Behind Rhetoric and Discourse of Community Forestry: in the case of the *Van* (Forest) *Panchayats* of Uttarakhand, Central Himalayas, India.

HENK HOFSTEDE
Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University , Utrecht, the Netherlands
Department of policy studies, TERI University, New Delhi, India
hofstede.henk@gmail.com

Abstract

To contribute to the debate of community forestry, this study aims to critically reflect on the rhetoric behind community forestry. To do so, this study conducts fieldwork and interviews with users and practitioners in the case of the Himalayan forests in Uttarakhand, India.

The study critically perceives the policy adoption of a popular concept in the developing discourse which resulted in a superficial top-down creation of many community entities in the state of Uttarakhand in a few years at the of the 1990s. This suggests a limited reality of community forestry in Uttarakhand. Further, the study illustrates how community governance still requires intervention from civil society and it illustrates how internal social differentiation undermines the ideal concept of community governance.

Future projects in community projects should be tempered against the popular community discourse. This means a development from below behind the rhetoric and discourse in which local social differentiation is taken into account.

1. Introduction

The debate of natural resource management in developing countries has witnessed a growing attention to include community participation during the 1980s and 1990s (Sundar & Jeffery, 1999, p. 15; Agrawal & Ostrom, 2001; Larson & Ribot 2004, p. 1; Matta 2006, p. 274). The community level was adopted by international agencies and brought a flood of scholarly papers and policy reports about community-based conservation (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999, p. 631).

The attention for community forestry can be seen as a response to several factors (Charnley & Poe, 2007, p. 305–306). First of all, the attention for community forestry is part of a shift in the development debate towards a decentralised development with limited assistance. In addition, it is part of a greater struggle for democratisation and resource access. Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that state governments lack resources to enforce laws and regulations.

Simultaneously, the realisation of community forestry received criticism. Charnley and Poe stress that in "reality, however, decentralization and devolution have only partially been realized, with many states retaining significant authority over forest management" (2007, p. 325). This calls for a careful assessment of the policy adoption in the 1990s behind the rhetoric of community forestry.

Firstly, community forestry policies are being questioned because states still retain their significant shares of large forest areas. In addition, cases are documented where simplistic community institutions have been created in a top-down manner to meet political objectives (e.g. Li, 2000; Cromley, 2005; Hale, 2006). Further, Lund (2015) claims that initiatives of community forestry in the south seem to sustain the domination of forest administrations. Thus, studies about community forestry cases should be critical towards the decentralisation rhetoric and focus on de-facto power transformations.

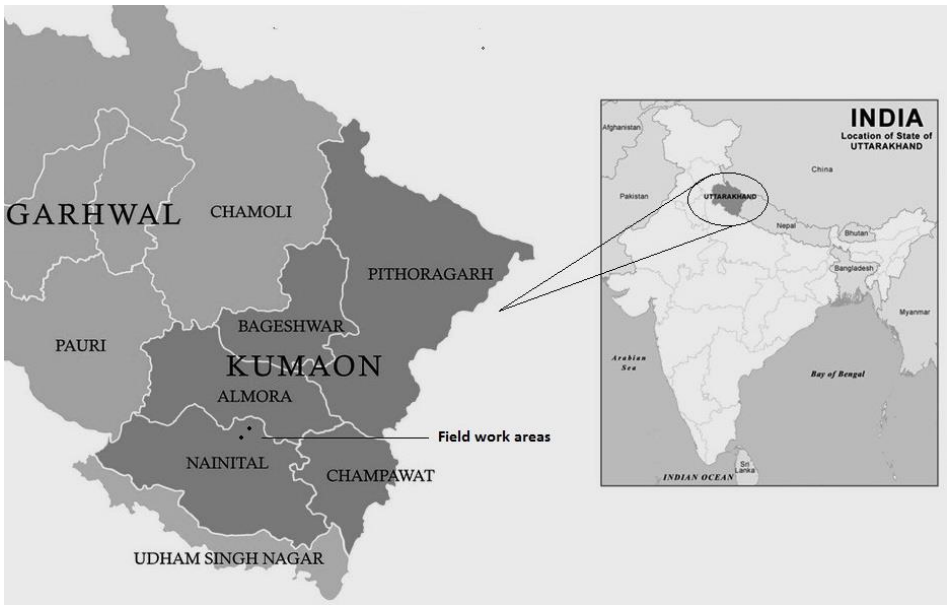
Secondly, the discourse of community forestry is being criticised by focusing on how social relations in communities lead to different outcomes for different social groups (e.g. Charnley & Poe, 2007, p. 313; Agrawal, 2014, p. 89–90). Lund (2015) stresses that participatory forest initiatives are increasingly been associated with inequitable social outcomes. Larson and Ribot (2007) and Vyamana (2009) even suggest that community forestry projects increase hierarchies and inequalities. For instance, Chomba *et al*. (2015) conclude that community forestry in Kenya increases the vulnerability of disadvantaged groups. Thus, studies about community forestry cases should be critical about the homogeneity rhetoric of the "community".

This study aims to contribute to the need to careful assess the policy adoption of community forestry. In doing so, it conducts a qualitative case study of two *Van* (forest) *Panchayats* (village councils) in Uttarakhand, India (figure 1). This Himalayan region is seen as an exemplary case of community forestry (Agrawal & Ostrom, 2001, p. 496; Ballabh *et al.*, 2002, p. 2163). For instance, Uttarakhand is well known to date by the activist *Chipko* movement. In addition, Uttarakhand is known as a forest state because it hosts the Forest Research Institute (FRI), the Forest Survey of India

(FSI) and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII). However, studies suggest a limited reality of Van Panchayats in practice (e.g. Ballabh *et al.*, 2002, p. 2163; Balooni *et al.*, 2007).

