

No. 4

Forest Participation Series

The View from the Ground

**Community Perspectives
on Joint Forest Management
in Gujarat, India**

**Madhu SARIN
and SARTHI**



Preface

Old alliances and new collaborations for local forest management

Today more than ever, government foresters need to pursue policies and create institutions which can control predatory loggers and secure the intergenerational public interest in some form of national forest estate. But they also need to abandon the pretence that they can do everything else besides. Relationships between people who live with trees and foresters who have formal responsibility to look after those trees have always been uneasy. Foresters in many places are now having to re-think their roles in the face of public hostility and disappearing forests. Increasingly they are looking to become supporters of forest management by local people.

The first five papers in this Forest Participation Series¹ illustrate the range of relationships emerging between government foresters and initiatives for community-based forest management. Some of these are entirely local initiatives which have been responded to by foresters. Others are efforts led by forest departments to initiate change and meet local needs. The case studies describe the origins and effectiveness of these initiatives. In all cases a parallel story is told of how the forestry institutions have themselves adapted to changing circumstances and needs.

Mary Owusu Agyemang (paper no. 1) describes how the Ghana Forestry Department has acknowledged and overcome the distrust of villagers in the

management of non-timber forest products (NTFPs). As in many places, NTFPs are extremely important for people living near forests in Ghana. Yet travel to distant forestry offices to pay for the required permit for collecting wrapping leaves was an unacceptable burden for the women around one forest reserve. Fears that a free permit experiment, introduced by some innovative Forestry Department staff, would lead to all kinds of unlawful activities proved unfounded. The leaf gathering women organised efficiently and protected gathering sites from fires and weeds. The author also describes the way in which the Forestry Department has adapted its ways of working through experiments like this, spearheaded by a Collaborative Forest Management Unit.

Jeanette Clarke, Saiti Makuku, Philip Mukwenhu and Josephine Ncube (paper no. 2) describe woodland management initiatives that have developed in a communal area in Zimbabwe. It is argued that government woodlot programmes have been largely unsuccessful and fail to address the real resource needs of communities. It is in this context that local communities have evolved their own changing woodland management strategies. These practices are entirely local in their origin, usually developed first by individuals who then lead by example and demonstration to others. Participatory research methods were used in the study and the authors discuss how an emphasis on both methodology and

¹ Paper nos. 1 to 4 stem from presentations made to the forestry session of 'In Local Hands': an international conference on community based sustainable development, held at the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, from 4-8 July 1994. The forestry session was facilitated by Dr Gill Shepherd of ODI, and the conference was hosted by IIED.

findings allows a greater understanding of how to document, promote and build on existing resource management practices at local level. The early stages of cooperation with these locally-derived practices by government forest extension staff is also described.

Minkesh Paul Sood's paper (no. 3) is written from the viewpoint of an "enlightened" forest officer in **Himachal Pradesh** state in **India**. He describes change initiated by certain sections at "the top" of the state Forest Department in response to lessons learned from the past 50 years of attempts to resolve its conflicting roles of extension and policing. Sood describes the careful state level preparation for adoption of the Joint Forest Management approach first outlined by the federal government in 1990. An intriguing picture is painted of a Forest Department grappling with the challenges of institutional reorientation towards collaboration with communities. Slow and sporadic progress is being made in training foresters in relevant skills, and there has clearly been an attempt to institutionalise a system for communication, feedback and information sharing in an otherwise strongly regimented forest service. Forest Departments are far from being monolithic entities. Sood's paper highlights the existence of a range of perspectives and enthusiasms at various levels of the Forest Department and the very real structural impediments - low pay, heavy workloads etc - to adopting new ways.

Madhu Sarin and her colleagues in **SARTHI** (paper no. 4), an NGO, describe locally-derived initiatives in **Gujarat** state, **India**, in response to forest resource scarcities. Across a wide area, a diverse range of organisational forms

and access controls have emerged, with group membership consisting of actual resource users irrespective of formal administrative village boundaries. The strength and effectiveness of the groups lies in consensus based, open decision-making with equitable sharing of costs and benefits among all members. Their major weakness lies in the exclusion of women from their functioning resulting in women's needs for forest produce, particularly woodfuel, being overlooked in forest management priorities. This results in highly inequitable distribution of the opportunity costs of protection between women and men, and puts in doubt the long term sustainability of their forest regeneration.

This case study is more one of collaborative management *despite* the state, rather than *with* the state. The authors argue that whilst Forestry Department field staff look with pleasure at the "wave in favour of forest protection (sweeping) across villages in the area", villagers do not recognise the Forestry Department. Villagers "do not want to fell their regenerated forests ever again", since the memory of previous large-scale felling during periods of resource scarcity is too strong. And whilst the Joint Forest Management (JFM) approach demands the sharing of benefits - the villagers do not want to share with the Forestry Department at all. The village forestry groups want the right to organise themselves as they see fit, and authority to honour their responsibilities. The challenge for the Forestry Department is clear: to become responsive to locally-initiated forest management by developing powers of facilitation rather than direction.

Calvin Nhira and **Frank Matose** (paper no. 5) develop an analysis of the JFM

approach in India in relation to current and potential "resource-sharing" initiatives in forest reserves in Zimbabwe. Whilst noting major differences in forestry context between the two countries, they point to a number of lessons for Zimbabwe which have been learned the hard way in India. They discuss the influence of policy, the roles of local institutions and mediating NGOs, and the incentives for local involvement. Whilst compared to some places in India the economic interest of local people in reserved woodlands in Zimbabwe may not be high, the subsistence benefits derived may be crucial for poor households. Thus far the Zimbabwe resource sharing scheme has been premised on the state's need to improve forest protection. The authors conclude that a re-orientation is required towards greater community control through negotiation of rights and responsibilities of communities, the state and local institutions. An adaptive management approach is the key - with ways to monitor and learn from experience.

Each of the papers in this series will be of interest to field practitioners of local forest management because they contain details of the steps taken, their successes and failures. Diversity is celebrated here; it is not the intention to derive generalisable lessons. However, certain themes stand out:

- indigenous managers exist, with rules and practices well attuned to local conditions, but they have suffered from a history of state denial of their abilities
- forest departments are changing; some seeing local management as merely a cheap option in hard-pressed times, others seeking a genuine alternative to ineffective forest protection and resource theft
- both costs and benefits need to be internalised; often the costs of management are internalised within a community, but the benefits are enjoyed elsewhere, i.e. if communities are protecting, they should receive genuine incentives (products, guaranteed access to resources or compensation)
- evolutionary not blueprint approaches are needed; recognizing the diversity and complexity of local context, and the importance of exploration and learning
- belief and recognition of ownership of the resource for those expected to manage it is fundamental; local management requires local involvement in decision making, and local institutions providing its authority
- specific consideration of equity amongst participants is needed
- given the above, collaborative management is difficult to bring about, and will clearly not work everywhere; care should be taken not to over-sell its potential where there is little motivation or capacity for its delivery.

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Note on authors

Madhu Sarin started working in Sukhomajri village in Haryana state in 1980, focusing on equitable and sustainable natural resource management by local institutions of resource users. She has worked with several NGOs in India on similar programmes since then. Since 1983, she has worked with SARTHI on developing natural resource management programmes for local conditions with a particular focus on organising and empowering women. At present, she is Programme Adviser to the National Support Group for Joint Forest Management with the Society for Promotion of Wastelands Development, New Delhi. She is also coordinator of a sub-group on gender and equity issues within an informal national network for JFM in India. Madhu Sarin may be contacted at: 4B, Sector 4, Chandigarh 160001, India.

SARTHI (Social Action for Rural and Tribal Inhabitants of India) is a local NGO which has been working in Santrampur Taluka, Panchmahals District, Gujarat, India, since 1960. During the 1980s, SARTHI changed its focus from conventional development projects to leadership development among village women and men, and promotion of organised action by groups of underprivileged sections of the population, particularly women. In the 1990s, when exploring the potential for women's groups to rehabilitate degraded forest lands under Gujarat's newly framed JFM resolution, SARTHI became aware of, and began working with, Self-Initiated Forest Protection Groups in some of the villages. Recent work with such Groups has included raising awareness of the JFM resolution and promotion of links between such village-based groups.

