A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO PARTICIPATION IN FOREST MANAGEMENT

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Introduction

The forest resources of the world are at present under great pressure. The dependency of the people on forest, the high consumption of forest resources and the lack of an effective strategy to tackle the actual problem is resulting in the high depletion of forest resources.

In the sequential model of forest resources given by Mather (1992), when the population was less and the forest resources in abundance, the forest was considered as an unlimited resource. Gradually with greater exploitation there is a depletion of forest resources. Either this process is halted well in time or the depletion continues to almost the disappearance of forests. Then due to awareness and necessities forest is created and expanded and stability occurs when there is an equilibrium between exploitation and regeneration of forest resources.

The sequential model of Mather may not be very predictive, but it broadly accounts for the trend of forest resources in most of the countries of the world. The issue of forest depletion is more intense in developing countries :

"Growing rural populations invade the forests in search of land for their crops, fuel for cooking and fodder for their animals. Governments impelled to raise foreign exchange earnings and employment, and to finance economic developing programs, turn to the forests as a resource that can readily be exploited. Under the relentless assault, forests in the Third World are retreating" (Anon., 1992).

Although the problem in the developing countries seems to be very severe, they seem to be fortunate that unlike some of the other countries on whom realisation dawned only after almost complete depletion of forest resources, the severity of the problem has been recognised while they still have a sizeable chunk of the resources left. Pursuing a policy of valuing biodiversity, enhancing forest cover and meeting the basic needs of the people should be able drift them away from the problem. Some countries are trying to tackle to problem, others are at crossroads as to what to do and what not to do. This situation has given some theorists to come up with very attractive suggestions. Not realising the essence of the problem, they have come up with ideas as if it is a novel problem and they have a novel solution. The past is termed as obsolete and redundant with no scope for learning :

"In his arrogance, modern 'technical' man may assume that both his perception of modern problems and his responses to them are (and must be) unique, and that he

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has little to learn from the past. If he takes this view, he is limiting his vision as effectively as if he wore blinkers" (Mather, 1992).

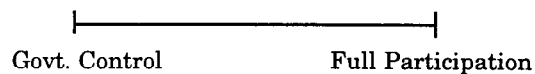## The Concept of Participation

The involvement of people in the developmental activities and in the management of natural resources has always been a necessity. Non-involvement of people has led to many unnecessary conflicts. But the concept of involvement or participation as is generally being propagated now-a-days is far from reality in at least two ways :

(1) It is assumed that the concept of participation is a recent evolution and there hasn't been any participation in forest management in the past. It is forgotten that in Germany (erstwhile West Germany) there have been community forests for centuries, with the management delegated to the State. The people there have great love for their forests and the local community has a decisive say in its management. It is for this reason that Germany is at present almost self-sufficient in forest resources. Another example is China, where almost half of the forest cover is under various forms of collectives, and where in one of the greatest afforestation efforts, the farmers accomplished 4/5th of the task to bring the forest cover from 8% to 15%. They hope to bring the cover to 20% by 2000 A.D.

(2) Secondly the prevalent concept of participation assumes that the government and the local community are at loggerheads, and the government can not manage the forests in the interests of the people. Hence participation is represented paradoxically as a spectrum with government control on one end and full participation on the other

end (Fig. 1). In between are various forms of people's interaction e.g. consultation, collaboration etc., which again do not have a hierarchical order but come into play as and when the situation arises. Evidently participation is supposed to be nothing else than government or public control.

Fig. 1

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Govt. Control   Full Participation

The paradoxical spectrum of participation

Obviously this concept gives full scope to its proponents to just criticise the government without realising the fallacy of their concept. The irony is that this concept has been taken as a new discovery and based on it, it has now become fashionable to put the word 'participation' before any technical term or definition and then go on elaborating as one wishes. It would not have been of much concern if the idea was limited to academic circles. But now it is being put to practice - another experimentation with the people. But being impracticable, the most probable result may be chaos.

The concept of participation should not be a bundle of theories but a pragmatic approach which may be implemented in spite of the vicissitudes of governments and the multitude of socio-cultural institutions and organisations around the world. The government should be there to make decisions for the social well-being and not to absolve itself of its responsibilities to the different sections of the society :

"Government by nature, structure, and purpose is supposed to make ethical choices. This is possible because the individual has the capacity to be moral, and the government

is that institution which can express this capacity on the level of social decision making" (Lutz and Lux, 1988).

France, Germany and Switzerland have been able to maintain and enhance their forest resources with the support of the people because of a strong policy and control. Government intervention and control of forests and natural resources becomes all the most necessary due to the greater play of market forces as voiced by the FAO :

"Failure to protect the forests effectively against the inherently short term forces of the market could clearly have disastrous results. This is the main reason why in many countries privatisation only affects forestry operations and forest industries. In countries as diverse as New Zealand and China public lands on which forests grow remain the property of the State in order to ensure long term continuity in management" (Anon., 1992).

