



Role of Community Forests for Resilient Environment and Mitigating Climate Change

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Stopping by the northern tail-end of the Arabari Forest of Paschim Medinipur district under Jungal Mahal, enjoyed the pictorial forest landscape and I still have a picture of this place in my mind. The day-long stay and enjoying the forest beauty at the Arabari Forest stand must draw a picturesque poetry of the tree lines to any visitor and perhaps all these happenings are unexpected on every day or to every places of interests. The Arabari forest is far end of Chandrakona Road, away from the urban crowd, is a lonely place, though a solitary inn, stands adjacent to a conference hall, constructed with the modern architectural design, where potato whole-sellers are busy for their meeting to consider retail price of potato, harvested at Chandrakona belt, for marketing far and wide in the state. Local people or their residential places are not visible in and around this area other than the jungle. Dense jungle with series of tree lines stand by the roadside and is extended to miles after miles. Except *Sal* trees, *Kendu*, *Mahua*, *Kusum*, *Bahera*, and *Muchukunda* trees, scattered all over the forest, make the forest a wide and dense greenery. Arabari, Jhitka, Lalgarrh, Ramgarh, Karnagarh Garbeta, the natural forests, scattered in this area with a few kilometers distance from each other, are surrounded with *Akashmani* trees planted outside the forest area to mark the border of the forests. Anyway, this Arabari forest is a famous in the history of forest management as this forest is known all over the country as the

pioneering forest range in implementing Joint Forest Management (JFM) scheme from which the concept of the community forest is introduced for managing and overall integrity monitoring of the forests.

The Joint Forest Management scheme is now practiced not only in the state of West Bengal, but all over India to fulfill the mission of greening one-third part of the geographical area of the country. A renowned forester Shri Ajit Kumar Banerjee, IFS, introduced this type of management at 1272 hectares area of Arabari forest involving local people through a voluntary participation process and communal practices from which the inhabitants of the surrounding villages are benefited of employment in silviculture and harvesting, sharing the profits from the forest produce, collecting fire wood and fodder from the jungle on a nominal charge.

Joint Forest Management (JFM), at present, has been working well in the forests of almost all ranges of the state of West Bengal and all over the country in India. In the forest sector, West Bengal is the pioneering state in implementing Joint Forest Management (JFM) with the initiatives taken by Ajit Kumar Banerjee, IFS, a Silviculturist, working for the forest department under Government of West Bengal as the Divisional Officer. Ajit Kumar Banerjee was able to involve 618 families living adjacent to the Arabari forest area under Paschim Medinipur district of Jungle Mahal subject to 25% of

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profits from the forests were shared with the villagers and thus was able to manage 12.7 sq. km of forest area classified as degraded forest in 1971. The experiment led by Ajit Kumar Banerjee was successful and was expanded gradually to other parts of the state. The West Bengal Government approved this Joint Forest Management programme in terms of Government Order of West Bengal Forest Department Forest Branch No. 1118-For. /D/6M-76/65 dated 7 March 1987. Joint Forest Management has now been implemented not only in the state of West Bengal, but all over the country for managing the forests. And this is how the community forest is introduced in the forest management where people and the government share to perform their duties to keep up the health of the forests and recreate the resilient forest that mitigate the effects of the climate change.

Much more the resilient forest grown up, impact of climate change would be less, and that scenario is reflected not only in the Arabari forest patches, but almost all the forest stands of the Jungle Mahal area as the forest area is increased in the Paschim Medinipur, Jhargram, Bankura and Purulia districts under Jungle Mahal which is recently recorded in the India State of Forest Report 2019. The changing jungle scenario certainly has direct impact on the mitigation of climate change as noticed through the observations of more carbon sequestration from the atmosphere and store in the forest floor that leads to the more nutrient supply to the

forest floors by the process of microbial biomass decomposition. Chemical analysis of the soils of the forest floors in and around the Jungle Mahal area shows five times more concentration of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, vital constituents for the forest vegetation, only in a period of twelve years. And this enhancement with all aspects is the direct contribution of the community forest monitoring by the village people living adjacent to the forest patches. People-managed forest is the community forest, and as it is managed by the village people, so the community forest is termed too as the village forests. Community forests show how the common rural people make a drastic change in the nature as well as their own society by their inherited experiences for caress of the forests through the implementation of joint forest management programme. Taking these experiences from the direct participation of the community forestry jointly led by the people and the forest department, it's the right time from the part of the government to empower the people-led community forestry group without further delay and thus, strengthen the activities of the joint forest managers for built-up resilient forest health smoothly that lead to the mitigation of the effects of climate change. The forest department of the government knows very well that the people living in the vicinity of the forests not only save the forests as their communal forests for the generations, they worship the trees of the forests, particularly by the tribal community, and forest to them is regarded as the sacred groves.
