

**SHIFT TO (DE)CENTRALISATION CREATES
CONTRADICTION IN POLICY OF MANAGING COMMONS**

A CASE STUDY FROM SEMI-ARID TRIBAL DISTRICTS OF WESTERN INDIA

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This is an ex-post impact study on role of decentralization policy in managing commons by comparing outcomes in three adjoining tribalⁱ districts of Indian states of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh on livelihoods of Bhil tribes from year 2000 to 2005.

ABSTRACT

Globally, since 1990's, decentralization has been recognized as important medium for bringing transformation in communities by reducing conflicts, improving livelihoods for indigenous groups, and promoting sustainable management. In 1993, participatory democratic decentralization was introduced in Indian states by Government of India (GoI). The constitution reform aimed to benefit the local political bodies of three-tier systems called *Panchayats*ⁱⁱ.

In 2000, preliminary literature review and action research comparative study result indicated that implementation of decentralization through 73rd amendment of *Panchayat* had general acceptance particularly by women and Bhils (Scheduled Tribes) in neighbouring three tribal districts of Gujarat (Dahod), Rajasthan (Banswara) and Madhya Pradesh (Jhabua). It was considered as an effective tool, and expected that participatory and accountability would be inbuilt advantage of decentralization (*panchayat*), if implemented appropriately. Immediate effects were observed that due to reservation quota, several tribal women were democratically elected as *panchayat* leaders. However, after five years, are these expectations achieved or it is still a distant dream for bordering districts of three Indian states, and in its implementation of decentralization?

In 2005, ex-post impact study was conducted as a follow-up to above-mentioned study to document implications of decentralization on joint forest management and water cooperatives in semi-arid tribal districts. This paper analyzes and shares outcomes on following main questions: (i) Are administrative, financial and political powers of (73rd Amendments) *Panchayats* closely knit with the other 'recognized' local forest and water committees and district level communities- *Zilla Parishads* (ZPs)?, (ii) what were underlying factors associated with successful implementation in one Indian state as against challenges in other neighbouring state?, and (iii) has there been learning of decentralization formal or informally, and management of commons through knowledge sharing among these tribal districts, between states, and regionally or internationally?

Some of the key results show complexities that are created by democratic decentralization on other existing local rural institutions, which govern social and economic development programmes including forests and water management. One of the revealing results of this study explains informal flow of knowledge sharing of *Gram Swaraj* among the adjoining districts particularly from Jhabua to Dahod, and formal uptake of decentralization policy in Banswara. Briefly, the first part of paper reviews and compares the decentralization policies in these three states; then it analyses the bureaucracy and influence of elite groups on tribal districts; and lastly, if learning from this regions could benefit and be adopted nationally and in other developing countries.

KEY WORDS: *Bhil tribal, decentralization, impact assessment, knowledge, and panchayats*

ⁱIndigenous communities, also known as *adivasis* in India

ⁱⁱ The third-tier of government institutions at village level for local rural self governance

INTRODUCTION

In 21st century, democratic decentralisation and devolution is rapidly becoming global trend. Several developing countries are promoting local governance to conserve and protect the forests at local level. Decentralisation, which is an integral part of local governance have been increasingly regarded as crucial factor for sustainable natural resource management. The Forest Resource Assessment Report indicates that globally the proportion of protected forest has increased from 8% in 1990 to 9% in 2000 and that 84% of the world's forests are publicly owned (FAO 2005). Trends towards community empowerment, decentralized decision-making and increased involvement of the private sector in forest management seen over the past 20 years are reflected in changes in forest ownership and tenure in some regions. Local and indigenous communities now own and control 22 per cent of the world's forested area (White and Martin, 2002:5). However, these new arrangements involving various types of collaborative management by governments and local communities are increasingly common in forest areas that have been severely damaged (*ibid*: 15).

The outcome of decentralisation greatly varies as the policies for transferring the rights to local governance differs across the developing countries. Problems include local elite capture, poor coordination and planning, lack of local community skills and empowerment, inadequate funding and commitment from higher government officials, among other factors (Johnson, 2003; Capistrano and Colfer, 2005). The stability of governance systems largely depends on the distribution of benefits from cross-scale linkages (Adger *et al.*, 2005). According to Berkes (2002), all resource management systems have some external linkages and drivers at different scales. He argues that failure to recognize these linkages is a central reason for some unsuccessful interventions in resource systems (cited in Adger *et al.*, 2005:5). Therefore, the important influence exerted by powerful stakeholders, including the forestry bureaucracy, needs to be recognised, and care needs to be exercised to avoid elite capture of benefits and authority (Capistrano and Colfer, 2005).

Forest resources can act as a safety net for poor communities providing non-timber forest products, especially during years of poor harvest (Angelsen and Wunder, 2003). With large number of poor people living in and around forest and traditionally managing the resources suggest strong interdependency between forests and people. In India, poor tribal communities are most dependent on forest resources who traditionally manage this resource through system of tribal self rules for centuries, even millennia.

In 1992, Government of India introduced a decentralisation policy- *Panchayati Raj*, through the constitution of 73rd Amendment Act. It formally recognised the third-tier of government at sub-State level that facilitated legal conditions for (traditional) local self-rule and aimed to empower local communities. Five years later, in 1996, Provision of Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areasⁱⁱⁱ (PESA) was passed to include fifth scheduled areas and tribal region. PESA gave an explicit right to the tribal communities in management of commons and the right to preserve their identity and culture. It approved greater power in decision-making process in a participatory manner through the institutions of *gram sabha i.e.* village committee (Pal, 2000).

ⁱⁱⁱAccording to the Fifth Schedule of Constitution of India, those areas where the tribal populations are predominant are considered as Scheduled Areas.

This paper reviews the impact of PESA at village level particularly on women and Bhils tribes (Scheduled Tribe)^{iv} in neighbouring three tribal districts of Gujarat (Dahod), Rajasthan (Banswara) and Madhya Pradesh (Jhabua) state of western India. The paper aims to understand the complexities of decentralisation at local government vis-à-vis village committees (commonly known as user groups) by comparing inter-state local governance strategies and policies. Analysis of this study is based on findings from two phases of field work. In 1999-2000, the first phase of the study was conducted. Findings indicate diverse interest level of stakeholder(s), and their high positive expectations on democratic pro-poor local governance outcomes in context of livelihoods and sustainable management of common resources. In 2005, five years after the introduction of tribal decentralisation (PESA) bill by central government, I revisited the tribal districts. Main focus of the second phase of the study was to assess what worked and what did not, and to trace underlying factors that influenced the change in livelihood and poverty alleviation issues of tribal, and their attempt to manage common resources.

