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GOVERNANCE IN ORISSA, INDIA

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**ENVIRONMENTAL SUBJECTIVITY, DEMOCRATIC ASSERTIONS AND
REIMAGINATION OF FOREST GOVERNANCE IN ORISSA, INDIA**

By

Neera Mendiratta Singh

A DISSERTATION

**Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

ENVIRONMENTAL SUBJECTIVITY, DEMOCRATIC ASSERTIONS AND REIMAGINATION OF FOREST GOVERNANCE IN ORISSA, INDIA

By

Neera Mendiratta Singh

In the Indian state of Orissa, several thousand villages protect state-owned forests through self-initiated community based collective action. Through multi-sited ethnographic inquiry, I explore the emergence of these community forestry initiatives and their role in democratizing forest governance. The three papers in this dissertation explore issues relating to environmental subjectivity, democratic inclusion, and reflexivity, respectively. The first paper, “Environmental Subjectivity in the Forested Landscapes of Orissa,” explores how rural people in Orissa recreate themselves as environmental subjects or agents who consider themselves as conservationists. A critical challenge for contemporary societies in view of large-scale environmental crisis relates to transformation in human subjectivity vis-à-vis the environment, to foster love, care, and conservation of ‘nature’. Recent scholars have turned to Foucault’s notions of governmentality to understand how regimes of power and knowledge shape environmental subjectivities. This work tends to privilege the role of these regimes in subject formation and does not pay adequate attention to technologies of the self or to the role of affect in shaping subjectivities. Based on ethnographic inquiry in Orissa, this paper explores how technologies of the self act in conjunction with technologies of power to shape environmental subjectivity. It illustrates the role of local agency, material practices, and affect in transformation of environmental subjectivity.

The second paper, “Democratic Spaces across Scales: Women’s Action and Inclusion in Forest Governance in Orissa, India,” addresses the challenges of social equity and inclusion within community forestry. Through a case study of a local federation, the paper illustrates how constraints to, and possibilities for, women’s involvement are different across scales. Further, spaces for participation and democratic action across scales are intermeshed and in dynamic interaction. In the Orissa case, marginalized women gained voice and visibility by organizing at a regional scale, and used democratic spaces at higher spatial scales to overcome constraints to their participation at the community level. The case demonstrates how closer attention to issues of scale and cross-scale linkages can help in deepening democracy and addressing issues of social justice.

The third paper, “Blurred Boundaries: Research, Researcher, and the Researched,” discusses my positionality and explores how complex identities are performed and negotiated in a research setting. In this paper, I use ethnographic vignettes and poems to explore the blurred boundaries and ‘in-between’ spaces between researcher and researched, insider and outsider, and action and research. The three papers are tied together with common themes about power, agency and subjectivity.

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Dedicated to the memory of

Ashok Babu and

Rajendra K. Sarangi

whose lives continue to inspire and challenge me

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Chapter 1

Environmental Subjectivity in the Forested Landscapes of Orissa

Abstract

A critical challenge for contemporary societies in view of large-scale environmental crisis relates to transformation in human subjectivity vis-à-vis the environment, to foster love, care, and conservation of 'nature'. Recent scholars have turned to Foucault's notions of governmentality to understand how regimes of power and knowledge shape environmental subjectivities. This work tends to privilege the role of these regimes in subject formation and does not pay adequate attention to technologies of the self or to the role of affect in shaping subjectivities. Based on research in Orissa, India, this paper illustrates the role of local agency, material practices, and affect in transformation of environmental subjectivity. In Orissa, several thousand villages are engaged in the conservation of state-owned forests through self-created governance arrangements. Using multi-sited ethnographic research with these forest-protecting villages, this paper discusses how rural people in Orissa have recreated themselves as environmental subjects. This research illustrates how technologies of the self act in conjunction with technologies of power to shape environmental subjectivity.

Introduction

How people come to a sense of commitment to their local environment—or, what turns them into conservationists—is a central problem in environmental politics (Raffles, 2005; Agrawal, 2005a). Usually this problem is seen through the lens of structure and agency, focusing on structural constraints that motivate people to act in their 'immediate',

rather than ‘real’ interests, or in terms of the rural poor failing to value local nature due to some false consciousness that can be remedied through environmental education (Raffles, 2005). Agrawal (2005a) suggests that structure and agency are inadequate lenses through which to understand this problem, and opens up the theoretical apparatus of structure and agency to the Foucauldian framework of power and the subject. In a study of forest councils in Kumaon, India, Agrawal traces the process of creation of ‘environmental subjects’, i.e. people who care about the environment, and shows that this care and the creation of environmental subjects are linked to the subjects’ involvement in the government¹ or regulation of the environment. He discusses the process of transformation of rural Kumaon residents’ subjectivities relating to environmental conservation and explores the link between action and subjectivities.

Human capacity to reflect upon and evaluate one’s thoughts, feelings, and actions—i.e. for self-reflective activity, or, broadly speaking, subjectivity—is the essence of philosophy (Atkins, 2005). In more precise terms, subjectivity refers to the production of subject positions—the repertoire of possibilities into which ‘subjects’ are recruited, temporarily and often unwittingly (Butler, 1997). While the subject of subject formation has engaged philosophers for years, it has received limited attention in the study of nature-society interactions (Agrawal, 2005b; Nightingale, 2006). Early work in political ecology treats identities and subject positions as fixed and pre-formed instead of examining how they come to be and change over time (Agrawal, 2005b: 211,

¹ Agrawal uses the term ‘government’ to refer to different mechanisms used to shape the conduct of specific people and groups, including the mechanism that such people and groups use on themselves.

Nightingale, 2006). Agrawal seeks to remedy this gap by drawing attention to ways in which the subject position of 'conservationist' is formed in the forested landscapes of Kumaon. Agrawal (2005a: 166) uses the term 'environmentality' to denote a 'framework of understanding in which technologies of self and power are involved in the creation of new subjects concerned about the environment.' 'Environmentality' provides a useful but incomplete analytical framework for focusing on subjectivities and subject formation in nature-society interactions. Despite repeated reference to what Foucault terms 'technologies of the self', Agrawal does not fully elaborate on the processes through which rural residents make themselves, and privileges technologies of power that act through the forest councils instituted and put in place by the state. Other scholars have critiqued Agrawal's approach for inadequate attention to local agency (Acciaioli, 2006; Gupta, 2005), for an ahistoric view of identity categories and positions (Hathaway, 2005; Narotzky, 2005), and for insufficient attention to the 'complex and deeply biographical practices' through which environmental subjects make themselves and are made (Raffles, 2005).

Based on my research in Orissa, I expand on the framework of environmentality by drawing attention to local agency, material practices, and the role of affect in transformation of environmental subjectivity. In Orissa, more than 8,000 villages protect state-owned forests through collective action even in the absence of formal legal rights. These community initiatives are not traditional indigenous arrangements but newly created institutions initiated and sustained by transformation in environmental subjectivities. Based on multi-sited ethnographic research, I explore how rural people

make themselves as environmental subjects drawing creatively from the cultural, discursive, and disciplining material available to them. I draw attention to the role of affect, technologies of self, and embodied practices in the shaping of environmental subjectivities. I argue that we give undue emphasis to the technologies of power and neglect what Foucault terms 'practices of liberation' or 'technologies of the self' through which citizens make themselves. Human interactions with their natural environment are suffused with emotion, yet emotion receives relatively little attention in nature-society studies. My inquiry draws attention to the technologies of self, generative forms of resistance and re-imagination, and the role of affect in the shaping of environmental subjectivity.

Intimate Environmentality: Enriching the Analytics of Environmentality

'The subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation' (Foucault: 'An Aesthetics of Existence' edited by L. Kritzman, 1988: cited in Bevir, 1999).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1979[1975]) elaborates on how the application of power in the form of the gaze produces subjects. He says, 'He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relations in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection' (1979[1975]: 202-3). The gaze thus acts as a sorting device. Those subject to the gaze become subject to power; those who escape the gaze also, presumably, escape the effects of power. Some of Foucault's later work recognizes the many different

ways through which subjects come into being (2000[1979], 2000[1982] cited in Agrawal, 2005). Foucault (1988:18) also talks about ‘technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect...a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves.’ Foucault (1992[1984]: 10-11) defines ‘techniques of the self’ or ‘arts of existence’ as ‘those reflective and voluntary practices by which men [sic] not only set themselves rules of conduct, but seek to transform themselves and to make of their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.’

Foucault is often criticized for not paying enough attention to local agency and his work on disciplining society is taken to imply a deterministic view. O’Farrell (2009) says that Foucault’s work is far from deterministic and suggests ‘constant strategic interplay between the forces of order and those who wish to think and act otherwise.’ Bevir (1999) also avers that Foucault’s rejection of autonomy does not imply rejection of agency. According to Bevir, ‘For Foucault, the subject is produced by regimes of power and knowledge, but these regimes do not determine the experiences that they can have, the ways they can exercise their reason, the beliefs they can adopt, or the actions they can attempt to perform.’ So, agents are creative beings; it is just that their creativity occurs in a given social context that influences it.

While Foucault’s later work focuses on technologies of the self, his work is most commonly associated with ‘technologies of power’ that seek to discipline society. Most of the literature on neoliberal governmentality focuses on technologies of power and knowledge instead of technologies of the self (Agrawal, 2005a). Agrawal (2005a) seeks

to correct this deficiency by focusing on the role of power, social practices, and imagination in shaping environmental subjectivity using empirical evidence from Kumaon. While Agrawal refers to the 'technologies of self', he does not fully explore it. His analysis suffers from a common shortcoming in nature-society studies pertaining to the conceptualization of the boundaries between self and environment (see Nightingale, 2006, Milton, 2002). The other shortcoming relates to the Cartesian dichotomy of mind and body that frames the scholarship on power and resistance.

