

Evolution of Forest Policies in India and the emergence of Village Forest Councils as rural institutions: A case study on Kerala in India

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a great deal of discussion on the working of village forest institutions (VFI) in developing countries with a view to understanding their role as rural institutions. In a tropical country like India, the success of any community based forest management effort largely depends on the emergence as well as role played by the institutions at local village level, which in turn is shaped and refined by the addition and omissions during the policy evolution process. The 'Village Forest Council' (VFC) functioning as part of the critically acclaimed joint forest management (JFM) has emerged as rural institutions potentially capable for sustainable forest management in India. Hence, based on the primary data from the field, along with historical evidences and secondary literature, this paper makes an attempt to understand the evolution of forest management policies in India, and also the emergence of VFCs as rural institutions in forestry through a case study on Kerala in India.

Keywords: Forest policies, Villages Forest Councils, Vana Samrakshana Samithis, Rural institutions, Kerala, India.

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a great deal of discussion on the working of village forest institutions (VFI) in developing countries with a view to understanding their role as rural institutions. For developing effective institutions for the sustainable management of forest resources, several village forest institutions (VFI) and community based forest management (CBFM) approaches have evolved globally over the last three decades. One among these approaches is the 'Village Forest Council' (VFC) functioning as part of the critically acclaimed joint forest management (JFM) in India, which works through local community-state partnerships (Bahuguna, 2002). In parenthesis, there has been worldwide interest in participatory forest management (PFM) as a potential approach for improving forest conservation and governance by institution building; and India is among the few countries in the world where such an approach has been implemented on a significant scale in an alternative style, primarily through the joint forest management (JFM) programme (Borgoyary et al., 2005), although there has also been widespread self-initiated community based forest management in some areas. In a tropical country like India, the success of any community based forest management effort largely depends on the emergence as well as role played by the institutions at local village level, which in turn is shaped and refined by the addition and omissions during the policy evolution process. Hence, based on the primary data from the field, along with historical evidences and secondary literature, this paper makes an attempt to understand the evolution of forest management policies in India, and also the emergence of VFCs as rural institutions in forestry through a case study on Kerala in India.

The broad objective of the study is to get a better understanding on the evolution of forest management policies of India and the emergence of village forest institutions in forestry.

The specific objectives of this paper are as follows:

1. To understand the processes involved and outcomes in the evolution of forest management policies in India.
2. To study the emergence of village forest councils in joint forest management and their role and shortcomings as rural institutions in forestry of Kerala.

2. Methodology

Data collection involved both primary and secondary sources.

Primary data was collected using questionnaire surveys, interviews, observations and focus group discussions. Meetings and interviews were held with Divisional Forest Officer, Range Officers and advisers, VSS representatives, and forestry department field staffs. Secondary data was collected, and secondary data directly related to PFM/JFM projects and other project reports with information relevant to the study was reviewed. Towards receiving a comprehensive picture on the evolution of forest policies and the forest management regime in India, secondary data was collected. The secondary data collation followed historical review approach of the existing literature and government documents. For understanding the emergence, institutional arrangement and implication of village forest councils in India, this paper draws ideas and conclusions largely from case studies on village forest institutions of Kerala; a southern state in India. Along with primary data, the paper presents implication and shortcomings of village forest councils called as Vana Samrakshana Samithis (VSS) in the state of Kerala in India.

Study area

Broadly the area selected for the present study falls under South Western Ghats and is located in the Adimaly, Neriampalam, Munnar & Marayur Forest Ranges (which is under Forest Development Agency, Munnar) in Idukki district of Kerala State in South India. The area falls under two territorial forest divisions namely Munnar and Marayoor on the forest administration map. The villages selected for the study included Choorakettan, Kodakallu, Kurathikudi, Edamalakudi, Pinavurkudi, Elamplassery, 5th Mile, Kanjiravelly, Neendapara, Marayur, Nachivayal and Karayur Tribal hamlets/settlements. The local population consists of mainly of Muthuvan Mannan, Ulladan, Urali, and Mala araya tribes. Some of the areas under the study also hold a relatively low proportion of Scheduled Castes (SC) families and settlers from mainstream society. The socio-economy of the area is primarily based on forest resources and traditional forest culture. Subsistence income from collection and sale of non-timber forest products (NTFP) and medicinal herbs serve as the backbone of the area's economy.