Other titles in this series are:

No. 1

The Leaf Gatherers of Kwapanin, Ghana
Mary M.O. Agyemang

No. 2

Supporting Local Initiatives in Woodland Regeneration: a case study from Ntabazinduna communal land, Zimbabwe
J.M. Clarke, S.J. Makuku, P. Mukwenhu and J. Ncube

No. 3

New Forestry Initiatives in Himachal Pradesh
Minkesh Paul Sood

No. 5

Joint Forest Management and Resource Sharing: Lessons from India for Zimbabwe
Calvin Nhlira and Frank Matose

Introduction

Concern over the rapid rate of deforestation in India has produced responses at both the policy and grassroots levels. At the policy level, the evolving 'Joint Forest Management' (JFM) approach reflects a growing recognition of the inadequacies of the century old tradition of centralised, top down, forest management in the country. As an alternative, JFM seeks to foster partnerships between state forest departments (FDs) and community institutions (CIs) of local forest dependent women and men on the basis of sharing benefits and forest management responsibilities. However, although to date, 15 state governments have issued enabling resolutions specifying their respective frameworks for JFM, and significant progress has been made in soliciting community participation in forest protection in some states (West Bengal, Haryana, Gujarat and Bihar), the programme continues to be largely state led with FDs unilaterally specifying their terms and conditions for JFM 'partnerships'.

In essence, the various state JFM resolutions assure participating villagers free access to most non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and a 25 to 50 per cent share of poles/timber on final harvesting. In return, the villagers are expected to protect the forests after forming an organisation conforming to the membership and structure specified by the FD, usually with an FD officer as the CI's member secretary responsible for conducting all CI proceedings.

The FDs reserve the right to unilaterally cancel the JFM agreement (and in most cases, to even dissolve the CI itself) if the CI is considered to be violating any of the conditions. In such a situation, the CI has no right to any compensation for its investments of labour, time or capital during the validity of the agreement. If the FD fails to honour its commitments, the villagers have no reciprocal rights for penal action against the FD¹.

Despite women being major gatherers and users of forest produce in India, the JFM resolutions do not provide any explicit institutional mechanism for ensuring women's active participation in determining the CIs' forest management priorities or their having equal entitlements in the sharing of benefits. At best, CI membership has been kept open to one man and one woman from each household (again, except in Haryana's draft rules where *all* adults are eligible), while in the majority of cases, a nominal representation of the two to three women (out of 7 to 18 total members) on the CI's executive committee has been considered adequate for ensuring 'women's involvement' in JFM.

Parallel to, and often preceding FD initiatives, forest dependent villagers in many states have initiated forest protection on their own. Thousands of such self-initiated forest protection groups (hereafter referred to as 'forest protection groups') are regenerating an estimated 400,000 hectares of forest in the eastern states of Orissa and Bihar and, on

¹ Only Haryana's draft JFM rules provide for villagers being entitled to compensation, if the FD does not honour its commitments. However, Haryana's draft rules have been awaiting approval by the state government since 1992.

a smaller scale, in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh (SPWD, 1993). These groups, encompassing tremendous diversity, are primarily confined to areas where people continue to have strong economic dependence on the forest and where a tradition of community resource management often still survives. Their internal stability is often dependent on consensus built up among all members by respected, often elite leaders, and open, accountable, decision making. Inability to maintain a dynamic balance between internal and external pressures can result in sudden collapse of forest protection groups with 'mass loots' of their protected forests. A characteristic of such 'community' groups is the near total exclusion of women from their decision making, although indirectly women are co-opted into following and helping to enforce the CI's rules (Sarin, 1994).

As state sponsored JFM expands, it is inevitably beginning to encounter these forest protection groups, confronting the FDs with a new situation. Here, the villagers do not need to be 'motivated' to start forest protection with the lure of assured benefits, as they are already doing it. Instead, with their own experience of creating consensus in favour of forest protection based on their members' forest management priorities and the problems faced by them in sustaining their efforts, the CIs are posing uncomfortable questions about the assumptions on which the JFM resolutions are based, and are specifying *their terms and conditions for participating in JFM*. These are centred around maintaining their CIs' autonomy²,

being provided the *authority* needed for forest protection and having the *right* to determine their own forest management priorities. Forest protection groups also desire mutual, rather than one-sided accountability, and an acknowledgement of the high opportunity costs incurred by their members for forest regeneration (over years, if not decades) in the benefit sharing provisions. Many forest protection groups totally oppose any 'final felling' of mature timber by the FDs, in part due to the fear of losing their painfully regenerated forests again.

The challenge this is posing to the FDs is that of demonstrating responsiveness to the forest protection groups' demands by accepting a facilitative rather than a directive role. This implies adapting the official JFM frameworks so that they *enable the FDs to participate in the villagers' initiatives rather than vice versa*. Only by finding such a mutually acceptable meeting ground, building on the strengths of both parties rather than their weaknesses, can be laid the foundations of *genuine JFM partnerships*, capable of regenerating India's forests on principles of equity and sustainability.

This case study documents the issues and lessons emerging from a process of interaction with such forest protection groups in several villages of Santrampur Taluka in the Panchmahals district of Gujarat State. Among the many interesting facets of self-initiated forest protection in the area is the fact that the initiative emerged organically from *within* the concerned villages, with no apparent external motivation or organisational inputs. No NGO, charismatic leader, or

² The provision in most state JFM government orders of a forest official being the member secretary of the CI is unacceptable to most forest protection groups.

environmental campaign acted as a catalyst for the villagers and most villages have thrown up their own, fairly representative and democratic (although exclusively male) group leaderships. Interaction with these groups is providing valuable insights into the factors which motivate resource-scarce villagers to initiate forest regeneration and the processes by which they build consensus in favour of organising themselves for a shared objective. The groups' reactions to some provisions of the Gujarat state JFM resolution has also highlighted the limitations of the assumptions on which it is based.

The first author is assisting SARTHI (Social Action for Rural and Tribal Inhabitants of India), a local NGO, to develop a support programme for the forest protection groups in the area. The original objective of the programme was to facilitate the forest protection groups' participation in JFM in accordance with the Gujarat JFM government resolution. However, even a preliminary understanding of the forest protection groups' priorities, processes of evolution and modes of functioning made it evident that several requirements in the resolution were incompatible with their needs. This

resulted in SARTHI's programme objectives being reversed to exploring the possibility of getting the government resolution adapted for the forest protection groups' needs, rather than vice versa. The programme has initiated this through facilitating a clearer articulation of the forest protection groups' terms for participating in JFM through information, networking and organisational support and assisting them in establishing contact with the Gujarat FD to begin negotiations.

The paper first presents the context of Panchmahals district, a brief history of forest management in the area, important provisions of the Gujarat JFM resolution and a brief description of the local organisation. The next part provides an overview of self-initiated forest protection in the area, the evolutionary processes of the groups and some of the general issues related to the groups' participation in JFM. The paper then considers gender relations within the forest protection groups, the importance of gender and the strategy SARTHI is developing for facilitating women's institutional integration in the groups' structures and functioning. The paper ends with the forest protection groups' demands presented to the State Working Group on JFM in May 1994.

Context

Panchmahals is one of the most industrially backward districts of Gujarat state. 82 per cent of the district's workers are still engaged in agriculture, compared to 60 per cent for the state as a whole. This percentage is even higher among the district's tribal population, which also has greater unemployment, illiteracy and poverty. 90 per cent of the district's

population lives in rural areas and 42 per cent of it is tribal.

The district has undulating topography and hard rocky terrain with shallow soil of low fertility. The northern and eastern part of the district, where Santrampur taluka (an administrative sub-unit) is located, is covered by hills and forests

interspersed with flatter, cultivated land in the valleys. This part is also where the district's tribal population is concentrated and where topographical conditions are more unfavourable for agriculture than in the plain areas of the district. Seven out of the district's 11 talukas are drought prone due to wide annual fluctuations in rainfall - on average, every third year has deficient rainfall. As 90 per cent of the cultivated land is unirrigated, most farmers can grow only one rainfed crop in a year and, if the monsoon fails, even that is lost.

The majority of the landowners in the taluka have small and marginal landholdings. Due to the small size of landholdings, people in the area have always relied on supplementing agricultural production by collecting a wide range of biomass products from surrounding forests and other common lands. These include timber for house construction and agricultural implements, firewood, fodder, fibre, edible gums, flowers, leaves, fruits, medicinal plants and various other products for processing into saleable goods. Forest degradation, combined with the development of few alternative employment opportunities, has resulted in acute hardship and resource scarcities for the people. Increased soil erosion due to deforestation has affected the entire ecological balance with reduced agricultural productivity and depletion of sub-soil water resources.

As a consequence, the district as a whole and the tribal areas in particular are characterised by widespread poverty, unemployment and both permanent and seasonal out-migration. Whereas the

permanent migration is male dominated, large numbers of able-bodied women and men migrate in two to three annual seasonal streams as harvesting labour to other, agriculturally more productive, districts. It is estimated that on average, 1.5 people from each rural tribal family migrate from the area (Space Applications Centre et al, 1991).

