

Participatory Forest Management and Scheduled Castes in Karnataka: Inclusion and Exclusion?

Dr. Arunkumar R Kulkarni

Centre for Multi-disciplinary Development Research (CMDR),
Dharwad, Karnataka

ABSTRACT

This paper tries to examine the social inclusion and exclusion of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Joint Forest Planning and Management (JFPM) initiative in Karnataka, based on data collected from 18 Village Forest Committees (VFCs) in Udupi and Uttara Kannada districts. It attempts to explore the challenges SCs face in accessing and using forest resources, their involvement in decision-making, and the benefits derived from their participation in forest management. The findings reveal that SC households initially after the formation of VFCs faced difficulties related to fodder, grazing land, and access to Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). However, the introduction of alternative fuel sources and employment opportunities have gradually reduced their dependence on forests. Furthermore, SC households are actively participating in all VFC activities and benefiting from their involvement, alongside other community members. These findings highlight the inclusion of SCs in participatory forest management in Karnataka.

Key words: Participatory Management; Inclusion; Exclusion, Natural resources; Scheduled Castes

INTRODUCTION

Participatory Forest Management (PFM) has emerged as a significant approach to ensure sustainable forest resource management while addressing the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities. It seeks to balance ecological sustainability with social equity by involving local communities in decision-making and resource management processes. In 1990, the Joint Forest Management (JFM) program was introduced to encourage shared responsibility, control, and decision-making over forest lands between local communities and the forest department. This initiative marked a shift from centralized to decentralized forest management, emphasizing resource development over revenue generation. It promoted multiple benefits instead of singular objectives, diverse cropping systems over monoculture, and participatory approaches in place of unilateral decision-making (Poffenberger et al., 1996; Dhanagare, 2000). JFM has been widely implemented across 27 states in India, involving over 62,890 groups and covering more than 14 million hectares, approximately 18 per cent of the country's forest area (Sehgal, 2001). In Karnataka, the program is termed Joint Forest Planning and Management (JFPM) and has been primarily implemented through the Western Ghats Forestry and Environmental Project (WGFEP).

Active participation of communities in all aspects of the program is essential for improved forest management (Murthy et al., 2004). Despite its focus on inclusivity, many programs face challenges in addressing the systemic exclusion of marginalized groups, such as Scheduled Castes (SCs). Historical caste-based discrimination, coupled with ongoing socio-economic inequalities, may perpetuate the marginalization of SCs. However, JFPM initiatives aim to involve all local communities; particularly SCs and Scheduled Tribes (STs). In the Western Ghats region of Karnataka, SC households significantly depend on forest resources for their daily survival. Many SC families are marginal and smallfarmers or agricultural laborers, relying on forests for essential resources like fodder, fuelwood, and Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). Forests also hold cultural and spiritual significance for SC communities, emphasizing the importance of biodiversity conservation. This connection provides an opportunity to develop inclusive forest management practices that balance ecological preservation with community needs. Through the JFPM framework, SC households have been given opportunities to participate in forest management and benefit from its outcomes. In this context, the paper examines the inclusion and exclusion of Scheduled Castes in JFPM initiatives in Karnataka Using primary data collected from 18 Village Forest Committees (VFCs) in Udupi and Uttara Kannada districts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The knowledgeable individuals in the selected villages who were interested in participating in the JFPM programme discussed the issue with their respective villagers. These village leaders or knowledgeable persons then approached the Range Forest Officer (RFO) concerned. They expressed their intention to protect their forest and gain some benefits from it. A list of households, involving all the households, in the village was also submitted. The Range Forest Officer (RFO) submitted the proposals for registering the VFC to the Deputy Conservator of Forests (DCF) with jurisdiction over the area. Then, the VFCs were registered as an Association under the Karnataka Forest Act by the respective DCF (Territorial). After the VFC was registered; the local leaders collected a membership fee of Rs. 2 from all individuals above 18 years of age by visiting each household in the village. Discussions with the village leaders, forest officials, and the VFC executive committee revealed that all efforts were made to include every household, irrespective of religion, caste, creed, etc. As a result, all eligible household members received VFC membership in the village, leaving no scope for excluding SC families from membership. Table 1 shows year of formation of VFC and number of Scheduled Caste VFC members.

