

*Award No. 102667-99906075-080: "Women of Nature, Women for Nature? A Comparative Assessment of Conservation and Livelihoods Development Programs in Himachal Pradesh, India." Technical Report submitted to IDRC*

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My doctoral research has critically examined how environmental perceptions and practices have been shaped at the interface of past and current paradigms of conservation and resource-based livelihoods development in the Indian mountain state of Himachal Pradesh. I had originally intended to undertake a comparative analysis of two resource-based women's enterprises in this state: a collaborative NGO-led initiative within a bilaterally funded project in the Changar region of Kangra District; and a state-sponsored program that has been implemented in the buffer zone of the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP) in Kullu District. However, a grounded understanding of the complexity and scale of these initiatives emerging out of preliminary research led me to conclude that I could not adequately explore both sites within the limited duration of my doctoral research. In addition, an internal overhaul within the NGO working in GHNP and the transfer of the park's director resulted in the loss of my contacts in this site. Health issues that developed during the period of my research, and my subsequent concerns related to conducting research in GHNP which is a relatively remote and inaccessible area, were a final consideration. I therefore chose to focus exclusively and in depth on my first research site: the recently concluded Indo-German Changar Eco-Development Project (IGCEDP), a flagship watershed development project that was widely implemented in the Changar region for more than a decade. Within this project, I explored the broader context of project design and practices and the evolution of community-based institutions, specifically village forest development societies and a federation of women's producer groups that were formed to promote its dual environmental and developmental objectives. My research focus on this wider context has been aimed at exploring the cultural and political dynamics of conservation and livelihoods generated through project discourses and practices and their intersections with socially differentiated environmental perceptions and practices in this region. This shift in focus is reflected in the current working title of my dissertation: "Endangered Forests and Enterprising People: The Cultural Politics of Conservation and Livelihoods Development Programs in Himachal Pradesh, India."

My research has examined how conservation and livelihoods development initiatives within IGCEDP have been articulated by a diverse range of donor, governmental and non-governmental agents at multiple levels of the project's design, planning, and implementation processes. These articulations can be contextualized within a wider framework of historical and

contemporary resource rights and property regimes evolved within colonial land and forest settlements, legislation, and competing policies that have highlighted concerns for environmental sustainability, commercial profits, and poverty alleviation in this region. By following representations, pathways, and sites of environmental governance and development within donor and governmental agencies as well as participating NGOs in the project, my research has demonstrated how conservation and enterprise-building initiatives have been contoured conceptually and in practice by an increasingly influential paradigm of neoliberal governmentality and development over the last two decades. It has explored how this paradigm has structured project interventions aimed at fostering autonomous, responsible, and self-regulating market and environmental citizens, and how in turn these have been refracted by a historically embedded politics of identity and place in ways that have had important consequences for social and environmental relations in this region. Through its identification and exploration of these points of refraction, my research provides a grounded critique of prevailing efforts to foster a convergence of conservation and resource-based livelihoods and the reasons for their disjunctures in practice.

Methodologically, my research has adopted a multi-sited ethnographic approach that has explored the complex facets of project design, planning, and implementation within IGCEDP and selected village institutions. This has entailed the use of several methods of data collection. Extensive secondary data, including archival documents such as land and forest settlements and records, past and current legislation, project documents such as planning, consultancy, and annual reports, and newsletters highlighting “success stories” were collected for textual analysis. Primary data was collected through informal discussions held with individuals and groups within village institutions; participant observation with women’s producer groups; semi-structured interviews based on previously identified checklists of focal topics and questions; and selective life histories highlighting temporal shifts in environmental and livelihood perceptions and strategies. Interviews and discussions were held with a wide range of former project staff within participating government departments and NGOs. These along with project documents have provided valuable insights on specific institutional imperatives and technologies of conservation and development that were designed and implemented within the project, and their reception by socially differentiated individuals and groups within “adopted” villages.

Given a research focus on conservation and livelihoods, two key village-level institutions created by the project were selected for study: village forest development societies (VFDSs) set up to establish and manage community plantations on forest and common land, and a federation of women’s producer groups that processes and markets a branded range of fruit and vegetable-

based pickles, chutneys, and candies. Based on a literature review, preliminary surveys and discussions, and selected criteria, a total of six VFDSs and five women's producer groups were selected for an in-depth study. Participant observation was carried out throughout the research process, for example, at the federation's apex management meetings and cluster-level meetings of women's producer groups, as well as during seasonal activities such as fruit collection and processing. These informal settings provided familiarity and insights into group dynamics and preparation for group discussions and interviews in the selected groups. Additionally, individuals and groups who were not members of the selected institutions, or who had withdrawn their membership, were interviewed in order to elicit a wider range of perspectives. Used in combination, these anthropological methods have illuminated how discourses and modes of participation generated through the use of specific project planning and implementation tools were mediated on the ground by an intersecting politics of knowledge, identity and place.

