

Re-imagining the forest as a resource: T
The social and economic strategies of young people in Chamoli District,
Uttaranchal.

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This paper examines children and young people's use of common pool forest resources in the middle Himalayas of India. It focuses on children and young people as hitherto ignored, but important resource users, and explores differences in age and gender in determining resource use. The paper also seeks to expand our conception of *how* forest resources are used. I draw on three case studies to show how children and young people construct the forest in varied ways.

CPRs: users and uses

This research builds on a long history of work in developing countries that has examined the local level users of common pool resources. The last three decades has seen increasing attention to local people's knowledge, and a call for 'community' participation in natural resource management (Chambers, 1983). The subsequent acknowledgement that communities are neither homogenous nor harmonious (Li, 1996, Agrawal and Gibson, 1999) has led to the examination of the specific environmental needs of different social actors, and to issues of power, access to and control of natural resources. Research began to expose the resource use practices and perceptions of previously marginalized sectors of society, and highlighted the potential problems arising from the neglect of key resource users. Agarwal claimed, for instance, that ignoring women 'may seriously distort analysis and policy on collective action in general and environmental action in particular' (Agarwal, 2000)

Such shifts in approaches to research have been important in the Himalayan region, and in the Indian state of Uttaranchal in particular, where the fieldwork for this paper was based. Struggles over forest resources has characterised the region's history, but it was the 1970s Chipko movement that highlighted the differentiated needs of particular resource users. This peasant movement, in which villagers in the Garhwal region famously protested against state control and the clear-felling of forests, emphasised the key role of women in protecting resources. It was controversially heralded by some as a women's movement (Shiva, 1988), but regardless of the political motives it was ascribed, the protest became a turning point in which women were recognised as knowledgeable users and managers of the region's forests.

However, despite increasing attention to these previously silenced resource users, and the introduction of new institutional structures and regulations, there remain gaps in our understanding of *who* is using the forests of the Himalaya. There is a need to combine an examination of gender, with an analysis of age and generation as forms of social difference. This paper seeks to address these issues by examining the role of children and

young people in forest use in Garhwal. Children make substantial contributions to the resource use activities of rural families in the Indian Himalayas, as they do in many other parts of the developing world. Yet their role has been largely ignored in analyses of resource use and management.

In addition to a narrow vision of resource *users*, our understanding of the *uses* of forests in Garhwal, and of CPRs more generally, remains partial. Vandana Shiva's essentialist notions of the spiritual relationship between women and the forest in India has been highly critiqued on several grounds, not least because of her attempt to make generalisations that cut across place and time (see Agarwal, 1992). There is a pressing need to examine the ways in which the forest is constructed as a resource for different local users at different times¹. The design and implementation of appropriate management tools is hampered by a lack of understanding of local level *users* and key *uses* of CPRs.

This paper seeks to show how a forest, or even the collection of a single forest product, may represent different resources to different people. I draw on the activities of children and young people to show how age and gender influence the ways in which young people use and construct the forest.

Children and Young People

This paper also draws on research into childhood and youth. This emerging literature proposes that children and young people are worthy of research in their own right, as competent social actors, not as potential adults or half-beings (James et al, 1998). Children are seen as active agents, continuously negotiating their positions within adult-imposed structures. Childhood theory has drawn on indirectly on early feminist literature that deconstructed the household as a consensual unit to reveal actors with different needs and bargaining power (Friedman, 1980). It presented households as being neither sites entirely of conflict or consensus, but rather arenas of both struggles and co-operation, where obligations are negotiated and fulfilled. Mayall (1994) points out that the 'continuously re-negotiated contract is a feature of children's relations with their parents', and that 'children seek to acquire greater autonomy through resiting the boundaries, challenging parental edicts, seizing control'.

However, I suggest that childhood theory might look beyond child-parent or household relations, to look more broadly at social institutions. Childhood studies might usefully draw on recent institutional theory, which constructs institutions 'not as clearly bounded, consensual social entities, but rather as a constellation of social interactions, in which people move, acquire and exchange ideas and resources, and negotiate and contest the terms of production, authority and obligation' (Berry, 1997). It draws on structuration theory and the recursive relationship between structure and agency. Giddens states that 'the actions of all of us are influenced by the very structural characteristics of the societies in which we are brought up and live, at the same time we recreate (and also to

¹ See Antje Linkenbach for an interesting exception (Linkenbach, 1998)

some extent alter) those structural characteristics in our actions' (Giddens, 1989: 18, as quoted in Cleaver, 2000). Work on social institutions also highlights the multiple ways in which social actors are positioned; 'actors may be part of many, overlapping institutions, and these institutions themselves might be intermittent, partial and invisible' (Cleaver, 2000). The approach dismisses dichotomous distinctions such as adult-child, and advocates overlapping identities, in which children and young people might slip in and out of different roles at specific times and in particular places.

