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Community Forestry: Historical Legacy of Himachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

The involvement of local people is one of the major tenets of the new paradigm of forest management. Himachal Pradesh has embraced this trend with programs such as Joint Forest Management and Sanjhi Van Yojana. While the shift toward community-based forestry is commendable, the practice fails the local communities in a variety of ways. Problems emerging from the political environment in which the forest department functions, the concealed agendas of different stakeholders, existing power structures, and ingrained working styles and ethics result in vast differences between rhetoric and practice. The move towards community forestry is occurring with a lack of historical context about the legacy of community forestry practices and institutions in Himachal Pradesh. This neglect is unfortunate since the collective memory of these past experiences forms an important element in popular perceptions and practices of people’s rights, villagers’ reactions to forest department initiatives, and the forest department’s underlying attitudes towards communities.

Institutions and past practices such as the forest settlements, rakha system, devban, and forest cooperatives are worthy precursors of current community forestry programs. Unlike many other regions of India, forest settlements in Himachal Pradesh have recognized several local rights. The rakha is represented by a forest guard with dual accountability to both the state and local communities. Devban or sacred groves illustrate a system integrating local belief systems with natural resource management. Forest cooperatives in Kangra district are exemplars of decentralized forest management with local involvement and support. While each of these historical institutions had their specific advantages and problems, they cannot be ignored without peril in today’s forestry context. Notions of trust, capability, and legitimacy are based on these past interactions between the forest department and local communities. In this essay I elucidate the institutional aspects of these historical systems, compare their strengths and weaknesses, and highlight their relevance to current and future initiatives.

Community forestry in contemporary Himachal Pradesh

Community involvement emerged as a new paradigm in forest management in the nineteen eighties. Participation of local people began to be seen as the solution to rising deforestation rates, as the impact of spontaneous local joint-management initiatives became evident (Poffenberger 1994; Lynch and Talbot 1995). Policies and projects in India and internationally began incorporating a social component, and people’s participation became an essential aspect of forestry projects. National policy also reflected these changes. “The National Forest Policy, 1988, envisages people’s involvement in the development and protection of forests. The requirements of fuel-wood, fodder and small timber such as house-building material, of the tribals and other villagers living in and near the forests, are to be treated as first charge on forest produce” (GOI 1990). These developments are well recorded in numerous books and articles on the theory and practice of participatory forestry (Jeffrey and Sundar 1999; Kalam 1998; Freeman 1998; Kothari et al. 1996; Campbell 1992; Poffenberger 1990, 1993; Poffenberger and McGeen 1996; Sarin 1995). Of course, this process has not been complete or all-encompassing. In many regions of India local people continue to have restricted access to forests they have used for several generations (Sundar 2001). However, most experts in the field today argue that cooperation of forest-dependent local communities is essential for the sustainable management of India’s forests. Over fifteen percent of India’s forest-lands are under Joint Forest Man-
The forests of Himachal Pradesh play a vital role in the unique Western Himalayan ecosystem by conserving the integrity of the upper watersheds of five major Indian rivers (Chenab, Ravi, Beas, Sutlej, and Yamuna), sustaining the agro-pastoral livelihoods of hill peoples, and balancing the economy of this small hill state. The wide range of altitudes and climatic conditions in the state sustain a variety of forest types including moist tropical, dry tropical, montane subtropical, montane temperate, sub-alpine, and alpine scrub. Although 66.43% of the geographical area of the state is legally defined as forest land, only 22.49% is actually under tree cover (IIED 2000). The bulk of the remainder is under rock and permanent snow. These forests are legally classified into reserved forests (5.12%), demarcated protected forests (30.82%), undemarcated protected forests (58.38%), unclassed forests (2.51%), and other forests (3.15%). In general, these categories represent decreasing departmental control and an increase of local rights within them.

