

Role of Community Youths in Conservation of Forests and Protected Areas of Bangladesh

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Abstract—Community living adjacent to forests and Protected Areas, especially in South Asian countries, have a common practice in extracting resources for their living and livelihoods. This extraction of resources, because the way it is done, destroys the bio-physical features of the area. Deforestation, wildlife poaching, illegal logging, unauthorized hill cutting etc. are some of the serious issues of concern for the sustainability of the natural resources that has a direct impact on environment and climate as a whole. To ensure community involvement in conservation initiatives of the state, community based forest management, commonly known as Co-management, has been in practice in 6 South Asian countries. These are -India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Involving community in forestry management was initiated first in Bangladesh in 1979 and reached as an effective co-management approach through a several paradigm shifts. This idea of Co-management has been institutionalized through a Government Order (GO) by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of Bangladesh on November 23, 2009. This GO clearly defines the structure and functions of Co-management and its different bodies. Bangladesh Forest Department has been working in association with community to conserve and manage the Forests and Protected areas of Bangladesh following this legal document. Demographically young people constitute the largest segment of population in Bangladesh. This group, if properly sensitized, can produce valuable impacts on the conservation initiatives, both by community and government. This study traced the major factors that motivate community youths to work effectively with different tiers of co-management organizations in conservation of forests and Protected Areas of Bangladesh. For the purpose of this study, 3 FGDs were conducted with 30 youths from the community living around the Protected Areas of Cox's bazar, South East corner of Bangladesh, who are actively involved in Co-management organizations. KII were conducted with 5 key officials of Forest Department stationed at Cox's Bazar. 2 FGDs were conducted with the representatives of 7 Co-management organizations working in Cox's Bazar region and approaches of different community outreach activities conducted for forest conservation by 3 private organizations and Projects have been reviewed. Also secondary literatures were reviewed for the history and evolution of Co-management in Bangladesh and six South Asian countries. This study found that innovative community outreach activities that are financed by public and private sectors involving youths and community as a whole have played a pivotal role in conservation of forests and Protected Areas of the region. This approach can be replicated in other regions of Bangladesh as well as other countries of South Asia where Co-Management exists in practice.

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I. INTRODUCTION

IT is a general practice in Bangladesh for the communities that live next to the forest and protected areas, depend on the forest extracting resources to sustain their lives and livelihoods. These extractions are always done in improper way, leading to over exploitation of resources that destroys the bio-physical features of the forest. Deforestation, wildlife poaching, illegal logging etc. are some of the serious concerns for the sustainability of the natural resources that directly impacts the environment and climate. To ensure community involvement in state conservation initiatives, community based forest management, commonly known as Co-management or shared governance, has been in practice in Bangladesh. Under Co-Management approach, Bangladesh Forest Department involves the local community for forest management and protection. Donor agencies have taken up development projects to support the co-management initiatives. Co-Management organizations officially involve people from different social strata and age groups. This study tries to reveal the involvement of community youths with the conservation initiatives of Government and Non-Government entities strengthening the co-management process and its impacts. To motivate these youths in conservation, they are needed to be sensitized through different community outreaches, financial packages and facilitations. Only then youths can play a significant role in conservation of forests and protected areas of Bangladesh. And these success of youth engagements can be replicated in other south Asian countries, where co-management is practiced.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study has selected Cox's Bazar, a district in south east Bangladesh, for its special landscape and Protected Areas combining hills, forests and sea. Another specialty of this region is a vibrant group of youths who are very enthusiastic, and passionately involved in conservation. Qualitative method has been used for the study. For the purpose of this study, 3 FGDs were conducted with 30 youths from the community living around the Protected Areas of Cox's bazar, who are actively involved in Co-management organizations. KII were conducted with 5 key officials of Forest Department stationed at Cox's Bazar. 2 FGDs were conducted with the representatives of 7 Co-management organizations working in Cox's Bazar region and reviewed approaches of 3 private

organizations working with projects initiating various outreach activities promoting forest conservation in the community.

III. PROTECTED AREAS OF BANGLADESH AND RESOURCE EXTRACTION

Protected Areas Covers 10.72% of Total Forest Area (SRCWP, 2015) of Bangladesh. Literally, within a protected area, all activity and movement is prohibited. Special permission is needed to enter or do any activity there. But in a developing country like Bangladesh, poor people living in and around the forest dependent on the resource of the forest. They collect timber, pulp, fuel wood, honey, bamboo, fish and hunt animals illegally for their livelihoods. In addition to collecting resources from the forest, sometimes forest lands are used as grazing ground destroying the forest and its biodiversity. The most common threat is, encroachment and harvesting Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP). Another major threat is environmentally unsustainable tourism. Bangladesh Forest Department is the primary custodian of the forests and Protected Areas, ensuring conservation and biodiversity within those areas. It is difficult for the Forest Department to cover and protect vast of forest lands with its limited resources. Also to address the threats on forests and its bio diversities, local concern and understanding the context are an utmost necessity. Thus the concept of involving local community with the conservation initiatives of Forest Department emerged and Co-Management approach was placed for conservations.

