Meeting the Challenge of Deforestation through Environmental Governance

<u>Public Participation to stop deforestation</u>

Bangladesh is a developing country which is densely populated and thus constantly faced with increasing demands of urbanization, accommodation and agricultural land, The rapidly increasing population has thereby, resulted in mass deforestation. The regulatory regime on forest protection in Bangladesh does not always reflect the progressive values of modern day governance. Instead, administration here is centralized that follows top-down approach and hardly involves people in the decision making process. Coupled with the compelling factors of over population and scarcity of economic resources, arbitrary resource allocation and maladministration are leading to continued degradation of natural resources and increased poverty for the marginalized that has direct linkage with limited or no access to resources.

Such is the case of the millions of ethnic minority in Bangladesh who habitually live in or around forests and earn their livelihoods from the forest eco-system. Exercising jurisdiction under the colonial laws and stepping into the shoes of the colonial rulers, the State has most arbitrarily established its control over the forests and sought to transfer the 'sense of ownership' of the ethnic group in favour of a most inaccessible colonial bureaucracy. For about 80 years, such police management of the forests has brought just two results: gradual eviction of the ethnic minority from their ancestral lands leading to deep rooted tensions amongst the state and these custodians of resources, and depletion of forests.

Over the years, forest cover in Bangladesh has come down to 6% from an officially claimed 20%. Statistics say that despite having the legal authority, the government has failed to finally declare substantial patches of forests as 'reserve' (a mode of protected area management that restricts peoples' access and exercise of customary rights) and categorically failed to manage those declared

both as an ecosystem and also as service providers to these bulk of ethnic people. This is because the mode of administration missed to perceive the linkages between people and nature and overlooking the genuine needs of the marginalized, opted for the closed and unaccountable mode of operation to satisfy the greed of few. That is why the recent anti-corruption drive of the government has listed the top officials of the forest department as the top corrupt people of the country.

On the face of gradual degradation of the forests, the administrators could not but bring a few changes in the management system to ensure peoples' involvement in the decision making process. As such the notion of 'social forestry' got legal recognition in the year 2002. Despite its limitations, this is an approach that has for the first time, emphasized on the need of involving people in the management of forest, recognized the service providing role of forest for the community and to some extent empowered people so as to create a scope for accessing the forest bureaucracy.

However, the success of this mode of 'social forestry' has been limited to strip cultivation and homestead afforestation. Though a mode of participatory management, 'social forestry' has not been able to address the long standing conflicts over ownership or management of forests in so far as the ethnic or local community in involved. Additionally, the benefit sharing mechanisms, governance structures, land ownership, selection of species, role of IFIs and all have been some of the most contentious issues that question the validity and sanction of 'social forestry' as a sustainable mode of forest management ensuring transparency and accountability and reflecting peoples' aspiration.

The Sal forest lying in the districts of Tangail and Mymensing, classic example where all existing management practices of the government failed. The government initiated the process of declaring the forest as 'reserve', but could not finalize the same due to resistance from local ethnic group. Eventually the

government could not finalize the various claims of the people over the forests and hence the forest was never managed as 'reserve' although the process remains pending for more than 25 years. Substantive part of forest was then declared 'national park', a decision that curbs peoples' rights and access but one that has come without any consultation with the local people. As a result, local people have always declined to accept the same. Again, part of the so-called 'national park' was purported to be declared 'eco-park' (a notion that has no legal sanction) against which resistance rose to such a height that incident of killing of ethnic minority (2002) took place. Ever since, every time the government wanted to construct wall around the forest in the name of developing eco-park, the same was halted due to resistance from local people. Such resistance and the shrinkage of the forest to only 6,000 acres has prompted the government to form a committee to identify the nature of local claims over the forests and suggest a model of participatory forestry to regenerate the forests. Though yet to take a final shape, this initiative has created a very positive sensation in the concerned community as it is already leading to bringing the gap between the local people and the administration, creating a scope for recognizing legal rights of the community over the forests and true participation in the forest management through innovative 'community forestry'. If successful, this model can be replicated in the other forest areas of Bangladesh where around 30 ethnic minority groups are living without any legal recognition of their right over forest. Alongside the survival challenges and the long history of deprivation of the indigenous and ethnic people, a successful model for forest management in a country like Bangladesh shall also consider the issue of carbon sinks and hence the potential stakeholders may go beyond the conventional ones to transmit the results in other forest area for their essential ecological service to the global community.

This Paper will look into the effective use of local population to ensure effective governance in curbing deforestation. In this regard the following issues will be discussed

- Elaborate on the process/steps of such participation
- Identify the challenges in ensuring the same and define the role of the stakeholders
- Identify the need and scope of peoples' involvement in natural resource management
- Indicate how participation increases efficiency and empowers groups, and
- Suggest the best model to institutionalize the notion