Five community forestry projects were functioning in Himachal Pradesh in 2001: DFID Himachal Pradesh Forestry Project (or Joint Forest Management / JFM), Indo-German Changar Project (IGCP), Integrated Watershed Development Project (IWDP), GHNP Eco-development Project (EDP), and Sanjhi Van Yojana (SVY). Each of these projects created village committees to manage forest areas. Village Forest Development Committees (VFDC) were created under JFM, Village Development Committees (VDC) under IGCP and IWDP, Village Eco-development Committees (VEDC) under GHNP EDP, and Village Forest Development Societies (VFDS) under SVY (IIED 2000: 10). I will focus on JFM and SVY, which were envisaged as state-wide models for community forestry in Himachal Pradesh.

In 1993, Himachal Pradesh instituted JFM with initial funding of six million pounds from the Department for International Development (DFID), UK. It started as a pilot project in Kullu and Mandi districts and has resulted in the formation of 155 Village Forest Development Committees (VFDC) registered by Divisional Forest Officers. The general body of the VFDC includes members from all households in a kothi (a revenue village), who have rights in a particular forest. An executive body is elected from this general body to manage the forest and distribute benefits. The forest guard, the lowest forest department official, is the member secretary of this committee and manages the financial and other records of the VFDC.

In August 1998, the Himachal Pradesh government decided to extend this model of cooperation with local communities for forest management. They announced a similar state-funded scheme for the entire state called Sanjhi Van Yojana (SVY). As part of SVY, village committees are registered as Village Forest Development Societies (VFDS) under the Societies Registration Act (1860). Membership criteria and management are similar to JFM. By 2000, nearly 360 VFDSs had been created in Himachal Pradesh (IIED 2000). As of July 2001, the status of these societies (VFDC and VFDS) is ambiguous as the department faces a resource crunch and new projects also require allocation of scarce funds. Both JFM and SVY have been discontinued, and a new project called Apna Van, Apna Dhan has been announced. Under this scheme, community groups will be provided tree seedlings of their choice free of cost, which they will plant on degraded forests and barren wastelands. They will be provided cash to cover expenses and labor and all usufruct rights in the plantation areas until the trees reach maturity. The right to harvest timber from these plantation areas will also rest with these community groups and the income generated shall be shared between the groups and the local panchayat in a 3:1 ratio (RUPFOR 2001). Since this new project is yet to take-off, I focus in this essay on JFM and SVY as the most recent community forestry efforts in the state.

While this overall initiative to involve people in forest management in Himachal Pradesh is laudable, the actual practice leaves much to be desired. The current financial crunch highlights the dependence of these projects on adequate funding. Projects are crucially dependent on particular project funds, and initiatives are undertaken where and when funds are available rather than at places and times when they are required. It is also significant that village committees have been set up in villages selected by forest officers, and there has been little indigenous initiative or demand for such committees. A state-wide model also introduces a rigidity that cannot adapt to diversity in social conditions and resource availability. Membership in VFDS and VFDC is pre-designed to include one male and female member from each household. While this is in consonance with concerns of caste, class, and gender equity, it leaves little room for voluntary participation or non-participation. The legal standing of these institutions is also ambiguous since JFM rules have yet to receive any legal sanction. VFDS have slightly better legal standing since they are registered under the Societies Registration Act (1860), rather than by the Divisional Forest Officer. These community forestry initiatives are also weak in terms of incentives since local people in Himachal Pradesh already enjoy most non-timber and user-rights in these forests. In general it is expected that only degraded government for-

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1 The forest department is officially called the Department of Forest Farming and Conservation. I refer to it as the forest department in this essay for convenience.
ests will be managed by these committees. Therefore short and medium term benefits are practically non-existent. The forest department retains a controlling role in the JFM/SVY organization, since forest officers decide where the committees will be set up, how they will be constituted, what rules should be followed, what funds will be available, and when the institution will be dissolved. Thus the danger remains that VFDC/VFDS may become one more government-organized committee in these villages, adding to the several others set up by different government departments (see Bingeman, this volume).