I therefore suggest that the literature examining everyday use of CPRs should attend to the practices of children and young people, and that institutional theory might act as a useful analytic tool in rethinking a child-orientated model of resource use.

Research outline

This paper draws on the study of CPRs and natural resource management, and to emerging work on childhood and social institutions, to examine the forest use strategies of children and young people in Uttarakhand. The paper draws on fieldwork conducted for my PhD, in which I had two central research questions:

1. What is the role of children and young people in forest use activities?

I examined how children and young people of different ages, gender, caste and class use the forest and learn about forest use practices. I also sought to examine perceptions of the contribution young people make to the household forest use activities and the extent to which children and young people provide adjustable labour in peak work periods.

2. What is the role of the forest in the lives of children and young people?

This question looks at the forest from a contrasting perspective, and seeks to examine the ways in which the forest is constructed by children and young people. I explored the opportunities and threats offered by the forest, children's perceptions of their work and the ways in which children actively sought to accommodate their own needs and desires through the use of the forest.

In this paper I expand on the second of these research questions by examining how young people use and socially construct the forest in very different ways. Ideas of structure and agency underpin my interpretation of young people's resource use.

Fieldsite and Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted in a single village in Chamoli District, Uttarakhand in the middle Himalayas of India from January 2003 to March 2004. I needed to observe the full seasonal cycle to examine when and for what purposes the forests were used, and how constructions of the forest varied with these uses. I required a village that was highly forest dependent and where children play an important role in forest use.

The village, which I shall call Dandoli, was situated some 40km from the main road including a three hour steep uphill trek to an altitude of 2500m. Dandoli is relatively large with 200 households forming its own Gram Sabha, or local level government. Three quarters of the households are Rajputs, and one quarter Scheduled Caste (SC). As is common in this area, villagers seasonally migrate between three settlements. Between December and April they live in the lower village and from July to September they are in the upper settlement. In the intermediary periods they live in the middle village.

The village economy is based on agriculture and the associated use of the forest. Land is rain fed and household land holdings vary between 5 and 120 nalis. The major subsistence crops include wheat, barley, a variety of daals, and potatoes. Potatoes are also the main cash crop, although low prices prevented sales last year. Some young men have migrated out for work – to the Army, or service trades – but the level of remittances returning to the village remains low. There are some opportunities for manual work in the village, and the Scheduled Caste men are mostly involved in carpentry, blacksmith or building work.

The huge forests play a key role in the agricultural cycles. There is both a well established oak dominated Van Panchayat, or village forest, to the west of the village, which joins onto the State-owned Reserved forest to the north (which is also mainly oak, but with a distant pine forest). The Van Panchayat was set up in 1946 and is well managed, with complex rules and regulations set by the powerful Sarpanch.

Methodology

Throughout the research, my research assistant and I lived with one family, and migrated with them between villages. The living was basic - our most recent home was a tiny stone built room on top of the donkey's shed. There was no electricity or bathrooms, and water was a short walk away. We would spend periods of 2-3 weeks at a time in the village before returning to Gopeshwar, the District town, for a week or so to type up my hand written fieldnotes. In all I spent twelve months in Chamoli District spread over a fifteen month period.

I began the fieldwork with a full village census, after which I employed a range of ethnographic methods. The most important of these was participant observation. I chose a group of 16 key informants, including both SC and Rajput boys and girls with ages ranging from 12 to 21. I also accounted for a mix of children from families of varied landholdings.

I would accompany these key informant children and young people on their forest use activities, such as herding cattle for the entire day, or collecting dry leaves or wood early in the morning. During periods of intense agricultural work, I also joined the young people and their parents in the fields, perhaps harvesting wheat and barley by hand, or weeding potatoes. I conducted participant observation and unstructured interviews with several other individuals throughout the fieldwork.

Of the key informants, 11 girls and boys also wrote daily diaries about their work. With the help of my research assistant, we collected and translated these on a regular basis in the field. I also conducted focus groups and PRA type activities with the key informants and some other children and young people. In the quieter winter months, I was also finally able to conduct a range of semi-structured interviews. I also spend some time mapping the villages and the entire resource use areas using a GPS. I intend to convert these maps into GIS formats.