The next section will introduce the forest policy in India and Uttarakhand. It will consequently apply a critical view to this policy based on the decentralised and homogenous rhetoric. The following section will explain the methodology about the interviews with practitioners and the field work in two villages. Then, the research area will be introduced. Consequently, the results will illustrate the critical viewpoints based on the interviews and field work. Finally, the paper will summarise the findings and reflect on the implications for the debate about community forestry.

Figure 1: ***Research area.***



Source: *http://uttarakhand.org/library/maps/*

2. Literature review

2.1 Indian forest policy before the 1990s

To begin with it is important to have an understanding of the early forest management in the British period. In particular, in 1878 the first step towards government control was made with the Indian Forest Act (Murali *et al.*, 2006, p. 23). Forest under state control increased at the expense of community control.

From the 1870s to the 1910s large areas were allocated as Reserved Forest (RF) under the new created FD to secure the national timber production which had become more profitable. As a result, villagers faced restrictions for their cattle and fuel wood. This created violent protests in which forests were burned down (Agrawal & Ostrom, 2001, p. 494; Ballabh *et al.*, 2002, p. 2154–2155).

In 1921, the government appointed a committee for the region of Kumaon (figure 1) to examine the situation. The committee recommended to reopen parts of the RF and to introduce

community forests. Subsequently, parts of the RFs were given less restrictions. In addition, a law in 1931 made it possible to create local forest councils (Agrawal & Ostrom, 2001, p. 494; Ballabh *et al.*, 2002, p. 2154 – 2155). Since the 1930s, VPs were mostly created in Kumaon and only in a later stage in Garhwal (figure 1).

Although the states of Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Haryana are other examples of states with early decentralised initiatives (Agrawal & Ostrom, 2001, p. 496; Dasgupta & Debnath, 2008, p. 54–57; Nayak & Berkes, 2008, p. 708; Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2010, p. 470), similar early processes as in Uttarakhand did not occur significantly in the rest of India. Since 1935, most Indian forests were under the control of the FD to get more control over valuable timber resources (Kaushal & Kala, 2004, p. 13). Forestry remained a state policy after independence and the policy in 1952 even stated that communities should never be permitted to use forests to secure national interests (Khare *et al.*, 2000, p. 45).

2.2 The origin of Joint Forest Management

In contrast to the centralised policies, the early 1990s comprises legal and administrative provisions to promote community governance in the fields of forests, branch canals and watersheds (Baviskar, 2004, p. 24). In particular, a change in forestry has been traced during the meeting of the Central Board of Forestry in 1989 which led to a resolution in 1990. It states that every village should have a micro-plan to regenerate and restore an adjacent forest which should be managed by a village representing entity (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 39). The resolution was adopted by 14 states in a first phase till 1993. The first phase included mainly a classification of forest communities and a creation of an institutional framework within the FD. This policy came to be known as Joint Forest Management (JFM).

The period till 1999 captures a strengthening of local committees to include forestry related micro plans which cover a broader rural development. The possibility for a broader development was underlined with a mandate to share the profits from timber. This made it possible to allocate benefits from the forest to broader rural developments (Dasgupta & Debnath, 2008, p. 62).

The period from 1999 to 2003 is labelled as the National Forest Action Programme with a pilot of 170.000 villages. It aimed to further strengthen the JFM network and activities. In addition, the JFM guidelines in 2000 holds a formal recognition of local forest councils, a recognition of self-initiated groups and a women reservation in the councils of 50% (Dasgupta & Debnath, 2008, p. 63 – 67). However, the amount of community forestry seems to stabilise during the end of the 1990s with more than 100.000 communities in India (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2010).

Finally, the rights of indigenous communities were recognised in 2006 which also recognised the subversion of indigenous right in former forest policies. It initiated the Forest Rights Act (FRA) in 2007 which gives tribes rights to use forests under certain conditions (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2009, p. 7). However, the FRA brought also local conflicts (Baheranwala, 2011, p. 77) and created tensions between the Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. This indicates

that community forestry is still limited in the mind-set of the FD which suggests a limited application of the JFM rhetoric.

2.3. Decentralisation

The limited application of community forestry can been discussed by a reflection on the decentralisation rhetoric. For instance, Ojha *et al.* (2009) use the term 'symbolic violence' to describe a romanticised global adaption of community forestry. Further, Baviskar (2004, p. 24) observes that in some cases "*the consensus in development circles about the virtues of decentralisation has created a curious paradox, leading to a situation where centralized strategies are employed to demonstrate the 'success' of decentralisation*". In other words, decentralisation initiatives are created in a top-down manner disregarding the necessary pre-conditions for community forestry.

Furthermore, scholars critically perceived the state involvement. For instance, Ballabh *et al.* (2002) conclude that the application community forestry is limited because centralised mechanisms are still in place. Additionally, Agrawal and Ostrom (2001) observe that communities in Indian forestry have indeed gain some management rights and operational rules to protect the forest, but emphasize villages do not have ownership and control. Moreover, JFM means for Uttarakhand a centralisation because the FD was not involved in the early VPs. Although it is important to note that the state control could be nuanced because VPs are able to define own institutions within the boundaries of a framework of guidelines (Agrawal & Yadama, 1997, p. 438; Agrawal & Ostrom, 2001, p. 495).

