NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND THE PROMISE OF DECENTRALISED GOVERNANCE: LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE IN INDIA

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Summary

Using the experiences of a number of Indian villages, this article illustrates many of the conclusions of the extensive literature on the value of local participation in conservation and development in developing countries. Taking the specific problem of the use of forest and other natural resources for sustainability of growing villages in rural India, the article shows that active local participation benefits both ecosystems and the villages. Such ideas challenge many centralised political systems. Although India is the world's largest democracy and a federal system of partially independent states, a strong centralizing tendency was inherited from its pre-independence colonial government. Local needs often conflict with national or regional policies. The consequence is a failure of appropriate governance of both ecosystems and social systems. In such a situation, decentralised, community based natural resource management shows a viable alternative model, but there remains also a critical role for larger state-sponsored institutions and structures.

1. Introduction: The Twin Crises

Like many developing countries, India faces a twin crisis of breakdown: one of the political governance structures, and the other of its ecological framework. Central and state governments are simply not delivering what they promise or should be capable of delivering. The number of government personnel (especially at 'higher' levels) and the amount of public work the government actually achieves appear to have no correlation. As for the environment, forests, topsoil, surface and groundwater, air, and all the other basic resources are getting more and more degraded and over-exploited.

Government failure and ecological loss have been viewed in isolation from each other, and never the twain does meet. Political governance and related issues such as the ability of people to control their own lives and defend their basic human rights have been the focus of political scientists, social activists, human rights advocates. Ecological issues, on the other hand, have been central to the work of biologists and that rather amorphous group called 'environmentalists'. The two have rarely cooperated or coordinated their activities. In some arenas (as, for instance, the conflict between wildlife conservation and people's rights to survival resources in wildlife habitats), they have actually been in conflict.

This is unfortunate because the breakdown in government and the destruction of ecosystems have common roots. Both failures will be reversed only if the ecological and the political are brought together. Both are the result of several decades of over-dependence on centralised structures of governance and management, taking away the power and ability of local communities in villages and residents' associations in cities, to manage their own surroundings. Distant government bureaucrats make policy in response to multiple pressures but inevitably ignore the special conditions of local ecological systems. Frequently, villagers who have adapted their customs and institutions to integrate their social system with the surrounding natural systems, are excluded from decision-making.

To an extent before colonial times, but in particular during the British rule and thereafter in so-called Independent India, central governments have repeatedly assumed the dominant role in the provision of basic services and the management of natural

resources. This is a problem common across the developing world: governance structures and cultures designed to implement the policies of distant imperial governments are insensitive to local needs. Such centralised structures are often maintained after independence. If these structures are staffed by underpaid and inexperienced bureaucrats in a society in which government employment is relatively bountiful, corruption or political goals can often override the rights of local populations and the needs of local ecosystems. Alienated from their own resource base by the actions of centralised government, villagers across India have increasingly viewed forests, bodies of water (lakes etc.), and wildlife as *sarkari*, open for unregulated exploitation and beyond their own reach to control and manage. Separated from the responsibility for, or control of, these lands, they are naturally tempted to over-exploit them. Urban citizens who are reliant on technologies that bring them needed resources from distant lands and waters and the governance structures that are only too happy to oblige them never see the connections between their lifestyles and environmental degradation.

2. Signs of Hope: Resolving the Twin Crises Together

Yet, out of this scenario of desperation and gloom, hope is emerging. Tired of waiting for unresponsive or corrupt central or regional government structures, or appalled at the destruction wrought by warped and elitist 'developmental' projects, so many people's movements are mushrooming in so many parts of India that it is difficult to keep track of them all. Consider the following:

- Hundreds, possibly thousands, of village communities are regenerating their forests and taking over management; decentralised water harvesting systems have made a strong comeback and posed a challenge to big dams, even in the driest of regions of India.

- Organic and sustainable farming systems are beginning to show that chemical-laden 'Green Revolution' technologies are not essential to grow adequate food.

- Urban residents' associations are beginning to demonstrate the success of waste recycling, rooftop water harvesting, and other elements that make them less of a parasite.

- People's mass movements are growing in strength, resisting insensitive and ecologically destructive 'development' projects, and encouraging the search for alternative, eco-friendly development options.

- The importance of biological and cultural diversity is being broadly articulated again.

- The state too has responded, with significant constitutional and legal measures towards decentralisation.

Communities are even rediscovering that they can manage social conflicts, crime, health, education, and other aspects largely by themselves, or sometimes with help extended by NGOs or sensitive government officials.

In all of the above, what is crucial is the sense of *collective local control over the community's life and destiny* as people are beginning to reduce their dependence on centralised political and bureaucratic structures. There are critical lessons in this for all of us.

3. Effectiveness of Community Self-Organization

There are many examples of this trend of which a few will suffice here. These examples cannot represent the enormous complexity of people's responses across the country but they give an indication of possibilities for local management of social and ecological systems within a framework of national and regional governance.