Table 1: Year of Formation of VFC and No of VFC Members				
VFC/Village Name	Year of Formulation of VFC	Total No of VFC members	No of Scheduled Caste VFC Members	% of Scheduled Caste VFC Members
Manjuguni	1993-94	300	16	5.2
Aigod	1995-96	657	72	11.0
Kastur	1996-97	436	43	10.0
Bellatte	1996-98	532	113	21.2
Nidgod	1994-95	894	0	0.0
Heggodmane	2005-06	406	146	36.0
Honnehadda	2007-08	471	70	14.9
Khurse	2007-08	324	34	10.5
Sampgod	2009-10	836	32	3.8
Amparu	2005-06	90	28	31.1
Durga	2005-06	200	31	15.5
Hosangady	2005-06	625	200	32.0
Karkunje	2005-06	250	8	3.2
Hosuru	2005-06	100	10	10.0
Pillaru	2005-06	205	23	11.2
Hirgana	2005-06	346	21	6.1
Vartur	2006-07	100	28	28.0
Peraduru	2005-06	200	25	12.5

Table 1 shows that the selected VFCs were formed between 1993-94 and 2005-06. The total number of VFC members and SC members varied according to the population of the villages included in the forest management program. The field study found that all the households had enrolled as members of the VFC, and no household, especially SC households, was excluded. Efforts were also made to revive or add members over time by the Executive Committee members and Forest Department officials, as evidenced by the VFC records in the selected villages.

Each registered VFC should have a Managing Committee (MC) and it should be elected by villagers for a period of 5 years to manage the day-to-day activities of the VFC. The MC members were individuals committed to the JFPM process, which enjoyed community respect, trust, and credibility, and were willing to dedicate their time to VFC activities. They represented the interests of VFC members and were responsible for the proper administration and active functioning of the VFC. To ensure the participation of weaker sections, especially SC, ST and women, it is mandatory to include them in the Managing Committee. Discussions with the Executive members of selected VFCs revealed that all the Management Committees of the VFCs included SC members in their executive body. It was also found that almost all the SC members in the executive body actively participated in the management committees. These members not only participated nominally but also took part in discussions and influenced the decisions of the VFC. It was observed that these members not only advocated for their community but also worked for the welfare

of the entire village community. This demonstrated that these members were not there in name only but were aware of their roles and responsibilities. They also participated in orientation programs organized by the Karnataka Forest Department and locally active NGOs. As per the stipulations of the Government Order; meetings of the Managing Committee were required to be held at least once every three months. However, in the selected VFCs, meetings were held every month. Since the VFC is a democratic institution, it was essential that its Managing Committee be elected according to the guidelines outlined in the Government Order. Discussions with the Executive members revealed that almost all the members of the Managing Committees were elected unanimously, and most of these members remained in position with very few changes. As a result, the composition of the Managing Committees had largely stayed the same. The VFC members selected these committee members based on their enthusiasm to work and their ability to lead the group forward. Based on the available records at the VFC and discussions with Forest Department officials, it was found that elections to the Managing Committees were held every year, and adequate measures were taken to ensure free and fair elections.

A micro plan, which is a detailed plan of action for VFC activities, was prepared after the constitution of the Committee. The preparation of the micro plan was a crucial process in enhancing community participation in participatory forest management. It provided the villagers with systematic information about the forest resources in the village, their sustainable use, and strategies for future management. The VFC prepared the plan in consultation with all its members, the forest department, and other concerned government and non-government agencies. The plan covered the village area and the forest area allocated to the committee. Its aim was to manage the forest and develop village resources based on the available resources. The plan was effective for a period of 10 years and was reviewed every 5 years, in accordance with the approved working plan. After preparing the micro plan, a partnership agreement in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the forest department and the VFCs were signed. The field investigations revealed that micro plans were prepared by VFCs in consultation with knowledgeable persons from the village, SHG members, youths, forest department officials, and NGOs. However, the participation of villagers in the preparation of micro plans was found to be very low. Most of the work was done by forest officers along with some village leaders. Villagers could have contributed their views about plantation activities, such as the type of species to be planted in the forest, but their input was neglected. Some villagers suggested that the preparation of the micro plan should be done at a more convenient time and with proper data collection. It was universally agreed to restrict the open grazing and collection of forest products in the selected areas to undertake plantation activities. Initially, this resulted in deprivation of required biomass resources, especially to SC families. The other community households have access to private lands and other alternative employment opportunities and hence they were not much affected with these restrictions. It was further found that mainly Acacia and Eucalyptus trees were planted, which would not yield NTFPs. The area under mixed species was much smaller compared to the area under Acacia and Eucalyptus. As a result, the total quantity of NTFPs

would be lower in the near future, which would affect communities that depend on the collection of NTFPs. Thus, Scheduled Caste members would be deprived of access to NTFP products in the future. However, the value of timber after the harvest of Acacia and Eucalyptus trees would be remunerative. Therefore, efforts should have been made to include all VFC members, especially Scheduled Castes who mostly depend on the forest, while preparing the micro plan and implementing it. Efforts should also have been made to plant more NTFP-producing plants instead of Acacia and Eucalyptus trees.

