

ORAL Presentation

Identity-based exclusion: tribal women's forest tenure rights in semi-arid Rajasthan

PURABI BOSE

*Forest and Nature Conservation Policy Group, and Law and Governance Group
Wageningen University, Wageningen, the Netherlands email: purabi.bose@wur.nl*

ABSTRACT

Current trend of forest tenure reform promotes identity-based categories such as indigenous people with an assumption to provide better tenure rights access for marginalized groups. India's historic Forest Rights Act of 2006 recognizes traditional rights of the scheduled tribe and other forest-dependents dwelling in and around forestlands. This paper examines the politics of forestland access for Bhil tribal women in semi-arid tribal district of Banswara, Rajasthan, India. Data was collected using in-depth interviews with 54 key informants, and two focussed group discussions. Rights-based access approach was used to analyze outcomes of forest tenure reform on tribal women's access to individual forestland, and inclusion and/or exclusion in discretionary decision-making of forestland management. Evidence-based arguments indicate that identity-based tenure reform act as a mere tokenism and hinders tribal women's political empowerment and access to forest-based livelihood options.

KEYWORDS: Tribal women, forest tenure reform, rights, decentralization, social-identity

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WORKING DRAFT

INTRODUCTION

The current trend towards decentralization has created unique opportunities for public participation and local management of natural resources, particularly forests. Moreover, the scientific approach to forest management has been replaced with progressive participatory forest management in many countries (Ostrom 1990, see also Saxena 1999, Khare *et al.* 2000). The participatory approach received increasing recognition following the international post-Rio forest dialogue, where the term participation was integrated as an important component of sustainable development. Several developing countries, in their National Forest Program (NFP), accepted the role of people's participation in forest management within a pluralistic entity. Promoting a wide range of legitimate stakeholders and new institutional arrangements by bringing local community forest users and professional scientific foresters together to share forest management decisions soon became an accepted norm and a key criterion for donors in many developing countries.

Participatory forest management has been promoted under synonymous terms, for example, collaborative forest management, community-based forest management, co-management and joint forest management (JFM). A common underlying idea across various forms of participatory approaches is the hope that it will benefit the livelihoods of marginalized forest-dependent rural poor, promote sustainable forest governance and the political agenda of reducing the cost of forest management by the state (Agrawal *et al.* 2008). JFM or co-management (Khare *et al.* 2000), for instance, is defined as a working partnership between local communities and the state for any forest management activities undertaken by rural people as part of their livelihood strategies, irrespective of forestland tenure rights. The JFM activities may be self-initiated or proposed by external development programs. The term participation, from the perspective of forest-dependent people, is understood over a wide spectrum ranging from mere passive participant to consultant and to a powerful political position in decision making (Agarwal 2001). To increase local participation and local democracy, decentralization is promoted to “enable

local people to make decisions for themselves through their representative local authority” (Ribot 2004: 8). Political decentralization occurs only when powers and resources are transferred to authorities who are representative (elected local government) of, and accountable to, local populations.

The literature on participatory forest management and decentralization has shown mixed outcomes in different parts of the world. Blaikie (2006) points out that the outcome of community participation and decentralization has been disappointing in Malawi and Botswana due to limitation in understanding and incorporating existing management and institutional arrangements. Nelson and Agrawal’s (2008) article on comparative case-studies from sub-Saharan Africa shows that the principal barrier to community-based management is lack of downwardly accountability. Andersson and van Laerhoven (2007) studied decentralization process in Latin America and their finding shows that local politicians’ incentive structure matters; it determines and influences the local government’s initiative to encourage citizens’ participation in governance activities. In general, reasons for the failure of the participatory approach in many developing countries have been a lack of devolution of power to local communities and insecure forest tenure rights of marginalized groups (Ribot 2004). Globally, about 60 million indigenous people are almost wholly dependent on forests, and about 350 million people who live in or adjacent to dense forests depend on them to a high degree for subsistence and income (Colchester 2004). Larson and Ribot (2007: 189) argue that “forest-based marginalized communities still live in a disabling environment of policy and practice that overrides some of the positive effects of increased ‘participation’ and ownership.”

