Participation of Lodhas in Joint Forest Management (JFM) at Muchibere Village in Paschim Medinipur District, West Bengal

Amit Kumar Kisku
Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Vidyasagar University, Midnapore-721102, West Bengal, India, Email - kiskuamit@mail.vidyasagar.ac.in

Manoj Raul
Research Assistant and PhD Research Scholar, Ramkrishna Mission Vivekananda University, Faculty Centre for IRTDM, School of Agriculture and Rural Development Morabadi, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India, Email- manojaul0999@gmail.com

Abstract
Lodhas since long have been dependent on the collection and selling of forest resources. Despite being the primary users of forest and living in the vicinity of forests, they mostly have been ignored in the affairs of the nationalized ambition of forest protection and its management. In this study, an attempt has been made to investigate into the structure and function of Joint Forest Management (JFM) in a Lodha village named Muchibere of Paschim Medinipur district. It is revealed from the study that the Lodhas actively participate in the programme. The programme, in turn, despite having some displeasing affect, gives a number of economic and social benefits to the villagers.

Keywords: Lodhas, Joint Forest Management, JICA, Forest Protection Committee, and Socio-economic Development

Introduction:
Environmental degradation became serious global concern since the first United Nations conference on Human Environment held in 1972 in Stockholm. In 1992, in the UN conference held on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, importance was given on the protection and management of environment and but also on the development of human beings who are depended on it. Agreements were taken that, as the human beings are the centre of concerns for sustainable development, they are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature. Thus, scientific measures should be taken to prevent environmental degradation, eradicating poverty, and ensuring full participation of women. It was also resolved that developed countries should initiate to reach the above goals. The agreement is now observed in the action of these countries to disburse funding to encourage participatory forest management programmes into the developing countries. The urgency has also been felt to regain forests, forest lands and density, to its sustainable and stabilise level in different parts of the world (Sohn 1973). At the time, India ambitiously pledged to cover one third of the country with forest perhaps based on its strength in JFM operating at local level.

The JFM came into its formal existence since 1988, when the Odisha state passed the first resolution and was followed by West Bengal in 1989. Government of India passed its first resolution on JFM in 1990 (Sundar and Jeffery 1999). At the national level, now 27 states have implemented the JFM programme and are protecting 17,331,995.12 hectares of forest cover with 84,632 JFM groups (Murali 2002; Ravindranath and Sudha 2004). The programme has been a successful institutional arrangement in regenerating degraded sal forests as well as in attracting outstanding funding from the international donors (Ravindranath and Sudha 2004). According to the FAO (2010) assessment, the forested land in India is expanding rapidly. Furthermore, about fifty countries all across the world have adopted the policies that are paralleled to JFM (Agrawal 2005). Undoubtedly, the nation wide spread of JFM soothes the global concern for the past few decades on environmental degradation, deforestation and encroachment.

In his study on the regional political and social history of the environmental change in Bengal, Sivaramakrishnan asserts that the patterns of change in environments influence the socio-political
outcomes of human endeavour and even of the powerful agents such as governments, scientists, and elites. Massive degradation of forest in both pre and post-independence periods compelled government to manage and protect it to ensure future supply of forest resources. The government initiated collaborative participatory programmes such as JFM by involving the people who have been living in and around forest (Sivaramakrishnan 1999a, 1999b). By engaging local communities through JFM, government made a transformation in forest protection and management, which earlier was a full-fledged state endeavour. Poffenberger and McGean (1998) describe such shifting histories of forest management from the control of forest department to the local communities through JFM in other states of India. Ravindranath and Sudha (2004) also present case studies on the spread, performance, and impact of JFM in six states of India: Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Tripura, and West Bengal. In a similar study, Springate-Baginski and Blaikie (2007) show the quantitative impact of JFM on the livelihood of rural people in Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, and West Bengal. A large group of scholars also has focussed on the problems of people’s participation and representation in JFM (Nadkarni et al; Baviskar; Correa 1999; Locke 1999; Saxena and Sarin 1999; Vasavada et al 1999; Vira 1999; Ghosh et al 2007; Kisku 2008, 2009). A vast literature also should be included here which considers people’s participation in JFM from the materialist and economic point of view (Stavins 2000; Balooni 2002; Barbier 2005; Palmer and Engel 2009; Behera et al 2011; Kumar 2011; Kumar et al 2011; Sharma et al 2012; Vira et al 2012). The commonality revealed in this scholarship is that the people involved in JFM are on the basis of their concentration in a particular geographical setting; thus they participate as communities as a whole, not as social identities.