The idea of people's participation has long been part of development thinking. But today the management of local natural resources by village communities is widely accepted as an institutional imperative. It is therefore essential to examine how these institutions perform, especially from the perspective of the more disadvantaged (Agarwal Bina, 2001). Discussions with the VFC members revealed that not all members participated in all VFC activities, such as attending meetings, protecting the neighbourhood forest from encroachment by outsiders, unauthorized grazing, and managing plantations. However, almost all members cooperated with the Forest Department in the protection of forests. It seemed that the extent of participation by members depended on the level of expected benefits. All VFCs now carried out income-generation activities and distributed the benefits under different schemes. As a result, VFC members (including Scheduled Castes) showed increased interest in attending meetings and participating in VFC development activities. However, interactive participation of members was found to be lacking in the selected VFCs. Loans were also provided through SHGs, ensuring opportunities for economic development for all sections of society. Furthermore, it seemed that forests were considered a source of revenue generation, as many VFC members expected income from them. The self-dedicated Member-Secretaries and field staff of the Forest Department also played an important role in encouraging the participation of members, including Scheduled Castes, in VFC activities.

The data obtained from the VFC showed that out of 18 selected VFCs, only 3 VFCs had not started receiving direct benefits from the forest. According to micro plans, after 10 years of protection, trees in the forest could be harvested with the consent of the forest department. These VFCs had been formed at different points in time, and the types of species also determined the period of harvest and the time of yield. The proceeds from the sale of forest produce were shared between the Government and the Village Forest Committees (VFC) based on specific categories. For Non-Timber Forest Produce, the Government received 10 percent while 90 percent went to the VFC, of which at least 50 percent was allocated to the Village Forest Development Fund (VFDF), and the remainder was either distributed as dividends among VFC members or allocated to the Village Development Fund (VDF) as per VFC decisions. For other forest produce derived from assets created with VFC assistance, the Government received 25 percent and the VFC retained 75 percent, with similar provisions for the VFDF and the balance distribution. In the case of assets predating VFC formation, including older plantations (excluding Teak), proceeds were shared equally between the Government and the VFC, with the VFC's share adhering to the same

distribution pattern. Lastly, for natural growth predating VFC formation (excluding valuable species such as Sandalwood, Rosewood, Teak, Honne, Matti, and Nandi), proceeds were again split 50:50, maintaining the same allocation structure for the VFC's share. Table 2 shows value of sale proceeds of forest products in selected VFCs.

VFC/Village Name	Forest area under VFC (Ha)	Total Sale Proceeds of Forest Products (Rs)	Sale Proceeds of Forest Products (Rs/ Hectar)
Manjuguni	200.0	3000000	15000
Aigod	1038.0	1197597	1154
Kastur	873.0	60244	69
Bellatte	834.1	472542	567
Nidgod	794.3	5000000	6295
Heggodmane	263.3	9003639	34201
Honnehadda	219.9		0
Khurse	610.0	1600000	2623
Sampgod	761.9	2239672	2939
Amparu	342.8	200000	583
Durga	1972.9	1200000	608
Hosangady	2343.0	500000	213
Karkunje	478.9	200600	419
Hosuru	50.0	500000	10000
Pillaru	124.4	100000	804
Hirgana	691.7		0
Vartur	342.8	200000	583
Peraduru	577.3		0
Total	12518.4	25474294	2035

Table 2 shows that VFCs had started receiving the benefits of protecting the forest in the form of NTFPs and timber as per the Micro Plan. The total value of such benefits mainly depended on the type of species, apart from the year of plantation and other variables. The value of benefits varied from Rs. 0 to Rs. 34,201 per hectare. Discussions with the forest department officials and Executive members of VFCs revealed that the benefits had been distributed equally (50: 50) between the forest department and VFCs. Out of the share of the

VFC, a minimum of 50 percent went to the VFDF and the balance was shared by the members of the VFC as dividends or went to the VDF as decided by the VFC. On an average, each member got Rs.1827 and in Heggodmane VFC, members got the benefits to the extent of Rs.11088 per person.

The main goal of the JFPM program is to generate livelihood opportunities for local communities through Village Forest Committees (VFCs), aiming to reduce dependence on forests and promote forest protection. A summary of the village development initiatives undertaken by these VFCs is provided below.