Eight percent of India’s population, or some 84 million members of Scheduled Tribes (also referred to in this paper as tribals), are dependent on forest resources for their livelihoods. The Scheduled Tribes of India could be considered as indigenous peoples of India according to definitions proposed by international institutions such as the International Labour Organization and the United Nations. The JFM program has been extensively documented (Hobley 1996, Poffenberger and McGean 1996) in studies that have highlighted the impact of the participatory approach in forest management. Khare *et al.* (2000) observe that the participation of rural forest users in forest management has led to elite capture. Sundar (2000: 275) states that JFM “is not really joint – the overall

agenda is set by the state, and the policy is unable to answer many needs on the ground, such as the need for ongoing supplies of small timber. What it does do in many cases is strengthen certain hierarchies in society.” In contrast to the mainstream rural population, the Scheduled Tribes and their plight in semi-arid areas of India has not been widely studied. In this region, the forest tenure rights of tribals are contested, forest resources are degraded, and tribal customary rights and practices are not recognized (Sarin *et al.* 1998). Sundar *et al.* (2001) explain that there is a similarity between the practice of community participation in forest management and the concept of customary law among tribal people. However, JFM has not helped the state and local communities to strengthen their weak relationship. Gadgil and Guha (1992: 123) note that “conflict between state right and tribal customary institutions continues despite JFM initiatives.”

In this context, there is an emerging need to study how participatory institutional arrangements have benefited or hindered the livelihoods of poor, forest-dependent indigenous peoples or tribals. This is more important now than before because of the new Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 (FRA) and the Rules 2007. This decentralized legislation aims to end historic injustice done to tribals and traditional forest dwellers by recognizing their forest tenure rights and involving tribal and other traditional forest-dwelling communities by empowering them to manage community forestry. This act will be implemented through the introduction of new village forest institutions by superseding the existing JFM committees in the villages. Thus, the big question is how new village forest institutions in tribal areas will ensure participation of all. This article’s main purpose is to provide an empirical understanding of the perception of participation in forest management from the perspective of marginalized tribals.

METHOD, STRUCTURE AND SCOPE

In brief, this article examines whether the participation of poor tribals (indigenous peoples) varies in different forms of community forest management (centralized and decentralized), and whether power, rule enforcement, benefit sharing and accountability of members determines people’s participation. Forest management institutions were

studied in two tribal villages of semi-arid Banswara district in Rajasthan state, India. The analysis in this article focuses on key political variables that promote or hinder the participation of local communities in forest management reform. The next section begins with a description of joint forest management and analysis – how it evolved and its political position in tribal areas. Then, the two village case studies are described using qualitative data analysis.

The selection of the villages was purposive. The village reviews focus on levels of participation among tribals, the extent of democratic decentralization carried out and the key actors involved in new forest rights reforms. In doing so, the central role of the village assembly – *gram sabha* – in influencing decisions about forest management at village council or *panchayat* level is analysed. The village selection was also determined by their tribal population and dependency on forest resources. All households in the two villages comprised small farmers with agricultural landholdings of half a hectare on average, and most of them claimed tenure rights to state forestland. The analysis reviews the institutional dimension of participatory forest reform on two aspects: representativeness and decision making.