To highlight some of these confluences, processes of knowledge production and (de)valuation within the project entailed the use of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques for acquiring social, economic, ecological, and geographical information and formulating village eco-development priorities. The use of these techniques generated modes of participation in which the interests and perspectives of socially and economically dominant individuals were often aligned by ties of caste, class, and gender to those of project staff, bound by rigid targets and the need to demonstrate success. Thus, modes and levels of participation were configured by particular social identities with upper caste male entrepreneurs primarily benefiting from the information, training, and resources provided by the project. A second aspect of this politics of knowledge within the project entailed the introduction of new paradigms of environmental knowledge based on principles of watershed management that legitimized pre-designed interventions such as soil and water conservation and plantations to the exclusion of existing local knowledges and practices. A value-laden distinction drawn between local and non-local knowledge has also intersected more widely with shifting perceptions of the productive base, namely forests, land, and livestock, engendered by rising education levels and aspiring class interests. Thus, while older informants emphasize integral ties of local subsistence through the interdependence of forests, livestock, private and common land, and a paucity of income sources in the past, current orientations are centered on residence, education, and cash-based employment in towns and distant cities with a corresponding devaluation of local productive labor and resources.

A politics of place engendered by the project and its implications for social and environmental relations has been a thematic focus of my research. One aspect of this spatial politics has entailed assertions of local identities by project staff in order to overcome local suspicions of a foreign project equated with collective memories of exploitative colonial practices. Project staff also articulated a discourse of community ownership and responsible management of project assets and spaces such as plantations, which contrasts with actual property regimes and the transfer of ownership of community lands to the government in the 1970s. A politics of place has featured centrally in the issues and contentions that arose around access to and management of project plantations. Common areas selected by project staff and participating members of village committees were described as “empty” when in fact they were important grazing areas in which members of one or more villages traditionally had customary use rights. The project’s creation of plantations as bounded regulatory spaces to be managed autonomously and responsibly by village institutions led, in practice, not just to exclusions of informal and customary users, but also had significant impacts on their livelihood strategies as many felt compelled to dispose of their livestock given the grazing restrictions in these critical areas.

The propagation of trees with commercial and subsistence values in these spaces has also resulted in their official redefinition as “forests” in contrast to common or “waste” land, and their management transfer to the forest department prior to the conclusion of the project in December 2006. Significant communication gaps within the project, for example between forestry staff on deputation to the project and those who continued to work within the Forest Department, and between the Department and VFDSs following the transfer of plantations, have left VFDSs with no substantive decision-making role in their utilization or management. Further, conflicts have also been generated within communities around access to and use of plantations. In some villages, those households (largely upper caste) with private land situated next to the plantations have often claimed exclusive de facto rights in the plantations in accordance with historical settlements that delegated rights in community land to tax-paying land owners. Thus, while a primary conservation objective of the project was to develop community forests in accordance with the collaborative and participatory precepts of the national Joint Forest Management (JFM) program and its state-level formulation, in practice its plantation schemes have been closely aligned to historical conflicts and competing claims over forest and common resources.

Another significant consequence of project practices centering on the establishment of plantations has entailed an ecological transformation of these spaces in ways that have had important implications for local livelihoods. Prior to their closure, plantation areas developed by

the project were widely used as community grazing areas and supplied grass for livestock during critical times, notably the monsoon period when private hay lands are closed for grass regeneration. Moreover, they were particularly important resources for those who did not have their own land for this purpose. However, a ban on grazing during extended periods of closure for three or more years to allow for the growth of planted saplings has resulted in most areas in an infestation of weeds, especially lantana, that were previously held in check by grazing livestock, and hence to a dramatic reduction of grass. The project's conservation practices have thus transformed the ecologies of these areas to the detriment of local subsistence-based livelihoods centered on livestock and agriculture, and have significantly reconfigured social, ecological, and property relations in this region in ways that were not anticipated by the project.

