

Introduction

The Indian subcontinent has been witness to a series of dramatic experiments in the participatory management of forest resources. Since the 1970s, social and community forestry programmes in both India and Nepal have attempted to transform the relationship between a powerful state bureaucracy and the local people directly dependent on forest resources. These programmes represent the realisation that a large proportion of the population is heavily dependent on forest resources for subsistence needs, energy, nutrition, income, and the maintenance of their farming systems. They also acknowledge the failure of traditional custodial management of forests by governments, without the active participation of local communities, to halt the loss and degradation of the subcontinent's forests.

The inadequacy of traditional approaches in forest protection and management led to a search for alternatives and a number of approaches has been followed, of which the major ones include: forest department sponsored plantations on a variety of 'wastelands', such as village grazing commons, government-owned revenue lands, roadside and canal and tank banks, with varying degrees of local participation; promotion of farmer tree planting through free and low-priced distribution of seedlings and decentralised nurseries of different types; environmental conservation education and dissemination of wood-saving technologies. By the early and mid-eighties, these social and community forestry programmes were being assessed. Growing evidence suggested that, with minor exceptions, most of these programmes had either failed or were exhibiting signs of failure in the future. This experience further intensified the search for newer solutions. One of the key and common factors leading to the failure of social forestry programmes was the absence of people's participation, which led to poor survival rates, and the reluctance of community institutions to take over management responsibility for plantations.

It is this background that led to the emergence of a new paradigm in community forestry. While community forests are being managed by user groups in Nepal, joint forest management arrangements between local communities and state forest departments are being explored in India (Campbell and Denholm, 1992). These initiatives were the first programmes that brought foresters out of the forest and into the villages and farms of the people who are the forests' primary users.

Fifteen years of roughly parallel experience with community/social forestry in India and Nepal have evidenced many similarities and some surprising differences, many instructive failures and some exciting successes. However, despite shared ecological conditions, similar socioeconomic conditions, and some similar programmes, there has been surprisingly little interaction or inter-learning between India and Nepal. As state and national forest departments are allocating or re-directing substantial funds and a lot of donor assistance to fund community/joint forest management, there is an urgent need to learn from these experiences.

An estimated two billion US dollars have been invested by donors in these programmes over the last fifteen years. People's participation, reorientation and training of forest staff, building local-level institutions, participatory micro-planning, equitable benefit-sharing, and gender-sensitive programming have all become new development imperatives. However, there are hundreds of millions of people who continue to depend on deteriorating forest resources and over 100,000 forestry department employees who need to adjust to treating community users as partners and clients. Community forestry in Nepal and joint forest management in India are beginning to take on these challenges. As they reach a much greater scale of replication, we need to ensure that they do not become target-driven, product-oriented, and top-down like many large-scale programmes in the past. A comparison between the two programmes provides a useful learning exercise in the ongoing practice of participatory resource management.

The essence of current changes in forest management, in both Nepal and India, lies in the attempt to transfer control and management of forest lands from centralised forest departments to decentralised people's institutions. The historical background and the legal basis for the two programmes are unique to each country, though they share certain similarities. The nature and extent of the shift of control from state/national to local/community also differ considerably. The types of community institutions are distinct, though they are evolving and share many features. It is at the implementation stage (at various levels) that a greater degree of similarity exists. Many of the problems are also similar.