# Chapter 8
# Local Communities in Forest Management: An Evaluation

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## 8.1 Introduction

Management of renewable natural resources, like forests, can be under different property regimes. The options range from exclusive government control to private property regimes and community-managed resources in the form of common property resources (CPRs). Forest management systems in India have evolved over time from an exclusive state 'command and control' system in the colonial period to more participatory systems prevalent today, wherein community and private rights over forest resources and lands is now recognised. Starting from the establishment of the highly centralised forest administration in the nineteenth century, to Social Forestry in the 1970s to Joint Forest Management (JFM) (since 1988), community involvement in forest management has increased over time.

The paper is based on a critical analysis of forest management policies and systems in India with special reference to the role and responsibilities of local communities, who reside within or near forest areas and are largely dependent on forest resources for daily subsistence. The review draws on literature that has documented forest management policies and practices in India, from pre-colonial times to the present. The paper argues that the primary focus of official forest management policies has always been to protect forests for their commercial use, with very little concern for the livelihood and development needs of local communities. This has resulted in breakdown of indigenous forest management practices and alienation of local communities from forests. As a consequence, recent policies of forest management in partnership with local communities have yielded mixed results. A historical review of forest management policies will improve our

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A. Bhattacharyya and S. Basu (eds.), *Marginalities in India*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5215-6_8

understanding of the relationship between local communities and forests and help in formulating appropriate institutional structures for its management.

Section 8.2 discusses the challenges in forest management, which has to balance the competing uses of forests and its multiple users. Section 8.3 is a historical review of forest management systems prevalent in India, from pre-colonial period to the present, with a discussion on the role of local communities in forest management in each of those periods. Section 8.4 summarises the discussion by highlighting the changing role of local communities in forest management and its implications for policy to formulate appropriate institutions of management.

## 8.2 The Challenge of Forest Management—Competing Users of Forest and Its Resources

Forests generate multiple benefits simultaneously, and the benefits accrue to different groups with varied levels of stakes and interests in forest. It helps in maintaining a balanced environment, preserving biodiversity, and provides environmental services beyond its boundaries, in terms of erosion control, flood control, conservation of water, soil moisture and stabilisation of local climate. Forests also provide the means of sustenance, food, fuel, fodder and raw material for human use. Thus, beneficiaries of forests range from the local community dependent on its resources for daily sustenance to the global community who benefit from economic and ecological functions that have implications for climate change and world economy (Lele 2011: 96). The many uses and functions of forests make them a very complex natural resource system. Decisions about one aspect have repercussions for all other benefits and users. The major challenge in management of forests entails balancing the needs of the various users and their competing interests.

In the context of India, one can distinguish between the following groups of users who have a stake in the forest and its resources (Webb 2008: 23; Nadkarni et al. 1989: 20):

- *The local community*, i.e. those who live in the forest region and depend on forest resources for their livelihood and sustenance. Their rights over forests are often claimed for customary and historical reasons.
- *Commercial and industrial interests of the larger economy*—industries dependent on forest resources, i.e. paper and pulp, construction. Their use of forest resources is aided by government policies.
- *The State or the Government*—forest is a major source of revenue and resources for the government. The government has the challenging task of reconciling short-term commercial interests with long-term interests of conservation and the twin objectives of regulating as well as accommodating the use of forest resources by local community in the face of pressures of the larger economy.

The competing demands of each of these users in the forest space and its resources result in contestations, and conflicts arise when the interests of one group gets precedence over others. Often it is the government, which dominates most of the decisions, being the most powerful actor. The government through its policies and laws lays down the rules governing the use and management of forests and specifies the roles and responsibilities of the different users. Section 8.3 traces the evolution of forest management policies and systems in India, while also analysing the changing role and responsibilities of local communities and its implications for forest management.

## 8.3 Local Communities in Forest Management in India

The close relationship between forests and local communities residing in it dates back to centuries; as is evident from the historical accounts of Indian epics (Mahabharata and Ramayana) and other mythological stories. As one of the main users of forests, local communities have always had a major stake in forest management. Their involvement and role have however changed over time, from being protectors and worshippers of forests, and they have been gradually alienated from forests. Forest management practices in India have undergone significant changes owing to historical and political reasons, that have influenced the way local communities have been engaged in managing forest resources. This review has considered the following periods: (i) pre-colonial period, (ii) colonial period (1757–1947), (iii) early independence period (1947–1980), and (iv) current period (1980s onward). The policies and practices of forest management in India has seen important shifts corresponding to these periods. The review tries to trace the changing role of local communities in forest management in this time period.

