

Participating or Just Sitting In? The Dynamics of Gender and Caste in Community Forestry

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Abstract

Community Forestry has successfully promoted sustainable resource use across Nepal. But to what extent do the programs fulfill the goal of providing resources for the poorest of the poor? Although some attention has been paid to the issue of participation of women and marginalized castes within CF, there is no or limited investigation into how such members participate, the extent to which they influence management decisions and the implications of this for sustainable resource management. This article first outlines why equating gender with women is problematic and then highlights the importance of integrating other forms of social difference into an understanding of social power. Using case study data from north-western Nepal, it is shown that how implementation of community forestry needs to take into account pre-existing social relations for the programs to be universally successful.

Keywords: *community forestry, social relations, gender*

INTRODUCTION¹

Community forestry in Nepal has been a very successful program since its implementation in the late 1970s. User-groups have proliferated across Nepal and the program has been exported to various parts of the world, including Great Britain and the United States. While it seems clear that in many places community forestry has promoted more sustainable use, and more significantly, conservation of forest resources, this has not been a universal result. It is therefore necessary to ask why community forestry does not have the same success everywhere.

In this paper I argue that one of the reasons for the uneven success of community forestry is the power relations within user-groups. If user-group members do not have equitable access to the management process, they are more likely to resist the rules set by more dominant members (cf. Scott 1985) and this can have both institutional and ecological consequences. Some work on gender in community forestry has been done, but while gender is a key axis of power in rural communities, it is not the only important aspect of social difference. This paper explores the ways in which gender and caste intersect to influence the extent to which marginalized user-group members are participating or just sitting in at management committee meetings.

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Issues of participation are crucial in the context of the stated goals of community forestry. The Forest Sector Master Plan of 1988 specifically states that "the principles of the decentralization policy will be applied to the forestry sector by community forestry, which will have the priority among other forest management strategies. Priority will be given to poorer communities, or to the poorer people in a community," (HMG/ABD/FINNIDA 1988:10 as cited in Graner 1997). Community forestry therefore has a dual mandate: to promote forest conservation and to promote equitable access to resources, with particular attention given to the needs of the poorest of the poor.

Yet what does equitable access to resources mean? Does it require that all community members are given exactly the same amount of each forest product at all periods of time? This is clearly untenable. Not everyone needs timber to build a house all the time, but most significantly, giving equal access to all resources will not promote forest conservation nor help to mitigate poverty issues in rural Nepal. Poverty is in part a result of uneven distribution of income and resources both at local scales and within the global economy (Blaikie 1985, Peet 1991, Peet and Watts 1996). The long term goal is thus not necessarily to give everyone equal access to all resources, but rather to foster equitable distribution mechanisms such that everyone is able to obtain what they need at different points in time. It is therefore important to focus on the management process within community forestry and how differential participation in the process is related to access and control over resources.

Donors and development practitioners have started to recognize the importance of equity and as a result have sought to foster the participation of women and marginalized castes within community forestry (Arnold 1998, Joshi et. al. 1997, Kharel 1993). This paper argues, however, that issues of gender, caste and other forms of social difference need to be given more attention within community forestry. The implementation of the program needs to take account of local power relations if projects are going to achieve their stated goals. At the core of my argument is the need to focus on locally specific understandings of social difference. The gender and development literature has too often equated gender with women. Rather, I want to focus on locally defined differences between people (men and women, different castes and ethnicities) and the ways in which these differences give people uneven access to resources and control over the community forestry management process.

I will approach this issue by first outlining why equating gender with women is problematic and the importance of integrating other forms of social difference into an understanding of social power. I then give some examples from research I did in north-western Nepal on community forestry. I conclude with some thoughts on how development practitioners can take account of social difference in the implementation of community forestry.