In addition, Baviskar (2004, p. 34) warns for pressures from donors. While donors promote decentralisation, they should also be perceived with their drawbacks (Baviskar, 2004, p. 34). Funding dependencies and administrative pressures in fixed timeframes are likely to force projects to show results, so that neither ecological nor social justice is achieved. Put simply, the fact that a lot of community entities exist does not imply that community forestry is also functional and effective.

Likewise, critical attention should be given to the high increase of VPs in Uttarakhand. The JFM policy brought an increase of VPs from 5000 in 1996 to more than 12.000 in 2014 (Ballabh *et al.*, 2002, p. 2155; FD, 2014). To illustrate, out of the sample of 30 VPs in this study 16 were created in the period 1996-1999, whereas 13 were created in the period 1930-1963 (one VP in 1977). The high increase in VPs might indicate a forced policy adoption.

The increase of VPs took place with the 'World Bank Uttar Pradesh[1] Forestry Project' from 1997 to 2003 for which $12,57 million was allocated for institutional development (World Bank, 2004). The project aimed for a creation of a VP in every village. The creation of VPs itself is considered as an indication that the FD is shifting to a participatory approach which indicates the narrow perspective on the application of decentralisation. Nevertheless, the evaluation criticise the focus on new VPs without specific activities to strengthen the existing VPs (World Bank, 2004).

[1] Uttarkhand was part of Uttar Pradesh till 2000

Last, the decentralisation rhetoric can by analysed with the size of VP forests. Namely, VPs are not sufficient to meet the rural livelihoods because state forests are largely used by villagers indicates. In the case of Nepal, Ojha *et al.* (2009, p. 370) state that community forests are too small to provide a significant livelihood potential. This decreases local incentives to manage forests which is an important factor in the governance of commons.

Similar to the size, one should consider the poor forest quality of VPs. Much land that is labelled as forest derives from the colonial time when most land, also shrub land, was labelled as forest to ensure the state interest. Such lands only occasionally have trees (Vasan, 2005, p. 4448). Moreover, VP forests are in the surroundings of villages and hence intensively used.

Thus, community forestry is criticised with a limited application of decentralisation. In particular, Uttarkhand witnessed a high increase of community entities under the program of the World Bank during the end of the 1990s in an institutional environment in which the state is still in control. Moreover, villagers are still dependent on state forests and the size and quality of VPs forests undermines the willingness to manage the area, both for villagers and FD.

2.4. Homogenous rhetoric

Community forestry naturally refers to homogenous social structures with shared norms, which excludes hierarchical, heterogeneous and conflict-ridden features (Sundar & Jeffery, 1999, p. 37–38). For instance, Agrawal and Gibson (1999) critically observed a popular rhetoric in which villages were seen as 'mythical communities'. In contrast, one should recognise heterogeneous communities which received increased attention with equity issues in the community forestry literature (McDermott & Schreckenberg, 2009, p. 158). McDermott and Schreckenberg (2009, p. 158–159) state that it is required to analyse power relations rather than simply focus on poverty impacts.

Rather than focusing on simple poverty outcomes, uneven outcomes in the management of natural resources can be associated with heterogeneous features by focusing on questions about power and authority (Sikor & Lund 2009). For instance, Leisher *et al.* (2010) found that more advantageous social ties creates elite capture of the benefits in ecological conservation initiatives world-wide. Further, Malla *et al.* (2003) and Sikor and Nguyen (2007) conclude that uneven local relations and lower awareness lead to more inequality.

Despite a focus on internal diversity, the application of community management has still been criticised with a lack of attention for equity issues. Agrawal (2014) stresses that successful ecological outcomes do not have to go hand in hand with an equal share of benefits (p. 89–90). Hence, he calls for a need of more social differentiated analyses.

In particular, in the case of India, Kumar (2002, p. 777) observes that unequal distributions of rights for land and local citizenship at the start of a forest project will shape outcomes. Further, Sundar (2002, p. 276) suggest that Indian community forestry projects may increase hierarchies and inequalities. For example, Ballabh *et al.* (2002) found that members of the forest committee were all

relatives of the head which resulted in a concentration of developments nearby the settlements of the dominant caste.

Finally, Gupte (2004, p. 366–367) emphasises the difference in formal representations of women on paper versus the traditional practices on the ground for the Indian context. Rural women in developing countries are important actors in natural resources because they are responsible for most of the collection of food and fuel wood. However, in Indian decision making they have been traditionally neglected (Gupte, 2004, p. 367).

3. Methodology

The study was carried out in the period September 2013 - February 2014. First, 16 semi-structured interviews with national and regional practitioners were held to address the general perspective of VPs in Uttarakhand. Interviews were held in the FD, the Divisional Forest Office (DFO) in Nainital, Forest Research Institute (FRI), the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and four NGOs. Further, interviews were held with a scholar in natural recourse management and a social forestry activist.

The respondents also included local forest guards and local NGO staff to have a more specific picture of the situation in the two case studies. The interviews with NGOs and practitioners from other regions in Uttarakhand had mainly the function to see whether issues in the case studies also apply for state of Uttarakhand in general.

