

# People's involvement holds the key to good

## forest management

By Geetartha Pathak

**T**he villagers of Borjan forest village under Digboi Reserve Forest alleged that the Forest Department does not allow collecting cane from the forest even for their domestic use. If they find raw cane in the hands of any villager they cut it into small pieces so that the cane cannot be used for making household furniture or other cane products. Their livelihood solely depends on agriculture and wage labour. While they cannot wholly depend on agriculture as the allotted forest land is limited and cannot be extended, getting work regularly as wage labourer is also difficult in those remote areas. Barring a few, level of education in the forest villages even in the revenue villages near the forest is abysmally low. The educational institutes are far off from these villages and they cannot economically support study of their children in the town. The government has no vocational or employment orientation program in these villages. Therefore, their principal avocation of life remains agriculture. A door-to-door survey of three forest villages under Chariduar Range of Sonitpur West Division reveals that more than 90 per cent families are dependent on agriculture, more than 60 per cent of the total population are illiterate with an annual income of Rs 5,000 to Rs 10,000 per family.

Araliloga Forest Village home of 164 families and a population of 898 people is the most backward one and all are dependent on agriculture. All the three villages were notified in 1962. The number of families has increased by 200 to 300 per cent since then. The increase in population is not abnormal, however, since the land allotted to the villagers of forest villages are fixed and not extendable and the villagers remain dependent on agriculture — the increase in pressure on forest land is the legitimate culmination. Khellong Division of Arunachal Pradesh, under which the Bhalukpung township falls, has no recognized

forest villages or revenue villages but there are human habitations here and there. They are getting all the administrative facilities and political rights. The Forest Department has never carried out any eviction drive though some of the people settled here have come after 1980. However, the opposite is happening in Assam. The forest villages hardly get any administrative facilities. The politicians are only interested in enrolment of the names of the villagers in the voters list and thereafter their responsibility is over. The DFO of Khellong Division, Mr. S. Manyu, an officer for the local Arunachali community said that the forest officials do not treat the inhabitants at the reserved forests as encroachers.

The MEF has now issued circular to all the State Governments to convert all the forest villages to revenue villages and settlement of other old habitations. In fact the MEF had issued six circulars addressing the issue of encroachments and forest dwellers. The May 3, 2002 circular of the MEF directing the Forest Departments of the States and the Union Territories to evict all encroachers of forests was one of the [FP (1)] set of the six circulars. The circular of conversion of forest villages to revenue villages was circular FP (5). In Assam the tribal organizations raised objection to this move of the MEF because they expressed fear that the tribals who are living hand to mouth may sell their lands to the non-tribals especially to the immigrants. Their apprehensions have some ground. For example — the tribal people who lived in the revenue villages around Guwahati sold their lands and moved out of the city as the value of land increased several times as soon as the capital of Assam sifted from Shillong to Guwahati in 1972.

After decades of monopoly over the forests of the country by the state, using forests for increasing revenue by pursuing the colonial forest policy of the British, finally the Government of India has recognized the need to involve the people in development, protection and management of forests. In 1990,

India adopted the Joint Forest Management (JFM) Policy. However, in the present form of JFM, communities are allowed to participate but decision-makers are again the old guards - the Forest Department and the government officials.

Except for a few states, the possibility of timber sharing in the present JFM system is remote. While Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh give 100 per cent and Arunachal Pradesh gives 50 per cent of the net profit from its timber sales to the JFM committee, Assam JFM Rules, 1998 gives only 25 per cent of the net profit from main timber harvesting to the committee. Formation of JFM committees has just completed in Assam and it will take a few years even if it goes on schedule to generate any dividend. All together 503 JFM committees were formed under division-wise 28 Forest Development Agencies (FDA). Since the FDA is headed by the forest bureaucrats and providing an umbrella cover of FDA over the JFM, it will only centralize power rather than effect its devolution to the masses.

A Bio-diversity Project under the North Eastern Council was initiated under JFM in Kunwarban and Abhaypur village under Jeypore Range on experimental basis, which had been successful. Piggery, shallow tube well, loans for small business like grocery shop and nursery were part of the Project. Theft, burglary and other petty crimes and movement of the insurgents were the order-of-the-day in these two hamlets. However, after implementation of the Project, the crime rate declined and the villagers even refused to shelter the ultras, claimed Surajit Dutta, DFO, Dibrugarh Division. This small project was successful because the villagers were given maximum profit sharing and control on decision making.

Assam imports dishes and bowls made of leaves of Sal trees worth crores of rupees from outside the State which is commonly used in public functions, marriages and other parties. With growing awareness, the people of the country are using more

biodegradable disposable articles. Therefore, dishes made of leaves of Sal and forest products like cane and bamboo products are increasingly gaining market and if exploited properly it could be a billion-dollar industry. Mr. Pradyut Bordoloi, Minister of State for Forest, Assam himself expresses concern at the high-handedness of the forest officials of the state.

The State Government has not been harvesting any of the MFP through departmental operations and leasing out any Mahals except one broom grass Mahal in Barak valley. The forests of the State produces apart from sand and stone, 35,200:10 CuM of fuelwood, 4,79,168 number of bamboos, 97,500 bundles of cane, 1,47,97,000 bundles of thatch and a number of other Minor Forest Products (MFP) as estimated by the State Forest Department in 1991-92. There are some other MFPs like Broom grass, patidoi (for making mats), Kohpat, Jengupat, Takowpat (leaves used for making house roofs), Salpat, etc. On the other hand, the forest of the State is rich in medicinal plants and herbs. The President of India, A P J Abdul Kalam in a meeting with the Members of Parliament of North-east talked about the rich bio-diversity, medicinal plants and herbs of the region, which could bring, if wisely used, not only enormous economic benefits but also provide health care for the poor. The President apprised the north-eastern MPs that the global market for the herbal medicine was a whopping \$60 billion. The annual turn over of herbal company Dabur is now around 1,000 crores. It is not impossible, if we exploit the medicinal plants and the herbs that grow abundantly in the State, to earn several billion dollars, which may increase per capita income of the State to more than US \$ 100.

Assam has varieties of Bamboo and can earn a good amount of foreign exchanges if it invests around 200 crores in the industry in the state.

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