

Decentralization of Natural Resource Governance—a case study from an Indian village

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Abstract:

The placement of natural resource governance with representative local government engages local people with local government. This is important given the magnitude of the dependence on natural resources in rural areas of the developing world. These environment-democracy linkages can be a source of strength for both environmental and democratic objectives.

Natural resource management is of interest to promoters of decentralization and local democracy, because they are a source of revenue and power, and offer potential legitimacy to new local government authorities. Decentralization is of great interest to environmentalists too because it reshapes the institutional infrastructure for future local natural resource management—potentially establishing institutions for sustainable and equitable community representation and inclusion. Whether, however, the transfer of natural resource powers within or into the local institutional landscape will promote or undermine representative, accountable and equitable processes depends on which authorities are being entrusted with powers of natural resource governance

In spite of the regulated use of the resources by community institutions, the degradation of natural resources has continued unabated. Conservation of large landscapes requires mechanisms to bring in equilibrium between the demand and supply within and among the communities in the larger socio-political setting. With the boundaries drawn at the village level and the custodial rights of the common lands vested with various departments of the state, it is difficult on the part of the communities to manage such resources. Therefore apart from the institutions at the village level, many of the discussions in recent times have focused on the need for Panchayat to play a vital role in the strengthening of these nested institutions at various levels to help conserve and protect the larger landscapes.

This paper studies aspects of collective governance over the natural resources of land, water and vegetation in the Chitamba Panchayat in Bhilwara District of Rajasthan. Over the years the efforts of village institutions in this Panchayat along with the Panchayat has resulted in the improvement in the biomass availability in the commons governed by the community, in stark comparison to the area not under community governance where degradation continues.

Key Words: *Decentralized Governance, Natural Resource, Common Property Resource, Panchayat, Village Institution, Communitarian Action, Hathai.*

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THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Decentralized natural resource governance

Decentralized governance, in a broad sense, means moving power away from the centre. There is a strong case for decentralization of Natural Resource governance. It would increase local influence on governance (improved accessibility and proximity with the governed). The volume and quantity of information—a critical factor in natural resource decision-making—would improve. There would be more opportunity for partnerships and better ability to target the poor. There would be faster learning of lessons, which come from different contexts and broader range of experiences (Carney, 2005).

There indeed are shortcomings of decentralized governance. To initiate decentralization itself may be difficult: the centre may not readily forfeit power, the units of governance may become scattered and artificially defined. The quality of governance could come down. There would be problems of coordination between the central authority and the decentralized units. Elite capture would be an increased risk.

Yet, decentralization is important for the sake of democratic principles. Specifically for natural resource, decentralization also holds promise because a community is likely to recognize the value of sustainable use of natural resource.

Decentralization in India

Indian thrust, which had largely been on centralized organs of government, changed in 1990s. Decentralization of natural resource governance has had three larger forms since. One form is the administrative: partnerships between user group and line department; examples are Joint Forest Management, watershed development etc. The other form is the political. This refers to the Panchayati Raj system, which was introduced after the 73rd amendment to the constitution in 1992. The amendment specifies a three-tier system of government though the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs): the Gram Panchayat (or simply, Panchayat) at the village level, a body at the block level, and another at the district level, usually called the Zila Parishad. The third form of decentralized natural resource governance is a 'bottom-up' one. Here, community level or civil society actors develop systems of community management of natural resources at the village-level on their own (Lele, 2004).

The Panchayats, as the 73rd amendment spells out, are highly devolved and have the advantage of statutory backing. However, they are severely limited by many factors. There is no clear demarcation of roles between the three levels of PRIs and few states initiated the devolution anyway (Pande, 2001). Fiscal decentralization has also not been implemented in entirety: there is little fiscal autonomy of taxation or expenditure with Panchayats. Panchayats remain dependent on governments and bureaucracy for fiscal resources. Panchayats are perceived by villagers to be ineffective, and without adequate resources. Their accountability and impartiality in decisions is seen as low. Representation for women and minorities has been politically mandated and this has increased participation. But proxy candidates or acrimony for a leader from weak section are not uncommon. Education and access to information are influential factors here (Pande, 2001).

