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'A Boat that Cannot Reach Either Bank'

Lessons from a Long-Term Analysis of The Cooperative Forest Societies of Kangra District, Himachal Pradesh, India

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ABSTRACT

The Cooperative Forest Societies (CFSs) of Kangra District, Northern India, have represented a unique experiment in participatory forestry for over 50 years. They provide many lessons for the contemporary wave of interest in participatory forest management approaches. This paper discusses the emergence, effectiveness, and current status of the Cooperative Forest Societies.

The study of the Kanga Cooperative Forest Societies was undertaken, as part of a PhD programme at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Fieldwork was performed over the period 1994-1997. The study was partly supported by DFID.

The aim of the study was to make a comprehensive analysis of these neglected groups. In particular it considered:

- their emergence, and development
- the merits of their unique institutional form
- their achievements and current status

To achieve these aims a variety of methods were used, including historical study using archive documents, a village household survey, focus group interviews and stakeholder interviews.

highlights the fact that in response to local resistance in the UP Hills in the 1920s, Forest Department annexationist strategies were modified to consider local needs where this was expedient, resulting in the establishment of the *Van Panchayats*. This paper considers the case of Kangra, which also contrasts sharply with conventional forest history accounts.

The history of forest management in Kangra, previously a Punjab hill district and, since 1967, a district of Himachal Pradesh, challenges the conventional historical progression. In Kangra, Baden-Powell's hard-line approach was never strongly implemented, thanks in part to Anderson's 1887 Forest Settlement, which generally avoided asserting the Forest Department's exclusive control over forests. Further, after local hostility to restrictions and reflective of concern over deterioration of the forests, Brandis's preference for village-level forest management was actually implemented along lines similar to those in the UP hills, though different in significant respects. From the early 1940s, 10 percent of Kangra's forests were gradually put under the management of Cooperative Forest Societies, and they operated for decades with the active support and encouragement of the Punjab Forest Department.

After three decades of reasonably effective forest management by the Cooperative Forest Societies, the forest management regime in Kangra reverted to the Baden-Powell style "command and control" approach. Kangra was transferred from the Punjab to Himachal Pradesh, and the new Forest Department had different priorities and internal culture. While social forestry's schemes in other parts of India were on the rise during the 1970s, the management regime in Kangra moved in the opposite direction. Cooperative Forest Societies found their sources of funds

Introduction

Conventional histories of forest management in India suggest that the recent official interest in local participation through Joint Forest Management schemes represents a significant innovation over the monolithic "command and control" regime it seeks to replace. This "command and control" model was inherited from the imperial era and was institutionalised in Baden-Powell's 1878 Forest Act. However, this view oversimplifies matters by glossing over significant spatial and temporal variability in the Forest Department's relationships with local people. Guha (1983)

dried up and experienced active hostility from the Forest Departments.

In the 1990s, Joint Forest Management schemes were promoted in Himachal Pradesh under bilateral donor support and were heralded as an innovative initiative in "participation." However, these are seen by Kangra Cooperative Forest Society members as a dilution of the Cooperative Forest Society principles. The requirement that a Forest Guard be the ex-officio secretary of the local forest protection committee is seen as a replication of the Forest Department's authority structure at the local level.

The Emergence and Development of the CFS: An Early Example of Collaborative Initiative between Forest Department and Community

Not only will . . . [communal] forests yield a permanent supply of wood and fodder to the people without any material expense to the State, but if well managed, they will contribute much towards the healthy development of municipal institutions and local self-government (Brandis 1884).

Kangra valley lies in the foothills of the western Himalaya, close to the current border of Pakistan. Kangra District, with a population of just over one million, is the most populous of the twelve districts that make up present day Himachal Pradesh. The district covers 5,739 square kilometers and has three main agro-ecological zones: the lower dry area below 2,000 feet to the south of the valley;

the main part of the valley up to about 7,000 feet, wherein most people live and the most fertile irrigated agricultural land is found; and the region above 7,000 feet to the north of the valley, generally wooded on a steep gradient, which climbs to the peaks of the Dhauladhar at over 18,000 feet.

The valley's once extensive forests historically supported a delicate interdependence of sedentary agricultural and transhumant pastoralism. For pastoralists this relationship allowed them to move herds between different ecological zones seasonally to avoid the climatic extremes of winter in the mountain and summer heat in the plains. For the sedentary agriculturalists the relationship provided a valued source of dung to fertilize their fields. The relationships between the sedentary agriculturalists, transhumant pastoralists, and *rajas* (who claimed ultimate control of the land) were manifested at different times in both customary informal and formal agreements over fuelwood collection, grazing rights (rights to graze on specific "runs," the size of flocks, frequency of grazing, specific seasons, and so on), timber collection, as well as the collection of non-timber forest products (Charkravarty-Kaul 1996).

