Social Forestry in South Asia: Myths and Realities

By

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Abstract

This study focuses on some of the major issues in relation to popular thinking about the theory of social forestry development in South Asia, including deforestation, community participation and appropriate forest policy. The mainstream view has been that deforestation is a process driven by community-based factors. Such views have had implications for formulation and implementation of social forestry projects in developing countries. This paper discusses three case studies from South Asia (India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) on social forestry. It attempts to critically examine the concept as such and analyse the mainstream views that justified the intervention of such afforestation programmes. The successes and failures in addressing the biomass needs through social forestry are discussed in the paper. Lack of good governance and policy support are assumed to be some of the reasons for poor success. National social forestry projects cannot be treated in isolation from the related issues of poverty, local diversities, gender and local cultural values. Success has been limited in terms of reaching the poorest segments of the population – some of whom have actually lost access to common pool resources as a result of social forestry intervention. There is some attitudinal change within the forest department, but it is rarely accompanied with intervention in the underlying power relations, reflecting a continued difficulty in viewing the forest department sociologically. This lack of sociological perspective is also seen in the tendency to focus on just adding resources perceived to be in short supply, but not attempting to remove institutional obstacles.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social forestry interventions in south Asia intended to involve local communities, whether it is agro forestry, farm forestry or community forestry needs well planned transformation of a dynamic inter-relationship among community, natural environment and the state (Agarwal 1995). In certain situations, the forest-community dependencies are deep rooted and need careful consideration while designing such development interventions. The theoretical basis for planning such transformations is more complex than project planners and bureaucrats often consider. Most of these forestry interventions (for the purpose of this paper termed as 'social forestry') went through a number of paradigm shifts, beginning with a top down conventional model approach, to the most recent approach wherein emphasis is laid on local participation. There is a lack of proper understanding by policy makers and foresters, and

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inadequate theoretical basis in these approaches. Analysis of the approaches may provide explanation for the poor performance of most social forestry projects in south Asia. Different views exist about the poor outcomes and the basic reasons for such outcomes.

Earlier studies that addressed issues of social forestry in south Asia tended to neglect local conceptualisations of natural resources, because their methodologies excluded local histories, local socio-political process and issues of institutional change. Studies in the recent years have started paying attention towards the analysis of local livelihoods, the local complexity of natural resource management and the long traditions of local resource management and conservation (Blaikie and Brookfield 1999; IIED 1998; IDS 1999).

This study will attempt to analyse some of the theoretical contents of the social forestry projects in south Asia and related policies in order to make them explicit and the factors responsible for the poor performance of the social forestry projects with regard to equity, environmental rehabilitation and sustainability.

The present study draws on the authors' research and field experience in social forestry in South Asia (India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) since the mid 90s. Some data was also gathered during specific reviews of three social forestry projects in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka funded by different international donor agencies. The reviews consisted of discussions with local key informants and government officials, several field visits and secondary data collection.

2. DEFORESTATION CRISIS AND SOCIAL FORESTRY

Generalizations about deforestation have been termed as "received wisdom" (Leach and Mearns, 1996), "orthodoxies" (Benjaminsen 1993, 1998), "mainstream views" (Sandford, 1983), "narratives" (Roe, 1991). Studies supporting these mainstream views on deforestation are built on the assumptions that use of fuelwood, fodder and other forest products by local people are the most important factors leading to forest degradation. This view has been presented in a number of publications (IUCN *et al*. 1980; Anderson and Fishwick, 1984; Timberlake, 1985; WCED, 1987). In some cases the situations were presented as serious, and produced an immediate need for enhancement of biomass supply to mitigate the fuelwood and fodder crisis. The mainstream views, encouraged donors and national governments to go for large-scale afforestation projects in many regions including south Asia. Social forestry was

originally conceived by the national governments as a response to the 'fuelwood crisis' and to accelerating deforestation. But, deforestation is more complex than suggested by the population-based models. The deforestation theories blaming locals were promoted by stakeholders with vested interests. For example, the Fuel Policy Committee set up by Government of India in 1974 noted that:

> The recorded fuelwood output (from Indian Forests) in 1970 is about nine million tonnes. The actual consumption of firewood is, however reported to be over 100 million tonnes, the balance coming from unrecorded felling from forests (GOI, 1976, pp. 23).