Agrawal suggests that the notions of imagination and resistance present two facets of the puzzle of the relationship between government and subjectivity. Benedict Anderson's (1991) work suggests that the imagination of the less powerful is colonized by the powerful. In contrast, the scholars of resistance highlight how such a colonization of imagination is resisted. Scott (1985) promotes the view that the weak resist the powerful through daily acts of resistance, and if nothing else, then in the realm of ideas and beliefs. Agrawal points out that these two streams of scholarship on imagination and resistance, when considered together, lead to conflicting conclusions. He says (2005a: 165), 'Technologies of government produce their effects by generating a politics of the subject that can be better understood and analyzed by considering both practice and imagination as critical.' He thus argues that closer attention to social practices can lead to 'theorizing that would be more tightly connected to the social ground where imagination is always born and, reciprocally, which imagination always influences.' I would like us to consider how these two streams of scholarship on resistance and imagination are premised on the mind and body dichotomy. Mitchell (1990) suggests that our conceptualization of power

(and resistance) is dominated by a single, master metaphor, i.e. the distinction between persuading and coercing that correlates to the dichotomy between mind and body. Power may operate at the level of ideas, persuading the mind of its legitimacy, or it may work as a material force directly coercing the body (ibid, 1990). Agrawal's attention to social practices as a way of collapsing the mind and body dichotomy—though he makes no reference to it—is insufficient. It will be more productive to look at embodied practices and embodied interactions between the self and the environment.

Tim Ingold's work is particularly instructive in comprehending the embodied nature of human relationships with the environment. Ingold (2000) asserts that 'the organism and the person' can be one and the same. He asserts, 'Instead of trying to reconstruct the complete human being from two separate but complementary components, respectively biophysical and socio-cultural, we should be trying to find a way of talking about human life that eliminates the need to slice it up into these different layers.' Drawing on the work in new biology that takes a relational view of the organism, Ingold opens up new ways of understanding the human-environment relationship and comprehending environmental subjectivity. To Ingold, '[W]ays of acting in the environment are also ways of perceiving it.' His work encourages us to pay greater attention to everyday practices as embodied ways of being and acting in the environment.

Raffles (2002) makes similar arguments in the context of Amazonia when he argues that 'for many people who live in the Amazonia, nature is something lived and of which one is unmistakably a part rather than something of which one has abstract knowledge.' Paul Richards (1993) shows that knowledge of nature is 'not only a set of practices, it is

also a lexicon—one that is profoundly contextualized, social, and dynamic’. Raffles (ibid.) points out that people enter into ‘relationships among themselves and with nature through embodied practice’ and suggests that what is termed as local knowledge is actually ‘intimate’ knowledge. He uses the term ‘intimate’ to refer to ‘affective sociality’ and suggests that ‘affect though inconstant, is ubiquitous and the perpetual mediator of rationality.’ For him, intimacy is a site for the social production of knowledge, and the reworking of human-nature boundaries. He emphasizes, ‘It [intimacy] is always within a field of power. It is always in a place. It is always embodied. And it is always, above else, relational.’

Embodiment is at the level of lived experience and is about ‘understanding’ or ‘making sense’ in a ‘pre-reflexive or even pre-symbolic way’ (Csordas, 1990: 10, cited in Wolputte, 2004). Embodiment is thus intrinsically a part of our being in-the-world and collapses the difference between subjective and objective, cognition and emotion, and mind and body. Raffles’s and Ingold’s work suggest that in addition to regimes of power and knowledge, human subjectivity is shaped by embodied human interactions with nature. Even though Agrawal discusses how participation in regulatory practices leads to environmental subjectivity, he does not elaborate on how these practices are embodied and are as much biophysical as they are social. How do the everyday acts of walking through the forest, watching the trees grow or the landscape change transform one’s subjective experience of nature and one’s ways of thinking about it?

This work also connects with recent work within geography and feminist theory that is attentive to the embodied, discursive, and social processes that produce subjectivity

(Longhurst 2001, Rose, 1993 cited in Nightingale, 2006). This work suggests that subjectivities are always place-based, i.e. performed within specific places and spaces, embodied and material, and performed within a matrix of power and resistance (Longhurst, 2003). While this work suggests that subjectivities and space are interactive and mutually constitutive, it has not explored the ways in which boundaries between self and other, and self and environment, are implicated in the processes of subject formation (Nightingale, 2006). Nightingale (2006) points out that although the boundary between self and the environment is not straightforward, most theoretical work takes it for granted. Kay Milton's (2002) work on the role of emotions and identification in how people form attachment to nature provides interesting overlap. In psychoanalysis, 'identification' refers to the unconscious processes of introjection and projection, which operate as dynamic exchanges within all interpersonal relationships (Bondi, 2003). Milton (2002) extends this process of identification to people's relationship with nature and argues that if people can identify with aspects of their ecological environment as being like themselves in one way or another, they are more likely to treat that environment as they might themselves or another person.

Judith Butler's work on performative construction of gender also helps analyze the formation of subject positions. Butler (1990) insists that gender identity is not 'is' but is done or performed. Her work encourages us to understand gender identity as a verb—as performative. Identity is a verb because it is realized through repeated acts, or reiterations, of cultural norms that function as signifiers of gender (Butler, 1990; Atkins, 2005: 254). If we extend this to subject positions vis-à-vis environment, it becomes

important to consider how environmental subjectivity is performed and shaped by this performance.

Drawing from the work cited above, and based on my analysis of community initiatives to protect forests in Orissa, I suggest that the analytical framework of environmentality can gain from explicit attention to the role of embodied and intimate practices shaped by affective sociality, technologies of self and local agency in shaping environmental subjectivity.

Research Setting and Methods

Orissa is a typical place at the margins, rich in natural resources—including minerals—with a high prevalence of poverty. A state located on the east coast of India, almost 40 per cent of its geographical area is classified as state-owned forest land. It is the least developed state in India with a high concentration of poverty in the tribally dominated forested areas. Socially marginalized groups like tribals (*adivasis*, or indigenous people) and *dalits* (the ‘untouchable’ castes) form almost 40 per cent of its population. Almost half of the rural population lives below the official poverty line. Poverty is further exacerbated for certain social groups. For instance, 72 per cent of Orissa’s tribals live under the poverty line. Population density in Orissa is high, with as many as 236 people per square kilometer. Almost 80 per cent of the state’s population is rural and depends heavily on the forest for livelihood and sustenance. This dependence on the forest has shaped villagers’ efforts to protect it. Through the lenses of structure and agency, these community forestry initiatives are explained in terms of the presence of

community institutions, the failure of state authority over forests, local culture, and the weak presence of formal local self-governance institutions (Kant et al., 1991).

This research is based on my dissertation fieldwork between 2004 and 2007. It also draws on my previous work in Orissa as a community forestry practitioner. I used qualitative research and multi-sited ethnography to explore rural people's relationship with forests through village case studies and interviews with community forestry leaders at different spatial scales. Multi-sited or multi-locale ethnography encourages 'a shift away from the ethnography that is so centrally place and local-world determined' towards an ethnography aimed at representing the operation of the system (Marcus, 1989). The different spatial scales and sites of collective action and engagement in my research include the community, block, district, and state levels². My methods included conversational interviews with village men and women, leaders of federations, prominent environmental leaders, NGO staff, and activists³. I also studied village meeting records in Ranpur block of Nayagarh district, and the meeting records of a block-level federation, Maa Maninag Jungle Surakhya Parishad. My analysis of discourses at higher spatial scales comes from interviews with leaders of six federations, focus group discussions, and participant observation of the meetings of federation leaders and of state-level workshops. I use villagers' songs and poems to examine the discourse that rural

² India is organized into states, which are then divided into districts, blocks, *panchayats*, and villages. Blocks contain about 200 villages.

³ I have used the actual names of village people, community leaders, and villages; after obtaining consent by my interviewees to use their names, since there is no perceived risk involved in doing so. Many of the people cited here are public figures and share these views at public forums. Names of Forest Department officials have not been used.

communities employ and as indicators of transformation in discourse and subjectivity (cf. Zerner, 2003).

Evidence for transformation in local subjectivity and environmental behavior is partly supported by data relating to change in the forest cover. Even though there is no comprehensive study that delineates forests regenerated through protection by communities, the Forest Survey of India Report (1999, covering the period 1993 to 1995), attributes an increase in forest cover by 90 square kilometers and 10 square kilometers in Mayurbhanj and Balangir districts, respectively, to community efforts. A study by Singh et al. (2005) uses remote sensing data for forest-cover change from 1990 to 2000 and undertakes ground-level verification. This study finds that in one decade, the forest cover increased from 53 per cent to 67 per cent in Kandhamal district and from 39.0 per cent to 39.7 per cent in Mayurbhanj district, and attributes this change to community forest protection. The other evidence comes from interviews with village men and women, and villagers' songs and poems.