Paper outline

In the remainder of the paper, I will use three cases studies to sketch some of the ways in which the forest plays an important role in the lives of young people. Two of the case studies concern young people aged 16 and 17, followed by a story of a 12 year old girl, all engaged in the same forest use activity. Their stories highlight how the one activity in the same forest may represent different resources to different people, and how age and gender are important in determining children and young people's use of and construction of the forest. All three case studies also explore the extent to which these young people are able to use their agency to meet their own needs and desires.

Case one: Rakesh

Rakesh comes from a poor family. He is the younger of just two boys, who, having been orphaned from a young age, live with their aged grandmother. Rakesh's older brother was recently married, but his wife still studies at school and does not yet live permanently with her husband. Rakesh studied up to 10th class but was prevented from taking his 10th exams, and subsequently dropped out. Despite being only 16 years old, Rakesh is keenly aware of his responsibilities to his family and the need to earn a cash income on top of their farming work.

One of the ways in which Rakesh is able to do this is through day long trips to the forest to collect lichen which grows on the trees. The lichen is known locally as *mukku*. For the last 5-6 years, villagers have been selling *mukku* in the nearby market for subsequent sale in the plains and the production of dyes and paint. For villagers, it now fetches Rs35/kg and so, for some, it represents a profitable activity during the less demanding winter months. However, it remains predominantly the work of children and young people; few adults are able to spend the entire day away in order reach the distant high forests where *mukku* is most abundant. So, Rakesh is one of the several children and young people who spend almost every day in the forest throughout the winter, and on rest days in Spring. From 8am to 7pm, they brave the bitter winter winds and snow, and return exhausted in the darkness.

This is Rakesh's first full winter out of school, and hence the first year that he has been able to spend everyday in search of *mukku*. But Rakesh has been collecting *mukku* since he was 11-12 years old. He said he used to see other boys going, so he wanted to go too. But it wasn't just the peer pressure that provided the incentive to start; 'they were getting Rs30/kg of *mukku*', he said, 'so, it was really because of my stomach that I wanted to go'.

Because Rakesh started collecting *mukku* at a young age, he boasts that he is now an expert, particularly because of his nimble tree-climbing ability. He learnt to climb by watching others, and soon realised that it is 'at the top of the tree that you find the real money'. Rakesh now talks about his *mukku* collection as his *naukri* (or waged labour). He brags about collecting 4.5 - 6kg in a day. That is, he can make between Rs150 and 210 each day, considerably more than the standard Rs80/day for manual work in the village. It is also more than the average 3kg a day that younger boys were collecting.

Rakesh is careful to collect *mukku* only in groups of boys, and dislikes going with girls. He thinks they are 'bad' or 'useless' at collecting *mukku* because they can't climb big trees like boys can. Instead, he said, 'they hang around beneath our trees and steal the *mukku* that falls from our trees'. 'Besides', he said, 'girls just go for fun, for timepass. But the boys are serious and go just for *mukku*'.

Rakesh sometimes goes for longer trips to collect *mukku* to even more distant forests, a days walk from the village. He stays in groups for 4 or 5 days, taking cooking pots and blankets, and sleeping in caves or kutcha rainy season gosalas. Such trips allow him to spend longer in areas where *mukku* is most abundant, and hence to collect large amounts.

Rakesh had not sold his *mukku* harvest from this year by the time I left, but he told me he had made around Rs6000 last year (and this is probably a conservative figure). Given that his family's monthly expenses are between Rs500-1000, this sum represents a major contribution. He plans to buy large supplies of flour, rice etc this year. Rakesh also said that his financial contribution had last year helped to pay for his brother's wedding, which had apparently cost around Rs65,000. He expects that in the not too distant future, his winter season *naukri* of *mukku* collection will also help provide for his own wedding.

Rakesh's story illustrates how children and young people may use non-timber forest products as a means of making a substantial personal income. Rakesh's story is one of determination and industry. Like many other boys, he sees the forest primarily as an *economic resource*.