Below section of this paper provides basic background information on India's Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme, national Watershed Development Programme (WDP), and Provision for Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA). This is followed by a synthesis of three cases presented with before and after scenarios of how decentralisation in tribal communities evolved institutionally, socially, environmentally, and politically at local governance level. The following section forms the core of the paper and I attempt to address three crucial questions- (i) Are administrative, financial and political powers of (73rd Amendments) *Panchayats* closely knit with the other 'recognized' local forest and watershed committees and district level communities- *Zilla Parishads* (ZPs)?, (ii) what were underlying factors associated with successful implementation in one Indian state as against challenges in other neighbouring state?, and (iii) has there been learning of decentralization formal or informally, and management of commons through knowledge sharing among these tribal districts, between states, and (if any) at regional level (in Asia) or internationally? Based on the results, I conclude with some of the impact stories and lessons learnt in management of commons through tribal governance.

(JOINT) FOREST MANAGEMENT IN INDIA

The National Forest Policy of 1988 identified the importance of local community to a relatively larger extent (MoEF, 1988). The broader interests of people's participation were determined by June 1, 1990 circular of the Government of India (GoI, 1990). National Joint Forest Management (JFM) Resolution was adopted that set guidelines for partnerships between local communities and the state Forest Departments for the protection and management of state-owned forest resources through forest protection committees. JFM was launched as a program and implemented according to respective State Government Resolutions. JFM resolution approved that local people can do protection of the (mostly degraded) forestland and derive appropriate (as per respective state government rules) benefits from the forests. The institutional structure of JFM Committees consists of a general body with representation of all households, and an executive body with representation of

^{iv} Bhils are the third largest scheduled tribe in India, and majority inhabit in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra. Scheduled tribe (ST) is an administrative term defined in Article 366 of the Constitution of India to mean such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are notified under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes in a particular state.

elected members having minimum of 33% reservation seats for women and other disadvantaged groups.

The Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF) initiated JFM Monitoring Cell to provide a common platform for stakeholders to share and learn. In 2000, according to JFM Cell, 10.24 million hectares of forest was being managed through 36,130 JFM committees in 22 States. By 2003, JFM had spread to 27 States (Ford Foundation, 2003: 46-47) with more than 63,600 village committees. Recent estimation is that around 20 million hectares of forestland are being managed by some 90,000 JFM committees covering almost all states in India (IIFM, 2006). The increase in number of JFM committees could mean a positive trend towards decentralised community managed forest practices. Although it remains to be seen how much of that total decentralised forest is effectively protected, and if it has improved livelihood of poor disadvantaged groups.

Under the JFM programme, the multiple stakeholder partnership was based on the objectives that responsibilities and revenues will be jointly managed and shared between communities and Forest Department, and within the communities. Policies related to sharing of forest resources such as timber and non-timber forest products, legalisation of the (self-initiated) village forest institutions, and administrative and financial status among other aspects differed according to each State Government JFM Resolutions, Circulars and Amendments. Benefit-sharing within the JFM committees have in most cases been left to the decision and authority of the committee itself.

In addition to respective State Government Regulations (GRs), almost a decade after the first guidelines of 1990 Ministry of Environment and Forestry (MoEF), GOI- the Forest Protection Division issued another notification dated 21st February 2000. This central government circular focussed on various aspects of legalisation and benefit sharing of resources by JFM committees, which otherwise was unclear in the earlier GR. Key points raised by the JFM guidelines includes: (a) registration of village forest institutions under the Societies Registration Act, (b) participation of women in JFM, (c) extension of JFM in good forests, (d) preparation of microplans in JFM areas, (e) recognition of self-initiated groups, and (f) contribution for regeneration of resources by the village forest committees (MoEF, 2000). This guideline was a crucial step towards empowering the JFM committees, but it had some limitations. First, it lacked clarity on role of *panchayats* in the JFM programme. Second, guideline suggested allocation of 33% and 50% reservation quota for executive and general body of JFM committees respectively. The criticism regarding quota was that it failed to ensure appropriate support for empowering the women in decision making process. Third, guideline did not specify the role, responsibilities and power of Forest Department and the JFM committees in protection and management of forests.

Two years later, based on the feedback received, MoEF incorporated some of the suggestions and passed a modified circular no 22-8/2000-JFM (FPD) dated 24th December, 2002. This version mentions that: (a) memorandum of understanding to be signed between Forest Department and JFM committees; (b) maintaining a balanced relationship between JFM committees and *panchayats*. The guideline suggests that the unique and separate non-political identity of the JFM Committees as 'guardian of forests' should be maintained and ensured. The benefits accrued from NTFP sales should be shared with all the members of the *gram sabha* including the JFM committees; and lastly (c) capacity building for the management of non-timber forest products (MoEF, 2002). Despite implementation of revised

versions of JFM GRs and circulars, uptake at the state, district and village (*panchayat*) level has remained vague and unclear.

THE NATIONAL WATERSHED GUIDELINES

In 1994 the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) of the GoI produced guidelines for implementing watershed programmes (GoI, 1994). The Watershed Development Programme (WDP) was implemented in drought prone/ desert/ non-forest wasteland areas for development of watersheds of 500 hectares in every village in a phased manner. This was an important government policy based on success stories of various NGOs and government projects. Main aim was to promote participatory approach working through different common interest stakeholder groups in a bottom-up planning approach. The objectives of Guidelines of each watershed project are to promote economic development of the village, the restoration of ecological balance, and to improve the economic and social condition of the resource-poor and the disadvantaged sections of the Watershed Community. In each state, the watershed development programme was implemented by different Departments of Ministry, but with a common approach set by the MoRD 1994 Guidelines. The Watershed Association constitutes local people (who are directly or indirectly involved) that elects a watershed committee.

Like JFM, WDP has several challenges. First, it lacks clarity on partnership between PRI and watershed committee. The Guidelines mentions that *panchayat* could be a project implementing agency (PIA) if the watershed area is demarcated within geographical boundaries of village *panchayat*. It further suggests that the *Zilla Parishad* (ZPs) may have an overall responsibility for programme planning and implementation. The Guidelines does not specify any concrete roles and responsibilities of *panchayats* other than mentioning *gram sabha* members should be involved in the watershed committee. Till date, there remains no strategy of how PIAs could play an active supportive role in implementing the WDP. Second, implementation of WDP created barriers for poor and disadvantage groups (particularly women and landless) in accessing the resources such as fuel wood and fodder. This could be because the watershed programme has altered access to Common Pool Resources (CPRs) such as village common lands, forests and water resources through the creation of, for example, tree plantations in these areas (Seeley. *et al.*, 2000:5). This problem is particularly acute where there are limited areas of CPRs and where the community is highly stratified (*ibid.*, pg.5).

Some state guidelines incorporated these issues as new second phase 'Watershed Plus' programme. The watershed plus concept was coined following a national level workshop on pre and post watersheds guideline in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh. It was considered as a step forward to include wider value-added activities such as minor irrigation work, the provision of drinking water and sanitation, crop management, horticulture, animal husbandry among others. This integrated participatory watershed plus aimed to focus specific needs of disadvantaged section of community.