GENDER, WOMEN AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCE

The issue of gender has been considered important within development circles at least since the mid-1980s (cf. the 1980s UN Decade of Women). Studies all over the Himalayas have shown how the harvesting of forest resources for daily needs—firewood, fodder, and leaf litter—is done primarily by women (Agarwal 1992, Agarwal 1997, Jodha 1986, Shiva 1988). In addition, the extra burden added to women as a result of declining forest resources has been given a great deal of attention, particularly in the Indian Himalayas (Agarwal 1992, Agarwal 1997, Shiva 1988). Other work on gender and forests has shown how forest resources are a critical source of livelihood security for women and lower-caste by providing access to resources they would

otherwise not have on their private lands (Agarwal 1997, Beck 1994, Daniggelis 1994a, Daniggelis 1994b, Shiva 1988).

Within the gender and development literature, gender has most often been equated with women and women's issues (cf. Nathen 1995). Yet gender is defined as the socially constructed differences between biological males and females. In other words, what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man varies across cultures, place, and over time. Thus, to take gender seriously within community forestry requires a focus on how differences between men and women are locally defined and what implications this has for participation in the community forestry process.

Across the hills of Nepal the social norms relating to men and women differ to some extent, but in very few places are women considered village leaders or have privileged access to community decision making processes. In contrast, it is considered normal for men to be village leaders and to take an active role in the welfare of the community. Yet anyone familiar with Nepal will take issue with this statement because of course not all men have privileged access to village leadership and decision making processes. Instead some men play these roles and most often they are from particular castes, families or ethnic groups. Thus, it is crucial to analyze how caste and ethnicity, gender, and kinship intersect to influence individuals' degrees of social power. It is also important to recognize that power relationships change over time and while caste hierarchies are very slow to change, family dominance does change more rapidly and new forms of social difference arise. Most recently, political party membership is becoming important as a form of social difference.² Thus, when analyzing community forestry, researchers and practitioners need to be attentive to local power relations, their foundations and how they are contested and reproduced over time.

Power relations are crucial within community forestry because in many user-groups it is the socially dominant individuals who are influential within the management committee, yet it is the more marginalized members who harvest the majority of forest resources. When marginalized members attend meetings are they participating or just sitting in? What are the implications for forest conservation and equitable distribution of resources if the people making management decisions are not those carrying out the work?

PARTICIPATING IN COMMUNITY FORESTRY

I spent two years doing research on community forestry in the upper Karnali zone of Nepal.³ The user-groups in these Brahmin-Thakuri dominated communities are not directly supported by foreign donors although they do participate in training activities organized and paid for by DANIDA. In one user-group, Thakuris, Chhetris and Sarki castes from two villages all shared one community forest.⁴ The user-group is an active group with a well developed decision making committee and support by the vast majority of forest users. In addition, they have been able to sufficiently lay claim to their community forest to prevent significant poaching by people from

² *In my work on community forestry, political party membership was very important, but I will confine my comments in this paper to caste and gender differences.*

³ *I have chosen not to specifically name the places I worked in an attempt to preserve the anonymity of the groups. The groups had no objections to being named, but given the sensitive nature of some of their internal disputes it seems best to leave them unidentified.*

⁴ *I have modified some of these details without changing the essential relationships in order to prevent identification of the group.*

outside the user-group. Some poaching does occur, but most non user-group people acquire permits before using the forest.

The user-group committee consists of eleven members, of whom one Thakuri, one Chhetri and one Sarki women are members as is one Sarki man. The remaining members and all the officers—secretary, president, treasurer and vice-president—are, Thakuri and Chhetri men. The Thakuris have a significant majority in terms of population. There are 42 households of Thakuris, 24 households of Sarkis and 12 households of Chhetris. Thus, on the surface this group has relatively good representation of all users except that more the Chhetris have a higher proportion of committee members than the Sarkis do. At meetings a number of non-committee members generally attend such that the composition of the meetings reflects even more closely the composition of the user-group.

I observed a large number of CF meetings and paid close attention to the dynamics of the meetings. When the user-group was first formed in 1993, the meetings took place at the mandir (temple) near the Thakuri village. The mandir was considered a neutral place because people would have to tell the truth in front of the deity and the mandir belonged to all of the people. Because of its spatial location within the Thakuri village, however, many more people from that village were able to attend meetings, and perhaps most importantly, Thakuri women were able to wander in and out of the meeting while doing other chores near their houses.