Case Two: Saka

The second case study concerns Saka, a girl of 17 years. Saka is the youngest of four children and the only one remaining in the natal home - her sister is married and her two unmarried brothers have migrated in search of salaried work. When her sister married 3 years ago, Saka left school having passed 8th class exams. Now, most of the field and forest work falls to her. The demanding agricultural cycle in the village means that Saka spends long periods of the year working 12 or 14 hour days alone in their fields. She returns home in the evening exhausted and has little time for socialising or meeting her friends. But then come the slower winter months and the lull in field work, when forest related work takes over. It is perhaps hardly surprising then that Saka seizes upon these precious opportunities to spend time with friends away from adult view. The best way for Saka to create this space is through day long trips to collect *mukku*.

When we first started accompanying Saka and her friends on *mukku* collection trips, we were somewhat alarmed when, on arriving at a distant part of *mukku*-abundant jungle, Saka would simply sit down and start chatting. We thought we were perhaps disturbing their work, but Saka gaily insisted ‘no, no, we only come to the jungle to play and chat’. She said, ‘We’ll do some work later, but this is really why we come.’ And she beckoned for us to join her.

‘If we don’t want to’, she said, ‘we do nothing all day and collect a little later. If we come back with very little *mukku*, we make up a story for everyone to tell their parents. We say we met a bear and we had to run away quickly. When we all have the same story, nobody will know what really happened’.

Their ensuing discussions focused mainly around the subjects of men and pre-marital affairs, subjects that I never heard discussed by unmarried girls elsewhere. They compared stories about lovers, about who had fallen pregnant and where they met, and teased each other about possible families into which they would be married. The girls would also discuss issues about their own bodies, asking about menstruation and whether they should be wearing a bra. Saka said they could talk more openly in this spaces than anywhere else; ‘at home, we can’t talk in front of our mothers and aunts and brothers’ wives’. Saka said that the only other time the girls meet is at religious festivals and other village ceremonies. But they agreed that those spaces were different for they were under the constant gaze of parents and possessive brothers.

Later, sometimes having not yet collected any *mukku*, the girls would have a picnic lunch; Saka, as the oldest and the obvious ring leader, would share out everyone’s roti and vegetable, while others mixed handmade spices into handfuls of snow. Eating was then always followed by rough, childlike games; pretending to steal each other’s *mukku* or pulling each other by the legs down the slippery mountain sides. They would be left filthy, often with torn clothes, but in high spirits.

By 3 or 4pm, Saka would call for the group to rapidly start collecting *mukku* to take home. They would spread out, the more skilled of them climbing nimbly up the trees. But the chat and games would continue. They would sing teasing songs, partly as a way of staying in touch with the group, as it disperses. Sometimes whilst with Saka, we heard groups of boys who were also collecting *mukku* but had come from different villages. The girls would provoke shouting matches: ‘eh grandson’, started the girls. ‘Eh girl, come here’, would be the reply. ‘No, you come here.....but what are you doing in my jungle?’ I once expressed surprise that the girls would shout in such uncharacteristic ways, but Saka coolly explained that ‘that’s how people talk in the jungle’.

Saka deeply valued these days and her ability to carve out a social space in this particular forest use activity. She reflected on how trips to collect *mukku* were different from visits to the forest to collect other products. She said ‘when we go for dry leaves or dry wood, we are always with young married women and they are afraid of being late because their mothers-in-law will punish them. So we have to collect the leaves quickly and can’t sit and chat. But when we go for *mukku*, we are just girls. We only have our parents and we

are not afraid of them. We don't have mothers-in-law to be afraid of, so we can do as we like.' Saka thus demonstrates that it is not just the specific forest activity that determines how a young person constructs the forest at any given time but also her social position. She demonstrates how her life as a young girl, and the social structures within which she is embedded, contrast with those of married women. Saka's greater spatial autonomy in this season enables her to negotiate more control over her time, whilst she acknowledges that married women of a similar age would not enjoy such agency. Although she does the work of a adult/married woman in certain seasons, Saka shows how she capitalises on her multiple identities to rejoin the young people's networks and strategies for some of the year,

But for Saka, these trips aren't without some conditions; Saka must convince her parents that she will gain for her family some financial benefit from her trips. Saka understands that, in order to maintain her bargaining power, she must alternate days when she returns with very little *mukku* with higher yield days. She has a sharp memory for how much she collected on each trip and keep track of her negotiating position. Besides, she fancies the idea of making enough money to be rewarded with a Rs30 second-hand *salwar-kameez*. But far more important than this *mukku* money is the implicit understanding between Saka and her mother that the forest offers Saka a chance to take time off, to enjoy the company of her friends and be free of the social norms that determine how she must behave in the village. That she must climb 1000m in altitude, and spend the entire day in the freezing conditions of distant jungles to find this free, social space is perhaps indicative of the social as well as physical hardship of girls in this area.

