

Proceedings of the consultation on the Grant of Permission for Timber Operations/Bamboo Operations as per Working Plan/Working Schemes.

Date: 7th November 2005

Venue: Hotel Presidency

Organised by- RCDC- Centre for forestry and governance

Background

The Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India in a letter no 9-17/2005- RO (HQ) dated 19th September 2005 to the Principal Secretary (Forests), Government of Orissa has granted Timber/bamboo Operations in the 11 Forest Divisions, which have approved Working Plans/Schemes. This order has fuelled a hue and cry not only among the forest protecting communities, civil society organisations and conservationists but also among the serving foresters.

The consultation was of small group of serving as well as retired forest officials for necessary technical inputs, and forestry professionals, environment experts and selected representatives from the forest protection groups was organized by RCDC Centre for Forestry & Governance to discuss the order and ventilate apprehensions.

Objective of the consultation

- i) develop clarity on the order,
- ii) discuss Government's preparedness to implement the order,
- iii) discuss the impact and ventilate apprehensions,
- iv) discuss the impact of the order in the JFM and CFM areas.

Discussion

Clarity on the order

The order says that, "Annual yield for the respective division shall be adjusted for illegal removal and natural loss of tree, if any that might have occurred. Only yield available after making such adjustments shall be harvested". This means that the net trees to be felled will be difference between permissible number of trees due for felling and the number of trees already illicitly felled. The data for quantum of trees felled illicitly apparently is not available in most of these eleven forest divisions. Only lone case is the Boudh forest division, the working plan has tried to estimate the illegal tree felling to be Rs. 600 lakh per annum. But

the annual seizure is estimated to be Rs. 6 lakh i.e. one percent of the total illegal removal of trees from the forest. Without proper assessment/quantification of the forest it is going to be very difficult for the Forest Department to regulate tree felling beyond the 'permissible limit'.

Arguments in favour of green felling

Different viewpoints came in the discussion for a need for green felling:

Mr. A.K. Pathak, DFO Berhampur viewed that timber felling is required. Because people require bamboo, small timber, firewood etc in their day-to-day life and since there is a ban, people meeting their requirement by illegal methods. Moreover, Berhampur is importing timber to cater to its needs so to meet the demand there is a need for selection felling.

Mr. H.N. Sahoo, a retired IFS commented that some operations are necessary for any forest. Working plan should be made keeping in mind not only the revenue but the environmental aspect as well. The ban has not helped in increasing the forest cover. He opined that police arrangement is required for protecting the forest. There is inadequate infrastructure, there are very less staffs. But he also agreed that yield assessment by the field officers is a difficult task and the points 'a' and 'e' given in the order will be difficult to implement.

Mr. B.K. Patnaik, CMD, OFDC, gave his personal viewpoint that OFDC will surely be benefited with the implementation of the order. Green felling is required and it has to be done in a sustainable manner. Tree felling ban was there only in Orissa as 60000 cubic meter of timber was there as stock, which couldn't be disposed off. OFDC used to deal with 2 lakh cubic meter at one point of time but presently it is involved with 20000 cubic meters from the salvage operations. People are using wood so a lot of illegal felling is done. The staffs of OFDC, forest department are not going to forests as no operations are carried out. In the super cyclone that hit Orissa in 1999, there was not much damage to the mangrove forest rather big trees were uprooted and it was because of the absence of tap root system (trees had overgrown). He emphasized on the lifting of ban. He was of the view that the community will not be affected by this order rather the mafia will be under check as the OFDC staffs, forest officials local people will continuously go inside the forest. He also explained that last year 9 lakh people got employed by the bamboo operations and the royalty was distributed to the people.

Mr. Saroj Patnaik, retired Chief Wildlife Warden also emphasized on lifting of ban and said that timber from Malaysia, South Africa is imported and they in turn are harvesting the rain forest, which cannot be renewed. So there should be conservative selection felling. He

informed that in an area of 50- 60 ha., 10- 20 trees will be selected for felling so it may not be economically viable.

Mr. Rajiv Kumar, DFO Khurda said that mafia is not cutting the forest rather people are doing it unsystematically. By systematic felling the needs of the people will be catered. Local people will be engaged in the operation so it will generate employment to them.

Argument against green felling

Working plans: Mostly the working plans are prepared as a document for timber operation. The working plans are highly undemocratic and do not reflect the livelihood perspective. NTFP component is almost negligible in the plan and it promotes commercialization. In Orissa, one crore people depend on forests for their livelihood so their interests needs to be safeguarded while preparing the working plan.

No assessment of the increase/decrease in the forest cover after the ban had been imposed: There is no record available with the forest department regarding the benefit to forest during the ban period so the argument that lifting of ban will help in conservation of forests is a debatable issue.

No quantification of forest: Without proper quantification of forest, it is going to be difficult for the forest department to regulate tree felling beyond the 'permissible limit'.

