
Women, Participation and Decentralization: A case study of Forest Resources in Uttarakhand

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Abstract: *The one-third reservation of seats for women in the local bodies, along with reservation of seats for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in proportion to their regional population was the revolutionary provision of the Seventy-third Constitutional Amendment Act. But women's participation in formal structures of governance, whether in formal political institutions or other institutions for policy making and implementation, has remained inadequate. The entry and presence of a few women in these structures became a mere symbol of their presence giving the illusion that women are able to enter all spheres of life without any problem. In this paper, through the selected case studies of the local level institutions such as Van Panchayats and Joint Forest Management Committees of Almora, Kumaon Division, Uttarakhand, an attempt has been made to analyze the institutions at the grass root level and how the functioning of these grass root institutions get influenced by the presence of women as a head of the institution. It will also examine the manner in which these arrangements affect collective outcomes in terms of efficiency and equity. The study of Van Panchayats has illustrated questions of overarching bureaucratic influence and 'the politics of presence' remain pertinent if decentralization has to achieve its radical potential.*

Keywords : Women, Participation and Decentralization, Forest Resources, Uttarakhand

The principles of direct democracy go beyond the elected representatives. The ideals of democracy should create maximum opportunities for citizens to participate in day to day governance. But one cannot ignore the importance of elected representatives who constitute the core of the decentralization process. There are many statutory functions which can be handled by elected representatives only. The elected representatives have a vital role to play as a coordinator. The extent and quality of participation depends on the capability and attitude of the representatives.

A distinctive feature of electoral representation at the grassroots level is the significant presence of women. The one-third reservation of seats for women in the local bodies, along with reservation of seats for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in proportion to their regional population was the revolutionary provision of the Seventy-third Constitutional Amendment Act. But women's participation in formal structures of governance, whether in formal political institutions or other institutions for policy making and implementation, has remained inadequate. The entry and presence of a few women in these structures became a mere symbol of their presence giving the illusion that women are able to enter all spheres of life without any problem.

In this paper, through the selected case studies of the local level institutions such as Van Panchayats and Joint Forest Management Committees of Almora, Kumaon Division, Uttarakhand, an attempt has been made to analyze the institutions at the grass root level and how the functioning of these grass root institutions get influenced by the presence of women as a head of the institution. The

paper is divided into two sections. The first section of the paper is about the field. The two local institutions managing forests are described in this section. Second section describes the impact of gender composition of an executive committee on the functioning of the local institution.

The Field:

Forests in India are jointly managed by the federal and state governments, but the state governments have the primary responsibility for implementation. States are expected to decentralize the responsibility and certain rights to the third-tier levels of government. The third tier of government relationships is left mainly to the states. National forest policy encourages partnerships with local communities for securing forest raw material supplies.

Uttarakhand is twenty seventh state of India, divided into two regions of Kumaon and Garhwal, with total thirteen districts. It covers 51,125 sq km area out of which 92.57 per cent is hilly area. Forests constitute a significant portion of the Uttarakhand. Around 12.60 per cent of the hilly region is cultivated and 64 per cent is forested (India State of Forest Report (2009)). Forests are a source of livelihood for rural hilly residents and provide resources such as fodder, fuel, green manure, and construction timber.

Forests in Uttarakhand are managed by different administrative agencies, with three different categories of forest land:

- Forests under the Forest Department;

- Panchayati or Community Forests under Van Panchayats (hereafter VPs) (Forest Councils); and
- Forests controlled by the Revenue Department.

Of the total forest area two-thirds are under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department and only 4,000 sq km (12%) are managed by VPs or the forest councils and the rest comes under the jurisdiction of Revenue Department (Mukherjee (2004)).

This study is confined to two institutions governing Panchayati or Community Forests, i.e., VPs and Village Forests Joint Management Committees.