IV. CO-MANAGEMENT IN OTHER SOUTH-ASIAN COUNTRIES

From the ancient and medieval periods the systems of using forest resources for meeting the livelihood needs of local communities in South Asian countries were participatory. This approach of forest management gave a realization that forests cannot be managed in isolation. Local peoples support for and involvement in PA management has been viewed as an important element of enhanced conservation in recent years, especially in developing countries. A comprehensive Forest Act in the Indian subcontinent was enacted in 1927 by modifying the first Forest Act of 1865 (and its subsequent revision in 1878). Some forests were earmarked as hunting reserves for royalties, a concept extended by British in their colonies (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) first by reserving commercially important trees (e.g. teak for royal navy) and subsequently by reserving forest lands (e.g. reserve forest and protected forest). In Nepal the first legislation for wildlife was implemented during the Rana regime more than 150 years ago. [1] The National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act promulgated by the Government of Nepal provided legal basis for establishing PAs in 1973. Bhutan Forest and Nature Conservation Act was enacted in 1995 wherein the role of local communities in wildlife conservation was emphasized. South Asian countries have experienced co-management of PAs, in different forms and practices based on their differed bio-physical conditions and socio-economic environment. As the common and core ground for conservation, local communities need to be engaged, adapting

best practices from neighboring countries with co-management, may strengthen co-management practices. [2]

A. Co-Management in Bangladesh: Engaging Community in Conservation

In 2003 Bangladesh Forest Department launched Nishorgo Support Project (NSP) with financial support from United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The objective of this project was to increase biodiversity conservation in targeted Protected Areas of Bangladesh, engaging local communities as a major partner in conservation. NSP started working in five protected areas, they were Lawachara National Park, Rema-Kelenga Wildlife Sanctuary, Proposed Satchari National Park, Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary and Teknaf Game Reserve. [3] These PAs selected by Nishorgo Support Project, were more remote compared to the other forests of the country. There were very few people living in and around these PAs. The number of staffs working in Forest Department were also very limited, who were deployed to protect these huge forest coverage. Rema-Kalenga Wildlife Sanctuary, covering nearly 1,795 hectors was managed by one range officer, three beat officers and 12 forest guards. Other PAs under Nishorgo Support Project had the similar situation. To overcome the limitations due to limited resources of Forest Department, the idea of engaging local communities in forest conservation and protection was introduced. Nishorgo Support Project pushed for a formal official declaration authorizing local community for conservation of forests and biodiversity. To develop a new Government regulation for Co-Management began in 2004 and the Government Order was signed in 2006. After going through trial and errors, a modified GO on Co-Management was published in 2009 with a more specific structure of Co-Management. Under the GO of 2009, total 8 Co-Management Councils and Committees were formed in 5 selected PAs. At present, 27 Forest sites are designated as Protected Forest in Bangladesh with Co-Management functioning in 22 sites. [4]

B How Co-Management Works for Conservation of Forest and Protected Areas

Co-Management has four basic tiers. Co-Management Council, Co-Management Committee, People's Forum (PF) and Village Conservation Forum (VCF). [5] These different tiers of co-management works in collaboration among themselves and with Bangladesh Forest Department. The key functions of Co-Management Organizations (CMO's) are to recommend and support initiatives for protecting the natural resources of the Protected Area and conserving biodiversity and assist the Forest Department and co-management institutions in implementing afforestation, habitat restoration, nature friendly tourism activities and other management activities of the Protected Area. [6]

V. CO-MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATION IN COX'S BAZAR REGION AND INVOLVEMENT OF YOUTH

From the youth engagement point of view, Cox's Bazar region is special for its enthusiastic youth groups involved in

conservation through co-management. There are six Co-Management Organizations in Cox's Bazar. They are Teknaf CMC, Whykong CMC, Shilkhali CMC, Himchari CMC, Medhakocchopia CMC and Fashiakhali CMC. These six CMCs are working together for the conservation of 19,247.38 hectares of Protected Areas under Cox's Bazar North and Cox's Bazar South Forest Division. All of the CMCs have successfully engaged youths in their conservation initiatives. Youths are involved in CMO's as Community Patrol Group Members, VCF member, NS or members of the Forest Conservation Club.²

A. Stories of Youth Engagement in Cox's Bazar for Conservation of Forests, Protected Areas and Biodiversity

The history of the youth engagement for conservation of forests and protected areas of Cox's Bazar CMC's are full of sacrifices and bravery. On 23rd March of 2008 Rafiqul Alam, the young CPG member of Shilkhali CMC was killed by the forest robber while on duty. Again on 5 February, 2012 another CPG member from Medhakachapia CMC, Shafi Alam was died in road accident while guarding the forest. During 2008 the young members of Khurermukh ECA Committee caught the robbers during poaching of around 700 bags snails and oysters from sea shore. Those were rescued and returned to sea by the youths. There are also stories of recent engagement from different CMCs. 7 CMC's shared their experiences of Youth engagement.