The case study shows how Saka is acutely aware of the extent of her agency. While at once pushing at the structural boundaries set by her parents (such as the amount of *mukku* she must return with) or by social norms in the village (including the manner in which girls of her age are expected to behave in public), Saka is also aware of her obligations to work. So, whilst both Saka and Rakesh regularly go to collect *mukku*, their experiences of the forest are clearly very different. The contrast lies in their incentives to collect *mukku* – for Rakesh the forest is a source of income, for Saka, it is for the rarity of a social space. The case studies highlight how gender differences determine not just the social structures in which two young people are embedded, but the opportunities, or resources, offered by the forest.

The last case study examines the *mukku* collection of a younger girl and shows how age, as well as gender is important in children and young people's constructions of the forest.

Case Three: Bina

12 year old Bina is in class 6 at the local government middle school in the neighbouring village. Bina has recently decided to live with her paternal uncle and his family, where she provides invaluable help looking after her two young nephews. Despite her young age and the fact that she spends large portions of her days at school, Bina was heavily involved in her family's agricultural and forest related work.

This year, during her month-long winter school holiday, Bina also added *mukku* collection to her forest use skills. Bina said her parents had suggested that she start accompanying her older sister, for she could begin to make a little money for the family. But Bina found the work difficult; since she has not yet learnt to climb trees where the best *mukku* is found, Bina was left to forage for *mukku*-covered twigs on the ground. It was rather fruitless, collecting but a few hundred grams by the end of the day. Bina also suffered from the physical hardship of *mukku* collection. She is small, and the long steep climbs to the forest peaks, the bitter wind and occasional snowfall tired her. On more than one occasion, Bina complained ‘I shouldn’t have come today...its too cold’.

But most of all, Bina was afraid of the forest. It was a place filled with ghosts, and where leopards, bears and wild pigs roamed. Although Bina never actually saw any of these animals, they were ever present. We listened to leopards calling every night and, shortly before Bina’s first trip for *mukku*, a leopard attacked one of her family’s cows in the middle of the village and in broad daylight. Although Bina went fearlessly to the nearby forests to herd cattle or collect dry leaves, the unknown territory of the distant, high altitude *mukku* forests offered new threats. Bina depended heavily on the company of her friends to counter her fears. She once described a really good friend as being ‘someone who doesn’t leave me alone in the forest’.

However, as Bina spent day after day in the forest, she slowly gained confidence. She began to learn where to find the best *mukku*, but more importantly, she realised that like other girls, she could make time to play and have fun. She no longer worried about coming home with lots of *mukku*, and simply laughed if she brought back a single bag. At home, Bina also learnt how to make excuses for her small harvest, asking ‘if I don’t find it, how can I bring it home?’ When her paternal uncle’s son once asked to see how much she had collected, Bina shoved handfuls of leaves into her sack and topped it up with *mukku*. When his back was turned, she emptied out the *mukku* again! Her uncle laughed at the small quantities she brought back and said that it didn’t really matter how much she brought, but he nevertheless tried to provide an incentive by promising her a new suit if she collected Rs400 of *mukku*.

So, Bina learnt rapidly how to make the best of her trips for *mukku*; the forest became as a source of playful fun as she learnt to capitalise on her family’s relaxed attitude to her rather unproductive trips. But still for Bina, the forest remains a place to be feared and where the work is difficult. For the next 3 years or so, until she is braver, stronger and has learnt to climb trees, Bina’s favourite forest work will continue to be herding cattle, when she can play with her friends while staying close to home.

Conclusion

My research reveals how children and young people form an important (and differentiated) group of resource users that has largely been ignored in accounts of forest use in Uttaranchal. In particular, the stories in this paper show how, in a single forest use activity, differences in gender and age may result in contrasting constructions of the forest. For Rakesh the use of non-timber forest products is a means of making a substantial personal income. By contrast, Saka imagines the forest as a social space in

which she can develop friendships with peers outside adult supervision. Meanwhile, for Bina the forest is a frightening place where the work is tough, but which she also slowly begins to recognise as a space for fun.

The case studies show how young people are active and creative in the ways in which they respond to their social and physical environment. They indicate how social differences not only reflect constructions of the forest, but also how age and gender are important in determining the extent and nature of young people's agency. The stories reveal how there are processes through which children learn to employ their agency and take advantage of the forest as a social and economic resource.

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