‘Lodhas’ in India are one of the Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs). They live in the forest covered districts such as Medinipur (West Bengal), Mayurbhanj (Odisha), and Singhbhum (Jharkhand). The highest concentration of Lodha community found in Odisha. The Lodhas called themselves as ‘Savar’, and argue that they are the descendants of Jarasandha (epic character) of the Mahabharata.

During the colonial period, they were regarded as “Criminal Tribe”. Lodhas are primarily forest dwelling tribes and live into the dense. They practice hunting and collecting forest products. But during the British rule in India, dense forests of Chota Nagpur plateau was cut down for mining, agricultural land, and railways purpose. At that juncture, with the help of some agriculture practicing communities particularly Santals, Mundas, Mahatos, and Bhumijs, the forest contractors destroyed the forest which pushed the Lodhas into a comparatively weaker tribe. Later when their population increased, they failed to fulfil all their consumption need within a specific and limited area. This economic and territorial displacement caused an adverse impact on their life style. Possibly, they could not solve this problem and did not find out other alternatives. They thus chose the path of criminality and plunder (Bhowmik 1963). The Dhebar commission (1960-1961) designated them as Primitive Tribal Group (PTG) for the features of negative population growth, a practice of hunting and gathering, and living into the pre-agriculture stage. In 2006 the Government of India designated them as one of the Particularly Venerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) (Panda 2015).

From the review of literature on the different aspects of JFM including their relevance among the tribes of different regions India, it was found that no study has yet been carried out among the Lodha tribe in this regard despite the fact that this community live almost adjacent to the forest and economically dependent on its products.

### Aims and Objectives of the Study and the Methodology Followed

Under the above background, the main aim of this study was to explore and investigate the implementation of joint forest management (JFM) program among the Lodhas people of a village named Muchibere of Paschim Medinipur district, West Bengal. The study had following objectives-

- To study the dependence of the village people on forest resources
- To study the level of participation of the villagers in the JFM programme
- To study the structure and function of the forest protection committee that exists in the village
- To study the problems faced and strategies adopted by the village people to participate in JFM program
To fulfill the above aims and objectives of the study, we collected data by using following methods. We used opportunity sampling to select out study village. The village is located only 10 km away from the University which was easily accessible to visit and collect data. We used observation method to collect primary data from the studied village. Then, through survey, we collected data on demographic and socio-economic aspects. However, to collect data on our selected topic, we interviewed villagers of all gender and age, forest officials, officials of the local gram panchayat, and also local political party leaders. We used case study method to collect in-depth data on forest resource collection and dependency over forest resources as well as the protection and management of local forest.

**Demographic Profile of the Studied Village**

The total population of this village is 374 out of them 173 are males and 201 are females. The sex ratio in the village is thus 1162 females per 1000 males. The total Lodha family in this village is 77 and the mean household size is thus 4.85. Total 105 individuals are illiterate which is 28.07 % of the total population, out of then 37 are males and 68 are females. 269 individuals are literate which is 71.92 person of the total population, out of them 136 are males and 133 are females. The total unemployed person of the village people is 29 (excluding children aged 0-14) which is 7.75% of the total population, out of them males are 14 and females are 15. The number of the persons who are engaged in any kinds of economic activities is 202, which is 54.01% of the total population. Out of them, 104 are males and 98 are females. The total dependent person of the village people is 143 of the total population, which is 38.24%, where the males are 55 and 88 are females in numbers. The village people are mainly economically dependent on agriculture labouring, collection and selling of forest resources, and day-labouring.

