
India: Gender bias and disempowerment in World Bank-funded forestry projects

Elected forest councils (Van Panchayats) have been the only existing example of reasonably autonomous legal space for community forest management in India. After having managed for years demarcated village forests in Uttarakhand, the hill region of Uttar Pradesh, Van Panchayats are being replaced by top-down “participatory” forestry projects pushed by the World Bank.

In the village of Pakhi in Chamoli district, from where the Chipko movement against commercial forest exploitation had begun in the early 70's, neither the women nor the poor --targetted as primary beneficiaries of these new forestry projects-- were consulted and their existing management system was not even taken into account.

The village forest is rich in biodiversity, with mixed species dominated by oak and rhododendron, and a sprinkling of deodar (Himalayan cedar). Its primary benefits have been fuelwood, fodder, leaf litter for animal bedding and other non-timber forest products, rather than cash income. These have been critical for sustaining local agro-pastoral livelihoods, still predominantly subsistence based. Collection of fuelwood, fodder and water is almost exclusively women's work in the hills. Decisions about when to open the forest for grass, leaf and firewood collection, the rules for collection, the fines for violation, etc. were taken by the women, ensuring that forest product collection did not conflict with periods of heavy agricultural work. As no external funds were available, the women used to repair the forest boundary wall with voluntary labour.

Although pleased with having appropriated control over the village forest, the women had expressed resentment over the men leaving all the forest protection work to them on the grounds that only women need the forest. However, when important village related decisions are made, the women are often kept in the dark.

This complaint became starkly true with the introduction of “participatory” village forest joint management (VFJM) under a World Bank funded forestry project in August 1999. The offer of a significant budget for the village forest led to a rapid gender based shift in power and control. The same men, about whom the women complained of leaving all forest protection work to the women, suddenly became over enthusiastic for it. Three watchmen were employed and initially they even monopolised wage work in the project financed nursery. Only after strong protests by the women were some of them employed.

But the men too are losers. They have a similar loss in local decision making control to the Forest Department. According to the president of the council, the new VFJM reduced the villagers' role from being responsible for forest management to providing information for preparation of the microplans and working as paid labour for forestry operations. The microplans are cast in the mould of plantation projects and reinforce the Forest Department's claim to being the monopoly holder of technical forestry knowledge, as well as the pattern of forestry as the best land use even for the remaining commons. This is despite its historical lack of experience in biodiverse forest management for enhancing livelihoods and ecological security.

In the words of one of the worried women, "In their lure for money, the men have made a deal over our village forest with the Forest Department", which has in fact become the only winner. These World Bank-funded projects have thus disempowered local women and men who have protected the forest while empowering a Forest Department with a long history of forest destruction.

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