The report issued a warning that; if fuelwood extraction would continue in the same manner it will lead to complete depletion of forest cover within 10-20 years. Similarly, the World Bank review of the Nepal forestry sector in 1978 resulted in an alarmist report premised on the 'theory of environmental degradation'. Such debates are relevant not to just explain past deforestation, but also have implications on planning strategies to solve the crisis and prevent recurrences in the future. The solutions would have been different if the debate had taken a broader perspective emphasizing on other factors responsible for deforestation, for example, agricultural expansion, timber extraction by local or multinational companies, mining, weaknesses in policy and legislation, weak institutions, corruption etc, rather than just the unsustainable exploitation by local people. In the latter case, the problem lies with the local people, and in the former it is do more with the broader society. Consequently, the solution would also depend on where the 'problematique' is located. Agarwal (1998) highlights the government's interests for acquiring funds from donor agencies, behind promoting these deforestation discourses and how the forestry projects during 80s were based on such discourses. In India, the National Commission on Agriculture (NCA) in 1976 recommended the creation of 'social forests' on common lands and state forests to provide the local communities fuel wood, small timber and fodder (GOI, 1976).

The following project background description by an external consultant for Department of International Development (United Kingdom) in 1987, shows how, even the donor agencies and national governments justified the social forestry projects based on the 'Fuelwood Orthodoxy' approach:

"India's designated forests cover about 75 million ha, but increasing pressures from local human and cattle populations have resulted in severe depletion of much of the natural forests. Fuelwood, extraction from forests is leading to widespread deforestation. A massive increase in afforestation is needed to ensure adequate supplies of fuelwood and fodder, building poles and other products for the rural poor. To achieve this the development of forest resources through social forestry is essential."

As a consequence, social forestry schemes by and large remained technocratic throughout the sub-continent emphasizing on biomass production and failed to respond to the needs of the poor and landless (FAO, 1993). However, in recent years there has been a growing awareness and research investigating the mainstream views in local settings (Benjaminsen, 1993; Fairhead and Leach, 1996; Agarwal, 1998; Udaya Sekhar 2000). These studies are providing more realistic assessments of deforestation and its causes, and giving a more respectful attention to local knowledge and practices that are the necessary bases for effective and appropriate environmental policies. According to them, deforestation is not merely a result of gradual local pressure on resources, but more of disruption of the traditional institutional framework responsible for resource protection and management. These studies demonstrate that extraction of wood by local communities is not the main reason for deforestation and that exclusion of local people does not help to realize the objectives of the studied projects.

3. LOCAL PEOPLE AND NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

Conservation and management of biomass resources and environment are embedded in an array of knowledge and local practices. Most development projects tend to ignore the ingenuity of rural people in responding to the local problems based on their local knowledge (Chambers, 1983). Initiatives intended to grow trees through Social Forestry projects have not taken cognisance of the existing local practises. For example in the Himalayan region, common practices of obtaining biomass resources from forests are through pollarding, pruning or selective cutting and not by felling of tress (Saethre, 1993). Similarly studies from Nepal have shown that, communities adjacent to forests mostly use dry wood as fuelwood and grasses for fodder that normally does not involve cutting of trees (Sharma and Shaw, 1993). For many local communities across South Asia, forests are not only of consumptive value, but also revered as places of great socio-cultural and religious significance (Chandrakanth *et al.;* 1990; Udaya Sekhar, 2001). The other factors that regulate resource extraction from forests

include (a) traditional rights (b) religious practices (c) and non-use of certain tree species in the region. For example, people have a strong belief that felling of certain tree species such as 'neem' (*Azadirachta indica*) and 'pipal' (*Ficus religiosa*) brings evil to the members of the household. Thus local systems of knowledge and management are sometimes rooted deeply in their religion and belief systems, which help in conserving the resources. But, state management was often based on flawed premises or a lack of understanding of the people-nature dependency (Chandrakanth *et al.*, 1990; Sharma, 1991). Gradually local communities have lost access and control of the resources, resulting in conflicts with the state and other stakeholders.

