

Disaggregating Communities and the Making of Factional States: Evidence from Joint Forest Management in Sundarban, India

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Abstract : In the face of a growing insurgent movement and the perceived failure of the state and the market towards sustainable resource management, a range of decentralized forest management policies was formulated in the last two decades, which recognized the need for community representations within the statutory methods of forest management. The recognition conceded on the virtues of ecological sustainability and traditional environmental knowledge, which were considered to be the principal repositories of the forest dependent communities. The present study, in the light of empirical insights, reflects on the contemporary disjunctions between the preconceived communitarian ethic in environmentalism and the lived reality of forest based life-worlds. Many of the popular as well as dominant ideologies, which have historically shaped the conceptual and theoretical understanding of sociology, needs further perusal in the context of the emerging contours of empirical knowledge, which lends opportunities for substantive reworking and analysis. The image of the community appears to be one of those concepts, an identity which has for long defined perspectives and processes associated with people living together harmoniously in small physical spaces. Through an ethnographic account of the implementation of Joint Forest Management (JFM) in a forest fringe village in Sundarban, the study explores the ways in which the idea of 'community' gets transformed through the process of state-making, rendering the necessity of its departure from the standard, conventional definition of homogeneity and internal equity. The study necessitates an attention towards the anthropology of micro-politics, disaggregating an essentially constructivist anthropology of 'collective identities', which can render the visibility of political mobilizations plausible within the seemingly culturalist production of communities. The two critical questions that the paper seeks to ask in this context are: how the 'local' is constituted within community based conservation practices? Within the efforts of collaborative forest management, how accurately does the depiction of 'indigenous environmental knowledge', subscribe to its role of sustainable conservation practices? Reflecting on the execution of JFM in Sundarban, the study critically explores the ways in which the state ceases to be 'trans-national' and interacts with the rural life-worlds through its local factions. Simultaneously, the study attempts to articulate the scope of constructing a competing representation of community, shaped by increasing political negotiations and bureaucratic alignments which strains against the usual preoccupations with tradition primordiality and non material culture as well as the amorous construction of indigeneity.

Keywords : community, environmentalism, JFM, state-making, identities, indigenous

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