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Vana Samrakshna Samithi- a study on Thenmala and Palaruvi

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India possesses 1.8 percent of the world's forests.¹ However the local community has been alienated or deprived from using the forest and its products by and large. This has contributed to the degradation, deforestation, poaching and other harmful actions in the vicinity of the forests in India.

Non Timber Forest Products (NTFP) are important source of livelihood for many Indian communities. Several thousand tones of NTFPs are removed annually from India's forests. About 60 percent of NTFPs go unrecorded and are consumed or bartered by about 15 million people living in and around forests.² The lack of a consistent policy on this matter has worsened the situation further. Many reasons have been cited to redraw the forest policy with immediate effect. The arguments supplementing the reasoning are given as below:

- Degradation, not deforestation, is currently the major problem in the forest in India, though deforestation was more important in the past.
- Data on forest cover, its rate of change and the demand and the supply of forest products are unreliable
- The shrinking common property resource base, the rapidly increasing human, livestock population and poverty are responsible for the tremendous degradation pressure on the existing forest cover. This issue is more accentuated by the alienation of forest dwellers from the policy framework.

For years, the researchers concerned with sustainable management of forests in the country have argued that the road to improved stewardship of forests resources is the transfer of varying degrees of responsibility to the local communities who get their livelihood for them. Accordingly, various joint management, extractive-reserve and indigenous reserve projects, have been increasingly gaining ground recently.

The participation of local community in preserving, conserving and protecting the wild life and forestry resources can be done in many ways. The formation of *Vana Samrakshna Samithi* (VSS) and Eco Development Committee (EDC) involving the local community are two ways in which the pressure on Forest can be minimised. Under both the schemes, more power including the management of resources and income generating opportunities are given to the local people without disturbing the flora and fauna.

¹ The World Bank, *India - Alleviating poverty through Forest Development*, World Banks Operations Evaluations Department, 2000.

² World bank, 2000

Eco Tourism - Eco development Committee

The international Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as: “responsible travel that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people”. At a time when traditional conservation through enforced protection of natural areas like forests and wild life is being questioned for the lack of effectiveness and social impacts, strategies such as ecotourism offers considerable potential for integrating conservation with development.

The purpose of eco tourism is not just attracting tourists. It involves the formation of Eco Development Committees and the participation of the local community. The economic opportunities available to the local community lay the basis of the conservation of natural resources. The basic objectives of the EDCs are to reduce the negative impact of the local people on the sanctuary and to involve encroachers in conservation, instead of exploitation

By the development of forests as recreation spots, the involvement of the local community at various levels like protection, management and conservation can be ensured. Viable and feasible eco tourism, properly construed and implemented can raise subsistence levels of the local community, thus alleviating the pressure on the forest.

Vana Samrakshna Samithi

Joint Forest Management (JFM) introduced in 1990, is a complete change over from the policies followed till then. It is consistent with the Forest policy of 1988. It envisages people’s involvement in the development, protection and management of forest. Forest produce like fuel wood, Non-timber forest produce (NTFB), timber etc are made available to the forest dependent villagers by the JFM, so that the village communities are motivated to help in the development and protection of forest.³

Participatory Forestry Management (PFM) justifies in dealing with the anthropogenic factors dealing with the forest protection in this context. The way PFM can be implemented depends on the various factors like the location, community, forest resources, and the means for revenue generation and so on. It involves protection, development and management of forests in a mutually contributing and sharing of responsibility between authorities and community. These activities are planned, implemented, maintained and monitored by the village institutions – *Vana Samrakshna Samithi* (VSS) constituted with the help of Forest Department.