In many parts of south Asia, local people maintained strict rules to manage natural forests in their vicinity even until the 60s (Jodha, 1992; Agarwal and Yadama, 1997; Udaya Sekhar, 2000). The examples given below are illustrative of the diversity of informal or traditional institutional arrangements at the local level:

(i) A grazing fee was levied on herders in some pasturelands. In some regions, grazing was banned in pond catchments to prevent siltation of ponds.

(ii) Cutting of grass and fodder leaves from the certain tree species, 'Sal' (*Shorea robusta*) in the *Terai* region in the Himalayas, or 'Palas' (*Butea monosprema*.) in central and western India was regulated on forestlands.

(iii) Collection of dry wood did not require individual permits from the informal councils at the village level, whereas special permits were required for felling trees on the hill slopes and catchments. In case of some species that are less in abundance such as Shisham (*Dalbergia sisoo*) and Bamboo (*Dendrocalamus* spp.) there was a ban on felling. These species had market value for their timber.

The village community performed collective work to enhance and maintain the tree cover, by fencing, planting, trenching in forests, fire lines maintenance and desilting of ponds. Each household had an obligation to contribute a share to such efforts, failing this its rights to resources were curtailed. These duties are no longer followed as the local rights to resources are curtailed with state control.

The indirect non-consumptive values were represented in day-to-day life in the form of rules and conventions regulating use of resources. The informal institutions tend to reduce the environmental uncertainty faced by resource users especially in arid and semi-arid regions

and also contribute to the conservation of natural resources (Agarwal and Yadama 1997; Jodha 1993; Runge 1992). In some cases, the local institutions are better informed than the state departments about local ecological, economical and social conditions and about problems and constraints, which may be important from the management point of view. According to some studies, traditional management systems of CPRs have contributed to the protection of natural resources from being over used and have played a vital role in the management and conservation of natural resources (Cordell & Mckean 1990; Feeny *et.al*.,1990).

4. TENURE RIGHTS AND BIOMASS RESOURCES

Prior to 1950s, local landlords controlled and had the authority to grant rights in forests in India, Sri Lanka and Nepal. In different areas, the tenure systems varied, for example the *Birta* system in mid hills of Nepal and the *Zamindari* system in northern part of India. The colonial regime in India and Sri Lanka significantly influenced the land tenure system. Under colonial management systems which continued in some areas even during the postcolonial period, the local landlords had the responsibility to manage forests and granted rights to the local households. These include access rights, use rights and entitlement rights, which determine the access and end use of resources from the forests. Timber extraction in general was regulated, but there was free access to non-timber forest products. These resources were treated by local communities in many parts of south Asia as a "free good" which were easily available. But these rights and duties ceased with the land reforms during 50s and subsequent development policies initiated by respective governments. In Nepal, forests were nationalized (under the Private Forests Nationalization Act of 1957 and the Birta Abolition Act of 1959) as a part of a wider move to break feudal structures. In India, it was the Land Revenue Act in the respective states, which was implemented to nationalize forests. Nationalization of forests did more harm to landless and rural poor whose access to common pool resources was restricted as part of these resources were declared protected.

In addition, communal sources of fuel wood, fodder and non-timber products have been reduced as a result of the forestry projects under the management and control of state functionaries. Due to nationalization of forest, the lack of local tenure and rights meant there was no incentive for local users, especially the poor and landless to exercise restraint. The rights to access and use of forest resources was further restricted with social forestry

interventions enclosing forestlands. For example, in the middle hill region of Nepal, the poorer sections of the people have less access to forest products for subsistence use and income today, than they had before the implementation of social forestry projects (Hobley, 1996). This is also the case in India and Sri Lanka, where common lands, which were accessible to the landless prior to the social forestry intervention, are no longer freely available (Jodha, 1992). In such a situation, the cultural overlay of rights creates paradoxically huge 'scarcity' differentials between households in villages, especially for the landless and poor. This tends to inhibit effective development and active participation by marginalized groups. Currently, the average poor household receives only one third to one fifth of the wood from forests than collected before the social forestry intervention (Agarwal 1998). The rights to use resources from forestlands, which were formerly guaranteed by customary law, were banned after the land reforms and land acts came into existence in 1950s.