Then, field work was carried out in two VPs to include the user perspective. Two villages in the district of Nainital (figure 1) were selected from a sample of 30 Van Panchayats (VPs) which was based on practical grounds in terms of accessible relations with a NGO. The two VPs were further selected to make it possible to give attention to the decentralisation and homogenous rhetoric. Hence, one VP was selected from the 1940s representing a more bottom-up VP and another VP from the 1990s representing a more top-down VP. In addition one VP had a clear spatial divide between SC and non-SC households whereas the other was more mixed with also a lower share of SC households.

To have an initial overview of the context, the data collection started with village mapping. In both villages, a villager discussed and depicted a perceived pattern of forests, settlements, amenities, entitlements and conflicts (figure 2). Eventually, the field work included 20 individual/group interviews with 29 villagers (15 female and 14 man). The respondents in the villages were selected in such a way that all areas were included and in such a way that both VP representatives and non-representatives were included. The interviews were accessed and translated with the help of an external environmental consultant and a villager in each case who had no role in the VP.

All interviews followed a semi-structured approach. The topics focused on the policy adoption of new VPs, the real existence of VPs, the position of the VP in relation with the FD, the daily practices and rules of VPs and the social relations in VPs. The topics had an evolving nature so that that results and topics from earlier interviews were used as input for following interviews. In addition,

to address the subjective nature of the information and the lack of statistical data, the approach of respondent triangulation was applied.

Last, it is important to recognise that the researcher stayed with the villagers themselves to better understand the daily practices but also stayed partly in the hostel of the local NGO. Further, diary observations were made about the functioning and context of the VP. Observations included for instance VPs meetings, NGO meetings with villagers and informal talks during the 24 hour stay in the villages.

Figure 2: ***Village mapping by a youngster in Kendrita.***

4. Research area

4.1. The importance of the Himalayan forests

Uttarakhand has 71 % of the land recorded as forest under various classes including VPs with 13,7 of the total land and 45% of the total land as RF (FD, 2014; Forest Survey of India, 2015). Forests are vital for the rural livelihoods. Fodder and grass is collected from VP and FD forests, for which oak forests are most suitable. Fuel wood is collected from trees on court yards and from VP and FD forests. Cattle grazes on own civil land and in VP forests. Only people who can afford it use gas.

The agricultural lands of Uttarakand (*uproan* terrace fields) are small and very low in production in relation to the Indian plains. The agriculture output is mainly for subsistence use and the population is partly dependent on grain from the plains. Straw, oak leaves, pine needles and leftovers from fodder are used as cushion for the cattle which is later on spread on the agricultural land. The removal of needles prevents fires in the summer and helps to stimulate the grow of grass and herbs.

The issue of forest management is also relevant for the sustainability of Uttarakhand the Indian plains. The north-Indian floods in 2013 illustrated the limitations of the slopes of Uttarakhand. In particular, degradation of the soil in the mountains increases the run-off in the monsoon period and decreases the deep-flow in the non-monsoon season. Hence, the cycle between floods and draughts is aggravated in the Indian plains.

Table 1*:* ***Basic features of the two case studies.***

	Bikhra (1800m)	**Kendrita (1400)**
VP Forest (% of village area)	Oak – Chir pine (11)	Chir pine (25)
Forest quality	Moderately degraded	Heavily degraded/absence forest
Scheduled caste share	12%	40%
Below poverty line	33%	38%
Geographical features of settlement	Scattered pattern of households with mix of caste	Two dense areas divided along caste
NGO Involvement	Low	High
NGO cover	Difficult relations with lower cast	Difficult relations with lower cast
Origin	Bottom-up / local activism	Top-down / created with JFM World Bank scheme

Sources: data from NGOs, FD and own observations

4.2. Case studies

The two villages for this study (table 1) are located in the district of Nainital and in the development block of Ramgarh (figure 1) and are do not share a border. To ensure anonymous information, fictive names are given to the villages. The VP of Kendrita (Hindi: geographically centered) was established in the late 1990s and the VP of Bikhra (Hindi: geographically scattered) was established in the mid-1940s. The villages are situated in a mixed area of Ban Oak forest and Himalayan chir pin forests.

Kendrita (1400m) is dominated by Chir Pine. The few oak trees disappeared in the last 15 years. The forest is very degraded and the villagers get almost nothing out of it. The case of Kendrita might be linked with the fact that a lot of scrub land was labelled as forest in the early 20th century. This might question whether some VPs in Uttarakhand can be considered as forests.

The domination of pine derives from the fact that pine trees cannot be browsed and cannot be utilised for fodder. Contrary, oak is of great use and is mostly used and as a result pine started to dominate. Furthermore, the domination of chir must be found in the deliberate replacement of oak with the more profitable chir pine (Somanathan 1991, 42).

Bikhra (1800m, oak regime) has a mixed vegetation of ban oak and chir pine and the forest is moderately degraded in comparison with Kendrita. Nevertheless, it became clear that also the Bikhra forest cannot fulfil the needs for fuel wood, fodder and grass. More specifically, in a very degraded part of Bikhra which is situated on a drought southern aspect, villagers only have some pine trees and can only utilise grass during a short period in the monsoon season.

The lack of the VP forest is in both cases compensated by the use of a RF located approximately 5 km from the village. In addition, villagers utilised the option to cut trees in the RF after paying to the forest guard. In Kendrita, all women stressed that if they need trees, they have to go to the foresters which was perceived as a sensitive topic in terms of finances.

Finally, the Van Panchayati guidelines states that a VP should have a functioning committee with a head (sarpanch) and members (panches). The committee consist of eight members or panches out of which four are women. In Kendrita, only one panch is from SC (women), whereas Bikhra has two panches from SC (woman and men) despite the SC share is only 12%.