This proximity to the Thakuri village became very important when the user-group wanted to limit the harvesting of leaf litter to two five-day periods a year. The high-caste women, who live farthest from the forest, were adamant that this proposal would dramatically increase their work burdens. The two high-caste women at the meeting left and gathered other women from the village to come and voice their concerns. One said, "How can we gather enough pine needles for six months in such a short period of time? And what will we do if a woman is sick or the daughter-in-law is having a baby during that week?" (CF meeting, March 17, 1994) The women had legitimate reasons for concern, the forest is at least a forty-five minute walk from their homes, it would be difficult for them to collect more than two or three loads of leaf litter in one day and difficult to maintain that level of exertion for five continuous days. The Chhetri and Sarki women could not be called to the meeting, but even if they could, they did not share the highest-caste women's concerns. Their village is on the border of the forest and they already collected leaf litter in short periods of time and stored it at their houses. It is important to note, however, that their opinions were not solicited before the measure was passed, yet like the Thakuri women, they are responsible for all the leaf litter collection for their households. When the decision was made, the high-caste women's concerns were not taken into account despite their speaking out at the meeting and the other women were not consulted at all. There were no provisions made for women who are sick or otherwise unable to collect leaf litter during the specified time and there were no provisions to allow a longer collection period for the high-caste women. Thus, while the Thakuri women were actively involved in the decision making process, they had no real power to change the decision made.

In this example, a clear difference between voicing an opinion and influencing a decision is evident. The women were unsuccessful in convincing the high-caste men who control the committee to accommodate their concerns. The high-caste women began with an advantage because the meeting was held in their village and they could easily gather other women to join the debate. Yet in effect, they were not able to use this advantage. The men had other reasons for

wanting to pass the measure⁵ and thus could not be swayed from their original proposal. The women were not able to influence the decision because the men's objectives took precedence over theirs.

Caste and gender therefore intersect to influence individual's degrees of influence in community forestry or in short, their social power. A focus on the participation of women, without differentiating between women, fails to recognize the way that caste is also significant in limiting participation. In the above example, the concerns of the lower-caste women were not considered important at all even when the Thakuri women were raising objections. An exclusive focus on women glosses over differences between women and their interests.

These differences are crucial in positioning individuals differently in community forestry. The lower-caste women, by virtue of their interests being almost entirely ignored by the FUG committee, are more likely to break the community forest rules. For example, in 1999 they harvested leaf litter without consulting the user-group because the group was delayed in announcing the harvest period. Rather than going to the committee and demanding that leaf litter harvesting be opened, they protested their marginalization by harvesting on their own. These acts of resistance can undermine both the functioning of the user-group and forest conservation objectives. If too many members fail to follow the established rules, the group loses its authority. Also, if the ecological purpose of limiting leaf litter harvesting is to allow it to accumulate and protect the forest floor for most of the year, when people harvest out of turn this objective is undermined. Thus, it is crucial for all members of the user-group to have a stake in the rules and to be able to influence their definition and implementation.

Similar issues arose when I returned to the village in 1999 for another six months of research. At this point the meetings had moved to the house of Thakuri man who had built a new house in the nearby market town. This location was more central for all the villages and new committee members had been chosen. The meetings continued to be actively attended by men and women of all castes.

There were several characteristics of these meetings that made me question whether women and lower-castes were participating or just sitting in. Most obviously, because the meetings were held at a Thakuri's house, most of the Sarki men and women felt they should not enter the house. No one ever told them to stay outside, but they also never tried to enter. The one male Sarki committee member usually did sit inside, but significantly, he had several sources of social power. He was the wealthiest man in his village and had ceased to do manual labor. He had done a number of other things to overcome local caste distinctions. He wore 'clean' clothes⁶ and he observed eating restrictions similar to those of the Thakuris. As an individual then, he was able to transcend caste differences, but none of his actions served to undermine the inherent hierarchy between the Thakuris and the Sarkis.