The choice of species or location of social forestry plantations was often made by people who had practically little local knowledge. The fact that there are local variations, even in small countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal, wherein women traditionally prefer certain tree species for fodder or fuel wood is important for any afforestation project to consider. The practice of use restrictions and the issue of land tenure, when viewed in the context of cultural and property rights based on gender inequalities and power relations within the households, presents a complex scenario. The tenure rights to land and resources in many South Asian regions are held by men, giving them legal rights over the resources, although women perform the frequent work of collecting biomass resources for household needs, cooking etc. Attached daily to the forest, women thus have a better knowledge on forest management and conservation, but are the most neglected group in social forestry projects (Chandrakanth et al., 1990).

There is no equity between men and women in land tenure specified officially in the land laws of the respective countries. Neither are women's rights in resource use are ensured in practice. Local traditions seems strongly influence on the women rights in land tenure, as it is the male child who inherits land. As a consequence, women's involvement in forestry projects is less, at the most they are being used as labourers in planting or watering the plants.

5. SOCIAL FORESTRY INTERVENTION

Social forestry is any practice, method, technique/technology or natural resource management system that enhances forest resource governance and makes forestry economically viable, and ecologically sound (GOI 1976). This definition is mostly a state view of what social forestry should be, and does not emphasise the involvement of local people. It advocates that forest plantations should be controlled by the state within fences, thus excluding local people and livestock from entering it. Projects designed with such an approach, for example the National Social Forestry Project (NSFP), aided by the World Bank in India, are typical examples dominated by the orthodox views of deforestation. In general, social forestry interventions initially emerged from concerns over forest degradation as discussed earlier. These forestry interventions, whether it was community forestry (CF) in Nepal or social forestry in India and Sri Lanka, had their focus on technical questions of resource management. It was only towards the beginning of 1990s that the shortcomings of the approaches became evident and since then social forestry interventions started taking a new direction. The forestry interventions started to encompass a rhetoric on a more 'people-oriented approach'. Social forestry or CF was then redefined as a concept, "where forest is managed by local people (living near or in the concerned forest) for their own benefit". However, the new approach still does not explicitly address livelihoods and local resource management patterns. The fundamental concept of CF in Nepal is that local forest users are given collective management responsibility for the local forests on which they depend for product flows. The model is an extremely defined form of organization that is defined in relation to the resource and not to existing social relations or community structures. The new policies still emphasize more on protection and regeneration of the resource, in response to the heightened concerns over rapidly deteriorating forest resources. Under the new management approach, the Joint Forest Management (JFM) committees in India or the Forest User Groups (FUGs) in Nepal find it more difficult to operate in some situations, as the state agencies become more strict as these are supported by policy amendments. For example, the Forest (Second Amendments) Bill, 2001 in Nepal amended the 1993 Forest Act in a number of fundamental ways, which have restricted the FUGs. Under this amendment, the FUG revenues will be taxed at 65 per cent, and CF in the *Terai* area would be subject to separate and more stringent regulations. This demonstrates the dual nature of the state trying to promote local participation on one hand, and at the same time giving more powers to itself to retain control of the forestland.

In general, justifying social forestry intervention was much easier for government agencies in situations where deforestation crisis was projected as more serious, than in situations where it was considered less serious. In the latter case, it can be difficult for forest agencies to justify their intervention and secure funding. On the other hand, the cost-benefit ratio had to be projected to convince donors about the economic viability of the projects. This led to the recommendation of fast growing species in social forestry plantations, irrespective of local factors and needs. Eucalyptus was one such species recommended by forest planners on a large scale during the 70s and 80s in social forestry projects. Large areas were brought under monocultures of Eucalyptus, which became a major environmental controversy towards the 80s and 90s. In the Terai region of Nepal and India, the Forest agencies, replanted degraded *sal* (Shorea Robusta) forests with exotic tree species, mainly *Eucalyptus* and *Sissoo* (Dalbergia Sissoo), under the pretext that it would produce biomass in short periods. There was resistance from local NGOs opposing the replanting program of the Forest Department, in some cases leading to violent conflicts with local people.

Social Forestry has been part of the national forest policies in South Asian region in one form or another since the 70s. But after three decades of development and implementation, it has still not met its stated objective of promoting plantation activities, which address the needs of poor people for fuel, fodder, small timber and non-timber forest products. According to Agarwal (1995), social forestry has the potential for substantial welfare improvements for the target population, especially women, through increased biomass availability, decreased time for collection and decreased pressure on natural forests. Intervention needs, however, to be very selective to be successful; they must be locally specific with special consideration given to the needs of local people. The goal of social forestry intervention should not only be to provide biomass but also to reverse the processes of negative change through active participation.