There was a tradition of autocratic control by *rajas* in Kangra, which meant that forest use had been firmly regulated (Singh 1998). Colonial annexation of the area in 1846 led initially to a relaxation of controls and an open access situation. Regulations were gradually introduced, finally becoming formalized through Anderson's forest settlement of 1887, wherein local people's rights to forest products were legally established. Restrictions on forest use were in fact slight for settled agriculturalists.

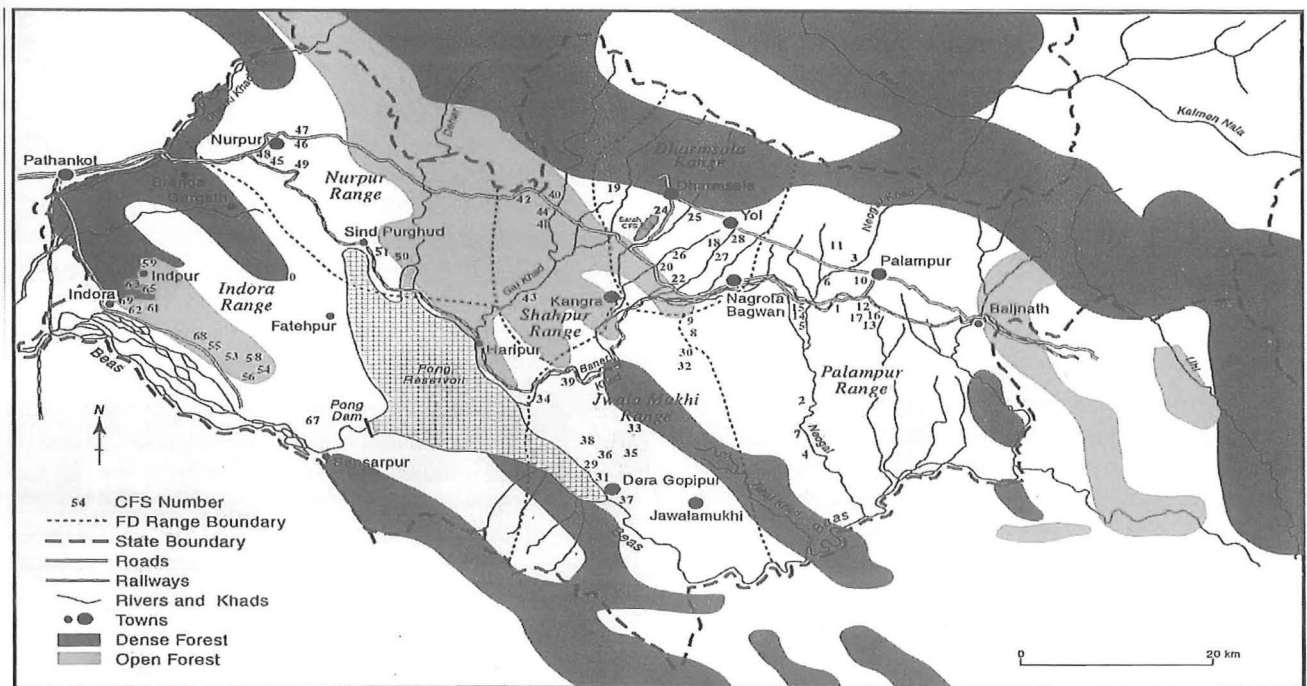


Figure 1. The Cooperative Forest Societies of Kangra

The forest extent and condition deteriorated over the last decades of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth century. This was mainly a result of the spread of settled agriculture, which had been vigorously promoted in Kangra by the colonial administration for revenue purposes. This process unbalanced the complimentary inter-relationships between the settled agriculturalists, transhumant pastoralists, and the forest. Pressure on the remaining forest was increased by converting forests to agriculture. Extraction of timber from the remaining forests also increased to satisfy growing imperial demands (for railways, urban and canton construction, and industry).

The deterioration of the forests became perceived as a serious problem by the early decades of the twentieth century, both by the colonial "authorities" and local people. Social unrest and agitations over government management methods reached a peak in the early 1920s. Although documentation is sparse, district archive documents mention "conflagrations" and "firings in the forest."

These concerns led to the Punjab Government Forest Commission 1937-8, the so-called Garbett Commission, which was an inquiry into forest-related grievances across the Punjab. This Commission eventually recommended that the forests in the Kangra hills should be handed over to community management, re-emphasizing Brandis's original proposals for village-level management of forests.

