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Protection and Management of forests through capacity building: A case of the forest people of Jhargram district, West Bengal

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Abstract

This study addresses the risk of forest degradation by examining the factors and management strategies for capacity building. Given the increasing challenges of forest degradation, it poses a significant threat to sustainable livelihoods in the Jhargram, Lodhasuli, and Manikpara areas of Jhargram district. Tropical dry deciduous forest, primarily comprising Sal and its associate species, covers the study area. The forest fringe areas of Jhargram are highly populated, and encroachment takes place to fulfil their daily needs to varying degrees on local forest resources. The study examines the necessary institutional capacities for implementing eco-conservation-based participatory forest management policies, as well as the evaluation and execution of these policies. The study pays particular attention to the role of organizational capacity in addressing forest management, along with various bio-conservational and socio-economic characteristics.

Keywords: Forest degradation, protection, management, sustainable livelihood, capacity building, joint forest management.

Introduction

The forest is probably the only source of the most essential resources on which human beings depend. A resourceful and diverse forest cover is a better opportunity for sustainable socio-economic development. A change in forest cover can modify environmental and ecological parameters such as soil, water, climate, and rainfall, which can significantly impact the local economy (Datta, Vijaya, & Gitali, 2004) ^[1]. A significant portion of Jhargram's population relies exclusively on forest resources for their livelihood. Forests are a source of food, bush meat, fruits, honey, shelter, firewood, and many other goods, as well as cultural, aesthetical, and spiritual values. Apart from this, the forest areas of Jhargram have excellent medicinal values. Human population pressure and the clearing of forest cover for agricultural activities have led to overexploitation of the forest. The presence of forests in Jhargram Division is significant on several levels. From a social and economic point of view, forests are a traditional resource for local communities as a source for fuel wood, construction materials, and the collection of non-timber forest produce for local market needs. Forests are also a valuable source of pasture for domestic grazers. Ecologically, forests are essential for some villagers to earn money by selling fuelwood, raw sal leaves, sal fruits, and many more products of medicinal value. Forests are the vast social and biological units of living communities. The forest communities play a vital role in balancing and maintaining the ecosystem all over the world (De, 1997; Kaushal and Kala, 2004) ^[2, 9].

Objectives of the Study

The basic objectives of the present study are:

- To identify the forest cover of the study area.
- To identify the root cause of the degradation of forest cover.
- To find out the possible range of human response, capacity building, and protection of forests.

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Results and Discussion

Presently, the forests of Jhargram, Lodhasuli, and Manikpara are situated in the civil sub-division of Jhargram district, i.e., the former Paschim Medinipur District of West Bengal. Forest-covered areas are located approximately between 21052' and 22048' North latitudes and 86034' and 87020' East longitude. Foresters used to domesticate the forest ecosystem's services as a livelihood strategy to maintain a narrow ecological balance and meet their needs. The forest ecosystem generally upheld the forest people's various traditional practices, including social, cultural, and religious rituals and beliefs, demonstrating the coexistence of humans and nature. The implementation of forest policies, both during the British period and after India's independence, has adversely affected some of the indigenous forest people of the Jhargram district, who rely on forest services. The execution of forest policies in various forest areas has expanded the government's control over forest resources, focusing on revenue generation and maximization, as well as the protection and management of these resources. As a result, the government completely prohibits forest dwellers from using the forest's services to sustain their livelihoods, leading them to explore various illicit methods to gain access to the forest's resources. Other threats to the study area include encroachment into forest land, rapid urbanization, illegal poaching, theft of forest wood, pastoralism, and illegal silviculture. The main focus of this study is to intervene in the sustainable forest protection policy and effective management strategies through capacity building in the forest areas of Jhargram District, West Bengal.

Sal dominates the forest under Jhargram Division (formerly Midnapore Division), along with Piasal, Arjun, Asan, Mhua, Kendu, Bahera, Dhaw, Challa, and thousands of indigenous medicinal plants. This division's entire coppice forest has endured maltreatment over the past 50 years, including repeated felling on short rotations, intensive grazing, and lopping. This area commonly hosts elephants, wolves, hyenas, jackals, wild boars, rodents, spotted deer, porcupines, jungle cats, snakes, etc. Scientific management of the forest began only after the Government of West Bengal acquired ownership through a published gazette in the Calcutta Gazette on June 21, 1956. However, the management policy did not yield the expected results. The fragmented and vast forest-covered areas of Jhargram-Lodhasuli of erstwhile Midnapore District needed to manage forest degradation.

The main causes of the degradation of forests are

1. Damage by lopping for the collection of firewood and sal leaves is a dangerous phenomenon.
2. Forest fire: During the dry season, fires sweep through the forest floor annually and destroy the leaf litter, ground vegetation, and natural regeneration.
3. Erosion: Sheet and rill erosion are very common. Gullies are formed wherever the slope is on the higher side.