6. SOCIAL FORESTRY IN SOUTH ASIA (REVIEW OF CASE STUDIES FROM INDIA, SRI LANKA AND NEPAL)

6.1 Shivapuri Watershed Management and Fuelwood Plantation Project in Nepal (funded by Norway through a trust fund to FAO)

The Shivapuri project was initiated in 1975 by the government of Nepal in order to protect the Shivapuri range as a water catchment area and a wildlife reserve. FAO became involved in

the project from 1985, introducing ideas of social forestry in the form of block plantations of fulewood, plantation on private land and other community development activities. The objectives of the project included protection of the watershed, reduction in land degradation and community development. One of the objectives related to biomass is phrased as follows:

- To alleviate the heavy demand for fuelwood/fodder in the watershed area by establishment of fuelwood/fodder plantations on available land in and adjoining the project area through community participation to meet local requirements; as well as encouraging the use of alternative energy where practicable.

This objective reflects the standard thinking of planners; keeping people out of forest areas while seeking to develop alternative resources on under-utilised land. The perception was that the degradation of the watershed area is caused by over-utilisation by local people, and that creation of alternative forest resources would reduce the pressure on the protected area.

The government's take over of ownership to the forestlands in 1957 caused a disruption in the traditional ways of land management and governance, and no alternative system was effectively developed in its place. This resulted in indiscriminate extraction of resources encouraged by a high demand for wood products from the nearby capital city of Kathmandu. Also other resources like grass and medicinal plants were collected for sale. As the sale was unofficial, it was difficult to develop a system ensuring a balanced extraction of resources. Thus, the commercial use of the watershed area and the lack of a management system and tenure arrangements were important factors in land degradation.

The unsustainable utilisation of the watershed was mostly by people who did not necessarily need or benefit from fuelwood plantations in the project area. Some were businessmen or farmers with large land holdings, and were not as such in short supply of fuelwood. In addition, the allocation of "available lands" land to community groups also deprived access of some vulnerable groups who had developed survival strategies based on grazing or harvesting grass etc. in these lands.

A part of the degradation in the Shivapuri range was caused by pilgrims from outside visiting the sacred source of the Bagmati river near the Shivapuri summit. In this case the sacredness had an adverse effect caused by fuelwood cutting and wildfires caused by pilgrims.

The expressed need of many families during a local survey was primarily school facilities, drinking water and alternative sources of income and not fuelwood. Although forestry activities had substantial support in the communities, the survey gives no evidence of a fuelwood shortage. Forest extraction may have been of more importance as an income generating activity, and as a source of fodder and building materials etc.

All of these indicate that the strong focus on fuelwood that was seen in the first phase of the project was a too simple approach to a complex problem embedded in social, historical and political factors. The plantation efforts were not necessarily wrong, but it was an incomplete response. Other needs were partially captured by other elements of the project objectives covering community development activities, but these received less focus in the early stages of the project. Such additional strategies were strengthened in the second phase of the project starting in 1991. In this phase the name of the project was changed, removing the fuelwood aspect and naming it the "Shivapuri integrated watershed management project" (FAO 1991). This reflects a change in development thinking. A more varied response to poverty alleviation and land degradation is reflected in the objectives of this phase. From focussing on the physical resources and the physical reasons for their degradation, a shift can be seen in the direction of focusing on the people and their livelihood, and on their use of the resources. The project was still, however, a *project*, not yet encompassing new ideas of a programmatic approach linking the management of the Shivapuri protected area and the development activities in the surrounding villages.

6.2 National Social Forestry Project in India (financed by the World Bank)

In India, social forestry programmes began on a large scale only in 1974 in response to the interim report of the National Commission on Agriculture. Social forestry was originally conceived by the Indian government as a response to the forestry crisis and to accelerating deforestation in India. As a consequence, the original objectives of social forestry projects including those financed by the World Bank were to produce fodder, fuel wood, small timber, fruits, and minor forest produce in fenced plantations using fast growing species. In 1984, the World Bank approved the India National Social Forestry project for $165 million. A review of the project document reveals the main objectives as follows:

- To increase production of fuel wood, small timber, poles and fodder.
- To increase rural employment, farmer's incomes and opportunities for participation by landless people.

