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Excluding the Poor From Their Rights: the Case of Natural Resources in West Bengal

Introduction¹

I am presenting today on a three year seven village study looking at natural and social resource use by the poor in West Bengal. The study was conducted between 1993 and the end of 1996, and follows from work that I had done between 1986 and 1990 on a similar topic (Beck 1994; 1994a). This is the first time to our knowledge that use of natural resources by the poor has been covered systematically in a study in either post-independence West Bengal, or Bangladesh (although I believe there has been some research on this topic recently by Syed Hashemi in Bangladesh). This is itself is an interesting point, because there have been several other studies of cpr use elsewhere in South Asia, so as well as all the other biases against recognition of the importance of cprs there is also in this case a geographical bias to which I will return. For further details of the study see Ghosh (1988).

The paper is divided into three parts:

1. rationale for the study;
2. some summary findings and,
3. brief conclusions related to policy

¹ First, credit where it is due. The material I am presenting today is part of a collaborative study carried out with a team of researchers at Viswa-Bharati University in West Bengal led by Madan Ghosh. Madan Ghosh was unable to attend this conference but he did present preliminary findings of the research at the cp conference in 1995. We have to thank IDRC for its financial backing and Stephen Tyler the project manager at IDRC for his intellectual input and support.

1. Rationale

There is little knowledge of the historical importance of cprs in the Bengal area, which now has a population of about 200 million, but our research team hypothesised from findings elsewhere in India and our past research that cprs are crucial assets for the poor.

When we started the research there was no benchmark against which to measure changes in the use and management of cprs, so we carried out quite detailed oral histories about resource use from the 1950s to the present. There is also some literary evidence as to the widespread existence and use of cprs which supports our oral history work, for example in one of the best known Bengali novels, the *Song of the Road*, by Bibhuti Banerji, published in 1929 - let me quote you one passage of many I could have chosen concerning cprs gathered by two young children of a poor Bengali household:

“Durga came into the room. She had just got back from one of her wanderings. Her feet were covered with dust, and a wisp of hair three or four inches long hung straight down over her eyes. She was always going off on her own, for she very seldom played in the village with children of her own age; but she knew what bush had ripe berries on it; and if there were green mangoes in anybody’s garden, she knew that too, and what tree they were on; and where in the bamboo grove the jujube fruit was good to eat.” (Banerji 1987: 82).

Elsewhere Banerji writes (p. 63-4) “between the jungle thickets in the open country grew clumps of tall grass, yellow-flowering rushes and wild plum trees; and over all this tangle of luxuriant growth the kolmi creeper had spread its large green leaves completely engulfing it...Nature had scattered its riches with a prodigal hand, like a king whose bounty knows no end.”

So there is some literary evidence as to the past importance of cprs, but very little contemporary information. Let me set out why I think the latter is missing. I will make five points.

1. There is a lack of acknowledgment of the importance of cprs and their decline in India as a whole, points well made in studies by Jodha (1986), Syed Pasha and others.
2. Gender bias. Gathering and use of cprs is still largely women's work, and this work is not highly valued or recognised. Although it has recently expanded its definitions of work to include some activities carried out by women, gathering of cprs is not included as work in definitions in the Indian census.
3. Anti-rural bias. There is a general ignorance of the ways in which rural people live their lives and the kinds of indigenous systems that are in place to manage or regulate natural resources.
4. Geographical and perceptual bias. Geographically, most literature on CPR use in India has focussed on the arid, semi-arid, hill and forest fringe regions of the country (Arnold 1991). Work has been carried out in W. Bengal and Bangladesh on forestry but not less visible cprs.

Why is this? Probably because West Bengal does not have the relatively large areas of common land that are found in other less densely populated regions of India. For example, an estimate of private as opposed to common land gives an all-India figure of 64% private land and 36% common land, but for the district of Murshidabad in West Bengal, an estimate of 98% private land

and 2% common land [Agarwal and Narain 1989: 41]. This may have led some researchers to conclude that cprs as such do not exist in West Bengal in the way that they exist in other parts of India. But our earlier research and the findings of our present study show that natural resources are probably as important to poor households in Bengal as elsewhere. CPRs do exist, but they have been defined out of existence, which is my next point.

