

The Social Construction of Indian Forests

ed. Roger Jeffery
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Forest management has for long been based on an understanding of trees and their growth characteristics. Increasingly it has been realized that this inadequate strategy is a dismal failure in biomass-based societies such as India. Social aspects have therefore gained prominence and policies such as Joint Forest Management that involve a diverse group of people, both technical foresters and village communities, have become popular. As more diverse groups of people are becoming involved in managing the country's forests, it has become clear that the forest means different things to different people: from timber stands to biodiversity havens to sacred space. Recognizing, understanding and incorporating these multiple meanings is a prime imperative for sustainable forest policy. This edited book brings together a range of articles that deal with alternative social constructions of Indian forests and presents a first step in this direction.

Jeffery's introduction is a tightly written essay that highlights the crucial arguments of this book. The main contention is that the legitimate meanings attached to forests are not determined by their physical characteristics, but influenced by social factors. These social constructions need to be considered in planning forest policies. In elucidating this idea, these essays challenge the simple contrasting ideal types of modern, scientific, industrial capitalist approach to forests versus the forest-dependent small-scale hunter-gatherers or subsistence farmers. This effectively deconstructs romanticized notions of pre-colonial and indigenous harmony with forests and seeks to provide "more realistic accounts of who forest dependent people are, where they are coming from, and what they want from the forest."

Two essays in this book are based entirely on literary sources, three are based on anthropological field-work and the last three are policy discussions.

These diverse approaches result in a collection of articles that approach the issue of social understandings of forests from different disciplinary angles. The first two essays focus on the descriptions of forests in literature and the physical and emotional characteristics attributed to forests and forest dwellers. Dubinsky highlights the symbolism of mountain forests in Tamil Sangam poetry. Bhattacharya analyzes verbal picturizations of forests and forest dwellers in modern Bengali fiction.

The next two chapters by Kalam and Freeman present a cogent and field-data based critique of romanticized notions of indigenous harmony with forests. Both show through examples that cultural practices are not directed according to some hidden ecological imperative. Kalam presents extensive data on the sacred groves of Coorg (Karnataka) and shows that the popular discourse on sacred groves as one of conservation and preservation is not borne out at the pragmatic level. Freeman further articulates this idea through a discussion of popular attitudes towards the forest in northern Kerala. He points out "how the desire for confirmation of modernist ecological doctrines may generate a tendency to reconstruct idealized scenarios of 'traditional' Indian society that may be at odds with what history and anthropology teach us of these specific Indian societies" (57).

Linkenbach's essay further the theme of this book by analyzing the cultural constructions of space in a Garhwal village. Villagers in this case study relate to 'their' forest as a bundle of significations. The forest is meaningful to them not as a concept in the abstract, but as a real forest – as an economic space, as symbolic space, as free space or backstage, as gender-related (male) space, and increasingly as a recreation area. The author argues that the forest is not the main point of reference in interpretive concepts of local people. The spatial concept is cons-

tructed in terms of territoriality and power and thus lays emphasis on sociality. Thus, "(A)ll the recent conflicts which have emerged around the forest and which became known under the label of ecological conflicts are primarily struggles for the right of management and control" (99). This struggle for the right of management and control of natural resources is again exemplified in the next chapter that provides a descriptive case study of people's rights in the Keoladeo National Park.

NGOs have been major players in popular constructions of forests and conservation attitudes. David Potter analyzes the role of an NGO coalition (Federation of Voluntary Organizations for Rural Development – Karnataka) in terms of its influence in agenda setting, policy choices and implementation process of Joint Forest Planning and Management (JFPM) policy in Karnataka. The influence of NGOs seems over-rated since in this case FEVORD-K seems to have had little influence in setting the agenda or affecting policy choices. However, Potter refuses to dismiss its influence and suggests that this NGO coalition is likely to be most influential at the policy implementation stage. Finally, Sarah Jewitt in the last chapter looks at two villages in Jharkhand and makes the important and obvious point that programs like Joint Forest Management are likely to succeed only where local people are aware and willing to tackle the problem of forest decline.

A major contribution of this book is that the introduction and the field-work based chapters in particular decisively spell the death-knell of romantic notions of indigenous ecological consciousness and simplistic pictures of local cultures. These alternative interpretations present the basis for a serious rethinking of our current understandings of Indian societies and their relationship to forests.

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