5. Results

5.1. Decentralisation rhetoric in practice: the increase in Van Panchayats

Most foresters observed a successful adaptation of community forestry. To illustrate, a woman in the WII argued that the shift to community forestry has been well integrated: *"from 1860 to 1990 the whole idea was about excluding communities from the forests [...] but then a global shift developed [...] and I don't think there is any lack of awareness, mind-set or skills now".* Also other foresters depicted the increase in VPs in positive terms.

Further, it was argued by two respondents from the WII that the attention for social matters and community involvement is now well integrated in the education program for foresters and hence created relevant knowledge and awareness. In addition, a Principal Chief Conservator of Forest (PCCF) claimed that Uttarakhand had no difficulties with the shift because community forestry was already present in Uttarakhand: *"We did not experience any kind of a shift! We already had the body of the VPs".*

However, a FRI professor identified "*a lot of resistance on community involvement by the FD because they were afraid of losing control"* and a forester in the District Forest Office (DFO) of Nainital used the term landslide to describe JFM which indicates a difficult change in the mind-set of the FD. Furthermore, a man at the DFO emphasised the remaining low attention for community governance next to the focus on forestry and wildlife law: *"They [Forest Department] do not prepare you to communicate with the villagers"*. Another PCCF identified that some VPs are so small in size that they are even not viable. He clearly admitted that the concern of forest size and quality in relation to the village size was not included in the creation of VPs in the 1990s.

Similarly, NGO practitioners also critical reviewed the shift towards community forestry. A respondent from a research NGO emphasised that an explanation of the superficial existence of VPs can be found in a mismatch in the amount and quality of forest needed for the rural livelihoods in proportion to the size of the village.

Further, respondents from the NGOs linked the increase of VPs with the financial incentives from the JFM policy. To illustrate, a man in another research NGO linked the hollow nature of VPs

with the JFM period: *"Most of the VPs are created after the start of JFM in the 1990s, formed only because of a target [...] there is no existence [...] and some are less than 2 hectares."* This supports the concern about the meaningless increase of VPs during the 1990s.

The emphasised micro-plans under JFM, which are claimed to be created by the village, can also be linked with financial incentives. To illustrate, the micro-plans were perceived with cynicism as budget letters by respondents from a local NGO: *"They [FD] made a micro-plan for whatever village [...] they make the same one for a cluster of VPs"*. In other words, by showing micro-plans and VPs, a rhetoric was created to receive support from donors such as the World Bank. After the donor support the micro-plans disappeared. Consequently, only 10 from the almost 400 VPs in the Nainital district had an active micro-plan in 2013. Moreover, theses 10 micro-plans turned out to be almost identical copies. This is a general observation for Uttarakhand according to the NGOs.

As a result of the end of the fund scheme, the foresters at the DFO described the current amount of money as low compared to the time of the high discourse. One current money flow to a VP from either a donor scheme or FD royalties contains already 200.000 Indian Rupees (about $3400) based on the 12 VPs out of the current sample of 30 VPs. Considering the fact that the flows were higher in past, it is likely that the financial flows during the high discourse received high attention from the FD and villages. Similarly, the fact that the old VP of Bikhra did not received DFO sources from 1991 till 2009 might indeed suggest a link between donors funds and new VPs.

Surprisingly, two foresters at the DFO also admitted a link between the attention for community forestry and the financial flows from donors: *"As long as the World Bank was providing funding, JFM was a success, but after the disappearance of the funding, the department had its own priorities"*. Moreover, a PCCF stated that without the funding only the 5000 initials would have exist to date.

Hence, it is clear that financial flows during the high discourse invited the FD to go for rhetorical targets such as the amount of VPs and the creation of superficial micro-plans. The large scale policy is perhaps best summarised with a '*Big Bang model*' and '*with the stroke of a pen*, as described by a scholar in natural resource management.

The difference between old and new VPs is also visible in the two case studies. In the case of Bikhra, the head of the VP (sarpanch) in Bikhra described clearly a bottom-up creation: "*Some people raised their voice in the British time. They said we have also rights to cut the trees. The British replied with agreeing to make a type of government [...]*". A man stresses further: "*It was created by the villagers*".

In contrast, the sarpanch of Kendrita emphasised the lack of profit from resin tapping as a reason for the creation of the VP: *"That time [1990s] the villagers were not getting good money. The main concern for constructing a VP was to get money [...]"*. He stressed that the VP started with substantial finances, unlike the current situation, which reflects the decrease of funding. Moreover, non-SC women stated that they received money individually for their households in the beginning of the VP which indicates that the VP was created with available finances. However, the financial input

was not used for forestry purposes neither for investments at a village scale to strengthen livelihoods more structurally.

In sum, the functioning of the VPs is highly questioned notwithstanding the positive perceptions by some foresters. In addition, it seems that VPs were created as an aim in itself due to financial incentives which can be illustrated with the case of Kendrita. Certainly, the FD was also just part of a discourse that believed in the promise of community forestry on a large scale. An influential individual actor in the FD believed strongly in the concept of VPs and he was determined that more VPs should be created on a large scale. Finally it seems that the state has no role in the VPs, at least not anymore after the funding disappeared.

5.2. Decentralisation rhetoric in practice: the existence of VPs on the ground.

The increase of VPs raises questions to which degree community forestry is present in Uttarakhand. Hence, to further analyse the decentralisation rhetoric this section will focus on the existence of community forestry as an institution..