History of forest management in the area

Compared to Gujarat State as a whole, Panchmahals has the highest proportion (25.7 per cent) of area classified as forest. The dominant forest species is teak (*Tectona grandis*) interspersed with several other valuable species such as Dhawra (*Anogeissus latifolia*), Aonla (*Phyllanthus emblica*), Timru (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), Bamboo (*Dendrocalamus strictus*), etc. Mahuda (*Bassia latifolia*) is another important local tree, particularly for the tribal population. However, the historically famous forests of the Panchmahals, where the Sultans of Ahmedabad and the Mughal Emperors used to come on elephant hunting expeditions, have suffered rapid degradation in recent years. According to a recent satellite survey, 44.3 per cent of the district's forest area, or 11.1 per cent of its total area is degraded forest (Space Applications Centre et al, 1991).

Until India's independence, most forests in Panchmahals district belonged to different princely states. Although the rulers undertook some commercial exploitation, they primarily preserved the forests for hunting. Villagers' access to forest produce for their domestic

requirements varied from state to state, but most states permitted limited extraction either free or at a nominal charge. According to members of the forest protection groups, although villagers did not have any rights to forest produce under the princely states, they never had any problems in meeting their domestic requirements for timber, firewood and fodder.

Drastic changes in the forest establishment as well as forest management priorities took place after independence. With the nationalisation of forests, the state forest department became responsible for forest management. Many of the ex-rulers filed cases in the courts to stall forest nationalisation. During the prolonged litigation period, most of them had their forests cut ruthlessly to extract maximum benefit before losing them altogether.

After Gujarat became a separate state in 1960, the state government started commercial exploitation of forests for generating revenue. Forest felling contracts were given to Forest Labour Cooperative Societies (FLCSs) many of whom sub-contracted them to private contractors. The Santrampur FLCS was formed in 1963 with a total of 1035 members out of which 835 were *adivasis* (tribals). It received the last forest felling contract in Panchmahals district in 1983 as there are few forests left for harvesting (VIKSAT, 1994).

Commercial exploitation was accompanied by clearing forests for agriculture and other development projects. Although conversion of forest lands to other uses was greatly reduced from 1980, unauthorised settlement on forest lands has continued. Submergence of large forest tracts by irrigation or hydro-electric projects also reduced the area's forests besides displacing large numbers of people, many of whom settled on other forest lands. Several forest protection groups have mentioned rapid destruction of their forests due to settlement of displaced persons in or near them.

Most nationalised forests in the area are reserve forests in which the local people have no rights. The penalties charged by the FD for unauthorised extraction are much higher than charges levied by the princely states. The denial of any legal avenue for meeting their essential needs, combined with the legalised onslaught of outsiders for commercial exploitation, led to widespread resentment and alienation of the local population. The FD's bureaucracy was unable to control unauthorised exploitation by both local and non-local interests. All this, combined with a substantial increase in the human and cattle population with continuing primary dependence on the forests, resulted in the near total destruction of forests in the area within a short span of barely two to three decades. The forest protection groups have emerged in the above context.

The Gujarat JFM Resolution

Compared to the JFM resolutions of other states, the Gujarat government resolution (GR) is among the least prescriptive (Government of Gujarat, 1991). It has the following key provisions:

- 1 Any group of interested villagers (this leaves room to include all women and men) can form an autonomous village level organisation (VLO) for participation in JFM. The VLO has to constitute a 'working committee' which must have at least two women and a panchayat representative as members, besides others interested in forest development. The working committee has to prepare an 'action plan' for the forest area and monitor its execution after approval by the FD.
- 2 The VLO's primary responsibilities include protection and development of the JFM area.
- 3 The FD is to provide the VLO with training, administrative, technical and financial support besides ensuring timely execution of forest development work.
- 4 The VLO shall not have any *legal rights* but its members may have usufruct rights to collect grasses, dry and fallen twigs and other NTFPs (excluding bamboo) from the JFM area (grazing by cattle is strictly prohibited). If the 'action plan' is implemented with state finances, the VLO shall be entitled to 25 per cent of the net receipts from sale of mature trees when harvested. If the VLO raises finance from other sources, then its entitlement shall be 80 per cent of the above amount. (This has now been revised to 50 per cent share for both parties irrespective of the source of the funds).
- 5 The VLO and the FD are to enter into an agreement on the above terms. This may be unilaterally cancelled by the FD if the VLO is considered to have failed in honouring its responsibilities *without paying any compensation to the VLO for its investments of time, labour or capital in the forest area*. The VLO has no avenue for redress if the FD fails to honour its commitments. (This provision makes participation in JFM unattractive for the forest protection groups as all the investment in forest regeneration has been made by them on their own).
- 6 A state level 'Working Group' (WG) under the chairmanship of the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests with representation of four NGOs and other FD officers is to oversee implementation of the programme and decide on administrative and financial procedures on implementation. The state government/Principal Chief Conservator may suggest modifications to the above order from time to time.

Modifications made to the government resolution since it was issued

During the five years since the Gujarat JFM GR was first issued, a number of changes have been introduced either through official amendments or by specifying detailed procedures for implementation. The ones having particular significance for the forest protection groups' participation in JFM are the following:

- Specifically at the time of tree harvesting, a working scheme will have to be submitted to the Government. *No tree is to be harvested without approval of this working scheme.*
- *An officer of the FD shall be a member of the VLO's working committee, and*
- *The forest area selected for JFM must be within the boundaries of the 'revenue' village (an administrative unit) in which the VLO's members reside. As discussed later, this is of particular consequence to many of the forest protection groups as their membership often cuts across revenue village boundaries.*
- *The agreement to be signed by the VLO and the FD has been finalised. This empowers the FD to recover the cost of any damage in a VLO's JFM area, even if that has been caused by the collaborating NGO, from the VLO.*

The Local Organisation

SARTHI is a local non-government organisation (NGO) which has been working for integrated rural development in Santrampur taluka since 1983. SARTHI has changed its focus from conventional development projects (such as deepening wells, installing handpumps, distributing improved seeds and fertilizer to farmers and starting income generation projects) to leadership development among village women and men, and promotion of organised action by groups of underprivileged sections of the population, particularly women.

Three consecutive years of drought from 1985 to 1987 increased SARTHI's involvement with raising the productivity of both private and common wastelands. During this period, the organisation's understanding of gender differentiated impact of environmental degradation improved and its first programme of working with women's groups to develop village common lands for meeting their fuel and fodder needs evolved. The impressive performance of the women's common land groups resulted in SARTHI developing several

other village groups as its village based partners. These now include community well users groups, oil engine users groups, women's savings groups and youth groups. In addition, several cadres of skilled villagers have been developed who, besides working in their specialised fields, also work as village level organisers. These include women para vets, women improved stove builders, bio-gas promoters, trained midwives, health workers (both women and men) and social animators.

However, although a major improvement from its earlier individual beneficiary-focused work, SARTHI's in-house programme of evaluation and review indicated the need for further refinement of the organisation's development strategy. The staff felt the need for an effective village based partner capable of accepting responsibility for all SARTHI supported activities in the village. Effectiveness of the trained and organised human resources base built in the villages needed to be improved through better synthesis and coordination.

Simultaneously, the women's common land development groups had started running into problems. While common land for development by new groups was not easily available, the existing groups, due to their limited membership, had started facing resentment by non-member villagers. This resulted in SARTHI exploring the potential for women's groups to rehabilitate degraded forest lands in 1991 under Gujarat's newly framed JFM resolution.

While looking for forest land suitable for JFM, SARTHI became aware of forest protection groups in some of the villages. Understanding how the villagers had themselves developed village organisations for collectively managing a common property resource and exploring the possibility of these organisations also functioning as SARTHI's village-level partners thus became a natural objective for learning more about forest protection groups. The second tentative objective was to explore the possibility of SARTHI facilitating the groups' participation in JFM with the Gujarat FD.

With these objectives in mind, identifying the extent of the self-initiated forest protection in the area and establishing contact with the groups began in August 1993. Even a preliminary understanding of the forest protection groups' organisational processes and forest regeneration priorities made it evident that some provisions of the Gujarat JFM GR were unlikely to be acceptable to the groups, or if accepted, could generate such

conflict within them that it could potentially threaten their survival. Instead of encouraging the forest protection groups to rush into JFM, SARTHI decided to enable the groups to, firstly, gain a better understanding through provision of detailed information about the JFM GR. Selected representatives were also taken on a study visit to a village already participating in JFM. Facilitating interaction and discussions within and between the forest protection groups was also initiated to enable them to articulate their collective terms and conditions for participation in JFM more clearly before approaching the Gujarat FD.

