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SOCIAL FORESTRY NETWORK

INVOLVING THE POOR IN FOREST MANAGEMENT: CAN IT BE DONE? THE NEPAL-AUSTRALIA PROJECT EXPERIENCE

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INVOLVING THE SILENT MAJORITY IN FOREST MANAGEMENT:

CAN IT BE DONE?

This paper will examine, in some detail, the working of the
Nepal-Australia forestry, bilateral aid project, which has been
operating, within Nepal for the past 10 years. The foremost question
that will be addressed is does the form of community forestry that is
implemented by this project, lead to an increase in poverty within the
villages, or does it increase access to and control over forest
resources, to those within the village who use and depend on the
public forest resource, the silent majority of poor?

To examine this thesis, the social reality within the villages will be
analysed. How is the natural environment articulated with individuals
to produce the reality of forest usage and control?

Although many articles have been written on the physical attributes of
community and social forestry, little has been written about the
political and social implications of using these terms. There are
several levels at which these terms are used, ranging from the
international through to the local. From multilateral aid agencies to
small, locally operating, non-government groups. In India, what
constitutes 'social' in social forestry, is questioned by many groups.
To the extent that some non-government groups will not practice
'social forestry', as they state that there can be no social benefits
associated with social forestry. They, themselves use the term
community forestry, imbuing the word with ideologies of empowerment of
the poor and women and their complete and active paticipation in the
local decision-making, required for enacting a community forestry
scheme. Such that a communally owned area of forest, either natural
or planted, is managed by those people within the area who use and
depend on it for the sustenance of their basic needs. Giving voice to
the 'silent majority', who otherwise remain outside the development
offered through social forestry.

The research detailed here forms a part of a PhD study and is based on
nine months of field work in the project area.

To examine the structured depth of social reality, the generation of
ideas by aid agencies will be examined. These agencies operate within
the capitalist world system. A particular form of community forestry
is born from this system. As a notion, it has not emerged from the
village level, where the resource conflict occurs. It ignores the
reality of this conflict and talks about 'forestry for local community
development'. A community of whom? A community of ruling classes? A
community of need? It is not that aid agencies, operating as part of
the ruling class, "intentionally and conspiratorially aims to dominate
ideologically, rather that the structure of social relationships
systematically generates ideological distortions which serve the class
interests of the dominant class (Keat and Urry, 1982). Statements
generated by the international aid agencies arise out of the
capitalist mode of production, with the agencies and banks only
reproducing those parts of the notion which will continue to sustain
capitalism. The use of the term 'community' in community forestry
gives rise to the notion of an undifferentiated group of
beneficiaries. All within the village will benefit from community
forestry. It is implied that local communities are an homogeneous
entity, united for common action by their need for firewood and
fodder. Ignoring the differential access to both natural and
political resources, within the village, dependent upon, in the cases
of India and Nepal, caste, class and gender.

Community forestry should not be defined by scale or by end product
but by where the decision-making power about the resource lies. As
Hyman (1985) states community forestry projects must give:

> "...a high priority on socio-economic objectives
> ....for example, changes in the distribution
> of income, employment, the social well-being
> of women and the landless poor...the ability
> of individuals and institutions to participate
> in development".

In this context, 'management' of the forest resource does not just
refer to the narrow understanding attributed, by foresters, to the

word management, that of utilisation, harvesting but goes beyond this to include the full participation and control by local people over all aspects of the establishment, sustenance, access to and distribution of the forest resource. The key concepts are power, authority, control and responsibility. Transfer of power and authority from those who have traditionally held it, to groups who previously had no access to power. As Oakley and Marsden (1984) have stated,

> "....it is difficult to disassociate 'participation' from its relationship with power. For participation to be meaningful, it must involve some direct access to decision-making and some active involvement in the determining of problems and practices".

What are the implications of developing such forms of community forestry, of encouraging the full participation of those who use and depend on the forest, in the decision-making process? How is such participation to be achieved since power will not be readily relinquished by the ruling elite? Will the rural poor, the silent majority of nearly landless farmers, low castes and women, in all these groups, share in the control and authority for the forest resource? Can such actions be supported or encouraged by a bilateral aid project? Can true participation be fostered, or is it that the action catalysed will not be sustainable because it does not and cannot strengthen the poor and access and control of the resource remains firmly with the ruling elite.