(a) ***Pre-colonial period***: Historical evidence shows that throughout history, prior to the British rule in India, forests were treated as a source of resources and, at the same time, forests were worshipped (Ghosal 2011: 108). Forest was an important source of subsistence for majority of the population who depended on it for fodder, fuel, food, articles for daily use. Burning of forests and cultivating select patches in turn, using forest resources for daily use as implements, fuel, fodder and food were common practice in this period. Such practice did not have much impact on the forests or forest-dependent people as very little forest was destroyed. People worshipped forests, which served as a safe abode and took care to protect and conserve its valuable resources:

> in ancient times forests were regarded as abodes of spiritual solace and the concept of preserving forests and wild life developed around the 'ashrams' (hermitages) of the sages. These forest based ashrams propagated 'AranyaSanskriti' or a forest culture and human understanding of the fundamental ecological utility of forest ecosystems and their economic importance (Rawat 1991, cited in Ghosal 2011: 108).

Evidence of practices of forest management and protection is found in Kautilya'sArthashastra (350 BC–283 BC), which has a detailed legal classification of forests according to its type and use.[1] Forests were reserved for procuring forest produce, game forests for rulers, and forests were also donated to eminent Brahmans. Separate forest tracts were reserved for the use of common people. The Arthashastra describes the King as the absolute authority over forests. It describes a well-established system for guarding, extracting and managing forest produce, with a Superintendent of Forest Produce, responsible to collect timber and other products of forests.[2] He was also to start productive works in forests and fix adequate fines and compensations for people who caused damage to productive forests. Forest products were classified according to their use as strong timber, rope-making material, leaf yielding, medicines, poisons, etc. The Superintendent was also responsible for setting up of *manufactories* to prepare commodities from forest produce and make it available for use by people.

Even during the Mauryan (321 BC–184 BC) and Gupta (280–550 AD) period, the Kings had a well-organised Forest Department for the management of forest and forest products, which used to take initiatives to increase forest cover and forest products (Ghosal 2011: 109). During the Mughal rule, few forests were earmarked as restricted areas for general public to ensure a good hunting environment for Mughal emperors; however, a large number of people (mostly indigenous tribal communities) used to live in or around forest areas depending entirely on forest products for livelihood and subsistence. There were no restrictions on forest and forest products collection for forest people during the Mughal period apart from forests reserved for hunting for rulers (Ghosal 2011: 110).

Even during the mid-eighteenth century, various types of users would draw on the forest resources, from villagers in neighbouring villages who would regularly collect grass, thatch, firewood, fish, etc., to armies of kings who would depend on forests for supporting their garrison (Guha 1999: 56). Kings and their armies would

[1]The Arthashastra gave a legal classification of forests and identifies the following three types of forests as (Ghosal 2011: 109):

- Forests donated to eminent Brahmans for sóma plantation, for religious learning and for the performance of penance.
- Reserved forests for hunting, which were of two types:
  - earmarked only for the king mainly for purposes of hunting and
  - game forest open to all members of the general public, on the extreme limit of the country.
- Reserve forest for procuring all kinds of forest produce: one or several forests to be especially reserved for the purpose.

Along with the above classification, it also specifies that the King shall make provision for pasture grounds on uncultivable tracts. It also advocated for separation of wild tracts from timber forests. The Arthashastra also propagated the concept of *abhayaranya* (inner sanctuaries), which corresponds very closely to the concept of national parks as is prevalent now (Singh 1994: 5).

[2]*Arthasástra* of Kautilya, Chapter XVII, "The Superintendent of Forest Produce" in Book II, "The Duties of Government Superintendents" accessed on 20 June 2012 at http://www.sdstate.edu/projectsouthasia/upload/Book-I-Concerning-Discipline.pdf.

collect taxes and fees from users of forests in their jurisdiction and sometimes collected forest products also in kind.[3]

A usual practice among the kings was to maintain reserved meadows, known as *kurans,* which was to reserve some meadow land by excluding other users from it. Often the superior fields with the best grass yield were selected as *kurans* by the kings and kept aside to meet the fodder and wood needs of the army, which often passed through the area (Guha 1999: 59). Most of these reserved meadows were taken over by the Conservator of Forests in the mid-nineteenth century. Dietrich Brandis,[4] the founder of the Indian Forest Service, in his writings had also referred to the forest reserves maintained by kings, which served as hunting preserves of the nobility and ensured supply of fodder and timber for the local people.

