



## Same platform, different train: the politics of participation

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*An analysis of the limited success of participatory efforts in forest management with a focus on India.*

[Joint Forest Management in India has been accused of using local people as sources of cheap labour. In the photo: a woman carries forest tree seedlings](#)

### Conflicting interests, differing perceptions

What divides is often as important, if not more so, than that which is held in common. Even words and concepts whose meaning is often assumed by their users to be "self-evident" may convey different meanings to different people at different times and in different places. For instance, 'forests' is a seemingly uncontroversial word used to describe a land cover category but its meaning is interpreted differently by different interest groups, thus resulting in heated discussions of what forests are and what they should be used for.

Degradation of the forests has radically different meanings for different groups of people because of differing consequences, inevitably giving rise to different approaches to tackling environmental degradation. The preferred response of many planners, politicians, development practitioners, civil servants and heads of industry lies in forms of management which are instrumental and (inevitably) top-down. Acting on "objective data", managers plan, mobilize and "clear space for action". People are "tapped", "mobilized", "brought out of traditional isolation", "empowered" or cajoled into "collaboration" so that they can carry out the managers' designs - or they become "obstacles" to be removed. The management of people is justified in the name of environmental protection. Meanwhile, the physical environment becomes a terrain to be reordered, zoned and parcelled up according to some preconceived "master plan".

By contrast, for grassroots groups who rely on the forests for their livelihoods, the debate is often not only over such technical issues as how to conserve soil or what species of tree to plant, but also over how to create or defend open, democratic community institutions that ensure people's control over their own lives. Central to the demands made by group after group are calls for local control over resources; for authority to be vested in the community - not in the state, local government, the market or the local landlord; for the power to review and even veto implementation of centrally planned development projects; for agrarian reform; and for a politic that is committed to addressing inequitable power relationships at all levels of

society - not only between communities but within them. For such groups, the question is not simply how their environment should be managed, but whose environment gets managed by whom in whose interest. As such, the struggle is for more than the mere recognition of rights over the physical commons; it is also a struggle to restore or to defend the checks and balances over the use of power which affects the local community.

## Participation in context

Given the existence of such different perceptions of what constitutes environmental degradation, it is not surprising that the growing enthusiasm among forestry departments worldwide for "participatory" forms of forest management - and for participatory approaches which stress "community-based resource management" - arouses deep suspicion, even within those movements for whom participation in and community control of forests are central demands. One reason for such suspicion is that few of the institutions now pushing for "participation" a "warmly persuasive word" which seems "never to be used unfavourably" (Williams, 1976) - have a history of taking it seriously.

The literature is replete with examples involving not only multilateral and bilateral development agencies but also the non-governmental sector- where the rhetoric of participation is not matched by realities on the ground. The forest policy of the World Bank, for example, states that the "Bank will stress new approaches to the management of protected areas that incorporate local people into protection, benefit sharing and planning and will highlight the need to consider the needs and welfare of forest-dwelling people."

According to a 1994 internal Implementation Review, the policy has been successfully implemented by Bank staff. The review states that the Bank has focused its assistance "on helping governments ... empower rural people to better conserve and manage all forests" and "incorporated into its work the need to involve stakeholders with interests in the forests" (Lohmann, 1994).

Policy documents are one thing, however, their implementation another. The experience of villagers in northwestern Thailand, where the Bank was planning a major "conservation" project, is illustrative. As a critic of the project wrote at the time: "I have in front of me hundreds of pages of a Pre-Investment Study for (the project) .... The project is slated for an area, the Thung Yai-Huai Kha Khaeng sanctuaries, inhabited by thousands of Karen people who speak a language distinct from that of the Thai majority. The project calls for their eviction. Yet not one of these hundreds of pages of bureaucratic English has been translated in Thai, much less Karen: much less communicated to, much less discussed with, much less agreed to by the local Karen people in the sanctuary to be affected. This in spite of the fact that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have requested Thai translations of all this material ..." (Lohmann, 1994).