Thus, if we do associate the concept of participation with some idea of power, radically different concepts of project practice must be conceived. The dominant paradigm of experts generating proposals and the rural poor passively acquiescing in one way or another must be broken down and replaced by entirely different actors. The priorities become the building up and the strengthening of the people, an approach which requires radically different project agents, as opposed to the too familiar emphasis upon tangible activities (Oakley and Marsden, 1984).

For community forestry projects to achieve a degree of success, they should in the words of Harari and Garcia Bouza (1982) be:

> "....neither exclusively 'top-down' nor exclusively 'bottom-up', it must be based on the active intervention of the underprivileged sectors concurrently with decisive support on the part of the state and of many other groups, strata and political actors...."

The project, over the last few years, has moved away from seeing its prime objective, to achieve community forestry, as being one of resource creation, one of finding technical solutions to technical problems, to one of management of existing forest resources, through local participation. Requiring a whole new set of skills and understanding. At each level, there is challenge and conflict in this movement away from resource creation to resource management for those who need and use the resource. The project has moved into an area, where the superficial appearance belies the reality. The struggle between the holders and non-holders of power is being acted out in the use of each resource. The public forest resource is no exception and exemplifies the problems inherent in encouraging the formalisation of management of a resource. With the entrance of a government official, foreign project staff, a written plan, comes the elevation of the forest, from a local resource of local interest to one of deep political significance. Where power bases established through usury and land ownership can be further consolidated through formalised control over the forest resources.

To examine the working of the project, two panchayats will be considered. Tukucha, close to Kathmandu, where the project has expended a large amount of time in trying to establish a management system and Banskharka, where the project has been excluded by the pradhan pancha, the local leader, from playing a direct role, and their intervention has been restricted to financial assistance. In both panchayats, forests and their use have become a political issue and have been used by factions, within the panchayats, as a political tool.

Forest ownership is divided into several categories:

1. Goverment forest, owned and controlled by the
   state, through the forest department. Local
   people have limited rights in these forests, for
   the collection of leaves and dead wood.

2. Panchayat protected forest, former government
   owned natural forest, which has been handed over
   to the panchayat, to control and ultimately to
   manage.

3. Panchayat forest, which is newly established,
   plantation forest, either on government or
   panchayat owned land. This forest is also under
   the control of the panchayat. Although, the
   costs for establishment and protection of these
   forests are met, in this area, by the project.

The latter two categories of forest land, in the working area of the
project, comprise a very small proportion of the total forest area,
with the major part of the forest area remaining under government
control, but with local use rights firmly but illegally established.

The categories into which government and projects divide the forest
land is of little relevance to the villager who has always considered
the forest to be the property of the village. In both the panchayats,
government owned natural forests were considered to be the common
property of particular villages, use regulated by the village and a
watcher employed by the village to exclude outsiders from stealing
from the forest. However, plantations recently established on
panchayat land but watched by government or project paid watchers are
considered to be government—owned forests. The local people say that
they have no authority and the responsibility for the forest is held
by the government. Local controls which regulate the use of the
natural forests are not enforced for plantations.

Forest use in Tukucha panchayat is officially demarcated by the
boundaries of the panchayat and in some areas by the ward boundaries.
The ward being the lowest level of administrative control, within the
panchayat. However, as has already been stated, the official and
actual use rights differ, where use by local people is derived from
locally established and controlled access rights, in existence prior
to the establishment of the panchayat system, 25 years ago.

In both panchayats, there are areas of forest which have been
protected by one settlement, with access regulated by the village
elders, by payment of forest watchers from the village and by peer
pressure. The surrounding villages know of the stated ownership by
the one village, which is respected, until their own resources become
limited, at which time the neighbouring forests would be cut for
firewood and fodder. However, sanctions imposed by the villagers on
outsiders stealing, have effectively reduced the rate of degradation
of the forest. The boundaries of each forest are clearly defined and
known by each village and usually follow natural boundaries,
regardless of the political boundaries imposed on natural resource
use.

Control over natural resources can be viewed in two ways. There is
the right established through use, which in these two panchayats, is
the right exercised by women in using the forest and the right
legitimated through the formal, political sphere which is associated
with the authority to enforce or withhold the user right. This right
is exercised by the power-holding men. It is not always a clear
dichotomy between the female user right and the male control right,
rather that those who were in a position of power within the village
could decide who did or who did not have the right to use the
government owned forest. Although, women's participation in decisions
made about the resource that they used was subordinated to all men,
some men's participation was also subordinated to other men. The
ability to exercise the right of use was controlled by the
individual's class, caste and gender.

