



Van Panchayats in Uttaranchal State, India

Present Day Challenges for Village
Forest Management for Traditional
Forest Users

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Organization of the Presentation

- History of Van Panchayat village forestry
- Subsequent erosion of local forest rights when forests are moved to the public domain for their protection
- Women's loss of authority over forests
- Village rules versus Forest Dept. rules
- Reforms of public regulation--a search for equity and new options for village participation

Uttaranchal State --

- Indian Himalaya; longest history of local people's participation in forest management
- 13 admin. districts with 34,661 sq km of forest (70% of total land area)
- after 1931 govt. returned some forest to people: 6,400 panchayat forest for local use and grazing needs; 24,000 reserved by Forest Dept.; 5100 state forest under state administrative control (civil forest)

Historical Pattern

- 1883 British gov t. declared Himalayan wasteland a legal protected forest, causing civil unrest in Kumaon and Garhwal hills
- 1911-1917 additional areas made reserved forests under Forest Department (FD)
- 1920 violent protests and citizen fires set
- 1931 Van Panchayat rules and 1972 Act administered by the Revenue Department
- 1976 revised with fewer rights and control passed to Forest Department.
- 2001 still under FD but tension with villagers and Revenue Department (local government system).

How effective was village management

- Civil forests: highly degraded
- Govt. reserve forests: tree density 40-50% up to 70-80% in patches.
- Van Panchayat: 30-60% under trees with 25 % encroached. rotational grazing and some fodder tree patches which are closed.
- Civil forests have heavily subsidized plantations but limited community involvement
- Van Panchayats may have strong community input and good grazing and fuelwood management at very little cost to government

What is the difference in resource and returns?

| Civil Forest | Reserve Forest | Van Panchayat |
|---|--|---|
| less grass and ecological returns; more problems with open access | more commercial species; strict enforcement of legal process | ecological benefits but limited new plantation/restoration |
| many people illegally enter and cut areas | tree felling banned above 1000 mtrs. ;all harvest to FD | trees sold at subsidy to villagers; |
| plantations in some areas but little people involvement | beginning to involve people in activities and management especially plantation | intense supervision by village head; panchayat imposes fines by consensus and social capital. |

How rules have changed with different locus of control

1931: Van Panchayats established own rules, including fines, invested in forest on their own; strong consensus among community; only Revenue department--i.e. district government could intervene in VP decisions and only if conflict. Downside only landowners were recognized as traditional decision-makers in village committees VPs could also manage reserve forests if effective.

Loss of Control to FD
1976: Pre-determined FD rules: e.g. 40% resin income to VP in theory but not in practice; VPs prohibited from managing any reserve forests; no commercial sale without FD permits; still only landowners on committees; timber sales not benefiting locals--trees damaged in harvest; contractors extract resin and wood;

Some rights back
2001:FD controls working plans and annual budgets; technical decisions by FD; More resin income deposited in VP account; FD does all timber sales for VP but gives back profits; no rights to non-designated products; FD imposed presence of low castes/women in VP committee

Changes in women's roles

- Under traditional system women were main actors collecting fuel and fodder and carrying out a lot of the protection. While not formal members of committees, they were heavily involved in decision making
- Under new system of FD, men have seen govt. investment potential and taken over many of women's roles or created paying watchman positions for themselves

When were these institutions effective traditionally

- Time was invested by local leaders to make the VPs work effectively
- Forests were distant from roads so limited commercial demand for harvesting.
- A resin share created added incentives and funds to manage the resource.
- Best committees were in single settlement Panchayats with more homogeneity.
- Where adjacent to reserve forests, used both resources for fuelwood/fodder and kept own forest in better management condition.

What needs to change

- Return locus of control to Van Panchayat authorities and eliminate mandatory roles of FD officials on committees, on decision-making--should be normative/ supportive.
- Simplify rules of registering VPs, permits
- Non-FD state officials need to understand their roles and responsibilities vis-a-vis VP
- Financial and legal aid to VPs to fight own battles against encroachment
- Return women to decision-making role but requires new rules as model has changed.

New Roles for all Actors

- Panchayat needs to broaden participation by women and landless; build capacity for management, legal process, and accounting/record keeping.
- FD needs to change role to norms, capacity building, technical support, not FD control.
- State govt. needs to finance new plantation and restocking but let Van Panchayats implement if possible on civil lands.

How to move forward

- National programs with participatory models can destroy effective local institutions if they apply rules too broadly--must now return power locally
- Once local control was lost, a complicated process is needed to re-empower effective local institutions--new issues emerge needing new solutions.
- Forest resource (civil, VP, reserved) needs to be analyzed as a whole, so that VP have roles in forest replanting and public forest management as well as traditionally allotted areas.