### [A view of a forested area in Karnataka, Western Ghats, India: forests used for multiple products and services](#)

### [Under the ODA Western Ghats Project, gaps in the forest should be planted with multiple species to restore the natural mix of the forest](#)

Other agencies are no less culpable. A 1998 review of European Union (EU) development assistance for forestry projects cites numerous examples of commitments to "participation" being ignored or flouted (Rice and Counsell, 1998). The EU-funded Leuser Development Programme (LDP) in Indonesia, for example, specifically commits the project to developing "a programme to encourage the participation of the community in the conservation of national resources and concern for the ecosystem". Yet, NGOs report that local communities were never involved in the planning and implementation of the project. One consequence is that

plantations set up by the project have been repeatedly burnt to the ground.

Even where agencies have taken steps to involve communities, there is often evidence that such "participation" is merely a means for engineering consent to projects and programmes whose framework has already been determined in advance - a means for top-down planning to be imposed from the bottom-up. Consultation is often desultory. The Catholic Institute for International Relations, for example, recounts the outcome of one "participatory" project in southern India, which involved 19 village women being given a bank loan to buy a dairy cow. Less than 10 percent of the women used the money as intended. When questioned by project staff, the women expressed anger at having been treated as passive know-nothings by the project staff: "You did not ask us if we wanted dairy animals", "I would rather have had a loan to start a tea business", "I wanted to retrieve my mortgaged coconut trees" (CIIR, 1995). Happily in this instance, the outcome was not detrimental to those involved in the project, which, as CIIR points out, had broad local support (CIIR, 1995). In many other cases, however, local people become effectively "trapped" into projects whose ends may be far from beneficial for the majority of the local community. In some cases, "participatory", "self-help" schemes or "food-for-work" programmes have been used to secure cheap labour for infrastructure projects (Chambers, 1995; Nelson and Wright, 1995; Peters, 1996) and, in others, to soften the social and economic consequences of policies, such as structural adjustment programmes, which have exacerbated social and economic inequalities and eroded the position of poorer sections of the community.

Given this political context, it is not surprising that many community groups see the new vogue among development agencies for forms of participatory development as attempts to undermine actively their attempts to reclaim control over the institutions, forests, fishing grounds, fields and rivers on which they rely for their livelihood. The case of Jains Forest Management (JFM) illustrates the point.

### **Joint Forest Management in India**

In India, JFM (and its more recent incarnation, JFPM -Joint Forest Planning and Management) has played an increasingly important role in forestry projects and programmes since the late 1980s. Following widespread protests against both the degradation of forests through industrial forestry and the exclusion of local people from forest resources throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Indian Government initiated a series of social forestry programmes to meet local needs for firewood and other forest products through the active participation of villagers in plantation forestry. Far from defusing the protests, however, the widespread takeover of communal lands for commercial plantations (chiefly eucalyptus for the pulp and paper industry) rather than woodlots for villagers led to still further unrest, with villagers uprooting the eucalyptus.

The evident lack of success in these early efforts prompted the government to revise its forest policy: it required forest departments to make commercial exploitation of forests secondary to forest management for environmental benefits and for meeting the subsistence needs of local people; it called for the protection of villagers' customary rights to the forests; and it advocated greater participation by local people in the protection and development of those forests from which they derived benefits, such as fuel wood, food and timber (Feeney, 1997).

In June 1990, the Ministry of the Environment proposed that usufruct rights to specified forest lands be granted to those village communities who formed themselves into an appropriate village-based organization with the specific task of regenerating degraded forests (Arora, 1994). The work undertaken, it was stressed, should be strictly supervised by the forest department, as should the villagers' access to forest products. NGOs, the circular suggested, should be encouraged to play an intermediate role between the forest department and the villagers. Sixteen states have now made changes to state forestry laws to enable such "joint

forest management" to be implemented (Feeney, 1997).

Significantly, in Orissa and West Bengal, the two states which led the way in adopting JFM, the promulgation of formal provisions for participation took place only after numerous village groups had already set up their own organizations to protect local forests. In effect, "people's participation and people's power preceded, rather than resulted from, policy change in these areas" (Arora, 1994).