TRIBAL PANCHAYAT POLICY

The local government- *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs) is considered as people's institutions at village and district level as well as its close association to the State. In 1993, this became reality with the introduction of 73rd Constitutional Amendment that made

Panchayati Raj a statutory body of Indian governance. PR is a three-tier system of democratic self-government. *Gram Panchayat* (henceforth will be referred as *panchayat*) is the first level of the elected body that may include population size of 5,000 and/or it may constitute more than one village. *Gram Sabha* forms the base of the three-tier consisting of all eligible members of electoral roles within the *panchayat* i.e. village level, and *Zilla Parishad* (ZP) at district level.

The provision of 73rd Amendment included various stipulations such as: local level (at district, sub-district, and village) representative election; one-third of all seats shall be reserved for women; recognising status of *gram sabha* as formal body in maintaining accountability and transparency (of *gram panchayat*); reservation for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) proportional to their population.

This Constitutional Amendment, however, excluded the scheduled areas (*scheduled areas are not governed by general policy/ law unless Governor considers it to be applicable in the area*). However, it provided a clause (Article 243(4-b)) that parliament, by law, could extend the provision of this act to the Scheduled Areas. Government of India appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Dileep Singh Bhuria in June 1994. After five years, on December 1996, based on recommendations of the committee, The Provisions of Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996, No 40 was passed. This Act was to provide for the extension of the provisions of part IX of the Constitution relating to the Panchayats to the Scheduled Areas with an aim to implement tribal self rule/ decentralisation in India.

The Provisions of Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) was an attempt to devolve legislative power to *panchayats* and provide *gram sabha* authority and power to manage resources, resolve conflict, control all functionaries and institutions of all social sectors, control all minor water bodies, minor minerals and non-timber forest resources, and administer village development without contradicting the existing village (tribal) customary law and traditions. This tribal self-rule decentralisation policy promised to fundamentally change the role of local governance by improving livelihood of poor disadvantaged tribal community.

Provisions of PESA depended on amendments by scheduled state governments for its implementation at village level. The Act extended *panchayats* to the tribal areas of eight such States namely Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan (MoTA, 1996). Respective State Governments passed the laws, but not totally in agreement with the central law. Implementation of the central law faced challenge as almost all powers including financial allocations to undertake activities such as health facilities, infrastructure, water and sanitation, and local schools have been made subject to rules, further circulars/orders, and availability of funds by the State Governments. Under JFM programme, *panchayats* has not been directly involved either in the executive committee, or in the decision-making process. Hence, by providing legal institutional rights and support to the tribal village *panchayats* it is expected to strengthen the communities to participate in local governance including forest management.

In 2005, while conducting the second phase of this study, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs had invited the public and other stakeholders to provide suggestions on the draft Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill no 17014/4/-S&M (MoTA, 2005). The primary objective of this Bill is to undo the historical injustice by recognising and vesting the forest rights and occupation of forest land to forest dwelling schedule tribes (FDSTs) who have

been residing there for generations and who are integral to the very survival and sustainability of the forest eco-system, including wildlife, but whose rights could not be recorded. Briefly, the main features of the Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill, 2005 includes clause related to: (i) rights of forest dwelling tribes, (ii) duties of forest rights holders, (iii) the authority, (iv) offences under the Act, and (v) nodal agency for implementation of the Act.

This progressive looking draft Bill has an aim to deal with ST issues such as non-recognition of ST rights during the process of consolidation of forests; permanent threat of eviction from their own land; non-conferment of ownership rights over MFP in terms of provision of PESA, 1996; more of checks and balances. Like other guidelines, this Bill too has faced criticism particularly by MoEF on issues such as exclusion of non-tribal forest dwelling communities; debate over conservation versus local rights; and authorising *gram sabhas* for decision-making. Despite some of its short-fall, if this Bill is passed, it could make landmark change in democratising the forest management system and by recognising the tribal rights.

TRIBAL SELF-RULE OF WESTERN INDIA

In this study, the semi-arid tribal contiguous districts of western India include three Scheduled States i.e. Banswara district of Rajasthan, Jhabua from Madhya Pradesh and Dahod district of Gujarat. I considered this tribal-belt as a case-study for several unique characteristics, but importantly because:

- *First, socio-cultural similarity for management of commons in the tribal region.*

The study area covers adjoining districts of the three States with different policies in a similar geo-physical environment, socio-cultural and economic situation. The inhabitants of this region are indigenous village communities- *Bhil* tribe, who live in scattered partly kinship base *falias* (hamlets) and is patriarchal community. *Bhil* tribe form the third largest indigenous communities in India, and highest population in the study area. Average land holding by *Bhils* is two acres (less than one hectare) of land, and the community is considered to be below poverty line.

Local economy and livelihood of the community is agriculture based with some involved in livestock rearing, horticulture, and occasional (seasonal) migration to urban areas for unskilled labour work. Fodder for livestock mainly comes from forestland and *gauchar* (revenue) land and partially from crop residue. The *gauchar* land is traditionally managed by the village communities. Non-timber forest products provide supplementary income to their livelihood, and often act as a safety net during drought. Several traditional forest protection committees existed in this region; some of them were recognised by the Forest Department under JFM programme.

Topographically, region is hilly undulating with elevation comprising of mountains, plateau, and major rivers flowing from this region – *Anas* and *Mahi* Rivers. They form an important watershed protection in this otherwise drought stricken region. The soil type in this semi-arid region is generally black cotton soil, sandy clay loam with moderately organic fertile soil and more of stony land. Annual rain fall is of approximately 750mm, and the bulk of precipitation occurs in monsoon from August to September.

Forest type in this region have a biotic and climatic potential for dry deciduous forest production, dominated by *Tectona grandis* (Teak), *Shorea robusta* (Sal), *Buteamonosperma*

(Palash), *Maduca longifolia* (Mahua), *Gmelian arorea* (Sevan), *Azardica Indica* (Neem), and *Diospyros mesamoxylon* (Timru) among other species. Forests and teak forest in particular, constitute a main natural resource in this region that is highly prone to degradation, if over-used. However, it is also easily regenerated through protection (coppicing), and/or plantation. Eucalyptus plantations are commonly found in the forest-land. In this region where deforestation has occurred, most of the forestland is barren degraded with 70% topsoil erosion, while in some parts grass is covered with few patches of natural rootstock of teak.

It is this kind of ‘degraded’ forestland that becomes applicable under JFM for protection and management by (poor tribal) communities. Such similarities will help the study to determine the linkages between administrative, financial and political powers of village *panchayats* vis-à-vis village water and forest committees.

