Discussion

Why Harda Failed

A Response

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In 'Deconstructing the Harda Experi-ence: Limits of Bureaucratic Participa-tion', Bhaskar Vira (*EPW,* November 26, 2005) analyses the Harda experience of joint forest management (JFM). On the basis of the findings of Cambridge Harda Project,[1] Vira unravels contradic-tions inherent in the state-driven participatory forest management projects applied in an "inherently hierarchical social structure" [Vira 2005: 5074]. He offers useful insights while explaining the lack of donor influence in bringing about sub-stantive changes in the state management of forests in India. Arguing that the bargaining power of donors has weak-ened because of strong economic develop-ment registered by India, Vira suggests that Madhya Pradesh, endowed with one of the best forest resources in the country managed by a strong bureaucracy, is a particularly difficult target for the donors.

Despite these significant contri-butions, Vira's paper fails to explicate on the root causes of the failure of participatory forest management in Harda. Cambridge Harda Project, premised on the assumption that conflicts in Harda and elsewhere are attributable to the differences of perceptions between different stakeholders,[2] recom-mended effective communication strat-egies including the publication of a comic book titled 'Spirit of the Forest'. I attempt a critique of this characteri-sation of the conflict and potential solu-tions suggested by the project. I argue that these conflicts are rooted in the disempowerment and marginali-sation of the tribal communities in colo-nial as well as independent India, a theme that has been the focus of several past and contemporary scholarly studies that I survey in this paper.

What Exactly Is the Conflict About?

Neither Vira's paper nor the set of documents produced by the Cambridge Harda Project offer specifics of the "con-flicts" witnessed in Harda. From whatever readers can learn by interpreting project background document and the section titled "Conflict in Harda: Clash of Paradigms?" in Vira's paper, it looks as if the major conflict is between the forest department and the mass tribal organisations (MTOs). Evidence from other studies on Harda on the other hand, suggests that the proximate causes of the conflicts in Harda could be traced to the complete neglect of the dependence of the poorest within the community on the forest land for subsis-tence purposes and relegation of the in-terests of this section of the community to a non-issue in the forest management system devised by the forest department and supported by the village elites. Thus, marginal farmers and the landless families that owned little or no land at all, gained little from the village resource develop-ment programme – a component that is unique to the Harda model [Bhogal and Bhogal 2000]. Under the standard silvi-pasture systems practised in JFM, it is typically the goat and sheep rearing com-munities that are worst affected because of the difficulty involved in stall feeding small ruminants [Conroy 2001; Kumar 2002; Jain et al 2003]. In fact, in Harda a strict ban was observed on keeping and grazing goats [Sarin 2003]. Cambridge Harda Project reports suggest that the forest department officials acknowledge the problem of elite capture but argue it to be beyond their mandate to address it [Chaturvedi and Godbole 2005].

While Vira does consider the gender bias inherent in the current format of JFM, his analysis of the differential benefits from JFM to sections within the communities is conflated with temporal changes in the benefit stream as well as the impact of ongoing degradation of the resource base. These are fundamentally different phe-nomena which could have been analysed carefully to gain insights on the overall impact of JFM, particularly on the most marginalised community groups, includ-ing the landless. Now I turn to the issues related to forest settlements and the way it affected tribal land rights and livelihoods, an issue that is apparently the most important cause of conflicts in Harda.

Issue of 'Encroachments'

Probably the weakest part of Vira's paper is his discussion of the issue of "encroach-ment". In its December 2004 circular, the ministry of environment and forests (MoEF) acknowledged that in the absence of settlement of rights

> the rural people, especially tribals and forest dwellers who have been living in the forest since time immemorial, have come to be erroneously looked upon as encroachers of forest lands [GoI 2004].