Many of these problems arise from the political environment in which the forest department functions, the concealed agendas of different stakeholders, existing power structures, and ingrained working styles and ethics. However, it is remarkable that Himachal Pradesh has a historical legacy of community forestry initiatives that have successfully resolved some of these problems. Unfortunately, many of the current efforts at involving community are occurring with a lack of historical context. The collective memory of these past experiences forms an important element in popular perceptions and practices of people’s rights and the moral conception of and expectations from the state. Notions of trust, capability, and legitimacy are based on earlier interactions. Moreover, the successes and failures of these experiments have potential lessons for guiding current community forestry activities.

For the remainder of this essay, I will focus on four historical experiences from different parts of Himachal Pradesh that continue to have an impact on forestry activities today. I describe these initiatives and present a comparison of their institutional characteristics. I highlight design principles that emerge from such a comparison, and conclude with lessons from these past experiences that are crucial for current community forestry initiatives.

Community forestry: exemplars from the Himachali past

Forest settlements and local forest use

Local forest rights in Himachal Pradesh, and indeed most parts of India, are based on colonial forest settlements conducted by British forest and revenue officers in the last century. When the colonial forest department was established, it became necessary to enumerate and specify all rights in forests that had now become the property of the colonial state. This process was called the forest settlement, where officers recorded and legalized some of the existing local forest uses. The main objective of this exercise was the appropriation of forests for the commercial use of the British government. Through a series of local regulations culminating in the Indian Government Forests Act of 1865 and then 1878, the government asserted its property right over large areas of forests. Settlements were to be based on inquiries into existing rights of local people, but in most regions, local rights, particularly valuable timber rights, were ignored in the settlements (Guha 1983, 1990). In general, the 1878 Forest Act was annexationist in purpose (ibid.) and denied most local rights. However, regulations only stated general principles and the broad framework within which specific forest settlements were to be made in different regions of India (Bhattacharya 1986).

There were considerable differences in opinion among forest officers who were conducting the settlements regarding the treatment of local customary rights. In 1855, the colonial Government of India framed and issued General Rules for the conservancy of forests and jungles in the hill districts of Punjab (including the present state of Himachal Pradesh). These rules, framed by Sir J. Lawrence, marked the first systematic effort to exert state rights over the management of forests in the region. After this, systematic forest settlements were conducted in almost all the forested regions of Himachal Pradesh between 1855 and 1934. These settlements, completed almost a century ago, are still the legal documents that provide rights to local people (see Chhatre, Baker, this volume).

Forest rights in Himachal Pradesh are quite different from other parts of India. The colonial forest settlements in most parts of this state have recognized and recorded many local forest rights for several historical, economic, and political reasons. Village landowners have extensive user rights to graze cattle and collect fuel-wood, poles, and most non-timber products for their personal use. Most villagers also have the right to periodically harvest timber for house construction and repair. Additionally, many villagers can sell non-timber forest products and thereby benefit financially from what are today state forests. Thus, although almost all the forests belong to the state in terms of ownership, villagers enjoy extensive user rights to forests near their villages. Anderson’s (1886) forest settlement of Kullu is a typical example. After much debate, the bulk of Kullu forests was classified under Chapter IV (protected forests) of the Indian Forest Act (1878), allowing considerable leniency in local people’s use of forests. All rights described above were registered in this forest settlement. Forest settlements in Himachal Pradesh are therefore progressive in the limited sense that they overtly recognize and legalize local forest uses. These settlements are significant today for community forestry efforts as they define the positions and expectations of local communities and the forest department in their negotiations.

