

Governance and Institution in the Indian Forest Sector

Jyotish Prakash Basu

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An Analytical Study



Springer

Jyotish Prakash Basu
West Bengal State University
Kolkata, West Bengal, India

ISBN 978-3-031-34745-0 ISBN 978-3-031-34746-7 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-34746-7>

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Foreword

Since the FAO initiated its five-yearly remote sensing-based global forest resource assessment in 1990, it has documented disturbing deforestation and forest degradation rates in the Global South. The underlying causes are highly complex and vary from place to place, but most documented degradation rarely follows official political priorities. On the contrary, deforestation and forest degradation are often categorized as policy failures. Following Nobel Prize Laurette Elinor Ostrom's groundbreaking publication, *Governing The Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* in 1990, various forms of decentralized forest governance have been implemented across the Global South to improve rural livelihoods and conserve forest resources. Since then, a substantial amount of research has investigated whether and the degree to which different forms of decentralization have delivered on the stated objectives. Many single-case or small-n studies trace decentralized forest governance's biophysical, socioeconomic, and socio-political effects, but large-n studies are rare.

This book offers a large-n study, including 36 villages, 844 households, 10 gram panchayats, 12 beat offices, and 36 forest protection committees in West Bengal. It also develops a forest governance index that allows a quantitative comparison across many cases. Hence, the results may be generalized for larger units within a formal forest governance hierarchy. This is not a trivial matter. Generalizations based on a few case studies that criticize the outcomes of existing power structures are often (rightly and wrongly) dismissed (by those in power) as non-representative. Through a rigorous collection of standardized data and index calculation on the rule of law; transparency; accountability; participation; degree of inclusiveness and equity; and efficiency and effectiveness, the governance of forests become directly comparable across villages and administrative units.

Most people in the studied villages are very poor and thus highly dependent on forests for their livelihoods. However, the combined forest governance index only qualifies as good in two of the investigated villages. The forest governance is poor in three villages, while the rest rank as medium. There is room for improvement in all villages, and the governance indexes, including their subcomponents, tell us which parameters and decision-making processes to focus on for further improvement.

Hence, the book will inspire fellow scientists investigating the effects of decentralized forest governance and practitioners striving to make forest decentralization work for forests and rural people.

Thorsten Treue
Associate Professor, Ph.D. in Forest
Policy and Economics
The University of Copenhagen
Copenhagen, Denmark

Preface

Forests play an important role in achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, 2030 Agenda, and SDG 16th have also focused on institutions and non-discriminatory laws and policies relating to forests and forest life. The forest management practice has led to the degradation of forests in some developing countries, especially in Latin America, South East Asia, and Congo. As a result, the forest management paradigm shifted from timber production to sustainable forest management. To achieve sustainable forest management, forest governance research has received keen attention to address environmental degradation, forest conservation, deforestation, and climate change issues at the global level along with livelihood generation and poverty reduction of forest-dependent communities at the local level in the socio-ecological and political system in West Bengal, India. The study of forest governance is largely influenced by the functioning of institutions.

In India, 97% of the total forest area is governed by the government out of which 93% is controlled by the state forest department and the rest 4% by the state revenue department. The rest 3% of forest land is owned by private entities and communities. In India, about 27–30% of the population are forest-dependent communities living in the forest fringe areas. About 28% of the forest area is protected or managed in collaboration with communities under the Joint Forests Management (JFM) program.

There are more studies on forest governance and institutions available at the cross-country level and national levels based on secondary data while very few studies are at the local level. The study provides an exhaustive analysis of forest governance quantitatively at the local level based on primary data collection. The study attempts to address the quantitative analysis of forest governance, enforcement, monitoring; participation, and institution which are the important pillars of the study.

The study was conducted in the two regions of West Bengal, India. One is the South Bengal forest division while the other is the North Bengal forest division in West Bengal, India, during 2020–21. The total number of selected households in the two forest divisions comprises 844, and the number of villages is 35. In addition, the study has also surveyed 12 beat offices, 10 gram panchayats, and 34 forest protection committees in both forest divisions. The study has utilized various governance indicators, namely Rule of Law, Transparency, Accountability, Participation, Inclusive

and Equitable, and Efficient and Effective to formulate the forest governance index. In addition, the monitoring index, enforcement index, and forest dependency index have been constructed at the household level. Different statistical and econometric models are applied to identify the determinants of forest governance at the household level. Besides, the study also attempts to address the impact of governance in the forest sector based on macro-level data in India.

Particular attention is given to the forest policies and Acts of India during pre- and post-independence periods and other Asian, African, and Latin American countries. Special importance is given to the study of governance trends in South Asian countries.

Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Jyotish Prakash Basu

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, for financial support to conduct the study. The study is based on secondary data and primary data. During the field survey, I received generous support, guidance, and assistance from several people, including students in different colleges, Ph.D. scholars, local people, and many others in the selected nearby villages, as well as government officials in West Bengal. The field survey would not be possible without their active participation and cooperation. Special thanks in this regard should be given to Dr. Sourav Kumar Das, the project assistant, for spending his tireless effort to make a successful field survey. Again thanks to Aishwarya Basu, Ph.D. scholar, Department of Economics, the University of Burdwan, for her participation in the field survey. I am further grateful to my university authority for giving me infrastructural facilities including space and a library.

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