5. There is a bias in the ‘new institutionalist’ literature towards examining certain kinds of natural resource management by ‘communities’. There is also a bias against examining complex relations concerning property. For example, let us take the four types of land ownership and use generally distinguished. The first is private property which refers to ‘....the situation in which an individual or corporation has the right to exclude others from using the resource and to regulate its use.’ The second is open access, which is the ‘....absence of well-defined property rights.’ The third is state ownership, with access to the resource determined by the state. The fourth is communal property, where ‘....the resource is held by an identifiable community of users who can exclude others and regulate use.’ [Berkes *et al* 1989: 91].

As is well known, much recent research has focused on the last category, the management of natural resources by local people, to oppose the idea that privatization is the only way forward for environmental protection (Baland and Platteau 1996). But in the case of West Bengal and Bangladesh, and probably other areas such as Kerala, there are forms of ‘resource management’ which do not fit into any of the categories above. In West Bengal access to many natural resources is not clearly defined legally but depends on a process of negotiation, bargaining or conflict between poor and rich, and on a system of customary rights whereby the poor access the land of the rich. While some resources are open access (for example stubble left after harvesting or wild foods that grow in drainage ditches or by the sides of ponds), other important CPRs (such as gleaned grains, fallen fruits, the right to collect cow dung or graze cattle on the boundaries between fields) should be defined as products that are found mainly on private land or which are controlled by richer villagers, and to which the poor have customarily negotiated access. While from the perspective of the rich these latter resources may be privately owned, from the perspective of the poor these resources are common in that the poor have attempted to maintain a right of access to them.

These resources are very similar to those described by British historians looking at customary systems in nineteenth century Britain. The most insightful of these historians is probably E.P. Thompson analyses this subject in some detail in *The Making of the English Working Class*, particularly in the chapter on field labourers in the 1820s and 1830s (1986: 239):

Those petty rights of the villagers, such as gleaning, access to fuel, and the tethering of stock in the lanes or on the stubble, which are irrelevant to the historian of economic growth, might be of crucial importance to the subsistence of the poor.

....if one looks at the scene again from the standpoint of the villager, one finds a dense cluster of claims and usages, which stretch from the common to the market-place and which, taken together, made up the economic and cultural universe of the rural poor.

Thompson's analysis is extended in a more recent essay called 'Custom, Law and Common Right' where he examines for example practices of gleaning in the late eighteenth century.

All of these biases have meant that we have been largely ignorant of cpr use in West Bengal and Bangladesh. Which brings me to the findings of our study.

2. Summary findings

Methodology

Of the seven villages in the study, 2 were in the district of Purulia and one each in the districts of Bardhaman, Birbhum, Jalpaiguri, 24 Parganas (North) and 24 Parganas (South). The study used standard methodological techniques. Villages were purposively selected to cover all of the major agro-ecological zones of the state as well as different kinds of resource use, and so-called agriculturally advanced and backward villages. There was also an attempt made to include marginalised groups - scheduled caste, scheduled tribe and Muslim communities. Field surveys were carried out using a standard methodology including structured questionnaires and anthropological surveys. The villages were as follows:

1. Matha - This village (in Bagmundi P.S.) is in Purulia which is the least developed district in the state. This district is, however, rich in natural resource potential, particularly forests. This village was selected to study the nature and extent of dependence on forest resources by the poor. This village is also one where a Joint Forest Management Committee, involving the local people in the management and protection of forests has been functioning since the early 1990s.
2. Arjunjora - This village is in the Hura P.S. of Purulia. This village was chosen to make a contrasting study of the performance of poverty-alleviation programmes of two agencies, viz., panchayat and N.G.O.
3. Nabastha - This village (in Bhatar P.S) belongs to the district of Bardhaman, which is one of the more prosperous districts in the state, and has a well-developed agricultural infrastructure. This district has witnessed a substantial rise in the area under perennial irrigation through the exploitation of ground water. Our purpose of selection was to study the manner in which water resources were used and distributed across different uses and users and its impact on the ecology and social equality in the study area.
4. Taltore - This village is in the Bolpur P.S. of the district of Birbhum, which is one of the less urbanised districts in the state. However, this village is very near to an urban area and linked with a metalled road. It was selected to study the impact of urbanisation on land and resource use.
5. Sannyasipara - is in the Rajganj P.S. of the district of Jalpaiguri in the northern part of the state. This village provides an example of how the recent shift in land policy of the government

encouraging extension of tea has resulted in a change in the socio-economic environment of the area. This is in sharp contrast to the land grab movement in the early 1970s when the poor people under the leadership of the Naxalites forcibly occupied tea garden land in order to grow food.