▪ *Second, existing diversity for adopting decentralisation to manage commons.*

Diversity in this tribal district from an external perspective would mean lack of coordination between local community and the relevant departments managing resources. The major factors determining regional diversity in managing commons are neither the conflicting interests between government and village communities, and/or within village nor inter-village differences. Rather, it is depended on institutions (at local, state, and national policy level) that have rights to access and manage commons, rights to devolve authority and power, and rights to enforce and monitor *panchayats*. There is a striking difference in policy adaptation and implementing decentralisation within the neighbouring districts, which makes diversity within level of people’s participation in local governance to manage commons. This diversity will help the study in determining role of external factors on institutions that facilitate to develop successful strategies in some village as against other neighbouring village.

▪ *Third, common goal in this region is to alleviate poverty among vulnerable (women and tribal) households by recognition of indigenous knowledge and rights.*

Most of the villages in this tribal-region have been managing natural resources for centuries. They practice traditional knowledge and laws that determines use and management of commons. This traditional (tacit) local knowledge is not static and changes into *new* knowledge each time with an intervention in policy, knowledge exchange, conflict resolution, globalisation and development. Thus, knowledge development creates an impact on social awareness and livelihood issues, and indirectly has an effect on the conservation and sustainable use of resources among (tribal and disadvantaged) communities. For example, a tribal women *panchayat* leader from one village could play pivotal role in empowering women from neighbouring tribal villages/ districts. The self-initiated local groups managing commons continued to exist in some districts due to its effective method in conflict resolution. Such groups are not based on legal forest or land boundaries, but on the basis of traditional best pro-poor practices benefiting the communities and natural resources.

Can traditional practices of *Bhils* in managing commons survive together along with the development of globalisation (in agriculture, irrigation technology, forest management) and the centralised JFM, WDP and/or PESA policy? It is this lesser known issue that makes it ideal to consider tribal-region as a case for this study.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in two phases. In 2000, during the first phase, desktop review of national and state level policies related to decentralisation and forest was analysed. Informal interviews and group discussion were held with 12 JFM committees, members of 9 watershed committees (includes executive committees and general body), and meetings with elected women representatives of 8 self-help groups (SHGs). Discussion with newly-elected four *gram panchayats* was organised along with independent discussions with Forest Department officials (includes forest guards, and forest officers at range, district, and state level); meetings were held with network and advocacy groups, and non-governmental organisations working in the tribal villages of three contiguous districts of three States. In addition, household survey was conducted in total of about 357 tribal households from Scheduled Areas. In 2005, second phase of field work was conducted to assess impact of local governance policy on livelihood of poor tribal in the study area. Findings from phase one was used as baseline criteria.

Multiple-tools used for data collection were analysing policies on paper (i.e. documents), questionnaires, interviews and mini-workshops, policy strategy analysis (to trace and analyse the strategies used by actors to influence policy), time-line, and policy analysis matrix. Assessing the effectiveness of the policies was based on changes in context of time i.e. before and after situation; and in some cases the space i.e. with and without scenarios. Main criteria used were social, institutional and livelihood factors. One of the study challenges was the time lag between introduction of PESA and its implementation at the local level to track the outcomes.

I. JHABUA, MADHYA PRADESH

Jhabua is located in westernmost district of Madhya Pradesh state in Central India. It borders state of Gujarat to the south and west. According to 2001 census, Jhabua district had a population of about 1,396,677 about 85% of them scheduled tribe population; majority of whom are *Bhil* tribe inhabited the interior hilly areas of the district. The total literacy rate is 36.87% with female literacy of only 4 percent. Jhabua is one of the most backward districts of the state, without much forest cover and have about 47% of population below poverty-line (Census, 2001).

In 1995, Rajiv Gandhi Mission on Watershed Development (RGMWD) was started in this region. Soon after this initiative, watershed committees were formed based on National Guidelines of India, and registered under District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), Jhabua. Participatory techniques involving all stakeholders including women and tribal was used in combination with remote sensing maps to develop action plan for every integrated micro-watershed. Jhabua was one of the pioneering districts for initiating women's thrift and credit Self-Help Groups (SHGs) locally known as *baira-ni-kuldis*^v initiated through *Rashtriya Mahila Kosh* national scheme. Stakeholders of the watershed committees included SHGs, user-groups and representatives from *gram panchayats*, and the project implementing agency- District Forest Office.

^v SHGs/ *baira-ni-kuldis* are involved in saving and thrift activities, often associated with local women's bank cooperatives.

Forest department actively implemented ridge to valley soil and moisture conservation activities. During the same period, JFM programme was promoted under Madhya Pradesh Forestry Project and approximately 75,000 hectares of degraded forest land was taken up through village forest protection committees (FPCs) (Jhabua FD report, 1998). By 2000, forests were regenerating with the support of the FPCs, and fodder production was shared as revenue among committee members. In addition, committee members benefited from minor forest produce such as *tendu patta*^{vi}, which supplemented their income from agriculture and livestock activities. This was true for majority of poor tribal households surveyed.

Initial findings (household survey conducted in 2000) from tribal villages showed that 72% were confident that SHGs and elected women's representative at *panchayat* would help the disadvantaged group to demand their basic rights from district offices. About two-third of households surveyed completely agreed that devolution process will further enhance on-going developmental activities through watershed and JFM programmes. More than half of this tribal communities mentioned that *panchayats* along with FPCs, SHGs, and watershed committees among other stakeholders will collaborate and function effectively. Less than 20% of the officials interviewed (district officials from forest department, rural development agency, district development offices) were optimistic about functioning of *panchayat* in the tribal villages.

In 2000, almost five years after the passage of the PESA, the district development office had still not completely devolved the power and authority of managing forests (and CPRs) to the *panchayat*. According to the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO), major reason for the delay was unclear roles and responsibilities of *panchayat* and revenue sharing policy. The Officer believed that until village *panchayat* were thoroughly empowered, it was impossible to disburse fund and allocate project activities such as watershed by the district office.

Despite this, the local government had democratic election that helped to elect women and tribal representative in the village *panchayat*. Exposure visit, meetings, training for women and tribal executive committees were organised by the government on various developmental, technical, and institutional issues. However, FPCs and watershed executive committees were more powerful and financially independent in decision-making process. The local government in most cases constituted groups of four-five scattered villages; while committees such as SHGs, FPCs are formed of *falias* (hamlets) of one or more village *panchayat*. This implies that the village *panchayat* and *gram sabha* will support the existing forest and watershed user groups rather than implement the activities of user groups. Since practically all the developmental activities of village come under *panchayat*, revenue sharing among committees and local governance have been one of the major issues of conflict. As per PESA, *panchayat* are given rights over minor forest produce, which contradict with the rights of FPCs.