Rakhas: Village forest guards

The rakha was a villager who was employed to guard local forests. He was responsible for carrying out forestry works, game-keeping, guarding the forest against fire and illegal use, and collecting fines from offenders. He was an
employee of the village and received his remuneration from all households in the village, usually in the form of grain. When the colonial forest department was later established, it partially institutionalized the rakha system and paid the rakha a nominal cash salary in addition to the grain he received from villagers. He was expected to report to the forest department in addition to his traditional duties. The rakha thus became a forest guard who was a joint employee of both the village and the forest department. The rakha was responsible for the everyday management of both government forests as well as common and private forests and grasslands. This is a remarkable practice where villagers actually paid to protect forests and reveals the importance of forests as livelihood resources in this region. It is also indicative of the perception of ownership and responsibility for forest management among villagers.

The existence of rakhas has been documented from 1853-54 (Sharma 1996: 226) in the old Kangra regions of the present Kangra, Hamirpur, and Una districts. Singh (1998:153), citing the Kangra district gazetteer of 1917, notes the presence of rakhas in Lahaul district. The rakhas’ emoluments consisted of two seers\(^2\) of grain from each landowner at every harvest and a portion of the zamindari share accruing in all the protected and unclassed forests. For a brief period, from 1920 to 1924-25, protected and unclassed forests were under the control of the revenue department. During this time, the revenue department inducted its own guards, also called rakhas, and paid them in cash. When these lands reverted to the forest department, they brought back the old system of grain payment by villagers.

The question of cash payment was considered and debated at length. In Lahaul, the appointment of rakhas was sanctioned in 1914 against an annual cash salary (Kangra district gazetteer 1917:227, cited in Singh 1998:153). Shuttleworth’s (1916) land revenue settlement in Kangra addressed the issue of a government cash payment to rakhas, but this idea was rejected as the government did not want to make the rakha a state employee. The proposal to pay rakhas in cash was rejected once again in Kangra in 1924, and they were regarded as village servants (Kangra district gazetteer 1924-25:351,435 cited in Singh 1998: 153). The issue was again placed before the Punjab Government Forest Commission in 1938 (Sharma 1996: 226). The Commission recommended that the government should not accept responsibility for the cash payment, since rakhas were village servants. Thus rakhas remained forest guards employed by villagers. However, the government assigned to itself the authority to monitor the rakhas’ work. Rakhas are still employed by some existing Kangra forest cooperatives. In other parts of Kangra district, however, the rakha is now appointed by the Divisional Forest Officer with the consent of the villagers and on the recommendations of the panchayat (Sharma 1996:227). The rakha is paid by villagers, but the Divisional Forest Officer has the right to appoint him and terminate his services, thus shared control and responsibility is maintained.

Sacred groves: intersection of resource management and religious belief systems

Sacred groves are specific forest areas of varying size and quality that have been accorded a “sacred” status and have thus remained protected for centuries by local communities. Such forests have been identified and studied in many regions of India (Ramakrishnan et al. 1998; Freeman 1998; Kalam 1998; Gadgil 1975; Gadgil and Vartak 1976, 1981; Hazra 1980; Chandrakanth and Romm 1991; Chandrakanth et al. 1990; Pandey and Singh 1995; Induchoodan 1991). Sacred forests called devban in Himachal Pradesh are a unique socio-ecological resource. These forests range in size from a few clumps of trees to forest tracts spread over many acres. Devta committees that manage them are a center of significant power and influence in rural society and crucial for local forest management.

Devban are managed based on rules that are specific to each devban. A variety of use restrictions concerning end-use, geographic or social community, species, quantity and seasonality including non-use are prescribed and followed. There is no one set of rules that is operative for all devban or at all times. In some devban, all human uses are prohibited, while others may allow the collection of fallen wood or lopping, or even timber harvests. Most devta institutions restrict certain social groups such as women or lower castes from entering or using the devban, the adherence to the rules of the devban and the severity of restrictions varies across the region. It is believed that the devta punishes transgressors. Observance of these rules therefore constitutes a religious practice, and no separate enforcement organization is necessary. This contrasts sharply from state forest management efforts that rely on legal entities, monetary fines, and the threat of arrests to enforce management rules.

