

Forest Governance in India: Historical Overview and Challenges Ahead

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The Indian forest sector is at a critical juncture right now, with the failure of Joint Forest Management (JFM) and the restructuring initiated by the Forest Rights Act 2006, both of which are denied/resisted by the foresters and many conservationists. What insights does academic analysis provide for understanding forest governance and proposing ways forward? Early academic writing came from a subaltern perspective, highlighting the colonial takeover of people's forests and the overbearing post-colonial state. This was followed by institutional analysis that highlighted the tragedy of open-access and the possibility of community-level forest management. The policy, however, turned to co-management (i.e., JFM) in the early 1990s was supposedly meant to address both (the overbearing state and the tragedy of open-access). Subsequently, however, academic perspectives have not been able to grapple fully with the complexity of issues thrown up by JFM. The institutional analysis literature has continued to focus largely on 'conditions for collective action'. The political ecologists have pointed to the continued power of the forest department under JFM. The environmental economists are focused on econometric analysis of participation in JFM or valuation of ecosystem services. In the meanwhile, events on the ground have unfolded in complex ways, with judicial over-reach, the Forest Rights Act 2006, and emerging carbon markets. I shall argue that the ability of academic analysis to contribute constructively to forest policy-making will depend upon its ability to synthesize across and even go beyond its disciplinary perspectives. The transition will have to be normative as well as theoretical. Normatively, we will have to embrace a wider set of concerns, combining sustainability, equity and quality of life. Theoretically, central issues include the recognition of multiple stakeholders and trade-offs, the presence of uni-directionalities and need for regulation, and addressing questions of power and markets creatively.