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STUDY OF DYNAMICS OF STRUGGLE FOR WATER RIGHTS IN UPPER MUSTANG, NEPAL

Background

Water is a scarce resource in cold, arid region of upper Mustang in western Nepal. The annual precipitation is less than 200mm most of which is in the form of snow. Whatever the crop production takes place in small patches of arable land, sporadically embedded in the vast tract of rugged terrain, it is largely shaped by the availability of water. Almost all of the settlements in the region are tucked in a narrow strip along the water source. Evidences of land abandonment and settlement shifting, forced mainly by the shortages of water, are commonly found.

Water from a single source is used for multiple purposes. Water from the same canal is used for irrigating the crops, drinking animals, washing clothes, running water mills, and in some cases for generating electricity. And in winter months, when water freezes in drinking water pipes, the same canals are the lone source of drinking water. Besides being a highly valued utilitarian resource, water is also a symbolic resource in the region. In almost all the settlements, every year rituals are held to determine the irrigation schedule. As a scarce and important resource, access to and control over water is often highly contested. Many of these settlements have undergone various levels of conflicts, sometime violent, both within and between themselves over using and owning water. Local communities have designed and developed elaborate systems of management of this scarce resource. Management of this scarce resource sometimes binds the community together and at other times it becomes the bone of contention.

Study of water rights

In societies where water is scarce and conflicts for water resource management are common, the norms for water management form the backbone of the community system (Boelens and Doornbos 2001). Upper Mustang is such a case where water is a scarce resource held in commons and where societies have struggled to access and control it. Access to and control over water is defined by water rights. Water

rights, viewed as 'an authorized claim to a benefit stream of a water source' (Beccar et al 2002), in addition to defining access to and control over water sources, constitute power relations existing in a society (Benda-Beckmann et al 2000, Boelens & Doornbos 2001, Meinzen-Dick & Bruns 2000, Pradhan 2003). Water rights, as they constitute and reflect the existing power relations of a society, are constantly contested and negotiated in people's everyday encounters. The struggle takes different forms ranging from engaging in dialogue to abstention, resistance, and sabotage (Colburn 1989, Scott 1985), and operate at three levels (Boelens and Doornbos 2001): (1) struggle to acquire and defend rights to access water and necessary infrastructure; (2) struggle to defend rights to take part in collective decision making, and defining water rights contents; and (3) legitimization and recognition of normative system to make rules and authorize claims (e.g. statutory vs. customary laws). Water rights are not only the provisions as stated in statutory laws but they are defined and interpreted in local complexities and contexts.

Water is also a symbolic resource

As differential access to water is reinforced and legitimized by social differentials such as gender, caste, and class (Benda-Beckmann et al 2000), study on struggle for water rights in Mustang not only help elucidates the dynamics of conflicts over water but also provides a lens through which the process of social institutional change can be observed.

Objectives and conduction of the research

Against this background, this research, to be conducted as a dissertation research, proposes to study how the struggle for water rights in water- scarce region modifies the institutional landscape of agricultural resource management. Specifically, this broader research question will be answered through four sequential component questions: (i) how are water rights and their contents defined? (ii) how are these definitions contested? (iii) how are the social relations of agricultural production modified in relation to these contestations? and

(iv) how do the modified social relations change a component institution and its relative significance in relation to other components of institutional landscape?

This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Robert E. Rhoades, Professor of anthropology at the University of Georgia. The fieldwork for the research began in September 2004 and will continue through June 2006, with the financial support of the National Science Foundation, USA, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, USA, the Winrock International, Nepal, the International Water Management Institute, Sri Lanka, and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Nepal.

Irrigation in high altitude society

This study is being conducted in three sets of villages each consisting of two villages. In the case of first two sets, villages within the sets share the water source, and the villages within the third set do not share the water source with other villages. Villages in the first two sets are Tsaile, Ghyakar, Lomonthang, and Namgyal and in the third set, they are Ghiling and Dhi. This research has been designed this way to study the dynamics of struggle for water rights: (1) within a settlement among different users with relatively little social differentiation, (2) within a settlement among different users with marked social differentiation, (3) between settlements sharing similar features, (4) between settlements bearing widely differing features, and (5) compare the pattern of intra-village struggle for water rights between settlements experiencing inter-village competition and not experiencing such inter-village competition.

Although the fieldwork is continuing and the final findings are yet to come, there is a diversity in management systems in different villages. However, it was found that in all the villages water rights and management systems are linked with the traditional inheritance system. Based on the traditional inheritance system, only the eldest son inherits the property and the households are grouped into Dhongbos, Farangs and Marangs. Dhongbos are the households that inherit the property, Farangs and Marangs are the males and females that do not inherit the property. Farangs and Marangs get access

to land and water through Dhongbos only. This grouping is one of the major social differentials that determine the access to water and households' role in managing other community resources. This study will highlight the water management system and the process of institutional changes in the cold, arid region in Nepal, that is culturally and geographically in the Tibetan plateau.

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