Where they exist, the devta committees, composed of villagers, are a major center of power. The committee usually consists of a kardar, or manager of the temple property, a kayath, or cashier, a pujari who conducts the rituals, one or more gurs who act as oracles receiving and conveying messages of the Gods, a bhandari, or storekeeper, and several bajantris, or musicians. Except for the musicians, who are lower caste men, all the other members of the committee are upper caste men. Men of the most powerful households within the village often hold positions on the devta committee, and serious gender and caste inequity is

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\(^2\) One seer is around 900 grams.
Forest policy have all influenced this institution in dynamic ways. Changing social parameters such as villagers' religious beliefs, their understanding of the common good, the influence of the market, and government forest policy have all influenced this institution in dynamic ways. Their relevance for current practices lies in their integration with and influence on broader social life in this region.

**Kangra Forest Cooperatives (KFCs)**

Forest cooperatives in Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh are a unique experiment in cooperative management of forests, conceptualized in a Forest Officers Conference in 1935 (HIPA 1989). In 1937, the Punjab Government appointed a commission of inquiry (popularly called the Garbett Commission) to consider the problems faced by people living near forests and to identify means to solicit their cooperation in forest management. The recommendations of this commission led to the formation of the KFC in 1940. This commission was far-sighted enough to propose that "[t]he ultimate, however distant goal is that the whole forest property of the village shall be managed on the lines approved by itself and given effect to by its own forest staff under the supervision of a qualified forest officer acting as assistant to the Deputy Commissioner. Then the expense of the staff will be lessened and the profits to the village increased.” This early resolution recognized the significance of stakeholder involvement and social fencing which are major tenets of community-based management today. The Kangra Forest Society Rules were approved, and the first Village Forest Cooperative Society (VFCS) was formally registered in November 1941. By 1944-45, forty VFCSs complete with working plans covered an area of 43,749 acres.

The revenue unit for the KFC was the *mauza*, which included at least a hundred households. A society developed if more than three-fourths of the cultivators of the *mauza* agreed to form a cooperative. Thus, cooperative societies were largely dependent on the interest and initiative of local people. The entire forest estate, irrespective of its legal classification, as well as any private land that owners wished to include were treated and managed as one forest block. Private land was included where landowners voluntarily gave their land. Villagers who did not wish to join such a society could do so without any threat to their existing rights in forest or village lands.

Members of forest cooperatives benefited from revenue generated through the sale of grass, fuel-wood and wood, fines collected on illegal felling or mining, and interest on bank deposits. Since the cooperatives benefited directly from the status of the resource, the incentive to conserve and develop resources was high. In addition to this income, the government also instituted a grant-in-aid of Rs. 50,000 to be distributed to all societies. Forest working plans were prepared and monitored by the forest department, but implementation was entirely the responsibility of the cooperative. KFCs were thus voluntary at all stages, community-initiated, retained decision-making authority at the local level, and provided sufficient incentives for local people to collaborate. The quality of the resource often improved although serious inequities remained as landless villagers and women were entirely neglected.

KFCs continued to function with full legal recognition until 1973. This was an example of rare cooperation between the district administration that provided grant-in-aid, the cooperative societies department that audited the societies, and the forest department that provided technical assistance. The grant-in-aid was discontinued as a result of policy changes in 1973, and this appears to have resulted in apathy and neglect from all three departments. The societies' registration was not renewed, no new forest working plans were prepared, and the societies were left in administrative limbo. However, some of the more profitable KFC continue to function independently today without any legal standing.

Table 1 summarizes the basic physical and institutional characteristics of *devban*, KFCs, and JFM/SVY. Comparison of these characteristics reveals a number of design principles relevant to community forestry institutions. Table 2 evaluates each of these institutions on the basis of these principles. Past institutions show both successes and failures in incorporating these principles.