In Kerala it is constituted with the help of the Kerala Forest Department (KFD). Other major activities include appointments of Coordinators, training, extension and motivation of local people, problem identification, VSS formation, finalisation of bye-laws, finalisation of roles and responsibilities, terms and conditions for sharing of costs and benefits and the procedures for evaluation and amendment of the program. The conceptual understanding on the formation of VSS under the guidelines of Kerala Government is as follows:

³ G.O.Ms. No. 84/97 F&WLD, Thiruvananthapuram dated 16.1. 1998

Every household in the selected ward/hamlet group has the option of participating in the *Samithi*. Any two adult members of a household can participate in the VSS, one of the two being a woman. They register their names with the range Officer on a payment of Rs 5 per household which is credited to the Core Fund of VSS. The Schedule Cast (SC) and Schedule Tribe (ST) members are exempted from the payment of the registration fee. While selecting the area and identifying the participating village community, the District Forest officer shall initiate actions for entry phase activities. During this period, the Range Officer (RO) may fix up a date in consultation with the villagers to hold the participatory meeting to initiate the proceedings.

The general body meeting of the VSS is held once every six months to review the actions taken in pursuance to the approved micro plan, status of the forest protection and functioning of VSS Executive Committee. The executive committee shall have nine elected representatives from the VSS. Out of the 9 members, at least 3 should be women. There shall also be proportional representations from SC and ST communities. The *Gram Panchayat* member of the concerned ward will act as the Ex – Officio member. Forester or Forest Guard having jurisdiction over the area will act as the Ex- Officio member Secretary. The committee elects the President from the elected members. The term of the committee is two years. Under the special circumstances the General Body Meeting of VSS can be convened on request of not less than 1/3 of the VSS members to the Convenor of VSS. The quorum for GBM will be 1/3 of the total members.

The VSS Executive Committee shall meet at least once in every month. The committee shall prepare a micro plan for a period of 10 years in consultation with the participatory community groups, NGOs and KFD. The plan shall include the prescriptions for the management of forest and village resources under the control of VSS. It shall prescribe the ways to reduce excessive pressure on forests and for the protection and restoration of forests to ensure the sustainable flow of goods and services. It may also discuss the responsibility sharing, rights and duties of the communities involved.

Preliminary	Planning	Implementation
1. Site identification- Specification of area and locality of the VSS	5. PRA - PRA is the technique adopted for the preparation of Micro Plan	9. Credibility Fund - Grant provided to VSS for initiating the activities
2. Memorandum of Association (MOA drafting)- It is a vision statement of VSS	6. Micro Plan - It is a plan of activities regarding conservation and community development for 5 years	10. Annual Action Plan - Action Plan prepares annually according to the Budgetary Resources
3. VSS Registration- Recognition by Forest Department	7. Micro Plan approval - Approval by Conservator of Forests	11. Annual Action Plan Approval- Approval by Conservator of Forests
4. Mobilisation of Funds- i. Core Fund- Funds provided to VSS through FDAs and FD and are at the disposal of VSS ii. Operational Fund- Funds in the joint A/c. of President/Secretary channelled through FDAs and FD	8. MOU Signing- The memorandum of understanding in the form of an agreement executed by Forest Department and VSSs concerning the norms for the protection of the Micro Plan area	12. Field Implementation - Implementation of Micro Plan at VSS level.

The members of VSS are individually and collectively responsible for:

- Ensuring protection of the PFM areas from encroachment, grazing, fires, illicit felling, poaching, thefts etc.
- Ensuring execution of the activities in accordance with the approved micro plan through the executive committee.
- Making the villagers aware of the importance of nature conservation and forest protection.

Case study

1. Thenmala.

Widely known as "God's Own Country", Kerala attracts tourists from all over the world. The state of Kerala, forming part of the Western Ghats, contains protected area of 2,324 Square Kilometres in two national parks and 12 Wild life sanctuaries. The Western Ghats of Kerala, with its tropical forest eco system, provides a natural advantage for development of Eco tourism.

