

**A MOUNTAIN CULTURE IN JEOPARDY: AN ANALYSIS OF A FAULTY FOREST POLICY WHICH IS AFFECTING THE CULTURE AND BIODIVERSITY OF A TRIBAL POPULATION IN WESTERN HIMALAYAS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Traditional mountain societies are characterised by their symbiotic relationship with nature. Living in harsh environments people have to rely on natural resources and on an array of practices which they have devised through trial and error during their inhabitancy through ages. Their holistic view of their ecosystem results in diversified and dynamic strategies that are well adapted to their natural environment. The emphasis is on diversification rather than homogenisation of landscape. But situation can reverse in the years to come and we can see a major upheaval in environment, transformation in the cultural milieu and economy thus leading to an unsustainable mode of life. The major cause of environmental degradation today is the unsustainable forest policy of the Himachal government which needs the attention of policy makers, if they want sustainable livelihoods for future generations. The paper analyses the faulty forest policy which is affecting the biodiversity and the culture of the Kinnaurese and reflects on why change is needed to transform the faulty policies not only in Himachal Pradesh but throughout the country.

**Keywords:** Culture; Forest Policy; Sustainable Development

**Introduction**

In the last few years ecological approaches to understand human societies have become very popular. Current awareness of global environmental problems is drawing ecological anthropology into multidisciplinary debates over 'sustainable development'. Ecological crises have affected all societies, but small scale societies have experienced the worst consequences of degradation of their environment. The rapid destruction of forests, grazing lands, coastal

fisheries etc., has stimulated interest in the ‘tragedy of commons’, a model that resources held in common ownership are inevitably overused and degraded by the people pursuing their individual interests. However examples of sustainable common resource management in many regions of the world challenge this model. For example, Swiss alpine villagers have for centuries successfully managed and conserved meadows, forest and irrigation as common resources (Bernard & Spencer, 2002:171).

However, state policies compelling the division of common resource can lead to the ‘tragedy of enclosure’. Privatization or government acquisition of the grazing lands deprives the herders and peasants to flexible access to seasonal pastures in climatically variable settings, as well as other forest produces and undermining pastoral adaptations. This in turn, lead local farmers deprived of fuel and fodder and other resources, which forces them to cut trees or branches; sometimes triggering resistance movements (Guha, 1989).

Thus, in the light of current global environmental problems and sustainability issues, the Rio Conference in 1992, recognised the mountain ecosystem as fragile and globally important, as water towers of the earth, repositories of rich biological diversity and, target areas for recreation, and as hub of cultural integrity and heritage. Occupying about one-fifth of the world's land surface area, mountains provide a direct life-support base for about one-tenth of humankind as well as goods and services to more than half the world's population. The judicious and respectful use of the fragile resources in the highland areas represents one of the greatest challenges for sustainable mountain development. (UNCED, 1992).

Policy decisions influencing the use of mountain resources are generally made in centres of power far from mountain communities, which are often politically marginalized and receive inadequate compensation for mountain resources, services and products. Mountain ecosystems are exceedingly diverse but fragile because of their steep slopes, altitude and extreme landscapes. Many of these ecosystems are being degraded not because of farmers unsustainable practices but by unsustainable and inappropriate policies of the government.

There is an entire range of environmental, economic and social policies and legislative initiatives that impact mountain ecosystem. I will focus on some of them which concern directly the tribal population of Kinnaur district in particular and other rural people of the State of Himachal Pradesh in general. With an ecological approach I went on to explore the human-environment nexus in the backdrop of culture. For the field study, village Jangi (altitude 2790 m) with a population of total population (668) in Morang Tehsil of Pooh Division of Kinnaur district in Himachal was selected. The selection of this interior village in middle Kinnaur, justified my

choice of field study, as it epitomized the essence of hill ecology and demonstrated itself as a repository of traditional indigenous knowledge, which helps the people to sustain a living in a harsh climate. In documenting the problems relating to the environment structured and unstructured interviews were taken up from the villagers. The villagers were also allowed to express their subjective dimensions through depth interviews. Through participant and non-participant observation technique a lot of data was culled up regarding various agricultural and forestry practices. Collective time spent with the farmers, ranged from between two to three hours which was spread over several visits to their fields. Case studies of women also made a part of the study, as they had to go twice in a day, to long distances for collecting wood and forage on high mountains.

### **The Condition of Common Property Resources**

At the outset, I would discuss the folly in policies regarding the management of Common Property Resources (CPR).