**Learning from the past**

*Local needs, legal rights, and de facto uses*

Surviving *devban* and KFCs share a common characteristic in that they have recognized, incorporated, and integrated local needs and uses of forests. The only *devban* that exist today are those where villagers have alternate forests from which they are able to meet their needs. Similarly with KFCs, restrictions on grazing and forest product collection in forests are decided at the local level. Thus there is a greater chance that they are based on local needs.

Local use of forests needs to be explicitly recognized and accounted for in management plans. Even when such uses may be detrimental to ecological sustainability, they cannot be summarily ignored. Conservation plans that create reserves or parks and extinguish local rights through bureaucratic fiat or legal acts are unrealistic. First, given current conditions, the state is unable to forcefully curtail such use. Considering the resources of the forest department and the large and mountainous area that needs to be monitored, it is practically impossible to account for all local use. Second, curtailed access to forests from which
### Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Devban</th>
<th>KFC</th>
<th>JFM/SVY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GEOGRAPHIC SPREAD</td>
<td>Mainly in Kullu, Mandi, Chamba and Shimla districts</td>
<td>Kangra district</td>
<td>JFM: Kullu and Mandi districts SVY: All over Himachal Pradesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TYPE OF LAND INCLUDED</td>
<td>Private land, protected forest</td>
<td>Private and shomlat (community) lands, protected and unclassed forests, some reserved forests</td>
<td>Mainly undemarcated protected forests. Proposal to include other forests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BASIS FOR ESTABLISHING THE INSTITUTION</td>
<td>Religious belief and cultural practices</td>
<td>A society is formed whenever more than three-fourths of the cultivators of the mauza agree to form a cooperative</td>
<td>Selected by the forest department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEMBERSHIP</td>
<td>De facto and voluntary membership: all villagers in an area</td>
<td>Voluntary membership for all landowners in a mauza</td>
<td>Fixed membership: one man and woman from every household in selected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEADERSHIP</td>
<td>Devta committee constituted by hereditary rights</td>
<td>Elected by general body</td>
<td>Elected by general body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOREST DEPARTMENT ROLE</td>
<td>None recognized by local people. Legal authority when devban is on government land</td>
<td>Technical assistance and monitoring</td>
<td>Deciding where the institution will be formed, forming village committees, designing working plans, motivation, technical assistance, maintaining and monitoring accounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEGAL STANDING</td>
<td>Private property laws; no legal basis when devban is on reserved or protected forests. Devta committees are registered under the 1860 Societies Registration Act since 1997</td>
<td>Societies had a clear legal status under the Cooperative Societies Act until 1973. Legal status is ambiguous after 1973 since registration was not renewed</td>
<td>JFM: Registered by the District Forest Officer SVY: Registered under the Societies Registration Act (1860)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MONETARY INPUTS</td>
<td>Voluntary contributions</td>
<td>Government grant-in-aid, sale and lease of forest products and services, interest on corpus funds and fines collected</td>
<td>JFM: Project funding from DFID. SVY: State project funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERCEIVED BENEFITS</td>
<td>Religious and cultural</td>
<td>Individual and collective monetary benefits both short term from NTFP and long term</td>
<td>Community benefits expected -- long term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CASTE AND GENDER REPRESENTATION</td>
<td>Higher caste/class leadership through hereditary positions; general membership</td>
<td>Higher caste, higher class and male membership and leadership</td>
<td>Representative membership through reservations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 1: Comparison of Community Forestry Initiatives