The ultimate, however distant, goal is that the whole forest property of the village should be managed on lines approved by itself and given effect by its own forest staff under the supervision of a qualified forest officer acting as assistant to the Deputy Commissioner. Then the expense of staff will be lessened and the profit to the village increased (Garbett 1938: 76).

The Forest Department implemented the findings and began the Cooperative Forest Society (CFS) scheme in 1940. This scheme was experimental and was to be renewed by government order every five to ten years if progress was satisfactory.

Over the next fifteen years, seventy-two Cooperative Forest Societies were formed. For a village to have a Cooperative Forest Society, a majority of landowners were required to agree to the terms and constitutions set by the Government. Then a working plan for the forest was to be drafted by the Forest Department in conjunction with the village CFS committee. About 10 percent of the valley's forests (or 23,553 hectares) were taken under CFS control, and only two Societies were dissolved due to irregularities.

Cooperative Forest Societies managed their forests, with Forest Department support, according to working plans drawn up by the Forest Department. The Forest Department's main objective for the CFSs was primarily

Tehsil	Number of CFSs	Area (Ha)
Kangra	16	8,491.2
Palampur	17	2,981.8
Dehra	11	4,251.7
Nurpur	26	7,828.0
Total	70	23,556.3
<i>Mean size of CFS</i>		336

Chart 1: Number and Area of Cooperative Societies
Source: Rawal 1968

to ensure more effective regeneration of degraded forests by closing areas to grazing and cutting. They also hoped to involve local people in planting and other management activities. However, to achieve reduced user pressure on degraded forest areas the working plans had to ensure that sufficient areas of forest were available to local forest users to supply their fuel and fodder needs. Revenues from forest products marketed by the Forest Department also provided an incentive to the forest users to protect the regenerating areas. Timber revenues were to be shared 50:50, and 100 percent of non-timber forest products went to the CFS.

The CFSs functioned to the satisfaction of all concerned during the 1950s and 1960s. The forests improved, forest products were distributed and marketed, and funds were raised and mobilized for forest improvement and community development. Reviews of the scheme by different parties were positive.

[T]he experiment of Co-operative Forest Societies it is felt has been fairly successful. It will, therefore, be worthwhile if the societies in existence continue to function till the expiry of this report [1982-83] after when, a thorough stocktaking of this institution should be undertaken with a view to examine the scope of its further expansion as also the improvements if any, in its present functioning (Rawal 1968: 195).

The Chief Minister of the Punjab raised a number of concerns over the progress of the scheme every time the Government Order faced renewal. He suggested, based on how well the scheme was working, applying it to all forests in the district. Otherwise, it seemed like preferential treatment was given to those villages involved. Furthermore, he wondered whether the CFSs should be incorporated into the *panchayat* structure. Perhaps most problematic of all was the issue of the government accounting system for the CFSs. As the forests regenerated, the revenues from marketing forest products increased. Fifty percent of the timber revenues owed to the CFSs was directed through

the Government system and appeared on the Forest Department accounts as a 'grant' to the CFS. As the sums increased, the Forest Department became increasingly unwilling to release the money and put ceilings on the maximum amount to be disbursed in a year. The Forest Department was also unwilling to form further CFSs, largely for this reason. In 1961, in the midst of these arguments over revenues and grants, the Chief Minister of the Punjab decided to stop the formation of further CFSs indefinitely. In 1967, the trade in non-timber forest products was nationalised, which meant CFSs lost a significant income source, as many had received substantial incomes from resin and other products.

On the re-organization of the Punjab, Kangra district was transferred to Himachal Pradesh in 1967. With this change came a transfer of responsibility for the CFS scheme to the Himachal Government and its line agencies. With no prior experience of the Cooperative Societies, the HP Forest Department sought to review their progress and consolidate their supervision; it commissioned an Integrated Working Plan, drawn up by Rawal. The plan was entirely complimentary in its evaluation of earlier progress and held out high expectations for the future. However, this initial warmth towards the CFS was not sustained, and in the early 1970s, the HP Forest Department decided to stop giving part of the revenues generated by the CFSs (the so called "grant in aid"). This was a blow to the CFSs, requiring them since then to rely on minor sources of income. An impasse has persisted from that time to the present day in the relationship between the Forest Department and the CFSs.