Thus, in the pre-colonial period, a well-established system of forest management and governance existed in India under the kings, who had laid down rules for access to forests and forest resources and penalties for violation of rules. Most Kings also had forest administration under them that overlook maintenance of forests. However, access of general public to forests was not altogether banned. Forests were especially earmarked for the use of local communities dependent on forests, and sometimes, the king would collect tax (mostly in kind) from the users of the resources. In fact, forests in India, before the colonial period, were not under the exclusive control of rulers or kings. Much of the forest areas were managed by the people who lived near or inside the forests and depended on it for their daily needs (Ghosal 2011; Poffenberger and Singh 1996).

Dietrich Brandis documented the traditional systems of forest management in India in 1897 and referred to these as '*traditional system of forest preservation'* and '*illustrations of indigenous Indian forestry*' (Guha 1996: 88). He had discovered sacred woodlands in nearly all provinces of British India towards the end of the nineteenth century—from the *Devarakadus* of Coorg to sacred groves in Mewar (Guha 1996: 89). It was mostly village communities that protected the forest groves which they designated sacred. A large number of people (mostly indigenous tribal communities) used to live in or around forest areas depending entirely on forest products and protect and manage the forests following laws of access evolved traditionally (Ghosal 2011: 110). These people believed themselves to be the actual owners of forest with rights to use forest products for their subsistence purposes.

Evidently, until the British colonial period, there existed different patterns of forest management practices in India, depending on the ownership of the forest

[3]Guha (1999: 56) cites the case of Anjanvel, a subdivision on the west coast of Maharashtra, where peasant households in the villages had to supply the kings' garrison with thatching grass, palm-leaf raincoats and other products which had to be extracted from the forest. Herdsmen who would seasonally bring their buffaloes to graze in Anjanvel had to deliver specified quantity of butter to the Kings' army annually. Such annually recurring demands necessitated maintenance of the grasslands and the forest on which these communities were dependent.

[4]**Dietrich Brandis** (31 March 1824–29 May 1907) was a German forester who worked with the British Imperial Forestry Service (IFS) in colonial India. He is considered the father of tropical forestry.

lands. Kings controlled forest areas within their kingdoms and had laid down systems for managing and access to forest resources for local communities. At the same time, local communities living within forests owned and managed its resources through indigenous laws evolved traditionally and held sacred by them.

> …..rulers from the Ashoka period, through the Gupta and Mughal periods, often left forest dwellers in peace, concentrating their political aspirations on the fertile agricultural plains and the more populous villages, towns and cities"..and.. "…yet, if the rulers made excessive demands in tribal forest areas, they often met with guerilla resistance… (Poffenberger and Singh 1996: 58).

Another significant characteristic of this period was that the market for forest produce had not yet developed in India, in the sense that the use of forest resources was mainly for local populations (Nadkarni et al. 1989: 22). Demand and consequent forces of the larger economy on the forests and its resources were negligible. Only some exceptional items of forest produce were considered scarce and had a good demand and market (ivory, sandal, etc.). Otherwise, forest resources were considered abundant and a free gift of nature. It is important to take note that however there existed well-established systems of managing forests and forest resources in the country much before the arrival of the British.

(b) ***Colonial Period***: The colonial period marked the beginning of deforestation in India and the alienation of local communities from forest and its management. During the early period (i.e. before 1857), the East India Company indiscriminately used forest products to increase its revenue. They had little intention to protect and manage Indian forests and forest products. The East India Company plundered the forests and its resources to meet the need for timber for constructing railway tracks, developing ship building industries, making furniture, providing a continuous supply of firewood and for the exportation of timber to Britain (Ghosal 2011: 110). The forests were thus linked to the demands of the larger economy, and this put immense pressure on the forest resources. The exploitation of the forests in the initial colonial period was not supervised at all. Poffenberger and Singh (1996: 58) state that during the early colonial period, "*forests were increasingly viewed as an asset of the state with great commercial potential…* (however) *during that period no public agency was in a position to monitor or regulate its use.*" They identify this period as the first period of accelerated deforestation in India.

