

FACE-TO-FACE

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“One of the most important lessons we learnt from our work on the commons is the need for rejuvenating partnerships at varied levels and unless we treat our partners as equals, celebrate their success and make them heroes, we won’t be effective in scaling up or bringing about system-level changes in the wider ecosystem.”

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Rejuvenating Commons at a scale: In conversation with Jagdeesh Rao

Jagdeesh Rao has been part of the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) for the past 35 years. He served as its Executive Director for almost two decades and recently transitioned his role within FES to a Curator. In a freewheeling interview with Rasheed Sulaiman V, he shared his thoughts along with anecdotes on his long career with FES, and how the organisation successfully evolved over the last three decades.

A very long innings with FES. How did it all start?

It’s been my only job, I never changed jobs. In 1986 I joined FES during its earlier avatar as the ‘Tree Growers Cooperatives Project’. Initially it was a part of the National Dairy Development Board and they decided that it should be a separate organisation – under the name National Tree Growers Cooperative Federation (NTGCF) – and in 2001, NTGCF evolved into FES. So, I have been running a long marathon for the past 35-36 years with occasional sprints in between.

Box 1: FES

FES works towards conservation of nature and natural resources through collective action of local communities, and it has played a pioneering role in furthering the concept of Commons as an effective instrument of local self-governance, as economic asset for the poor, and for the viability of adjoining farmlands. It has also focused on strengthening the institutional dimension, the collective action spins off from effectively managing natural resources to other spheres of village life such as education, health, and access to economic opportunities.

The three fundamental dimensions or cornerstones of FES are:

1. Ecological Restoration;
2. Commons and Community Institutions; and
3. Rural Livelihoods.

As of September 2020, FES, along with its partners, works with 31731 village institutions in 78 districts, and assists the village communities in protecting 9.17 million acres of common lands, including revenue wastelands, degraded forest lands and Panchayat grazing lands, positively impacting 16.62 million rural people across 10 states of India. We support Panchayats and their subcommittees, Village Forest Committees, Gramya Jungle Committees, Water Users Associations and Watershed Committees in order to improve the governance of natural resources.

Source: <http://fes.org.in/index.php>

How has FES evolved from an implementation agency to an organisation performing more applied research, as a think tank, and as a capacity development agency over the years?

I think we always had our feet on the ground all the time and with each emerging opportunity we became better. We used to attend Commons Conference from the early 1990s and we were sharing our experience there. We developed collaboration with researchers – such as Dr Ruth Meinzen-Dick from the International Food Policy Research institute (IFPRI) and Prof Gautam N Yadama from Washington University – who have interest in the area of commons, not with any specific project in mind but as just friends, and then the projects and funds came along. That's how it started!

Later, we tied up with researchers like you and Andy Hall during 2006-07 in the Fodder Innovation Project implemented by ILRI and UNU-MERIT, and we have a compelling sense of curiosity and we were clear that there is no single silver bullet that fits every situation. So, there was a kind of a feel for the pulse on the ground, a great degree of humility and openness which comes together and manifests as a compelling urge to fix it.



Village Discussion on Commons ©FES

I think these were the cornerstones for the kind of organisation we grew into. It comes from a great sense of levelheaded respect for local wisdom and not the arrogance that typically science pours out that we know and pass on to you. Instead, we were keen to look at the location, the complexity and the dreadful nature of the problem and try and fix it. We are keen to see knowledge, not just as something that is passed on to an empty receptacle, but as something that is exchanged not only among researchers but also among the village knowledge systems and its interaction with external knowledge systems. At the end the villagers have the final right to determine what is a plausible solution to work on, or even to the extent of determining the research question. Though we began by implementing action on the ground, we are now recognized and even funded for our action research. We also try to influence decision makers by serving as local think tanks.

FES has been a pioneer in using Geographical Information System (GIS) and Bio-diversity mapping. How did it start?

In the early 2000s the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) gifted us with a remote sensing and GIS facility as we had been working on land, forest, water, which demands a spatial view. (This led to our later work on developing the India Observatory, discussed in Box 2.) CIDA also trained a couple of our colleagues and gave both the hardware and software for our use. So, we systematically maintained that strength. In 2008 we launched a portal on birds of the Indian sub-continent (IBIS) which is one of the taxa of the Indian Biodiversity Information System. We did the GIS work from the village's perspective.