6. Dwarbasini - This village is in 24 Parganas(North). It was selected to examine the functioning of a co-operative-management of a tank for fishery and irrigation. It shows how the management of a CPR has benefited some and excluded others from the rights of access to it. This example also shows how present management has adversely affected the interests of women.
7. Radhaballavpur - This village in Basanti P.S. of the district of 24 Parganas(South) is situated on the bank of a river. There is a fisher community in the village which depends on fishing in the river. When high tide comes in the river, poor people come with small nets and collect whatever fishlings they can find. Prawn spawn is common. Our intention was to study the nature and extent of dependence of the poor on fishing in the river, and how the recent introduction of mechanised boats for fishing in the area has adversely affected the interests of the poor.

In the first part of the investigation, information on caste/religion, land holdings, and annual income was collected from all the households in each village. The households were then stratified into different caste/religion groups. The households were further classified into two sub-groups, viz., poor and non-poor, using the arbitrary category of income, based on Government of India figures. Poor households thus included households with less than 15,000 rupees yearly income, while non-poor included households with more than 15,000 rupees annual income. The point was to get a rough estimate of numbers of poor households in the village for the purposes of the research.

Poor households were selected for a more intensive study of cpr's use. In Matha, Taltore and Nabastha all the poor households were selected for in-depth study, while in Sannasipara, Dwarbasini and Radhaballavpur, 30 poor households each were selected from the different ethnic groups in proportion to their number in the village. In the case of non-poor category, 15 households in each village were selected at random. The distribution of households among the different caste groups was done on the basis of their proportion in the village. In the village Arjunjora all the households in each group were covered under the investigation. Totals in the survey were 313 poor households and 75 non-poor households.

In the second part of the survey, data were collected in respect of individual sample household characteristics and activities, particularly pertaining to demography, education, occupation, asset ownership, income, collection of cpr's, levels of living and mutual support networks. In addition, anthropological information was collected from 10 women informants among the poor households in each village on their role in the management of household economy, and from 5 poorest households on how they managed their household requirements during times of economic stress.

The list of the villages, number of total households and the number of sample households selected for study in each village are presented below.

Table - 1 Total households and sample households

Name of the villages	District	Religion/ Caste	Total no. of house holds		No. of sample h. holds	
			Poor	Non-poor	Poor	Non poor
1. Nabastha (Mahachanda)	Bardhaman	G. C.	3	25	3	7
		S.C.	9	33	9	3
		S.T.	15	22	15	-
		Muslim	25	74	25	20
		Total	52	154	52	30
2. Matha (Baghmundi)	Purulia	G.C.	5	11	5	5
		S.C.	7	3	7	-
		S.T.	37	29	27	10
		Total	49	43	39	15
3. Taltore (Bolpur-Sriniketan)	Birbhum	G.C.	3	33	-	10
		S.C.	36	22	36	5
		S.T.	12	4	12	-
		Total	51	59	48	15
4. Sannyasipara (Rajganj)	Jalpaiguri	Total	75	52	30	12
5. Dwarbasini (Bongaon-I)	24 Pgs. (North)	G.C.	17	68	9	7
		S.C.	75	104	15	8
		S.T.	8	5	6	-
		Total	100	177	30	15
6. Radhaballavpur (Basanti)	24 Pgs. (South)	G.C.	8	16	2	4
		S.C.	18	14	11	3
		S.T.	5	1	3	-
		Muslim	29	28	9	6
		Christian	42	62	5	2
		Total	102	121	30	15
7. Arjunjora (Hura)	Purulia	G.C.	45	49	45	49
		S.C. & Muslim	39	11	39	11
		Total	84	60	84	60

1. G.C.: General Caste, S.C.: Scheduled Caste, S.T.: Scheduled Tribe.

Skewed distribution of income was observed in all the villages, but it was more conspicuous in the developed villages. For example, in Nabastha the average annual income of the non-poor households was more than ten times higher than the same among the poor households, while in Arjunjora and Matha the corresponding figures were 3.5 times and 4.66 times respectively. In

West Bengal as a whole and in the study villages there is generally a high incidence of landlessness, as well as a high incidence of sharecropping, with a minority class of middle farmers in control of village resources. It is from this group of middle farmers that the poor must negotiate access to cprs.