- ❖ Provision of alternative energy sources such as LPG, solar lamps, solar water heaters, biogas, gohar gas, smokeless stoves, and CFL bulbs to reduce reliance on forest resources for fuel.
- ❖ Distribution of building materials, including cement poles, cement, and steel sheets, to economically disadvantaged VFC members, with a preference for Scheduled Castes, to reduce dependence on timber.
- ❖ Support for public infrastructure, particularly schools, bus stops, and sanitation facilities. Emphasis was placed on school development, including provisions for computers, construction of compound walls, gates, biogas systems, drinking water facilities, and steel grills.
- ❖ Construction of community halls and wells, installation of solar street lights, and provision of electric fencing units.
- ❖ Financial assistance to impoverished households for health and education expenses, with a focus on supporting Scheduled Castes.
- ❖ Formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) – The JFPM program aimed to create a system that supplemented livelihood opportunities for members through SHGs. These groups were either formed by the VFCs or by adopting existing SHGs. Loans were provided by the selected VFCs for income-generating activities such as animal husbandry, farming, poultry, and tailoring. The choice of activity depended primarily on the interests and skills of the individual. The income from these activities helped improve the quality of life for many, albeit in a modest way. With the opportunity to earn income, many families were able to improve their living conditions, send their children to school, and expand their small businesses. This was made possible by the loans provided through the VFC. However, it was noted that villagers often took loans from various sources for different purposes, making it difficult to track the specific impact of JFPM on their economic improvement. Nonetheless, VFC support for

income-generating activities provided opportunities for poor households to acquire new skills and earn income.

- ❖ Training for self-employment in tailoring.
- ❖ Purchase of utility items such as furniture, pedals, and vessels, which were provided for rent

Discussions with the VFC executive members revealed that the majority of VFCs used the VDF funds to provide LPG, solar lamps, gobar gas, and smokeless stoves to member families. The remaining VFCs used the funds to support construction activities, create assets for the VFCs, and generate resources to strengthen VFC funds. The general principle followed in using VDF funds for community assets was that improving the quality of people's lives led to the development of both the village and the forest. The VFDF funds were primarily used for plantation and related activities, such as soil and moisture conservation, as well as organizing capacity-building programs focused on forest protection, wherein most of the SC households were involved. Seed money, another source of funding for the VFC, was provided by Karnataka Forest Department through SHGs for income-generating activities.

Overall, the discussion indicated that the implementation of JFPM in the selected villages benefited the entire society, including Scheduled Castes. In the early stages of JFPM implementation, Scheduled Caste families faced challenges related to fodder, grazing land, and NTFP collection. However, with the growth of forest trees, these issues were resolved. It appeared that the dependency of Scheduled Castes on the forest for NTFP had decreased due to the availability of alternative employment opportunities in nearby cities and towns.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

This paper tried to highlight the complex dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Karnataka's Joint Forest Planning and Management (JFPM) initiative. It is found that initially SCs, along with other weaker sections of the population, faced challenges related to access to forest resources, such as fodder, grazing lands, and Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP). JFPM has adopted a suitable strategy to ensure the participation of SC members. This inclusive approach has helped SCs to gain equitable access to forest benefits, including the proceeds from NTFPs and timber, which are shared between the Forest Department and the Village Forest Committees (VFCs). Additionally, the VFCs have played a pivotal role in reducing SC dependency on forest resources by providing alternative income opportunities, such as access to loans, training in self-employment, and improved infrastructure. The active participation of SC members in the management and decision-making processes of VFCs reflects the impact of strong governance frameworks and community-driven efforts. Moreover, the growing opportunities in nearby towns have further diminished the SCs' dependence on forests for livelihood, facilitating their socio-economic

integration into the broader economy. The paper calls for continued efforts to ensure that all communities, particularly SCs to participate in and benefit from forest resource management, ultimately leading to a more inclusive and sustainable future for forest-dependent communities.

REFERENCES

Dhanagare, D N (2000): “Joint Forest Management – A Study of Uttar Pradesh” C.B.Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad.

Mahed-Ul-Islam Choudhury, C Emdad Haque, Sanzida Habib, Participatory exclusion of women in natural resource management: silent voices from wetland communities in Bangladesh, *Community Development Journal*, Volume 53, Issue 1, January 2018, Pages 42–60, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsw007>

Murthy, I. K., Hedge, G., Ramprasad, V., Bhat, P. R., Rao, J. R., Nagaraj, B. C., et al. (2004). The Ecological impact of Joint Forest Management in Karnataka. In ‘Spread, Performance and Impact’, edited by N.H. Ravindranath and Sudha P. This book was published by Universities Press (India) Private Limited

Murty, M N (1994): “Management of Common Property Resources: Limits to Voluntary Collective Action” *Environmental and Resource Economics*, Vol.4, No.6, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Pp. 581-594.

Poffenberger, Mark and Betsy, McGean, Ed (1996): “Village Voices, Forest Choices: Joint Forest Management in India” Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Sehgal, Sushil (2001): “Joint Forest Management: A Decade and Beyond” Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi, Workshop Paper