The Contested Forests

Professor Radhamohan⁴, who has long experience with community forestry, describes his first encounter with forest protection initiatives in Dhenkanal district. 'It was September of 1971. Monsoon played truant. It was a drought-like situation'. On that day he and his students were taking two pump-sets to a village to draw water to save the paddy crop. 'On our way, we were stopped by a group of elderly people. This is what we

⁴ Interview was in English, exact words used. He is an academic who has been teaching at district colleges and has also been deputed to the Government of Orissa in various capacities. In January 2007, when I interviewed him, he was the Chief Information Commissioner with the Government of Orissa.

saw. A group of women were crying. More than 300 people—each of them armed, with whatever country arms they could lay their hands on—were coming in our direction. Around 30 to 40 young people from a small village took a strategic position and were getting ready for the supreme sacrifice. Women were wailing. They stopped us and said, “Please do something”.’ The small village had been protecting a patch of forest of about 100 hectares for the past 15 years. The night before, one man from a large neighboring village tried to take some timber from this forest. He was caught and fined. After hearing about this fine, the larger village was outraged and decided to teach the small village a lesson by destroying the forest that they had protected. It was on this scene that Radhamohan and his students arrived. Radhamohan continued, ‘Thirty to forty youth from the small village were ready for “the supreme sacrifice”. They said that “only over our corpses can they harm our forest.” My students and I stood between the two parties and tried to avert bloodshed. After about two hours of persuasion the two groups laid down their arms.’ After considerable effort and dialogue over weeks, it was agreed that the large village would protect another forest patch and would not lay claim to the forest protected by the smaller village. Radhamohan says that he still gets goose bumps as he thinks about that evening. While this incident sounds dramatic, it is not unusual. It occurred in 1971, and the small village had been protecting forests for 15 years. In 1990, I was similarly amazed by community efforts to protect state-owned forests. As I traveled through Dhenkanal district with a technical team evaluating the progress of the Social Forestry Project in Orissa, in close proximity to sad-looking monocultures of eucalyptus

and acacia trees, I found luxuriant stands of regenerating sal⁵ forest under community protection and care. This community protection was in striking contrast to the work of the Social Forestry Project, which aimed to plant trees on non-forest lands to protect the natural forests against villagers.

Why was it that although outsiders like Radhamohan repeatedly encountered community efforts to protect forests, and persistently tried to bring attention to them, community efforts remained invisible to the state? The narrative of villagers as destroyers of forests continued and shaped investments in social forestry, while local efforts to regenerate forests at no cost to the state exchequer remained unseen and uncelebrated. The explanation lies in part in the politics of control; there was money to be made in planting trees and sustaining the myth of local communities as destroyers of forests. The explanation also lies in colonial forest governance and continuing contestations over the control of forests.

Rich work in India's environmental history illustrates how the politics of knowledge and discourses of science, development, and conservation shaped India's forests. Both forestlands as a juridical category and forests as an epistemological construct co-evolved and were shaped by these discourses. Forestlands as a juridical category originated with the annexation of large tracts of lands by the colonial government. Large areas that were not under direct control of private owners were brought under state control, aided by the 'right of conquest' (Guha, 1983). The first attempt at forest legislation, the Indian Forest

⁵ Sal, *Shorea robusta*, is a tree species native to South Asia. It is one of the most important sources of hardwood timber in India. The wood is resinous and durable, and is sought after for construction. Sal resin is burned as incense, and sal seeds and fruit are a source of oil and vegetable fat.

Act of 1865, empowered the state to declare any land covered with trees or brushwood as government forest. This was driven by the contention that ‘total state control over all forest areas is the only check on individual self-interest and short-sightedness’ (Gadgil and Guha 1989). Annexation of large tracts of land as forestlands granted tremendous power to the Forest Department as the agency that controlled lands and their disbursement (Rangarajan 1996). Wherever the potential proprietors or traditional local users did not use language recognized by the colonial government to stake claims, their claims remained non-existent (Guha, 1983). As a result, certain forms of forest use, such as swidden cultivation or pastoral nomadism, were not recognized at all.

In addition, epistemological, cultural, and historical forces shaped the process by which forests were constituted, or imagined. The early British attitudes towards forests were conditioned by their own military history and agricultural revolution, with the forest seen as an abode of ‘robbers, lawless squatters, poverty-stricken and the uncivil’, and the cutting of trees and expansion of agriculture seen as signs of progress (Skaria, 1999; Rangarajan, 1996). Closely related to this were attitudes towards the ‘wild-people’—the *adivasis* who were termed ‘wild-tribes’. Skaria (1999) highlights how the British sought to assimilate and civilize both wild spaces and wild people and how wilderness was placed ‘before or outside civilization’ with a consistent focus on ‘mastery’.

Even though the struggle for forest rights was an important part of the resistance and rebellion against the British throughout India, the post-colonial government continued more or less with the same forest governance framework. In the past few decades, the contradictions between democratic polity and undemocratic forest governance have

intensified the call for reform in forest governance. Tensions and contestations have continued as environmental conservation has replaced revenue imperatives as the driver for centralized management.

In Orissa, much of the forest was managed through timber concessions to private companies. Following independence, there was large-scale felling of trees in forests in *ex-zamindari*⁶ areas in a bid to profit before the forests were transferred to the government of Orissa. In many areas, villagers recount large-scale degradation of forests in the period following independence due to a sudden sense of freedom, and loss of state control over forests. In addition, large-scale commercial harvests of forests by the state in the bid to maximize forest revenue led to pronounced degradation from the 1950s to 1970s⁷. Conversion of forest areas to agriculture and for various development projects was another cause of forest degradation.

Transformation of forest-people relationship through formal institutions of governance has been a complex and highly contested process. It is not easy to will landscapes and subjects into discipline through formal policy and epistemological constructions. Both landscapes and people resist and defy easy governability. Local communities, peasants, and tribal societies opposed formal rules restricting their relationship with their environment through open rebellion and resistance as well as through forms of 'everyday resistance' (Scott, 1985). In south Orissa, for example, attempts to reserve the customary shifting cultivation lands of the Saora tribals led to

⁶ The *Zamindari* system was a way of collecting taxes from peasants. The *zamindar* was considered a lord who would collect taxes on his lands for the British authorities, retaining a portion for himself.

⁷ Prior to that, forests had suffered massive commercial exploitation during the British rule, especially during World War II.

rebellion forcing the British to de-reserve parts of forests. During the independence movement, issues of forest access and taxation were an important grievance and source of mobilization in the *Prajamandal Andolans*⁸ in many princely states, such as Nayagarh, Dhenkanal, and Rairangpur⁹ (Rath, 2000), as well as in *zamindaries* such as Kanika and Jeypore (Pati, 1983). These struggles still resonate in the memory of the peasantry and rural people and shape current contestations over forests.

Almost two-fifths of Orissa's geographical area is classified as state-owned forest, and local people have few rights over these forests. About a quarter of the state-owned forests lies inside village boundaries and is commonly referred to as village forest. Studies have demonstrated that villagers find it easy to extend community management to village forests due to the management vacuum arising from confusion between legal ownership (in the revenue department) and management responsibility (in the Forest Department) (Kant et al., 1991). Over time, village-based efforts to protect forests have taken place in almost all legal categories of forests, even in the absence of any formal rights over these forests. In response to questions about why communities have taken the initiative to protect forests, one woman captures the approach. 'Even if we don't own the forest, this is the forest that we use, the *only* one that we have. The forest guard will still get his salary even if the forest disappears. For us, nothing would be left'. In contrast to the more violent protests and rebellions, recent community initiatives to protect forests

⁸ *Prajamandal Andolans* were peasant movements against the British in the 1930s and 1940s. They were significant local struggles against feudalism and for self-determination in many princely states.

⁹ Present-day Orissa previously comprised 24 princely states and three British-delineated provinces.

can be seen as a form of resistance through which local communities seek to assert moral claims as conservators of the forest.

Local Agency: Initiation of Community Forestry Initiatives

In the incident that Radhamohan describes, the village started protecting forests sometime in 1956 following forest degradation. Throughout Orissa, villagers responded to degradation of their landscapes by initiating active forest patrols and restricting their own use to allow forests to regenerate. Indeed, collective action for natural resource management worldwide can be explained in terms of local innovation in the face of scarcity, degradation of landscapes, and dependence on resources (Ostrom, 1992; Templeton and Scherr, 1999). While these factors explain local action to conserve forests, they do not fully explain shifts in local subjectivities that shape villagers' willingness to die for the forests that they have conserved¹⁰. To understand this, one needs to delve into the processes through which subjectivities are transformed.

I start with a brief description of the initiation of village-based or community¹¹ forest protection efforts. Even though there are several instances of villages protecting forests as

¹⁰ There are several instances where people have actually been killed in the act of protecting forests. Vasundhara, an Orissa-based NGO, has instituted an award for 'jungle shaheeds' (forest martyrs). In 2002, a *pallia* (forest patroller) in Nayagarh was killed while patrolling forest. The demand for state recognition of his sacrifice brought forest-protecting communities from all over Orissa to Nayagarh in an extraordinary display of solidarity and strength.

¹¹ I use the term 'village' interchangeably with 'community'. These efforts are usually village- or habitation-based. Rural people themselves use the terms *gaon* or *mauza*, 'village' or 'hamlet', to refer to the unit of forest protection. The translation of 'community' as *goshti* in Oriya has little valence at the local level, and refers to crafted institutions or crafted forums instead of communities living in physically shared spaces. While villagers share physical space, the space is by no means homogeneous. Negotiations are needed to work together as a whole, and not everyone shares equal costs and gains equal benefits in working together as a community. For a more general discussion of the problematic of using the term 'community', see Agrawal and Gibson (1999) who suggest an emphasis on institutions instead of on community when discussing community-based natural resource management. See also Brosius et al., 1998.

early as the 1930s (Sundar et al., 1996; RCDC, 2006), most efforts are more recent, starting in the 1970s and 1980s (Kant et al., 1991; Singh, 1995). There are no concrete figures available for the actual number of such initiatives. A survey by RCDC (2006) lists 5,500 community forestry groups in 16 out of a total of 30 districts in Orissa; this can be extrapolated to estimates of 8,000 to 10,000 community forestry groups in Orissa.