The World Bank in its Forest Policy Paper, 1991 has also warned against the free interplay of market forces : "The free interplay of market forces will not bring about socially desired outcomes".

Now the question arises, if the prevalent concept of participation is not in the social interest, then what is the pragmatic approach to involvement of the people. To understand this let us visualise a common rural community. At this level we find that there is a government organisation (represented by some government official), a local community body, some informal groups and organisations, all interacting with each other and the local natural resources (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2
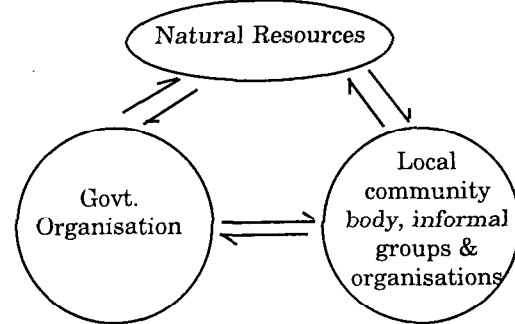
The interactions between local organisations and the natural resources

The government is characterised by the definite responsibilities of each official, an hierarchy, and formal rules according to which decisions are taken (Blau and Scolt, 1969). The local community body is not so formal in nature. The informal groups and organisations work according to norms and use grapevine for communication (Altman and Venzi, 1985). Thus the informal groups and organisations and the local community body are more capable of taking various flexible decisions pertaining to the community while the formal government organisation is more capable of taking a holistic view, mobilising resources and implementing decisions efficiently. The real involvement is the optimum utilisation of the merits of all groups and organisations for the benefit of the community and the society at large. Participation means involvement both of the local groups and bodies and of the government organisations. This involvement can be satisfactorily achieved by the smooth flow of information and effective communication between all groups and bodies in all matters and decisions regarding any activity which is affecting the community (Fig. 3). Smooth information exchange implies that any

decision can be implemented only when all groups and organisations unanimously or by consensus approve it. No decision can be thrust by anybody. Effective communication implies that no information or message is delayed or dumped without taking action upon it. It means regular face to face interaction among groups and organisations. The process and procedures for such interactions, smooth flow of information and effective communication may be decided by the groups themselves.
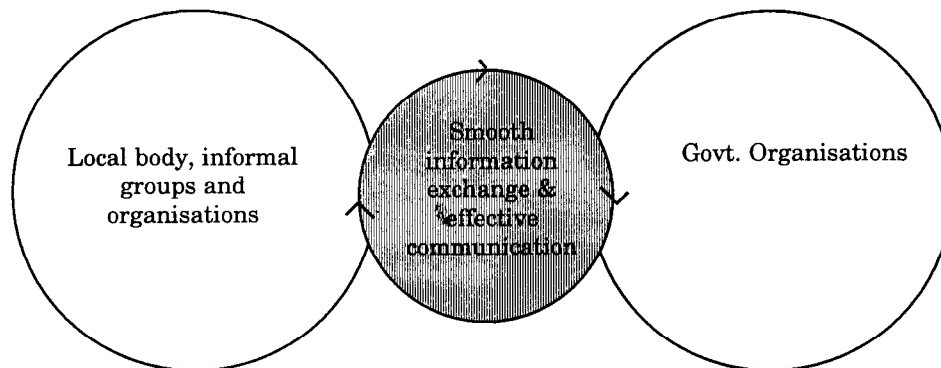
Thus the pragmatic concept of participation does not assume any hostility between the government and the people. It is rather a handshaking to complement the different capacities and capabilities for the betterment of the people (Fig. 4). It does not demand an intensive study and probe of the type of government and the socio-cultural fabric. It may be applicable under all situations and social conditions as long as there is no social chaos. It does not aim to formalise the local institutions and thus rob them of their inherent characteristics. Too much formalisation at local levels will result in impersonalisation and loss of community feelings among the people.