The data collection was carried out in August and November 2008. Semi-structured questionnaires, interviews and focus-group discussions were used to gather information about the users' perspective and their perception of the situation based on their experience. The questionnaire included both open and closed questions. The first author, knowing the local languages, interviewed the people in the Hindi, Gujarati and Bhili dialects with the assistance of a vernacular interpreter. A scaling method (in closed-type questions) was used to measure people's participation, and response descriptions against each item were given on a 3-point Likert-type scale (always, rarely and never). Data were collected from all occupied households in the two villages, that is, a total of 82 households including adult men and women. Since the data are based on the perceptions of tribal and traditional forest-dependent people, they are open to an inherent subjectivity challenge. Because of funding restrictions, it was only possible to collect data once. In view of these limitations, it should be stated that the aim is not to generalize the role of local institutions in forest management. Neither is it to examine whether democratic decentralization policy (through the FRA 2006) improved the forest resources condition;

that is beyond the scope of this study. The aim of this article is to provide some lessons about the conditions under which forest governance initiatives that involve poor tribal communities may lead to a win-win situation.

PARTICIPATORY FOREST MANAGEMENT

Centralized people's participation through JFM (1990 to 2005)

The joint forest management or JFM program in India is one of the largest participatory efforts undertaken by any state in the world. It began in mid-1990s by forming more than 10 000 village forest institutions or committees and involving them to work with state forest departments to protect and regenerate about one and half million hectares of forestland, mostly degraded government forestland (Agrawal and Saigal 1996). In 1988, the National Forest Policy explicitly identified the importance of participation by local communities in forest management, particularly the Scheduled Tribes. However, the broader interests of people's participation were determined by the 1 June 1990 circular of the Government of India.

JFM is justified as a strategy under which the forest department and the village community enter into an agreement to jointly protect and manage forestland adjoining villages and to share responsibilities and benefits. The institutional structure of JFM committees consists of a general body with representation of all households, and an executive body with representation of elected members, with a minimum of 33 percent of seats reserved for women and other disadvantaged groups.

A recent estimation by the Indian Institute of Forest Management, Bhopal, is that around 20 million hectares of forestland are being managed by some 90 000 JFM committees covering almost all states in India. The increase in the number of JFM committees could mean a positive trend towards decentralized, community-managed forest practices. Almost a decade after the first guidelines of 1990, another notification, dated 21 February 2000, was issued. Key points raised by this JFM circular were: (a) registration of village forest institutions under the Societies Registration Act, (b)

participation of women in JFM, (c) extension of JFM in good forests, (d) preparation of microplans in JFM areas, (e) recognition of self-initiated groups, and (f) contribution for regeneration of resources by the village forest committees. This guideline was a crucial step towards empowering the JFM committees, but it had some limitations. First, it lacked clarity on the role of the *panchayat* (village council) in the JFM program. Second, the guideline suggested allocation of a 33 percent and a 50 percent reservation quota for the executive and general body of JFM committees, respectively. The criticism regarding these quotas was that they failed to ensure appropriate support for empowering women in the decision-making process. Third, the guideline did not specify the role, responsibilities and power of the forest department and the JFM committees in protection and management of forests.

On the basis of the feedback, the Ministry of Environment and Forest incorporated some of the suggestions and issued a modified circular no. 22-8/2000-JFM (FPD), dated 24 December 2002. This version stresses three points. Firstly, a memorandum of understanding is to be signed between the forest department and JFM committees. Secondly, a balanced relationship is to be maintained between JFM committees and *panchayats*. The guideline suggests that the unique and separate non-political identity of the JFM committees as the guardians of the forests should be maintained and ensured. The benefits accruing from non-timber forest product sales should be shared with all the members of the *gram sabha*, including the JFM committees. Lastly, capacity is to be built for the management of non-timber forest products. However, Indian forest department officials continue to perceive the risks of formally recognizing the participation of multiple stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Twenty years ago, Chambers *et al.* (1989) observed that, although changes were happening, the attitude of forest officials remained conservationist, with forest-dependent poor people regarded as extractors rather than as joint managers. This holds true even today in some Indian states, and it has caused widespread resistance from indigenous and other marginalized groups and in general has led to public disillusionment. The revised versions of JFM regulations and circulars failed to address the forest tenure rights of tribals; this may influence their participation in forest management (Bose 2008).