**Structure and Function of the Forest Protection Committee in the Village**

According to our informants Kasinath Nayek, Niranjan Nayek, Bankim Nayek and some other villagers, in 1989 the local Gurguripal Forest Beat Officer and Range Officer along with some other forest officials called upon a meeting along with the villagers. The officers told the villagers that the large dance forest adjacent to the village did not belong to the forest department only but the villagers are also it's owners. They further told the villagers that the resources of the forest needed to be preserved so that it could fulfill not only the needs of the present generation but also of the future generations. Only the forest department could not preserve it and thus the cooperation of the villagers was needed.

Once the villagers agreed to the forest officials, a Forest Protection Committee was formed comprising 10 members from the village. Much later on 06.02.1998, the committee received its government registration with the name ‘Muchibere Banraksa Samitee’. Villagers of Khasjungle, Tailakkapur, Muchibere were included in the committee and an amount of 92 hectare forest area was allotted to them for protection and management. Niranjan Nayek, a villager of Muchibere, was selected as the head of the committee.

The following instructions were imposed on the committee members.

The villagers are allowed only to collect dry woods, leaves, stems, and edible products such as mushrooms, honey etc. from the forest. However, they are not allowed to cut big or small living trees, more specially small and immature trees. They were also prohibited from killing or hunting wild animals. Villagers were allowed to cut big trees only in emergency such as cremation of dead bodies. During the construction of homes or for the purpose of making ploughs, they were permitted to cut trees, but only after the permission from the FPC. If these instructions were not followed, forest department had the right to take legal action against the offender/s. After protection and management of the forest for a certain period of time, the FPC in consultation with the forest department would arrange the final cutting of trees. The forest department would then auction the logs of the cut trees. 25% of the selling price of the logs would then be distributed among the committee members.

At present, there are two types of forest protection committee in the village. One is Muchibere Banraksa Samitee and another is JICA Committee. Muchibere Banraksa Samitee is connected to the forest office and deals with the protection and management of the forest, particularly the forest
dominated by sal trees. There are 128 enlisted members in the committee along with 6 members in the executive committee. Tarapada Nayek is the head member of the committee in the village.

The JICA committee comes under the Forestry and Natural Resource Management Projects in India assisted by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). This committee in the village mainly does the plantation works in the deforested areas in contact with the local forest department. It also takes care and protect the planted trees. There are 15 members in the JICA committee and 4 of them are executive committee members. The head of this committee in the village is Kasinath Nayek.

The FPC made a list of routine for forest patrolling for all the members. Each of them had to go to for patrolling for at least once in a week. Because of this, the forest under the FPC is fully protected now and hardly any case of unauthorised tree cutting is heard. The main aim of JFM thus seems to be successful through the functioning of this FPC.

**Contribution of Forestry Programmes to the Village**

Muchibere villagers have received economic benefits that for protecting and managing the forest under the JFM programme. As reported by the local forest department and confirmed by the villagers, final cutting in their protected forest has been done three times so far. In 1994, 10 hectare of sal forest was cut and the 25% sharing the FPC received was Rs. 62,000.00 which was distributed amongst the FPC members. Each member thus received an amount of Rs. 480/-. Similarly during the final cutting done in the year 2000, 63 hectare area of sal forest was cut and a total amount of Rs. 3,21,000/- was received by the FPC. During that time, each member received an amount of Rs. 2500/-. During the final cutting of 2003, 20 hectare of sal forest was cut and the total amount received was Rs. 1,60,000/-. Each member then received an amount of Rs. 1250/-. Throughout the cutting process, they were also employed as wage labourers.

Recently in 2015, plantation work has been done on 20 hectare of degraded forest land with the initiative of the JICA committee and the forest department. Akasmoni, Eucalyptus, Kajubadam and Mehogoni trees were planted during the project work. The JICA committee members were given responsibilities to planting, taking care of, and grow the plants. Before this, in 1999, the forest department did plantation work with the help of the FPC. During that time, only sal trees were planted. In both the cases, villagers were employed in the plantation work on the wage of Rs. 150/- per day. Apart from the larger social benefits through plantation, this job opportunity for the villagers is the direct economic contribution of the forest department.