Collection of cprs:

Despite a decline in access to cprs over the last 40 years, they remain of great importance to the poor. The relative importance of cprs as well as the different sources of collections differed significantly across the study villages. Table 2 provides data on the importance of collection among the poor and non-poor households in the study villages.

Table 2
Value of collections to households per year

Villages	POOR		NON-POOR		
	Amount (Rs.)	% of total income	Amount (Rs.)	% of total income	Resource status of the vills.
Nabastha (Bardhaman)	701	6.82	142	0.13	Canal and Sub-soil water
Matha (Purulia)	2065	24.63	2195	5.62	Forest
Taltore (Birbhum)	1307	12 .44	1169	1.97	Canal water
Sanyasipara (Jalpaiguri)	563	6.12	139	0.38	Tea garden
Dwarbasini {24 Pgs. (North)}	804	7.25	-	-	Cooperative water tank
Radhaballavpur {24 Pgs. (South)}	5780 (4478)	44.27 (34.30)	-	-	Sea coast prawn
Arjunjora (Purulia)	1155	11.74	748	2.17	NGO - forest area

N.B. : Figures in parentheses indicates collection of prawn spawn.

A few points about this Table. First the estimates in the Table do not include the opportunity cost of gathering the resource. Second, we have taken a gross category of the poor here- we need to

disaggregate and it is almost certain that the poorer the household, the greater their dependency on cprs, so we will probably find an average of about 25% of income made up by cprs for poorest households. Let me make three points about the Table:

1. On average cprs make up about 10-12% of household income of the gross category of the poor across the whole State. We need to do some further calculations on this, but if average household income for poor households is Rs. 8000, then cprs add about Rs.800 a year to poor households' income, or the equivalent of about 40 days male agricultural labour.
2. There is a very clear differentiation between benefits gained from cprs by poor and non-poor households.
3. In areas where mechanization of agriculture is most advanced (Bardhaman and N. 24 Parganas), poor people gain least access to cprs.

Our study notes some other patterns common to access to cprs by the poor. The most important of these is that across all villages and agro-ecological regions, access to cprs by the poor is decreasing. Respondents with whom we discussed local resource uses and with whom we worked on resource histories all said there had been a dramatic decline in access to cprs between the 1950s and today. There are several reasons for this. First, as already noted, is mechanization of agriculture. This has some unintended effects - for example HYV do not provide anywhere near the amount of grains for gleaning as traditional varieties (see also Das *et al* 1996). Second is reclamation of waste land and grazing land for agricultural use, for example in the Barhdaman village where waste lands and marshland has been reclaimed since the 1960s. This also relates to the land reform policy of the government of West Bengal which has provided land that was formerly accessed by the poor to private owners. And third is increasing privatization of resources, usually for sale in the market. The most blatant example of this is the case of Radhavballavpur, the village in South 24 Parganas situated on the bank of the river Matla. Poor people in this village go to the river for seven to eight months of the year to collect prawn spawn. The introduction of mechanised boats in the recent past had severely affected the catch of both prawn spawn and other. The problem had become exacerbated by the introduction of trawlers, which has changed the pattern of habitat of prawn and other fishes and this had adversely affected spawning and growth of prawns as well as other fishes. The composition of the recent catches showed that many species had disappeared due to indiscriminate and over fishing by the trawlers as well as by the mechanised boats.

We also have a lot of information about class and caste wise gathering and the types of resources that are gathered which I will not get into here.

To give you a sense of what kinds of resources were gathered by poor households, here is the example of Taltore in Birbhum District.