Decentralized forest right reforms for tribal people (2006 onward)

The scientific forest management initiated during the colonial period strategically deprived the tribals of their customary forest tenure and community forest management rights (Gadgil and Guha 1992). The FRA, prepared by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs for the first time in independent India, recognizes the rights of forest-dwelling communities. The act recognizes and vests the forest rights and occupation on forestland of forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers who have been residing in such forests for generations but whose rights could not be recorded.

The FRA provides for the recognition of forest rights of other traditional forest dwellers provided that for at least three generations prior to 13 December 2005 they have primarily resided in and depended on the forest or forestland for *bona fide* livelihood needs. The act also recognizes the right of ownership access to collect, use and dispose of minor forest produce that has been traditionally collected within or outside village boundaries. One of the unique features of the act is that it provides for the right to hold and live on forestland under individual or common occupation for habitation or for self cultivation for livelihood by a member or members of a forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribe or other traditional forest dwellers. However, the rights conferred under the act are heritable but not alienable or transferable. Gadgil (2007) observes that, considering the failure of the government's top-down forest management control approach, the FRA provides an opportunity to the Scheduled Tribes and other forest-dwelling communities to adopt a participatory approach to resource management.

As per the act, the *gram sabha* or village assembly has been designated as the competent authority for initiating the process of determining the nature and extent of individual or community forest rights, or both, that may be given to the forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers. The *gram sabha* is given the authority to form village-level forest-right committees. The final decision rests with the district level committee. The district level committee is also the authority that would decide the period for which a forest-dependent Scheduled Tribe's forest rights should be derecognized in the event of repeated contravention of the provisions of the act. Therefore, there is concern that, although the act envisages the involvement of

democratic institutions at the grassroots level, the *gram sabha* does not have the power to recognize forest rights or enforce such rights.

The act provides that the committees shall consist of officers of the Department of Revenue, Forest and Tribal Affairs of the State Government and three members of the *Panchayati Raj Institutions* at the appropriate level, of whom two shall be Scheduled Tribe members and at least one shall be a woman. The *Panchayati Raj Institutions* are three-tier government bodies, the lowest level of which is the *gram panchayat* or village council. Previously implemented JFM in the tribal villages is expected to be superseded by the new progressive forest rights act. The effect of new parallel participatory village forest institutions on JFM institutions is highlighted in this paper.

THE STUDY AREA

This section briefly describes two cases of participatory forest management. The study villages in semi-arid Banswara district are situated in the southernmost part of Rajasthan state in western India, which is home to over 95 percent of the indigenous or Schedule Tribe population. Rajasthan, the largest state in India, has a total geographical area of 342 239 sq.km., 10 percent of which is forest area. The Scheduled Tribe district, Banswara, has a Scheduled Tribe population of 1 085 272, that is, 12.57 percent of India's tribal population. The forest type is dry-deciduous; it is common in most places to find denuded and highly degraded forestland. Commonly dominant timber tree species in the forests are teak (*Tectona Grandis*), sal (*Shorea Robusta*), sevan (*Gmelian Arorea*). For consumption purpose, tribals gather minor forest produce such as tubers, fruits, honey and medicinal plants. In addition, some of the minor produce is sold in local markets such as firewood, fodder grasses, seeds of drought-resistant *ratanjyot* (*Jatropha Curcas*), which is in high demand for bio-diesel, and *khakhro* leaves (*Butea Monosperma*) used for making leaf-plates.

The largest forest-dwelling marginalized Scheduled Tribe in the district are the Bhil. Historically, the Bhil in this region have struggled to maintain their identity and customary tenure rights by resisting the dominant groups in society. The Bhils continue to recognize the traditional system of social control and stay in a *falia* (hamlet) that

represents a common clan. Mosse (2005: 145) aptly summarizes the situation as follows: “Bhils have been patronized and disciplined, displaced or protected, integrated or excluded, reformed or rescued, ennobled or accused in colonial or post colonial policies on the tribal or in contemporary environmental debates on deforestation or dams”.

