

Foreword

This monograph, entitled *Managing India's Forests: Village Communities, Panchayati Raj Institutions and the State*, is a study of the institutional structures for sustainable management of common property resources, especially forests, in India. The author, Dr P J Dilip Kumar, who served as a forest officer for almost four decades, has drawn from his vast experiences in the civil services of forests and environment. Besides, the author also draws heavily from the main literature on panchayati raj, joint forest management, economics of natural resources and related subjects in developing this study.

There is a vigorous debate in India today about articulating the most effective mode of conserving our forests and similar natural resource bases. The social environmentalists like Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha (1992), tribal rights activists and protagonist NGOs, have argued forcefully that forests are under threat, not because of the pressure of human uses, but because of inequitable institutional relations. The colonial government had instituted the system of notifying reserved forests and entrusting them to a specialized department, i.e., Forest Department, which was set up in the middle of the 19th century. The social environmentalists have long argued that this has alienated the people from their own natural resource bases, resulting in a constant tension between the forest-dependent communities and the state forest departments. They advocated handing over the control of the forests back to the communities, as enunciated in the latest legislation on the subject, the Forest Rights Act, 2006.

The forest department, on the other hand, has advocated the system of Joint Forest Management (JFM) with the communities which is a bipartite model. And the early JFM institutions developed in the states like Odisha and Bengal in the 1990s were of this kind. Dr Dilip Kumar clearly espouses this alternative, and has adduced local evidences in support of this position and tries to take it beyond. Thus, he visualizes the conversion of a bipartite model into a tripartite model. In order to introduce the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) into the JFM model, he argues that decentralisation need not end with the Gram Panchayats, but must be further inclusive and anchored on smaller institutions like village forest protection committees and their umbrella organizations as it is done in the JFM model. He also draws support from the work of Elinor Ostrom, who recommends a series of nested institutions which facilitate the face-to-face building of trust and confidence in the community, as well as effectively utilize the larger legal and judicial apparatus of the state in the instituting of sustainable natural

resource management regimes. Thus, the framework of Elinor Ostrom is not very different from the JFM model as VFPCs are also grassroots-level popular organisations based on the trust and confidence of the village communities. This piece of research by Dr Dilip Kumar is based on the case study of villages in three states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Haryana. The objective of the study was to understand why some communities are successful in conserving their common property forests, while some others are evidently struggling to do so. An associated objective was to understand the community's perceptions of the role of other principal actors – the state (represented by the forest department), and the organs of decentralized governance (PRIs). The consensus coming through the case studies in all the three states is that communities, by and large, recognize that both PRIs and state line departments have their respective roles, and the people on the ground do not perceive any grave rivalry or antagonism between the two. This confirms and underlines the need to look at decentralized governance at different levels, including hamlet- or settlement-based organizations below the formal Panchayat Raj Institutions.

I am optimistic that the monograph will be a valuable addition to the literature in institutional arrangements in managing CPR in India.

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