To have an idea about the presence of community forestry one might first look at the functioning of the sarpanch and the committee in quantitative terms. It became clear that the frequency of meetings was very low. This was well illustrated by the sarpanch in Bikhra: *"There were three meetings in the last five year. These were general meetings where everybody in the village can come. But usually not a lot of people turn up at these meetings. People are not interested because they think they have nothing to gain from these meetings so only 15 people turn up. If there is no pine resin money, people are not interested because there is even not enough money for a cup tea."* This shows that panches in Bikhra are not willing to get involved.

For Kendrita, the panches have in fact no role. A meeting in December 2013 was the first meeting in at least four years and also the first meeting for the new sarpanch after being a sarpanch for a year. This meeting did attract 50 men mostly because the meeting addressed the allocation of royalties from the FD.

Rather than focusing on the committee, the informal application of penalties and rules might give a better picture of the functioning of community forestry institution in practice. Important to consider is that the low utilisation value of the forest, especially in Kendrita, is likely to decrease the willingness to create rules for the VP. Hence, one has to look for small clues which indicates the presence of the VP.

The fieldwork observed ambiguity and flexibility in the rules to cut trees. While it was argued that green trees were not used, a quote from an old man in Bikhra indicated the flexibility of rules: *"We do not cut green trees"* [Interviewer: *"But if you need a green tree for a wedding?"*]: *"Yes then we do"* [Interviewer: *"for how much?"*] *"200 Rupees"*. Furthermore, a man in Bikhra shared confidentially that the sarpanch never knew about the trees used for his house, though he told this only when the voice recorder was switched off. Moreover, it was observed in situ on the road side how villagers in Bikhra chopped a green and young tree till no branches were left.

In addition, the former sarpanch in Bikhra described the flexibility by stressing the right to use trees from the VP in accordance with certain needs: *"Everyone has to ask permission from the sarpanch and if anyone has problems for wood they can go to the VP. For instance, if we need trees for our house, the VP can ensure in that"*. He further emphasised the possibility to differ in payments along the financial ability of households.

Despite the flexible application and some illegal activities, Bikhra seems to show a presence, though limited, of financial mechanisms for timber use. Approximately 70.000 Rupees had been collected as fees and penalties for trees in the last 20 years based on the interviews with the current and former sarpanch. The former sarpanch even claimed to ask payments for old trees. The money was used for a guard for some years and the former sarpanch also described how money from penalties was directly given to a women group.

In Kendrita, the current sarpanch never used the possibility of penalties or fees and also argued that inspection is not required. According to villagers, an earlier sarpanch did use the possibility to fine but was also accused of taking the money for himself. The current sarpanch explained his policy by stressing the common rights of the VP forest: *"The VP is for villagers and they can cut a tree with permission of sarpanch or panch. [...]. For a green tree there should be a rare condition"*. Considering that villagers have to pay for trees at the RF because their forest is highly degraded, it is understandable that it might be uncomfortable for the sarpanch to ask for fees.

In addition to the pressure for the sarpanch, the sarpanch lacks power and faces practical difficulties. For instance, a woman in Bikhra identified the sarpanch as*" powerless in face of so many people with different claims. People can chop trees on the middle of the day and night and the sarpanch cannot be around to check that. [...] He has no agency to speak"*. In addition, the sarpanches in both villages had to combine their function with a retail shop.

To illustrate the lack of enforcement, villagers emphasised the problem of cattle grazing in the forest. Only in Bikhra, grazing is prohibited in some areas. A woman in Bikhra illustrated the difficulties of grazing: *"We had new plantations but some people allow their cattle in the forest to graze. The sarpanch asked to stop [...] but they couldn't stop because they can't afford to buy fodder"*. In addition, the intense removal of leaves and grass on the ground is not regulated which hinders the restoration of the forest soil.

Another concern is the absence of investment to support forest resources which was already highlighted in the former section. Only some money from the CAMPA program in Bikhra, which is led by the FD, was used for 3 hectares of plantation. Especially in Kendrita, all villagers called for social use of the money as pointed by a woman: *"The village needs a pot and tent for occasions of marriage and festivals"*. Moreover, most households just wanted to see cash in return for the resin tapping. In addition, it is surprisingly that the sarpanches were not aware of the possibility for the VP to use national wide funds via the gram sabha (general village meeting).

The tendency to focus on non-forest purposes may be explained in two ways. First, there is no inspection whether the guidelines of the Panchayati Forest Rules of Uttarakhand are followed in terms

of VP plans and accountability. This also questions the functioning of micro-plans, as highlighted in the JFM. Second, the absence or low existence of a livelihood function for the VP forest limits the incentive to invest in the VP forest. In addition, the incentive is undermined by the fact that people in Kendrita experience a delay of 6 to 10 years between the resin tapping and the income flow from which 50% has already been taken by the FD.

Finally, an important note should be made. Namely, the low presence of community forestry does not automatically lead to a high involvement of the state. In contrast, there seems to be a high absence of the FD. For example, the sarpanch in Kendrita stressed the low involvement of the FD: *"They [foresters] have no interference, they should come to the meetings but they are never there and never checked"*. A local forest guard explained why foresters are limited to involve in VPs: *"I have 739 hectares of forest to protect. VP is an extra duty, the FD does not have enough persons"*.