The two cases were selected on two main criteria. First, the site had to have JFM, and the implementation of the new FRA legislation had to be in progress. Secondly, the site had to contain a high population of tribals who depended on forest resources for their livelihood. The following findings are based on data analysis; this first draft paper will be further elaborated and improved for final publication.

Table 1. Profile of study villages

	Village A	Village B
1. Demographic profile	Revenue village*	Revenue village*
a. Population and user community	52 households; heterogeneous community; poor tribal majority	85 households; heterogeneous community; poor tribal majority
b. Economic composition	Rain-fed farming; 0.5 hectares of land; seasonal migrants	Rain-fed farming; 0.5 hectares of land; seasonal migrants
2. Forest profile		
a. Status	110ha forestland; households located inside forest area	210 ha forestland; shares boundary with other two villages
b. Forest mgmt prog	Forest dept initiated JFM committee with donor funding in 1990; current status of committee: defunct	Forest dept initiated JFM committees with NGO support in 1990; current status of committee: non-functional
c. Decentralized forest mgmt through	Yes, village forest institution committee formed	Yes, village forest institution committee formed

the FRA		
3. Benefits of JFM	Minor forest products	Minor forest products

* A village with definite surveyed boundaries.

Description of participatory and decentralized forest management in villages

Village A

The village population consists of tribals (Bhils and Bhilalas) – the majority – and non-tribal community members who are recent settlers in the village. The forest was traditionally managed by the tribal communities. There are at least four key stakeholder groups in village A: local people, forest department, revenue department, *panchayat* (village council). Village A shares its *panchayat* with another five villages.

Several reasons were mentioned by locals regarding their interest in collaborating with the JFM program promoted by the forest department. All respondents perceived the entitlement to forest product collection and a 25 percent share of the income accruing when the trees are finally harvested and sold (benefit sharing) as the major incentive to form the JFM committee. Before the JFM initiative, the forest department had restrictions on local (mainly tribal) communities extracting minor forest produce. Because locals depend on forest resources for their livelihood, the benefit-sharing aspect was an important issue for local people's participation. The second factor that influenced participation was decision making and planning in the implementation of the JFM program. The forest department promised to register the JFM committee and provide financial assistance to carry out all the planned activities.

However, local people's participation in JFM was limited to forest protection. Only members of a small elite non-tribal community were selected as executive committee members and enjoyed power to control the forest resources. Poorer tribal communities could not afford the time to actively participate in the JFM activities as most of them worked as unskilled labourers in neighbouring cities. They participated actively and widely in forest protection, forest planting and other implementation activities, but they did not receive any capacity-building training. The elite non-tribal members imposed fines on collection of firewood from the forest. This conflicted with the traditional forest

management practices of poorer tribal communities. Almost 90 percent perceived loss of trust in the forest department as the main underlying cause for the non-functioning of JFM committees – the reason being that the forest department converted the forestland into a reserved grass belt, and this restricted the amount of grass that the members could extract from their forestland. Secondly, the lack of involvement in decision making was another factor in tribals' discontent with the participatory approach. Tribals were not represented on the JFM committees. The JFM committee had a parallel role to that of the *panchayats*, and the committee was not accountable to the village members. The elected representatives from tribal communities were given a tokenistic role. The third factor that influenced the local people to abandon the JFM committee was the total control of the forest department in forest management; many tribals who traditionally owned the forestland were considered illegal encroachers. Moreover, the earlier proposal to share 25 percent of the proceeds from the final harvest was withdrawn by the forest department. People protested against the forest department, and a court case was initiated. However, the locals lost the case because they were unable to provide any documentary proof of such benefit-sharing claims, and because the status of the JFM committee was not that of a statutory registered organization, rather an *ad hoc* body. This incident resulted in a bitter relationship between the forest department and the local communities. It also created drift within the local communities between tribal and non-tribal communities.