Specifically for Common Property Resource (CPR), or commons, the Panchayat remains a weak institution. Commons become open access resource and are encroached and degraded. Panchayats tend to lack resources and administrative and political inaction hardly helps the case. With rise in pressures, claims over natural resources also increase. There is increased loss and decay of communitarian responsibility. In turn, sustainable mechanisms are lacking to even begin with (Annamalai, undated). Further, in case of resources such as forests, parallel bodies like the Joint Forest Management Committees create duplicity of function and undermine the Panchayat (Bose S, 2006).

In this paper we discuss the case from a village in Rajasthan. We discuss events that led to the successful devolution of authority by the Panchayat for governance of commons. This form of decentralization, which would be the third 'bottom-up' one in Lele's classification, went to successfully manage the common lands. We also attempt to discuss this case in light of the broad debate on decentralization of natural resource governance in India.

AREA CONTEXT AND ASSOCIATED ISSUES

Livelihood: Central Rajasthan is a semi arid region. Due to its topographic complexities the area has witnessed prolonged drought. With less and erratic rainfalls agriculture has limited itself with a tiny produce, only enough for subsistence. Animal husbandry has been much affected by degradation of common lands. The lush greenery of *Prosopis juliflora* has grown to create impressions of greenery, though it has minimal use either as firewood or fencing material. Migration for wage labour is high.

Degrading and unproductive Common Property Land Resources: The state government allotted common lands to villages commensurate to livestock populations in early parts of twentieth century. Animal husbandry has since re-emerged as a lucrative livelihood because of its traditional appeal and the decline of agriculture. Animal populations have risen and continued grazing pressure degrades the common lands quickly. Regeneration would be a slow process demanding isolation of the patch from any pressure—a comfort these villages clearly cannot afford. Encroachments on these lands are tremendous too. So, while dependence on common lands is high, especially for the marginal sections, the state of these lands is heavily degraded and contested.

Lack of Participation: Women in the area reinforce their role as producers in every sphere of production: on farms and non-farmlands, tending to livestock and children, fetching fuelwood, fodder, water, producing food, and household chores. However, their strategic needs are neglected.

Lack of leadership: There is a lack of leadership and this worsens intra-community conflicts. Meetings are often cacophonous and chaotic with several aspiring leaders, none with an exceptional clarity of thoughts or ability to hold audience with a sound rational stands. Institutions do not sustain when leadership is weak. Villagers tend to lose faith in overall committee when leadership is weak. This does irreparable damage to faith in institutions.

CASE OF THE VILLAGE

Location

Chitamba is situated in Bhilwara district; some 65 km northwest of the district headquarter. The village itself is 600 years old and was named after a sub-sect 'Chita' of the Gujjar caste, whose members were original inhabitants of this village. They were later joined by other castes like the Rajputs, Balais and Mahajans. It is a small village of 450 households divided into nine wards or administrative units of Mandal Block of Bhilwara District. Chitamba now comprises five hamlets: Sanjadi Ka Badia, Telion Ka Badia, Naga Ka Badia, Balaivas and Chitamba.

The fast depleting natural resources in the area posed a serious threat to agriculture and livelihood. This caught the attention of the community, who organized themselves and have shown exceptional perseverance and collective will in the past few years to arrest the degradation of natural resources.

Transformation: Restoring CPR through Community Governance

In early 1990s Mangra Mewar Vikas Sanstha, an organization working on regenerating natural resources, made an effort to develop patches of land to enhance fodder availability. The initial trust building exercises were important because of high apprehensions of encroachment and mistrust of an external agency. Later the village community with help of Mangra Mewar Vikas Sanstha developed 124 acres of land. A village level committee was formed to formulate rules and byelaws for operational management of the institution, resource use and protection. The focus was enhancing soil moisture and regeneration of existing rootstock. This is easier said than done because it needs strong community management, inculcating local customs and regulations so that the beneficiaries would use the resource judiciously after regeneration. Here began the first instance where Chitamba worked as an organization to manage and conserve its resources for optimum use.

