



# Does “Participation” in Common Pool Resource Management Help the Poor? A Social Cost–Benefit Analysis of Joint Forest Management in Jharkhand, India

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**Summary.** — Joint Forest Management (JFM) has succeeded in halting forest degradation in India, but its poverty reduction objective has not fully been evaluated previously. This paper compares JFM forests and government-managed forests to assess their respective net social benefits to different groups of local villagers. It shows that the JFM regime reflects the social preference of the rural nonpoor, and that the poor are net losers over a 40-year time horizon. Future plans for JFM need to include suitable compensatory mechanisms to reduce the poverty of the poorest within a village. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Despite initial skepticism that common pool resources (CPRs) in poor regions could ever be managed sustainably (Gordon, 1954; Hardin, 1968), there is now a vast literature which suggests that suitable institutional frameworks can be designed to secure beneficial outcomes for stakeholders.<sup>1</sup> Linked to this is a growing appreciation that sustainable resource management can go hand-in-hand with poverty alleviation (Jodha, 1986, 1992; Kumar, Saxena, Alagh, & Mitra, 2000; World Bank, 2001) and that the effectiveness of government as a resource manager is improved when it shares powers with different user groups. It is fair to say, indeed, that there has been a revolution in the philosophy of CPR management over the past 20 years. In the case of forestry, co-management of government forests by a joint body of government staff and forest fringe villagers under various cost–benefit sharing arrangements is becoming the standard practice.<sup>2</sup> It is said that co-managed systems are more efficient since they can utilize the local maps of poverty and ecology available with the users.

It is reasonable to argue that forest user groups are depositories of information about local forest stocks and agreed procedures for

access and use (Jewitt, 1996). But it is far from clear that villages, at least in eastern India (which is our area of concern here), are in any sense “communities,” if by community we are meant to understand small homogeneous groups within which distributional conflicts are absent or minimal. Such “communities” can indeed be expected to manage a CPR in an effective and uncontested manner, particularly where that resource is confined to a small, well-defined area that is marked by strong *de jure* tenures. For the most part, though, such communities are the exception not the rule, even though much of the emerging literature on co-management of CPRs assumes the opposite (Agrawal, 1999; Kiss, 1990). This is not just the academic literature: in India there is a presumption, too, on the part of

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policy makers and external donors, that undifferentiated communities of forest users are the norm *because* these groups are very often composed of *adivasi* (or members of the Scheduled Tribes). Tribal communities are supposed not to discriminate on the basis of gender, and are said to be unmarked by distinctions of wealth or status. This is far from being the case, as I shall show in this paper, but the assumption allows policy makers to disregard intra- and intervillage inequalities of wealth and power.<sup>3</sup> This assumption in turn blinds them to the fact that many of the products of a (public) forest are private (excludable) goods, which, in the absence of specific mechanisms to protect the poor, are often captured by members of a village elite that might already have captured the decentralized village-level forest institutions (Lawbuary, 1999; Saxena & Sarin, 1999).<sup>4</sup>

For the most part, though, such evidence as we have on this issue—of a possible tradeoff between effective forest protection and the pursuit of a pro-poor social agenda—is anecdotal: it has been difficult for the managers to estimate the relative benefits to the poor and nonpoor that flow from a decentralized system of forest management.<sup>5</sup> Where cost-benefit analyses have been undertaken (e.g., Hill & Shields, 1998; Nadkarni, Ninan, & Pasha, 1994), they have generally failed to consider the differential nature of returns to specified social groups within a given village or group of villages. In this paper, I attempt to predict the differential returns by means of a social cost-benefit analysis (SCBA) of a decentralized CPR management program, that of Joint Forest Management (JFM) in the Indian State of Jharkhand. JFM is meant to reduce forest degradation while at the same time offering an equitable distribution of the benefits of forest regeneration to households that belong to a Village Forest Committee (VFC) in order to reduce rural poverty. This paper considers the robustness of this second objective, which has been much applauded by the development community. An income-stratified household-level data set collected from a cross section of JFM and non-JFM villages in Jharkhand is used to address two questions: (a) how much impact has the program made on the pattern of extraction of wood (timber and firewood) and nonwood forest products (NWFPs) by different groups of villagers? and (b) how consistent with a principle of social justice are the observed patterns of costs and benefits over different time periods? I conclude that JFM is well suited to

the promotion of sustainable forest regeneration, but that such regeneration is currently being achieved at the expense of the poor. In the absence of significant levels of intergroup mobility, and thus of reductions in the levels of inequality between poor and nonpoor villagers (which is not expected to be significant over the next 40 years), it is important that actions are taken now to put in place compensatory mechanisms for the rural poor. Indeed there is a possibility for intergroup mobility and reduction in inequality between poor and nonpoor over the long period of a JFM cycle (40 years), but these trends appear insignificant in Jharkhand.<sup>6</sup> Compensatory mechanisms need to be put in place to secure a proper measure of equity.

The paper begins with a description of India's forest problems and policies, and a more specific account of the assumptions about "community" and "rural poverty" that inform the agendas of Joint Forest Management (Section 2). Section 3 describes the patterns of community stratification and forest use in the study area, and in Section 4 the assumptions that underpin the social cost-benefit model are reviewed. Section 5 presents the main findings. It concludes that nonpoor members of VFCs determine the social time preference of JFM. It also shows how the management regimes for JFM forests that are put into place by VFCs must discriminate against the poor, often to a debilitating extent. Section 6 highlights the need for a more comprehensive SCBA that would take into account the value of local ecological services from JFM forests. These services also channel resources to the nonpoor landholding classes, and they strengthen the argument, made here in conclusion, for a suitable compensatory mechanism to protect poor forest users. This mechanism will be required not just for reasons of social justice, but also to ensure that poorer households do not disrupt the protective functions of JFM.

## 2. JOINT FOREST MANAGEMENT IN INDIA

### (a) *JFM and the alleviation of poverty*

Joint forest management holds a particular relevance for India, where predominantly state-owned and managed forests were subjected to rapid decline in the decades before and after Independence in 1947.<sup>7</sup> One of the main

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