I thereby argue that in the mid hill economy, current property regimes on natural resources are not consistent with mixed farming systems and should be immediately amended for any development to take place. Inappropriate intervention of the State Government has resulted in defacto partition of the common grazing lands. People have demanded the control over the resources which they use as common property resources of the village. Hence, their proper management and conservation practices are more important to perpetuate resources 'potential for the economic progress and sustainable development'. Therefore, in this regard three CPR are taken up. These are:

- Land
- Khuls ( Irrigation Channels)
- Forests in the context of timber distribution rights

### **Land**

Renewable resources which are not produced but are extensively harvested are mostly used as common property resources. In Himachal Pradesh until 1974, the pastures and wastelands, part of the forest surrounding villages, riverbeds, irrigation channels and common paths belonged to the Panchayats and were used for common purpose of the village. This land was termed as shamlat or shamilat-deh, in accordance with the Punjab Village Common Lands Regulation Act 1961. Due to the increased state concern over the environment in the 1970's especially in the

form of afforestation schemes, the Indian Government wanted to apply 'scientific methods of management' on open waste lands which were previously used as common pastures. To facilitate this, another Act in 1974 was passed. This act resulted in the transfer common lands ownership from Panchayat to the State Government, 'except land subjected to partition between individuals co-sharers before the date of the commencement of the Act'(Blunt et al., 1999).

This change in access to the village commons has several negative consequences. According to Jodha (1992), large tracts of newly private pastures have increasingly converted into cultivated land. The agriculturists, who were excluded from this, have been forced to graze their cattle in the forest and intensify lopping of branches from deodar. Forest lands are de jure lands and are used as de facto lands, common to all. The patwari says "the remaining parts of the shamlat that were not encroached upon, but vested in state government, have been bifurcated into grazing land (50 percent) and allotable pool land (50 percent) for farmers not owning farmers more than 1 acre. But the time consuming and intricate procedure has discouraged most of the poor farmers who already had less than 1 acre of land in the village and wanted to have more land. Most of the farmers said it took years to get the 'nau tor' (new land for agriculture or any other purpose) land, after rounds of visits to district headquarter and main forest head office in Shimla. The land which they got eventually was barren and moreover was far way from the khuls (water channels).

Thus, encroachments and further political regularization have been important factors responsible for both the shrinkage of grazing lands and consequent intensive use of forests for lopping and grazing. This illustrates that how inappropriate policies of the government have adverse affects on the socioeconomic justice and ecology and should be amended as soon as possible.

Further impact can be seen in the local pastoralism, which the tribal population has been practicing since ages. Local cows which used to graze the steep slopes in the past have been replaced by stall fed cattle, because most of the grass reserves have been converted into private ones, the remaining commons are few in number and of poor quality. Privately owned grasslands are not fenced but access to them is restricted to the owing families. Natural boundaries such as a tree, a stone are traditionally used to demarcate the limit of the property. "Respectively, 33% or 34 households, out of 103 household of the village own private grasslands, which they encroached" as said by the patwari. What is evident from this is the economic power factor with caste domination in the area is prevalent which has helped the wealthy farmers to overstock, compelling others to buy fodder from Animal Hospital of the village, which means that they have to sow fodder species on their limited land on which they were producing their staple food or cash crops. Further the scarcity of fodder has resulted in people keeping fewer cattle and this

has affected the availability of cow dung and natural manure. As a result, people are more dependent on fuel wood and have to use chemical manure. Moreover, shortage of fodder has a multiplier effect on their traditional village economy. This also affects women particularly, as they are primarily involved in the daily collection of fodder. They have to travel long distances for collection of fodder and it adds to an already high workload. The only solution which could end the miseries of the women of this region is to provide them with 'Gas Chulhas' at very cheap rates. This will surely be a solution to all the collection problems faced through out the year.

### **Khuls (Irrigational Channels)**

Khuls are the second major Common Property Resources used by the villagers in Jangi as well by the agriculturists in various parts of the district and the State. Because there is no system of drawing underground water in these areas, irrigation is mainly through the gravity flow. By far the major source of irrigational water supply is the age old method of directing water from stream, through rills to the cultivated fields. This archaic method of conducting water may be improved by human efforts but cannot be abandoned in any case.