Van Panchayats (VP):

There are total 12,089 VPs in Uttarakhand. The VPs in Uttarakhand were created in 1931 as a result of protest by local people against the British colonial state when between 1911 and 1917 it transferred more than 3000 sq. km of forest area to Imperial Forest Department through an act of decentralization by the British colonial state (Agarwal, 2005; Agarwal, 1999; Kumar, (2006)).

The VPs are elected bodies. The villagers vote to elect between five and nine council members and the council leader. Elections to the VPs are held under the supervision of the forest council inspector who is an employee of the Revenue Department. The VPs come under the jurisdiction of the Revenue Department (Mukherjee: 2004; Kumar: 2006).

Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMC):

There are 1,434 JFMCs in Uttarakhand which stands second to Madhya Pradesh. The JFMCs in the region are introduced in 1997 as an outcome of the conditionality of World Bank’s \$65m loan

given to the Uttar Pradesh Forestry Project for the period of 1998-2002. The Uttarakhand Government has continued with the same legacy. JFMCs are generally registered under the Forest Departments. The committees formed under JFM are not legal bodies and they turn into legal bodies only when they are registered under the Societies Act or the Co-operatives Acts. Therefore, the legal status of JFMC differs from state to state. The JFMCs are expected to protect their forests from grazing, encroachments, poaching, fire and timber smugglers but they are not delegated any authority to enforce such protection. Only after the successful protection for a minimum of five to ten years, the JFMCs gain entitlement to 25- 100 per cent benefits of its produce. Forest Department has the power to cancel the JFM agreement if a JFMC is considered to have violated any of its terms and conditions.

There are spearhead teams in the JFMCs to communicate with and develop micro plans for the selected villages. These teams consist of one Assistant Conservator Forest (ACF), one Ranger or Deputy Ranger, one Forester or Forest Guard, and two NGO members as ‘social motivators’ (Upadhyay: 2003; Kumar: 2006; Mukherjee: 2004).

For the study, total of four VPs (Satyun, Bajethi, Chauda Falyati and Ranman) were selected from two developmental blocks namely Takula and Lamgara, of district Almora on the basis of random sampling. The main criterion for selection of VPs was the implementation of JFM program and its impact. Satyun and Falyati were those VPs where JFM program was implemented and in Bajethi and Ranman it was not implemented (for details see table 1).

Table 1: Description of Selected Case Studies of Van Panchayats

Van Panchayats	Satyun	Bajethi	Falyati	Ranman
Block	Lamgara	Lamgara	Takula	Takula
Establishment Year	1932	1975	1967	2003
Area of Van Panchayat (Ha)	145	80.20	55.200	1.394
JFM duration in village	1999-2003	Not implemented	1998-2003	Not implemented
Area under JFM (Ha)	28	-	30	-
Expenditure under JFM	09.50 Lacs	-	14 Lacs	-
Activities under JFM	20 Ha Protection; 10 Ha Grazing area development; 25,000 plants raised		30 Ha Protection; 25 Ha Grazing area development; 70,000 plants raised	
Last elections held in VP	2009	2007	2007	2007
Social Composition of Households	205 (00 Brahmins; 170 Thakurs; 35 SC/STs)	45 (18 Brahmins; 22	85 (00 Brahmins; 70 Thakurs; 15	66 (16 Brahmins; 50 Thakurs; 00

Van Panchayats	Satyun	Bajethi	Falyati	Ranman
		Thakurs; 05 SC/STs)	SC/STs)	SC/STs)
Composition of EC of VP	09 (6 M; 3 F) (7 Thakur; 2 SC/ST)	09 (7 M; 2 F) (4 Brahmin; 2 Thakur; 3 SC/ST)	09 (6 M; 3 F) (2 Brahmin; 7 Thakur)	09 (7 M; 2 F) (7 Thakur; 2 SC/ST)
Gender of Sarpanch	Male	Male	Male	Female
Total Women Members in EC	03	02	03	02
Source: Field Survey 2011				

The Impact of Gender Composition of an Executive Committee on the functioning of Local Institutions:

An important insight of the field study is that despite the fact that women are more dependent on forests and is the direct beneficiaries of resources from forests, their presence in these local institutions have been negligible. The study of four Van Panchayats and the data provided by the forest department, reveals that women's participation in formal structures of governance has remained a mere illusion (see table 2 and 3).