Consecutive two years of drought in 2001 and 2002 and low rainfall in subsequent year made most of tribal to migrate to neighbouring cities for daily wage. Agriculture failure, increased debts, termination of watershed mission funding, and no support from *panchayat* were main factors for breakdown of forest protection committees in this tribal district. During this period, about 45% of the SHGs discontinued their monthly saving and credit activities, as number of defaulters increased due to lack of income. The village elite (in most cases non

^{vi} *Tendu patta*, leaves of *Diospyros melonoxylon*, which is commonly found in this dry deciduous forest region are used for bidi wrapping. Madhya Pradesh is one of the leading producers of *tendu patta* in India.

STs) benefited from the village drought-relief funds, according to response of more than half of tribal households surveyed. In contrast, most of the poor households in villages were charged by officials and levied fine for illegal cattle grazing. Due to fodder scarcity, most of the poor households had to let their cattle graze in the JFM forest land. This incident led to conflict between officials and among FPCs.

Jhabua district popular for its pro-poor watershed and forest protection committees was finding difficult to maintain people's participation. Influence of political parties for vote bank by regularising 'illegal' encroachment became an issue of debate in this region. Revenue sharing from the regenerated forests, according to two-thirds of the interviewee from FPCs was satisfied by distribution. However, village *panchayat* executive committee members protested against the FPCs receiving the benefits. *Panchayat*, in some instance, has taken a somewhat ambiguous position in such conflicting situations^{vii}. On one hand, *panchayat* represents tribal majority from the village and actively collaborate with FPCs and watershed committees in the management of commons. While on the other hand, *panchayats* openly disagree with FPC's institutional policies and rights to resource sharing (like minor forest produce).

II. BANSWARA, RAJASTHAN

Banswara district is located in the southern most state of Rajasthan. It is bounded by Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh on south, and Dahod district of Gujarat on south-west of the district. According to 2001 census, the total population is about 1,500,420 and predominantly inhabited by tribal like *Bhils*, *Bhil Menas*, and *Charpotas* among other communities (Census, 2001). Almost half of the population live in the villages. Many of these people depend on minor forest produce such as *tendu patta*, *mahua* flowers, gum, and fodder for their livelihoods. The average agricultural land holding per household is below one hectare. Like Jhabua, most of the forest land is degraded and without trees.

Study area of Bagidora range had *van suraksha prabhand samitis* or village forest protection and management committees-VFPMCs established under Aravalli Afforestation project^{viii} in the *panchayat* villages since 1992. In 2000, VFPMCs in the tribal villages were already receiving preliminary benefits from bamboo plantations (plantations done under scheme-Rehabilitation of Degraded Forests and Reforestation of Barren Hills), which later helped to strengthen the tribal communities in protection and management of forest under JFM programme. The project was also initiated with an aim to provide employment to rural and tribal population thereby improving their livelihood.

Preliminary study result indicates that almost all tribal household interviewed from Banswara (in *Zhalakiya*, *Kumbhpura*, and *Zer villages*) were actively involved in JFM programme. The VFPMCs, in most cases received agreement letter from the forest department to protect the degraded forest land. Fodder generated from the revenue and protected forest land provided financial support for functioning of VFPMCs. In early 2004, the 73rd Amendment was implemented, but most of the clause related to tribal self-rule (PESA) was left to the decision

^{vii} Most of the information in this section comes from interviews, and meetings with local FPCs, panchayats and other stakeholders.

^{viii} Aravalli Afforestation Project in Rajasthan supported by OCEF-Japanese Government was taken up with objectives of conserving soil and moisture conservation, checking desertification, and for conservation of biodiversity of flora and fauna.

of the state government. To represent in the *panchayats*, villagers in Banswara were depended on increased reservation quota (from 15 to 21%) for other backward classes. This is unlike the case of Jhabua.

The recent amendment by Rajasthan State (issued in October 2000) assured one seat reserved for women in the executive committee. This post could be either of a chairperson and/or a secretary. About 72% of the survey respondents were of the opinion that at village local governance fulfilling such quota was impossible, esp. from tribal community. Most of the women elected as chairperson for the village *panchayat* belonged to an elite political group i.e. non ST/ SC groups. Majority of respondents from the *gram sabha* and VFPMCs did not consider this change in local governance legislation as a crucial step. The elected women leaders are often given a back-seat. Findings from an informal interview conducted with the two village executive committee suggest that the functioning of local governance by an elected women representative is managed and controlled by her family i.e. male relatives.

During the severe drought period (2000-2001), programmes such as *Swarnajayanti Grameen Rozgar Yojana* (SGRY) and Food for Work Programme (FWP) provided employment and food grains security. It supported in identifying ground water resources, installation of hand-pumps for immediate water supply, soil and moisture conservation, and traditional water harvesting structures to mitigate drought as long-term measure. These activities were implemented through the VFPMCs involving poor households and generated employment in the villages. The Drought Prone Areas Programme (DPAP) scheme was implemented through *panchayats* during this period. However, 77% of the respondents said that only one-fourth of the funds were utilised for the objectives of the schemes, and remaining amount was misused. The study result by Mahapatra (cited in Nayak et al, 2002:44) explains that officials in the state government of Rajasthan estimate minimum 30-40% of the money released never reached the people, which further corroborate with this study.

In 2000, with the completion of Aravalli Afforestation Project, the VFPMCs and other self-initiated forest protection committees had to re-register under Society's Registration Act for protecting community forest and water resources. The decision by department for renewal of VFPMC's registration under new Government Regulations (GR) faced criticism from tribal village communities. It took six years for the communities to protect the degraded forest and regenerate tree species such as teak and bamboo in the forest areas. Tribal communities considered re-registration process as threat to lose the regenerated forest land, which was no longer fall under category of degraded forest. With re-registering under separate Act, the government officials may not consider the past efforts of the communities thereby allocating another degraded forest area for protection. This issue was solved with the intervention of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and advocacy groups. The committees were given rights to re-register with the same forest land that they had protected under community forest management programme.

As mentioned earlier, the Rajasthan Government has been slow in implementing the PESA. In 2003, government circulars were passed for making the PESA operational. Study findings (in 2005) indicate that 42% of respondents were unaware of state government circulars related to PESA. While majority, i.e. 58% of respondents mainly belonging to village *panchayat* and forest protection committees were aware of such circular due to an awareness campaign led by local non-governmental organisation. They were aware about its success in some villages of neighbouring Jhabua district, and considered PESA could be effective for democratic decentralisation at village *panchayat*.

At present, all the three JFM committees studied have tribal chairperson and/or secretary in the executive committee. This is in contrast to the situation when JFM programme was implemented in this region, no tribal represented in the executive committee. About one-fourth of the respondents representing executive body of JFM expressed their interest to contest for next *panchayat* election even if the seat were not reserved under ST quotas. This strategy, according to respondents, will enable them to break the traditional monopoly of the elite groups. Findings suggest that *panchayats*, which have political influence, are mostly dominated by non-tribal communities or *settlers* in this region. Major political parties often strategically support *gram panchayat* elections with a promise to implement government schemes such as MPLADS (Members of Parliament Local Development Scheme).