The newly formed decentralized village forest institution in this village shows a high intensity of participation by the locals – mainly tribals. As there is a quota for the tribals on the executive committee of the village forest institution, the majority of the seats are held by tribals, including women. Tribal people felt that forest tenure rights (individual as well as communal) would encourage co-operation from the majority of village population in forest management. Sixty percent of respondent said that they could better manage the forest if the state recognized and approved the transfer of forest tenure to the tribals. Almost all tribal households participated in all the meetings organized by the new institution. Nevertheless, it created new forms of resistance by non-tribal elite community of the village, who received no forestland tenure rights. All non-tribal household respondents mentioned that new decentralized forest legislation as compared to JFM is non-participatory and political due to the involvement of the *panchayat* as a

stakeholder. Other stakeholders, such as the revenue department and the forest department, are also represented in the village forest institution. So far (Dec. 2008), the village forest institution has received no funds, nor has the actual devolution of power happened in the village. Forest resources are equally shared among all members of the village by the village forest institution paying small fees for forest protection.

Village B

The case and issues contended are comparable to those in village A. Village B tribals had been practising community-based forest management for more than five decades – the village had a self-initiated forest management committee. The two interview excerpts reproduced below show tribals' perception about participation, rule making and rule enforcement of the new forest management strategy.

“The situation we had earlier, JFM and the new decentralized village forest institution, was better. Our tribal customary institution though did not involve women, but it did include their needs and participation in forest management. But, this was not accepted. Therefore, we had to adapt to the new forest governance policy changes. Today, some of us are made chairperson without letting us make decisions to manage and without recognizing our forest tenure rights.”

“Our main problem with the state is that they often change the forest policies... with new policy new institutions are chosen by the state and given recognition to manage our forests. We don't have any choice but to participate. The newly formed decentralized village forest institution's key authority is the district level committee and not us.”

The key reason, according to 80 percent of respondents, for participating in community forest management is to claim statutory rights to ancestral communal forestland. Similar to village A, the forest department restricted their fodder and firewood collection. Seventy-four percent of respondents perceived that the way forest management decisions

were made without consulting with locals was inappropriate. To illustrate, 210 hectares of forestland was allocated by the forest department to the JFM committee. The committee protected the forest, and this led to regeneration of teak forests. The forest department did not share the income from the final harvest of the teak trees with the JFM committee members.

The new village forest institution (as per the FRA) has been initiated, but unlike village A, the same JFM committee members were selected by the forest department to represent the forest institution. The FRA quota system for a minimum number of tribal and women representatives in the village institutions was not fulfilled. A majority of tribal households mentioned that they never received information about village forest institution meetings, nor did they receive forms to claim individual forest tenure rights. They do not feel involved in communal forestland management.

DISCUSSION: TOWARDS INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION

The case studies presented here reveal a mismatch between tribal people's performance in community-based forest management and the idea of participatory forest reform planned by the state. Springate-Baginski and Blaikie (2007: 375) explain that "JFM is a confidence trick not only because local forest users are unaware of future cost and benefits of new JFM scheme, but is also due to the way in which deal is presented under conditions of very unequal power and knowledge". Tribal communities, as observed in this study, have become less interested in investing their time and energy in forest management because of the uncertainty about benefit sharing. In the name of participation and inclusive decision making, the forest department used a standard working plan for all JFM committees without taking local needs into consideration. The motivation to participate fizzled out in village A when donor support was withdrawn, with the consequence that wage-labour opportunities were no longer available for poor tribals. In addition, the right of local people to receive 25 percent of the net income from the forest department was not honoured in either study village, and this created distrust.

Institutional recognition was another important factor affecting the perception of locals towards joint forest management. The majority of respondents from both case-

study sites stated that the status of an institution was an important factor for them to collaborate. Although the JFM committees were promoted by the forest department, locals felt that since they were not recognized (not even registered as per requirement) most of the forest management rules were not enforced. Though some scholars of decentralization promote institutional pluralism (Conyers as quoted in Ribot 2004), this study found that tribals had little freedom to choose the institutions to which they wanted to belong.