The East India Company paid little attention to managing forests, however, in order to retain their control over forests and ensure a steady supply of resources; restrictions were imposed on access of local people to forests and its resources. Such regulations were in effect much before an official Forest Act and Forest Department was in place. The East India Company imposed restrictions on the practice of *cumri* cultivation by the local people; which involved forest burning in 1848 in Uttara Kannada (Nadkarni et al. 1989: 40). Forests began to be controlled by the East India Company purely for commercial interests, and local people were considered a threat. Local peoples' access to forests was restricted through rules and

laws, while forests continued to be exploited to meet the demands of the Company and British economy (Poffenberger and Singh 1996: 58). Forests with valuable timber (such as teak, sandalwood) were reserved for use by the Company, and more species of trees were increasingly being reserved. More restrictions were imposed on local use as commercial interests in forest resources increased with time, giving rise to discontent among local population dependent on forests. The competing demands of the local users, vis-à-vis the demands of the East India Company for the larger economy, led to conflicts as the local users were increasingly restricted from using forest resources.

After the transfer of power from the East India Company to the British government (1857), significant steps for forest preservation and management were taken. The British government established a system for management of forests mainly to regulate local use and ensure regeneration of commercially more valuable forest produce (Saxena 1997: 2). The compulsions of the colonial state were to generate revenue and meet imperial demands for raw materials. Thus, its approach to forest management was directed at commercial exploitation of the forest resources. The colonial government established a forest management system which helped them to increase control over forest resources of India. A separate Forest Department was established in 1864, with Dietrich Brandis, a German expert in forestry as the first Inspector General of forests.[5] To achieve control over Indian forest resources (mainly timber), the British government had to restrict local inhabitants' rights by implementing strict rules and regulations. The Government used legislative powers to control large tracts of forests and impose restrictions on local use. The first legislation was the Government Forest Act, 1865, which empowered the Government to declare any forest as government property. The Act established the state monopoly over forests. The process of reserving certain species of trees by the British had started earlier in the East India Company period. This process was extended to classify forests as reserved and protected areas, and large-scale surveys of forest areas were initiated across the country. Rules and acts were designed to curb local use of forest resources for subsistence needs of the people residing inside or nearby forest areas.

The Indian Forest Act of 1865 was replaced with the Indian Forest Act of 1878, which formalised the classification of forests as Reserved Forests, Protected Forests and introduced another category—the Village Forests. The new law was more comprehensive and imposed more stringent restrictions on local use of forest resources. The Government had absolute ownership over Reserved Forests. Local communities were banned from using resources from Reserved Forests and had limited access to Protected Forests, subject to restrictions imposed by the Government from time to time. They had rights to resources only from the Village Forests, which they used for grazing, fuel, fodder, etc. The reserved forests were

[5]The British at this time did not have expertise in forestry science, and Germany was the leading European nation in forest management (Guha 1996: 88). In fact, British India was one of the first countries in the world with a national forest service.

rich in timber, whereas the less productive areas were earmarked as village forests. The colonial government brought more and more forest lands under the reserved category throughout the country and established a centralised system of forest management, with very less regard for the traditional forest management systems prevalent in India prior to the colonial period. During the 1880s and 1890s, the forest department began a concerted effort to demarcate forest lands with the greatest commercial potential. An estimate shows that, as a result of the forest settlement work carried out by the colonial government between 1870 and 1900, almost 69% of the total forests in India were under the reserved category (Nadkarni et al. 1989: 43).

The colonial government initiated 'scientific' forestry mainly through the preparation of working plans for forests. Working plans were being prepared in some places since 1885, but they took concrete shape and were implemented more extensively only since the early twentieth century. Working plans were developed by the Forest Department following a systematic method of survey and based on scientific knowledge of forestry. The basic objective of the working plans was to ensure the best possible return from the existing stock and to improve the stock for future rotations. The colonial government gradually took over large tracts of forests which were earlier under the control of local communities and obstructed their entry into the forests. Restrictions were imposed on lopping and grazing rights, rights to non-timber forest products and extension of cultivation, and the department strengthened the number of official forest guards. In Almora district of Kumaon region, between 1910 and 1917, the government transferred 2500 $km^2$ of forests to the Imperial Forest Department (Agrawal 2000: 59). In Dhule district of Maharashtra, the forest department introduced a ticket system in 1877, which allowed only ticket-holders to enter the forests and cut wood (Guha 1999: 69). The forests were transformed into mere sources of revenue for the British government, and forest communities were termed as 'intruders' and 'aliens over state property' (Ghate 2008).