Fuel (fallen leaves, dry branches, cow dung):	61%
Fish (caught in the river and paddy fields):	17 %
Fodder (mainly grass):	7%
Vegetables and fruits:	7%

Gleaned grains:	5%
Tubor crops (potatoes):	3%

I want to give a very brief case study now of one of the villages, Dwarbasini in N. 24 Parganas. Being relatively close to the Bangladesh border, this village has been the home of Bangladesh refugees that have swelled the population which is now 1301 persons per sq. km. Waste and marsh land which was formerly open access has gradually been converted to crop and residential land. I mentioned earlier the bias against the poor and in favour of the 'community' in much of the recent literature on resource management. There is an interesting case in Dwarbasini village of how management of a resource by the 'community' has led to the exclusion of certain groups which formerly accessed the resource. In the 1950s, poor people had access to tanks of up to 100 acres from which they would collect fish, oysters, lotus, lilies and various spinaches. But with the formation of Co-operative Fishing Societies the rights of access to these tanks has been strictly confined to the members of the societies.

Example of co-operative management of a tank - who benefits and who is excluded Dwarbasini village, N. 24 Parganas

In the village there is a tank of 86 acres. This was formerly owned by a *zamindar*, vested in the state in the 1950s, and uncultivated up until 1959. The water lilies (for food) and lotus (for puja) were collected by women. Cattle could graze, small fish could be collected, and various wild foods were also collected.

In 1959 a group from the fisherman caste emigrated to the village from East Pakistan. They set up a co-operative with the help of the relief and rehabilitation Dept. and the Dept. of Co-operatives. They received financial assistance for renovation of the tank.

Since then this group has been cultivating the tank. They have set up rules and regulations which exclude non-co-operative members from fishing the tank. Now there are 30 households involved (which have now become middle class) with 70 members. Members are allowed to harvest 5 kg. of fish a day, with 50% of that goes to the co-operative. Adult males aged 18 and above can apply to join, women cannot become members.

The co-operative has also bought land which they lease out to members. STWs have been installed on these. Co-op also buys seeds.

An area which previously had open access and used by women is now restricted to a limited number of relatively well off men.

3. Conclusions

Though there is little bench-mark data to get an idea of changes in access to cprs over time, there is evidence to suggest a dramatic decline in such resources during the last several decades. Poor people are being systematically excluded, across a range of resources and agro-ecological zones, from resources to which they have probably customarily had access for generations. This has been noted elsewhere in India but for the first time here in West Bengal.

Related to policy and cprs, there are several points to make:

First, there needs to be a recognition and understanding of the problem. We have tried taking our research findings directly to decision makers in West Bengal and Bangladesh and have organized workshops for researchers, practitioners and decision makers in Bangladesh and West Bengal on poor people and their environment in South Asia. We circulated the findings of these workshops to about 500 policy-makers and others in briefing form (Beck 1998). Attempts to take research findings directly to decision makers have not left me optimistic. The reaction is partly that cprs are part of a rural setting that is disappearing as agriculture is transformed and rural industrialisation is advancing. Perhaps if it was 10% of decision-makers' salaries that was about to disappear they might be more interested.

Second, attention needs to be given to remedies. The universal panacea being attempted in many countries these days, management of natural resources by 'communities' (Baland and Platteau 1996) will not work to the benefit of the very poor in Bangladesh or West Bengal unless there is extensive state or NGO intervention because of the skewed distribution of wealth and power in villages. But that level of intervention in West Bengal is unlikely. So a different model that guarantees the rights of the poorest needs to be tried as well.

Third, policies such as land reform or privatization of tanks may mean that certain groups among the poor benefit but others lose. Unfortunately this is a zero sum game and it is often the most marginalised group most dependent on natural resources - poor women - that lose most.

Fourth, we need to re-think models of resource use and management which have tended to focus on those who can organize and manage the resource. If a key condition for resource management is exclusion (Bromley 1992; Ostrom 1992), we need to pay more attention to those excluded - usually the poor. We also need to move on from the open access-community managed polarity and think in terms of the complexity of rural systems, where many resources do not fall into either category but depend on a system of class relations and negotiation and conflict between classes. In this way we will gain a better understanding of how poor people have customarily gained access to resources, and how their customs can be supported by outside intervention.

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