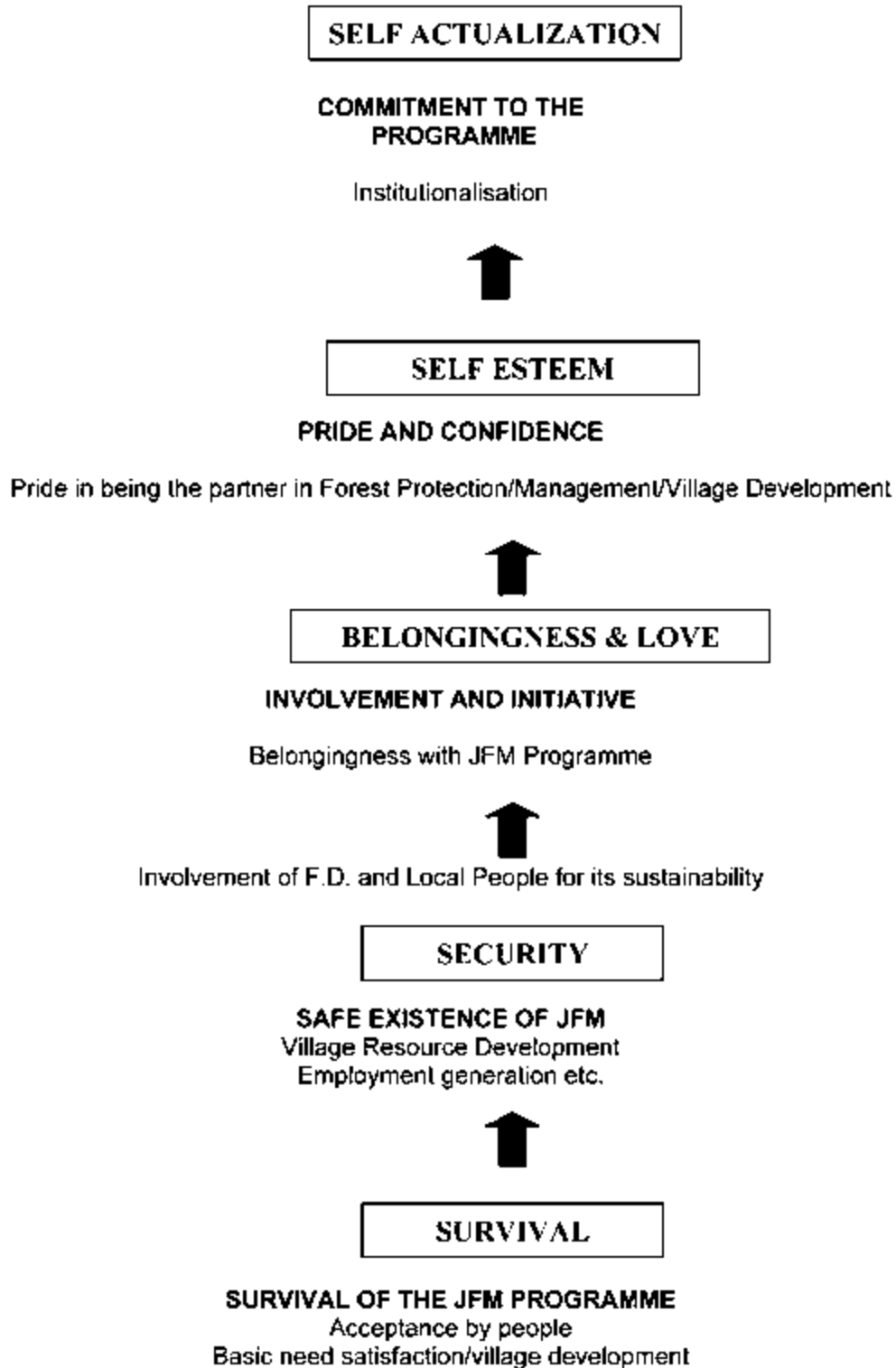
For villagers, their illiteracy and ignorance and insufficient villagers-foresters' contact were the more important constraints. The results indicate that definitely, there are some constraints to JFM although they may be perceived differently by villagers and forest personnel. Suggestions on the part of villagers as well as forest staff can definitely lead to the success of the programme to some extent.

Discussion

Analysis confirms that success of JFM can not be assured without following the integrated approach combining forest protection with developmental activities. Results highlighted the fact that both forest officers and local people show a trend towards developing a positive perceptions towards each other and there is a significant improvement in the inter relationship between the two. However, slight variations in the verbal commitments to investigators in the rating scales and actual situation were found through indirect observation. Its reason was basically related with the organisational structure of forest department providing limited freedom to lower staff, as far as their field working was concerned. Until unless, they are recognised by the superior staff in a significant manner, they can only provide the limited recognition to people's participation. Pratima and Jattan (1999) also indicated that commitment of the FD staff is the most crucial factor for the success of JFM, which necessitates reorientation of the FD staff 's role. The programme has succeeded only where FD staff could be reoriented and trained to handle the new responsibility.