The immediate result of such centralisation management of forests was the alienation of the local communities from forest protection and management. The long-term outcomes of this process of centralisation of forest management were, loss of incentive for long-term community management and unregulated encroachment on state forests (Webb 2008: 27). The traditional institutions of community forest management were stripped of their access, management and use rights. This resulted in conflicts between government agencies and local communities dependent on forest resources.

Across the country, local communities dependent on forests for subsistence opposed the official rules. Rebellions against colonial forestry are reported across the country extending over several villages, and the rebels were mostly the illiterate peasants and tribals. Forceful implementation of scientific forest policy stimulated indigenous forest dwellers to collect forest products (particularly food, fodder and firewood) illegally, ignoring the British Forest Department's rules and regulations (Ghosal 2011: 112). The traditional systems of forest management broke down in many areas as local people were not allowed to manage forests. But their

dependence on forest resources continued, and as a result, they started exploiting forest resources illegally. In some parts of the country, local communities organised themselves and were successful in influencing government policies to accommodate their needs and in some instances could gain some control back over the forests. Like in Almora and Kumaon in the Himalaya region, consistent protests by the villagers against the state control of forests led to the enactment of the Forest Council Rules of 1931, which gave village communities some control in managing forests for their subsistence needs (Agrawal 2000: 60).

The policy of the British government was to give concessions and relax restrictions wherever it suited them, and also to prevent public resentment from getting out of control. Such relaxation in restrictions was allowed since the 1920s, but the firm control of the Forest Department also prevailed over forests; thus, protest movements continued with concessions being granted as and where necessary. In some places, the local community through sustained protest could get some concessions for local use of forest, but where they could not, they started illegally exploiting the resources. The effect of the colonial policies on forest management practices can be summarised in terms of (i) emergence or strengthening of community-based forest management institutions in some parts of the country that were granted concessions by the British government and (ii) indiscriminate exploitation of forests by local people, who lost rights over forest resources due to restrictions imposed by the colonial government. Thus, community-based forest management system existed and evolved only in select patches of the country, in response to colonial forestry.

(c) ***Post-independence period***: Commercial exploitation of forests continued even in post-independent India, with support from the newly formed Government, which adopted most of the colonial policies. Demand for timber from the paper and pulp industries, demand for poles for the spread of electrification across the country, increase in cultivation, forest area taken over by major industries and hydroelectric projects are some of the reasons identified for rapid depletion of forest cover in the country during this period (Poffenberger and Singh 1996: 60). Forests continued to be centrally managed by the Government, with little consideration for the people living within or near forest areas. Ancestral rights and usufructs agreements granted earlier by the colonial government were considered to be generous concessions and privileges, and government policies emphasised on the need to 'tighten concessions and privileges' granted to rural populations in the interest of the nation (Poffenberger and Singh 1996: 61).

The National Forest Policy of 1952 emphasised on industrial and commercial needs and labelled local needs as secondary to 'national' interest (Saxena 1997: 5; Singhal 2008: 6). Across the country, the forest department increased their control over forest resources by establishing 'depots', where local people could receive supplies of fuelwood, grass, etc., for their daily needs at subsidised rates. This practice did not allow local communities to manage and harvest forest products themselves and further alienated them from forests. However, local communities

could not be completely eliminated from using forest resources. The flip side of the increasing state control over forests was that local communities no longer had incentives to maintain forests and perceived it as a state responsibility. A study of the forest regions in two districts of Western Ghats, Uttara Kannada and Shimoga in Karnataka, found that forests under local access were in a relatively higher state of degradation (Nadkarni et al. 1989: 162). Local communities continued to illegally collect forest produce and turned into poachers. The gulf between foresters and local people grew leading to intense confrontation and conflicts (Palit 1998: 212).

Mc Kean (2000: 35) points out instances in India, Nepal and sub-Saharan Africa, where transfer of property rights from traditional user groups to the government converted owner-protectors into poachers and aggravated resource depletion. Increased state control over forests resulted in competition among the users/user groups to extract as much short-term benefit from the resource as possible. Nadkarni et al. (1989: 72) note that denudation of the unreserved forest areas was more as compared to the reserved forests in their study area in Uttara Kannada. Such denudation is the effect of indiscriminate exploitation of forest resources by local people. Further, with rapid depletion of the unreserved forests, people are forced to look for resources in the reserved forest areas, thus leading to depletion of forest cover in the reserved areas as well. The emphasis of the government policies on commercial exploitation of forests to meet the needs of the national economy continued till the 1970s.