The pre-existing conflict emerged into the political arena, when the
project decided that an area of natural forest, surrounding three

villages, should come under management and a management plan be written, following principles that the project considered would lead to 'sound' management. All the initial decisions, regarding the need for formalised management to be instituted, were made outside the panchayat, by the project and forest department staff.

There are three villages and a small settlement of low caste Kamis and Sarkis, using the forest. There are also three distinct areas of forest, in terms of the physical condition of the resource which were linked, through use rights to each of the three villages. The large area of well protected forest, was claimed by the Pandays of Pandaygaon to be theirs, since they had protected it for the last 25 years. A watcher had been appointed, by the village, who was paid in kind by each household, according to the number of family members and what they could afford. For this same period of time, the village has also held local power, with the leader of the ward, living in this village. However, both the Thapas and the Rais disputed the Pandays exclusive rights to this area of well protected forest and claimed that they too had rights of access to this forest. These rights would have to be written into the formal and 'legal' management plan.

It was initially assumed, by the project that use and control over the forest was a non-contentious issue, mainly because the forest was legally government owned and controlled. Secondly, because all the initial meetings to discuss management of the forest were held in Pandaygaon, to which mainly members of Pandaygaon attended with a few villagers from Raigaon. The opinions of the other villages were not heard. Thapagaon was outside the Tukucha panchayat boundary and thus was considered not to have any rights over the forest in the adjoining panchayat.

The leaders of the Panday village who were also members of the forest committee established at one of the initial meetings, were part of the local ruling elite. The period during which these meetings were being held, was just prior to the local elections. It was politically a very difficult time to be holding discussions about handing over control for the forest. Each village had to be seen to be fighting

for its rights, there could be no compromise. An apparent resolution
was made, the forest should be divided between the three villages,
with the Pandays conceding the rights of access to a small part of
their forest, to the Thapas and Rais. However, when the forest was
to be demarcated, no agreement could be made, as to where the boundary
should be placed. Although, the authority for the forest had been
handed over, by the forest department, to the two committees, formed
by Pandaygaon and Thapa and Raigaon, these committees could not
function.

The actual caste and gender composition of these two committees, is of
significance, when considering the balance of power and for whom the
decisions will ultimately be made.

Pandaygaon	Caste	Male	Female
Panday	Brahman/Chetri	17	5
Duja	"	0	3
Khadka	"	1	0
Kami	Low caste	1	1
		9	9

The actual power-holders are obvious, their numerical and sexual
dominance ensure that the representation of both women and low castes
is ineffective. The committee composition is representative of the
population as a whole but does not adequately represent those who
depend on the forest for sustenance of their basic needs.

Thapa/Raigaon	Caste	Male	Female
Thapa	Chetri	13	10
Rai	"	3	0
Khadka	"	1	0
Budhathoki	"	1	0
Duja	Brahman/Chetri	1	0
Kami	Low caste	1	1
Sarki	"	0	2
		20	13

The control of this committee is held by Thapagaon over Raigaon,
where the size of the village and its wealth is much greater than that
of Raigaon. Through this association, Thapagaon has secured rights of

access over the forest formerly controlled by Raigaon, giving Thapagaon a supply of forest products that it previously could obtain, only through stealing.

The decisions made by these committees were representative of the views of a small part of the population. In the words of a low caste blacksmith when he was asked where he thought that the authority for the forest should be held, he said:

> "If the villagers own the forest they may protect it or they may destroy it. If the watcher is from the village, he may allow only the rich people to use the forest and not allow the poor people to. If there is a government watcher, he may treat everyone equally"

He then went on to to say that authority for the forest should be held by the government and not by the local people. His fear being that local control would prevent him from gaining access to the forest.

The women of Thapagaon, when talking about authority for the forest, said that the authority should be vested in the women. They are the ones who use the forest and should, they say, make the decisions about the forest.

Women's participation on forest committees was seen, by the project, to be a way in which women could have some control over the decision-making process. Women were elected as vice-chairman and members of the committee but when decisions were made about access rights, these women were actively discouraged from attending the meetings. As one woman said, "we are only invited to meetings when foreigners will be present, otherwise we are completely excluded". Although women are present at the meetings, their authority is minimal. Change, if it is to occur must be slow and should be catalysed from within, with support from outside.