Case Study: Sarah Cooperative Forest Society

To understand the functioning of the cooperatives more clearly let us consider the experiences of a particular society. Sarah village, located to the north of the valley, is surrounded on three sides by 237 hectares of both Chil plantation and mixed natural forest. It is located in a mixed caste village, the major castes being Jat/Rajput, Chaudri, and Kumar. The main livelihoods are farming, service, and labouring, and the average size of land holding is just less than 1.5 hectares. Seventy two percent of households keep livestock, of which 45 percent use the forest for grazing and fodder, and 17 percent depend solely on the forest.

Sixty-three percent of households use firewood from the forest for cooking fuel and heating and on average take about 261 kilograms of firewood per year from the forest. In general there is the sense that it is quite difficult to find sufficient firewood, though always possible with some effort and time.

Sarah CFS has been involved in four primary activities. First, the society has protected and planted the forest, and regulated extraction of forest products. Second, grass

production in some open areas has been annually managed over the monsoon period, and auctioned to households, who would then use the entire amount or sell the rights to collect in sub-plots to other households. Third, the CFS has regulated the granting of timber trees by the District Forest Office under the Timber Distribution rights system. Last, the CFS has been engaged in a variety of community development activities.

Sarah CFS received a high level of income from timber and resin over the period that the Punjab Forest Department paid "grant-in-aid" and in 1997 had bank deposits of about Rs.92,000. It has spent its income primarily on forest protection and improvement and on village development, such as school building and path-laying in the forest. Its main source of income today is the interest on the bank deposits, which just covers the cost of paying the (relatively low) salaries of the *rakha* (forest guard) and Secretary.

The main forest rules, which the *rakha* enforces, are: no tree-cutting without Forest Department permission, no grazing in closed areas (for regeneration and grass-growing), and only dry firewood collection (i.e. not green fuelwood cutting). It is apparent that there is much potential to develop the forest and improve forest management methods in order to yield more produce (e.g. through coppicing).

Fifty-two and a half percent of all households questioned said the forest condition had either changed little or improved over their lifetimes. Sixty-three percent were aware of one or more of the CFS forest bylaws.

Twenty-eight percent of respondent households said they were members of the CFS, although in fact virtually all households in the village are formally members. Most households viewed active involvement in the month-to-month activities of the CFS as unnecessary since it was in "safe hands." Only seventeen percent of households had attended the (1997) CFS Annual General Meeting. Nevertheless, seventy-one percent of the households interviewed said the CFS had undoubtedly brought "great benefits." The main benefits cited were protection of the forest, administration of timber distribution rights, management of grass production and auction, and "the forest condition."

Sixty-three percent of respondents felt the forest would rapidly deteriorate without the CFS to protect it, no matter what alternative arrangements would be made. As a sign of their commitment to preserving the forest, virtually all respondents said they go to fight forest fires when they occur.

The CFS committee includes a mixture of castes and income levels and is not dominated by a village elite in the way that the *panchayat*, for instance, may be. However, non-right holders have been excluded from membership by the constitution, which was imposed at the time of for-

mation. In practice this has only excluded them from voting but not from use of the forest. There is no politicization or political bias evident in the activities of the CFS. However, women are not involved at committee level in the CFS, which reflects the traditional gender roles in this society.

The Current Status of Cooperative Forest Societies

Evidence collected from Dharamsala forest circle suggests 95 percent of CFSs are as active as Sarah CFS. Evidence suggests that almost all CFSs are active in holding regular Committee and Annual General meetings, and share the objective of forest protection, as well as social development goals. Almost all CFSs employ permanent or temporary forest guards and have bank deposits, upon which they depend for interest in order to pay running costs. Virtually all CFSs feel the HP Forest Department stopped paying "grant-in-aid" in order to undermine their functioning. They are all under extreme financial hardship as they have limited funds with which to operate.

Most CFSs feel their main achievement has been protecting and regenerating their forests. There has also been social development, such as construction of schools and community centers. It is remarkable that even in the face of official opposition and hostility from the Forest Department, the CFSs have continued to protect their forests.

A District CFS Union was formed during the 1990s to protect the interests of the CFSs and over half the Societies are members. A case brought by the District CFS Union against the Forest Department is currently pending in the Himachal Pradesh High Court.

The Achievements of the CFSs

The Cooperative Forest Societies have been highly successful in achieving the original aims set out for them. People's participation in protecting and regenerating the forests has been achieved through the Cooperative Forest Societies. The Coops were a great success throughout the period they received government support, and most have continued to protect forests despite the Forest Department's attempts to wrest them from village control, under the rhetoric of failure.