So far the concept of participation looks very nice as far as the planning, implementation and monitoring etc. of any project or programme is concerned. But if participation is to be consistent, it should be independent of any project or aid. Involvement of the people and the government for social benefit should go on as a process. Projects and aid wherever possible should be utilised as catalysts to continue this process. It is only possible if local people and groups do their role expected of them and the government official does his role expected of him. This stage of everybody doing his or her role to full capacity is the stage of active participation.
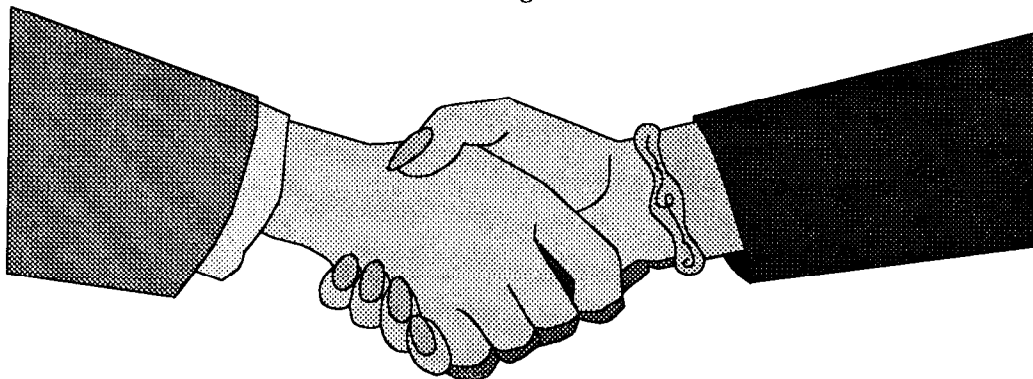
Active Participation

Active participation implies that all the resources available within the community i.e. land, forest, water, people etc. (both governmental and non-governmental) are utilised to the optimum for the benefit of the community. Non-utilisation or wastage of any available resource by anybody is non-participation to the extent it is under-utilised or wasted.

Fig. 3

A Pragmatic Concept of Participation

Fig. 4

Participation is the handshaking of different capacities and capabilities

The prevalent concept envisages a host of activities just on the forest area with the local groups and organisations struggling with the government organisation as if there is a liberation movement. The pragmatic approach suggested envisages co-operation among all sections of the community and encourages activities related to the available resources. Thus the members of the community are engaged in various informal activities which do not demand a major deviation from their daily routine and neither put any extra responsibility of a formal organisation on them, e.g. :

(i) Planting trees of local use in small numbers on their field bunds or courtyards (this single activity by the farmers would be able to solve a great problem of forest related needs in developing countries).

(ii) Small soil and water conservation works and adoption of integrated farming practices on private fields.

(iii) Rotational grazing by cattle in forest area (where the practice is to graze cattle in forests).

(iv) Roster-wise patrolling of forests and natural resources owned by community of government (the ownership pattern may change from country to country).

(v) Taking part in small savings etc.

These are examples of some of the activities which may be performed by members of a community without being burdened by any responsibility of a formal organisation. These activities are going to benefit the individuals as well as the community as a whole, which is a reflection of the participation of the people in the well being of the community.

The formal organisation of the government (represented by its officials) has to play its part in participation if the participation is to continue. The participatory activities of such a person, irrespective of the ownership of the forest land, may be :

(i) Advising and helping the members in their participatory activities.

(ii) Advising on the management of private

forests (if there are private forests in the community).

(iii) With the co-operation and consensus of the members of the community, estimating the forest related needs and devising strategies to meet these needs.

(iv) With the co-operation and consensus of the members of the community, chalking out the forest and natural resource management guidelines.

(v) Drawing up the technical management plans for government and community forests with the involvement of the community and getting its approval. Besides the forests being managed as a large ecosystem, a community and natural resource micro-plan will have to be prepared to cater to the needs and interests of the community.

(vi) With the help of the community implementing protective measures. The regulatory measures regarding distribution of usufructs may be decided and carried out by members of the community themselves. The government officials will be there to advise and help them.

(vii) Ensuring that smooth flow of information, effective communication and the overall participatory process continues with zeal.

Thus, a pragmatic participatory approach puts an extra responsibility on the government and its officials. But due to participation from the local people this responsibility will not necessarily involve much extra burden of work. What is really envisaged is a co-operative environment with the government official working as a

part of the community and not as an outsider. Once the process of participation, as proposed, has started, it will by itself effect the essential changes required in the working of the different organisations and groups. Although interactive learning will be a continuous process, a few special interactive sessions of the different groups in the very beginning will be helpful in accelerating the process. It is in the initial stage that much more dedication and work is required to create an atmosphere of Active Participation.

Approaching the Community

Even if one is very empathetic while approaching a community one may often forget a basic point of human psychology. In one's enthusiasm, one may be busy in probing the wants and desires of the individuals. Unknowingly, one is unnecessarily mixing up needs with wants. Human needs and human desires are two different things. If we do not differentiate between the two, we may come up with a list of desires which may not at all be needed in the community. For example if you ask a person, "which tree species do you like most?" - you may get the name of a species. But if you ask "Which species do you think is the most useful for the whole village?' - you may get the name of another species. The first answer gives the likeness of that particular person for that particular species. The second answer is the response of the person as a responsible member of the community. According to the humanistic psychology, a human being consists of a dual self. He is simultaneously that which he is and that which he yearns to be :

"Its lower aspect ...seeks one's own advantage regardless of the interests or well being of others ...In contrast, the higher

self is that which identifies with a common humanity and finds its rationality in objectivity, fairness and the truth" (Lutz and Lux, 1988).