Besides the direct economic contribution of the forest department to the villagers, it has donated two thrashing machines to the FPC. Some torches and umbrellas were also donated so that the FPC members could go to the forest patrolling even in night and during rain. Scarcity of drinking water was a great problem for the village people. The forest department had installed a deep tube well in the village. Further, from the project financially assisted by JICA, the forest department installed a submersible motor pump set for the villagers which costed approximately Rs. 2,55,800/-. After the installation of the pump set, the scarcity of drinking water in the village was solved and 24 hours drinking water was available. Furthermore, as reported by the forest officials, they are planning to launch some Self Help Groups (SHG) in the village through which employment opportunities could be given to the villagers.

However, the structure and functioning of this Muchibere Banraksa Samitee and the JICA committee is not at all a fairytale success story as it seems. There are some dark sides in reality. For example, the water infected with arsenic that comes out of the deep tube well which was installed by the forest department. The submersible motor pump set was stolen by some unidentified persons, but allegedly by ruling party members. No traces so far could be made so far about the pump set. No complaints has been lodged anywhere. The voices of the villagers are reported to be not heard in the local Manidaha Gram Panchayat because they happen to be supporters of the opposition political party in the state. Beside these, there are some other reported cases of conflict which are directly related to the forest.

**Conflict on Forest**

It was reported by the villagers that a number of times quarrels happen with other neighbouring villagers in connection with the cutting of trees. In one instance, about three years ago, five persons...
from the neighbouring Murakakata village entered to the forest that was protected by the Muchibere FPC. While cutting sal trees, they were caught red handed by the FPC members. The FPC levied a fine of RS 500/- for each of those five persons. They were not released until they paid the penalty money. In another case, this year (in 2017) few month ago, two women were cutting trees in the forest protected by the Muchibere FPC. A forest guard saw those women but they women flew away. Then those cut trees were carried to the village by the FPC members and the logs were sold out. The money of the sold logs was then kept with the committee.

If the above two were example of inter-village conflict in connection with protection and management of forest, there are also examples of intra-village conflict where the villagers quarrel among themselves. In one such instances, about 10 years ago, a villager named Bimal Kotal used to cut trees from the forest and sold them in the market everyday. It was noticed by all and the FPC members warned him against his act. He at that time agreed to abide by the warning of the FPC but after few days he began to do the same act again. One day some FPC members beat him badly and police came to the village to mutualise the matter. Few months after the incidence, Bimal Kotal left the village with his family and never came back. Till now, nobody from the village know his whereabouts.

There is no such misunderstanding between the villagers and the forest department in connection with the protection and management of the forest and the collection of forest resources from there. However, there are reported cases where the villagers enter into conflict with the wild animals.

In the months from November to January, the villagers harvest their paddy and bring it home. Due to dense forest, wild animals such as elephants and foxes wander into the forest. Amongst these animals, the elephants are the most threatening to the villagers. They come in groups to stay in the adjacent forest because of its large size and denseness. In the night, even sometime in the day time, they enter into the paddy field to eat paddy. Sometime, they also enter into the village and go to the houses in search of stored paddy.

In one such instance, on a midnight, some wild elephants from the forest entered the village when the villagers were sleeping. As informed by Kinu Nayek and some other villagers, nine elephants along with two calves came to the village. At first elephants attacked the two storied mud house of Kinu Nayek. The family members of Kinu Nayek frightened badly and climbed up to the first floor from where they were watching the elephants. The elephants demolished the verandah of the ground floor and ate paddy. Then they demolished the cemented water tank which was just outside of the house.

By that time, the villagers had woken up hearing the noise and were ready to drive out the elephants. But before they were exorcised, the elephants had left the village and headed towards the forest through the agricultural field. There was a hand dug well in the agricultural field close to the village. The well was dug by the forest department to irrigate the planted trees. On their way to the forest, an elephant fell into the well. The other elephants tried to lift it when the villagers were spectating the scene through torch light. Being failed, when the villagers could reach close to the well, the elephant had already died. Having no option, the villagers also could not lift the elephant from the well. The local Gurguripal Forest Beat Office was already informed when the elephant fell into the well, but nobody came for its rescue. It was until the next morning when with the initiative of the forest officials and local political leaders, a crane was called upon and the dead body of elephant was lifted from the well.