⁵*the argument is too complex to present convincingly here, but I believe the high-caste men thought they needed to follow the Rangers' suggestions or they could lose the forest again. Simultaneously, I think the men were trying to gain political power by positioning themselves favourably in relation to the District Forest Rangers who suggested the group initiate this kind of restriction on leaf litter harvesting. Otherwise their actions do not make a lot of sense as they were undermining their own households by passing the measure.*

⁶*Many people in this part of Nepal cannot afford soap and thus 'cleanliness' is associated with wealth. To many outsiders, however, no one looks very clean due to the black soot generated by burning pine wood.*

The other Sarki people sat outside the door and would speak loudly towards the inside when they had something to contribute. The people inside could usually hear these comments, but they could not hear the quieter discussions amongst the people sitting outside. Similarly, the people outside could not hear everything that was said inside unless comments were specifically directed outside.

The higher-caste women members moved between the inside and the outside. Sometimes they sat inside, especially if they thought the discussion was important, but more often they sat outside and talked among themselves or with the lower-caste men (very few low-caste women attended meetings).

It seems clear that the location of the meetings is very important in terms of giving members access to the community forest process. Spatial practices relating to caste are very strong in north-western Nepal and therefore by holding meetings inside a Thakuri's house, many marginalized members were excluded from the decision making process.

An evaluation of these meetings was not simple, however. The lower-caste members and women did voice their opinions, often vehemently. They argued over the meaning of the Forest Operational Plan, accusing the literate higher-caste men of fabricating what they said was written in the plan. The lower-caste men and all the women are illiterate and therefore could not read the plan themselves. In one instance, a Sarki man said, "How do I know what is written there? You could just be saying what you want [and pretending to read]," (CF meeting 7/9/99). The issue for evaluation of participation is whether or not these kinds of protests and voicing of opinion had any influence on the decisions that were made. According to my observations and the opinions of some of the user-group members-including high-caste men who are not on the committee-marginal voices do not influence the decisions.

These two ethnographic accounts, combined with others I observed, point to the difference between participating and just sitting in. The women and lowest-caste members do attend meetings and they do voice their opinions. In most assessments of community forestry, attendance is equated with participation. A recent evaluation done for the Nepal-UK Community Forestry Project indicates that women are present at most user-group meetings and this was considered evidence of their participation in the process (Springate-Baginski 2000). Yet, the results from my work question whether presence at meetings, even speaking up at meetings can be equated with participation. I argue that for community forestry to be an equitable process, women and other marginalized members need to be able to influence the process.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The barriers to this kind of equitable process are many. Social difference is a key way in which power is distributed in rural Nepal (see also Hausler 1993). There is a long history of domination by rural elites—although who these elites are has varied from place to place. Women and lowest-castes, however, have not been elites in any parts of Nepal. It is therefore appropriate to focus on them specifically and to monitor whether or not they are able to influence the decision making process within user-groups. Yet beyond encouraging them to attend meetings and 'women's empowerment' initiatives, how can the process of community forestry be modified such that marginalized members are given a greater stake in the decisions? I argue that community facilitators and government staff need to be trained to make linkages with marginalized members as well as more influential members in order to ensure that the interests of all group members are considered.

The challenge for researchers and project managers is to recognize the ways in which power is mobilized and the tactics marginal members use to resist domination (cf. Scott 1985). Relations of power within community forestry are rarely very different from those within the community more generally. It is therefore important to look at various contexts and ways and power are distributed in communities. One of the important tactics is to break community forest rules. If groups have difficulties getting sufficient compliance with the rules, it would be useful for program staff to investigate who controls the FUG assembly and the committee, and the extent to which they consider the needs and interests of all group members. This paper has argued that a focus only on gender is insufficient. Other forms of social difference, particularly caste, but also kinship and other locally defined hierarchies influence the degree to which individuals can be influential within communities. To overcome these hierarchies, marginalized members need to be given key posts within FUG committees and service providers and facilitators need to actively support and promote the interests of these groups. More specifically, district forest staff needs to be sensitive to these issues of power and to pay close attention to whether marginalized members are participating or just sitting in.

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