Different reasons lead villagers to protect forests. These include experiencing rapid degradation of forests and witnessing changes in their landscape within a short span of time, such as 10 to 15 years. For instance, in Lapanga, in one of the oldest instances of forest protection, villagers decided to protect the village commons as a forest in 1936, when forest products became scarce. In neighboring villages, protection started after the construction of the Hirakud dam in the 1950s, which led to massive deforestation. In Nayagarh district, villagers reported that forests became degraded following Indian independence, during the transition in governance regimes. Following deforestation and large-scale poaching, wildlife disappeared and the forest became more accessible and amenable to timber pilferage. One villager observed, 'Tigers used to protect the forest. When the tigers were gone, there was no fear. We had to step in [and replace the tigers].' The narrative of change in landscape and of loss figured prominently in the reasons people gave for protecting forests. For example, in the Budhikhamari cluster of villages in Mayurbhanj district, one rural resident stated, '*Sabu jungle sarijai thila. Highway disu thila*' [The entire forest was depleted. The state highway was visible from here]. In a village in Dhenkanal district where women initiated forest protection, a woman said, 'The forest was gone. There was no cover for *jhada* [defecation]'.

In Kesharpur village¹² in Nayagarh, villagers narrated an incident in which villagers could not find wood to cremate the body of a poor man. Less extreme instances of the scarcity of forest products were cited in other interviews as the reason to protect forests. One woman in Mayurbhanj district observed, 'If there is forest, then one can stoke the fire [for cooking] and run to the forest to get a tuber to boil, pick some mushrooms or greens to cook [even if there is nothing else to cook]'. Scarcity of small timber and poles for house construction and for agricultural implements also promoted forest protection. Villagers also cited humiliations and hardships endured due to non-availability of forest products as reasons for forest protection. A resident of Sekamal village in Boudh district said, 'Most houses in the village got burned down due to fire. There was no wood nearby. We had to go the farther- away forest, to "steal" wood, and face humiliation. *Setebele bujhihela kastata* [then we felt the pinch].' Or in another case, 'You know, we could not even find a good-sized log for the plough. It was really hard.' Humiliation at the hands of Forest Department staff was another commonly cited reason. In one village, villagers decided to protect the village forest after they were fined by a forester for 'stealing' wood from the reserved forest. Humiliation and insults also often came from other villages that had started protecting forests and restricted the access of others.

¹² Kesharpur is a pioneer village in terms of forest protection in Nayagarh district. It forms the nucleus of an overtly environmental movement to protect forests, which now has expanded to over 900 villages. Human and Pattanaik (2000) describe the evolution and expansion of this movement, which incorporates Gandhian philosophy and global environmental discourses into a uniquely powerful local environmental and forest protection narrative (also see Kant et al., 1991).

Environmental reasons or perceived connections to failed rains or intensifying heat in the summer was another causal factor. In many villages, protection started after drought or failed rainfall. A villager in Phulbani district said, ‘The forest had become completely degraded. The heat also became unbearable. Rains became erratic. After that, we decided to protect [the forest].’ The fertility of agricultural land in the foothills was another driving force and, often, the initiative to protect forests came from farmers driven by concerns for the flow of streams and agricultural fertility. Sometimes, forest protection was initiated to check further encroachment or conversion of forests to agriculture by individuals (Village Kudamunda: Panda and Pati, 1992). In addition to current hardships, concern about the future generation and children’s needs also led to collective action. “We are protecting for our children [*Pila mane pain jagichu*]’ is a common refrain. The critical importance of forests in life at different stages is also commonly related— i.e. ‘from birth till death, wood is needed’¹³. In a locality, after a few villages started protecting forests, other villages learned from these examples and followed suit¹⁴. Most forests thus protected were extremely degraded and needed several years of protection before any visible results could be seen. The moral claims associated with the effort to protect the forest created a moral economy of ‘care and claim’. Villagers commonly stake their claims to a forest that they have protected by saying, ‘We have protected the forest

¹³ ‘When you are born, you need wood to boil water for the first wash. Then, at the time of getting married, wood is needed for *agni-sakshi*. And you need wood for the funeral pyre when you die.’

¹⁴ Several villages take pride in being the first ones to start protecting forests in their area. The reason for conflicting claims is not necessarily because these villagers are being dishonest. Rather, several villages in an area probably took the initiative to protect forests independently.

with a lot of *jatan* [effort], and years of *thengapalli*¹⁵. Forest protection thus becomes a basis for asserting moral authority on the forest. Informally, this set into motion a process of converting state-owned or defacto open-access forests into communally claimed forests.

Community leaders in different parts of Orissa have referred to the villagers' process of taking up forest protection as '*Board mara hela*' (sign-boards were put up). Villagers made public announcements of their decision to protect by beating drums, making announcements at the local marketplace, or by putting up sign boards. Access by neighboring villages was restricted, with a gradual intensification of control and patrolling. Villagers sought the support of neighboring villages by invoking the rhetoric of 'environment conservation' and 'benefits to humanity'. It was usually easy to garner this support as these forests were heavily degraded and did not offer much. Protection by a few villages then triggered other similar initiatives, as it was clearly seen as a process of asserting control over forests. Villages that took up forest protection early often claimed large areas, with less forest available to the late-starters. Instability caused by such an inequitable distribution of forests led to conflicts and renegotiation of boundaries under these informal regimes. The need for inter-village coordination and conflict resolution led villages to develop coordination arrangements. Informal networking among villages was later stepped up by community leaders and NGOs to form federations of community forestry groups.

¹⁵ *Thengapalli* is an Oriya term that literally means 'stick on rotation'; a wooden stick or baton is passed from house to house to signify the household's turn to send someone on patrol.

What stands out clearly is the way that people articulate the materiality of their relationship with forests. Material dependence on the forest provided the initial impetus for forest protection. But an awareness of this relationship with the forest emerged only as it disappeared and its resources became scarce. The humiliations, physical hardships, and cultural dislocation were germane to the initial investment of labor for forest protection. However, to sustain the effort and to leverage community support for the process, a discourse of moral authority was needed, especially in the absence of formal rights over forests.

Intimate Practices: Protecting and ‘Growing’ the Forest

What exactly does community forest protection entail? It involves restricting outsiders’ access to the forest as well as imposing restraints on the village’s own use. Villagers form a separate forest protection committee, or entrust the village committee or the council of elders with the responsibility of devising rules to protect forests and of instituting a management system. Restrictions on outsiders draw moral authority from the village’s own restraint on use. To restrict access and restrain use, rules are framed to specify which activities are and are not permitted, what can be extracted and when, and penalties for non-adherence to rules. Generally, villagers start by completely closing access to the forest. As the forest regenerates, access is gradually permitted and rules become more complex. In the absence of formal legal power, these penalties are backed by the ability to impose social sanctions. These arrangements are quite dynamic, adaptive, and flexible, with a high degree of cross-learning between villages. (For a

detailed discussion see Kant et al., 1991; Singh and Singh, 1993; Human and Pattanaik, 2000; Conroy et al., 2000).

Villagers use words like *jungle jagunchu*, which roughly means ‘to bring forest into one’s consciousness’ or *jungle badhaibar*, ‘to grow forest’. These words reflect a more intimate relationship with forests through a process of nurturance and care. Protection systems include a range of arrangements, such as merely ‘keeping an eye’ —*thengapalli* or paid watchmen. Usually two to six people go on *thengapalli* per day. Giridhari Pradhan from Iramaru village¹⁶ described *thengapalli* arrangements in his village thus:

‘*Palli* (patrolling duty) begins from this end of the village to the other end of the village. Today four people go for *palli* and tomorrow again four people will go. Even at the night time *palli* happens. The four people who go during the day also go at the night time. If anyone misses their duty without prior information then the person will get fined. So, no one skips their turn without informing. If anyone has any problem, they arrange for someone else to go in their place through a mutual exchange.’

Often instead of *thengapalli*, villagers decide to keep an eye on the forests. In some villages, women told me, ‘we go to the forest all the time. If we see anyone entering the forest, we call the men. *Thengapalli* is not needed’.

Through *thengapalli* or ‘keeping an eye’ on their forest, villagers develop an embodied relationship (or reinforce a pre-existing one) with the forest in the process of patrolling, walking through the forest, and thinking of the forest as their own. In villages that use *thengapalli*, the regulatory authority is dispersed, and everyone gets an opportunity to partake in the regulatory as well as care function. While on patrolling duty [*palli*], the *pallia* stops to pick berries, remove weeds, get a creeper out of the way, assess

¹⁶ Iramaru village, in Ranpur block, Nayagarh district. Interview by Aurobindo Rout, translated by me.

whether any trees have been freshly cut or lopped and whether there are any signs of pilferage or violation of forest rules. These actions—and the day-to-day interaction with the growing plants and trees, birds and animals—lead to intimate and embodied practices in relation to forests. Subjectivities of nurturance and care are evoked through these daily practices.

Different sections of the community participate differently in these practices and thus have different experiences based on their differing dependence, use, and participation in regulatory practices (cf. Agrawal, 2005). Women, especially from lower caste and poor families, tend to make daily trips to the forest to gather fuel wood, tubers, leaves, mushrooms, and medicinal plants, and spend several hours of the day in the forest. These trips are also times for social interaction with other women gathering forest products.