Some other conflicts occurred cantering this incidence. Neighbouring villagers alleged that it was because of the Muchibere villagers, the elephant fell into the well which the latter denied. Then, argument also began when forest department wanted to burn the dead body of the elephant and the local people insisted to bury it. The forest department had to convince the local people that burying the elephant will cause more pollution (specially bad smell for a long time) than burning it.

It was not practical to burn the dead elephant as whole unless cut into smaller pieces. Further argument began when the forest department hired five persons belonging to Muslim community of the nearby Benasuli village for that purpose. The villagers and some local political leaders argued that an elephant is a Hindu deity, an incarnation of Lord Ganesha. Muslim people thus did not have the
Concluding the accidental death of the dead elephant, the matter was solved and ultimately the elephant was cut into pieces and burnt.

**Conclusion**

The Joint forest management (JFM) programme involves partnership between forest user groups and forest department with regard to protection and management of forest and at the same time socio-economic development of the forest users. The programme thus involves mutual trust and jointly defined roles and responsibilities between the two parties involved in it. The programme has received wide recognition not only across India but also beyond it. The tribes of India mostly have been involved in this programme as they are the people who live within or nearby forest and live in a symbiotic relationship with the forest.

Lodhas are one of such tribal groups, in fact Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) among the tribes of India and once labelled as ‘Criminal Tribes’, who are supposed to be mostly affected by the JFM programme. It is because of the fact that they still practice pre-agricultural economy. They subsist on hunting, collection of forest resources and selling it into the market or neighbouring villages. Surprisingly, not much Lodha people have been involved in the JFM programme. Scholars researching on JFM have also not paid much attention to the participation of the community into the programme.

Considering the above facts, the present authors conducted a research in a village named Muchibere where the Lodhas participate in JFM programme. The village is located adjacent to a large and dense forest. In 1982, a Forest Protection Committee (FPC) named “Muchibere Banraksha Samitee” was established by the co-operation help of 10 villagers as directed by forest department authority. Now there are 128 members in the committee from the village who are protecting 97 hectares of the forest area.

As reported, the Lodha villagers were dependent mainly on cutting of sal trees from the forest and selling them either in the neighbouring villages or in the town. But after the formation of the FPC, they are allowed only to collect dry woods, leaves, and stems and also edible products such as mushrooms, honey etc from the forest. They are no more allowed to cut big or small living trees. They are also prohibited to hunt and kill any wild animals. Disobeying these restrictions, they were threatened that legal action would be taken against them by the forest department.

Interestingly, the occupation have changed after the initiation of the JFM programme in the village. Once they were fully dependent on cutting trees and selling the logs and woods in the neighbouring villages and town. Now they engage themselves mostly in agricultural and other daily labouring works. Besides, they only collect those forest products which are permitted under the JFM programme.

The villagers actively participate in the JFM programme. They protect and manage the forest and its trees through FPC. They also plant trees under JICA forestry programme. The forestry programme has also brought a number of benefits to them. They villagers have received money after final cutting of their protected forest. They were also employed as wage labourers in different stages of forestry programmes. Hand dug well, deep tube well and a submersible pump was also installed in the village to solve the scarcity of water in the village.

On the displeasing side, the forestry programmes have often created inter and intra-village conflicts. One event even went to an extent that somebody left the village. There are also instances when the people are helpless by the attack of wild elephants and religio-politics revolve around because of accidental death of an elephant. The villagers are also helpless under the political pressure in the changed political scenario of the state of West Bengal.

**Acknowledgement**

The authors acknowledge the help and cooperation received from the villagers of Muchibere during the collection of data. The authors are also thankful to the faculty members and research scholars of the Department of Anthropology, Vidyasagar University. The authors are grateful to Mr. Arghya
Santra, a PhD research scholar of the Department of Anthropology, Vidyasagar University for his untiring assistance throughout the process from conducting fieldwork to the writing up of this paper.

References cited:

**Web References:**