Villagers have traditionally met their everyday needs creates resentment toward the state bureaucracy and hinders any prospect for trust or participation. Third, the creation of parks and restricted areas, turns a community resource into a common resource. When forests provide subsistence, local people have a stake in sustainable use. When local needs are made illegal, there is no incentive for careful extraction or sustainable management since there is no long-term assurance of access to the resource. Legal, long-term use rights rather than currently existing periodic conces-
Design Principles | Devban | KFC | JFM/SVY
--- | --- | --- | ---
FLEXIBILITY | Extremely high | High in the initial stages. Once the society rules have been framed, very little flexibility | Very little. A state-wide model is followed
LOCAL CONTROL | Extremely high | Fairly high | Low to moderate
CULTURAL INTEGRATION | Extremely high | Low | Low
INCLUSIVENESS IN MEMBERSHIP | High (all villagers are members) | Low (only landowners) | High
DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP | Low | Moderate (only landowners) | High
SHORT-TERM INCENTIVES | High (cultural and social incentives) | High (regular income from sale and lease of products and services) | Very low
LONG-TERM INCENTIVES | High (cultural and social incentives) | High and certain | High potential but uncertain
TENURE SECURITY | High | High until 1973 | Low

Table 2: Principles of Institutional Design: Comparative Evaluation of Community Forestry Institutions

Incentives for participation

A share of the final income on tree-harvesting is a significant but delayed long-term incentive. It demands a sense of trust in state policy that has a history of being ad hoc and inconsistent. Thus user rights to non-timber forest products has emerged as one of the most attractive incentives in JFM in most other states. However, villagers in Himachal Pradesh already have legal rights to most forest produce. Therefore, JFM currently relies on wage labor, infrastructure-building, and a share in the final harvest as incentives. The appeal of these incentives remains to be tested. It is important to recognize this difference and creatively rethink JFM incentives in Himachal Pradesh, which may be quite different from areas with no local rights or extremely degraded forests.

The significance of the rakha system is that it achieved the national objectives of JFM through institutional incentives rather than material benefits. Alternatively, KFC provided individual monetary benefits in addition to community benefits. While the notion of “community” is significant to such efforts, practical necessity dictates that changing concepts of community and importance for individuals and households should be taken into account. With increasing awareness of and resentment against prevalent social inequities in “traditional communities,” it is necessary for projects to recognize problems with the notion of community. Communities may need to be redefined as dynamic and flexible, changing with time, objectives, and incentives.

Authority and responsibility sharing

Village committees in JFM/SVY participate in decision-making as advisors, rather than as partners sharing authority and responsibility. It is a progressive step that these policies now provide a voice for peoples needs and concerns. However, for these initiatives to progress, a more proactive role needs to be envisaged for these committees. The result of decades of policy aimed at protecting forests against human use is a mutual mistrust between foresters and local people, with power in favor of foresters. The rakha system points to an innovative way of overcoming this mistrust and effectively sharing authority. The rakha was traditionally a forest guard who reported to both villagers and the forest department and served both their needs. This emerged from a sense of ownership over forests where vil-
lagers were actually paying to protect “their” forests. In contrast, over the years, the forest guard has been increasingly seen as a state employee working against local people. The forest guards also recognize the state as their employer and have no incentive to consider or consult people. This situation can be remedied by allowing both the forest department and local community authority over the guard in JFM/SVY. This would ensure that local people not only cooperate in forest conservation but also demand and expect it as their right. A forest guard at least partly paid by the village committee or panchayat would be a step in this direction.

Further, the role that the forest department envisions for itself and the role that other stakeholders see as legitimate needs to be reconciled in forestry projects. In KFCs, the forest department was responsible only for technical assistance and overall monitoring. This implied a trust in the ability of local groups to manage the everyday aspects of forest management and decision-making. Such trust in the capacity of local VFDS/VFDC seems lacking in current efforts. The grant-in-aid given to KFCs represents another discretionary power that was handed over to local groups. While significant funds have been spent on JFM/SVY, the control of these monies has always remained with the forest department. No information or accounts for these expenditures have been shared with participating partners. Control over everyday management of forests needs to be devolved to local committees systematically to ensure long-term sustainability.