Regardless of the absence of involvement by the state, two old men in Kendrita were aware of the fact that the land is owned by the FD and that the FD has the last decision on paper. They seem to refer to the time that the VP forest brought incentives for the FD as being economically valuable for resin tapping and fund flow. The limited interest from the FD only in times when resources are available is critically reflected by a man in another NGO who observed that *"the FD is [was] only linked with some VPs within the schemes and they did not want to go behind these programs"*. Then, the FD seems *defacto* not involved in the VPs as a result with the absence of financial incentives after the schemes ended.

The foresters explained the low involvement by referring to the limited capability such as highlighted by a forester at the DFO: *"You cannot expect from the same person to do protection work in the morning and to be a NGO in the evening [...] that is where the NGO can do better work"*. This underlines the weak position of the FD as a suitable agency to implement community forestry. Hence, NGOs might play an essential role in the success of VPs.

Therefore, respondents from the NGOs claimed that well-functioning VPs are closely linked with NGO support, such as identified by respondents in a research NGO: *"A NGO is there for 30 years with women groups and plantations [...], there is no ability without that NGO [...], every NGO has some VPs"*. Another NGO compared VPs with NGO involvement versus VPs without programs or NGOs, and they found large differences in awareness about forest management. In general, respondents from NGOs described the presence of VPs as very weak with low to no awareness about the existence of VPs by villagers. Illustrative is the claim by a man in a research NGO who cynically observed the low existence of VPs: *"I think that only 5% of the VPs are actually existing [...] they only exist on paper"*.

In sum, the two cases showed a low awareness and functioning of the institutional entity of the VP. In particular, the older VP had some regulation whereas the younger VP had hardly any enforcement. The low presence is also visible in the absence of allocation of financial resources to forest improvement, especially in the young VP. Only in the older VP some plantations were made. Finally, the VPs seem to rely on NGO support.

5.3. Homogeneous rhetoric in practice

The VP of Kendrita is divided along the geographical divide of the village between SC and non-SC households. The part of the higher caste is further divided in two women groups created by the NGO. The lower caste villagers have a collective part with one women group. Further, the royalties are planned to be divided accordingly. When asking for the reason behind the division, answers did not go further than simply *"they have their forest [...]everybody protects their part"*. This clearly shows the divided nature of Kendrita.

In Bikhra, the VP is divided along groups of adjacent households, so called *tokes* or hamlets. The women in Bikhra explained that the forest is controlled along the hamlets: *"People made small groups to protect the forest [...] when we as women are in the forest [pointing to their VP patch on the hill behind their house] we can see what is happening there. At night we don't know but at day we can caught them"*. However, the fact that women pointed very strictly at their role to guard their adjacent forest will in fact mean that they exclude other hamlets in their hamlet. This is also likely to prohibit the effectiveness of the earlier central guard who is from a particular hamlet. Further, the sarpanch also emphasised that the panches should represent each hamlet in the committee but are in practice not interested in the VP.

Furthermore, it became clear that the SC households from the most degraded patch of the Bikhra face a disempowered position. Specifically, a SC woman illustrated that she faces uneven access: *"People of the village cut trees but do not allow other people from other parts to cut trees. [...] People from there [pointing to the higher caste area] also go outside their area including the foothills of our area [SC-caste area]"*. After being confronted with the practices the higher caste people justified their actions: *"We guard ourselves. We said them [SC-area people] to stop with cutting that green tree because it is from our father, and they did not stop [Interviewer: is it true you took the instruments from them as punishment?] Yes. They cut green trees, that is why"*. This is likely to make the SC households more dependent on the RF than the households nearby a better VP forest patch.

The backward position of the SC households in Bikra is further decreased by the fact that the former sarpanch explained that an area in the east of the VP could improve because he restricted cattle to graze in this area. To save this area, he allowed to use trees from a SC area. As a result, SC households had to allow other hamlets to use 'their' trees which explains the conflict described.

Another issue to access the rhetoric of homogeneity is gender. For instance, women in Kendrita illustrated their low position in meetings: *"They [men] do not consider the talk of women. We only went sometimes because we cannot get anything from the meeting and they do not listen to us"*. In contrast, some women from the higher caste explicitly accepted their position: *"Men know about royalties. The men decide it, I have no idea. I don't know where it is used for and where it comes from"*. This acceptance might be interpreted as a satisfaction with the money in the early stage of the VP which was received for their livelihood. Also, the higher caste women argued that they know more about the meetings of the earlier sarpanch than the meetings of the current sarpanch. This

suggests a higher willingness to involve in the beginning of the VP, most likely due to the fund flow in the early stage of the VP.

Finally, the field work observed a critical role of the local NGO along caste. In Kendrita, the local NGO mentioned that they have a difficult relation with the lower caste and this was accordingly to the NGO mostly due to the bad practices of protection. In Bikhra, a SC woman pointed out how the NGO did not succeeded in her area: *"the NGO has done some fodder development in the past but people did not follow the advice of the NGO and the sarpanch about keeping their animals out. After that, the NGO has not done any development here because they got dissapointed"*. The same woman laughed when she was asked about the local NGO. Although more proof is lacking, these observations question the work of the NGO along social divisions.

In sum, Kendrita is in practice divided in two VPs along caste and Bikhra showed a divided VP along multiply hamlets. Especially in Bikhra, the minority position and scattered pattern of SC households lead to uneven practices and conflicts. Further, although women use the forests, they have no power in the meetings. Surprisingly, the non-SC women of Kendrita accept this situation whereas SC women complained about their minor position. Finally, it appears that the local NGO has some challenges in their relations with SC villagers.