3.1. Jardhargaon

Jardhargaon is a typical village in the Himalayan foothills of Tehri Garhwal district, Uttaranchal state. About twenty years ago, faced with serious fuel, fodder, and water shortages, residents took charge of protection and management of the slopes above their village. Today, their regenerated forests are providing them with their basic needs. Moreover, these forests now harbour significant wildlife and biodiversity that professional botanists have shown to be amongst the most diverse in this region.

Jardhargaon's farmers also are getting increasingly disillusioned by the short-term lures of chemical-intensive farming, and are switching back to some traditional practices and reviving their traditional seed diversity. Some of them have collected several hundred varieties of seeds from neighboring villages that have been lost elsewhere in the region (up to 250 of rice, 170 of rajma beans, and others). Finally, the village is also maintaining its own equitable system of irrigation, in which individuals appointed by the residents guard the canals and ensure that no-one misuses or over-uses the water. Jardhargaon has also fought off attempts, by outside forces, to start mining on some of its slopes. It is now struggling with finding ways to employ the youth of the village, and linking the bio-resources with livelihood options.

3.2. Mendha-Lekha

Mendha-Lekha is a small Gond tribal village in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra state. In earlier decades, interaction with government officials had only meant exploitation or extortion. Slowly the forests near the village were also taken over by the national government and access restricted. The government then started extracting commercial timber, gave permission to the paper industry to extract bamboo, and awarded contracts to outsiders to extract non-wood forest produce. In the 1970s, Mendha-Lekha's villagers participated in a massive and successful tribal movement against two dams that would have submerged their homes and forests. Subsequently, with the help of a local NGO the villagers organised themselves under the motto *Dilli Bambai hamari sarkar, hamare gaon mein ham hein sarkar* ("our representatives form the government in Delhi and Bombay, we *are* the government in our village"). The villagers then formed a Village Forest Protection Committee to manage and sustain the surrounding forests, and forced a stop to commercial and destructive practices by both locals and outsiders (including the national and regional governments and the paper mill).

The village has explored various avenues for employment, and has ensured year round jobs for all residents. Biogas, fisheries, irrigation, sustainable forestry, handicrafts, and other such activities are now commonplace here. Community cohesion in the village is so strong that any programme, government or non-government, can only be implemented after discussions with and permission from the villagers. Voluntary study circles that also include outside experts but are initiated by the villagers, help to keep the people well-informed and aid them in their participatory research on matters of importance to the village. One of the issues they are likely to discuss is traditional hunting which, according to outside groups who have researched in the area, may affect some threatened species.

3.3. Bhaonta-Kolyala

This region comprises villages in Alwar district of Rajasthan state. By the mid-1980s, water availability in the villages had been greatly reduced. Forest resources, which were critically important for the majority of the pastoral community residing here, were disappearing. Out-migration from the villages in search of jobs was very high. With the help of a regional NGO the villages revived their traditional system of water storage, recreated a village council for managing natural resources, and started protecting a large patch of nearby forest which was recognised to form the catchment of the local rivers and reservoirs.

Fifteen years later, Bhaonta-Kolyala and several hundred villages in this region have, through construction of several thousand *johads*, turned this water-deficit area into a water-surplus one, and seasonal streams into perennial ones. Double cropping is now common, and triple cropping is possible in some areas. People have largely stopped migrating out for employment. Destructive mining, that is allowed by the national government, has been stopped in dozens of places.

In early 1999, Bhaonta-Kolyala and other villages in the Arvari river catchment formed a parliament as a decision-making forum for not just natural resource management but also for settling inter-village disputes and other socio-political issues. The Arvari catchment has been declared a "people's protected area." Interestingly, the local parliament has also decided to ban the commercial cultivation of sugarcane, chilies, and rice because the available water sources would not be able to sustain such crops in the long term. In most of these villages, decisions about the management of natural resources are taken at the village level, with little input from formal governmental institutions. Despite these changes, problems remain. For example, issues of land rights, in particular those of 'lower' castes, remain to be addressed in many villages.

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Biographical Sketch

Ashish Kothari is a founder and member of Kalpavriksh a youth environmental action group which has been active for the last 22 years. Formerly a lecturer in environment at the Indian Institute of Public Administration in New Delhi, he is now active in several national and international organizations and participates in international policymaking on environment and development. For example, he is the coordinator of the Technical and Policy Core Group to formulate India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan and is a member of several national governmental committees including the Expert Group on the proposed Biodiversity Act, the committee to revise the National Wildlife Action Plan, and the Environmental Appraisal Committee for River Valley Projects. He is an active participant in several Indian environmental movements, including the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

At the international level, he is Co-Chair of the IUCN-World Conservation Union Inter-commission Theme on Indigenous/Local Communities, Equity, and Protected Areas. He also is a member of the Steering Committee of the Commission on Environmental, Economic, and Social Policy and of the World Commission on Protected Areas at the IUCN-The World Conservation Union and is a member of the Board of Directors of Greenpeace International.

He has coordinated an action research project on local community participation in ecosystem and wildlife conservation in South Asia and has published 12 books, and over 100 articles, on environment and developmentissues.