

Forest Management

The history of management of forests in West Bengal dates back to people who looked at all creatures with compassion. The forest areas were large and people less in number. Sages lived in these jungles and imparted training and spiritual enlightenment. The pressure on forests increased considerably later. The increasing population with changing morals led to destruction of Forests.

After independence the Government of India in different policy proclamations, realized the importance of green vegetation for sustenance of humanity. Since 1922, broadly two management practices were followed in forestry in West Bengal. A system of clear-felling and thereafter artificial regeneration through taungya (Agri-Silviculture) was followed for forests of sub- Himalayan tract comprising of Jalpaiguri district and Siliguri sub-division of Darjeeling district. The main species was Sal (*Shorea robusta*) mixed with associates *Terrinolia* spp, *Chukrassia* spp. etc. The lateritic tract comprising of the districts of Purulia, Medinipur, Bankura, Birbhum and part of Burdwan districts contained 38% of the state's forest land. The main species was Sal with associates of *Madhuca latifolia*, *Diospyros melanoxylon* etc. Management system followed was simple coppice system. Forests were scattered and interspersed with blank forest land and also private farm land.

Around 1960, Government of India invited Dr. J. Von Monroy, a FAO expert in forest industries to study the country's raw material resources for industries. He recommended raising plantation of quick growing species such as *Eucalyptus*. The Government accepted the recommendation to supply raw material to wood-based industries. This was the beginning of introduction of eucalyptus hybrid with associates like Akashmoni (*Acacia auriculiformis*) and Minjiri (*Cassia siamea*) in lateritic tracts of West Bengal. Other states like Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Kerala also followed this trend. The National Commission on Agriculture recommended social forestry in the mid-seventies, it got real boost in West Bengal from 1981. The IDA supported West Bengal Social Forestry Project initiated a new approach to deal with problem of biotic interference on forest land.

In the initial years the foresters, having very little experience of south West Bengal, started raising plantations of traditional species in the denuded areas. Stress was given on Sal, piasal, paccasaj, mohuland kend. To improve the moisture content of soil, contour trenching at regular intervals and even annular trough on the upper slope side of the pits were dug, and 'donga' planting done. But because the species were mostly slow growing and protection from cattle and fire could not be given for years, most of such plantations failed. Subsequently a great change had come up in forest and forestry management for protection and development of the south West Bengal Forests, where Forest Protection Committees (FPCs) were formed following Arabari experimentation. The reorganization of forest areas were done to coincide with the Government or Panchayat units and sub-units for quick handling of participatory management problems with people and government staff at different levels. This not only helped in solving management problems but almost all the degraded forests in south West Bengal in districts of Medinipur, Bankura, Purulia, Burdwan and Birbhum were rejuvenated. More than 4000 ha of such forests came up with participation of people.

In 1995 for the first time the FPC members became eligible for revenue sharing in south West Bengal. This distribution of usufruct to the villagers was unique in the history of any state Government and the project took firm root in the minds of the people of West Bengal. However the scheme introduced in North Bengal was in different form as these were very good forest areas with matured Sal and other miscellaneous trees. These areas were kept outside the purview of the project. Therefore participatory management was the only ready option available to the Forest Department.

Improvements in fields of wildlife research and management were also noticed. Management Plans were written for individual protected areas. Wildlife squads were formed to mitigate man-animal conflict. In capturing big carnivores and herbivores chemical tranquilization was resorted to. Translocation after their tranquilization reduced chances of casualty.

Introduction of computers in offices at all levels and amongst field staff have been found to be very useful by the department especially for budgeting, accounting and for regular submission of various reports and returns to the state and central governments as their timely and prompt submission is essential for various projects and for release of fund.

Today with increasing human population, growing industrialization and waste generation, the challenge is to determine ways and means of ensuring that biodiversity conservation is an integral part of forest management.