In Banswara, local NGOs has invested most of their time on knowledge sharing activities; disseminating information and creating awareness about PESA; resolving conflicts related to communities' forest management issues; training women and tribal leaders; and coordinating with government officials for policy advocacy related to PESA and forests. Survey result shows that increased awareness among tribal communities led to unbiased pro-poor benefit sharing from minor forest produce. Little or no overlapping rule between *panchayats* and user groups (such as JFM and watershed) is considered to be positive factor for minimal internal conflicts within villages to manage commons.

III. DAHOD, GUJARAT

In 1997, historically renowned Dahod^{ix} was designated as a district, and was formerly part of Panchmahal district. The tribal-dominated district of Dahod has highest number of *Bhil* population, only next to Dangs district. As the name suggests, Dahod shares border to the west with two Indian States: Madhya Pradesh (Jhabua) and Rajasthan (Banswara). Total population is 1,635,374 (Census, 2001) and 71% of them are tribal community living near hilly and forest terrain. *Bhil* tribe constitute the majority of the local rural/tribal population. Their livelihoods largely depend on small-scale agriculture, minor forest produce collection from forest lands, seasonal migration for labour work, and livestock rearing. Socio-economically they have similar characteristic like that of Jhabua and Banswara districts.

Dahod district has about 25% of its total land under Forest Department, which is approximately 130,000 hectares of forest land. This is sizeable area and to large extent an important source of livelihood for tribal household in this district. It is estimated that in hilly region, about 40% privately owned land are appropriate for forestry plantation. Appropriate land-use planning in this otherwise degraded region would help in poverty alleviation and improve tribal developmental activities.

In Jhalod taluka, Kheda, Rajudia and others tribal villages had many self-initiated forest management committees. In 1994 when JFM programme came into effect their legal status was questioned. Traditionally, the *Bhils* along with all the stakeholders (for e.g. nomad tribe, hamlets of neighbouring villages located close to forestland, women etc) protected and managed the forest-land. Fuel-wood and fodder was right of every women belonging near the protected forest area. In 2000, some of these groups continued to protect and manage their forests, revenue land and water resources, as per their traditional customary laws. They

^{ix} Dahod (commonly known as *Dohad*: means borders of two states) is a birthplace of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb.

received little or no financial, technical assistance and/or legal recognition from the State Government.

By 2005, survey results indicate that almost two-thirds of this self-initiated resource management committees were registered as JFM committees. These groups were re-organised according to the convenience of the forest department's forest and village boundaries. Thus, the tribal customary resource management practice was abandoned in many cases due to policy and institutional reasons. First, forest department demarcated forest-land boundary as per village *panchayat* jurisdiction. This was contradictory to the tribal traditional management policy, which were need based and/or social closeness of households to the forest-land. New system led to isolation of some of the hamlets who traditionally managed the forests. Second, department imposed regulation by providing permission to only those households registered as JFM committees to protect forests. Third reason, as per JFM norms collecting, sharing and marketing of minor forest produce were applicable only for registered household members of the JFM committee.

In Dahod, restructuring of self-initiated groups with the new progressive JFM programme became an issue of conflict in some of the tribal villages between the local groups and district forest department. Under the Central Government JFM Circular (MoEF, 2000), *self-initiated groups need to be identified, recognised and registered as JFM committees after proper verification of records... the groups should be suitably assessed before giving them rights to derive benefits under JFM* (Pal, 2000).

Informal meetings with the newly formed JFM committees showed that 66% of the members were dissatisfied with the restructuring of their self-initiated groups. It also indicated that during restructuring phase there was substantial increase in number of illegal logging, theft of minor forest produce, and conflict for fodder distribution. According to the JFM executive members, main reason was directly related to exclusion of some of the *falias/* hamlets from neighbouring villages. This excluded group of hamlets were depended on forest resources for livelihood. They resisted the new institutional arrangement proposed through JFM programme by indulging in activities such as illegally logging the regenerated forests that were previously protected by them. Internal conflicts between hamlets of *group-gram panchayat* (i.e. two-three villages under jurisdiction of one *panchayat*) were ultimately resolved. Forest department reconsidered their decision and included all stakeholders who were part of traditional self initiated JFM and watershed committees irrespective of the village forest boundaries.

Another issue of debate raised by the district forest officials were regarding inclusion or exclusion of fodder as a minor forest produce. One of the immediate outcomes from protection of degraded land was surplus production of fodder. Most JFM committees shared the profits from fodder collection equally among all members. In some cases excess production was sold in market by the committee. In 2001, Gujarat government declared as a drought year. Due to scarcity of fodder, forest officials restricted the committees from harvesting the fodder by declaring it as reserved grassland area. This became a matter of major conflict between government departments and JFM committees in Dahod. Fodder production from this district has been considered as an important source of revenue for the rural district department. JFM communities disagreed with the government rule to part away with the fodder production, and were successful to receive their rights of benefit-sharing. On average, 78% of household surveyed said that both employments generated (as daily wage

labourer) from fodder collection, and fodder received as benefit sharing are important source of income for their livelihood.

Dispute between government officials and village committees has been on rise, but they do collaborate and share common platform on various issues. Some of the activities conducted in partnership are participating in the micro planning of the forests and watershed, for example planning the soil and moisture conservation, jointly identifying location of constructing water harvesting structure, plantations in village common land (revenue), benefit sharing and marketing of non-timber forest products, joint patrolling of forests, training women for nursery raising, and employment generation activities.

With the implementation of PESA, scheduled areas had democratic election in the village *panchayat*. This resulted in several tribal men and women representatives elected for executive committee of *panchayats*. According to survey result (survey conducted in 2000), 69% of respondents were optimistic on role of elected representatives in village *panchayat*. In majority cases, transfer of power and authority has happened from district government level to the *panchayats*, but without much financial support for the village developmental activities. Elite groups (economically and politically dominant, mostly non-tribal) within village had little control over the executive committee of the tribal *panchayats*. In some village *panchayats*, elite groups were excluded from the decision-making process. Success stories of self-help groups and watershed management in neighbouring district of Jhabua has spread in most of the tribal villages in Dahod. Many SHGs were initiated in this district.

In 2005, SHGs jointly established rural women's co-operative banks in Dahod. Almost two-thirds of tribal women respondents agreed that formation of SHGs minimized their dependence on elite groups of money lender in the village. With government and NGO funding, SHG members received numerous leadership training (both in-house and external) that had indirect influence on their participation level at *panchayats* and JFM committees. About 61% of the respondents from SHGs started to actively participate in decision-making meetings in the general body, and at executive committee. According to elected or nominated women members of the local governance, financial independence helped to gain confidence to play an active role in management of natural resources. Many women began to actively implement horticulture and agro-forestry that helped to improve their livelihood. Majority of the *gram sabha* members mentioned that internal conflicts related to managing common resources decreased due to democratically elected representative of *panchayat* belonging to the majority group- *Bhils*.