The poor in the village with little of their own land and no private trees, are totally dependent on the public forest resource, for firewood and bedding for their animals. Firewood has entered the

circuit of capital as a saleable commodity. Firewood was formally monetised and ascribed a cash value at one of the early meetings held by the project and the forest department, to establish a committee. The rationale for monetising fuelwood was given that since funding of the Australian project would end in three years, the forests should become self-sustainng and produce a revenue to support the forest watchers who had been employed and paid for by the project. In this ward, a price of Rs4 was fixed for 30kg of firewood, which would be equivalent to one load of firewood. Although, Rs4 may not appear to be expensive, the actual costs in terms of both money and labour are much greater. The proposal made at the meeting, was to organise firewood cutting through the use of a depot system, to be controlled by the Pandays. Thus, centralising the control of the resource and collection of the money into the hands of a few people. A few people would be nominated to cut the firewood and paid for doing the work. The monetisation of the forest resource, elevated a previously subsistence non-monetary resource, with only a labour value attached to it, to the level of a cash crop. Moving the forest resource from those who are heavily dependent on it, moving it outside the subsistence economy, to a sphere which belongs to the wealthy, a monetised, exploitative sphere.

Using this argument of self-sustenance, ultimately, it is the poor, who most heavily use the forest who will bear the burden of its cost. For a poor person Rs4 for a load of firewood is many times more expensive than for a wealthy farmer who has no need to take firewood from the forest to supply basic needs because there is sufficient available on his private land; Rs4 is a small amount to pay for a resource that he does not need to use. For the poor person, firewood has become an even higher valued commodity, not only does it have the pre-existing labour value but has an additional monetary value. The poor farmer would not have the surplus cash and would need to labour for others to supply basic needs of food.

When the wealthy of Pandaygaon were asked how the poor would be able to pay for the firewood, they suggested that they would have to labour for a day in the forest. However, a day spent labouring in the

forest means a day less labouring in the fields or in Kathmandu for wages. He would have lost a day's labouring income to pay for a previously free good.

Those who expend the greatest amount of labour in collecting forest products, are women. Those who have the least dependence on the forest resource and expend the least amount of labour in collecting forest products, are the major decision-makers and controllers of access to the forest resource.

Actions of the project, although pushing for women's participation and the involvement of the poor, have in effect, strengthened and legitimised the position of the ruling elite, who appease the project by allowing token women and low caste to be on committees, but themselves retain the power and authority.

The second panchayat, Banskharka, is a day's walk north of Kathmandu. It is composed predominantly of a Buddhist, ethnic group, the Tamangs. The form that intervention has taken in this panchayat is very different from that of Tukucha, due to the presence of an authoritarian pradhan pancha, who permits little interference in the way in which he rules the panchayat. He has been actively conserving the forests, in the panchayat, for the past 25 years, for the duration of which he has been the panchayat leader. Through his forestry work, he has achieved regional and national recognition and uses forestry as a means by which to consolidate his power base, both within the panchayat and within the region.

He has established his own ward-level committees, composed of his supporters. In one meeting, where a faction, politically opposed to the pradhan pancha, were not present, he denounced them for their attitude towards the forest and politics:

> Arjun of Kanaltol was asking for some trees to
> build a resting-place down there....I asked him
> not to cut any trees here but he did not listen
> to me. The next day I found Kanals cutting down
> trees. By chance the guard was coming that way
> and he saw them cutting the trees. He blew his

> whistle and went to the spot, so they could not
> cut the trees. They opposed this action, they
> claimed they should be allowed to cut whenever
> they need timber for some useful work. All the
> Khanalis supported this and they had one voice.
> They are anti-government poeple, they are against
> the system. They want a multi-party system of
> government, so they have not come to the meeting.

Although the forests of Banskharka have been protected over the
past 25 years through the actions of one man, how much has poor
people's access to forest been increased? Since the effective closure
of the forests, the proportion of private trees grown on individual's
land has increased, with villagers saying that 15 years ago, there
were few trees on private land and crop production was greater.
However, for those lower castes and poorer Tamangs, with little land,
there continues to be an absolute dependence on forest within the
panchayat which the protected forests will not sustain.

The forestry project working within this panchayat, is unable to work
beneath the level of the pradhan pancha. There is no formation of
strong committees, and thus no assurance that those who use and depend
on the forest are fully represented. Whilst those who do not need the
forest but are using it as a political tool, continue to be free to
cut the forest. There can be no challenge to the existing power
structure, either at the village or panchayat level.