Initially I worked near Madanapalle in Andhra Pradesh, and started working with a group of some 30-32 villages around a hill range called Sadhukonda Reserve Forest. Sadhukonda is a contiguous hill forest with a high amount of anthropogenic pressure that was degrading at an alarming rate over the years. After our work, the forest started showing visible improvement. These were the days of Joint Forest Management and the villagers were talking about improvement in forest cover and we wanted to build evidence around it. So, we went to the Indian Institute of Science and there one professor helped us with his knowledge of how a dry deciduous forest grows, and so we used the formulas and our remote sensing revealed that 'though the forest was improving, the rate of extraction was higher than the growth', as a result of which the forest might not grow in a sustainable manner eventually.



Experimental Games on judicious use of water ©FES

The villagers couldn't believe it and this led us to undertake a household survey in these villages. This was also the time when administrative devolution to mandals was initiated in Andhra Pradesh. With more staff coming to the mandals and more shops, dhabas and hotels coming up at the mandal level, the demand for firewood went up and the villagers had become labourers who were just cutting the firewood and selling it for their livelihood. This analysis helped us to take two broad directions. The first one was to demystify the science into understandable idiomatic knowledge. So, we contextualized the data and suggested to the villagers that if they harvest and transport more than seven cartloads a month, then it was going to be unsustainable. That was the simple calculation and villagers could easily connect to that. They then put their own checks to regulate cutting of trees. On the second aspect we worked with dhabas – encouraging them to acquire and use improved stoves.

We partnered with another organisation called TIDE, and they actually customized stoves for each dhaba so as to reduce the use of firewood.

FES played a major role in organizing the 2011 international conference on commons. How did you get involved in this?

We hosted this global conference of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC) in Hyderabad, and at that time commons were really being threatened by biofuels policy and setting up of special economic zones. Commons were being treated as waste lands or as unproductive land and we wanted to address it, and set it out in public discussions. Hence, we used the conference as an opportunity to bring not only academia but also practitioners and policy makers. More than 600 delegates from around 69 countries participated in that conference. We worked for about two years – together with NGO networks – in the build up to the conference on physical common resources such as Forests, Grazing Resources, Protected Areas, Water Resources, Fisheries, Coastal Commons, Lagoon Commons, Irrigation Systems, Livestock and Commons, as well as New Commons such as Information Commons, Cultural Commons, Genetic Resources, Patents, Climate, etc. We also worked with two state governments to assist them in drawing policies and programmes around Commons.

When did the policy engagement happen?

This was during the build up for the Conference in 2009-10, where we started working with the Government of Rajasthan (GoR) and the Government of Andhra Pradesh (GoAP). When we started talking with GoR, they requested our support in drafting a policy on commons. GoAP was more interested in running a programme alongside National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (NREGP) for commons. So, we brought together NGOs and ran an NREG CPR programme with them. So, once the Rajasthan policy came out, we could get executive orders from the government on implementing some of the policy recommendations. There was also a Supreme Court judgement on commons in 2011. So, we worked with GoR, and some 13 executive orders in line with the Supreme Court Order were issued by that government.



MGNREGA work in Umrod, Sayara, Udaipur, Rajasthan ©FES

With devolution to Gram Sabhas, every Gram Panchayat can have a standing committee on commons. By channeling NREG funds, they could restore their pastures. That was the kind of evolution that we actively pushed. Once we did that, we partnered with the government to host a campaign. We picked up the cost for the campaign and we ran TV and newspaper campaigns, sent messages as SMS, and we also set up a response centre. As a result of this, people started calling with their problems, such as how to map commons, encroachments, etc. There was so much demand that it led us to think of ways to respond to this by developing relevant capacities. Thereafter, we set up 'Prakriti Karyashala' or rural colleges for enhancing the capacities of semi-literates or near literate, Panchayat representatives, etc.

What led to the development of the India Observatory, which was formally launched in 2019?

