

BOOK REVIEW

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The Political Economy of Forest Use and Management

M.V. NADKARNI with SYED AJMAL PASHA and L.S. PRABHAKAR, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1989, pp. 182 (Hardback), Rs. 150.00 (Paperback) Rs. 75.00.

This book is a welcome addition to the very scant literature on the political economy of Indian forests. It also symptomises the growing academic interest that social scientists are showing in the forests: too long an exclusive domain of biologists and environmentalists.

Emanating out of a study supported by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, this book deals with questions of political economy at various levels. At one level, it looks at the political economy of forest use and management in Uttara Kannada (North Canara) and Shimoga districts of Karnataka. At another level, it talks about Karnataka and the whole of India.

It studies the problem of "reconciling diverse ends with scarce means" at a historical and regional level, "focusing on the struggle between three interested parties--the locals, the commercial interests of the larger economy and the Government". It also looks at "the class character of the contemporary local economy itself and its forest dependence".

The processes studied in the book have three dimensions "technical change, commercialisation and integration of the local (forest) region into the larger economy". This process is conceptualised in four historical stages which, in chronological order, are: "Pre-commercial-cum-pre-capitalist stage, initial commercial stage, highly commercialised (or in-

dustrial stage) (sic), and the advanced or enlightened stage of systematic and rational management with due regard to conservation and regeneration".

Based on this framework, the book goes on to describe, in great detail, the historical and present-day situation in the two selected districts of Karnataka. It gives an interesting account of the emergence of commercial pressures on the forests, and the resultant regulation of local use and evolution of forest acts and policies. It traces the development of forest management techniques and the alienation of local communities from the forests.

This alienation is shown to result in protest movements, which are then analysed, and a mention is made of the concessions that followed such protests.

The historical narrative leads to the contemporary situation with the heavy industrial pressures and conflicts between the three "interested parties", the local people, the commercial and industrial interests, and the government.

The authors conclude by affirming that the problem of deteriorating forests "actually lies in the political economy, which gives a rationale for this study". They go on to analyse the reasons for forest degradation and argue that the state had the difficult task of balancing between, on the one hand, the conservational requirements for "safeguarding environmental balance" and, on the other, the consumption needs of the local and commercial interests. As there was no lobby to pressurise the state on behalf of environment, the other two lobbies won and "the adverse effect on the health of forests was thus inevitable."

They stress that, contrary to popular belief, "the locals have hardly shown any more concern for the environment than private commercial interests even in forests where they enjoyed free access". They admit, however, that "though reserved forests are in a much better state of health than other forests, their own production has hardly been heartening... this dismal picture indicates that even the state, the most responsible, powerful and farsighted of the three parties involved, failed in its task".

The first major weakness in the book appears to be the linkage between the data-base and the all India conclusions. Most of the data presented deal with the two districts of Uttar Kannada and Shimoga. It is here that primary data were collected, and the book would have done well to restrict the applicability of its conclusions and policy suggestions to this area.

In support of the much larger general conclusions that the book attempts, no real basis has been given. The authors do say of the study that "though based mainly on the experience of a forest region in the Western Ghats in South India, its findings are of general interest". However, the only reasons they seem to give in support of this contention are: "This is not only because the study takes note of the general context of the experience in the country as a whole, but also because in many ways the findings are illustrative of what has taken place in general, if not in every specific region". No further reasons are given to establish that the findings

are generalisable.

This omission becomes critical when, in the conclusion, general statements about the whole country are made. It is, for example, stated that local people have shown no concern for the environment, that the state has been the most responsible and farsighted of the three parties, that "By modern standards, the use of forests (by local communities) was extravagant", and that "the locals do not share the perceptions of scarcity by the larger economy".

These statements run counter to at least one type of common understanding, and contradict many other studies. Without denying the authors the right to disagree, it does not seem unreasonable to insist on data, facts, and case-studies representative enough to justify such broad generalisations. These, unfortunately, seem to be missing.

There also appear to be serious limitations in the understanding of both social and ecological processes. Local people, for example, are accused of not being concerned about the environment presumably because 'open' forests show greater degradation than 'reserved' forests. But what is environmental concern and when is it justified? Before the advent of state control and commercialisation of forests, there is no evidence to believe that an environmental problem existed. All indications suggest that human beings lived in total harmony with the forests and whatever was extracted left no dent. What, then, was an environmental concern and what was its justification?

It was only the appropriation of large areas by the state and the commercialisation of forestry that created environmental problems. It created problems by forcing the local communities to meet their needs from smaller and smaller areas. It also disrupted, along with other colonial forces, the economic stability of the rural masses forcing them to rely more and more on the forests. Finally, it created the elite-consumers who very rapidly dispossessed the local people of what little they were left with. The author's have only to look at what happened to the *ban*-makers in Safranpur, or the basket weavers in Madhya Pradesh to find evidence of this. But, despite this, many local communities continued to regulate their own use the way they had for generations. Just as fisherfolk throw back into the water undergrown fish, so the Gujjars lop only the large trees of Rajaji National Park, which have an ability to regenerate. Many communities have maintained sacred groves and suffered much because of their fight to protect the environment. The Bishnois of Rajasthan and the *Chipko* activists of UP are two of many examples. What else is "an environmental concern". And what more can be justified?

Among the most striking distortions in the study is the almost totally benign role given to the state. One would have expected a study in political economy, more than any other, to have taken cognizance of the nexus between the industrial lobby and the custodians of the state machinery. Would the authors want us to believe that the state was "responsible and farsighted", but was forced to allow the forests to degrade only because of

its eagerness for 'development' and the lack of an environmental lobby. What, then, of all the well documented cases of pay-offs, of corruption, of shared loot.

Another serious lacunae seems to be the absence of a debate on the current development model. Can political economists ignore the fact that failure of land reforms and other rural development schemes is forcing the poor people of the country to commit ecological and cultural suicide by destroying their own forests?

Finally, very little notice has been paid to the questions of conflicting land-use. Though, theoretically, a large amount of land exists which can be afforested, the suggestions that the author's have given in this direction seem incomplete as they do not take into consideration the well known problems of making this land available for socially just afforestations.

Despite these problems, the study brings out many very important issues, and is a valuable input to the ongoing global debate.