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- To increase the forest cover
- To strengthen forestry institutions.

The objectives show that emphasis is mostly on resource creation through planting fast-growing tree species on privately owned large farms and wastelands. But the products from social forestry plantations were found to have more value for paper and pulp industries and commercial institutions, rather than meeting biomass needs to local people. For example, Eucalyptus, which was the most planted species in the NSFP, was inappropriate in meeting the project's objectives because of its lack of fodder value and ineffectiveness in soil building. Besides, it was inappropriately used as a monocrop in semi-arid areas where competition for water and the need for soil enhancing treatments are high. Several studies expressed that widespread planting of eucalyptus in ecologically inappropriate arid areas has boomeranged with degradation of soils and water tables. An USAID review in 1988 noted that the project was not meeting the subsistence needs of the local people, and therefore was ineffective in reducing pressure on existing forestlands. The opportunities for participation by landless people meant using landless people as daily wage labourers for planting activities. The local participation was thus measured in terms of man-days as labourers, also seen by the donor agencies as a progress indicator.

Gradually, social forestry projects have come under increasing criticism because they have failed to actively involve the local communities and rural poor, who are supposedly the main beneficiaries. Private farmlands, wastelands and community lands have been converted for commercial uses, and in a number of cases the access of poorer rural populations to fodder, fuel wood and other forest products has actually been reduced. The lack of participation of local communities in project design and implementation, and over reliance on industry-biased State forestry departments appear to be the main causes of the project's shortcomings. For example, in Karnataka state of India, small farmers and rural poor were driven to protesting industry biased plantations, including civil disobedience involving the uprooting of seedlings on village common lands.

Similarly, in Bastar region of Madhya Pradesh, which is predominantly a tribal district, the social forestry project involved land covered by natural forests, which was used to raise commercial plantations. The area was planted with tropical pines and other non native species and the biomass produced was not much useful to the tribals whose livelihoods are solely

dependant on natural forests. The tribal sustenance base in cane and bamboo for basket weaving, mangoes, tamarind, jackfruit, mahua and edible berries was disrupted when monoculture plantations of eucalyptus or tropical pine replaced natural forests. The project was finally shelved due to the serious resistance of local tribals. It was based not on local knowledge but on ecological ignorance of the forest ecosystem and tribals integration. Such setbacks led to critical reviews both in academic and executive circles, resulting in a much broader approach to address the biomass needs of the poor. In recent years, there is a shift in the terminology, which appears more social, and response from the people to participate in the development process. The solutions to long perceived biomass scarcity in India lie not in the effectiveness of state initiatives in forestry development, but in promoting local forestry management practises through the new Joint forest management policy. However, it is important that the new management paradigm is committed to actively involve people, and ensure equitable distribution of resources, especially to the marginal groups. One of the problems identified in the new paradigm is the retention of the power by the state to make decisions related to sharing of forest resources, membership in the management committees and other day to day activities of the committees which can be left to the people to decide.

6.3 The Upper Watershed Management Project, Sri Lanka (Funded by an ADB credit)

The Upper Watershed Management Project (UWMP) objectives were to rehabilitate and sustainably manage and protect the critical watersheds, to improve the income of project beneficiaries and to facilitate the establishment of a medium to long-term watershed management policy. The project has three main components:

- Participatory rehabilitation and protection of forests,
- Promotion of conservation oriented farming systems
- Capacity building and institutional strengthening of the concerned institutions.

The objectives show a shift in the thinking and approach of project planners. The forestry components included buffer zone planting in degraded areas around demarcated government forests and reserves with mixed fast growing species, rather than monocultures. Farmers or village groups are to be awarded contracts with limited rights for harvesting of wood and other forest products. Besides, it also supports the creation of small timber farms on