In 1998 Foundation for Ecological Security (FES), an organization working for eco-restoration and to establish processes of collective management and governance extended its services. The primary inclination of FES stemmed out of community dependence on productivity of the charagah (the common grazing land) for fodder—an important source of livelihood. This would address both, ecological and livelihood security through a raise in biomass and water retention. The work of this NGO and community now covered all 618 acres of common land in five plots, which were now also recognized for their value to water supply of an area. Apart from the biophysical activities like regeneration measures and soil water conservation efforts, an essential component of the project undertaken by FES had been two pronged — strengthening traditional mechanisms where they had survived and crafting new institutional arrangements where none existed. FES assisted village community to set rules and regulations that were suitably adapted from larger principles of successful common property governance. This included shaping village specific rules and regulations, building transparent and democratic decision making platform, encouraging transparent and accountable finances, effort to elicit meaningful and active participation of women and also building interlinkages for formation of forum for reinforcing efforts for sustenance. A usual shortcoming with such efforts is that lack of tenure arrangements over common lands in favor of communities. This negatively influences the degree of participation and also the distribution of benefits, particularly to marginal populations, whose dependency on such lands was in the first place. The institutions that were built

took the local Panchayat into confidence and sought their support in the form of resolution in the Panchayat Meeting for permitting these institutions to work on these lands—a security of tenancy.

Decentralization of Natural Resource Governance

The Chitamba Panchayat innovatively used three institutional setups.

Village Institution (VI): Each habitation formalized a body with set of rules and regulations to govern common property resource within its revenue boundary. Institutional design aimed to include all users in management and governance. The focus was to develop an institution, which focused on views and needs of deprived sections (caste and class). It would also set processes that addressed social equity and distributional equity. Their mandate is informal and situation specific.

There are two such Village Institutions in Chitamba; one manages three different resource plots and the other Telion Ka Badia; which manages two such plots. Both of them are informal village institutions Charagah Vikas Samitis (CVSs) formed to manage the grazing lands. All gram sabha (village assembly) members are automatic member of such institutions; a management committee heads each CVS. The whole habitation, through informal election, appoints key office bearers like chairman, vice chairman, treasurer and secretary. Byelaws are made for the management of resources, beneficiaries are listed (actually the whole habitation) and terms of reference to carry out work are also made by a consensus in the gram sabha (village assembly).

Village institution Federation: The Chitamba Panchayat thought it important to converge these CVSs into a collective body because all faced common problems like recurrent drought, degraded common property and seasonal migration for livelihood. The Panchayat strengthened its CVSs to federate at the local level and to shoulder responsibility and develop capacity. Simultaneously this body would now negotiate with different external agencies to attract funds and schemes. The federation meets quarterly, where the Panchayat calls these associated institutions to discuss common concerns and strategies.

Panchayats: This works as the only statutory body in the scheme. Decentralized governance anywhere comes across the impediment of unwillingness of central authority to devolve power (Carney 2005). Chitamba Panchayat has shown remarkable volition in devolving authority to enable local village institutions to function as independent institutions. The Panchayat, who faced direct consequences of degrading common lands, was readily willing to innovate for their management even if that meant forfeiting certain authority.

Management protocol

Chitamba played a significant role not only in crafting and developing mechanisms for institutional setup only but also interlinked institutions that manage CPR and other spheres of village development. The Panchayat devolved its power to its villages to decide upon the resource use, beneficiaries, protection mechanism etc. The CVSs oversee collection of fees, maintenance, penalties for non-compliance, and finances.

The grazing lands of Chitamba are conjointly managed by the collective action of user groups from all five habitations. The reasons for this include strong affiliation of the habitations to the main village and a sense of belonging to the village community. Over the years the village has worked out a number of innovative mechanisms of grazing management. The plots are closed to grazing during monsoons. Animals use private fallows and bunds/ roadsides or the 20-25 acres of CPR that is never closed. A post-monsoon conjoint meeting of the five habitations later takes stock. It decides on the specificities of cycles of opening plots to grazing—bigger animals first and only few plots at a time so that biomass lasts till summer. Dry wood, tree lopping, dung collection are all appropriately used. The village in addition to the fence that has been made, uses social sanctions and also rotationally protects the commons. For transparency and accountability a monthly general meeting (aam sabha) of all constituent hamlets is called. All the processes of planning review, payments and decision are taken in front of the village community thereby bringing in them the confidence to manage their grazing land. This also forms the forum for conflict resolution.