Flexibility in management and social integration

Sustainable social institutions are generally well integrated into local livelihoods. Traditional institutions that have survived are excellent examples. These institutions are involved in the socio-cultural lives of villagers and are flexible in adapting to changing local needs. For instance, every surviving devban has a set of rules that depend on the needs of the particular community, the resources available, and local power relations. This flexibility allows the devban to adapt to changes. JFM/SVY are state-initiated programs and by their very nature tend to have universal rules and formats that are advantageous in state level management. However, flexibility is key. Different strategies will be required in different districts: a district like Kullu, with rich forests, will require a very different approach from some of the lower districts that are relatively dry and have scrub forests with little standing timber.

Social structures that manage the forests cannot afford to remain isolated from the overall life and culture of people. For instance melas (fairs) in Kullu are occasions when strong linkages can be built and maintained between different ethnic groups. It is difficult for a state bureaucracy to achieve this level of integration. However it is worth thinking about these social events as opportunities for interaction with local communities. Politicians have recognized this reality and often use such events to integrate themselves in society through organizational assistance, financial contributions, and an active participation in melas. Just as people are expected to participate in JFM meetings, it may be prudent to expect forest officers to participate in local events such as melas.

Participation as choice

In concept, participation is a voluntary choice, where the participant is free to make decisions. However in modern community forestry projects, participation is equated with registration. Once the forest department has decided where to implement JFM/SVY, all households in that village must register as members. In contrast, KFCs are unique for their voluntary membership. They are established only in response to a demand from more than three-fourths of the cultivators of a mauza. Similarly devban rely entirely on voluntary support. In both cases, perceived benefits encouraged people to participate enthusiastically. Preparing the ground for voluntary participation, which may be a long-term process, is crucial for any vision of state and civil society as partners.

Dealing with existing social institutions

Traditional power centers such as gram-sabhas and devta committees are often active and influential in rural society. They are highly inequitable in terms of class, caste, and gender. However, they have to be recognized as a dominant presence and explicitly dealt with when creating modern institutions for community management. New institutions that threaten these entrenched local power relations need to be strong enough to counter their opposition or be able to work with and use these structures.

The potential for creating multiple parallel institutions that often work at odds with one another should also be noted. Every development or conservation program introduces a new and independent village institution. Each government department and each non-government organization also creates a new collective from the same group of villagers. For instance, in some districts there are several mahila mandals (women’s groups) in a single village—organized by the block for development programs, initiated by the forest department for conservation, organized by local non-government organizations for specific projects, and created by various other government departments. Sometimes multiple mahila mandals are also segregated by caste. Apart from these, there are youth groups, cooperatives, caste groups, panchayat, devta committees, and

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3 Traditional village leadership
forest committees. In this context, JFM/SVY has a mandate to create new community institutions. New institutions may often be necessary since the older ones tend to have various biases, inequalities, and discords. However, it is critical to seriously rethink the advantages and disadvantages of having multiple groups in a single area, with overlapping membership and varying objectives that often contradict each other (see Bingeman, this volume). It is in this context that a rigorous analysis of pre-existing institutions becomes crucial. Depending on local conditions, these institutions may be co-opted, modified, or at least invited as collaborators to achieve the objective of sustainable forest management.

Conclusion

Current community forestry projects attempt to redefine relationships between the forest department and local communities. Such redefinition occurs in the context of past practices that have left an indelible mark on the social and ecological landscape. Forest management institutions and policies can never be created in a social vacuum. Past experiences of trust and mistrust between different communities and stake-holders, perceptions of legitimacy of the state and of particular groups, established attitudes of dominance and patronage, and past and present power relations all affect the acceptance or rejection of a policy, irrespective of a discourse that seeks to highlight only cooperation. This article has highlighted one determinant of the above-mentioned factors, namely the historical legacy of community oriented forestry practices in Himachal Pradesh. Understanding the contextual realities created by this legacy and designing policies and programs that deal with issues it raises are essential for sustained success of any forest policy. The analysis of past practices in this essay provides some pointers to deal with this challenge.

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