government lands, providing more extended user rights. On paper, the forest authorities claim only 20% of the sales value of any tree crop and the projects pay 80% of the labour cost involved in establishment of the timber farms. However, there was limited direct interaction with communities while planning and thus they adopted a fairly top down approach. The communities were not involved in prioritising activities or discussing alternative solutions to the land degradation problem. The preliminary project review has found that the resource creation part of the project is satisfactory. But, there is lack of proper policy evolution in support of the people's participation. The participation of farmers is only though payment for work done. The project also lacks a gender strategy, and specific targeting of poor families is limited. Participatory rural appraisals implemented prior to initiating the project activities are of a rather summary nature, and the project offers a largely pre-determined package defined in the project document. This is typical for many projects oriented towards physical targets. A process oriented approach defining the participation and institutional development objectives at the core of the project would probably have focussed differently. This is not to say that it is wrong to have physical targets for rehabilitation of watersheds with critical importance for water supply, electricity and food security of the country, but the strong focus on reaching quantitative targets is seen in this project to have consequences for quality and sustainability. Participation through wage labour does not secure the development of local social and institutional mechanisms to sustain the benefits of the project in the long run.

Many public institutions in Sri Lanka suffer from resource constraints, lack of trained personnel and old fashioned centralised decision-making structures. The Forest Department is not an exception in this regard. The tradition – inherited from the colonial period – has been one of attempting to limit the access to the forest resources in order to secure their protection. Controlling the use of forest resources and enforcing all relevant rules and regulations has not been possible with the resources available. More than half the time of some field personnel is used in court prosecuting forest offences. This way of prioritising limited resources has been encouraged by the system allowing the Department to keep a substantial part of the fines collected for their internal use, and the officer in question can personally retain a similar amount as an incentive.

Rural communities in Sri Lanka often lack strong local organisations, and joint community action related to natural resource management is limited. This makes it natural to focus on family units when developing e.g. timber farms. Plans to enhance community forestry through

the UWMP have therefore not gained much momentum. There is lack of proper policy and institutional support for encouraging active participation of the communities.

7. NATIONAL POLICIES AND SOCIAL FORESTRY

The Forest Policy prescriptions during colonial and neo-colonial periods in South Asia have been influenced by the mainstream views on deforestation leading to restrictions on local communities to extract biomass from state forests in this region (Gadgil and Guha, 1995). Most of these policies continued in the post-colonial period, but under a different nomenclature. International policy documents on environment and development such as WCED (1987) have also been echoing such views and providing support to national policies in developing countries. These restrictive forest policies and legislation have rather weakened the State in its efforts to conserve natural resources.

In general, forest legislation is south Asia is based on a 'command and control' system, stating mainly what is not allowed, rather than how the forests *can* be used. The system creates numerous opportunities for corruption, including private sale of produce from the state forest, payments for overlooking offences and unofficial 'fees' for issuing permits for logging and transport. Particularly the latter two have created widespread resentment among local people, and conflicts with the forest agencies. State failures have led to the realisation by the governments and conservationists in South Asia that the orientation and direction of past state policy on forest management had itself been the primary reason for the worsening state of forests. For example, The Indian Forest Policy, 1988 (GOI, 1988) mentioned that:

" Excessive concern for revenue, a disregard for people's needs, and lack of initiative
in involving people in the past needs to be corrected ".

Such policy statements need to be highlighted to show that conflicts actually originate in the dissolution of local institutions and ignoring local people's needs.

Local environmental movements in south Asia have also become more influential in the present decade, especially the grass-roots environmentalism based on the legacy of issue-focused local voluntary bodies (e.g., *chipko* movement in India), and the political ecology movement, which presents a wider critique of modernization. Grassroots environmentalism

and political ecology have both been able to gain momentum by involving society at the local level. Informal grassroots forest protection movements in south Asia such as the "Western Ghats campaign" and "Save the Himalayas", promoted environmental concerns as well as local interests through media and rehabilitation programmes (Gadgil 1993; Gadgil & Guha 1995). The pressure from various movements across the region and international agencies eventually led to new forest policies in south Asia during the 90s. The new forest policies of Sri Lanka, India and Nepal appear to be moving towards participatory use and management of forest resources and the involvement of local people, community groups and the private sector. Also, local organisations like the FECOFUN in Nepal, have gained power though the development of a national non-government organisation. This organisation has been able to influence political decisions, and is putting pressure on forest authorities to allow local management and local retention of revenues. Pressure is also being asserted to reduce corruption within the forest departments. Thus, the push for change in policies and institutions is building up from beneath, and supplements a push for change coming from international cooperation and changes in development policies.