Turning now to livelihoods development within IGCEDP, schemes were initiated for establishing orchards and cultivating cash crops (vegetables, ginger, turmeric and trials of medicinal species) available free or at subsidized rates in order to promote economic activities and provide incentives for participation in the project. These activities, however, largely benefited individuals who were socially and economically dominant within communities and who were able to take advantage of the inputs, training, and other resources made available through the project. Moreover, project stipulations on ownership of consolidated landholdings of a preformulated minimum area for inclusion in orchard development schemes determined who could participate and resulted in the exclusion of a significant stratum of village communities. Thus, the project's efforts to create self-improving and successful entrepreneurs within village communities were closely aligned to existing social and economic identities and relations within targeted groups and to ties of caste and class fostered with project staff. Interestingly, these model entrepreneurs, whose perceptions and practices meshed well with the project's objectives and targets, were often the strongest advocates of and participants in its core activities centered on conservation and plantation development. As discussed earlier, they were in some cases able to informally assert claims to resources within plantations based on historical rights and property regimes, as well as ties of patronage and influence within their communities.

Apart from these individual schemes, a primary livelihoods component of the project has entailed the design and facilitation of an eco-income generation program by individual consultants and NGOs contracted by the project. This program, which has aimed to synthesize conservation and livelihoods development objectives, has exclusively targeted village women in the collection, processing, and production of products made from locally available fruit and vegetables. Though well profiled and viewed as successful model engendered by the project, the program was

conceptualized and initiated by individuals and agencies located outside of the project's core institutional structure, and has largely been viewed as an "add on" to integral project activities that have focused on improvement of the resource base within targeted areas. Envisioned as a decentralized cooperative structure with an apex level body providing management and sales support for products produced by village clusters of women's producers, this enterprise model has fostered entrepreneurship in particular ways based on the locations of women within the structure. At the apex level, key decision-makers and leaders have emphasized business development and market integration, while producer groups have focused on processing and production according to targets set by the management committee. The significance of location has also been evident in the formation of the groups based on ties of caste, kinship, and locality within the networks of facilitators and their spheres of influence. These networks have been largely divergent from those that were fostered and sustained by core project staff located within participating government departments. Thus, there has been little interaction between project agents and institutions that focused on the main project components, namely forestry, agriculture, livestock, and soil and water conservation, and the eco-income generation scheme. Notably, with very few exceptions, the spaces in which VFDSs and women's producers groups have been established have been separate and disconnected. Thus, at the conceptual and institutional level of the project, there has been a disjuncture between its two primary goals, namely conservation and the development of resource-based livelihoods.

A second important aspect of this disjuncture is evident in the widely held perception within the project of the women's enterprises being based on "waste" or surplus fruits, especially Indian gooseberry (amla) and mango, which were viewed as being abundant and widely available within common lands and forests. Given their lack of commercial value, these fruits were assumed to be easily obtainable by the women from their localities. The enterprise was not, therefore, conceptually or practically linked to other project activities such as plantation of species of fruit and fodder trees. However, access to raw materials by the women's groups has been conflict-ridden from the time that the enterprise began in 1996, and new tensions have been generated within communities as the enterprise has grown and production has steadily increased. Contrary to project assumptions, these fruits are mostly available in private hay lands and to a lesser degree in common lands. They are rarely collected from forest areas. Given cultural strictures against the commercialization of fruit, their collection from common and private lands, often without permission, was widely resisted by other community members, who regarded the fruit as resources for local consumption and not for markets. Many also disapproved of the women's entrepreneurial activities, which contradicted traditional gendered norms of seclusion

within the home. These tensions, moreover, were also in some cases linked to village politics and the prominence of particular women, especially older widows as group leaders or members. Thus a cultural politics of gender, caste, class, and age within village communities has closely intersected with resource-based enterprise development, generating new tensions and dynamics within the communities where these activities have been fostered.

The above discussion highlights research activities, methodology, and indicative findings, which reveal how environmental knowledges and entrepreneurial practices within IGCEDP have articulated with social, economic, and property relations in ways that have had significant implications for perceptions, norms, and practices around environmental resources. These articulations can be seen to pose significant challenges for achieving policy and programmatic objectives of environmental sustainability and poverty alleviation within such projects, and will be explored in depth in my dissertation. In addition to this academic endeavor, a key research objective is to disseminate these findings amongst relevant stakeholders such as the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department and the federation of women's producer groups in Changar. Towards this end, I will be writing joint reports with my research assistants for each of these stakeholders and will be facilitating a workshop for the women's producer groups at an apex-level meeting in order to share findings and promote wider discussions on future strategies for addressing emerging concerns within the organization. My research assistants have both had several years of experience working in this area as researchers and community facilitators. Their experiences during the course of our research have provided them with an in depth understanding of the complexities of project design and implementation and they have demonstrated sound analytical skills throughout this process. They have both evinced keen interest in pursuing this work further and I will therefore provide them with opportunities to do so through collaborative writing and facilitation of further research, fellowship, and other opportunities.