3. Evolution of Forest Policies in India- Processes and Outcomes

To get a better perspective of the evolution of forest policies in India and the emergence of village institutions in forestry, the paper provides a brief historical narrative of the various forest management regimes and their policies, starting from the pre-British era to the present.

3.1 Pre-British period

In the pre-British period, the ownership of forests resided with the rulers of the various kingdoms across India. With few exceptions, access to forests was largely unrestricted throughout the pre-British period (Guha, 1983). The institutional framework was complemented by religious and symbolic functions of trees and forests (Pretzsch, 2003) and the caste system played a crucial role in forest management. For example, the Mauryan Empire (324 BC to 180 BC) used a forest classification system, based on the requirements of different social strata: reserve forests, for the king or the state; forests donated to eminent Brahmins (priests under the caste system); and forests for the public (Dwivedi, 1980). At the village level, the use of all natural resources was managed by a local community institution known as the Panchayat, composed of five village elders who managed all village affairs. A significant part of their duties revolved around settling disputes over land, access to water, and mediating conflicts among villagers (Guha, 1989). In the non-consumerist Eastern cultures, a distribution perceived to be fair by local communities, but not necessarily equal, was sufficient to prevent the rise to serious conflicts that would have hampered forest management decisions during those times (Borgoyary et al, 2005).

In Mughal India, the empire did not tax forest holdings and the state had no direct claims over lands other than hunting preserves where hunting was prohibited but the local population was permitted to gather other materials (Borgoyary et al, 2005). Outside Mughal India, in many areas the control and management of local resources was vested in the local communities who designed a variety of practices for effective resource conservation through local knowledge and religious idioms (Borgoyary et al, 2005). Rural population often disposed only of use rights (usufruct) over land and vegetation, the property right was in the hand of the ancestors and of future generations (patrimonium) and sometimes, very well organized and intensive land use systems were elaborated, in which the natural tropical forest was simulated (Pretzsch, 2003).

3.2 British colonial period

During the British period, the sole purpose of forest management became to redistribute economic gains in favour of the colonial empire (Kant and Cooke, 1999). The whole enfolding of policy was built on economic concepts favouring higher efficiency, increased control over the people and the resource, and centralisation of power (Buchy, 1995). This was achieved by commercialization of timber, restriction of the rights of local people, and large-scale deforestation (Guha and Gadgil, 1989).

The exclusion of local people from forest resources led to conflicts between the empire and local people. The unwritten, orally laid down local knowledge was lost in the colonial and post-colonial era, when priority was given to scientific forestry approaches originating from Europe (Pretzsch, 2003). The local people searched for a solution through various non-violent movements, although some eventually turned to violent means. Their success was sporadic and limited: for example, the British agreed to community-based forest management for some forests in the Himalayas – Van Panchayats in Uttar Pradesh and to Forest Cooperatives in Himachal Pradesh (Guha, 1983). Thus, the British period created large-scale conflicts among forest managers and local people, and marked the beginning of the breakdown of a symbiotic relationship between many communities and the forests in which they were situated (Shah, 1996).

3.3 Forestry after independence

After independence, from 1947 to 1987, the Indian government tried to redefine social-utility and social-welfare functions, but the emphasis of forest management regimes continued to be on commercial timber exploitation and the exclusion of local people (Kant and Cooke, 1999). Forest management regimes did not take the cognizance of existing examples of community-based natural resource management such as village ponds, sacred forests, forest panchayat (Van Panchayat), and informal tree tenure for collection of NTFP, and continued regulatory and authoritarian forest management practices. This alienated the communities from being a responsible part of the ecosystem, and resulted into unsustainable and destructive harvesting of products and loss of bio-diversity. Peoples' participation was first experimented with the launch of social forestry programme in mid-1970s. However, the top to bottom approach with more authoritarian approach lead to failure of these programmes (Kant, 2000). Furthermore, after independence the Panchayat was transformed from a system of local governance to one of a state regulated "representative democracy" (Sarin, 1993). The former legitimacy of local leadership and the tradition of collective decision-making were abolished; in their place, a new institution, which continued to be referred to as the Panchayat, took over (Sarin, 1993).