MAIN FINDINGS: IMPACT ASSESSMENT

In this section, I briefly present comparative analysis between three districts and the decentralisation pro-poor policies from the perspective of (i) tribal communities managing natural resources (village forest protection committees, watershed management committees, SHGs etc), and (ii) local governance institution- *panchayats*. Five main factors are considered for the analysis i.e. social, political, livelihoods, environmental and knowledge sharing.

STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION: SOCIAL IMPACT

Stakeholder participation in management of common resources continues to be better in those villages where direct and indirect economic benefits are high.

In 2000, performance of village level community institutions were at peak. SHGs, watershed, and forest management committees were receiving financial aid through national programmes. Most of these programmes were slated for 4-5 years. During this period, there were high numbers of community activities such as committee meetings, leadership trainings, exposure field-trips, daily wage labour work among others. An outcome of this process was 69% of stakeholders attending meeting organised by the village committees. This figure dropped to 42% in 2005.

Main reason could be due to completion of government and withdrawal of external funded schemes. Watershed committees lacked the legal recognition; therefore, *panchayats* being the local village government was considered as best choice to do follow-up maintenance work. However, majority of *panchayats* in the study area lacked an in-depth understanding of technical operation, institutional functioning and capacity in maintaining social cohesiveness among stakeholders. Despite with the implementation of PESA in some states, people did not have complete confidence on *panchayat's* capacity to support the committees managing the natural resources. The change in the institutional arrangement proved challenging to sustain the functioning of the watershed committees. It also meant conflict due to diverse opinions and power imbalances between the actors.

PANCHAYAT POLITICS: POWER IMPACT

Finding from the study area shows that *panchayat* and/or *gram sabhas* is often dominated by elites (often non STs and SCs) from the villages. The tribal communities are under the influence of the local elite and have to adhere within the limits set by the *panchayats*. The *panchayats* have largely derived benefits from tribal development schemes (such as voluntary labour, income from minor forest produce, agricultural technologies etc). Some schemes have attempted to include representatives from the disadvantaged groups, but this was mostly limited to the entry point activities.

Power is reflected in, and reproduced by, the capacity to control and capture resources from different levels (Lebel *et al*, 2004). The power politics in *panchayats* as compared to JFM and watershed committees to great extent restricted the growth of collaboration and partnership in the study areas, thereby limiting one of the major goals i.e. democratic decentralisation of tribal self-rule in the village. JFM committees collectively make decision to include or exclude certain groups within a village to manage and/or use forests and water resources. Unlike *panchayats*, JFM and WDC tend to be flexible in deciding the user group, geographical and institutional boundaries.

The average percentage of tribal households that thought collaboration between local governance i.e. *panchayats* and village communities such as FPCs and WDCs will complement developmental activities decreased by 11% from 62% in 2000. Except in few tribal elected *panchayats*, such partnership building efforts proved expensive. In some instances, political groups formed alliances with newly elected tribal representative of local governance, breaking further the social cohesiveness within the tribal communities.

POVERTY ALLEVIATION: LIVELIHOODS IMPACT

The long-term sustainability of poor forest dependent tribal people's livelihood is fragile and depends on effective pro-poor policies. Rapidly changing political decisions, sometimes in favour of local traditional practices of managing common, while in other situation against

have direct implications on their livelihood. Where state has shown commitment to recognise tribal rights over forest and water resources, for example in Jhabua and to some extent in Dahod, it has proved strong incentive for these stakeholders to protect their resources. In some of these villages, NTFP marketing and benefit sharing rights were given to FPCs/WDCs. It helped locals to directly derive economic benefit by selling NTFPs to the Tribal Co-operative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED^x). To-date, it remains unclear what products tribal can extract and market as their legal rights.

Most of the local communities lack appropriate technological facilities such as storage, processing and packaging units and transportation of NTFPs at local level results in economic loss for local communities. As mentioned earlier, disadvantaged groups in this region are in-directly dependent on NTFP for sustenance. Though due to decentralisation, access to forest resources and benefits from watershed programmes have provided immediate incentives to the locals, but is insufficient to improve their livelihoods. As there is no long-term security over rights to harvest NTFPs or insurance for the damage caused due to natural calamity, tribal in this region continue to strive for survival.

MANAGING THE COMMONS: ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Overall, 89% of the respondents agree that sustainable management of watershed and forest has an important environmental role. After years of struggle, FDST have managed to regenerate forest in the degraded forest land. Today, the threat to CPRs is from within the community that is fast losing trust on the government policy reforms. The findings suggest that rate of illegal felling of timber increases when forest department imposes claim over revenue-sharing of NTFPs or when they overrule right to some of the minor forest produce.

There has been little attempt from the state to promote local traditional knowledge on richness of forests and biodiversity for medicinal and conservation purposes.

INFORMATION SHARING: KNOWLEDGE IMPACT

It is assumed that impact assessment of knowledge sharing and learning could help us identify gaps in policy and practice, and ways to overcome them. During the first phase of the study, local NGOs and advocacy groups of Dahod had initiated informal sharing of practices, policy information and new ideas through district level working groups (DLWGs). Since the contiguous scheduled districts have similar problems there was an attempt to introduce a common platform for cross-district level (of three states) sharing, but became impossible due to bureaucratic reasons. However, social informal network played an active role in raising awareness among local communities in Banswara to demand for similar DLWG in their district.

Obviously, forest and water related information sharing has been the primary role of external actors like NGOs and network institutions. With the passage of The Rights to Information Act, 2005 (by Ministry of Law and Justice, No. 22 of 15th June 2005) it is expected to provide opportunity for locals to access information such as on decentralisation and NRM.

^x To pay specific attention to the marketing requirements of tribal forest and agricultural produce, the Government of India set up the Tribal Co-operative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED) in 1987. The main objective of TRIFED is to serve needs of tribal by marketing NTFP and surplus agricultural product collected/ cultivated by tribal community.

IMPLICATIONS OF DECENTRALISATION:

Administrative and institutional context:

- Almost all amended 'effective' GRs and policies continue to assign more rights and responsibilities to the disadvantage groups such as tribal, women, landless, and others, but lacks to provide operational rights for livelihood security and incentives to manage commons.
- Various agencies (including government, NGOs, donors) implement forest, land, and water management programmes within a village by creating separate parallel identical local institutions for managing different resources without giving these (and user group) institutions legal status. It is assumed that multiple parallel institutions will provide financial opportunities and in long-run help to enhance collaboration among communities. Instead, immediate effect is it tends to create conflict and competition (for more funds) among local communities within a project implementation area.
- Quota for STs, SCs, and women and/or reservation of scheduled area merely ensures elected representative(s) at local governance. These seats are allotted by rotation to different constituencies, thus the elected representative from backward section gets term for five years to represent their community in *panchayat* with little chance for getting re-elected from general category in next term. Such newly elected groups face challenges in administrative, leadership and managerial skills due to social inequities and power imbalances. Most often, as in this case, the progressive policy fail to provide appropriate institutional mechanism to empower disadvantage groups, to build their capacity, and create an institutional learning process. Thus, it is important to recognise and commit important investments in learning/ training activities for long-term sustenance of tribal leadership.