At the same time, it became evident that due to the strong tradition of exclusive male decision making in the groups, village women had been adversely affected by their forest use and protection rules. On the one hand, there is grossly inequitable distribution of the opportunity costs of protection between women and men. On the other hand, there are questions about the long-term sustainability of the forest protection groups' present form of forest regeneration as some of the earlier pressure on their forests has been diverted to other areas through the women having to go elsewhere for collecting firewood.

In view of the above, introducing gender equity in the forest protection groups' functioning through institutional integration of women in their organisational structures was identified as a priority objective.

Self-Initiated Forest Protection in Santrampur Taluka

Overview

SARTHI has five field centres which are between 5 and 20 km. apart. Self-initiated forest protection is taking place in each field centre's area, although the extent and organisational sophistication varies. Altogether, self-initiated forest protection has been identified in over 60 villages which are protecting *at least* 7,500 hectares of government owned forest lands. Although the majority of these villages fall in Santrampur taluka, some are in the adjoining talukas of Lunawada, Godhra and Jalod.

The period since the villagers started protecting their forests varies from as long as 10 years to one or two years. While about 20 groups are highly organised with clear access controls and protection responsibilities, about 30 have informal hamlet-based protection systems and in the remaining villages there is limited group formation with individual families protecting patches of forest land adjacent to their private land holdings. Clusters of villages tend to have similar organisational forms and protection systems, with one village having taken the initiative and neighbouring villages following suit. While there has been some interaction between neighbouring villages, this has not taken place between village clusters at some distance from each other, indicating that forest protection and regeneration were initiated independently by several villages scattered over a fairly large geographical area. This pattern was confirmed by the

local FD field staff. According to the previous range forest officer of Lunawada range, until a few years ago, the FD field staff had to be constantly alert to prevent forest damage. Today, they have few problems as a wave in favour of forest protection sweeps across villages in the area.

The *primary* motivation for initiating forest protection in all cases was to regenerate timber for house construction and agricultural implements for *their own* use by local villagers. Secondary to that is increased availability of firewood, fodder and other NTFPs. The villagers also perceive other environmental benefits from forest regeneration such as improved recharge of sub-soil water, increased rainfall, improved agricultural productivity and a better environment.

The *process* of organising around forest protection consisted of respected village leaders (called *agyavans*), who may or may not overlap with elected panchayat representatives, initiating discussions on the hardships being faced by everyone due to forest destruction. Villagers stressed the need to take action *themselves* to save whatever remained of the forests, on the grounds that it was beyond the FD's capacity to do so. If the FD had such capacity, the leaders argued, the forests would not have been destroyed in the first place. Village discussions were held during social gatherings for marriages, deaths or other events. Over time, consensus was built up in favour of forest closure for facilitating natural regeneration from the surviving

rootstock. Faction-ridden electoral politics of gram panchayats (village councils) were consciously kept at a distance from these discussions as village *agayans* perceive them to be disruptive for consensus based decision making. Although in some villages, an *agayan* is also a panchayat representative, he is accepted as a leader because of the respect and trust he commands from other villagers and not because of having won an election.

Relationship of the forest protection groups with local FD staff

Barring a few exceptions, local FD staff were neither taken into the confidence of the villagers; nor did they play any role in motivating them to initiate forest protection. The villagers have generally considered them irrelevant to their self-initiated forest protection efforts. When SARTHI started establishing contact with the self-initiated forest protection villages in late 1993, the majority of the villagers were unaware of even the existence of the Gujarat JFM GR. While in some cases, local FD staff had informally supported the villagers' initiative, in others they had been obstructive. The only time the villagers had sought help from FD staff had been when forest offenders had challenged the villagers' authority to deny them access to a protected forest. Even at such times, although in some cases FD staff had penalised the offenders, in others, the staff had rebuked the villagers for 'interfering with forests belonging to the government'.

However, none of the forest protection

groups question the government's ownership of the forest land. They say they are interested in regenerating forest produce on that land for their essential needs. To gain access to that produce, particularly to limited amounts of small timber for agricultural implements or house construction, they are willing to pay the FD's penalty for unauthorised extraction. This is still much cheaper than buying the same timber from the market.

In some villages, the forest protection groups have negotiated informal deals with their forest guards which recognise the villagers' contribution to forest regeneration. As the leaders of one forest protection group said, they recognise that the forest guard has to do his duty and cannot be asked to totally overlook unauthorised extraction. At the same time, the guard also has to accept that he could not function in the area without the villagers' cooperation. The 'deal' they have worked out is that when any member needs timber for house construction, the group informs the forest guard when construction is begun. When the house is completed, the guard is invited to count the number of poles used and calculate the penalty payable. The guard, in turn, gives a 50 per cent 'discount' by recording only 50 per cent of the poles/timber actually used. This is in recognition of the villagers' contribution to forest protection.

Essentially, this is a locally controlled, unofficial form of JFM devoid of complex bureaucratic procedures, rules and written agreements. It enables the villagers to gain access to 50 per cent of their timber requirements free of cost when they need it and the other 50 per cent at below market price. The benefit sharing provision in the

JFM GR cannot compete with such an arrangement! One can see the total unacceptability of the provision in the JFM GR that no tree shall be harvested without approval of a working scheme (invariably by a more senior and therefore, less accessible officer) for such villagers.

Social units of organisation and definition of forest boundaries

Among the more complex aspects of the forest protection groups are the processes of inter-group negotiations by which composition of the social unit of organisation and boundaries of the forest area it has started protecting, have been defined. Due to the scattered settlement pattern of the area's tribal and semi-tribal population, most villages near the forests do not have compact settlements. Instead, they consist of individual houses scattered next to agricultural landholdings. Most villages have a number of *falias* (hamlets) named after the particular sub-caste or tribe residing in it. However, even these are not easily identifiable as physical units as essentially they are *social* units. Administrative 'revenue village' or 'gram panchayat' boundaries do not necessarily overlap with the social unit boundaries. There is also considerable variation in the amount of forest land within the boundaries of different revenue villages with little co-relation between a village's population and the forest area within its boundaries.

Yet, the majority of the population continues to have similar levels of

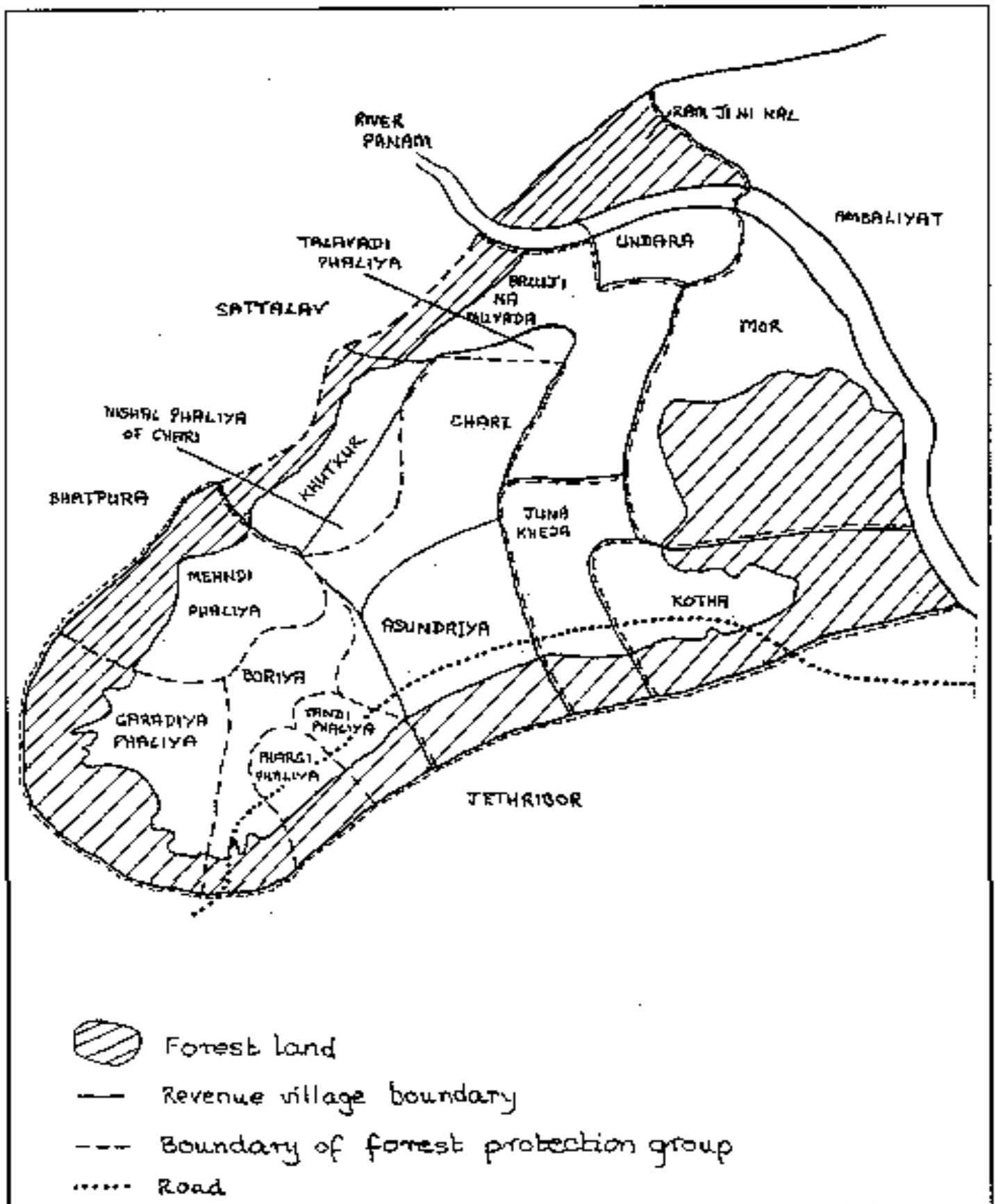
dependence on forest produce. As a consequence, it is physical proximity, extent of dependence, and social relations, rather than formal 'revenue village' boundaries, that have determined both which people use which forest area, and the membership composition of the forest protection groups.