Working on issues of forests, land and water calls for a bird's eye view, as such resources are spread across human boundaries and a spatial view helps strategize preservation of threatened species, conservation of resources like water and biomass, and extraction of resources for human needs. Satellite images offer a view that's much better than the bird's eye. Often vast data sets, algorithms and tools are available in a range of organizations, but inaccessible to professionals and people, especially in an intelligible manner. We tried to address this through the development of the India Observatory (see Box 2). Through this initiative, FES is not only helping policy makers and administrators in sound decision-making, but is also empowering people in villages and remote areas to determine their future, themselves.

Box 2: The India Observatory

The India Observatory brings together more than 1,600 data layers on social, economic and ecological parameters at one place. It is freely available for civil society organisations, students, government departments and citizens, and includes 11 technology tools that help in understanding the status and plan interventions for conserving forests, renewing water resources and improving livelihoods of communities. These tools can work offline on smartphones and are available in local languages with easy to interpret codes, and can even be used by semi-literate people. For instance, the Composite Landscape Assessment and Restoration Tool (CLART) helps to identify best areas for groundwater recharge under the MGNREGA scheme. GIS-Enabled Entitlement Tracking system (GEET) builds awareness on entitlements for marginalized communities by tracking eligibility at the household level. Similarly, the Integrated Forest Management Toolbox (IFMT) contains tools that assist in both data collection and analysis, and help forest departments in preparing long-term working plans.

Who funded all these? Did the Government support FES for this?

We shy away from taking money from the government for any of this. We used to prevail on the government to spend their money on the panchayats in their own way. We were supporting the government in different ways, such as communication, technology or helping with drafting documents, etc. We had our own unrestricted funds which we could apply in whichever manner to move the needle. So, the point is we moved from direct action or implementation to become a vehicle for scaling through our capacity enhancement efforts and by working with governments. We looked at opportunities and shaped our organisation according to these emerging opportunities. So now we are recognized by governments and NGOs who look to us for capacity enhancement. We have MOUs with five state governments currently, we have 84 NGO partners who are working on commons-related activities.

How does FES look at its partnership with NGOs?

We include NGOs in our work as we have something like 200 million acres of common land in the country and we are working so far only on around five million acres. Who is going to fill the rest of the

195 million acres? Unless one joins hands with various organizations there is no way that one can fill this gap. Apart from this, it is very undesirable to have only one organisation doing this and it is almost impossible for any single organisation to have all the contextual ecological and social knowledge. So, it is definitely necessary to bring a distributed ownership and leadership around commons according to the geography, according to the culture and the legal environment. And another important reason for partnerships in this case is the need for plurality in approaches. One needs a range of approaches to secure the commons and so, since 2016, we have been promoting a decentralized and pluralistic approach in partnership with several NGOs.



Biomass Assessment ©FES

Good to see that FES has successfully evolved from the initial informal policy engagement to entering into formal MoUs with the government. How is this working?

We believe the government has confidence in our expertise and our ability in executing projects, and also they do not want to sign multiple MoUs with several small NGOs. Though the government might not be recognizing the role of other small NGOs, we know their strengths and we always include other NGOs in our work with the government. We try to work at several entry points and at several levels including the village, district, state, and national level. The varied entry points for commons-related work might, in some places, be about strengthening local self-governance. In other places it could be about getting the land rights or may be good use of NREG funds in restoring degraded commons.

How does your work impact agriculture?

All of our work on the commons has direct impact on agriculture, livestock, water, biodiversity conservation, and rural poverty reduction, and we could approach it from all these aspects. Strengthening commons through ecological restoration often leads to enhanced water availability and arrests soil erosion, and enhances the scope for agricultural development. By choice we go into areas where there is a high preponderance of commons, for instance forest- or pasture-dominated

landscapes that cover 30-50 per cent of the land. Agriculture and livestock are a source of livelihood for rural communities in the region, though a significant portion also depends on natural systems like forest or pastures. For most of them the ecosystem is part of their cultural identity, many having their names based on trees, birds or butterflies in these regions. For us livelihood was never defined in a very strict economic or production sense. We always believed that human society is one part of the larger ecological whole and in human well-being, economic well-being is only one part of it. There is spiritual and cultural well-being too. But we also realized the importance of meeting demands of communities for more income.