Because of deficiencies in the institutional framework, most of the released capital left the locality, the region and even the country and incentives for local development were minimal (Pretzsch, 2003)

Subsequently, in 1980, India passed the Forest Conservation Act establishing the primacy of environmental and social service functions for forests, while placing clear restrictions on commercial logging. At the same time, forest protection initiatives by local communities emerged across India in response to growing scarcities of forest products and threats of exploitation by outside groups. These community actions were an indication of conflict between formal and informal institutions involved in forest management (Prasad and Kant 2003).

By the mid-1980s, both government and environmental circles began to admit the failure of National Forest Policy of 1952, an exclusion-based forest policy regime and its corollary effect of generating conflict between local people and forest managers. As a result, the second National Forest Policy (NFP) was announced in 1988. The policy has many features different from previous practices and according to Prasad and Kant (2003), the key aspects of were (1) it called for stopping timber supply to forest industry at a concession-price ; (2) it recognized the rights and concessions of the communities living within and around forest areas, specifically the tribal people, and (3) it suggested that the holders of customary rights and concessions in forest areas should be motivated to identify themselves with the protection and development of forests from which they derive benefits. Hence, this policy re-introduced the concept of community-based forest management institutions.

India's National Forest Policy (NFP) of 1988 and the subsequent circular on Joint Forest Management (JFM) in 1990 created space for community participation and establishment of village forest institutions (VFI) in the management of forest resources of the country. Here it strongly emphasized the necessity to address the quality of life of the 350 million people living in and around the forests (Bahuguna, 2002) and VFIs become the impetus for changing the conventional approach to that of one prioritizing environmental stability and the welfare of local communities (Pari, 1998). An increasing focus on people-centered policies, bottom-up planning processes, and decentralized governance are some of the key characteristics of this new paradigm (Ostrom, 1990). Out of 28, 25 Indian states have passed enabling resolutions for involvement of local people in forest management by June 2001 (Prasad and Kant, 2003). Later the Forest Rights Act 2006 in India strengthened institutional framework of Village forest institutions by restoring traditional rights of forest dwellers and maintaining the ecological balance with a view to provide sustainable livelihood options (WWF, 2008).

4. Emergence of Village Forest Councils

The establishment of JFM shifted the management of forests from the sole domain of the state, to joint management in partnership with local communities.

This in turn facilitated the emergence of new local institutions (Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) now known as Village Forest Councils (VFCs). In many southern states of India including Kerala, the VFCs are called Vana Samrakshana Samithis (VSS). Each village (hamlets/settlements) forms a VSS bearing the same name as the village.

4.1 Kerala State in India – the case study

Kerala has an area of 38,863 km², a southern state of India, Its 9,400 km² of forests include tropical wet evergreen and semi-evergreen forests (lower and middle elevations—3,470 km²), tropical moist and dry deciduous forests (mid-elevations—4,100 km² and 100 km², respectively), and montane subtropical and temperate (shola) forests (highest elevations—100 km²); altogether, 24% of Kerala is forested and accounts for about 9% of the total land area in the state (FSI, 2002).

4.2 Institutional set up of Village Forest Councils in Kerala

As mentioned earlier the Village Forest Council (VFC) are called Vana Samrakshana Samithis in the local official language; Malayalam. In Kerala, the Vana Samrakshana Samithis (VSS) functions under the Forest Development Agencies (FDA). These FDAs are registered under Travancore – Cochin Charitable Societies Registration Act of 1955 and as of 2008, there are 34 FDAs in the State. VSS is a society of forest dependent general population of a given forest locality with an elected president and a forest guard or forester, as its secretary (KFWD, 2008). Tribal people and women are given preference in this society. VSS, along with the forest department, nurture degraded forests and take up conservation activities under long term agreements; also apart from gaining employment, the VSS members are also permitted to share the benefits of forest produce (State Forest Policy, 2008). The 'VSS' is the prescribed institution at the village level for the protection of the forest area adjacent to their village boundary (Singh, 2003) and are also responsible for preventing forest fires, hunting, illegal logging etc. They pool in a share of their profits raised through ecotourism and sale of non-timber forest produce (NTFP) and spend them for the development of their village. As of now there are 405 VSSs in Kerala (Economic Review- Kerala, 2009).

