Indigenous Community Forestry Systems vs. Imposed Institutions

With the shift in focus towards community forestry in both India and Nepal, foresters and researchers have realised that many communities are already protecting and managing government forest lands on their own initiative. In Nepal, traditional systems may include government-sanctioned management under the *Kipat* and *Talukdari*

---

[3] West Bengal, Gujarat, Haryana, Orissa, Rajasthan, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Tripura, and Jammu and Kashmir have all passed orders, Maharashtra is preparing orders, and a number of other states have initiated the process.

systems, in which the government maintained some nominal rights of control and taxation; religious forests (*dharmic ban*); and independent management by villages, families, or clans. A number of studies reveal that many of these systems have been in operation for decades while others appear to be fairly recent. Many of these indigenous systems are functioning quite well and have a variety of rules and regulations.

India possesses a variety of historically-recognised, traditional community management systems, including the Forest Cooperatives of Himachal Pradesh, the *Van Panchayat*(s) of U.P., and the *Communidade*(s) of Goa. Several researchers, particularly students of the Indian Institute of Forest Management, have discovered and documented widespread indigenous community forest protection movements in the tribal areas of Orissa, Bihar, Karnataka, and Gujarat. In Orissa and Bihar alone, several thousand indigenous forest management groups, protecting over 200,000ha of forest land, have been identified (Singh and Singh 1993). Each has different characteristics, membership criteria rules, regulations, sharing arrangements, degrees of formal structure, and so on. The Indian forestry scenario is further complicated by the presence of a number of community forestry institutions introduced and aided by NGOs.

Indigenous systems, particularly those that are self-initiated, have to be identified, studied, and recognised so that community forestry can build on indigenous knowledge and motivation. Critics of JFM in India stress the need to determine whether local groups have already initiated forest protection and then "take care not to erode viable local institutions by superimposing new, redundant ones" (Sarin 1994). In Orissa, over 6,000 JFM committees (VFPCS) were formed by the government in a span of a few months, many of them overlapping with already-existing local institutions (Kant et el. 1991). When innovative foresters have built upon community initiatives, the results have been excellent (Singh and Singh 1993). In Nepal, it is now recognised that "An important element for being successful with community forestry implementation is the field staff's ability to identify and incorporate existing local systems of forest management into their recognised systems of Community forests" (Bartlett and Malla 1992). It has been further argued that field workers need to be prepared for communities that wish to maintain their own traditional system, independent of the government programme. It remains to be seen how far programmes in Nepal and India will go to accept this option.

Incorporating existing forest management systems into CF and JFM requires a high degree of flexibility in implementation. This may be at odds with overly-specific government orders and guidelines. In India, state orders are very specific about the structure of community institutions, stressing, in particular, the need for an executive committee. In Nepal, it has been suggested that the concept of a formal committee, following bureaucratic modes of planning structures, may not be appropriate for the particular social context found in different parts of the country. However, bureaucracies appear to be most comfortable dealing with formal entities, such as committees, and least comfortable with a fluid association of people as represented by user groups.

However, the importance of building on self-initiated community movements must not undermine the necessity of studying them carefully and maintaining equity in terms of participation and benefit-sharing. Initial documentation of indigenous forest management systems in India indicates that gender inequality, for instance, is as serious a problem in these self-initiated institutions as in many government-sponsored forest protection committees (Sarin 1994).