(d) ***1980s onwards***: The period since 1970s is marked by a shift in the government's approach to conservation of forests and its resources through some important legislations. This period is marked by an increasing environmental awareness in the country, largely owing to the rapid deterioration of forest areas. During the 1970s, several community-based environment movements took place, protesting against official policies and commercial exploitation of forests by the Government and private enterprises. Conflicts and confrontation between protectors and local users is nothing new in the history of forestry. However what marked the difference of these protest movements over earlier periods was that, this was based on an environmental consciousness of the local communities; as against the earlier movements which were mainly to get more access and benefits from the forests (Nadkarni et al. 1989: 82; Poffenberger et al. 1996: 34). The Chipko movement in the Uttar Pradesh hills, Appiko movement in Uttara Kannada, and Naga and Mizo revolts in the north-east are examples. Need was felt to involve local communities in managing and protecting forests, and in many parts, local communities themselves took control over forest areas and started maintaining those, often without any formal support from the government (Sarap and Sarangi 2009; Sarkar 2008).

In Orissa, many communities began protecting forests themselves from the 1970s in response to increasing pressure on the forests of the region and deforestation. By the late 1980s about three to four thousand communities had established control over approximately 10% of the state's forests (Poffenberger et al.

1996: 34). Similar instances are also noted in West Bengal, Gujarat and Bihar. But most of these were community-led movements to protect forests and received very little support from the government, except in the case of West Bengal, where some forest officials involved the local communities in forest protection activities in return for share in forest produce.

The first official support for community involvement in forest management is usually traced to the programme of Social Forestry in the fifth five-year plan 1974–1979 (Vira 1999: 255). The Social Forestry programme emphasised 'people's forestry' and had two main components: farm forestry targeted at private landholders and communal woodlots to be established on various categories of public and community land. In most of the states where Social Forestry was introduced, the most successful component was farm forestry, which was plantations on private lands. Very few states could achieve targets for community woodlots. Moreover, community forestry was restricted to village and other uncultivated government lands, excluding forest land (Vira 1999: 257). Most of the land earmarked for community woodlots was already in a degraded condition, and the official inability to involve the local communities in the programme are some of the reasons for the poor performance of the Social Forestry programmes.

It was not until the late 1980s that community management of forests received widespread support from national and state governments. On August 1988, the government of Orissa passed the nation's first forest policy resolution endorsing community management of forests. Many other states followed. The endorsement by the Central Government came in the form of a policy circular in 1990 that formally adopted a participatory forest management model in Joint Forest Management (JFM) Programme. JFM is a principal element of forest management strategy in India, which recognises and legitimises local community efforts at forest management. Its primary focus is on protection and conservation of forests and its resources, in partnership with the people.

JFM has shown mixed results, and in many places, the local institutions for forest protection have broken down. In studying JFM institutions, researchers have highlighted the issue of unequal power relationships inherent in partnerships between the state and community institutions and inherent imbalance of power within communities themselves (Sarin 1996: 170). The 'jointness in JFM' as Lele (1998: 2) states has to be ideally between (i) the individual villagers into a 'community of forest users' and (ii) this community so formed and the state (represented by the FD officials). However, both of these relationships are tenuous due to a number of factors as evident from empirical studies conducted in different parts of the country.

The terms and conditions of access, share of benefits, rates of sale and procurement are entirely decided by the government, and the participating communities have very little role in the decision-making process. Sarkar (2008: 16) observes that in the case of *kendu,* a forest produce of high economic value, the forest communities are simply acting as 'collectors' and 'price takers', and it is the state marketing corporations and licensed traders/societies working under the state forest department that decides the rate and policies. Faust (1998) in a study of JFM in

villages of Surat district in Gujarat finds that there is little participation of villagers in the JFM committees and the Forest Department staff have developed a patron–client relationship with local community groups, providing employment, land and infrastructure investments, biogas plants, and fruit trees in return for cooperation.

