Community forestry – linking conventional and nonconventional forest areas for sustainable development

Community forestry has been defined as 'any situation which intimately involves local people in a forestry activity'. Though this concept does not give a clear picture of ownership of land resource, equity share, participation in decision making, etc., it clearly emphasizes the need for active participation of the community in regeneration and protection of the forest resources at all times. This aspect of forestry not only benefits local people but also provides great benefits to the landless people, viz. fodder, fuel wood, small timber and other non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Community forestry is not a new concept in India. It was developed prior to the pre-colonial period by people in community-owned forests. Most forest lands during the colonial period were brought under the control of the forest department by the forest acts in 1865 and 1878. Notwithstanding, community forestry was started in Kumaon hills, a conventional forest area through active participation of the Panchayat and was popularly known as Van Panchayat.

During the post-colonial period, community forestry programme was adopted by the forest department to meet the basic requirements of communities through raising trees in nonconventional forest areas, viz. community land and public land through active participation of the community. For instance, in Tamil Nadu, Acacia nilotica trees were planted in community lands like foreshores of water reservoirs through active community participation.

Similarly, community forestry in Gujarat was started both in public as well as community lands such as roadside plantations, supervised woodlots and village self-help schemes. Now, the community forestry programme has gone beyond the boundaries of nonconventional forest areas. Presently, it is followed in both reserved forests and unclassed state forests (USF) through Joint Forest Management. Thus, the community forestry is a dynamic concept which implies ‘forestry of the people, by the people and for the people’ that is practised in various types of lands, viz. panchayat land/community land, public land and forest land (Figure 1).

In the recent times, community forestry can be considered as one of the modes to interlink conventional and nonconventional forest areas that can ensure sustainable development through forestry practices in resource rich areas such as northeast India. Possible legal instruments need to be strengthened in order to encourage community participation and benefit sharing under the prevailing acts such as the National Biodiversity Act, 2002.


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Figure 1. Community forestry interlinks conventional forest area, community land and public land.