6. Conclusion

This study addressed the decentralisation and homogenous rhetoric of community forestry. It carried out empirical field work in two cases in the state of Uttarakhand, India, and it conducted interviews with practitioners and experts. Consequently, this study uncovered several insights.

Firstly, the study made clear that one should be moderate in the interpretation of the increase in VPs as a successful decentralisation policy adaptation of community forestry. Especially the more recently created VP in this study can be seen as illustrative for the superficial creation of VPs as a result of the popular discourse in developing thinking. Consequently, this study advocated that the increase of VPs might be linked with the high discourse.

In addition, the study confirms previous finding by Baviskar (2004) that financial incentives from donors can create a top-down and superficial policy adoption of community governance on a large scale. The link between financial flows and VP support from the FD is still present in a FD project in 2014 to strengthen 700-1000 already functioning VPs with financial support from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and German Development Cooperation.

The superficial nature of new VPs and the illustrated limited functioning of early VPs confirms the results by Negi *et al.* (2012). They observed a low functioning of the Van Panchayat as an institution in terms of for instance a lacking committee, non-participatory micro-plans and an absence of mechanisms enforcements to deal with encroachment. It further provides additional evidence for the concern by Ojha *et al.* (2009) about a limited reality of the community forestry

rhetoric in Nepal. The use of state forests in Uttarakhand by VP villagers imply that the VPs cannot fulfil in the livelihood and hence suggests a limited reality of community forestry in Uttarakhand.

On the other hand, this study alleviates the claim by Lund (2015) that initiatives of community forestry in the south seem to sustain the domination of forest administrations. Regardless of the fact that VPs forests are officially still under the FD and FD permission is formally needed for formal activities in the VP, this study showed that the FD seems only able to get involved in the case of available resources or funding.

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that the state has a low ability and interest to get involved as a result of the practical organisational limitations, the state's historical legacy and the low value of VP forests. This finding correspondents with Balooni *et al.* (2007, p. 1447) who described that forest officials are practically not able to get involved.

Secondly, the study focused on the social heterogeneity in community entities in contrast to a homogenous rhetoric. In doing so, the study approached the VPs as heterogeneous and conflict-ridden entities. The study observed that a VP can be divided in separate VPs areas and it observed villagers only protect their part and exclude adjacent villagers.

Similar to observations in the same research area by Balooni *et al.* (2007, p. 1446), this study has shown how SC households were overruled in their own area by an adjacent higher caste area and it has shown how a SC area was specifically used to protect another part in the VP. Thus, this case study is no exception in the context of the global south where community forestry faces unequal outcomes (Sikor & Nguyen, 2007; Lund, 2015).

Further, it seemed that the NGO had challenges in their relation with certain areas and groups. This finding points to a compelling need for further studies to understand possible difficulties between NGOs and certain groups. Here, it is important to bear in mind that SC households are historically situated on naturally lower productive grounds and weak forests which make the areas these households less applicable to include successfully in natural resource projects.

Nevertheless, this study does not aim to fully deny the positive consensus about community forestry. Despite the fact that most VPs seem to have a superficial nature, the more mature VP in this study showed, though still weak, signs of informal institutions which did not follow the formal Van Panchayat guidelines. This confirms the importance of informal institutions and localised arrangements such as emphasised by Ostrom (1990).

However, a positive consensus about community forestry seems to be likely mostly in places with a specific set of local features. For instance, Agrawal and Ostrom (2001, p. 496) show that when community entities do function well, they may contribute between 25 and 50% to a village's livelihood. Similarly, a VP in the same area consisted of a homogenous high caste population with a large forest in relation to the size of the village. As well, the specific forest had an advantageous hydrosphere. Finally, it had a well aware and charismatic sarpanch who possessed contacts with higher levels to maximally utilise the JFM funds. This VP had even no NGO involvement. In addition,

popular media show successful cases of community forestry in terms of forest quality and women participation (The Hindu 2013; Amar Ujala, 2015).

Regardless of some limitations due to a lack of statistical data, a lack of representative data for Uttarakhand in general and sensitive issues, this study developed an useful perspective to analyse the application of community governance. The study emphasised the need to critically perceive a policy adoption of a popular concept in the developing discourse. Further, the study illustrated how community governance may require intervention from civil society and it illustrated how internal social differentiation may undermine the ideal concept of community governance.

To further assess the debate between the positive consensus and the critical literature, it would be of great use to adopt the same approach which includes both the policy level as well as the village level to reflect upon community governance in other areas and fields. In addition, the study can be of use in development practices. One should selectively apply community governance and carefully consider whether a village is really suitable. Large schemes of villages should be prevented following the idea that community based projects are best undertaken in a context specific manner with a long time horizon with clear monitoring and evaluation (Mansuri & Rao, 2004, p. 1). This means a focus on real development from 'below' instead of a *'big bang'* from 'above'.

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Abbreviations

DFO	Divisional Forest Office
JFM	Joint Forest Management
FD	Forest Department
FRA	Forest Right Act
FRI	Forest Research Institute, Dehradun (Garhwal)
FSI	Forest Survey in India, Dehradun (Garhwal)
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
PCCF	Principal Chief Conservation of Forests
RF	Reserved Forest
SDO	Sub Divisional Office (under DFO)
SC	Scheduled Caste
VP	Van (*forest*) Panchayat (*council*)
WII	Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun (Garhwal)