Back in 1990 a framework for resolu-tion of disputes related to forest land between tribal people and the state was worked out by the union government. Accordingly, six circulars addressed to the secretaries of forest departments of all states/union territories were issued on September 18, 1990 by the MoEF [Kalpavriksh n d]. Evidently, the issue of contested tenurial status of forest lands in tribal areas has been accorded high prio-rity by successive governments notwith-standing that no satisfactory resolution has been achieved so far for various rea-sons. Thus, prima facie, perceptions of different stakeholders regarding the bare facts of this important cause of conflict in forest management do not seem to be in conflict. MoEF also recognises that the scale of the problem and number of people affected is significant enough and that it warrants a critical scrutiny of the core issue of settlement of forest rights. Contrary to this, Vira's paper suggests that "powerful villagers, who had the support of the forest department, were carrying out most of the encroachment"[3] [Vira 2005: 5073]. Considering the gravity

of the situation, this observation is fraught with serious implications for the future of forest management in India. It is therefore appropriate to briefly look at the past and contemporary scholarship on the issue.

Based on a rigorous study of decentralisation in a number of states in India, including Madhya Pradesh, Baumann and Farrington (2003) argued that the limited success of decentralised natural resource management programmes is attributable to the failures at challenging "the basic distribution of rights and access to natural resources established in the colonial period and reinforced in the immediate post-independence period" (p 1). Authors urged reconsideration of the ultimate objectives of decentralised natural resource management programmes if they were to make serious dent (ibid). Sarin (2005) documents how in several areas around the country, vast lands were declared "forests" without surveys, leave alone proper settlement of existing rights and concessions stipulated in the Indian Forest Act, 1927. Sarin's observations accurately describe the situation in Madhya Pradesh where a 2003 forest department survey report suggests that rights of forest dwellers remain unsettled in 11,759 forest blocks, constituting 83 per cent of land declared as public forests in undivided Madhya Pradesh [Prabhu 2005]. These figures not only reflect the unusually high levels of systemic failure in the forestry administration, they are also a reminder of the historical disempowerment that the tribals of central India have been subjected to, in both the colonial and post-independence India [Rangarajan 1996; Shah et al 1998]. Tribals were deprived of the rights to their cultivable lands on account of British policies for agriculture expansion, forest protection, colonial government's tendencies to enforce a sedentary way of settlement, and the officials' reliance on 'begar' – a form of unpaid forced labour [McEldowney 1980; Rangarajan 1996]. The colonial policies of extracting forest and labour resources in the tribal regions permanently damaged tribal economies leading to their marginalisation [Prasad 2004]. In recent times, this sense of marginalisation has been further reinforced because of the "summary evictions" of tribals residing and cultivating on forest lands under the guise of the National Forest Commission guidelines, and several related judicial interventions by the Supreme Court [Sarin 2005; Kalpavriksh n d].

Thus, institutionalising participation of the marginalised communities for sustainable forest management will be difficult to achieve as long as tribals live under the uncertain and contested tenurial right to the land that they depend on for their subsistence. In other words, without a full and final settlement of the issue of "encroachments", to borrow from Shah, "peace is unlikely to return to the jungle" [Shah 2005] and any scrutiny of the current participatory programmes cannot be complete without discussing this.

Decentralisation and State Accountability

Vira suggests that "a paternalistic form of collaboration" seen in Harda could form the basis for synergy between the forest department and the communities (p 5074). This observation is out of tune with much of the recent literature on decentralisation that has emphasised the need for accountability of the state and the local community leadership [Agrawal and Ribot 1999; Bardhan 2002; Ribot 2002; Bardhan 2005]. Considering the observation that MTOs articulated local issues, (and) kept a check on corruption [Vira 2005: 5073], MTOs may be capable of contributing substantively by bringing some accountability in the system. Such possibilities were realised to some extent in Harda where forest department agreed to pay wages long overdue to the community members after activist groups mobilised demonstrations at the district headquarters [Diwan et al 2001]. This kind of success is an illustration of what Agrawal and Ribot consider to be a prerequisite for institutional accountability – "counter powers exercised by those subject to actors holding decentralised power" [Agrawal and Ribot 1999]. While the MTOs may not be willing to work with the forestry department for ideological reasons [WII 2005] attempts at ensuring accountability of department officials and local community leaders must be pursued vigorously if participatory forest management is to succeed. This is also evident from some of the more successful cases of participatory forestry in India.