A small village at the foothills of the Western Ghats, Thenmala is a predominantly forest area with a lot of intervention at its periphery. *Peppara* dam of *Kallada* Irrigation project in the state is situated here. The famous *Shendurenay* Wild life Sanctuary is established around this water body. The wild life sanctuary, of about 100 square kilometres harbours large varieties of flora and fauna. This sanctuary is the most important eco tourism resource of Thenmala Eco tourism project.

Thenmala Eco Tourism Promotion Society (TEPS) was formed in July 1998 to promote eco tourism activities at Thenmala.⁴ It was supported by Forest, Irrigation and Tourism departments. The project objectives are⁵

- To develop Thenmala Dam and its surroundings as a major tourist destination.
- To promote Eco tourism on the basis of sound principles of ecological sustainability in the surroundings areas of Thenmala
- To have a well planned tourism destination with emphasis on tourism development so as to become a model for other destination development programmes.

The Thenmala eco tourism Project adopts a three-fold strategy, which involves eco friendly general tourism, eco tourism and pilgrimage tourism. The TEP is divided into four different zones; culture, leisure, adventure and eco tourism project. All these facilities are based on four factors – nature, ecological sustenance, possibility of conducting research and involvement of local people.

Nine EDCs were formed in Thenmala at the beginning. Each EDC consisted of 10 families,⁶ each family contributing Rs 25 to the fund. However, there has been a notable lack of interest on behalf

⁴ An environment impact assessment (EIA) was conducted by Kerala Forest Research Institute in 1998 in Thenmala

⁵ Satish Kumar, Binu 2005

of the local people. There are many reasons for this lack of interest. TEP is mainly under the guidance of tourism department. The Kerala State Electricity Board who was a part of the committee in the early years is not a part anymore. Tourism Minister of Kerala chairs the Thenmala Society while Vice Chairman is Secretary to Tourism of Government of Kerala. The Executive Board consists of the secretaries to Tourism, Forestry and Irrigation, District Collector, Local MP, local MLA, Principle Chief Conservator of forests – Kollam District, Thenmala Panchayat President, *Kulathupuzha* Panchayat President and Director of eco tourism. All decisions are taken by the committee. The committee is largely bureaucratic in nature and the local people have least to say in the functioning of the society.

The first phase of the Thenmala eco tourism was inaugurated in 1999; the second phase in 2000. Since then there is a total negligence from the part of the administrators to complete the next phases as planned. This, the local people say has much to do with the political manoeuvring. The tourism department has announced new projects on the same line at other places without bothering about the next phases in Thenmala. The local community does not expect much from the Government as such, but there is no way to get out of this wrangling since they have no voice in the decision making process. The success of an eco development project depends on the degree of participation of the local people. At Thenmala, it is found that the participatory level has come down to almost nil recently. This is because of the reason that too much state ownership still regulates and controls Thenmala Eco tourism project. Even though it promised a lot to the local people at the initial stages, it failed to live up to the expectation of the local community. There were instances where the locals turned to the tourism promotion related works like trekking, boating, bird watching, mountaineering, wilderness treks, staying in natural caves, studying flora and fauna, animal behaviour studies, ecological studies and so on in the initial years.

A total of 15 local youths have been trained as guides. But there are none in this field today. Rather, the society has encouraged private organisations from outside the periphery of the project to bid for the various vacancies which have come up in between. It has drastically alienated the local community from the project, and has created a rift between the locals and the administrators of the project. To prove this point, it was observed that out of 52 employees at the site as listed by the society, only three were from the local side. There is no apparent infrastructure uplift in this area. The local people have lost their faith and hope in the midst of the bureaucratic meddles.

There is a tussle between the forest department and the tourism department over the issue of who has more control in Thenmala project. There is no transparency on the fund generated by the tourism in this area ploughed back to the preservation and protection of forest. Sufficient fund can be allotted for the habitat improvement and other amenities. In fact, the local people from the Thenmala formed the Thenmala Tourism Development Co-operative Society Ltd in 1998. Apparently, this society has more clout over the local people than TEP has. This society also has training programmes and tourism promotion schemes. At present there are 310 members in the society. More locals are involved in their activities compared to the Government initiative.