This new approach to forest management attempts to promote people's participation through co-management. This approach could be a part of the new people-centred paradigm recognizing that local people are capable of managing their environment. The new approaches offer a promising opportunity to respond to the numerous problems which states are facing (Poffenberger & Singh 1996) while implementing forestry projects. However, the approaches are also co-opted by the state and, given the scepticism in the administration to give power to the people, the implementation of the new policies and the participatory role of local people the new paradigms is not clear. Is it simply to co-opt rural people into state-dominated modes of resource use in order to lessen state obligations toward resource management and enforcement, or will local communities really be involved in decision-making?

According to some, the new forestry management paradigms are genuine attempts to involve local people in natural resource management (Sarin 1993; Mukherjee 1995). There are others who are sceptical about it, however, since it has been framed externally in a top-down manner (Kolavalli 1995; Menon 1995). The top-down nature is evident from the policy documents where the state defines the rules and terms of partnership in forest development projects. The local communities are meant to follow these terms, which do not show much flexibility. For example, the ratio of benefit sharing between forest protection committees and Forest

Departments in general are fixed by the forest agencies. Activities such as tree felling and fodder extraction are possible only with the prior approval of these agencies. This also applies to plantations created under social forestry projects on forest as well as community lands.

The major constraint in implementing the new forest policies lies in the hesitation of the State bureaucracy to transfer powers to local communities. This is evident from the presence of the local forest officer who represents the state in the village committees constituted under new forest management models. The local forest officer will not only be a technical advisor, but will also control permits for use and sanctions for misuse of natural resources. The state has rights of exclusion here, since it decides who may or may not have access to forest resources. The village committees do not have any powers to frame rules of withdrawal or impose sanctions on offenders. The most common approach to resolve offences so far was through paying bribes. Thus the system of permits controlled by state officials was vulnerable to corruption and manipulation, and its continued existence only served to highlight the vulnerability of the state authority. The Forest Service personnel see the new decentralized policy as a threat to their authority. Many problems associated with the new decentralized approach stem from the policy guidelines, which are interpreted to suit the interests of the Forest Service

According to Kothari *et.al*., (1995), externally initiated community forest management efforts in South Asia have not proved very effective in controlling deforestation problems. With recent socio-economic changes in the region the present situation with reference to biomass extraction may not remain the same in the future if resources are not managed properly. Markets may start influencing forest management in the region encouraging people to cut trees. It all will depend on how the new policy initiatives will actively empower local people and to what extent the people will be involved in management of natural resources.

State initiatives to help local communities in meeting their energy demands through village woodlots or closure schemes have remained as isolated attempts. In a few areas, state forests and village lands that were closed periodically under rehabilitation programs by Forest Departments were found to have good vegetative cover. This may be due to additional protection measures which the department provides to closures, but in general such measures were not popular since they often excluded local people, as seen from the damage to plantations, frequent grazing and low success rate.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

What do we learn from this overview? The linkage between biomass extraction by local people and deforestation is not so easy as it has been portrayed by mainstream views. These theories do not capture the local communities-nature interface. The approach in social forestry was too simplistic in the early stages based on mainstream views; to create block plantations in fenced areas for producing biomass. Biomass problems are more linked to local tenure rights, access to resources, and social and cultural factors, often ignored by planners and researchers. Besides, the block plantations created new problems like e.g. reduced access to common lands for poor people and landless and violent conflicts. The social forestry cases from the three countries show that there is a change in the approach towards forestry interventions from the time they started. Simultaneously, there is opposition from certain groups who are reluctant to part with the powers and authority. However, if the impacts of forestry projects on livelihood and forest management are to be sustained such issues have to be addressed. There is an urgent need to empower the local groups and secure access to resources for the landless and poor. Local initiatives to protect forests are hampered by insecure access to resources, and lack of alternative sources of income for the landless and poor.

Despite the reluctance of forest authorities to give up power, the process has gone beyond the point of no return; people are also not willing to give up the opportunities to harvest the forest resources. This is underscored by the legislation and policies, which support local forest management in south Asia, and by the fact that forest users are getting organised with the support of NGOs. Backlashes and delays in the implementation will therefore not change the overall picture, unless the governments are committed to address the issue and actively involve local people. Local initiatives to manage forest resources have to be intensified and integrated in mainstream development of forest management.

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