The dynamics between these institutions—the Panchayat, the CVSs and the federation of CVSs—makes them more mutually dependent in terms of power sharing as well as decision-making. The Village Institution, or CVSs, decides upon quantum of physical intervention. The community in its various forums and institutions (interchangeable forms as they are within an informal village) projects their next year plan, discusses and reviews past year's work - the plans for physical and institutional aspects, the progress that has been made in the year; the complexities the institution had to confront while achieving its defined plans and work that was yet to be completed. The community, in the process, revisits their action plan, treatment plan and perspective plan. The management committee of the institution discusses the expenses, funds deposited and current balance in this general meeting of the village that happens every month.

The Panchayat makes strategies for strengthening village institutions, greater participation of women and disadvantaged section and devise mechanisms for financial viability, exposing village institutions to larger level forums and planning for five year development plans in context with CPR Management.

Why the arrangement works

Many quarters, including bureaucracy, do not approve of such village institutions because they fear dominance of one village level institution on another. There is also an argument that one legitimate body (the Panchayat) is sufficient for overall development and administration. This argument is vindicated in that, even at a Panchayat level of at least 500 households, representation for the extremely marginal becomes difficult. When other issues take precedence, critical issues of commons tend to get sidelined. So devolution of power to focus on a hundred households rather than 450 is a rational and need specific arrangement.

The Chitamba set-up has also belied concerns of parallel bodies stepping on each other's toes. The CVSs work along with the Panchayats and not against them. These village institutions are independent of the Panchayat in terms of structural responsibilities (nomination of office bearers, day-to-day working etc) and normative

responsibilities (the larger principles/ norms to which they adhere). They are truly democratic, without absolute interference from the Panchayat. The CVSs works specifically on a mandate which the Panchayat somehow does not prioritize i.e. “focusing on CPR governance” with sectoral development in other spheres. These CVSs have emerged as stilts subsidiaries bodies to assist the Panchayat rather than as adversaries. Chitamba Panchayat has embraced this though it could well have been the opposite. This structure actually supports the theory of power decentralization even at the levels of Panchayats, thus enabling the structure to attend more needs and focus on hamlet wise development.

Grazing lands are statutorily under the custodianship of the village Panchayat. In the case of Chitamba too, CVSs required a no-objection certificate to initiate work on grazing lands. While the Panchayat of Chitamba has officially not been involved in overseeing these institutions, the involvement of the Panchayat members has by and large formed a linkage—an informal but strong one—between the Panchayat and the village institutions.

Incremental achievements

The arrangement worked not only to better NR governance in the village. As an added incentive, the village matured on other counts of social indices.

- a. Women participation: The office of Sarpanch (head) of Chitamba Panchayat was reserved in 1999 for scheduled caste women. Kesi Bai, a Balai woman—doubly disadvantaged because of her gender and low-caste—was elected Sarpanch. After she assumed office, she turned out to be a natural leader, a pro-active person with the strength and support of her village behind her. She also enlisted a group of women to accompany her to several Panchayat and other public meetings. And then it followed that the village decided that this group of proactive women take on the executive functions of their collective action on the Commons. In one of the CVSs, Sanjadi Ka Badia, where these women belonged, the village decided to nominate an eight-member all-women executive committee with a lone male member to help with accounting and documentation (the women were largely illiterate).

Another explanation for this is the men’s laissez faire attitude and inefficiency to CPR management, and non-ability to appreciate its importance to livelihood and ecological restoration. In an all-women committee, the women found the only option of taking responsibility in their own hands despite their overburdened work and engagements in household chores.