This relationship is reflected in the pride that villagers display in the forests that they protect. In the peak heat of summer afternoons, I was taken on long treks by villagers to show me their forest. Often, I dreaded the invitation, '*Aaso, jungle tike bhuli aasiba*' [Come, let us take a short walk to the forest].. The short walk would last a couple of hours with my tour guides wanting to take the longest possible route, stopping frequently to point out medicinal plants, pick berries, and generally display with pride the results of their years of protection and sacrifice. In the process, what clearly emerges is the relationship they have with the forest, trees, and different plants (and to some extent with animals) as living resources. There is a relationship of nurturance and care. This special relationship is a function not of gender and other social identities but of material practices and interaction with plants and the environment. The investment of labor, institutional

ingenuity, and care that villagers make in their forest leads them to develop an intimate relationship with the forest, somewhat similar to their relationship with crops and farm animals. Through the practice of protection and what they term as 'growing forest', there is a shift in how forests are viewed and in subjectivities related to forests.

The practices relating to forest protection transform interaction with forests. New rules need to be negotiated about what can be harvested and what cannot. There is also a sense of forests coming into the community domain of ownership and care, irrespective of the de jure status of forests. The act of conservation and daily practices structured within the framework of care seem to foster a feeling of love for forest. This is reflected in the songs and poetry of people (not folk or traditional, but more recent and emergent), and in the care that they display for the forests.

As forests regenerate, wildlife comes back, often creating the menace of agricultural crop destruction. Despite this problem, villagers often speak lovingly about the return of wildlife as a sign of their success. In Boudh district, a village leader reported that with the regeneration of their forest, elephants have started using it as a corridor. Yet instead of speaking about this as a problem, he spoke fondly about encounters with elephants.

In many cases, individuals have protected forests. Satyanarayan Hati of Sekamal village in Boudh district has been protecting a patch of forest for the past several years. He is a 'head-loader' who used to sell fuel wood as a livelihood and can be categorized as someone in a destructive relationship with the forest. Yet, he is now invested in protecting the forest and for the past several years has been fighting a mining company and timber smugglers at great risk to his life and his family. When asked what he

personally hopes to gain from putting so much labor and effort into protecting the forest, he found it difficult to comprehend the question. He finally said ‘We live by the forest. The forest provides us many things—roots and herbs, fruits like *mahua* and *char*, also fallen wood and branches, which I can sell in the future.’ When asked if he will cut the trees to sell them, he vehemently exclaimed ‘Never.’ He went on to say, ‘The cool breeze coming from the forest, it feels nice. It feels good that we have protected this forest.’¹⁷

Community-based protection has involved sacrifice and investment by villagers. For example, in Kesharpur village in Nayagarh district, villagers decided to sell off their goats to allow the forests to regenerate, an extremely significant sacrifice considering the importance of goats in the local economy. *Thengapalli* involves a considerable investment of labor. For a small village of 30 to 40 households, *thengapalli* of four people a day translates into a substantial investment. In a village in Mayurbhanj district, one villager said, ‘In 1982, the minimum wage was 20 rupees a day. If pallia went once a week, then he will go 52 times a year. Then that will be worth 1,040 rupees per year. After 22 years of service, if the person demands that money as wage, can the government provide it?’ For a person on patrolling duty, it means loss of wages for that day, and in the context of a hand-to-mouth existence these are remarkable sacrifices. In many areas, women have shifted to using leaf litter as fuel instead of wood. In Jatipur village, in Mayurbhanj district, even in 2005 (after years of forest protection) women used leaves as fuel, except during the rainy season. Often forests have been protected against huge odds. For example, when a group of about 90 villages close to Baripada town started protecting

¹⁷ Interview with Satya Hathi, translated by me.

forests, they faced enormous pressure from the organized timber smugglers and from the local ‘head-loaders’ supplying fuel wood to the urban center. This is the case in many areas.

As mentioned, community protection requires substantial investment and sacrifice. Garnering the support of the entire community for such an investment requires creating a discourse about moral imperatives. The following section discusses how such a discourse is created and employed to further moral authority for forest protection.

Discourse of Moral Authority

‘Aamo pakhe to bandook nahin, aamar aastra houchi katha’

‘We don’t have guns, our words are our weapon¹⁸.’

In the absence of formal authority over forests, villagers must invoke and rely on moral authority. To invoke this moral authority, villagers use the global and national discourse of environmental conservation, and tropes such as ‘working in the interest of the environment and humanity’. In the process, global environmental discourse has melded with the emerging local environmentalism. Even though community forest protection started as early as the 1930s in several cases, programs spread more rapidly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the increased influence of environmental discourse at the global and national levels. Several environmental awareness programs were initiated in the 1970s. In Orissa, environmental awareness programs were incorporated as part of the university-level National Service Society (NSS) program. After learning of community forestry efforts, Radhamohan used Dhenkanal College’s NSS program to

¹⁸ Gorachand Mohanto, Budhikhamari Joint Forest Protection Party, interview August 2004.

expand such initiatives. In Nayagarh, teachers played an important role in environmental awareness. The Social Forestry Project (SFP) initiated in 1983 also had an environmental extension component. This growing emphasis on the environment made local communities realize that the environment was something that the external world valued, and they began to represent their forest protection using the dominant environmental discourse.

Local environmental and economic imperatives and global environmental discourses melded to create discourses about the need to protect forests for clean air, rain, global benefits, and local needs. For example, in a song used by Dhanarasi village in Sundergarh district, reference is made to the forest bringing welfare to all (*jungle kariba sabhinka mangal*), and the song is used to call for unity to restore the forest's lost glory. In Nayagarh district, Brukhya O' Jeevar Bandhu Parishad (BOJBP)¹⁹ uses songs and slogans to spread environmental awareness and foster a collective identity as 'jungle surakhayakari' or 'forest-protecting people'. For example, the following slogan talks about trees being life's treasure:

Brukhyo aamar jeevan dhano,
Jagaye mati pani pawano,
Brukhyo' beena banchiba nahin
Bruskhyo aamaro jeevan bhai.

Trees are our life's treasure
They offer us soil and air
Without trees life would end,
Trees are our life's friend.²⁰

¹⁹ In Nayagarh district almost 900 villages are involved in forest protection. In 1982, 22 villages came together to protect forests on Binjhigiri hill, and formed an organization called Friends of Trees and Living. In the region, the forest protection movement has a very strong environmental, spiritual, and emotional content. For details of the movement see Kant et al., 1991 and Human and Pattanaik, 2000.

²⁰ Translated by Human and Pattanaik (2000).

Or the slogans used, such as this:

Congress pain, na Janata pain
Ehi andolan jungle pain,
Jungle pain, jungle pain
Barsha pain, jeevan pain,
Ehi Andolan jungle pain.

Not for Congress or for Janata (Party),
This campaign is for forest,
For Forest, For Forest.
For Rains, For Life,
This campaign is for forest

Or take this lyrical song from Dhanarasi village²¹:

Ahare chai kete sundara chai,
eta aau kata nai
Ethanu tike chetare bhai
Jahata sarila, sarita galana,
ethanu tike chetare bhai
Gacha ama bandhu sukha dukha sahi
Jete kati dele mana nai kare
Tathapi se nai die durei

How cool and lovely is this shade,
Please cut it no more...
Hitherto be aware O' brother
Whatever is lost, lost it is,
From now on, take care, my brother.
Trees are our friends,
ours in happiness and sorrow,
Even on being cut, they don't protest
Or shrug us away

Gacha amara ghara duara sabu kame
laguche
Jeri buti aonla phala harida baheda miluche
Katuthile tangari dhari hae kahe nai
Janam kala maa lekhe sabu achi sahi
Nijar lekhe taku tike dekha
Dekhu dekhu nai dia jalei

Trees give us so many things
Herbs, medicines, *aonla*, *harida* and
baheda, everything we get,
Even on being axed, they don't yell
Like life-giving mother, they bear all our
excesses,
Now like our own child, let us take care of
it,
Look...care...let it not catch fire.

In this song, embodied ('cool shade') and material relationship with forests ('gives us so many things') is interwoven with the narrative of love, nurturance, and care. Villagers commonly refer to the forest as a mother and also pledge to take care of it like their own children, thus completing a cycle of care and nurturance. In Dengajhari village, for example, Sashi Pradhan said, 'We protect forest as if we are protecting our own child

²¹ This song was documented by a village youth of Dhanarasi village as part of a village biography documentation project by Vasundhara and NIRD. I translated the two songs from Dhanarasi village included here from Oriya to English.

from any sort of danger.’ The word *mamta*, i.e. motherly love, is used to describe their relationship with their forest. This nurturance is then used to assert moral authority concerning forests. For example, at a village meeting in 1992, policy recommendations for benefit sharing between the Forest Department and village communities under the Joint Forest Management (JFM) program were being discussed. An old man walked out of this meeting in protest. He said, ‘We have protected our forest as a child. Now, you are discussing who will get what part [of the child].’

‘Jungle’ Loko: From ‘Uncivilized’ to ‘Environmental’ People

In the process of protecting forests, rural people are asserting their identity as ‘*jungal loko*’ (forest people). Due to colonial representations of forests as wilderness and forest-dependent people as uncivilized and wild, the word *jungali* has negative connotations. Rural people are re-appropriating this term to mean ‘environmental’ people. In Nayagarh, the forest protection movement uses the song, ‘*Aame he jungle-jati*’ (O, we are forest-caste). In the process, they challenge the prevalent caste-structure, and seek to displace it with new ‘caste’ and identity as forest people. Instead of *jungali*, they use the term ‘jungle’ to subtly eliminate the negative connotation. In one of my interviews, a district forestry federation leader criticized a state-level leader as an *aun-jungal loko* (non-jungali person), and claimed that a person who does not depend on forests cannot represent the concerns of forest-dependent people. That the higher caste and middle class people have embraced the term primarily ascribed to uncivilized tribals is a testimony to changing subjectivities. For example, consider the following song from Dhanarasi village:

Ame jangalia loka ho,
jangala ama mulaka
Peta pain dana, roga ku oushadha,
ei ama sukha dukha.
Phala mula sabu die ho,
Jhuna mahu sabu die,

Nija pua boli mane rakhithiba,
na heba epari kie ho
Asa sapatha kariba ho
jangala ku na katiba
Jangala katile
barasa abhabe chatapata ame heba ho.