⁶ There is only one tribe in this area namely *Kani* tribe.

The overall flow in the system is so explicit. Those who were the destructive forces in the past are not given adequate participation. They have excellent knowledge of the forest and the camping sites can be a resource to the over all program. Their presence in the area along with the forest officials and tourists ensure its protection from poachers and other illegal encroachers.⁷

2. Palaruvi - VSS

Palaruvi VSS was formed in 2003 with the prime objective of river protection, to promote eco-tourism. Palaruvi with its waterfall from a height of 80 meters is a famous tourist spot. It is 9 kilometres from Thenmala. Till the VSS was formed in Palaruvi, the area was notorious for criminal activities and anti social elements. The site was also becoming hugely polluted. Even though the preparations for the formation of VSS started early in 2001, there were conflicts of interests among the local people, which resulted in disputes over the area of jurisdiction and the membership criteria.

The Forest Department held 9 awareness campaigns to explain the aims and objectives of VSS. VSS was started with an involvement of 132 families, which have now risen to 150. There are altogether 209 members, out of which 104 are males and 105 are females.⁸ Each family is represented by 2 members, with Rs 5 collected initially from them. The initial fund allotment from the Government was used to build the basic infrastructure facilities like eco tourism office, canteen, dressing rooms and toilet at the waterfall site. The membership fee has been hiked to Rs 7recently. It took almost one year to form the VSS in Palaruvi. Local political leaders irrespective of party interests played a constructive role in its formation.

Upstream maintenance and Forest protection are the two main activities of VSS. The primary objective of the VSS is to protect the area from pollution and ecological disaster. There are 15 tourist guides appointed for this purpose. Five volunteers look after conservation activities. There is a spices shop known as Palaruvi Spices run by the VSS. The waste accumulated in the Forest area close to waterfalls due to the influx of tourists is systematically collected and disposed by the VSS members. Two women Self Help Groups (SHGs) have been formed and they function well as micro credit units.

The activities on Eco-tourism have helped in developing the area into an attractive tourist centre. The VSS is authorised to collect prescribed entrance fee from the tourists. The total number of visitors to this spot as on 8.2.04 was 1, 09,131. Income earned through Gate Collection till 8-2-04 amounted to Rs.5.22 lakhs and the expenditure incurred was Rs.3.36 lakhs.⁹ The money collected is deposited to the nationalized bank next working day itself. Major portion of the collected amount is utilised for upstream maintenance and forest protection, after meeting the expenses towards labour costs, wages to guide and minor infrastructural expenses. The DFO (Chief

⁷ K.G.Mohanlal, 2002

⁸ Kerala forest research institute

⁹ Kerala Forest Research Department

Executive Officer of the Executive Committee, FDA) releases the funds to the VSS of this area only after submission of Action Plans.

The VSS conducts Wildlife week in the nearby schools. This year note books and umbrellas were distributed to the children of 135 families using the income of VSS. Recently; VSS started planting medicinal plants in the vacant lands of forest. They wish to convert it to a medicinal plant garden

The involvement of local community has prevented Forest fires in Palaruvi since VSS inception. At present 18 locals are employed under VSS.¹⁰ It is interesting to observe that 6 VSSs are operational in the adjacent areas. Palaruvi is the most striking one. At certain other places, there are possibilities of generating income by selling Forest products. Sizeable amount of spices and NTFPs are available in these sites. Two interesting factors are colluded with this. In areas where the spice and medicinal plants grow in plenty, the local community is tribes. They are illiterate and know little on the functioning of VSS. At *Achankovil* VSS, it was observed that, even the office bearers of VSS have no clue about what VSS means. So they are still exploited by the officials and by the law. They have not seen the law book, which describes VSS in detail. Another factor is that of attitude by the officials. They can either manipulate or enliven the proceedings especially in tribal VSSs. A charged and vibrant executive committee in Palaruvi has shown the way for others.