At the outset of the scheme, villagers were persuaded by the officials' promises that if they agreed to forego grazing and lopping, forests would yield greater benefits in the future. As the forests under village protection regenerated, revenues (and potential revenues) increased. The "grants" paid to the CFSs by the Forest Department became substantial. In 1968, with the re-organisation of the Punjab, Kangra was transferred to Himachal Pradesh. The Forest Department ceased returning revenue from forest product marketing to the CFSs and in this way retained significant

amounts or revenue. The Forest Department also gradually sought to bring forest lands under its own control.

The CFSs have struggled to continue their operations without proper sources of income. The forests have come under the de facto protection and management of both the CFSs and the Forest Department whilst its legal status is contested. The official policy of the Forest Department has been either to ignore or to seek the closure of the CFSs. However informally there has been much cooperation at the Range-Post level, something which the Forest Department has sought to stop:

[I]n the eyes of the Forest Department [the Forest Co-operative Societies] are non existent. . . It is therefore once again directed that you [i.e. Range Officers and Forest Guards] should not entertain or admit any recommendations of such societies. . . . You will be held responsible for any such unauthorised acknowledgement of so called society. It may be brought to the notice of all concerned also (Divisional Forest Officer Letter 1994).

Regular calls to review the CFS situation at the state level have had little effect. The most concerted attempt to review the situation was prompted by the Cooperative Department in the late 1980s, and led to the "HIPA report":

[D]egraded forest and shamlats were given to the care of [Co-operative Forest] societies and they have definitely improved over a number of years through closures and protection. Plantations undertaken by societies 30-40 years back have fully been established and their stocking can be favourably compared with stocking of plantations in Government Forests. This has been achieved with low investment and through people's participation.

The main object of securing co-operation of the local people in managing forests has been achieved. . . . The CFS in Kangra District is a unique example in India [of] involving people in forest management. . . . The benefits are being directly derived and a sense of belonging has developed in . . . [the local people]. As a result the people have voiced their feelings that they had raised and reared plantations 30-40 years back and sacrificed their convenience in effecting closures. Now when the plantations have established, they are being denied the fruits of their efforts.

Public participation in social forestry has become the order of the day . . . co-operative societies already formed for this very purpose, are ideal institutions for effective implementation of social forestry programmes with public participation (Himachal Pradesh Institute for Public Administration Report 1989).

There has been little political will shown by the government to resolve the impasse over support to the CFSs, and many in the Forest Department have been resolutely opposed to change:

The creation of Co-operative Forest Societies was an experiment which has been [a] failure. ... [The] situation presently is totally different from that in the year 1935 [when the CFS scheme was conceived]. At that time the undemarcated forests were in deplorable state and the Government were short of funds. These forests have now been planted, and there are no more areas available for planting and there is no dearth of funds for the purpose (Chaudhary 1989).

With the acceptance of the Joint Forest Management policy involving local people in forest management, the relationship of the Forest Department to CFSs in Kangra has become an anomaly with HP State policy.

Cooperative Forest Societies remain an important institution for forest and community development, awaiting a supportive and collaborative perspective from government. Simple steps could be taken immediately for reconciliation between the CFSs and the HP Government. The crucial factor is the attitude and role of the HP Forest Department.

Lessons of the Cooperative Forest Societies experience

Almost three-quarters of those households interviewed in Sarah CFS village said the CFS had brought "great benefits." Approximately two-thirds of respondents felt the forest would rapidly deteriorate without the CFS to protect it, irrespective of the kinds of alternative arrangements that are made.

The CFSs have been highly successful in achieving the original aims of regenerating and protecting their forests. They have also been able to perform valuable social development work such as school and road construction. The CFSs have continued to protect their forests in the face of official opposition and hostility from the Forest Department.

Local people have shown themselves here, as in many other such schemes, to be committed to and capable of sustainable forest management when a suitable institutional framework is in place.

The main threat to the success of participatory forestry policies and programs such as this comes from the government's side: participatory forestry programs are vulnerable to government departments' opportunism and indifference over the long term. For this reason long-term commitment is needed from the Forest Department to insulate local people's achievements from official opportu-

ism and indifference. Forest Departments need to promote internal cultural change at all levels, "from conflict to collaboration."

The experience of the Kangra CFSs shows us that even adverse conditions need not stop motivated local people from acting to protect their forests. Nevertheless, state support is essential if they are to flourish.

As for the Cooperative Forest Societies, despite all the opposition they have faced, they are still functioning, protecting their forests, and trying to regain official support:

The destiny of the CFS is like a boat stuck in the middle of a river that cannot reach either bank. We want a bright future and development for the society, which is only possible if [we] receive ... help (Chairman, Bhanala Co-operative Forest Society 1997).

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