The organizational structure and membership rules of village forest institutions differ in each state in India. The organizational setup of VSSs functioning in Kerala is given in the figure 1. In Kerala, all the members of the village community are members of the VSS. However, VSSs are run by the Executive Committee elected by the village community; a minimum of five and maximum of fifteen members constitutes the Executive Committee (EC). The members of the EC elect its president from the EC members. The president of the EC is also president of the VSS. At least one third of the Executive Committee members must be women. The forester concerned is the member secretary of the Executive Committee and facilitates the election process of the members and president of the EC. The Executive Committee is responsible for day-to-day activities of the council and meets at least once a month.

4.3 Village forest councils as rural institutions

Institutions are the formal and informal rules and regulations that serve as humanly devised constraints. They shape human interaction and help structure the incentives of human exchange, thereby decreasing uncertainty in transactions (North, 1991); and their underlying social organizations are becoming increasingly relevant for the attainment of socio-economic development and natural resource sustainability goals. This is particularly so in rural areas where a lack of cooperation, cohesiveness, and coordination frequently hampers economic progress and for this reason; strong local organizations are often touted as a key determinant of successful rural economic development (Rossi, 2007). The Village forest councils in Kerala are responsible for the management and protection of forest, harvesting of forest produce, prevention of grazing, fire, theft or damage, reporting of forest offences to the forest department, to assist forest officials in distribution of returns from forestry operations; to maintain and operate a village account; to undertake development activities using financial resources generated from forestry activities etc.

The annual NTFP revenue for some of the Village Forest Councils has already crossed US\$4,000 (Kaushal et al., 2005) and, from the initial money of US\$12,000 for buffer zones, some Villages have developed a corpus fund of US\$24,000 (Pillai, 2007). Accordingly several success stories have been reported on these rural institutions and one among these is from Periyar Tiger Reserve in Kerala where the people's institutions were able to merge ecotourism, wildlife conservation and forest protection for rural development (Damayanti et al., 2004) On the other hand, social cohesion and cooperation are generally strong in the forest areas and becoming stronger with intervention. Social status and self-esteem of women, health status and education in the rural households are found to be on the rise while migration in search of livelihood decreased; improved social capital conditions have a potential to enhance human capital (Reddy, 2009). The institutional analysis on VFC/VSS in Kerala carried out based on the focus group discussions is given below (table 2.).

Because the forest villages in Kerala are small and relatively homogenous, the problem of elite capture or marginalization of disadvantaged groups that has been observed in other Indian states has not been observed here. These village-level forest management institutions have transformed the shape of degraded forestlands as well as the deprivation of rural communities (Prasad and Kant, 2003). Hence, Vana Samrakshana Samithis (VSSs) should be viewed as an entity for an overall development of the village resources and its people, and not merely an instrument of developing the degraded forests, focusing on alleviating rural poverty (Reddy et al, 2005). As a result, community based village forest institutions have become the accepted institutional arrangements for forest management and rural development India. The reciprocity resides in the mutual quid pro quo of specific measurable actions by local people to improve conservation and project investments that foster alternative resource use and livelihood. The intervention of these social institutions formed along the fringe areas of the forests of Kerala indicates that the novel approach adopted for building bridges between people and the state forest management system are paying dividends with regard to the long term conservation of forested areas and in the overall social capital built up in the communities.