Both the Joint Forest Management effort and the Forest Protection Committee were established in the 1990s, as stated in the 1999 Forest Report. The Joint Forest Management project began in the early 1980s. These forest protection committees brought about a remarkable transformation in forest conservation practices by bringing

awareness to the rural-tribal impoverished people of the forest fringe region through a series of meetings conducted in order to raise awareness. In a short amount of time, it became abundantly evident that the engagement of local people in forest conservation was unavoidable. This was accomplished through meetings, seminars, and regular field visits. As a result, the implementation of the Joint Forest Management concept resulted in the remarkable achievement of improved management of this terrain. In addition, policymakers, forest agencies, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) need to be educated in order to raise widespread understanding about the need of ensuring a sustainable lifestyle for local people and improving the forest and wildlife in the region.

Other regions, such as the Jhargram Division (which was formerly known as the Midnapore Division), have been responsible for effectively implementing approaches that involve indigenous tribal people in the conservation and management of forests since the middle of the eighties. Through the issuance of a government decree in 1989 and subsequent changes in 1990 and 1991, the government acknowledged these methods of forest management, which are commonly referred to as cooperative forest management. There are now close to 500 Forest Protection Committees under this division's jurisdiction. Within the context of capacity building, the Forest Development Agency is considering providing training to members of the forest protection committee as well as workers from the forest department. Training FPC members in a variety of forestry vocations is the primary objective of this programme.

The fact that women spend a substantial amount of time in the forest is the most important characteristic. In addition to gathering firewood for their own personal use, they also do it for business purposes. Collecting sal leaves and selling them in their raw form for use in plate manufacturing are the primary occupations that women engage in in the region under investigation. According to the findings of the study, conducting community-based organisational capacity-building activities is a crucial aspect in the process of sensitising FPC members and local communities, particularly the economically disadvantaged individuals in the region under investigation. The study makes it abundantly evident that it is of utmost significance to initiate the diversification of livelihood possibilities, including tailoring, veterinary care, sericulture, and pisciculture. As soon as these efforts are finished, the economic situation of the people who live in the forest in the region under investigation will dramatically improve.

The villagers have enough experience regarding the forest as their homeland, and they have participated in the Joint Forest Management (JFM) committee under the guidance of the Divisional Forest Office. The villagers shared their opinions and experiences regarding activities aimed at protecting their forest land through the Joint Forest Management Strategy. The forest division of Jhargram, along with the villagers, framed the Forest Protection Committee (FPC) under the JFM project (De, 1997; Roy, Dutta, and Bandyopadhyay, 2001; *Ninth Working Plan*, 2009; State Forest Report, 2012-2013)^[2, 12].

Nearly 30-40% of forest villagers participates in the forest management programme and engage in plantation activities. Besides these projects, they participated in the training programmes on different JFM schemes organized by the Jhargram Forest Division. Through this capacity-building

initiative, villagers actively participate in forest protection committees and eco-development committees, actively safeguarding the forest environment. JFM's various capacity-building programs provide various financial benefits to its FPCs or EDC beneficiaries, allowing them to participate in decision-making. In spite of that, villager's performance and participation are not good in number (Sadashivaiah, Gangadarappa, Kenchappa, Ganesamoorth, Sanjeev and Nagesha, 2005, National Workshop on JFM, 2011; State Forest Report, 2011-2012)^[13].

Conclusion

There are considerable problems in the study region, including the deterioration of forests and the loss of biodiversity. According to the findings of the study, the community-based approach to safeguarding forest land and forest resources for the purpose of providing sustainable livelihood alternatives is a phenomena that is of great significance in the region under investigation. Residents of the Jhargram district rely heavily on the forest regions of the district for the provision of both forest and non-forest items that are essential to their lives and means of subsistence. In addition, forest land is an essential component in the process of preserving the equilibrium of the forest ecosystem. Villagers living in destitute conditions in the forest fringe areas rely mostly on forest-related activities as their principal source of income. It has been the goal of the Jhargram forest division to make a coordinated effort to protect the forest area and its resources, so assuring that they would continue to exist and maintain their patterns of subsistence. In spite of this, the villagers have resorted to ways that are not sustainable in order to fulfil their day-to-day requirements. These methods include the collection of fuel wood, timber, and non-timber forest products. Moreover, the efficiency of various measures for protecting and managing forest resources was limited by social friction, communication that was either poor or non-existent between local people and the forest department, and a lack of conscious forest preservation displayed by local Forest preservation Committees. It is unfortunate that this might result in a substantial breakdown in norms and processes, since it is possible that essential agreements and contracts with forest authorities would no longer be legal and will become inviolable.

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