Consistency in policy:

- The Central Government Guidelines have not been adopted and/or implemented appropriately by the States. Moreover, there is an emerging need to link all local, state and central governmental policies and programme that currently overlap or are contradictory. To illustrate, forthcoming Bill on *The Scheduled Tribes Recognition of Forest Rights* by MoTA is an attempt redress the rights of FDSTs that has not been fulfilled despite existing legislative/policy framework by MoEF (MoTA, 2005). Administratively, tribal *panchayats* do not fall under jurisdiction of Ministry of Environment and Forests, but rather to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. In contrast, all forest land is state owned and managed by Forest Departments of MoEF.
- People are losing trust on the local governance pro-poor policies and programmes. In most instances, even the most hyped programmes like JFM have failed to retain confidence among locals. In last two-three years, this distrust has increased due to the reluctance in delegating power, transfer of authority, slow implementation, and no financial support by the state and central government. For example, several guidelines and policies like PESA are basically designed to promote constitutional rights to STs, SCs and other disadvantaged communities. However, in practice such guidelines and policies are limited by offering the operational rights that are either revoked or are overruled before it gets implemented by new amendment GRs.
- For effective implementation of decentralisation, there is demand for monitoring and evaluation system to assess the role and interest of actors in pro-poor local governance. For example, actors having political motives may divert the tribal

development fund to gain majority vote or promise to provide permanent ownership to the immigrants in the tribal areas.

Benefits for tribal communities:

- The degraded forest land has very little benefit to motivate tribal community for community management of resources. However, this does not hinder the tribal communities in taking up challenge to regenerate forests by protecting the common resources.
- The decentralisation has proved its opportunities in places where complete transfer of power and authority were handed-over to tribal *panchayat*. This is evident in case of *panchayats* and *gram sabha* in Dahod villages having independent decision-making power vis-à-vis *panchayats* in Banswara villages that lacked authority and relevant information due to slow in adoption of central PESA bill in the state.
- Social networks have proved beneficial in local forest and water governance information sharing and exchange at inter-village (or districts) level and within a village. Information-gap between the local tribal community and other actors exist due to poor knowledge networks. With the passage of Rights to Information Bill (2005), it is expected local communities will have better access to information. NGOs and bilateral projects in the region have been proactively supporting awareness campaign on rights to information, particularly in Rajasthan.

Attitudinal change of decision-makers:

- There has been a gradual shift to adopt technically correct jargons and use of sensitive language by the local authority of the state in their interaction with actors. This could be considered as a positive indicator for their attitudinal change towards recognising decentralisation in scheduled areas. On ground, it meant mere lip-service as the state continues to hold all centralised power and operational rights to protect resources involving poor tribal communities.
- In some states, the district development department have shown flexibility in implementing GRs to accommodate needs of the tribal dependent on MFP. Most of these forests and watershed areas allocated had little revenue returns for the department.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, the three comparative cases show different outcomes of local governance in managing commons in contiguous tribal districts of western Indian states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat. Several external factors such as power imbalance between actors, geographical distance, skewed flow of information, political position of different institutions, status of the natural resources, and the cross-scale interaction has implications on determining the success or failure of decentralisation. It will be inappropriate to generalise from these cases, and may be too early to prove an in-depth impact of decentralisation on natural resources and on livelihoods of poor tribal. Nevertheless, some of the learning could be crucial in determining emerging need to bridge the gap between local governance (*panchayats*) and CBNRM institutions within India and cross-regionally.

To begin with the national issues, we first need to understand that in the scheduled areas of western India, decentralisation of local governance managing natural resources is changing

rapidly. During last decade, several central level ministries have issued pro-poor tribal and NRM policy frameworks. The process usually involves sharing and incorporating recommendations from multistakeholder debates and opinions on interpretation of policies. As the number of stakeholder involved in decision making process is increasing, the need for negotiation and compromise among actors also is becoming complex. Formulating good participatory policies does not end as good developmental practices. It is evident from the study that too many 'new' policies in short period have resulted in diluting the purpose thereby making it difficult to implement. Furthermore, the cases presented here indirectly help to pin-down the fact that decentralisation could be beneficial for this region if policies are centrally formulated. Central government till date play pivotal role in determining rights of STs and SCs in the Scheduled States. The consequences of tug-of-war between MoEF and MoTA in claiming authority over scheduled areas are faced by the poor tribal households. All this issues raise crucial question whether central government imposed rights for decentralisation will ever influence the state to lose its power of operational control.

Second, to understand why *panchayats* collectively manage natural resources together with user groups in some place and not at others we need to look at the community practice in the area and how this practice are perceived by the various actors. The case presented here illustrates that more the user groups are self-confident and economically independent, the better chances to collaborate and negotiate with the *panchayats* and forest (or other relevant) department in managing commons. And, that organised functional *gram sabhas* help to gain trust of all member of a village, including the FPCs/ WDCs.

Finally, summing up with this quote of a forest dwelling scheduled tribe women *sarpanch* (elected *panchayat* leader), “*centrally defined decentralise system of local CPR governance is of less concern rather it is historical tribal self-rule practices that matters to us.*”

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ACRONYMS

CBNRM	Community Based Natural Resource Management
CPR	Common Property Resource
DFO	Divisional Forest Office
DLWG	District Level Working Group
DPAP	Drought Prone Areas Programme
DRDA	District Rural Development Administration
FD	Forest Department
FDST	Forest Dwelling Scheduled Tribe
FPC	Forest Protection Committee
FWP	Food for Work Programme
GoI	Government of India
GP	Gram Panchayat
GR	Government Rule
JFM	Joint Forest Management
MFP	Minor Forest Produce
MoEF	Ministry of Environment and Forests
MoRD	Ministry of Rural Development
MoTA	Ministry of Tribal Affairs
MP	Madhya Pradesh
MPLADs	Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NTFP	Non-Timber Forest Product
PESA	Provision for Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas
PIA	Project Implementing Agency
PRI	Panchayati Raj Institutes
RMK	Rashtriya Mahila Kosh
SGRY	Swarnajayanti Grameen Rozgar Yojana
SHG	Self Help Group
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TRIFED	Tribal Co-operative Marketing Development Federation of India Ltd
VFPMC	Village Forest Protection and Management Committee
WDP	Watershed Development Programme
ZP	Zilla Parishad

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