5. Shortcoming of VSS on Kerala

The ambiguity regarding the recognition and legal status of Vana Samrakshana Samithis is considered as a threat to institutional sustainability in the long run as they are treated unregistered entities under the prevailing laws and rules of the country. VSSs are registered under the Forest Development Agency (FDA) and FDAs are legally recognized bodies with more of administrative and bureaucratic representation rather than village community participation. It can be learned, that community stability depends mainly on economic benefits that are at the disposal of community members (Pretzsch, 2003). But the gender difference in benefit distribution may also hinder the institutional sustainability in the long run. In spite of the increasing social harmony within the VSS, the social cohesion between the villages has declined due to boundary conflicts arising over demarcation of VSS land. After an era of rich experience with local knowledge, social forestry and the characteristics of forest use and management by local communities, more emphasis should be given to the superordinate institutional framework (Pretzsch, 2003). Therefore, implementation of government driven institution building and capacity empowerment initiatives for the VSS could prove fruitful and effective in enhancing the effectiveness of sustainable utilization of natural resources and in turn forest management.

6. Conclusion

The historical evolution of changing community rights over forests; and the increasing state control over the resource in India, shifting towards state-community partnership is a fascinating and vast subject of study. However, tracing historically the evolution of forest polices in India revealed the shaping of forest management regime and the emergence of village forest institutions in the country. Joint Forest Management is undeniably the most important step taken since independence for improving management and governance of forests in India. The Village Forest Councils established under JFM function as local institutions to entrust greater responsibility to the local communities for the management, protection and development of public forest in partnerships with the forest departments. In areas that have been marginalized by basic development and self-government institutions, the VFCs are emerging as an important mechanism for addressing forest health as well as the wellbeing of forest inhabitants. Because of growing importance and utility of Village Forest Councils in Kerala, the day is not far when they may be recognized as an integral entity of local self-government, as a subunit of Village Panchayat. But more than anything else, it will require the unflinching will and efforts of forest department, other government agencies and local participants to further nurture these fledgling institutions and overcome the shortcomings raised here.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1

Characteristics of VSS							
Sl. No.	Name of VSS	FDA	Type	No. of Families			Area under PFM (Ha)
				ST	SC	Others	
1	Elamplassery	Munnar	Tribal	113	0	0	800
2	5th Mile	Munnar	Tribal	61	0	0	1200
3	Pinavurkudy	Munnar	Tribal	120	0	0	1000
4	Neendapara	Munnar	Fringe	32	20	195	260
5	Kanjiraveli	Munnar	Fringe	28	0	258	300
6	Kurathikudi	Munnar	Tribal	173	0	0	800
7	Choorakettan	Munnar	Fringe	81	29	5	300
8	Kodakallu	Munnar	Fringe	67	0	0	215
9	Edamalakudy	Munnar	Tribal	167	0	0	2200
10	Karayoor	Marayur	Fringe	0	0	120	97
11	Nachivayal	Marayur	Fringe	0	147	42	100
12	Marayur	Marayur	Fringe	0	0	120	300
Total				842	196	740	7572

Source: Kerala Forests and Wildlife Department, Kerala Forest statistics, 2008

Table 2

Institutional analysis on Village Forest Councils in Kerala

INDICATORS	STATUS
Policy Framework	— Comprised of policy statements by Government of India (1988 & 2000) and implementation order by Kerala state government.
Legal Framework	— Vana Samrakshana Samithis (VSS) are registered under the Forest Development Agencies (FDA) which is a legally registered body under the Travancore – Cochin charitable, literary and scientific societies Act of 1955.
Institutional Arrangements	— Forest management at the village level known as Vana Samrakshana Samithis (VSS).
Land Tenure	— Forest Department designates state government land or common degraded land without changing tenure.
Management Authority	— Government retains main authority but shares certain responsibilities with local communities under state-specific arrangements.
Management Unit	— Executive Committee of the VDC with 10-15 members including forest department staff.
Benefit Sharing	— Free access to NTFPs except for those with high commercial value where sharing of net revenue between 25 to 50% of sale value.
Rights of Communities	— All rules have to be framed in consultation with the forest department.
Degree of Participation	— Active (leadership with forest department staff)
Level of Institutionalization	— Initially project and scheme-based; government supported. Now many are self-sustaining through reinvestment of income.
Governance, access, forest management quality & contribution in social development	— Good
Sustainability	— Fair

Figures 1

Organisational setup and communication process of VSSs in Kerala
(Developed based on the study)