This is well demonstrated in one settlement, in Banskharka. It is a
high elevation settlement of Sherpas, where the productivity of land
is low and the outmigration of both men and women, but predominantly
men, to India is high. Frequently, there is only one adult left in
the house, usually a woman. Out of the eight households that compose
the settlement, five are headed by women, two are male headed and the
eighth house is empty.

This predominance of female headed households has not led to an
increase over their access to and control over resources. Women
continue to be excluded from the political decision-making sphere,
which is dominated, in this settlement by the two closely related,
male households. These two households are wealthy with large land

holdings, worked by tenant farmers. There is no need for this family to send all its male members to India for work. They have maintained a continual male presence within the settlement for as long as can be remembered. Thus, retaining control over the formal decision-making sphere and control over the communally managed forest resource.

The forest had been bought 40 years ago, each household had contributed Rs25 with the aim of allowing the degraded oak forest to regenerate for the use of the village. Each household had the right to collect dry firewood and leaves for bedding material.

The two dominant households use the strong belief in witchcraft, as a weapon against one household of women, to restrict their access to and participation in village activities. One of the male headed households whose head is the village leader, claims that the women are witches and has said that they were rsponsible for the death of his son-in-law. Using the claim of witchcraft, the women are excluded from access to the village water supply and falsely accused of cutting green firewood, from the protected forest. On several occasions, the leader has beaten the older of the two women, for allegedly cutting green firewood. The women say that they are powerless to react against these acts of aggression because the leader is the most powerful man in the area and has the political support of the pradhan pancha. The women say that they are powerless because "the rich people dominate those who ae poor". Other women in the settlement, although they disagree with the charges of witchcraft, say that they too cannot change the situation because they have no men within the household, to act on their behalf, in the formal, political and legal arena.

The two households have further consolidated their control by seizing, through the bribery of members of the cadastral survey, an area of common grazing land and forest, which was previously considered by other households, to be common property.

In such a situation, a forest committee formed for the ward in which this settlement is in, could not, with the existing power structure represent these women or other such families. The project cannot

catalyse action which would disturb this existing power structure. Community forestry, where those people who depend on the public forest resource have an active role in its control will be difficult to achieve.

In conclusion, the problems facing the project, for the implementation of community forestry are not 'simply' how to involve the poor farmer, the superficial appearance of the interaction between the deeper social relations of class, caste and gender. But how to understand these existing relations and the power that individuals exert for the control of a natural resource.

Inadequate understanding, leading to many misperceptions, resulted in the problems experienced in Tukucha. However, how does a project with limited financial and physical resources, working within the constraints of a bilateral aid programme, actually ensure that the 'silent majority' are actively participating and that through their actions, the conditions of women and the poor are improving and not worsening?

The project has begun to follow a two-level approach. One through the education of the forest department, at all levels, but with particular focus on the forest rangers. The ranger level, is the village contact level of the forest department, which works very badly, with the relationship between ranger and villager characterised by mutual mistrust. These rangers will eventually become the contact people between the villager and the forest department. They will be the motivators, who will be able to establish an effective rapport with forest users and local leaders. The training programme for this part of the project has already commenced, with intensive workshops on the art of communicating and more importantly, listening. It is a whole process of re-education, playing a role that is very different from the existing role of the ranger. Involving extensive periods of time in the village, communicating with people, who previously would not have been noticed by the ranger. It is hoped, by the project that strengthening and training this level of the forest department will, in part, help to promote community forestry.

The second level of the approach continues in parallel with the first and will eventually become contiguous. This is the process of consciousness raising within the panchayat, itself. This is carried out on a small scale because staff are limited. Using forest rangers who have been through the training. Time is spent in the village identifying the forest users and forming them into groups, with the eventual aim that they will form a committee. However, the project continues to espouse these ideals but as was seen in Tukucha, the lack of understanding of the power structures led to a strengthening of the elite and not to a strengthening of the poor. Given the political constraints under which the project acts, the overt support which would be needed to ensure that the poor are not alienated from the resource, would not be tolerated at any level of the political power structure.

What then does the project face? Is it a future where statements are made saying that bilateral projects can never reach nor support the poor. All they can do is to improve the condition of the majority and thus, using an implicit trickle down approach, vainly hope that the poor will benefit.

Community forestry, forestry for those who use and need the forest resource, is unlikely to be obtained without invoking deep social change. A process which this project will follow, only as far as it is permitted, by national governments but perhaps more importantly by the local power structures that support the elite control over resources.

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