Table 2: Number of Van Panchayats headed by Woman

No.	Block	Total Van Panchayats	Van Panchayats headed by Woman	Average
1	Bhaisiachana	103	09	0.08
2	Bhikiyasan	182	16	0.08
3	Chaukhutia	187	12	0.06
4	Dhauladevi	244	30	0.12
5	Dwarahat	218	20	0.09
6	Hawalbag	237	26	0.10
7	Lamgara	183	15	0.08
8	Salt	247	17	0.06
9	Saldey	197	07	0.03
10	Takula	155	16	0.10
11	Tarikhet	247	38	0.15

Source: Forest Department, Almora

Table 3: Gender Composition of EC in Van Panchayats

No.	Van Panchayats	Gender of Sarpanch	No. of Woman in EC	Total Woman Members
1	Satyun	Man	03	03
2	Bajethi	Man	02	02
3	Falyati	Man	03	03
4	Ranman	Woman	01	02

Source: Field Survey

Table 3 indicates that even after the mandatory provision of Uttaranchal Panchayati Forest Rules, 2005 – which says that four seats will be reserved for women of whom one is reserved for Scheduled Caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribe (ST). If there is no SC or ST in the village then the seats will be considered as unreserved – none of the panchayat fills all the four positions. In this region, women are responsible for carrying firewood and fodder from forests, and they know forests better than men, still their participation in van panchayats and its decision making process is negligible. It is also noted that, in terms of age, most of the elected women are forty years or older. There are few younger women. The reason behind this, the discussion revealed, is the greater freedom of physical mobility enjoyed by the older women and

relatively lower burden of household chores and childcare on older women.

The discussion with the committee members and the observation at the field made it clear that the argument of Bina Agarwal (2010) that the relationship to the forests on which the community depends is characterized by complex interests that vary especially by gender and class; stands true. The study findings state that the dependence of rural women on forests is very different from rural men because they require firewood, fodder and non timber products from the forests, whereas the man needs timber. Due to this variation in needs, if there is a greater involvement of women in van panchayats and decision making process then the forests can be protected and regenerated in a much better way. In other words, the women's presence

in institutions of forest governance could make a significant difference to conservation outcomes. According to findings, women when inducted into the EC are more likely to follow the rules themselves and be able to persuade other village women to comply. It also motivates them to actively participate in the actual process of protection by forming a formal patrol group or keeping an informal lookout as they work in the fields.

In discussions with the female committee members, it was also found that all the women members have not contested voluntarily. Many times they were persuaded to contest elections because seats are reserved for women and because their male relative such as husband, brother, father etc wants to retain the political power and status within the family. In many cases women members are treated as mere proxies or surrogates for their husbands. Except for signing official documents, their male relative does everything. He makes decisions, issues various documents, attends meetings of far of places and in an interview answers all the questions on behalf of his wife. This was observed during interaction with Shrimati Mohini Devi of Satyun van panchayat and Shrimati Prabha Devi of Ranman.

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In short, this study concludes that women involvement in the functioning of van panchayats can make a difference in its condition, but for that only the reservation of seats is not enough. There is need to make women aware about their rights and duties so that they do not become puppets in the hands of their male relatives and can function independently in the decision making process. It can be said, in fact, that there is a causal relationship between the presence of women and the effectiveness of the institutions of governance. The greater participation by women in the local level institutions of governance will increase the efficiency level and the rate of success of the institution.

Conclusion:

To conclude, one can say that gradually, policy changes have expanded the role of local institutions in terms of functional areas. Communities are increasingly involved in forest protection and the implementation of forestry schemes at the local level. The need to strengthen capacities of local institutions remains. It can be said that the process of decentralization, still, has to cover a long journey to achieve its goal. A lot of changes are required in the rules to move firmly and completely accomplish its object.

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