### **Western Ghats Forestry Project**

In a number of states, however, JFM came to India not so much as a result of domestic institutions responding to popular pressure as from international agencies doing so. In the State of Karnataka, for example, peoples' movements were extremely active throughout the 1980s (and, indeed, for decades beforehand) in defending and regenerating forests. While the Karnataka State Forest Department (KFD) all but ignored the national shift towards JFM, it did take the opportunity to cash in on national and international concerns over forest degradation by drawing up a funding proposal for an extensive tree planting programme in the Western Ghats area and submitting it to the Overseas Development Administration (ODA), which had previously funded a number of social forestry projects in the state. Entirely lacking from the proposal was any element of peoples' participation. Local people featured instead as a source of cheap labour for replanting schemes. ODA agreed to consider the project, provided people's participation and poverty alleviation were incorporated.

#### **[Heavy chemical industry established in a high biodiversity area in the Western Ghats. Involving local people in resource use decision-making might have affected the location of the plant](#)**

A series of workshops with the KFD and local NGOs followed and the project was substantially modified, although NGOs still expressed considerable concern. In April 1991, a final project document was drawn up by the KFD incorporating participation plans (largely based on proposals drawn up by United Kingdom forestry experts) that would bring joint forest planning and management to the Western Ghats. The British Government agreed to commit £24 million to the project.

The stated aim of the Western Ghats Forestry Project is to enhance and improve the management capacity of the KFD, in particular, to enable it to respond to the conflicting demands from different users for access to the forest. Under the scheme, the forest has been divided into five zones: Zone 1 - ecologically important areas; Zone 2 uninhabited forest areas with a potential for commercial exploitation; Zone 3 - areas with pockets of forest dwellers; Zone 4 boundary-edge forests near settlements (mostly degraded land); Zone 5 - common land outside the forest. Villagers are permitted to participate" in the management only of those lands in Zone 4.

### **Decided in advance**

Although NGOs played a key role in modifying the project to incorporate greater involvement of villagers and a poverty-oriented focus, these modifications were simply tacked on to an existing framework. The project's goals had already been decided by the KFD and ODA; NGOs were consulted only on how those goals might best be implemented. Had NGOs (let alone villagers) drawn up their own project, rather than modify someone else's, it might have taken a very different shape. Instead of seeking to conserve the forests by dividing them into zones and encouraging the planting of degraded land, for example, many villagers might have pressed for stiff career penalties and enforcement mechanisms - to be introduced within the KFD against forestry officials who accept bribes for handing out logging concessions. They might have argued for money to be spent on elephant ditches and electric fences to safeguard

crops from forest animals, thus increasing term incomes and helping to overcome some of the hostility with which many farmers regard the forests. They might have demanded village roads to be upgraded (or built) in order to improve access to markets, or for mining activities within the forest to be halted, or for the ban on felling of live trees to be effectively enforced. They might have pointed to local institutions that were already managing local commons or tending local sacred groves as better forums for managing the forests than the imposed village forest committees. They might have pressed for land reform or measures to secure tenure for poorer villagers. They might have argued against planting as the best way of restoring degraded lands, pointing to the many instances in the region where unaided regeneration has proved highly effective. They might have warned that establishing plantations on village commons could disadvantage the poorer villagers who rely on these lands for various uses and products, and they might have pressed for full legal control over much larger areas of forests than just Zone 4.

### **Village forest committees**

Under the project, villagers are encouraged to form village forest committees (VFCs) with responsibility for conserving and restoring specified areas of forest and sharing the benefits (for example, sales of timber from plantations) with the KFD. Any change of access or use which has an impact on local communities should be arrived at through consultation.

In many cases, however, the KFD has established plantations even where no VFC has been formed. As Patricia Feeney of Oxfam-UK reports: "Although public meetings were held ... to tell the local community about the project and to listen nominally to their suggestions about planting, nurseries had already been raised and pits dug before any consultation occurred. Planting was pre-determined by the KFD" (Feeney, 1997).

Where VFCs have been formed, the meetings have often been held at short notice at the convenience of the KFD, officials of which kept the minutes of meetings held and managed the funds, leading to suspicions that the VFCs had been set up solely to satisfy ODA's conditions of funding.