The Chari-Boria cluster of villages

The diversity of composition of forest protection groups in relation to revenue village and panchayat boundaries is best illustrated by a cluster of villages around SARTHI's Chari-Boria field centre. As the groups here are also the oldest and most organised, it is useful to trace their evolution.

There are nine revenue villages coming under seven gram panchayats clustered in a valley surrounded by hills (see map). Until the early 1970s, the hills were thickly forested with dense vegetation and abundant wildlife. In 1972, a road going past the southern villages was built for the construction of a dam across Panam River, to the east of the cluster. Practically all the forests around the villages disappeared within a few years of the road being built. The illicitly cut timber was carted away in the trucks bringing materials for the dam.

By the late 1970s, the villagers started experiencing acute hardship due to the non-availability of a diverse range of forest products. For the men, traditionally responsible for house construction and agricultural implements, it was the non-availability of suitable timber which became the primary motivation for initiating forest protection.



The Chari-Boria Cluster of Forest Protection Groups

Interestingly, the first village in the cluster to start forest protection around 1980 was Undara, which does not have any forest land within its revenue village boundary. One day, when the villagers had assembled near the river for a religious ceremony, looking at the bare rocks on the hill across the river, some of the men pondered over the tragic, irreversible destruction of the forest. Bika Bhai, a young man of the village, said that if everyone decided to collectively protect the forest, it could still be regenerated from the surviving rootstock. Although appreciative of Bika Bhai's sentiment, the others felt that it was impossible to provide such protection. However, Bika Bhai maintained it was possible, given the villagers' support. The village *agyanans* gave their support and the gathering appointed four people (including Bika Bhai) to start full time protection. All other villagers agreed to contribute 5 kg. of grain per household annually for the watchmen's compensation and the first forest protection group in the cluster was born.

The forest Undara's residents decided to protect is across the river in the revenue village of Ramji ni Nal which has a relatively small population of the Naik community. Undara has a much larger, mixed population. Due to the Naiks being far more dependent on forest produce, the infeasibility of their small population protecting the forest on their own, and Undara residents traditionally having met their forest needs from the same area, Ramji ni Nal readily agreed to join Undara in regenerating their forest.

Impressed by the regeneration of Undara's protected forest, most villages in the cluster formed similar forest

protection groups over the next six to seven years. In all cases, the lead was taken by village *agyanans* in creating consensus in favour of forest protection, and ensuring the decision was approved in open village meetings, before being put into practice.

However, as more and more forest land was closed off, residents of Chari village found themselves hemmed in by the other villages. Chari has very limited forest land of its own and even that had already been encroached upon. As a consequence, different hamlets of Chari had been meeting their forest produce needs from the forests of their nearest neighbouring villages. Although all villagers of the cluster were facing hardship due to forest closure, the forest protection group members were going to have access to increased forest produce after regeneration. Chari's residents realised that they were unlikely to have access, even after regeneration, unless they joined the forest protection groups. So three of Chari's hamlets negotiated membership of the groups of their closest neighbours: Chari's Talavadi *falia* joined Baluji na Muvada, the Nishal *falia* joined Khutkur and Pagi *falia* joined Asundriya.

Due to the large size of Boria village, three of its *falias* formed one group while two others formed a separate one. Some families joined Asundriya's forest protection group as their neighbouring *falia* within the village was unwilling to initiate forest protection.

In all cases, late joiners were asked to deposit grain for the watchmen equivalent to that already contributed by other members, as an entry fee. The basic understanding is that *all* members are

entitled to the same access to forest produce in exchange for all respecting commonly agreed upon rules for protection. The basic rules, and any changes in them, are approved in general meetings before being enforced.

Thus, in a single, fairly compact cluster of nine villages, while three forest protection groups' membership as well as forest area is confined within the boundary of a single revenue village, two groups are sub-units of a larger revenue village and the membership of three is spread across two or three revenue villages. In the pioneering forest protection group of Undara, the majority of members belong to a village different from the revenue village in which the forest they are protecting falls.

The *agryavans* of the different groups agreed to make residents of adjoining villages members because they are equally dependent on the forests and unless included in the groups, were likely to resort to unauthorised extraction, becoming a constant source of conflict for the groups.

If the above forest protection groups participate in JFM, application of the FD's condition that the JFM area must fall within the revenue village boundary of the VLO's members is likely to create havoc. Not only could it lead to the break up of organically evolved and effective forest protection groups, but also exclude residents of villages like Chari from JFM benefits, simply because their village happens to have very little forest area within its administrative boundary. Besides increasing inter-village inequity, enforcement of the FD requirement could also create inter-village conflict

threatening the survival of both the forest protection groups and their regenerating forests.

Access controls and protection systems

All the forest protection groups in this cluster have initially totally closed their forests for the first four to five years. Each family contributes 10 to 15 kg of grain and/or Rs 10 to Rs 25 per year to compensate the two to four village men appointed to protect the forest on a full time basis. No one except the watchmen are permitted to take any tools inside the forest. Collection of fallen twigs and branches and other NTFPs is permitted. Generally, for the first two years, grazing is totally banned. After that, grazing by cattle, but not goats, is permitted. After four to five years of such total closure, the groups start opening their forest for one to five pre-announced days in a year when their members are permitted to cut bushes such as *Kada* for use as firewood. While some forest protection groups in other areas have permitted multiple shoot cutting of teak, in the Chari-Boria cluster, timber species have not been touched so far. Only recently have some of the groups planned to undertake multiple shoot cutting of teak, partly in response to women's hardship in obtaining firewood since closure of the forests (this is discussed further below).

Interestingly, none of the forest protection groups, even outside the Chari-Boria cluster, have enforced a long-term grazing ban in their forests, except concerning goats. This is because there is limited agricultural residue available for

use as fodder from rain-fed agriculture, and water scarcity prevents the growing of irrigated fodder. As a consequence it is impossible for the majority of villagers to switch to total stall feeding of their cattle. The groups therefore permit cattle grazing in the forest after two to three years' total closure. The JFM GR's requirement that grazing in the JFM areas must be totally stopped cannot be enforced by the groups unless preceded by water resource development in the villages.

Enforcing their access controls has not been an easy task for the forest protection groups. Particularly in the beginning, each group faced enormous resistance, especially from outsiders. The watchmen often had to continue patrolling even at night and at times, all villagers have had to rush to assist them in fighting armed attacks by organised groups from other villages. Due to such conflicts with their neighbouring villages, many of the forest protection groups have had to pay the price of earning the hostility and enmity of their neighbours.

Maintaining consensus *within* the membership has been an equally demanding task requiring constant alertness and quick action, sometimes creating tensions within the group. One night, preceding the open day fixed for firewood collection, Asundriya's watchmen discovered large piles of already cut firewood lying in their forest. The entire village was immediately summoned to the forest to identify the culprits. It was later found that the residents of the *falia* nearest to the forest had started cutting in advance so that they could extract more firewood than it was feasible to cut in a single day. This

sub-group resented being publicly rebuked and was threatened with exclusion from the group by other members if they repeated the offence.

For the groups to be effective in performing such tasks, they have to have a trusted in-house leadership capable of rallying all the members in times of crisis. As one of Asundriya's *agvavans* said on first hearing about the JFM GR's requirement of a panchayat member and an FD representative being members of the VLO's working committee "the village's power must be in the village itself". He said that despite their having called the panchayat's sarpanch (head) ten times he had not come as he lived in another village. And, the local forest guard seldom went round their forest area. How could such people provide the leadership required for forest protection?