Khuls consists of a network of primary, secondary and tertiary diversions structures, 'pacca' and 'kachha', which compel irrigators to undertake annual maintenance and repairs. This is done twice a year. Repairs before the peak season is carried out and other occasional damages are dealt through daily supervision. As far as annual repairs are concerned, the absence of a water master, mutual monitoring and consensual agreements are adopted within the user groups.

Irrigation through khuls brings in a lot of disparity in the village, when irrigation hours are allocated by the Gram Sabha to the individual families. The village is multi-ethnic and Rajputs are a dominant caste, economically superior and having a higher percentage of irrigated land in the village. The Lohars (Blacksmiths), Kolis (Weavers & Tailors) and Badhais (Carpenters) form the artisan castes of the village. These caste groups have less land as compared to the Rajputs and likewise these artisan castes are allotted less hours for irrigation by the Village Gram Sabha. The irrigation time allocated for each family in the village, is as per revenue records, in consultation with the Gram Sabha, i.e., one and a half hours of irrigation per bigha (1 Bigha=752 Centare). Moreover, one day is divided into eight dobar (divisions) that means one dobar is equivalent to three hours. Thus, one and half hour is given for one bigha irrigated i.e., either orchard or cultivated land. No khul water is allocated to other types of land like barren land, forest land even though this kind of land is acquired by mostly the lower castes of the village. After irrigating the fields, a family again gets its turn after 25 days.

Thus, there is an all out call for a ‘full government management’. The government should ensure equal access to all the people without any discrimination by enforcing new laws”. Thus the involvement of the State in Khul management will improve the user group’s ability to adjust to the stress induced by the heterogeneity of the user group.

### **Forests and Timber Distribution**

Over centuries, the forest and other CPRs (Common Property Resources) have constituted an important part of the study area. Forest and human beings have intimate relationships with their dependence on each other. From the forest people used to collect fuel wood, timber wood, fiber, fodder, fruits etc. However, the nature and extent of the dependence varies according to the purpose, financial conditions of the households and agro-climatic conditions. But the livestock of this area is heavily dependent on these forests, which provides grass (dry and green) to them generally throughout the year and particularly in the time of scarcity.

A policy feature that is unique to Himachal, and that is of key importance to rural livelihoods, is the form of Timber Distribution (TD) rights provided to local people. These rights go beyond similar provisions in other states. TD rights became codified in the original forest settlements carried out between 1870 and 1920, which recognized that all communities were dependent on agriculture and forests, and thus that residents should have certain rights in law to timber and other products (Blunt et al., 1999).

The forest settlements were an extension of the British introduction of 'scientific forestry'. Scientific forestry required working plans, and these in turn needed defined areas. Forests were classified as reserved forests or protected forests and carefully mapped on topographic sheets (4 inches to the mile and 16 inches to the mile). Other areas were also classified: 'undemarcated protected forests' and 'non-reserved land' - the latter to be left aside for expansion of the economy and the needs of the population - but nonetheless part of the 'forest estate' (about half of it). The forest in the 'undemarcated protected forest' areas has mostly been removed over the years (responsibility for the undemarcated protected forests was given to Himachal Pradesh Forest Department (HPFD) in the 1970s when government wanted to find a way to police illegal timber), but the (demarcated) protected forests and reserved forests have remained more or less intact. (Gouri et al., 2004)

According to the village patwari “to this day, trees are granted to all those with recorded rights according to the Settlement (i.e. those who controlled the land at the time of settlement). The provision of TD rights has been extended to include those who have been granted land under government schemes. Once every two to five years a family is permitted to fell a tree for

subsistence use. Sons inherit the rights as head of the household, but even today, widows have no rights. TD rights are effectively spread through division of landholdings among family members before the death of the main right holder. In cases where land is owned by women, they also become eligible for TD rights.

People find the TD grant procedure extremely cumbersome and time consuming. According to Vikas Chander (Lohar) TD application is verified by Panchayat Pradhan, Patwari (revenue official), Forest Guard and Range Officer before being sanctioned by Divisional Forest Officer. This process is tedious and at times takes up to a year. Further, the increase in the period of TD grant, choice of wood and the marking of the tree to be felled under TD is time consuming and immediate needs for TD are not respected. Moreover it is impossible to bribe the official at every step. It becomes difficult for poor villagers like me to get a grant with so much corruption”.

The timber is intended to be for bona fide use in house construction or repair, kinship rituals, temples and the like. In times of disaster, trees may be felled for cremation of the dead. At the time of settlement, the fee was set to be paid by TD right-holders for trees for domestic use. This was set at one-third of the market rate at the time - by the 1920s the average across districts was about Rs. 5 per tree. It has not been revised since then, though the market rate of a normal second class deodar tree is presently in excess of Rs. 20,000(Forestry officer).