Demand & supply: There was an argument that if there is so much demand by the communities as well as the urban mass then will working in 11 divisions meet the total demand? The demand will always increase so should the forest be opened for felling?

Marking: For felling of the trees, the marking officer usually does the marking of the trees. Enough leverage is given to the marking officer to determine the removal of the trees so there is an absence of checks and balance measures. In many places, local workers are doing the marking. So there was an opinion that DFOs and Conservators should be included in the marking process or the marking officer should be of the rank of DFO or Conservator.

Impact on the villagers: Since 1988, people have been imbibed with the fact that there is ban on tree felling so what will be the impact when people suddenly come to know that the ban is lifted. The representatives from Orissa Jungle Manch were of the view that they have developed and nurtured forests amidst great difficulties and this lifting of ban will lead to a lot of bloodshed. The order will benefit the local communities is not true. In bamboo harvesting, 50 percent of the harvest is given to villagers but they are not allowed to sell it. So what is

the benefit to them? There is always debate on joint management and on the other side people are not allowed to sell the bamboo harvest. Moreover, there are policies on compensatory afforestation but it is not implemented as yet.

Lack of infrastructure: There is 40 percent vacancy in the lower level staffs of the Forest Department. The present arrangement at the field is not able to check the illegal removal of timber so proper monitoring would be almost impossible if the timber operations are carried out.

Impact on forests

There is absence of proper assessment of the illegal felling and annual yield. It will be difficult for the forest department to regulate tree felling beyond the permissible limit. Lack of infrastructure and unsystematic cutting rules will contribute to over exploitation of the forests.

At present, most of the sawmills in the state have been closed. After the lifting of the ban, Supreme Court has allowed saw mills to be opened by the OFDC or DFOs and round timber will be made available. This will ultimately go to the traders and outside market instead of meeting the local demand.

From the silvicultural aspect, selective felling and normal forestry activities like thinning, pruning and other activities are necessary for maintaining the health of the forests.

Due to ban on green felling, the movement of the forest officials, OFDC staffs have almost stopped inside the forest. The movement will increase if the ban is lifted and it will check the illegal felling by the mafia.

Impact on JFM/CFM areas

No specific modality has been fixed in the present order to harvest trees from the JFM/CFM areas. These areas have not been mentioned in the working plans also. There was an apprehension that forest protected by these groups might fall prey to this order. It was discussed in the meeting that the communities in JFM/CFM areas shouldn't be looked only as the beneficiaries but they should be involved in the whole process of planning and implementation. There was a debate on the pressure shift by the communities and the opinion of the forest officials was that that people are protecting one portion of the forest and cutting from the other forest areas so there is no net benefit to the forest but another point of view was that the pressure shift is there only in the initial stages but when the entire community is protecting then this problem is not there. They have mechanisms, rules, and

regulations to meet the demand. It was emphasized that there is pressure absorption rather than pressure shift.

Mr. Rajiv Kumar, DFO, Khurda informed that Puri division working plan will be revised and VSS areas will be included in it.

Impact on the wildlife

There was an apprehension that the lifting of ban can be critical to the wildlife population. It was explained in the meeting that no protected area is coming under working plan prescription. Another apprehension was regarding the protection of wildlife in the areas other than the protected areas and the strategies and mechanisms the government will take to reduce the impact of tree felling on the wildlife population.

Possible prescriptions

Forest Department level:

- The working plans should be developed after thorough consultation with different stakeholders like NGOs, forest protecting communities, civil society organisations etc. Collector approves the working plan but his comments do not represent the local people's viewpoint. The district administration, Panchayats and local NGOs should be consulted before preparing a working plan and a copy of the working plan should be placed in the district library.
- Proper assessment and quantification of the forest and harvesting of forest produce should be done. With environmental assessment, social assessment has to be done.
- Assessment of the areas which will be completely denuded due to developmental projects like mining, industries etc.
- Assessment/survey regarding the benefit to the forest in the ban period.
- Lot of vacancies is there in the lower level staffs of the forest department. Staffs to be recruited in for protection of the forests and monitor the different activities of the department
- It is the responsibility of the marking officer to determine which trees to be felled. Proper orientation should be given to the marking officer regarding the felling rules and operations. The marking officer should be of the rank of DFO or conservator or there should be mechanisms where different stakeholders are involved in the marking process for proper checks and balances.
- Strategies and mechanisms to be developed by the department to reduce the impact of felling on the wildlife population.

.

VSS/FPC level:

- Regular consultation with the forest department and keep a vigil on the felling operations and detect and disseminate the news to the forest department.

Civil Society organisations:

- Assessment of the illegal felling, impact of ban on forest.
- The lacunae in the implementation process can be detected

Some general recommendations

- There should be a coordination committee at the division/district level of multi stakeholders to monitor and regulate timber and bamboo harvesting and meeting the environmental concerns.
- The orders/guidelines need to be written in simple oriya language and circulated by the government to lower level staffs, FPCs/VSS, NGOs etc.

Minutes by RCDC- Centre for forestry and governance