We are forest-people, O'
Forest is our country
Food for stomach, medicine for
disease,
With us in our happiness and sorrow.
Fruits and tubers, everything it offers,
Scented resin and honey, too,

Let us keep it like our son,
There won't be any one like this one
Come, let us take an oath,
We won't cut forest
If we destroy forest,
Failing rains we will suffer, O'

Another song used by the Nayagarh Jungle Surakhya Mahasangha promotes a common identity of forest-protecting people as 'forest-caste'. It describes how forest protection is their policy and *dharma*²² (religious duty), and how they derive moral strength from non-violence and from their struggle for life and nature. Through forest protection, villagers are not just regenerating forests but also rejuvenating community institutions and unity (Singh and Nayak, 2003). Protecting the forest together gives villagers a sense of pride and ensures the 'sustenance of unity' in the village²³. In Dhavani village in Mayurbhanj district, where the community forest protection system had broken down, villagers' disappointment and a sense of failure was palpable. This contrasted sharply with the sense of pride and excitement that a neighboring village

²² The term *dharma* refers to one's righteous duty or any virtuous path in the common sense of the term. Throughout Indian philosophy, *dharma* is presented as a central concept that is used in order to explain the 'higher truth' or ultimate reality of the universe. The word *dharma* literally translates as *that which upholds or supports*, and is generally translated into English as *law*.

²³ Focus group with Boudh district forestry federation, August 2006.

protecting the forest displayed. In the process of regenerating forests, villagers are creating new identities for themselves as *jungle surakhyakaris* or conservators of forests.

Moral Authority Discourse at Higher Spatial Scales

The common identity of forest conservators as forest-protecting villages has been aided by the process of villagers coming together as federations. After individual villages starting protecting forests, they often felt the need to coordinate with other neighboring villages due to the shared nature of forest resources, or to manage conflicts due to changes in access regimes. Groups of villages thus came together for inter-village coordination. Conflict resolution was an important need fulfilled through these inter-village coalitions. Over time, this experience of federating and coordinating among groups of villages was used to envision and institute networks at higher scales. The idea of federating caught on, and gradually block-, district-, and state-level federations emerged either spontaneously or aided by NGOs.

In 2008, there were 26 different district or sub-district level federations, covering 23 districts, with an approximate membership of about 7,000 villages. These federations are at varying levels of activity with some of the federations being very strong and vibrant and others still struggling to bring villages together and establish effective communication channels. Some of these different federations further link up through a state-level federation called the Orissa Jungle Manch (Orissa Forestry Forum, hereafter referred to as OJM). Formed in 1999, OJM represents several thousand villages and is a major venue for community voices though it continues to struggle with issues of representation, elite dominance, democracy, and funding and resource support.

Community forestry federations have helped in projecting the collective imagination of villages involved in protecting forests and in articulating and aiding transformation in subjectivities. They have helped villagers learn from each other and share ideas across scales and locales, and helped coalesce emergent meaning and environmental imaginaries by assisting in the emergence of a collective identity and voice of forest-protecting villages.

State Response and Local Resistance

Despite large-scale forest protection by communities, the state refuses to fully acknowledge these initiatives. In 1990, when I started working in Orissa, my naïve initial response was that the state did not know about these initiatives. I later realized that not knowing was not possible; not seeing was more likely. Even though forests in Orissa respond very well to protection, the state nevertheless ignored widespread community forestry initiatives in favor of investments in Social Forestry Projects²⁴. From 1983 to 1996, Social Forestry established plantations of exotic tree species at huge cost, instead of supporting low-cost protection efforts. In many areas, the Forest Department (FD) struggled to find land to plant trees and sometimes cleared sal forests to plant eucalyptus. In some of my earlier work (Singh 2002), I comment on the invisibility or the ‘conspiracy of silence’ on the part of the FD. What were the reasons for this invisibility or this

²⁴ Social Forestry was premised on the assumption that if villagers were provided fuel and fodder woodlots close to their village (on non-forest lands), then they would not resort to using natural forests and degrade them further. Social Forestry has been criticized as having a faulty design and for meeting the needs of paper and pulp industries instead of local fuel and fodder needs. In Orissa, Social Forestry was particularly ill-suited given the large-scale community initiatives to protect natural forests that could have been supported at much less cost to the state exchequer than was planting trees.

silence? As I mention earlier, the state's refusal to see these initiatives was linked to the politics of control over forest resources, and opportunities for rent-seeking.

In 1988, the chief minister of Orissa received thousands of postcards from forest-protecting villages demanding recognition. Responding to this pressure, the state issued a policy resolution that provided for the formation of Forest Protection Committees to protect state forest reserves. This was the first policy of its kind in India and was a precursor to the Joint Forest Management (JFM) approach adopted in India in 1990. In 1993, Orissa promulgated a detailed JFM policy that allocated a 50 per cent share of final forest harvests to the JFM committees. Through JFM, the state sought to impose order and uniformity on community forestry arrangements. Unlike in some other states in India, communities in Orissa saw JFM as a step backwards, and responded by asking, 'Where was the FD all these years, when we were struggling alone to protect forests? Why has it come now to ask for a share in the forest?' (Singh, 1995; Vasundhara, 1999). In an interview with Indramani Jena in Mayurbhanj district, this was how the Forest Department's interest in JFM was interpreted²⁵:

In 1988, suddenly the (forest) department walked in from nowhere. Like a father who disappeared when a child was born, and suddenly reappears when the child is five years old, and thinks, 'My son will probably go to the school now. If I hand him over to someone for house-work, he can fetch me 10 or 50 rupees a month or a yearly sum of income.' Exactly in the same manner, the department reappeared, thinking: village people have protected trees, now let us go and assert our 'paternal' rights and say that the forest is ours.

There were also more fundamental concerns and differences in worldview that made villagers wary of JFM. These included concerns about loss of autonomy by becoming

²⁵ Interview in August 2006, translated by me.

upwardly accountable—to external authorities—instead of downwardly accountable, or differences about what forests meant and how they should be managed (Sarin et al. 2003).

Until recently, Orissa's JFM program was not funded through overseas assistance. In a way, this helped community initiatives to continue with relatively little interference from the FD. For the past few years, FD investments in JFM have been increasing, first through federal government funds and recently through a loan from the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC). With funds flowing to the JFM program, the FD is able to buy local consent for the JFM framework as well as use money to disrupt local community arrangements (Sarin et al., 2003).

The state's refusal to acknowledge and accommodate community forestry initiatives through policy changes is linked with the politics of control over forests and more importantly with the politics of disciplining people. It is hard for the state to admit that transformation in environmental subjectivities is happening through self-emergent processes instead of through a state-led process. At one state-level conference in 1991, a senior FD official insisted that villagers were protecting the Social Forestry plantations but not state-owned natural forests, even though an FD-funded report documented 1,100 communities protecting forests. The reason for such a denial possibly lies in the need to be in control of the disciplining process. The state would like to be the driver of the transformation in people's attitudes and their subjectivities relating to forests.

In response to continuing efforts by the state to co-opt community forestry initiatives under the uniform JFM structure that offers limited local autonomy, villages have

organized in the form of federations. Forest-protecting villages have intensified their own process of democratic assertion and seek to posit alternate discourses based on moral authority, and to present alternate imaginaries relating to forests and forest governance.

The legal terrain thus continues to be contested, and the struggle of local communities for legal recognition and rights over the forests that they protect continues. Even though villagers generally are able to enforce moral authority, they also cite problems that arise from their lack of legal authority. In Dhavani village in Mayurbhanj district, where the forest protection system broke down, one villager stated that other villagers challenged their authority to restrict access by saying, 'Is this forest your father's property? Did you water and make these trees grow?'

Local communities have been perplexed at the response (or non-response) from the state. At a dialogue session with JBIC and FD representatives, one federation leader said, 'We are confused. The state wants to protect forests. Thousands of villages are protecting forests. These villages are doing the job of the [Forest] Department. We would have thought that the department would be happy. But instead of being happy and joining hands, they continue to ignore us. And now, the state is asking Japan for money for the forests that we have protected. All this makes us doubt the intentions of the government²⁶.' In 2005 and 2006, community forestry federations protested the government of Orissa's proposal to obtain funds from JBIC for a JFM project. The following is a translation of part of a song used at one protest rally in Nayagarh:

²⁶ Meeting of Orissa Jungle Manch with JBIC in February 2005.

The state refuses to see us,
Devises new ways to break us
In the name of forest development, money is going to come
How will they write these forests as degraded?
Are they complete nuts?
We have regenerated forests, don't you know?
Can't you see?
Who gives you the right to go to Japan with a begging bowl?