Although VFCs are supposed to ensure the participation of all sections of the village in deciding planting regimes, many are dominated by more powerful social groups within a village and by men. Moreover, as Feeney (1997) notes: 'Those villagers who become members acquire the responsibility and authority to compel the non-members to conform to the VFC's decisions regarding areas of forest to be protected and to respect new rules about access to and use of forest produce. This can have a dramatic impact on the rights of the poorest villagers to collect non-timber forest products on a day-to-day basis to meet their subsistence needs .... Denial of such rights has serious equity implications and may become a future source of conflict.'

In effect, the VFCs directly or indirectly reorder access to and rights over the environment, generally (though not exclusively) in favour of the landed elite groups who dominate the VFCs, even in villages which have full membership (Saxena *et al.*, 1997).

One reason for the dominance of elite groups on the VFCs is the methodology used by the KFD when initiating new VFCs. Generally, forest officers tend to contact those whom they consider to be the most important people in the village who also happen, in many cases, to be those with whom they have had previous contact. Usually, it is these villagers who end up being the president of the VFC or becoming its members.

Understandably, many other villagers are suspicious of the VFCs' impartiality. A recent Oxfam appraisal of the project quotes a villager from Honnavar: "What difference does this JFPM make? Our president has worked in the KFD for many years. Do you think he is any different

from them? They suggested his name as the president. And we had to agree. It's not that they forced us, but you know what will happen if we don't agree to what the KFD says. We have to live in this village for the rest of our lives" (Mitra, 1997).

### **Marginalizing women**

The voices of many women, in particular lower-caste women, have been ignored by the project, despite efforts by ODA to heed them. Originally, the KFD prescribed one representative per household to the VFC which "had the effect of systematically excluding women from the VFCs and from active participation in JFPM" (Feeney, 1997). At the insistence of ODA, the forest department's rules were amended to make "spouses" automatic members of VFCs. Even so, this still leaves many marginalized women (and men) within households excluded - for example, single women, women whose husbands have left them, second wives and widows. Where women do attend the VFC meetings, they generally "sit quietly and serve tea and snacks", while some "fail to attend VFC meetings altogether because there is no discussion of problems affecting them". Even where such discussion does take place, the voices of women are frequently ignored. In one village, for example, women complained that the scarcity of fuelwood meant that they had to spend up to three hours a day collecting a headload of leaves and twigs for cooking fuel. Only six of the 97 VFC members in the village are women, however, "so there was little objection when the VFC decided to sell off all the firewood from their 30 ha JFPM plantation instead of using it to meet local consumption needs" (Feeney, 1997).

### **DISEMPOWERING THE ALREADY MARGINALIZED**

Although the Western Ghats Forestry Project was intended to improve the livelihoods of poorer people, women, tribal people and other disadvantaged groups, in many cases it has had the opposite effect. The ODA-funded plantations have been mainly on village commons from which villagers (particularly poorer villagers) derive pasture for animals, fuel, manure, medicinal plants and other products to fulfil their basic needs.

In some villages, landless families who have encroached on common land for lack of anywhere else to grow food have been evicted to make way for the plantations, depriving them of their livelihood, without any compensation. Such evictions are the most visible examples of how the project has undermined the security of poorer villagers. An ODA-sponsored independent review of the project, carried out in 1997 in response to NGO lobbying, stressed that "in some villages" the project and the current implementation of JFPM are subtly but systematically further disempowering the already marginalized and resource poor" through "the more invisible and subtle processes of exclusion, delegitimization of their traditional resource use patterns and use of monetary and wage incentives from plantations" (Saxena *et al.*, 1997).

Under the project, gaps in the forest are to be planted with "valuable timber species", with an aim of restoring the natural mix of the forest. Yet a recent study by one local NGO reveals that, in the majority of the villages surveyed, such gaps had been planted with *Acacia auriculiformis* (an exotic tree imported from Australia); in some cases, 90 percent of the trees planted were acacia. Villagers have repeatedly asked for fewer acacia to be planted. NGOs had warned that, despite a commitment to allow villagers to plant trees of their choice, the project would encourage the further conversion of natural forest to monoculture plantations (Parisara Sanmrakshana Kendra, 1994;1995).

