

Institutional Pluralism at the Grassroots for Management of Commons: Case Studies from India

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Abstract

Grassroots Commons in India have been managed by the traditional community based local institutions in Indian villages. But the traditional institutions are not inclusive, democratic and gender sensitive. A recent (1992) constitutional amendment in India has created 2.5 lakhs village governments (Panchayati Raj) and equal number of village assemblies. The new local governments are inclusive democratic and gender sensitive. In many states of India critical commons like irrigation systems, village common lands and minor forests are transferred to the democratically elected village local governments. This paper explains the changes brought out by the new arrangements in the management of village commons. Three case studies are included each illustrating the management of commons by three types of institutional arrangements. The first case is a model for the synergy. In this case village local governments and traditional local community organisations are able to find ways and means to manage commons jointly and use all the available opportunities from the state and community. The second case explains how Panchayats are able to manage the commons effectively on it's own through the legally established system of governance. The third case illustrates how a local community based institution is able to operate independently within the local government and effectively manage the commons. The strength and deficiencies of all the three cases are discussed. This paper presents the significance of pluralistic institutional arrangements for the management of commons. This will help the institutions to be more efficient sustainable and democratic.

Introduction

Self governing institutions are an integral part of Indian rural society. And a variety of intersecting grassroots self governing institutions operate (Kirupa Ananthpur, 2004). Most of the common properties of the villages like irrigation tanks, grazing lands, fisheries and minor forests have been managed by them (Ragupathy V, 2004). Recently Indian parliament enacted the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act and created village Panchayat at grassroots. One third of the positions in the panchayats have been reserved for women and panchayats have become more inclusive. About 2.50 lakh village panchayats are functioning at the grassroots and have powers to manage common property resources at the grassroots. Out of the 29 subjects allotted to Panchayats at least 14 subjects are related to common property resources. But studies have pointed out that despite these legal powers, the panchayats have limitations in managing common properties for variety of reasons. Failure of panchayats has led to the conversion of these

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useful common resources into overused, exploited, neglected and mismanaged resources. People are seeking alternative arrangements to manage such common resources for the benefit of the community (Jodha N.S, 1991). Due to the significance of these resources to their life people create collective management systems through informally evolved community organizations (Ragupathy V, 2004). However in some cases the formal village panchayats themselves are able to effectively manage common property resources through collective action.

In some cases formal village Panchayats and local community organizations are able to join together for the management of common property resources(Palanithurai G, 2004). In this process positive changes in the management system are taking place. Apart from efficiency equity is also ensured. Women and socially marginalized groups are included in the process of decision making. It is felt that there is a need for institutional pluralism at the grassroots for management of commons(Ostrom E, 1990). Against this background, three case studies are presented in this paper. Extensive field research has been undertaken by the author on these three cases.

Nallukottai is a village in Sivagangai District. Nallukottai village has a village panchayat of its own. Irrigation tank, water ponds, common lands, grazing lands, fisheries in the water bodies, trees in the common lands are the main common property resources of the village panchayat(Palanithurai G., 2004). About 70 per cent of the families in the village have irrigated land, and all of them are small farmers. There are 3024 people and 628 families in the village.

Institutional Arrangements

The village has two important institutions, one is the community based and the other is the village panchayat. Local Community Organisation is a voluntary association promoted by the local community to mainly attend the needs of the people related to the management of CPRs and settlement of minor disputes. It also attends activities related to the religious and cultural events of the village. The LCO of the village has a village assembly and a leader. There is no formal village executive committee in the village assembly. Village assembly consists the representative from all the families of the village. Families must fulfil certain conditions to become members of the local community organization. A membership register is maintained and every year membership must be renewed. Only the members are eligible to participate in the activities of LCO and share the benefits common.

Village assembly meets once in a month and special meetings are also arranged. The decisions of the meetings are binding and members are expected to follow. Nallukottai village has a village panchayat of its own. The office of the village panchayat is located in the entrance of the village. The village panchayat president is a women from a respected family of the village.

The LCO of the village has influence over the functions of the village Panchayat. The village assembly normally sponsors candidates for the village Panchayat elections. Village Panchayat and the LCO are able to work together in the village to a great extend for the promotion of CPR and welfare of the community.

Collective action for the management of CPR

Nallukottai has eight irrigation tanks and ten water ponds. 70 percent of the families own land and most of the farmers are small farmers. The village has about 23 acres of common land. There are about 3200 trees in the common lands. The fisheries in the water bodies are collectively managed. The grazing lands in the village is well protected and grazing is regulated.