What democracy...this is autocracy. Where is our voice?
Can't you hear?
Can't you see?
The British left, but soon came in brown Masters,
The British took the keys,
But left the old locks,
Come, let us break these locks,
Demand our rights, our forests,
Our children's future,
O' people, let us do *andolan*²⁷

More importantly, through their efforts to protect forests, Orissa's villagers resist a dominant representation that paints them as short-sighted destroyers of forests, and they try to create new identities for themselves as conservators of forests. Through their investment of love and labor in regenerating degraded forests, communities in Orissa seek new meanings and ways of being with forests. At the same time, villagers are engendering creative forms of resistance. Their resistance, unlike the usual 'weapons of the weak', does not drag feet, pilfer from forests, or break rules, but resists images and labels thrust upon them. These forms of resistance posit alternate 'environmental imaginaries' (Peet and Watts, 1996) that challenge dominant discourses. In contrast to the more visible social and environmental movements that confront corporate take-over of their lands and resources, they represent more subtle but no less significant forms of

²⁷ Andolan means struggle or movement.

resistance. Here, villagers resist through exercise of agency to fashion new ‘selves’ as forest conservators. These ‘selves’ and subjectivity might be in sync with the behavioral change the state aims to produce in them encouraging environmental consciousness. However, they are not shaped only through the state’s will to power or the ‘will to improve’ (Li, 2007), but they assume new forms that take the state by surprise.

The terrains of power also shift in the process. By assuming the role of the state in conserving forests, without a formal transfer of authority, villagers have demystified the state and its power. The state also experiences this transformation in power relations. In my interviews with Forest Department staff, they asserted that community forestry federations were trying to run a parallel government. A community leader from another geographical area cited a divisional forest officer (DFO) who made a similar comment. In Mayurbhanj district, the community forestry federation, Budhikhamari Joint Forest Protection Party (BJPP) received active encouragement from the Forest Department in the early 1990s, but in 2005 the Forest Department renounced it. In addition, the federation changed its name from ‘Budhikhamari Joint Forest Protection Committee’ to ‘Budhikhamari Joint Forest Protection Party’ to dissociate itself from JFM committees. When I asked the DFO about BJPP, he said, ‘I cannot help you there. The FD has nothing to do with the federation.’ When I suggested that the federation had been initiated by the Forest Department, another officer responded, ‘Well, that was the “scheme” then.’ And the DFO added that they recently hosted a team of forest officials from Nepal who came to explore means of breaking the federations and developing joint forest management in Nepal.’ Thus, even though the ‘environmentality’ of villagers might align with changes in

behavior that the state wants to bring about, it can still disown or discredit this environmentalty.

Transformation in Environmental Subjectivity

Abe to gote nasha hai jaichhi.

Mado-pado khaile bhi aame jungle chadibu nahin

Now, forest protection has become a passion. Even if we get bashed and beaten-up, we won't leave the (protection of) forest²⁸.

Local subjectivity about the forest and the environment are transformed through the practice of forest protection. Others have voiced views similar to those above—asserting that 'now' forest protection has become a passion, implying that there has been a process of transformation at work. As I have described, this process of transformation has been aided by intimate material practices, by participation in the government of the environment, as well as by embodied day-to-day interaction with forests shaped by material practices.

As Ingold suggests, 'ways of acting in the environment are also ways of perceiving it.' Through their actions and practices of protecting and growing forests, villagers have begun to perceive forests in a certain way. These perceptions are expressed in terms such as 'our forests' or statements that the forest is like 'our child', or like 'our mother'. These perceptions are imbued with sentiments of care, nurturance, and love. The relationship between the forest conservators and forests is intimate and embodied, and therefore the practices that shape local subjectivity in relation to the forest are as much biophysical as

²⁸ Gorachand Mohanto, Leader of the Budhikhamari Joint Protection Party, interview in August 2005. My translation. The exact same words were used by another community forestry federation leader at a state-level workshop held 15 December 2005.

they are social. The villagers' practices and subjectivities as forest conservators are performed in day-to-day living and are in turn shaped by this performance.

Since forest protection requires large investments of time and effort, discourses of environmentalism and a certain conception of self and collective are needed to initiate and sustain such investments of local time and care. In the process of creating this self-conception as forest conservators and through intimate practices as described in the paper, subjectivities are transformed. Through transformations in subjectivity, environmental consciousness becomes part of people's notions of themselves. This subjectivity then becomes a part of their identity and becomes part of who they are and how they act. Like other identities—such as being Oriya, a village resident, a *dalit* or *adivasi*, a woman or man—being a forest conservator becomes a subject position. This is expressed evocatively in the songs through which people assert their identity as 'forest caste' or as environmental people. It is also expressed in people's actions to conserve forests through risking their own lives.

I do not wish to paint an overly romantic picture of utopian environmentalism. Not all the people in Orissa have come to care similarly about their environment, or have become environmental stewards who give primacy to environmental conservation over short-term interests. Even within the communities involved in protecting forests, some are more committed than others. Many other problems exist within forest protection, such as conflicts between and within villages over resources, exclusion of the marginalized, struggles for power and position, politics of class and caste, and so on. At local levels, exclusion and marginalization occur within these forest protection efforts. Many of these

systems of forest protection break down due to internal conflicts and external aggressions, though the transformation in subjectivity may not necessarily extend back to the pre-protection days²⁹. Problems persist (for a detailed discussion see Sarin et al., 2003; Singh, 2002); I have not elaborated on these given my focus on subject formation and subjectivities. As is to be expected, transformation in environmental subjectivities is embedded in fields of power and terrains of contestations. The villagers may have succeeded in regenerating forests in thousands of villages, but have not done as well in coming together in larger political mobilizations to force the state to accede to their demands for rights. They have not been able to create a larger political identity or come together as a statewide green political movement. The state continues to ignore these arrangements and seeks to co-opt them. Yet, millions of people in thousands of villages in Orissa, involved in forest protection, think of themselves as forest conservators, among many other identities, and their actions and discourses are informed by this subject position.

How does local environmental subjectivity interface with regimes of power, knowledges, institutions, and practices? As I mentioned earlier, local 'environmentality' was influenced by the dominant discourse of environmental conservation. Local initiatives are also embedded in dominant perceptions of forests shaped by scientific forestry, but they also form a substrate on which these new forms of knowledge flourish. In the early 1990s, many villages adopted silvicultural practices, such as cleaning and

²⁹ For example, while in a village that I describe above, discussing the forest protection system that had broken down, a few women sat in a corner conferring with each other. They said, 'No matter how busy we are, we can always make a quick trip to the forest, and see how things are [and reinstate protection].'

thinning, borrowed from the technical knowledge of the Forest Department. Over the years, through practice and horizontal learning, villagers seem to have developed different knowledge bases upon which to draw to manage their protected forests. For example, in Mayurbhanj district, villagers told me that they no longer carry out organized forest cleaning (clearing of the understory) or thinning (removal of poles), since their regular use—and the care they take when they extract products—serve similar purposes. Official silvicultural practices and knowledge is increasingly challenged as villagers experiment and realize that their objectives are very different from those that have shaped scientific forestry. For example, in one of the oldest cases of forest protection, in Lapanga village, villagers worship *saat-gachias* (sal trees with seven stems), and there are large numbers of trees with multiple stems. Such trees would not be possible in a forest managed by foresters, for whom efficient timber production favors retaining a single pole or main trunk to maximize timber production. However, villagers need smaller timber, mainly poles, and therefore did not thin out multiple trunks. Communities often prioritize non-timber forest products (NTFPs) over timber production, and accordingly may manage forests so as to promote NTFP production. For instance, women in the Ranpur area have initiated a festival for planting *Bauhinia vahlii* vines in protected forest areas, as they provide leaves for leaf-plate making, an important livelihood activity for poor women. In the process of actively taking care of the forest, villagers experiment with practices related to forest management that challenge dominant knowledge. Thus protection initiatives become actions or steps in the direction of re-imagining or re-visioning local relationships with forests and in challenging dominant scientific forestry

paradigms. In response to the dominant mode of managing forest for timber (for example, coppice with standards), villagers say that the ‘forest is not a crop to be harvested.’ Transformation in environmental subjectivity has thus led to a questioning of dominant power and knowledge.

What is the evidence that a transformation in subjectivity has taken place? The regenerating forests stand as testimony to the labor and effort put into bringing them back. The day-to-day *thengapalli*, the songs, the narratives that display the local relationship with the forest and the concern for future generations, are further evidence that people have re-imagined their relationships with forests in novel ways. Barhart (2009) cites a community forest user group member in Nepal as saying, ‘*People do not love the government. The government took the forest from them and left nothing for the people, so the people didn’t love the forest.*’ This imagined relationship with forests in the pre-protection days also applies to Orissa. In Orissa’s forested landscapes, the nature-culture dichotomy imposed through the formal forest governance framework is being transformed as local people reconstruct their relationship with the forest. Forests are transformed from being ‘nature’ out there, to being a part of constructed landscapes that are nurtured through constant care and attention. Forests are also transformed from state property to community property and brought into an informal community management arrangement. Local communities in Orissa assert, ‘*Ama jungle aamar*’ (Our forest is ours), even though the legal struggle to make it theirs continues.

Conclusions

In the forested landscapes of Orissa, through local practices of forest protection and discourses relating to it, local subjectivities about the forest and the environment have been clearly transformed. I do not seek to establish a causal relationship to explain this transformation. I would like to draw attention to possible pointers, such as material practices, embodied interactions, discourses, and affect that create or transform self-conception and shape environmental subjectivity. I suggest that the analytical framework of environmentality can gain from more explicit attention to embodied intimate practices shaped by affective sociality, technologies of the self, and local agency. Attention to embodied practices is in consonance with the work of other scholars who suggest that breaking down the dichotomy between mind and body can enrich our understanding of the notions of power and resistance. Through my analysis, I join Raffles (2005), who suggests that exploring environmental subjectivities requires close attention to the deeply biographical practices through which environmental subjects ‘make themselves’ and, equally, ‘are made’.