The irony is that village-based forest management institutions have long existed in Karnataka, as elsewhere in India. If they are no longer effective, it is in no small part due to the past policies of the Karnataka Forest Department. Under the 1924 Forest Act, for example, the then colonial government laid down that communities should be entrusted with the management of

forests immediately adjacent to local villages, many of which established village committees for this purpose. In 1979, however, the District Commissioner of Karnataka passed an order requiring village forest committees to hand over their forests to the Forest Department. In most cases, this went unchallenged. However, three villages successfully challenged the ruling in the High Court and, to this day, retain control over their immediate forest base which they managed according to their own priorities and customs. The new VFCs being imposed under the Western Ghats project reestablish nominal committees but real control over the forest remains the hands of the Forest Department.

## Power and participation

The Western Ghats project illustrates that "participation" which fails to recognize fully and interact with the distribution and operation of power within local communities and the wider society in which they live is likely to offer little to marginalized groups.

Many participatory projects rest on the dubious assumption that simply identifying different "stakeholders" and getting them around the table will result in a consensus being reached that is "fair" to all. However, such an assumption holds only if all the actors involved are deemed to have equal bargaining power (which they do not) or if the inequalities between stakeholders are viewed as a purely technical matter, the only challenge being to ensure that correct procedures are formulated for bringing the parties into contact, changing the behaviour and attitudes of those who are used to dominating, and giving "primary stakeholders" more opportunity to express their views (Nelson and Wright, 1995). Facilitating measures may be important in negotiations, but they are not enough to grant marginal groups the bargaining power they require to overcome the structural dominance enjoyed by more powerful groups. On this view, participation requires wider processes of social transformation and structural change to the system of social relations through which inequalities are reproduced. Behavioural changes, although necessary, are not enough.

## Talking truth to power

Addressing the structural causes of inequality not only demands policy changes for example, agrarian reform but rethinking the means by which such change is achieved. Many NGOs, for example, are drawn to participate in projects whose framework neither they nor the communities with whom they work have any substantive role in designing. Their conception of power as something which a small minority (the "powerful") "have" and that others (the "powerless") "lack" suggests that participation in such projects is one of the few ways they will be able to exert influence. Herein, however, lies a great irony. The "have/lack" picture of power is one to which the "powerful" have never subscribed. Industry and governments, for example, reveal a persistent and pragmatic preoccupation with grassroots resistance and the opinions of ordinary people. They are acutely aware of having to act against a constant background of opposition and of the need to manage that opposition.

Embracing projects simply because they are "there", or because an involvement offers the opportunity to put one's case to those "in power", may therefore be misguided. Rather than participating in projects which fail to reflect the political demands of marginalized groups, a better route to genuine structural change may well be to eschew involvement in them.

## Working on one's own terms

This is not an argument for non-engagement; rather, it is an argument for other forms of involvement that learn from the successes of those movements at the grassroots which, historically, have been most effective in forcing political change. Rather than participating in alliances and programmes that have been mapped out by institutions with little or no



commitment to structural change, NGOs and others might be better off forming alliances with those whose politics they share. Such alliances might well include sympathetic individuals within government departments and industry, just as they may include a wide range of other NGOs.

Such a view argues for NGOs and others to take a more politically committed approach to participatory projects - and to press donors and governments to do likewise. If international and national development agencies are serious about addressing issues of equity, sustainability and poverty reduction, they should admit the demands of marginalized and oppressed groups. This may require them to take measures that actively disempower dominant groups (for example, through the implementation of agrarian reform or, as in the Western Ghats project, promoting women-only VFCs). It may also call for funds and other forms of support (including, in some cases, their own withdrawal from projects and programmes) to be given in the spirit of active solidarity - not in order to coopt stakeholders to a preconceived agenda or with a view to empowering from outside. Perhaps the first step that agencies which are serious about participation and pluralism might take is not to reach for the latest handbook on participatory techniques, but to put their own house in order: to consider how their own internal hierarchies, training techniques and office cultures affect the receptivity, flexibility, patience, open-mindedness, non-defensiveness, humour, curiosity and respect for the opinions of others that active solidarity demands.

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