If Maslow's (1957) hierarchy of needs is referred, local people are still at the lower levels of hierarchy where satisfaction of basic needs and shelter are their main considerations (Parul 2002).

Figure - 2: Hierarchy for Progress of JFM Corresponding with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Source: Parul, 2002.

Mukherjee (1997) also found that survival needs of poor communities need to be recognised on a priority basis as pillars for strengthening community participation. In these terms, the results indicate that the stages of survival and safe existence of JFM have been crossed in most of the cases and currently the

stage of involvement and initiative is probably going on where people and forest officers are in the process of further improving their relationships, jointly analysing the constraints to JFM and providing suggestions for the same. So the steps are moving in the right direction. **However, overlapping has been found in the above hierarchy where survival needs are still being catered simultaneously with the stage of involvement and initiative. In the beginning of any approach, without assuring the minimum motivation and maturity level of people, one can just expect dramatic success with participatory approach. Indian culture, especially the rural culture, where the programme was operating, was not participatory, rather it was authoritarian where there exists the concept of family head, which is obeyed by everyone. So people do not have much say in decision making and are not mentally prepared for much empowerment. So, gradual organisational change at local and institutional level will be more desirable in this context for promoting institutionalisation of JFM.**

The personal observation and discussion revealed the fact that wherever field forest staff/forest officers develop a nurturant relationship with people, i.e. express their personal concern and sympathetic understanding like a fatherly figure, they are able to seek a much better co-operation of people and committee's functioning is also very effective (Parul 2002). In this regard DFO plays a very critical role and his leadership style is of utmost importance for the committees to succeed, besides that of field staff. **Both forest officers and local people perceive that JFM is yet to be institutionalised, although steps are moving in the right direction.**

Thus, both forest officers and local people perceive that JFM has inculcated participatory approach in the functioning of forest department and committees to some extent. JFM has also improved the condition of forest and is attempting to contribute towards village development and improving socio-economic condition of villagers. However, villagers' expectation for immediate benefits from JFM, their poverty, illiteracy and ignorance, limited role of women, limited motivation of people and forest officers and caste conflicts were considered as major constraints to the effective implementation of JFM. According to local people, busy schedule of forest officers/staff, therefore, less time available for the committee work was also found to be the constraint in the effective functioning of committee besides the above constraints. Forest officers suggested amicable resolution of internal conflicts of villagers as the foremost condition for the effective functioning of committee. They also suggested creation of new and innovative capacity building and awareness generation programmes for local people and field staff with the use of video and documentation. Villagers, on the other hand, desired limited interference from forest guard/secretary in deciding and finalising proposals to be passed from committee and wanted appropriate vocational planning and equitable distribution of fuelwood during lean season. The common efforts for overcoming these constraints can promote sustainable forest management through participatory management approach.

Conclusions

Perceptual analysis provides useful implications for making planned congruent changes in people's perceptions, i.e., developing more and more driving forces about JFM institution and reducing the strength of restraining forces.

- **It can be possible only when a humane institutional network of forest managers is established which personally takes interest in promoting genuine stakeholders' participation in decision making and forest management.**
- **Development of well-knit and approachable system of conflict resolution is also desirable in this regard involving participation of village representatives, local Non Government Organisation representatives and Forest Personnel.**
- **Besides, forest managers should also ensure to provide judicious and justified benefits of forest resource to local people, region and nation at large. Interdepartmental co-ordination from local to region to national level will be required in this regard to ensure its implementation.**

- **Adopting nurturant- task leadership style, specifically by DFO and Range Forest Officer will facilitate in developing pro-people attitude along with keeping the broader objective of sustainable forest management in mind. Well planned training in current requirements of forestry leadership at institutional and departmental level and promoting realistic participation of all the categories of local people and other stakeholders by providing them the atmosphere of trust, openness and encouragement is especially desirable in this regard.**

There is a strong likelihood that incorporation of above functional/process changes in JFM programme will continue to further improve the effectiveness and acceptability of JFM as a tool for participatory decision making.

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¹ Faculty of Personnel Management & Organisational Behaviour, Indian Institute of Forest Management, PO Box. 357, Nehru Nagar, Bhopal - 462 003,India. Tel: 91-0755-775716; Fax-91-0755-775878; Email: parul@iifm.org; Website: www.iifm.org