- b. Caste liberalization: The hathai is a physical space holding central place in community deliberations. It is a space of deliberation and decision making that is invested with a collective respect decorum that precludes dishonesty, partisanship and indecency. Traditionally, only men folk are allowed to sit on this platform and it is considered the most auspicious place in the village after religious temples. Breaking this norm even for one woman becomes disastrous and the community faces dire sanctions from adjoining villages and clans. Many villages of Rajasthan have witnessed this event, and none dares to defy. Chitamba having decided on a women’s committee faced a dilemma of either

allowing women onto the hathai or of forgoing the location of hathai for decision-making. The latter was a difficult option because the hathai brought with the immense power of collective respect. The village took a stalwart stance and decided to break this societal norm knowing in advance of all the sanctions that would be imposed. They decided that if a dalit woman had been elected to the leader's position, she surely deserved to sit on the hathai. The village collectively decided to face the consequences, for it would be for their own benefit. For continuous three months this Panchayat was kept aloof from inter-village functions. It did not stop here; the gujjar clan ousted the whole community from all rituals and this continued for quite a long time. But the communities determinedly faced and welcome all injunctions but didn't move from their stance. In Bhilwara district, among 1867 villages, this example can only be found in 4-5 villages, thus making Chitamba a remarkable victory in terms of denying social norms that restrict free participation.

- c. Transparency and communitarian sentiment: Chitamba, being an unpredictable example, also invited a lot of criticism especially from envious people doubtful of female leadership. The financial transparency added to effective leadership. The women management committee was once challenged by an outsider of embezzling significant amount of money, which was funded by development organizations. The challenge was accepted countering all allegations; proven wrong the person making the allegation would punish himself with his own boots. A third party was asked to look at the work and audit the accounts. The level of transparency in this village institution was quite high, where most of the members were familiar with the amount spent and against which the work was done. This exercise proved surplus work done against the sanctioned amount which itself vindicated the community's contribution in terms of extra labour provided by them.

Discussion and Conclusion

Decentralized governance of natural resources meets criteria of both: democratic principles and environment stability. On commons, specially, both these criteria are reinforced because of acute dependence of marginal groups on commons. In this case of Chitamba in Rajasthan, work on commons over the years has not only improved the health and productivity of common land, but also established Chitamba Panchayat for collective governance of the land and water resources generated. The Panchayat has in turn decentralized many of its functions to other local bodies and established a successful governance system. Size of the group was crucial, as Agarwal (1995) has argued.

There are four question in the broad debate on decentralization of natural resource in India: should there be a complete handover of Natural Resource ownership to community; which is an appropriate local organization-a Gram Panchayat or a Village Institution; which implementation is better: top-down or bottom-up; should decentralization be externally funded or not? This case helps us address some of these questions. On the question of complete handover of natural resource, the Chitamba case only helps draw premature conclusions. The Village Institutions do stand the risk

of meeting the same fate as PRIs: legitimate constitutional bodies within the ambiguous PRI structure. Simply through this case it is difficult to comment on the efficacy of complete handover of resources.

On the second question on the kind of institution preferred, the Chitamba case offers many hints. The subjects devolved to Gram Panchayats do not entail any specificities of CPR. Out of all subjects devolved to the Panchayat, CPR governance become indistinct and its real focus gets lost. So the VI with its specific responsibility and decentralized legitimacy would get authority and acknowledgement of the work they do. Also VIs get involved to address small hamlet level issues and need of CPR, which is not possible for the Panchayats with their administrative chores and level of reach.

On the third question, bottom up approach has assumed significance in application. Top down approach has been mostly unsuccessful and this has been proven by many of the government schemes and programmes, framed by development laboratories in government departments.

For the last question, the Chitamba case would encourage funded support. But development should not restrict to funds and dependence on external agencies. Traditional ways of development within a village were more dependent on community voluntary labour and monetary contribution and self managed mechanisms to counter deprivations in all spheres.

The system has been adaptive in a context where drought and consequent scarcity of fodder forced people to buy fodder/ migrate/ or even let cattle die. The village brought their CPRs under effective management and involved two different agencies. Decentralization was an adaptive management of Panchayat to conserve the resources as well as developing good practices through providing powers to local village institutions for management of resources owned by government bodies, which would not have been possible if they were left in sole government hands.

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