Opportunities at Thenmala and Palaruvi

Palaruvi and Thenmala have within them, scores of opportunities, which if exploited would most definitely aid in betterment of the ecological, and social activities in the region. The VSS can indisputably serve as a venue to discuss all kinds of issues viz: nature, ecology, employment etc, help focus attention on areas that need reform and thus play a catalytic role in bringing several policy and institutional issues to the table. It can help bring together scattered communities into a common plat form and even help in women empowerment through participation.

VSS is a better mechanism to sensitize people on the need for the conservation efforts. It shall largely reduce the workload of the forest department by educating the forest dwellers. It is an avenue to discuss issues confronted by the community in preserving the forest resources. This may also go a long way in initiating Micro enterprises through self help groups and also in the preparation of micro plans by communities. It may even change in the attitude of the FD officials, consequently ridding the Samithies of at least a few administrative hurdles.

Limitations of the schemes at Thenmala and Palaruvi

Novel though the schemes are, it does face its own set of limitations. There is a definite lack of co-ordination between the various Departments of the scheme. There is a seeming Inadequacy of funds for development activities in the various VSSs, and the vested group interests within the community also act as a major hindrance.

The vital link between the JFM and the livelihood issues of the people is yet to be established at many places. The conservation activities widely involve the confidence building mechanism. But

¹⁰ Average salary is Rs 3000

this not in built in JFM as far as the locals are concerned. There is a rift between the forest officials and the community on the sharing of forest resources. At many places, there are complaints received on the issue of non – acceptance of the potential community members to the VSS. Their applications are summarily rejected or delayed. The community can only plead for rights and not claim. The power or termination of VSS is vested with the DFO. It is very easy to befool the forest dwellers and create vested interests among them thus divide the population along different lines. This happen as there is still larger dependency on the officials as far as the implementation process is concerned. Sometimes, the transfers of forest department officials add misery to the whole issue. Those who replace my not have the liking of the local community. The lack of interdepartmental coordination work as such at Thenmala cannot be underestimated and most of the times it is because of the ego of the officialdom create this problem.

Also, differences in the perception towards JFM create conflicts of interests. FD sees JFM as a means for regenerating forests; the local communities view it as a means of meeting their livelihood. (Fodder, fuel wood, small timber)

Moreover, the local communities at Thenmala and Palaruvi and almost all other such areas are predominantly, impoverished and illiterate people. These areas face problems such as inadequate social amenities like Health Care system, Nursery care and schooling. In addition to the above mentioned, are the gender issues which tends to limit a women's presence/participation in the Samithies.

Besides these limitations, the VSS in these areas also face certain threats like the destruction of crops by wild animals, intervention of Tribal Co-operatives in NTFP collection, development of political and communal groups in the VSS and the existence of sand, liquor mafias who use the community to their advantage.

Inference from the VSS

Several inferences could be made about the VSS in general by keeping in mind its opportunities, strengths and weaknesses. A list of inferences is given below:

- a) VSS is successful in places where community leadership is effective and Officers are keenly involved. At many places, it is the lack of awareness among the local people on the concept of VSS makes it ineffective. It is rather the lack of interest or adaptability to the changing scenarios by the forest department officials worsens this situation.
- b) It has helped to bring institutional issues to the table. (For e.g., permission to cut trees planted in their own settlement).
- c) Forest fire occurrence reported to be decreased.
- d) Awareness programme for the community is inadequate.
- e) Vigilance against forest fires has decreased forest fire.
- f) *Gram Panchayat* ward member is an ex-officio member in the executive body of the VSS. Beyond that the Panchayats do not actively co-operate with VSS activities.

