

Experiences of Partnership With Rural Community in Managing Forest Resources: Evidences From Bankura District

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ABSTRACT

Participation is a dominant concept governing institutional planning, globally. But literature review reveals that the outcome of participation has been variable in various settings leading to a belief that there exists a gap between what is written about participation and what happens, in reality. The study adopts a case study approach and focusses on a case of community forest management and planning from the state of West Bengal, India. This state has been the cradle of a number of decentralization initiatives. Following the tenets of behavioural geography, the study tries to understand the behaviour of the stakeholders in participation in the planning process, the factors affecting it, and the nature of engagement process. The study concludes that the level of local participation not only on the willingness of the formal institutions convening participation but also on the understanding of the community of the socio-economic and political processes affecting them, accessibility to resources like information, education, government training programmes, etc.

KEYWORDS

Community Planning, Empowerment, Joint Forest Management, Microplan, Participation

INTRODUCTION

The notion of ‘participation’ and its association with the concept of planning and governance has increasingly become important. While there is a broad consensus on the effectiveness of this approach (Chambers, 1997; Singh, 2009), some scholars consider it utopian and point to the gap that exists between the theoretical and the operational scenario of participation (Cooke et al., 2001; Hickey et al., 2004). The present study is an attempt to examine the participatory processes directly emerging from the context of governance. The study considers this theme with reference to the state of West Bengal, a state in eastern India, which has made a significant impact in pursuing participatory initiatives. The objective of the study is to understand the ground reality of incorporating participation of the community in implementing a policy to manage resource. The study aims to address the nature and extent of participation and the factors which have affected the outcome of participatory processes in a representative case site, within broader context of participatory governance. The study adopts the tenets of Behavioural geography which is an approach in human geography to understand human behaviour, the spatial reasoning and the decision making process (Norton, 1997). Here, participation

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of stakeholders has been understood as a phenomena and the way this phenomena operates in a spatial framework is the object of the study.

Participatory planning has been pursued both at the urban and rural areas of West Bengal. Of all the Participatory planning projects operating in the state, Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme is a significant one. The JFM is a programme of empowering forest communities with management functions related to protection of forest and management of forest resource, through a participative approach. The JFM programme was initiated in the 1970s in West Bengal as a pilot project and was formally mandated by the National Forest Policy of 1988, which envisaged peoples' involvement in the wise use and management of forest resources. In recent times, within the framework of JFM, microplan has to be prepared for each village, under the National Afforestation Programme of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India. This is a plan for management of forest areas assigned to the community under JFM. Microplans are developed through participatory planning.

The study adopts a case study method for a contextual and in-depth analysis of the ground reality of participation in a participatory plan, in a spatial context. Data was collected both through secondary sources as well as the primary ones through questionnaire survey, indepth interview of the key stakeholders, focus group discussion etc. The case site was selected after a pilot survey, from Bankura district. In West Bengal, Bankura district occupies a prominent place in the implementation of JFM Programme as it is one of the few districts in the state with a large number of Forest Protection Committees (Sau, 2008). Three villages of the Khatra Range in Bankura District prepared microplans and Chakadoba was one of the three villages of the Khatra Forest Range in Hirbundh Block of Bankura that prepared a microplan for management and conservation of its forest resources.

The paper is divided into a number of parts where the first part emphasised on elaborating on the concept of participation and revisits theories relating forest resource management, participation etc. The second part outlines the methodology of the study while the third part outlines the main findings on the nature in which the participatory exercise was conducted, its impact on the stakeholders and the major factors affecting it.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Defining Participation

The word participation has been used with different connotations in different contexts. Lexically, participation is the act of sharing in the activities, of a group. However in the context of development studies, participation is public involvement in development.

A few definitions of participation in planning and governance has been put forward by some of the major international organizations or at the international summits which have been noted below.

The importance of participation received recognition at the Rio Summit Declaration in 1992, as one of its 27 principles (Papadokis, 2006).

Principle 10 states that “*Environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level*”.

Another important definition of participatory governance came from the United Nation's Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2007):

Participatory governance provides citizens with access not only to information, but also to decision-making and power to influence public choices. It means access not only for a privileged few, but for all, including those who are still too often excluded from the benefits of development, particularly the poor, the marginalized, and vulnerable group. (United Nations, 2007)

The accepted definition of participation within the World Bank:

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