
Community Forests: Emancipatory Change or Smoky Mirrors?

A groundswell of support appears to be building for community forests, if we believe the rhetoric of the World Bank, the United Nations, and NGOs all over the world. For example, Objective 3: Goal 4 in the Forest Work Programme approved by the 6th Party to the Convention on Biological Diversity reads: "Enable indigenous and local communities to develop and implement adaptive community-management systems to conserve and sustainably use forest biological diversity".

Now, no one likes a pessimist, but I have some serious reservations about the supposedly blissful track of community forests, including some of the success stories I have come to rely on in my own advocacy. I wonder, do some community forest schemes actually enable state actors to extend their reach and control over forests? That is, while community forests purport to address power and governance over forests, how many really challenge or, more importantly, change state authority? Research by Arun Agrawal in Kumaon, India, noted that even in so-called community forests, the state continues to "outline the ways in which resources can be used, define who is empowered to use these resources, and extend their control further and more intensively into given territories." (Agrawal, Arun, 'State Formation in Community Spaces', 1998) Furthermore, Agrawal's research found that these community forests did little to further the interests of the most marginalized members of the communities.

Nepal's community forests also seem to be heading down this track. Changes to National Forest policies are encroaching on community autonomy over forest lands in insidious ways. The forestry department has enacted stringent measures which make it very difficult and expensive for communities to develop and maintain control over forests. For example, communities are now required to do intensive forest inventories that the government itself does not even do on the national lands. The government is also beginning to charge high taxes on forest products produced by communities. (Kaji Shrestha, FECOFUN, pers. comm., August 2002).

Devolution of real power and authority is only one part of the community forest challenge. Community forests are bound to remain marginal if our societies (particularly those in the North, and Southern elites) remain on the current trajectory of high-throughput economic growth and industrial consumption. The most valuable forests and largest proportion of forests still remain in the hands of the state, and in large companies --where profits can be captured. It seems community forest movements need to address central issues of consumption and economic development as a part of their strategy. Unfortunately, the consumptive aspect of forest conservation has largely remained on the sidelines for governments and NGOs alike. Ashish Kothari states (in reference to the lack of reference to northern consumption in the Forest Work Programme of the Convention of Biological Diversity): "Ah, so while poor communities are expected to take action to restrict their meagre consumption, the rich will only be obliged to 'become aware' of their consumption. And then maybe, once they are aware, they will be nice enough to reduce their impact on the world." (Kothari, Ashish 'Let the Poor Pay for the Excesses of the Rich', ECO 6(2), 2002).

Community forests have the potential to create great change in the way we live with forests and each other. Community forests have the potential to empower marginalized people, deepen democracy,

conserve biodiversity, and undermine established (and often oppressive) relations of power. This is happening in many places already to differing extents. But it is not easy, nor simple. If community forestry is going to move off the sidelines, it will have to confront an entrenched system of forest liquidation and consumption. Recognizing, revealing and removing the smoky mirrors of “community forests” is a pressing challenge --community-based must mean more than communities helping the state manage national forests.

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