Village Planning ©FES

We also believe that collective action is a very strong component of livelihood, agriculture or livestock keeping. You have to transact between people either for markets or for seed or for whatever reason – hence needing collective action. Commons have the inherent strength for collective action and we try to strengthen the transactions between individuals. Once we conserve forests or pastures, you improve the availability of water, fodder and biodiversity needed for sustainable agriculture.

What is needed in these forest-dominated landscapes is not the practices followed in mainstream irrigated agriculture. Most of these lands are rainfed and one of the problems there is soil health. We are trying to address this challenge by understanding how to improve nutrient status in these soils through nutrient recycling (e.g., farmyard manure) and better soil management through microbial growth, etc. The second aspect is the change in agronomic practices (e.g., tillage). And the third aspect is reducing costs of cultivation by adopting better pest management (e.g., bio control) practices. For instance, if there are more of spiders then the number of pests will come down. Spiders require hedges around the farm and so we have been promoting hedges and that in turn will reduce the cost of pest control. Another well-known aspect is the importance of birds and butterflies in pollination. So the question is how do we bring nature into these agricultural practices.

In most places in India, the state Departments of Agriculture play a major role in promoting technologies and often they promote external input intensive agriculture. But you are trying to promote low input intensive agriculture which seems to be appropriate to these contexts. Are you also trying to demonstrate these approaches to the Department of Agriculture?

In general, it is very difficult to change their thinking overnight to move from chemical fertilizers and pesticides and most of their activities are focused around promoting these. But in a few cases, they are willing to change. For instance, in Odisha, they have problems of, say, crop-water use. So, we have an MoU with the Department of Agriculture and Farmers' Empowerment, Government of Odisha, wherein we are training them on balancing the supply and demand side of water. They have now started appreciating the crop-water budgeting exercises we have conducted. We can't expect them to change their perspectives overnight. There are other forces working on them, especially commercial interests, that are trying to maintain the status quo. If you want to achieve a larger change you have to win some of the scientists into talking your language. So, that is the process we are in.

How did you start working in the area of groundwater?

We began working with Elinor Ostrom (who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009 for her analysis of economic governance, especially commons), around the time we started organizing the 2011 commons conference. We worked on experimental games based on game theory to bring about behavioral change and collective action for groundwater as commons. She pointed us to Arizona State University with whom we started partnering, and with IFPRI, we developed very robust experimental games wherein people start seeing the benefit of cooperating for groundwater management, which is happening in Odisha, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Initially we tried it in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh but then we moved it to other states. So, maybe some 600-700 villages are currently managing groundwater as commons. But we need to scale these up. We started with the two-step training of trainer, cascading model where you have a master trainer and master trainers train the villagers. But, that's not enough. So, in the last year we tied up with ECHO.



Using CLART app for designing plan ©FES

It is a kind of navigated learning, where say a village woman, at any point in time that she is free, can go at her own pace into learning the stuff. It addresses some of the limitations in a typical training where we call trainees for training for a few hours or days and during these days they have to leave all their work. Even if we say it is only from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., they still have to travel 5-10 kms from their homes and many have to forego their daily wages too. Whereas, here if you put it on a phone and the material is all there, then they are doing it at their own pace and that has been very helpful during COVID-19 times because physical contact was reduced. In the navigated part you can have mentors talk on forest rights Act, you can have mentors talk about it somewhere in Sambalpur even if you don't have a good mentor in Koraput. So, Koraput people can put the message on WhatsApp or/and the Sambalpur person can respond, and if they need to have a phone call, they can have a phone call. But there are challenges in that too as you need at least a smartphone. So, we are working on that. How do you use this model? It might address 70 per cent but still you need to cross the digital divide and go to places where there is no internet. In this way, our body of understanding goes to a wider range of people either through an NGO or through a technology platform or both together, so that we can address these issues at scale.

What is FES' current level of operations and how are you organizing your teams?