### **The Current TD System is Inequitable**

The TD system was inequitable to begin with, and is made more so by abuse. TD rights were established on the basis of land area, so that land ownership meant a generous entitlement to TD timber and wealthier TD right-holders were able to establish a level of timber rights that enabled them to construct one or more large houses. There is no lack of cases where rich and influential people have constructed palatial houses and also more than one house on TD grants.

One of the arguments put forward for maintaining the current system is that any change will impact negatively upon the poor. The poor villagers of Jangi claim that this is not a poverty issue, but that TD rights are an extra, a bonus. “To claim that the poor will suffer without the current TD rights, as those who are benefiting from them frequently do, is absurd. TD is currently wholly captured by the rich”(Palma, a Koli by caste). Others like Nargu Ram says “getting a tree is very difficult for us and it is impossible for us to bribe the Forest Officials, as they demand openly to grant us our rights over the tree. Moreover the system is so complicated that it becomes tedious to run from door to door. TD is only for rich people of our village....see their lavish houses, you will understand yourself from where and how the wood came”.



As far as the villagers of Jangi are concerned they generally live in smaller homes requiring less timber. Often they do not have the capability to push a TD claim through even if they are eligible, and if they do succeed then they have difficulty in converting trees into planks and the like - not being able to afford the milling and carpentry. Only the wealthy Rajputs have lavish houses of deodar with one to two stories, constructed by the workers from Kashmir, use many trees to construct one house. Field research showed that TD is primarily an issue of affluence. Direct outcomes of this are that people now travel long distances to get TD, have to make more effort related to greater procedural delays and there is less TD. They felt that, had they been warned before and guided properly, they would themselves have not taken TD or wasted so many trees on constructions. They said they did not know of any such policies, were not aware of planting cycles and now they were paying heavily in terms of shortage of timber trees.

Seventy per cent of the respondents had been able to access the TD for making houses; but it was significant that the poorest and the landless, who have houses in poor condition and are most in the need, do not get TD - a big flaw of TD policy.

The solution may lie in finding ways to better identify those villagers in genuine need of timber for subsistence purposes, such as devolving authority for managing allocation to local people. Moreover the government should take stern action against those who are found guilty of manhandling with the TD distribution rights through legislations.

### **Some other Policy related Suggestions**

Almost all of the people in Jangi as well in the whole tribal belt of Kinnaur are dependent on the CPRs as they do not have adequate resources of their own to meet their day-to-day requirements. Efforts should be made by inculcating the importance of these resources in the minds of local people to protect, regenerate and develop these valuable common property resources.

Alternative sources to replace the wood should be made available to the people at reasonable prices and people should be encouraged to use them. Religious importance of some trees should be brought to the forefront of the people to reduce their destruction. Environmental concerns have come to the fore at the international level as well as in the agendas of the national government; therefore knowledge should be imparted to every farmer about the management of natural resources in full form and on the basis of sustainability.

There seems to be a wide gap between the users and the government on knowledge about the rules of CPRs. So, this gap should be bridged to a great extent. Due to the alarming situation of



the physical degradation and falling productivity of village forests, community pastures, etc., the government should devise measures to raise their productivity

### **Conclusion**

The situation is grim and needs attention of policy makers and the State Government in particular. Wide spread repercussion is about to come and this slow death of forests can take a dramatic turn in the years to come. There are visible changes with in forest cover between dense forest to open forest which indicates a decline in the productivity of forests. National Forest Policy 1988 needs to be modified since analysis shows that in HP only 35.5% geographical area is capable of sustaining forest and tree cover, against 66% envisaged by policy to be brought under forest and tree cover in mountainous and hill states of India (Gupta,2007).

We are sitting on an edge and changes in the agricultural patterns and certain changes in the social structure will definitely put more and more pressure on the forest and environment. With the tradition polyandrous family system on decline and nuclear families on rise, there is bound to be pressure on the land and forests. This concern stems from the experience of other Trans-Himalayan Buddhist communities that are undergoing rapid population growths following a breakdown of the traditional population regulation mechanisms (Fox et al., 1994; Goldstein, 1981).

Therefore stern action is the needed to rectify the forest policies around the country and help out local cultures to develop and sustain their livelihoods with impinging upon the forest land.

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