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Introduction

Forests provide multiple benefits to society and are crucial to the livelihoods of millions of people in South Asia, particularly those living in rural and mountain areas. In India alone, 270 million people in rural areas depend directly and indirectly on forests for food and fodder, as well as cash income through collecting, processing, and selling varieties of timber and non-timber forest products like medicinal and aromatic plants and honey (Talwar 2006, p. 72). In addition to their diverse economic uses, forests serve as protectors of watersheds, conservers of biological diversity, carbon sequesters, and stabilisers of climate. They also play an important role in balancing the ecosystem and supporting agriculture by maintaining and enriching soil fertility (Myers 1996). Until the late 1970s, forests in South Asia were managed by bureaucratic government organisations using a top-down, centralised approach (Poffenberger 2000). This traditional custodian approach, however, could neither maintain the extent and quality of forest resources, nor meet the needs of local communities (Sarker and Das 2006, p.270).

Forests have been degraded extensively in many countries in South Asia (FAO 1999; Tole 1998, p.21). According to an estimate made during the 1980s, over half of the official total forest area of 35 million hectares was degraded (Poffenberger 2000). Officially, 23% of India's area is recorded as forest, but only about 12% has dense forest cover (FSI 2002). In Nepal, two million hectares of forests were destroyed in just 11 years from 1964 to 1975 (Wallace 1981, p.19). In Pakistan, forest cover has been reduced from 25% to 2% over the last few decades (Nizamani and Shah 2004). In Bangladesh, deforestation is continuing at an alarming rate. In 28 of the 64 districts of Bangladesh, there is no natural forest left and the growing stock in all major forests is declining (Khan 1998, p.1); the percentage of land officially under forest is about 14%, but the area under actual tree cover is only 8-9% (FMP 1993). According to an estimate made in 1980, the annual rate of deforestation in South Asian countries between 1981 and 1990 ranged from 0.6% to 3.3%. The lowest was in Bhutan and India (0.6%) and the highest in Bangladesh (3.3%). Nepal and Pakistan experienced deforestation at rates of 1.0% and 2.9%, respectively (Tole 1998, p.21). In recent years, although the rate of deforestation has declined, the trend remains the same.

It has now been realised that forest resources cannot be managed sustainably without the meaningful involvement of local communities. Thus emphasis has been placed on participatory or community-based forest management (PFM, used here as an umbrella term) which includes several participatory management models such as social forestry (SF), community forestry (CF), joint forest management (JFM), and collaborative forest management (CFM) which have evolved in different countries in the region. Community forestry (CF) occupies a central place in forest management in Nepal. In CF the community takes the lead and manages resources, while the government plays the role

of supporter or facilitator; forest management is a community effort and entails little financial or other involvement on the part of the government. In India and Pakistan, JFM has emerged as an effective approach to conserve, manage, and regenerate forest through state and community partnership arrangements. In JFM the owner (the government) and the user (communities) manage forest resources and share both the costs and the benefits. In theory, JFM represents a partnership between the Forest Department (FD) and local village organisations for the joint protection of local forests. These partnerships should entitle village organisations to a specified share of forest product benefits if they honour the multiple responsibilities assigned to them.

These different approaches may have similar goals, but they have slightly different objectives, structures, organisational functions, and characteristics, as well as different implications for the management of forest resources and the livelihoods of forest dependent people.

In order to identify the most appropriate management model for genuine participatory forest management (both conceptually and in practice), it is imperative to know the evolutionary background, key characteristics, and relative strengths and weaknesses of the different systems. Despite a strong desire by many organisations and groups to promote participatory forest management, little effort has been made until now to understand the nature and consequences of the different approaches, and their relative strengths and weaknesses and outcomes. In view of this knowledge gap, this paper attempts to examine critically the different types of participatory forest management approaches that have emerged in South Asia in terms of their policy and legal framework, level of decentralisation and devolution, degree and quality of participation, and rights and responsibilities of local participants. This paper first traces the evolution of participatory forest management in South Asia, followed by a comparative analysis of the different systems. Finally, lessons are drawn from the different approaches, in terms of their relative strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations are made to facilitate and argue for participatory forest management. As a result of the shortage of information and knowledge on participatory forest management in other countries in South Asia, this paper focuses on SF in Bangladesh, CF in Bhutan, JFM in India, and CF in Nepal in hill and mountain areas. It relies to a great part on information drawn from various secondary sources, including government documents, books, reports, and journal articles, as well as the authors' own learning, impressions, and reflections. Secondary information was validated during field visits to selected participatory forest management initiatives in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal and in discussions with key informants. Even though a particular participatory forest management model may be implemented differently in each country (due to local conditions and the nature of local peoples' participation in planning and implementation), at the risk of generalising, this paper identifies the common characteristics of each management model in order to compare them with each other.