In the JFM program, elite members – mostly non-tribal communities – were involved, and tribals were excluded. This in a way facilitated the implementation of the program because it required less capacity building and investment from the forest department. This corroborates what Agarwal (2001) terms as participatory exclusion, wherein significant sections of a society's marginalized groups, such as women and tribals, are excluded from participatory development. In case-study village B, women were nominated to the newly created village forest institution because of the quota system, but they were not told what their responsibilities were and how their position would benefit women's forest needs by undertaking forest management.

The concept of community and geographical boundaries varies in the scientific world of forest management (Khare et al. 2000). This has a significant impact on people's participation. As noted in village B, the forest had been protected by the locals for four or five decades. The traditional mode of operation was that all the households located near the forest would be part of the community management – tribal self-governance. The introduction of JFM led to the fragmentation of the traditional community, thus creating conflicts. The designation of revenue village (that is, a village with definite surveyed boundaries) as a form of community was resisted by locals who were denied their traditional rights. Broadening the involvement of actors in decision making ensures that all will be included, but this in turn can run the risk of failing to represent the multiplicity and the voices of the marginalized.

The analysis revealed that people's participation in policymaking at local level was not evident. In the JFM committees in both of the villages, participation was mainly confined to the non-tribal elite community who were selected by the forest department. In villages A and B, the JFM institutional arrangement promoted limited user involvement

in the process of regulatory decision making. The executive committee members took most of the decisions, often without consulting the village assembly. As compared to JFM, under the new village forest institution, in both the villages, tribals were involved in rule implementation.

With the implementation of the FRA, the pre-existing (though defunct) JFM committees were not taken into consideration. Even though tribals are to the forefront in participating in the new village forest institutions, they face institutional hurdles mainly created by the non-tribal elite community. Therefore, it is important to take care to ensure that the existing JFM committees are taken into consideration when new institutional arrangements are being suggested. This would have avoided the new forms of exclusion, as we have noted in both the case studies. Secondly, the risk that FRA runs relates to its emphasis on individual forest tenure rights and less focus on community-based forest management. The statutory forest tenure rights of the community were not discussed, and the communities in both of the villages were unaware of their existence as a clause in the legislation. This lack of communication further weakened the traditional community forest management system.

Decentralized forest governance introduced through the FRA clearly holds the potential for livelihood-oriented forest management. However, it requires institutional and attitudinal change in the forest department to enable them to devolve significant discretionary decision-making authority to local communities and treat them equally. It provides a real challenge for otherwise traditionally competitive horizontal line departments (revenue, *panchayat* and forest department) to collaborate in tribal areas. The inherent problem that is evident from the findings of this study is the whole approach to decentralization and participation in tribal areas that continues to be a top-down bureaucratic process.

CONCLUSION

Participatory forest management reform strategies should take into account the historical overview to ensure that current decentralized policy is applicable. Forest management through a participatory approach involves diverse actors and is a dynamic, long-term

process. The changes targeted under a participatory approach to forest reform require a long-term relationship between actors. Continuous dialogue and renegotiation are required to shape changing political relations between the main actors. At local level, there is need for a shift towards devolution of discretionary decision making and the transfer of tenure rights to marginalized tribal communities, including women. Moreover, there is need to statutorily recognize a forest management institution by different line ministries and departments managing forests in tribal areas. At national level, there is need for a constitutional approach to forestry reform in which the state should be accountable. A clear tribal policy that stresses the recognition of traditional forest and land tenure rights of tribals is a key requirement for the success of India's participative forest management. The concept of participation as coined in the western world and by external agents (donors, researchers, etc.) is evidently different from the perception of poor, marginalized tribal communities. Therefore, there is an urgent need to revisit what participation implies in tribal areas for the management of degraded forests. Equally, there is need for empirical research to examine role of participation and rights-based policies in the current decentralized approach to forest management in tribal areas.

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