Management priorities: Needs-based selective felling versus timber harvesting for income sharing

When first informed about the benefit sharing provision in the JFM GR, the villagers' reaction had been one of amazement. They said that they were *not* regenerating their forests, with tremendous investment of time and effort and every household contributing grain or money from its pocket, just in order to cut them again. *They never want to fell their forests again. What they do want is the right to extract small amounts of timber for their own use, as and when required. The authority to regulate such*

extraction also must be with the group as only they can distinguish between genuine and non-genuine need.

The forest protection groups remained resolute even after various discussions facilitated by SARTHI. They found the notion of the FD taking a major (in fact *any*) share of the timber, when it is the *villagers* who have done all the work, particularly objectionable. Emphasising that it was under the FD's management that the forests were destroyed in the first place, and that it was beyond the FD's ability to regenerate the forests without the *villagers'* help, they contended that the forests would only be destroyed again if the FD is permitted to cut them, even on a benefit sharing basis. Pointing to the dismal performance of the FD's plantations, mostly of thorny species unpopular with the *villagers*; they said that the FD is welcome to cut them as its share - but that it had no right to claim a share of the natural forests regenerated by the *villagers*.

There are a number of important issues underlying the *villagers'* views:

- *Equity* as a necessary basis of any partnership between the forest protection groups and the FD. Any sharing of benefits must be based on the actual sharing of responsibilities. Some *villagers* became so agitated over

this issue that they threatened to cut and remove what *they* had already regenerated, so that they would then start afresh, with the FD having to make an equal contribution to protection.

- *An alternative concept of sharing.* The *villagers* do not consider their rejection of timber sharing with the FD as unreasonable. In their view, as the landowner, the FD's share under self-initiated forest protection is a dramatic improvement in the quality of the land.
- The dynamics *large scale felling* tends to generate in a context of resource scarcity is seldom discussed in the timber sharing model. The memory of rapid forest destruction due to illicit extraction *during* earlier timber harvesting under the FD's management is too fresh in the *villagers'* minds. They no longer have trust in the FD's capacity to control unauthorised extraction at such times. The forest protection groups are equally concerned about losing control over their *own* members during such harvesting. It is the fear of losing control during the harvesting of a more valuable product that has prevented many of the forest protection groups from taking up even multiple shoot cutting of teak.

Gender Concerns in Self-Initiated Forest Protection

The initial situation

Initially the authors found two types of situation. In Vena and Machod villages, where SARTHI had already motivated village women to form saving and credit groups, more women than men were present in the authors' meetings with the villagers. The women *appeared* to be equally involved in the forest protection efforts. Probing questions into whether the women had resisted or questioned total forest closure due to its likely impact on firewood availability had *only yielded a vague response that some women are 'slower to understand'*.

In the other two villages, Asundriya and Baluji na Muvada, only male village leaders and the forest protection groups' watchmen had been present. Impressed by the determination and discipline of the men, the authors had enquired whether village women had also participated in the discussions leading to forest closure. The men's response had been that of surprise. "Women, what is the need to consult the women?" they had asked. But hadn't women faced problems in obtaining firewood due to total forest closure? The men had replied that every household owned land from which they could obtain firewood. To enquiries as to whether some women hadn't attempted to violate the protection rules while collecting firewood and fodder, the response had been that if any woman broke a rule, it was her husband whom they reprimanded. It was clear that due to the powerful tradition of women's

exclusion from community decision-making forums, the men perceived women's only role to be that of passive compliance.

Understanding gender differentiated impact of forest protection

The *impact* of the men's access controls on the women became evident during a separate meeting with some women from three forest protection groups in the Chari-Boria cluster in December 1993. The women reported that they were simply informed about the forest areas being closed by their respective men. They were told not to enter the closed forests with any tools and not to let in any goats or cattle for grazing, and that was that.

For the women, the decision had resulted in a drastic increase in the labour and time required for firewood collection. The women of Chari village said that whereas earlier they could make two short trips a day to the adjoining forest, each taking less than 1 hour to fetch a headload, now they have to leave at 4am and return with only one headload three to four hours later. They now go to the still unprotected part of Bhatakpur village's forest 2 to 3 km away to collect firewood. To avoid additional trips the women try and carry back heavier and larger loads. The women collect firewood daily for one month in the winter and stock it up for later use. This is supplemented by the firewood gathered during the one or two

days each year during which the protected forests are opened by the forest protection groups. In addition, the women have switched to using dung, weeds, fallen twigs and agricultural residues (if available) to meet the balance of their cooking fuel requirements.

Thus, effectively, 'community' forest protection with the strict and rigid access controls designed by the men has increased women's recurring work burden of firewood collection, concentrated it on the shoulders of the younger and sturdier women, compelled them to partially switch to inferior cooking fuels and transferred some of the pressure for firewood to other, as yet unprotected, forests.

In addition, women's vulnerability to humiliation by outsiders has increased as they have to go outside their own villages. They cited a case of two young women being frightened and humiliated by an adjoining group's forest watchman.

There are problems with collection of tree leaf fodder also. Due to the ban on using tools, the women have to pluck the leaves by hand. Besides increasing the labour and time required for collecting the same amount of leaves, ironically, the availability of tree leaf fodder has also declined. This is because lopping of branches, which increases leaf production of the local fodder tree species, has stopped (due to the ban on tools) and as the trees grow taller, the leaves become beyond the women's reach.

When asked if they had not protested when the men had simply announced closure of the forests, the women talked about being 'beaten by thick, heavy

dundas (sticks)' if they didn't comply. None of those present had actually been beaten, but the *fear* of such a prospect was evident. It was clear that the women had been strongly pressurised by the men within their homes to accept a grossly unequal share of the costs of protection. A similar situation surfaced during a meeting with representatives of several forest protection groups, and is described in Box 1.

Issues of gender equity and sustainability

According to the traditional gender based division of roles and responsibilities in the area, obtaining timber for house construction and agricultural implements is men's responsibility. Although timber is needed only occasionally, the men had met to organise how *they* were going to ensure they would honour *their* responsibility.

However, ensuring daily availability of cooking fuel is women's responsibility. With women having no say in the self-initiated forest protection groups' decision making, this need had been totally overlooked by the men.

Much has been written about the harassment and humiliation faced by rural women from forest staff while collecting firewood from forest areas (Government of India, 1988; Fernandes and Menon, 1987; CSE, 1985). Forest staff, in turn, talk about the equally strong fear of being accused of molestation by women 'forest offenders' while trying to apprehend them. In the advocacy for decentralised, community controlled

Box 1: Gender Impacts of self-initiated forest protection

A meeting was held with representatives of eight other forest protection groups. Except for Phull Behn, who had accompanied her husband to represent Vena village, all the group representatives were men. The representatives of each group described their activities and methods of working. When Vena's turn came, Phull Behn's husband talked about forest protection in their hamlet. When he had finished, the authors asked Phull Behn about her views. Immediately, several men pointed out that her husband had already spoken. The authors insisted that as the only woman representative present, she should at least talk about the impact of forest protection on the women.

To begin with, Phull Behn said that protection was for 'everyone's' benefit as all households need timber. But, she was asked, where did the women collect firewood from now? Her reply was significant: she said that now the first thing women do in the morning is to set off for the still open forest at considerable distance from the hamlet. They leave around 8am and return by midday or 1pm. And this is when the hamlet's forest is in good condition with dense vegetation just behind the settlement. Collecting a headload of firewood from there should take no more than half an hour and with responsible harvesting for the hamlet's small population there could be little damage to the forest. This led to a discussion on the differential costs and benefits of protection for women and men and the need to evolve access controls and harvesting methods which could facilitate forest regeneration without penalising women so unequally.

Many of the men were amazed, but

agreed. It was as if this aspect of their protection had simply not crossed their minds before. The indirect costs to the household due to so much of the women's time being spent on firewood collection, and possible negative health impacts on the women due to inadequate rest, sleep or leisure were discussed. None of the men disagreed. One of them could only say "Gujarat is ganda (mad)" to express his inability to justify such unequal distribution of costs between women and men. The access controls adopted by Keda Mar village's forest protection group, which permit women regular access to cutting bushes and hardy coppicing species such as *kada* were presented to the group as one alternative which was not so harsh on women. Many other management alternatives could be designed if women had an equal voice and were empowered to participate in group decision making as equally responsive members.

The above preliminary analysis of the gender differentiated impact of self-initiated forest protection was further confirmed during a training programme in Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques for SARHI's staff in March 1994. Particular attention was given to ensuring that the training was sensitive to gender concerns to help build up the staff's capabilities to evolve appropriate support interventions for the groups. Field exercises for the training were done in Katha and Asundriya villages, both of which have well-organised forest protection groups. Small group discussions with village women, and preparation of seasonal calendars for firewood and fodder with them, confirmed that self-initiated forest protection had reduced the availability

of both, thereby increasing women's work burden and hardship.