A study of van panchayats in Uttaranchal concludes that van panchayats have steadily lost control of their incomes and management systems; thus, the forests under them has degraded over time (Balooni et al. 2007: 1451). The reasons identified in the study for the failure of the community institutions are as follows: (i) heterogeneity among stakeholders, which has adversely affected collective action; (ii) increasing population and market pressure; (iii) disenchantment among stakeholders, i.e. van panchayat members, owing to the meagre share of the benefits accruing to them; (iv) erosion of enforcement regulations, due to tacit understanding among stakeholders to ignore offences as everyone benefits; and finally (v) socio-economic changes in the village society. Lele (1998: 7) also points out that due to increased penetration of markets in rural areas and integration of villages to the larger economy, the traditional sense of 'community' has declined in rural India. Thus, the assumption of a homogenous village community on which the success of JFM rests is itself flawed.

Sarkar (2008) in her study of van panchayats in 45 villages of central Himalayas finds that in spite of the existence of favourable conditions for successful outcomes of collective action, the forests under the van panchayats as well as the state-controlled forests have degraded over the years. She points out that local communities are indifferent to the administrative jurisdiction of forests, while extracting resources, thus resulting in degradation of both types of forests. The study found that collective rule violation in the villages was common, and the villagers are unaware about the long-term ecological implications of their actions. The study reveals that both government- and community-managed institutions are eroding due to unprecedented pressure on the resource base. The dependence of local people on forests is very high as very few alternatives in terms of livelihood and other resources have been offered to them. She finds that community rules are liable to dissolve under continuous pressure of population growth.

The findings of most of these studies show that traditional systems of community forest management have broken down due to their alienation from forests for a long time. Also, other factors such as change in the rural community and rural society, erosion of community structures, low regard for community rules and regulations, increased population pressure on resources and low incentives for protecting forests are responsible for degradation of community institutions managing forests (Lele 1998; Balooni et al. 2007).

## 8.4 Conclusion

Forest management policies and practices over time have gradually isolated local communities from forest management and eroded the traditional, community knowledge and structures for forest management. Thus, current approaches of forest management in partnership with local communities have yielded mixed results. Programmes, like the JFM, are formulated on the assumption that local communities are cohesive units, willing to take over protection and management of forests and that all members of the community have strong conservationist approach and interest in protection of forests (Lele 1998: 2). This assumption is faulty, as pointed out by several studies. Moreover, during the colonial period, community forestry was successfully practiced only in some areas where the British had given concessions and special permissions. However, when JFM was initiated, it applied the same rules across the country, without considering the history of community management of forests. Even in places that had a tradition of forest management by local communities, over time institutions and rules are withering, due to increasing pressure of population, their livelihood and sustenance needs.

The current official policy on forest management is vacillating between a conservationist and populist approach. Conservationists give overriding priority to sustainable management, often neglecting livelihood needs of the people dependent on forests. Whereas populists call for handing over management of forests to people, ignoring conservation. As Lele (1998: 1–2) crucially remarks, '*the current system is a patchwork of full state control (Reserve Forests, Sanctuaries and National Parks) in certain areas and open-access in others (what are typically classified as Protected or Unclassed Forests): systems wherein the local users are either at loggerheads with the state in the former or with each other in the latter.*' The official policy for protected areas is one of denial of existence of human populations within the reserved forests, whereas human settlements are present in virtually all pockets of forests across the country.

The concern is no longer whether forests are to be exclusively managed by the state/government or the local community. 'Pure state management' through centralised mechanisms have caused much harm to forests and its resources. Also 'pure community management', in the absence of regulation, does not work. What is required is a system of forest management involving both state and local actors, with roles and responsibilities clearly defined according to their interests and incentives in the forest resources. The role for the state/government in the management of forests is mainly to address the need for a coordinated and centralised management system. The state has a facilitating role in reducing transaction and institution costs of coordination among user groups and other stakeholders, sharing of relevant information about the resource, its availability across the user groups, sharing of specialised knowledge and learning among researchers, government agencies and communities (Grafton 2000: 514).

There is little chance of protecting forests and its resources without the involvement of local communities. However, the absence of any regulation on local

communities may lead to degradation of forests, and in the absence of any community institution, the degradation would be faster. Local communities have to be recognised as active participants in the management of forests on which they depend. The Tiger Task Force Report (2005), which is a telling commentary on the state of management of forests, calls for the emergence of an 'Indian model of conservation' that takes into consideration the protection of forests and wildlife, and also the livelihood and developmental needs of the people living within and around forests. Forest management policies need to recognise the dependence of local communities on forest resources and make them active agents of conservation. The focus of forest management has to be on maintaining and regenerating forests keeping in mind the livelihood and sustenance needs of the population.

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