When one approaches the community, one should approach the people giving them the dignity of a responsible human being. They do not have just personal desires. Besides self-interest, they also have mutual interest. If we are not careful, we may come up with a cluster of self-interests only. A correct approach should elicit points of mutual interest which incorporate the self interest of individuals.

Need for New Appraisal Tools

The main participatory tools being used in rural appraisal nowadays are : Time-line, trend analysis, ethno-biographies, seasonal diagrams, livelihood analysis, participatory diagramming, well-being or wealth ranking, analysis of difference, scoring and ranking, estimates and quantification etc. (Chambers, 1992).

These appraisal tools are very helpful in working with the communities especially in rural areas. They give us an opportunity to interact very informally with the people and their perception is represented by them in their own way. But after the perceptions of people are represented, its interpretation and further planning is done by other persons at a different time. It is here where the lacuna lies. We have not approached the community properly. We have taken the perception of people regarding their individual desires but not what is beneficial for the whole community. To remove this lacuna two steps may have to be taken :

(1) The questions put to the people should be such so that they feel important as somebody who can suggest not only what he or she wants, but what is beneficial to the society at large. It is especially in ranking desires and preferences that there is great probability of making a mistake. Often questions are asked about preferences which are not mutually exclusive. The person has anyway to respond to the question, and the resulting ranking may be such to which the asked person may not agree at all. Moreover ranking may be totally misleading if a value based issue is involved e.g. suppose a person ranks three brands of cigarettes x, y and z as z, x and y in descending order preference. The ranking shows that the person has the least preference for the y brand and the most for the z brand. Yet it may later turn out that the person is totally averse to cigarette smoking.

(2) A few new tools will have to be developed which may be able to reflect the very responsible perceptions of the individuals giving a direct clue to procedures and planning.

Essentials of Working with the Community

Encouraging participation and participatory appraisals are very challenging works, especially in developing countries. In participatory appraisal there is a tendency to go and meet people in pubs and in places of social gathering. Here the atmosphere is of leisure and entertainment. It is not necessary that people will respond very responsibly in such environment. Participatory appraisal will give the best results only if the people contacted agree to give some time especially for the purpose. That will require extra time and effort of course.

Secondly, working with the community requires a sense of empathy both from the person involved in participatory appraisal and the person involved in the implementation of a plan or project. The work itself may be very entertaining, but if it is done as fun or is associated with fun-making, then it loses its essence.

Finally participation and participatory appraisal can not be performed as a mock exercise. Even if it is to be done as an exercise, it should be associated with an actual plan of the community, so that it has real consequences and people do not feel as if they have been experimented upon.

Conclusion

With the depleting forest resources, the governments, especially in the developing countries are struggling with the twin problem of conserving their forest resources and meeting the needs of their people. The situation has given some theorists the opportunity to come up with paradoxical ideas. High sounding words and phrases are not going to tackle the actual problem, and the experimentation of these ideas on the people may most probably result in a chaos.

A pragmatic approach should be to create an environment of co-operation at all levels in the society and to engender a spirit of resource utilisation. This is possible at the community level irrespective of the political vicissitudes and the diversity of socio-cultural factors around the world. What is really required is smooth information exchange and effective communication. The aim of involving the people should be to meet the physical and psychological needs of the people. Thus the effectiveness of participation has to be measured on some human needs scale and not by an abstract parameter. Working with the community requires empathy and dedication. The appraisal tools should be used in such a way that responsible responses of people giving direct clue to procedures and planning may be obtained.

SUMMARY

The paper proposes a pragmatic approach to participation especially with regards to forest management and outlines the impracticability of the prevalent participation concept. A simple and practical approach of involving the people coupled with consistency and dedication is the hope for the countries struggling with the pressure on their natural resources.

वन प्रबन्ध में भागीदारी कराने की अनुभवाधारित दृष्टि

शहबाज अहमद

सारांश

इस अभिपत्र में भागीदारी कराने के लिए, विशेषतः वन प्रबन्ध में, एक अनुभवाधारित दृष्टि प्रस्तावित की गई है तथा प्रचलित भागीदारी विचारधारा की अव्यावहारिकता की रूपरेखा दी गई है । लोगों को साथ लगाने की सरल और व्यावहारिक दृष्टि और उनके साथ लगे रहने और समर्पण की भावना ही उन देशों के लिए एकमात्र आशा है जो अपने प्राकृतिक संसाधनों पर पड़ रहे दबावों से जूझ रहे हैं ।

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