Gujarat, one of the pioneers in implementing JFM, has seen active participation of some well established NGOs such as AKRSP(I), and VIKSAT who have helped mobilise village forest committees into taluka, district and state federations. These NGOs and federations of forest protection committees have shown promise in terms

of shifting local balance of power thus strengthening social challenge to the status quo [Baviskar 2001]. In West Bengal, the state that is credited with the innovation of JFM, a strong grassroot democracy has created deliberating spaces and has sustained plurality in political processes. This has in turn fed the democratic intent of forest protection committees, and has facilitated effective mechanisms for consultation between officials and villagers [Sivaramakrishnan 1999]. Thus, accommodation of leaders, politicians, and representatives nominated by multiple institutions of democratic politics – panchayats, party cadres, or self-help organisations supported by NGOs help in instilling democratic imperatives of accountability within the systems of management and governance of forest resources (ibid, pp 438-39).

These counter examples of the cases of relatively successful forest management programmes suggest that attempts at forging multiple centres of decentralised power have helped instil accountability and thicken participation in forest management. By implication, future attempts at strengthening participatory forestry in Madhya Pradesh must concentrate on dealing with its twin legacies of begar – unpaid tribal labour extracted by forest officials that turned tribals into subjects of colonial masters, and 'baiga chak' an attempt at turning baigas into a forest ghetto community. The impact of these traditions have continued well into the new millennium via an inherently anti-tribal coalition of non-tribal community leadership, state officials, and timber smugglers, which must be neutralised for successful forest management [Sundar 2001; also see Shah et al 1998]. In this context, direct government intervention in enforcing the rule of law and helping build countervailing power to local elites, and enforcing state accountability [Sundar 2001] must be central to any attempts at strengthening local governance of forest resources. By omitting these aspects of decentralisation, Vira reinforces existing simplistic understanding of participatory forest management without making use of the rich insights that conflicts in Harda JFM offered.

Conclusion

Discussions of the existing research on community-forest-state relations suggests that it is neither sufficient nor useful to treat the conflicts in forest management,

such as the one witnessed in Harda, as being an outcome of difference of perceptions between different stakeholders, as suggested by Vira and the project documents. In fact, the conflicts and poor outcomes of participatory forestry projects such as the Harda model are reflective of the larger issues concerning democratisation, and the development policies pursued by the state as Vira himself postscripts in the concluding section of his paper.

Contrary to the much publicised successes on human development front achieved by the Madhya Pradesh government, recent research has shown a systematic exclusion of scheduled tribes and scheduled castes from accessing development gains [Shankar 2005; Mishra 2006]. Considering that the regions with high concentration of tribal population are also the regions well-endowed with forest resources [Shah et al 1998], it is important to look at the state-community interactions in JFM as part of the broader and more important agenda of "reconciling social justice claims in a manner consonant with ecological concerns" [Rangarajan 2005]. To this end, providing space and legitimacy to the voices of tribal communities should form an important agenda for the scholars of participatory forest management notwithstanding the extant academic fashion of introducing analytical ambiguities through research and analysis that claims to be detached from any "normative concerns". It is only then that the "sophisticated and empirically-informed debate" led by the NGOs, activists, and academics, and the "room for agency within the broader structure", which Vira refers to (pp 5074-75), can be effectively utilised for devising policies and programmes that help us move forward in institutionalising significant changes in the state-community relations.

Finally, revisiting what I see as fundamental gaps in Vira's analysis also helps in defining priorities for future research. In the context of the analysis and evidence presented above, it seems likely that the poorest within the local communities who have historically been and continue to be marginalised, are adversely affected by the continued state control over forests and its management without any means of ensuring state accountability. Such evidence is already available from Jharkhand [Kumar 2002] and similar research must be undertaken in other states. Second, while this paper presented fundamental issues in a rather stylised manner, a finer understanding of multiple issues involved in participatory forest management must be evolved through institutional analysis while adequately compensating for the historical legacies of state-community relations in tribal areas. Finally, discourses of sustainable participatory forest management and any research on the same must be informed of the agendas of democratisation and empowerment of the marginalised communities if it has to be a truly "joint" effort. 〔EPW〕

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Notes

1 Full set of project documents is available on the internet at http://www.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/harda/
2 Project background available online on the internet as mentioned above.
3 This statement, though selectively quoted, reflects the general tenor of the treatment that this issue receives in Vira's paper.

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