The findings from these exercises were then presented to general body³ meetings of women and men in both villages. Efforts to probe the above issues further during the meeting in Kotha village generated interesting group dynamics which reflected the powerful cultural constraints inhibiting women from expressing their increased hardship.

During the meeting, when the women were asked what the impact of forest protection on firewood availability had been, they did not give a direct response. Instead, they just said that they were allowed to collect firewood from the protected forest for two days every year. If that wasn't enough, they could dig up roots of dead trees for use as firewood. On further probing as to whether such roots were dug from the protected area and, if so, whether use of any tools for the purpose was permitted, the women still didn't openly admit facing any problems. However, suddenly, one of the group's watchmen burst out in anger. He asked the women loudly why they were complaining of a firewood shortage when they had been told that they could dig out dead roots with tools in case they faced any firewood shortage. He said that a woman had asked him whether she was expected to burn her hands for cooking food with

The watchman's outburst, in turn, upset

the women who had so discreetly avoided directly saying that they faced firewood shortage. Feeling unfairly humiliated in front of so many people, whispering in protest to each other, many of the women got up and moved to one side of the gathering. The biting question posed to the watchman by some woman when he had stopped her from cutting firewood from the protected forest had obviously left a disturbing imprint on his psyche, possibly because he had no satisfactory answer to give her. It also reflects the suppressed frustration among women over being denied access to their traditional source of firewood without being provided any viable alternative.

The following day, having overcome some of their inhibitions, the women of both villages openly acknowledged that firewood shortage was a problem and that something needed to be done about it. Undertaking annual multiple shoot cutting of teak coppice growth in parts of the protected forests was agreed upon as a desirable option not only for increasing firewood availability but also for improving the quality of teak timber for future use. In Kotha village, the men agreed to let the village women frame alternative rules for harvesting tree leaf fodder which would increase leaf availability on the condition that the trees were not destroyed in the process. The men also agreed to open their groups' membership to the women to avoid overlooking women's specific priorities in the future.

³ The 'general body' refers to a democratic village organisation with a broad based membership (the general body), which elects or selects an executive committee to deal with the organisation's day to day tasks, on behalf of the general body.

natural resource management, how gender based needs would be addressed by a male dominated structure is seldom discussed. An implicit, but unexamined assumption is that somehow, such problems will automatically get solved under 'community' management. However, as discussed above, in the Gujarat villages, the shift from the FD to community forest protection under exclusively male decision making simply transferred the earlier policing role of FD staff to village men, without devising any alternative means for the women to meet household cooking fuel needs. The village women are simply being socialised *within their homes* into accepting a shift in the centre of control from FD staff to their household men. However, challenging household men is not only socially unacceptable but can threaten a woman's status within the home. To help themselves fall in line, women had conjured up images of being beaten with thick, heavy sticks for not conforming and while voicing the household's need for timber, started walking so many extra kilometres to fetch each headload.

Issues emerging from the above experience and analysis are the following:

- 1 That male controlled 'community' based forest management *does not necessarily provide relief to women in fulfilling their gender based responsibilities*. In fact, due to the policing role shifting from FD staff to household men, cultural taboos prevent women from even voicing their problems.
- 2 That unless community based forest protection is accompanied by development of silvicultural and management alternatives which ensure adequate availability of NTFPs for essential needs, besides highly inequitable distribution of opportunity costs of protection between women and men, it is unlikely to have long term sustainability as its *feasibility is dependent on transferring unsustainable exploitation to other areas*.
- 3 That because forest regeneration after near total forest destruction is a 'new' situation, of which the villagers have no past experience, they tend to continue using familiar forest management practices which do not address many of the new problems. There is a need for the groups to *develop alternative, gender sensitive silvicultural practices and management options*, which is likely to require considerable facilitation with technical and managerial inputs.

SARTHI's programme strategy for institutional Integration of Gender Equity in the Forest Protection Groups

Based on the above analysis, SARTHI has designed a specific strategy for institutional integration of gender equity in the forest protection groups' functioning, which should also increase the sustainability of their forest regeneration efforts. Although unwilling to accept several conditions of the state JFM resolution, the groups' leaders are now keen to obtain at least some formal

recognition of their forest protection efforts by the FD to safeguard their long term access to forest produce. It was decided to seek such recognition by submitting formal applications to the FD expressing their interest in participating in JFM. This would result in the groups' protection efforts entering official FD records. Negotiations about the other terms and conditions for JFM could be continued subsequently.

A VLO's application for JFM has to include names of its general body and executive committee members. As the Gujarat GK entitles all interested adults to VLO membership, it was decided to activate this provision for institutional integration of women in the forest protection groups during the process of their acquiring a formal identity. This would be done by encouraging the groups to make all adults primary members of their organisations instead of only one person per household. This would ensure that about 50 per cent of the general body members are women.

Similarly, it was decided to promote women's representation on the groups' executive committees to more than the minimum of two stipulated in the government resolution. SARTHI staff encourage the groups to move towards women's *equal* representation on the executive committee.

Gender balance in SARTHI's own interaction with the groups would be structured through having a staff team of one man and one woman responsible for working with the groups in each field centre. Process documentation formats to be used by the staff shall separately record the number of village women and

men present during each meeting as well as the specific concerns or issues raised by the women compared to the men. The dynamics generated in each group by the focus on gender equity shall be documented with an effort to note contributions from women and men verbatim.

Increasing gender awareness in the groups shall also be facilitated through participatory compilation of gender disaggregated data about collection and use of different forest produce by women and men as well as the impact of forest protection on both. SARTHI would also provide additional support to the women of these groups through training, awareness generation camps, study and exposure visits and organisational development.

These interventions were finalised with SARTHI's staff after thorough discussions of the organisation's goals and staff assessment of the villagers', particularly village men's, likely reactions. With the staff feeling confident that they could handle introduction of these radical changes in the forest protection groups' traditional, exclusive male structures, the strategy started being operationalised from the middle of March 1994.

Preliminary feedback on forest protection group responses to gender equity concerns

Although it is still too early to evaluate the long term impact of the above *systemic* interventions in the forest protection

groups' functioning, regular feedback from the field is very encouraging. To begin with, except in a few of the 57 groups, the village men displayed remarkably little resistance to women's equal representation and participation in the groups. Eligibility of all adults, both women and men, to primary group membership has been accepted in principle although, in practice, most households have nominated one man and one woman each as formal group members. Similarly, the majority of groups have generally accepted 50 per cent representation of women on their executive committees.

In some cases, there are more women primary or executive committee members than men and at least in one of the groups, Keda Mor, a woman has been appointed as the group's president. In one case, one man and his three wives and in another, one man and his two wives, have all become general body members.

Applications for participation in JFM, with the above membership composition, were submitted by SARTHI to the FD on behalf of all the 57 groups in May 1994.

More important than the numbers are the processes the focus on gender equity has set in motion among the villagers. Among the men, it has generated conscious reflection on the desirability of making progressive changes in the age old tradition of women's exclusion from community decision making forums. The more progressive men have attempted to persuade the more resistant ones to accept such change. The few men who have gone on exposure visits to other groups already participating in JFM have played

a particularly important role in this. They have shared what they learnt from interaction with the other groups' women and men, and how their effectiveness had increased after they started involving women in their functioning.

A recent Constitutional amendment stipulating that one third of the elected panchayat members, and that one third of panchayat sarpanches (heads) must be women, also proved useful for the progressive men (Government of India, 1992). If so many women were going to become panchayat members in the next panchayat elections, how, they argued, could women be denied membership of the forest protection groups.

For the women, the sheer recognition of their identity as formal primary or executive committee members, and their being invited to general and executive committee meetings in that capacity, has evidently been an empowering experience. They have already started articulating not only their specific concerns but also how these could be addressed by the groups. Examples of women's participation in forest protection group discussions are given in Box 2.

From the above examples, it is evident that initiation of women's institutional integration in the forest protection groups is beginning to have the impact of women's priorities at least getting expressed in the groups' decision making forums instead of being totally overlooked. How this is changing group priorities and decision making is being closely monitored by SARTHI, to generate new learning which could be useful for increasing gender equity in JFM as well as making it more sustainable even in other areas.

Box 2: Participation of women in forest protection group discussions

In the all-activist Bhamri village, where most households had been protecting forest patches adjoining their lands for several years, six women attended the first village meeting to discuss the formation of a group in the village. When forest protection rules of the new group started being discussed, and the men proposed total forest closure, the first question the women asked was how they would cook the food if they were not permitted to collect firewood from the forest.