- **Shilkhali CMC:** In west side of Cox's Bazar marine drive, Rohingya refugees encroached the forest and set up a colony. This colony was destroying the marine ecosystems and biodiversity. Habitants of this colony destroyed the naturally generated saplings, snails, oysters and other marine species. In 2015 under the leadership of Forest Department, the youth CPG members of Shilkhali CMC actively participated in eviction of this Rohingya habitat.
- **Himchari CMC:** On June 2015, 50 youth members of Himchari CPG, with Forest Department, Administration and Police had participated in an eviction expedition targeted towards the forest land encroachers. The encroachers destroyed 5 acres of forest in Modhurchora National Park, a Protected Forest of Ukhia Range under Cox's Bazar South Forest Division.
- **Fashiakhali CMC:** A youth group of CPG and VCF members participated in eviction of encroachers, who destroyed 10 hectares of Forests in Fashiakhali Wildlife Sanctuary in 2014. The same group also protected poaching of trees from Fashiakhali Wildlife Sanctuary.

² Community Patrol Group- A group formed with the members of co-management organization works as guards protecting forests.

Forest Conservation Club- Youth led community organizations works with Co-Management Organization for conservation of Forests and Protected Areas.

VCF- Village Conservation Forum is the lowest tier of Co-Management Structure, who are basically the direct forest resource user.

NS- Nishorgo Shohayok (NS) are enthusiastic youths of the community who fosters the spirit of conservation and works for conservation. They may be or may not be the members of Co-management organizations.

B. What Motivates the Youths to be Involved in Conservation?

The basic catalyst behind motivating youths to conserve, was increased awareness. Different community based awareness meetings and outreach events involving youths, have motivated them to work for conservation.

Formation of Forest Conservation Club (FCC) is one of the most successful approach of forest conservation in Cox's Bazar region. There are three Forest Conservation Clubs at Medhakacchapia National Park and one Forest Conservation Club at Fashiakhali Wildlife Sanctuary with 200 numbers who's age range from 18 to 30 years. These four FCC's are organizing awareness meetings on Patrolling within forests, Climate Change and its impacts, ways to conserve forests and biodiversity. FCC clubs organize regular meetings where the different issues of forest conservation, hill cutting, encroachment and poaching are discussed to increase awareness among the local community. FCC's are directly involved in co-management as they have two representatives in Co-Management Council and Co-Management Committee. Bangladesh Forest Department, a Government Organization and USAID's Climate-Resilient Ecosystems and Livelihoods (CREL) Project, a development projects and Non-Government organization, Nature Conservation Management (NACOM) are working in Cox's Bazar region involving youths in conservation initiatives. These organizations have facilitated the formation of Forest Conservation Club, finalization of its structure and involving FCC's with Co-Management Councils and Co-Management Committees.

CREL and NACOM in coordination with Forest Department have organized different outreach events to sensitize the youths of this region. One of such event was 'Jungle Walk'. The event "Jungle Walk" was organized for the youths, introducing them with forest and its ecosystems, thereby ensuring their engagement in conservation of forests and biodiversity. In these events the college level youth around the protected areas were taken to visit the forests. There they were briefed about the ecosystem and bio-diversity by local forest officials, they took part in group discussions on how they can support the conservation initiatives of the community and identified their roles to support these initiatives. As part of raising awareness among youths, various National and International days are observed with engaging youths in events like photography contests and exhibitions. The objective of these contests and exhibitions were to introduce the young population with the beauty of Bangladesh landscapes where they reside and develop a sense of responsibility for conservation.

Capacity of the members of youth groups from Cox's Bazar region have been developed by involving them with different income generating activities and trainings like livestock rearing, nursery, agriculture and aquaculture by CREL Project and NACOM. These are gradually reducing their resource dependency and enhancing their focus on conservation.

One of the top officials of Forest Department of Cox's Bazar shared that by engaging Forest Conservation Club members as watcher for Assisted Natural Regeneration (ANR)

activities have provided them with the opportunity to earn 5000/month as a salary. This is enhancing their motivation for forest conservation. He also shared they have 20 more openings for the post of watcher and they intended to engage more youths. Another higher official of Forest Department expressed that, Youth Community Patrol Group (CPG) members are now key role players in conservation. They are protecting the forests. In partnership with development projects like CREL, they are providing guarding materials and remunerations to the CPGs so that they become more motivated towards their conservation works.

Through the FGD's the youths shared that formation of more environmental clubs, raising awareness among the members of sports clubs, Peers to Peers learning, showing documentary on Co-Management will enhance the motivation of the youth for better engagement in conservation of forests and protected areas of in their region as well as Bangladesh.

VI. CONCLUSION

The community youths of Cox's Bazar, engaged with Co-management through formal and informal approaches become role models for conservation of forests and protected areas in Bangladesh. USAID's CREL Project and NACOM in partnership with Bangladesh Forest Department has motivated the young generation of Cox's Bazar region to contribute in effective forest management through different community based outreach and awareness events, facilitating youth led organizations, involving them in income generating activities and trainings. These youth groups have proved that if properly sensitized, youths can lead the forest and protected area conservation. Some of these practices have resulted in improved condition of forests and biodiversity. These actions can be replicated with in Bangladesh and other countries with similar conditions.

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