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Governments, Villagers, Markets and Ecological Stress: History and Controversy

Richard Tucker

The practice of large scale timber extraction in Himalayan forests extends over two centuries. There has been a century of professional forestry administration, but barely two decades of joint forest management between local people and outside "experts."

Serious depletion of the Outer Himalayan forests began in the 1770s with the extension of metropolitan market demand from Calcutta up the Ganges into the Terai sal forests. By the early nineteenth century most forest cover of the north Ganges districts was gone, replaced by agricultural production, while the Nepali side of the border was under increasing logging pressure.

However, it was not land clearance per se that began to alarm the government of British India,so much as the rapid loss of construction timber. The imperial regime established a German-rooted forest management system after the 1850s throughout the Indian Himalaya, emphasizing timber extraction for distant markets and permanent preservation of forests in remote orfragile watersheds.

Villagers' needs were to be assured as well, but over the years that priority was moved to theadministrative periphery. Marginal forests and woodlands adjacent to villages were left outside the Forest Departments' sphere. Forestry officials were not responsible for those lands and Revenue Department officers rarely paid much attention to managing them. Hence, official records give little detail on how specific villages managed their forest resources under the constrictions imposed by the new system.

In one region, we have reconstructed in considerable detail the continuity from pre-colonial to post-colonial times: the Kumaon hills just west of Nepal. In the Kumaon hills village forest panchayats were established in the early 1920s with mixed results. The only detailed study of their functioning indicates that they have maintained their forest resources sustainably only where village structure is relatively unstratified and free of factionalism.

My current work attempts to assess the extent to which the forest administration actually intervened in harvesting and marketing the wide variety of non-timber forest products which have always been essential to both village subsistence and biological diversity. I am willing to suggest that in these aspects of the meeting-ground between forests and villagers on the one hand, and markets and managers on the other, life continued for the most part in a pattern of peaceful rivalry until the 1960s, when people began to feel the scarcities of marketable non-timber products such as medicinal herbs.

The experience of village forest panchayats was somewhat different in the Punjab hills of Kangra valley. My preliminary survey several years ago indicated that these panchayats rarely functioned at all.

After Indepedence the Indian government placed urgent emphasis on economic mobilization through planning mechanisms under the early Five-Year-Plans. The recent colonial past was seen as having

severely inhibited the economy's response to a growing population and its needs. In line with that ideology, forest policy placed urgent emphasis on accelerating timber extraction as a contribution to productivity, understood in market terms. The generation of Indians who had inherited the Forest Service from their British mentors were caught in a bind between meeting the production targets of "scientific" or "ndustrial" forestry and defending or improving whatever forest cover still remained-the other side of "scientific" forestry. Like foresters internationally, they were badly prepared to understand or cope with the intricate social issues of how rural communities manage natural resources when left to themselves. Most international aid programs of that quarter-century showed similarly serious flaws in their understanding of the social dimensions of forest use.

Forest villages throughout the subcontinent faced an even more severe dilemma since they were being challenged by both commercial and administrative pressures. In many places, relations between villagers and officials slowly deteriorated. By the end of the 1970s, new proposals for revising the forest law were stressing that the Forest Departments should have more authoritarian powers. In response, by 1980, an unprecedented political coalition of their opponents was able to slow that drive. For a decade new, more cooperative approaches made little headway at the national level.

In Nepal, the high degree of isolation from foreign influence postponed the confrontation between peasant and state until the 1950s. In the more densely populated areas of the Kathmandu valley and the middle hills, the situation was complicated by polarized land tenure patterns and the complications of landlord tenures. In terms of villagers' vulnerability, landlords were in some ways the equivalent of government officials in the British districts of the Indian Himalayas. When the confrontation between peasant and state came in Nepal, it was probably more severe than in India, in the quite sudden imposition of the 1957 Forest Law. Yet by the late 1970s, Nepal's rethinking of villager.-forester relations surely matched the most innovative local and state level experiments in India.

Within the past decade, historians have entered the discussion over the relations between the state (colonial or Princely) and peasant communities. In many ways, historians and administrators still inhabit two separate intellectual worlds. For the most part, academic conferences still center their attention on the nature of the colonial state or the traditional Himalayan kingdom, the historical structure of peasant communities in the mountain region (with or without landlord regimes), or the character of peasant resistance to the capitalist economy and the bureaucratic state. All of these issues are vitally important, yet they are phrased in a way which needs translating into a somewhat different language and conceptual framework in order to speak directly to policy dilemmas.

Few analytical links have been convincingly made in specific local settings between human processes, changes, soil erosion, declining perennial water sources, the depletion of vegetation cover, or the longterm biotic impacts of domestic livestock-to say nothing of keeping wildlife in the zoological sense. We don't have enough full-spectrum local studies. The Nepal-Australia project was the path-breaking exception, accomplished by long-sustained multi-disciplinary teamwork.

The continuing uncertainty over these issues is illustrated by Lawrence Hamilton's letter in the latest issue of *Mountain Research and Development,* in which he praised the field research of K. S. Valdiya and S. K. Bartarya on the decline in water flow from springs in the Gaula River catchment of Kumaon. But, ever the skeptic, Hamilton goes on to challenge their suggestion that human-caused deforestation is necessarily the cause of that decline, or the only cause. His call for more thorough and convincing analysis of the specific human impacts on the mountains indicates the continuing weakness of our collective work in drawing those interactions between changing human systems and changing natural systems.

I believe that most historians are still ignoring the long-term trends in village forests in India, many of which were severely depleted before Independence in 1947. Several other key issues are still not well dissected, such as the relative pressures between commercial logging and village subsistence; the three-way relations among villagers, foresters and timber contractors; the fiscal functioning of timber markets, and changing use of the vast array of non-timber forest products. And we are only in the early stages of research on villagers' perceptions and memories of their own relations to the land.

Finally, let me briefly consider the global perspective on these issues, as illustrated by the forestry debate at the Earth Summit conference last June. It is disconcertingly evident that the debate over global forests at Rio was split along lines similar to the fissures which we are discussing in the Himalayan region. The official Forest Principles and the NGO Forest Treaty differed sharply over the question of who is to have effective decision-making power in allocating access to forest resources. Where does this leave us regarding grass-roots and tree-roots initiatives and their consequences? We can now begin to see a wide variety of village traditions, disruptions and reorganizations over the past two centuries, and villagers' working relations with outsiders in recent years. Blanket hostility to village-level management traditions has been, at worst, destructive, or at best, blind to vitally valuable cultural resources. Conversely, the now-familiar romanticization of villagers as ecological sages has turned out to be at the very least over-generalized, and intellectually generated by a reaction against the neo-colonial state.

Somewhere in the middle ground between these two poles is where we work now, in settings that vary enormously and change unpredictably. Finding that middle ground and strengthening the working relations between academic analysis and working experience will keep us all busy.

Dr. Richard Tucker is a Professor at the University of Michigan. His research includes ecological change in the Himalayan mountain system and the environmental history of U.S. interests in the developing world.