At a recent meeting, where women's equal representation on the executive committee was one of the agenda items, the number of women had increased to 8 out of a total of 33 persons present. When two or three men questioned the necessity of having women on the executive committee, saying that the men were more capable of handling such matters, the women retorted that when men needed cooked food, they came to the women. Now why were they objecting to women being executive committee members of a forest protection group?

In Kotha village, where, during PRA training, it had been decided that women would be permitted to frame their own tree fodder harvesting rules, the forest protection group now has 10 women and 10 men on its executive committee. At the first monthly meeting of the newly constituted executive committee, all the women executive committee members turned up saying that now even *they* were members while only some of the men came. One of the first things the women wanted to discuss was the framing of new fodder harvesting rules as agreed upon earlier. The men present evaded the issue by saying that such important matters could not be

decided by the executive committee on its own and that they needed approval of the group's general body. The SARTHI staff present didn't feel confident enough to support the women in at least initiating a discussion on the various options. However, during subsequent meetings, the women have raised various issues on their own.

In the mixed caste Falwa village, eight women were present in a total gathering of 45 villagers when women's greater representation on the executive committee was discussed. Initially, some of the men strongly objected to having so many women on the committee, saying that it might as well be made an exclusive women's group in that case. With other men as well as SARTHI staff pointing out that now not only one third of the panchayat members but also one third of all Sarpanches were going to be women, the resistant men finally agreed to an executive committee with six men and five women members. However, when the men proposed making Kalu Bhal the group's president, the women objected saying that he drank too much and beat his wife daily. They made him vow in front of everybody that he would stop drinking and beating his wife before accepting him as the president. This Kalu Bhal did amidst loud applause - and he kept his promise to the great joy of his wife!

While agreeing to accept equal responsibility for forest protection, even Falwa's women pointed out the necessity of designing group rules which enabled women to obtain firewood as they had to cook food twice a day. They even proposed growing trees on their private lands as a means of increasing firewood availability and promised to bring more women to the next meeting.

In Baluji na Muvada, while men of the Baria community, who have more conservative attitudes towards women, refused to agree to more women members on the forest protection group's executive committee, members of the Nalk community in the same group said they would nominate more women from their hamlet to make up for the fewer Baria women! The Nalks have the greatest economic dependence on

forests in the area and Nalk women collect a wide range of NTFPs for sale.

In other villages, when some men have objected to women's executive committee or primary membership *in the presence of the women*, the women have challenged the men's objections pointing out that it is the women who effectively protect the forest as the men often migrate or go out for work.

Beginning a Dialogue with the Gujarat Forest Department

Having heard about the forest protection groups in SAKTHI's area, the Gujarat State Working Group (WG) for JFM requested further information in early 1994. SAKTHI staff sought the forest protection groups' views on the existing JFM GR to convey to the WG: the groups articulated the following conditions:

- 1 That their groups should have the right to select their own leaders from *within* the village and no mandatory outsiders should be thrust on their executive committees. They are willing to accept a panchayat member as a *member* of the group with *accountability to the group* and *not* as a representative of the panchayat (which often covers multiple villages).
- 2 They neither want to *themselves* fell their regenerated forests, nor let the FD undertake such felling, even for the next 100 years. Nor do they want any percentage share from a 'one-off' timber harvest: that is totally

unacceptable. Instead, they want the *right* to do selective timber harvesting, as and when needed, for meeting the timber requirements of their own members for house construction and agricultural implements. The *authority* for regulating such extraction *must be in the village* with the VLO's leadership.

- 3 Their VLOs must have the *authority to fine or otherwise punish offenders damaging their forests*. This is because one of their biggest problems as forest protection groups is that their authority to protect their forests is challenged by offenders.

A common element in all three demands is the VLOs' need for the *authority* to honour their responsibilities, something on which the Gujarat and other state JRM GRs are totally silent. The other aspects of their demands are related to the *villagers' right to organise themselves, choose their own leadership and determine their forest management priorities themselves*

instead of having to accept imposition of these from above.

During its May 1994 meeting, the WG was also informed about the complex processes by which the forest protection groups' membership and the forest areas they are protecting evolved, and the destructive impact the condition of VLO membership being confined within revenue village boundaries is likely to have on them.

The absence of consideration of gender differentiated needs in the forest protection groups (as well as in FD promoted JFM) resulting in transfer of pressure to other forest areas through the women's search for firewood was also brought to the WG's notice, highlighting the need for developing alternative silvicultural and management options to *make both the forest protection groups and other JFM groups' forest protection efforts acquire long term sustainability.*

The fact that the forest protection groups have been protecting forests *entirely on their own* for several years was also highlighted to the WG. This is a situation not anticipated by the state's JFM GR and

required special consideration. The unacceptability to the forest protection groups of the JFM GR's provision that the FD may unilaterally cancel a JFM agreement on perceived violation of some condition by them *without paying any compensation*, when the groups have regenerated the forests single-handedly was also emphasised.

The WG generally appreciated the forest protection groups' points of view and accepted that the other issues raised about their participation in JFM required special consideration. It was decided that the then Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, after his retirement at the end of May 1994, would personally visit the forest protection groups to study how their special demands could be accommodated in the state's JFM framework and make his findings *available to the WG.*

The subsequent interaction between the forest protection groups and the Gujarat FD has raised a host of new issues concerning JFM 'partnerships' between state bureaucracies and autonomous institutions of resource users. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address them.

Summary and Conclusions

Self-initiated forest protection by villagers in Santrampur taluka of Panchmahals district is a totally grassroots response to resource scarcities resulting from forest degradation. The villagers have developed a diverse range of organisational forms and access controls with their membership consisting of actual resource users irrespective of formal administrative village boundaries.

The strength and effectiveness of the forest protection groups lies in consensus based, open decision making on the principle of equitable sharing of costs and benefits among all members.

Their major weakness lies in the exclusion of women from their functioning resulting in women's needs for forest produce being overlooked in their forest management priorities. This not only results in highly inequitable distribution of the opportunity costs of protection between women and men but also makes the long term sustainability of their forest regeneration potentially unsustainable.

SARTHI has initiated a process of attempting institutional integration of women in the forest protection groups' structures and functioning which is generating lessons for introducing gender equity in JFM in other areas.

Having become aware of the JFM GR, the groups are keen to participate in JFM to protect their long term access to forest produce, but on *their* terms.

The forest protection groups' demands are focused on retaining the autonomy of their organisations with the *right* to select their own leadership and determine their own forest management priorities. Besides, they want the *authority* to control access to their forests for more effective protection as well as to undertake selective harvesting of timber for meeting their members' needs, instead of a share of timber from 'final' harvesting.

Self-initiated forest protection in the area has come to the notice of the Gujarat FD and a dialogue on the villagers' demands has been initiated with the state WG on JFM.

JFM is viewed as a radical departure from past forest management practices in favour of 'participatory' forest management in partnership with local organisations. However, to date, JFM frameworks have been primarily based on official assumptions about how village organisations function and villagers forest management priorities.

Self-initiated forest protection by villagers themselves is highlighting the limitations of these assumptions and offering an opportunity to adapt the official JFM framework through an interactive process of dialogue instead of insisting on top down conditionalities. It is now up to the Gujarat Forest Department to demonstrate its willingness to respond in a truly participatory spirit.

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Acronyms

CI	Community institutions
FD	Forest Department
FLCS	Forest Labour Cooperative Society
GR	Government resolution
JFM	Joint Forest Management
NGO	Non governmental organisation
NTFP	Non Timber Forest Products
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
SARTHI	Social Action for Rural and Tribal Inhabitants of India
VLO	Village level organisation
WG	Working group

The View from the Ground: Community Perspectives on Joint Forest Management in Gujarat, India

This paper describes locally-derived initiatives developed in response to forest resource scarcities. These initiatives comprise a diverse range of organisational forms and access controls, with group membership consisting of actual resource users irrespective of formal administrative village boundaries. The strength and effectiveness of the groups lies in consensus based, open decision-making with equitable sharing of costs and benefits. Their major weakness lies in the exclusion of women from their functioning, resulting in women's needs for forest produce, particularly woodfuel, being overlooked in forest management priorities. This leads to highly inequitable distribution of the opportunity costs of protection between women and men, and puts in doubt the long term sustainability of their forest regeneration. This case study is more one of a study of collaborative management despite the state, rather than with the state. Villagers do not recognise the Forestry Department and, whilst the Joint Forest Management approach demands the sharing of benefits, do not want to share with the Forestry Department at all. The village forestry groups want the right to organise themselves as they see fit, and authority to honour their responsibilities. The challenge for the Forestry Department is clear: to become responsive to locally-initiated forest management by developing powers of facilitation rather than direction.

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