In Nallukottai village Panchayat, LCO are jointly managing common property resources. Village Panchayat is able to effectively use various government schemes for the development of CPRs with the help of the LCO. LCO generate social capital required for the collective action and also generates local resources. It ensures the contribution of the community for the development of CPR. It also enforces the rules framed by the LCO and helps the panchayat to enforce its rules also. With the help of the LCO panchayat is able to implement many of the government schemes related to CPR like desilting of tanks, promotion of social forestry and maintenance of community toilets.

Some of the activities of the panchayat and LCO related to the CPR in the village is listed here.

LCO's activities

1. Annual maintenance of irrigation tanks
2. Evolving common crop calendar
3. Appointment of common irrigators
4. Sharing of water in the irrigation tank
5. regulation of grazing and issuing grazing permits
6. protection of trees in the common lands
7. protection of fisheries in the water bodies
8. sharing of fisheries in the common water bodies
9. organizing village festivals
10. generating common funds
11. settlement of conflicts over the common property resources
12. maintenance of accounts
13. evolving clear rules on the management of these common property resources.

Village Panchayat's Activities

1. Developing a plan for CPR management
2. Desilting of water bodies using government schemes
3. developing trees in the common lands
4. developing fisheries in the common water bodies

5. development and maintenance of community sanitary complexes
6. construction of check-dams and percolation ponds
7. works related to land development
8. promotion of community compost unit and vermi-composting
9. promotion of herbal garden
10. promotion of social forestry
11. development of grazing lands
12. promotion of village as total sanitation village
13. Promotion of vegetable garden for the school.
14. Removal of encroachments from common lands.

In Nallukottai village, village Panchayat and Local Community Organizations works together for the management of common property resources. The local community organizations concentrates on common resources like irrigation tanks, and grazing lands. These resources are related to the livelihood of the local people and local community has great concern for these resources. LCO is able to clearly define boundaries and rules for the management of CPR. LCO is able to generate the required social capital for the management of CPR and the transactional cost for the CPR management is reduced.

Village Panchayat concentrates more on modern CPRs like check-dams, percolation ponds, community composting, school vegetables gardens, herbal gardens and social forestry. Village Panchayat is able to effectively manage these resources with the support of LCO. LCO helps panchayats in generating people's participation for its activities. Without the support of LCO, panchayats cannot enforce rules of the local community. It effectively use government schemes with the support of LCO.

Nallukottai is a case where village Panchayat and local community organizations are able to work together for the management of CPR and effectively use the local resources and the resources given by the government effectively.

II

Rajendrapuram is a village in Pudukottai District of Tamil Nadu. The village has a population of 3295. The village has its own village Panchayat. Irrigation tank, grazing land, common lands, fisheries in the water bodies and the trees in the common lands are the important common properties of the village(Palanithurai G., 2005). About 60 percent of the families have land in the irrigated area and most of them have small land holding.

Institutional Arrangement

Rajendrapuram has a local community organization. But the organization is not effective. It has lost control over the common property resources of the village. The common properties are used without any control. Some of the common lands are under encroachment. Irrigation tanks and ponds have been silted and rainwater was not properly harvested. Due to this agriculture in the village is affected. Rajendrapuram village Panchayat is headed by Shamuganathan, a progressive farmer. He and nine ward members of the village Panchayat are actively engaged in the management of common property resources.

Collective action for the management of common properties

In 2001, Shanmuganathan, was elected as the president of the village Panchayat. He and the members of the village Panchayat decided to develop the common property resources of the village on priority basis. The panchayat developed a micro plan for the common property resource development and got it approved from the Gram Sabha. A committee consisting of members of the village Panchayat, youth leaders, women Self Help Groups members and traditional leaders were formed for this purpose. The village Panchayat undertook the following activities for the common property resource development between the years 2001 and 2006.

1. Desilting of two irrigation tanks
2. Desilting of seven ponds
3. development of nurseries for social forestry
4. social forestry in common lands
5. construction of check dams and percolation ponds
6. promotion of rain water harvesting facilities of 900 houses.
7. construction of channels for rainwater harvesting
8. development of fisheries in the water bodies
9. construction of maintenance of community sanitary complex

The village Panchayat could very effectively implement the above mentioned activities for the development of common properties. Because of the efforts of the panchayat remarkable impacts have been created in the village. About 6000 trees have been grown in the village in a five years period. The entire rainwater of the village is saved in the water bodies. Because of this, ground water level has been significantly improved in the village and agriculture has been improved.