- g) Collection and marketing issues related to Non Timber Forest Products (NTFP) need urgent attention.
- h) A well-integrated strategy is to be formulated for the successful implementation of JFM. Greater inter sectoral co-ordination between Government, Ministries and Departments is required.
- i) In dealing with protections of forest areas, tribal and gender concerns show, that forest management is a challenge in conflict management. The forest strategy needs to recognize this factor explicitly and take steps to resolve such conflicts.
- j) The NGO's/NGIs are to assist the FDs in PFM activities.
- k) Gender issues receive limited attention. The intention of increasing women participation is present in JFM. But they do little to address the crucial constraints that women face.
- l) Instances of constructive political interference are reported for certain VSS especially in the initial stages of formation where as in some other cases politicians manipulate the VSS to decide their party strength.

Suggestions for betterment

In order that the VSS flourish and carry on with their activities in the best way possible a few suggestions could be taken into practice.

Research in forest management techniques, to suit PFM objectives is essential. (For e.g. the selection of plant species to suit the soil condition, sharing the know how of the dependent community and so on) Further initiatives through repeated training are suggested for creating greater awareness of the PFM concept among the people and benefit they accrue from their participation. NTFP management is the primary concern of the PFM approach. The traditional knowledge of the forest dependent community may be tapped and scientifically used for bio-diversity conservation, re-generation, making of herbal medicines and other bi-products. The VSSs should resist the entry of the outsiders in tribal settlements, so that the true beneficiaries benefit from Government funds. Incentives can be set for the well managed VSS.

At present the programmes of line Departments are not implemented through VSS. Hence there is a need for co-ordination and implementation of official programmes through VSS. VSS is encouraged to take up income generating activities. However, scientific skills may be imparted to them for running a nursery, grafting fruit trees or up grading the designs of finished products. The VSS is eligible to get 10% of profits from their plantations and 100% of NTFPs from the micro plan area. It is a pre-condition of National Afforestation and Eco-Development Board (NAEB) for Natural Afforestation Programme (NAP) for financial support to FDAs. The *Girijan* Co-operative Societies also claim that NTFP marketing is their monopoly. In these circumstances the matter may be subjected to detailed scrutiny.

There require an overall change in the approach and better legal footing for the local community at the basic level of VSS. Even the afforestation programs like plantations run into sad state of affair when the plans like eucalyptus and acacia are used. This has the tacit approval of the forest department officials as it lessens their supervisory tasks in terms of the plants growth and cutting. If the marketing rights of NTFP are given to the VSS in their chosen market, VSS will be more effective. This is very much important especially in areas where the income generation purely depends on NTFP and not on waterfall sites like Palaruvi.

The 73rd Amendment of the constitution vests *Panchayati Raj* institutions (PRIs) with subjects such as social forestry and minor forest produce which in turn necessitates the need for exploring linkages with executive initiated JFM practices. Hence strategies for linking micro plans of VSS with decentralized planning of the PRIs may be explored.

Presently, women's organizations are reluctant to create awareness and instil confidence among women in forest settlements. Such organizations may come forward to take up the venture so that the women can fight for the genuine rights.

The Forest Department, Excise and others may extend their support to VSS to prevent illicit brewing and *ganja* cultivation in forest areas. Check posts of a vigilant VSS to prevent intrusion at the forest boundary shall be more active and effective. Forest Department officials should maintain effective and cordial relationship with VSSs members. Change in attitude from policing to that of a people friendly approach is required on the part Department staff for effective and active participation in the programme. Timely payments VSS for the completed works is essential to establish the credibility of Forest Department and gain the confidence of members of VSSs. Frequent transfers of FD officials may be avoided since the inception of VSS till it attains momentum of its activities.

Community awareness and the empowerment of the local people through participation should be ensured. A data bank may be made available in the open domain on various counts related to the project. A proper planned eco tourism project can be a viable solution to the budgeting and staffing problems faced by the government in order to conserve the protected areas and wild life.

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