Right now, we have about 38 teams and we are working in 41 districts directly. Ten we have about 84 NGOs who are working in much greater numbers than us. In the last 2-3 years the number of our NGO partners has increased. Each of our direct field team has something like 4-6 people depending on the area of operations. In some cases, it might go up to 10-12 persons. As an organisation our total strength is around 300 and we work with 84 NGOs and we are a part of 25 national and international think tanks. We are collaborating with five state governments, have eight programme MOUs, and are working in 10 states. Our main strength comes from the village level cadres. Every place where we work, say a panchayat level, will have a man and a woman cadre who are local and have some leadership skills.

We also work with the State Rural Livelihood Missions (SRLMs) and we use their sakhis and we build their capacities. In that sense, we don't bring in a new person in some cases so that it will sustain as long as the mission sustains. Rather than bringing a new actor into the field, we pay for the additional work they do based on the norms we have, say for instance for mapping a common land we pay them INR 400. Everything is broken down into the accomplishment of some outcome.

What type of expertise does your staff at the district level have and how do you recruit them?

Most of our staff at the district level are generalists. We recruit mostly young people through campus recruitment mainly from institutions such as Azim Premji University, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Xavier Institute, etc. At the mid- and senior-level we often recruit through word-of-mouth and we intend to have more lateral recruitment at mid- and senior-level so as to reduce inbreeding and bring wider perspectives. We are also trying to attract more women staff especially at the senior management level.

We have a study team which supports the different districts. But most of the technical expertise is centralized either at the central and regional offices. We have four regional offices – one in Rajasthan, one in the south for Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, one for Odisha and Jharkhand, and the fourth one is in the north-east for Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland.

What kind of qualities and skill sets do you look for when you recruit people?

For us the most important aspect is the right attitude, something like 'I am OK, you are OK'. Another aspect we look for is some degree of sincerity and a kind of systematic way of working. Someone having his/her own initiative. In other words, we look for those who are sincere, systematic, serious and sensitive types. Sincerity and seriousness are easy to estimate during the interview process. We have an initial year of probation. We can understand how systematic they are only when they start working with us. But during the interview, it is easy to find if a person is more of a doer, planner or thinker type, and these are the kinds of buckets I put people into, and it works out. It's been working out but there is no one strategy, you have to keep imagining and keep improvising. Word-of-mouth is the best recruitment strategy. Very few people leave after the end of one year. Earlier we used to have a long induction training which we have now reduced to a shorter, high-intensive induction training.

How do you keep your staff motivated?

I often talk to the new recruits at least once a year and ask them which organisation will give you the kind of opportunities we give – working on the ground, engaging in action research, promoting technologies and training others. So, if one is not keen on going to villages and like to be involved more in studies, we move them to studies. Some people like to talk more and engage in training, we move them there. Some like to lead and some only want to be part of a team and we recognize these and give them those roles. These days, we need to keep trying every trick to keep people motivated, stay back and contribute. Right now, we have about 50-60 people who have spent almost 30 years of their lives with FES. So, these are our cultural agents and they continue to hand hold and inspire young staff.

The same is the case with partnerships with NGOs. We need to support them in their contexts and for that our body language and attitude should change, and again it should be also about 'I am OK and you are OK'. We need to treat them as equals and celebrate their success, make them heroes rather than saying FES did everything. We tell our partners that they don't even have to mention us. This is the only way to make networks work.

What about partnership with the private sector?

We haven't really worked with private sector industries. But we are part of the India climate collaborative (ICC) which is basically all these corporations coming together on climate. But we are yet to work with one given industry though they are also an important player in the development sector. We actually have not put enough energies into this. Our current relationship with the corporates is not the funder-grantee kind, but mostly around ideas and scaling.

How do you look at the future of FES? Any new strategy, say FES 2040 or so?

Right now, when I am speaking for FES, my role has changed. As I said before, we are only working in five million acres or so but the requirement is to secure about 200 million acres. So, unless you become an ecosystem of actors comprised of varying partners, we won't be able to achieve scale or make large system-level changes. Right now, my job is not to work only for FES but my job is to work with 100-200 other organisations trying to build that wider ecosystems capacity during the next five years. So, if you consider this as something like conquering a mountain, the next five years might be about reaching the base camp and fixing the ropes. Some 100 may reach the summit, some 500 might reach the base camp. But the ropes are fixed for some 5000 people to come up. We might turn lucky if more states come forward with new programmes and policies that will help achieve these.



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