In Rajendrapuram village Panchayat there is not effective presence of any community based organization. But still panchayat can take effective steps to manage common property resources. It can also generate peoples participation to a great extend. But it has been found that the village Panchayat is not able to undertake activities related to the management of irrigation system. Enforcement rules related to the use of CPR is also difficult to panchayat. Panchayat could not exclude non-contributors from using common property resources, panchayats role in managing traditional CPRs like irrigation tanks, grazing lands and fisheries is very much limited in Rajendrapuram.

III

Pulikanmai is a village in the Sivagangai District of Tamil Nadu state in India. Most of the families in the village entirely depend on the irrigation tank for their livelihood. Irrigation tank, grazing land, fisheries in the water bodies and the trees in the common lands are the important common property resources of the village. About 80 percent of the families in the village has irrigated land. Water in the

irrigation tank is considered as the common property and shared by the families for cultivation. There are 980 people and 212 families in the village.

Institutional Arrangements

The village has a Local Community Organization (LCO). It consists of a village assembly and a village executive committee. LCO does not have any legal sanction and it is only a voluntary association of the local people. It looks after the common properties, village temple and resolves conflicts. Pulikanmai village is located in the Paruthikanmai village panchayat. The village Panchayat is headed by a women. Paruthikanmai village panchayat has two more villages like Pulikanmai. In all the three villages of the panchayat community organizations are also functioning. The village panchayat has legal powers to manage common properties like irrigation tanks, grazing lands, fisheries and trees in the common lands. But in practice the Paruthikanmai village panchayat does not take much interest in generating peoples participation for the management of these resources.

The village panchayat has also a village assembly (Gram Sabha) common for all the three villages in the village panchayat. But the participation of the members is very limited. The LCO has a village assembly consisting of representatives from families. The LCO has a membership register. Families have to fulfill certain conditions to enter into the village assembly. Mostly the conditions are related to the participation in the activities of the LOC and compliance to its decisions. All the families in Pulikanmai are the members of the LCO. Village assembly meets once in a month on full-moon day and sometimes emergency meetings are also arranged. Attendance in the meeting is strictly enforced.

Collective action for managing CPR

Because of the LOC Pulikanmai village community is able to protect its CPRs and effectively manage them. LCO is involved in the following activities

1. Annual maintenance of irrigation tanks
2. Evolving a common agricultural calendar for tank irrigated area
3. appointment of common irrigators
4. rotation of irrigation
5. evolving a system of sharing water in times of water scarcity
6. appointment of watch and ward for protection of corps and common lands
7. protection of water ponds
8. promotion of fisheries in the water bodies
9. sharing of fisheries among the members
10. Regulation of grazing and issuing grazing permits
11. evolving clear rules and enforcing them.
12. maintenance of accounts for common funds
13. organizing cultural and religious events

14. general welfare of the community

The village assembly takes decisions related to the above areas and village executive committee enforces the decisions. All the members of the village community mostly follow the decisions of the LCO.

The village panchayat has legal powers to attend activities related in the above mentioned areas. But the village panchayat in this village is not able to attend any of these activities. Village panchayat concentrates more on the activities related to the municipal facilities like drinking water, street lights and sanitation. The village panchayat also implement some of the government sponsored schemes related to the maintenance of irrigation tanks and water bodies. But village community is not involved in these activities.

In Pulikanmai village, common property resources are managed by the local community organization with the participation of the local community. The village panchayat is not able to generate peoples participation for such activities. It implements government schemes like desilting of water bodies through the contractors. Village panchayat also do not take any steps to regulate the use of common properties by the people of the village. It also does not intervene in the activities of the local community organizations for the management of CPR.

Conclusion

Based on the discussions and case studies some conclusions may be derived. In spite of the fast changes taking place, still in many villages, community based organisations are functioning and managing some of the critical common property resources. The village Panchayat are expected to manage some of the CPRs like minor irrigations tanks, common lands, grazing lands and fisheries. From the case studies it appears that chances for synergizing the activities of the formal panchayats and local community organizations will provide more opportunities for CPR management. It appears that village panchayats are more efficient in managing modern common properties like community sanitary complexes, construction of check-dams, social forestry and community compost. Government can effectively use various types of local institutions for managing CPR by synergizing their activities wherever possible. LCOs are not functioning in all the villages of India. They are informally evolved based on the local needs. Government may encourage and facilitate emergence of such community based organizations. These organizations can generate social capital and facilitate people's participation in CPR management. These type of organizations will be helpful to village Panchayats in managing CPR. These organizations can be nested in village Panchayat. It will improve the functioning of the community based institutions. They will become inclusive and gender sensitive.

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