The transformation of environmental subjectivity in Orissa illustrates the role of local environmental imaginaries, intimate everyday embodied practices, and creative forms of resistance in the making of environmental subjects. While the ensemble of power-knowledge, formal institutions, and the social practices mediated by these institutions play an important role, equally important is the bedrock of physical and material reality of daily practices that are shaped by human interaction and dwelling in the environment.

The case of Orissa presents a sharp contrast to Agrawal's (2005) representation of transformation in environmental subjectivities in Kumaon. Agrawal attributes the transformation to technologies of power and social practices engendered through formal institutional arrangements for the government of environment. In contrast, community forestry initiatives in Orissa represent transformation in environmental subjectivities shaped through intimate daily practices that are mediated through affective sociality. The Orissa case illustrates how creative imagination and daily practices of resource conservation by thousands of village communities and millions of resource-dependent poor have nurtured environmentalism and social movements and fostered transformation in environmental subjectivities. These daily practices are more than social practices, instituted and mediated by the state. These are 'intimate' practices (Raffles, 2000) that are shaped by everyday interactions with forests, interactions that are embodied and mediated by affect.

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Chapter 2

Democratic Spaces across Scales

Women's Action and Inclusion in Forest Governance in Orissa, India

Abstract

In developing countries and subsistence economies, rural women depend critically on forest resources but tend to be excluded from forest governance and decision making. Recent efforts for decentralization in forest governance have not improved this situation much. Drawing on multi-scalar ethnographic research from Orissa, India, this paper shows that constraints to and possibilities for democratic participation for women are different across spatial scales. Further, spaces for participation and democratic action across scales are intermeshed and in dynamic interaction. In the Orissa case, marginalized women gained voice and visibility by organizing at a regional scale, and used democratic spaces at higher spatial scales to overcome constraints to their participation at the community level. The case demonstrates how closer attention to issues of scale and cross-scale linkages can help in deepening democracy and addressing issues of social justice.

Introduction

In forested landscapes of developing countries and subsistence economies, rural women depend critically on forest resources but tend to be excluded from forest governance and decision making (Agarwal, 1997; Colfer, 2004). This marginalization continues despite recent efforts towards decentralized natural resource governance. Despite the rhetoric of democracy, social justice, and rights, the so-called 'democratic decentralization' initiatives remain elite-dominated and do not adequately challenge deeply entrenched power relations (Ribot et al., 2006; Sarin et al., 2003; Agrawal and

Gibson, 1999; Thoms, 2008). Local participation and empowerment in these top-down approaches to institutional reform are conceptualized on a harmony model of power and structural constraints to equity and power relations are downplayed (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). There is also a tendency to romanticize communities as homogeneous, static, and harmonious units within which people share common interests and needs (Guijt and Shah, 1998). Increasingly, this essentialization has been critiqued and the notions of 'community' and 'participation' have been problematized (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Brosius et al., 1998; Flint et al., 2008). The problem of exclusion and elite dominance persists despite efforts to address it (Colfer, 2004).

This problem is not unique to natural resource governance but is a central challenge for development interventions in a wide variety of contexts. Scholars and practitioners concerned with women's participation in the public sphere express frustration at the limited success of top-down approaches in solving complex social and political processes (Cornwall et al., 2006; Batliwala and Dhanraj, 2006; Mukhopadhyay, 2006). While top-down approaches have limited success, bottom-up processes that challenge unequal power relations are unlikely to emerge from locales and spaces where these power relations are most strongly entrenched. In this paper, I show how this paradox can possibly be addressed through an example of women's organizing in community forestry in Orissa, India, at a meso-scale.

In the Indian state of Orissa, several thousand villages are protecting state-owned forests through community-based arrangements. In contrast to the state-led devolution efforts through Joint Forest Management (JFM), community forestry initiatives in Orissa

represent democratic assertion from below through which citizens seek to exercise greater control over decisions that affect their lives. At one level, they further democracy by seeking to alter state-citizen relations and interactions in the realm of forest governance. But at another level, they are rooted in traditional local institutions and mirror existing social power relations within which certain groups of people, particularly women, *dalits*, and *adivasis*³⁰, are marginalized and not included as full members of community republics. This paper discusses the case of a local community forestry federation in which women used space for participation at higher spatial scales to overcome constraints to their participation at the community level. Drawing on long-term multi-scalar ethnographic research, the paper illustrates how spaces for participation and democratic action across scales are intermeshed and in dynamic communication. Further, impulses for change can come from scales that are more amenable to change. This research illustrates that power relations manifest differently across scales and suggests that marginalized people can gain voice and visibility by traversing through scales and organizing at scales and locales where power relations are less strongly entrenched. Hence, constraints to, and possibilities for, democratic participation differ across scales. Attention to these differences in constraints and possibilities at different scales can

³⁰ *Dalit* refers to a caste traditionally regarded as untouchables. *Adivasis* are believed to be the aboriginal population of India and are also referred to as 'tribals'. Both groups tend to be discriminated against in rural India.

improve interventions to deal with issues of marginalization and powerlessness at the community level.

Following this introduction, I introduce the conceptual framework of democracy, democratic spaces, and scales that frames my exploration of women's organizing and collective action across scales. After this, I introduce community forestry in Orissa as the setting of my research, including the Maa Maninag Jungle Surakhya Parishad (MMJSP), a local-level federation comprising 187 forest-protecting communities. After a brief description of research methods, I introduce the nature and extent of space for women's participation at the community and federation levels in community forest management in Orissa. I then describe women's actions to expand their space, and how opening space at one scale impacted spaces at other scales. I conclude with a discussion of the opportunities for expanding democratic spaces by explicitly working across scales, as well as implications for research approaches to examine cross-scale linkages.

Conceptual Framework: Democracy, Spaces, and Scales

Theoretically, the notions of democracy, democratic spaces, and the politics of scale frame my exploration of women's action within forest governance. In this section, I elaborate on how I use the terms 'democracy', 'spaces', and 'scales'. I also introduce the key concerns behind the paper, which are exclusion of marginal citizens from decision making and the opportunity to use democratic spaces at one scale to open new spaces at another scale.

Substantive Democracy: Redefining State-Citizen and Citizen-Citizen Relations

I start with the idea of democracy to help grapple with issues of social exclusion and marginalization. Key principles of democracy include control by citizens over their collective affairs and equality between citizens in the exercise of that control (Beetham, 1999). In forest governance in developing countries, given the history of lack of state accountability, most discussions about reform and democratization focus on altering state-citizen relations, but the inequalities among citizens and power differentials within communities are often overlooked. Ideals of equality demand not only equal political rights, but also social conditions that create free and equal opportunity to speak, which implies a precondition of freedom from domination, and an environment free of power asymmetries and coercion (Young, 2000). In social contexts such as Orissa, strong social stratification and power inequalities get in the way of inclusion and political equality. Not everyone has an equal opportunity to speak and be heard; some utterances are more important than others and some voices are perpetually silenced due to social marginalization. It thus becomes important to assess how power relations between citizens are altered so that women can gain more voice and become equal citizens. When we assess women's citizenship, it is useful to view citizenship not only as a status but as a practice (Oldfield, 1990). This implies paying attention to structures that define what it is to be a citizen and individual agency that shapes what it is to act as a citizen (Lister, 1997). And often it is the local rather than the national that becomes the arena for citizenship struggles and expression of human agency (ibid. 1997: 34). In view of this, Yuval-Davis's (1999) notion of citizenship as a multilayered construct applicable

simultaneously to people's membership in sub-, cross-, and supra-national collectivities and in nation-states provides a useful construct to look at varying participation across scales.

Democratic Spaces and Participation as a Spatial Practice

Recent feminist scholarship draws attention to different locales and spatial scales as sites of political action and engagement (Harcourt and Escobar, 2005). Cornwall (2004) invites us to analyze in spatial terms arenas of democratic participation. Drawing on Lefebvre (1991), she uses space as 'a concept rich with metaphor as well as a literal descriptor of arenas where people gather, which are bounded in time as well as dimension' (cf. Massey, 1995). The spatial has often been overlooked in previous work about participation (O'Reilly, 2007). Framing participation as a spatial practice, Cornwall (2004) encourages us to consider how 'particular sites come to be populated, appropriated or designated by particular actors' in ways that enable or disable social transformation. She draws attention to the 'relations of power and construction of citizenship that permeate any site for public engagement'. Further, she contrasts invited spaces with popular spaces to distinguish between spaces created as part of externally imposed top-down participatory development projects, and self-emergent spaces created through collective action.

Scale, Democratic Spaces, and the Marginalized Voices

In recent years, the concepts of scale and scalar politics have attracted considerable attention in the field of geography and beyond. Recent work in geography challenges the commonplace understanding of scales as arenas or nested territorial containers, 'Russian

dolls' with discrete scales contained within one another (Bulkeley, 2005). This work emphasizes that there is nothing ontologically given about scale; rather, scale is socially constructed, contested, and reconfigured (Brenner, 2001; Marston, 2000; Bulkeley, 2005). Further, the boundaries between home and locality, urban and regional, and national and global scales are blurred (Smith, 1993). These boundaries are 'established through the geographical structure of social interactions' (ibid 1993); and 'the social and ecological outcomes of any particular scalar arrangement are the result of the political strategies of particular actors and not inherent qualities of a particular scale' (Brown and Purcell, 2005). The politics of scale involves 'continuous reshuffling and reorganization of spatial scales' as part of 'social strategies and struggles for control and empowerment' (Swyngedouw, 2000). While scalar arrangements are constantly being made and remade (Swyngedouw, 1997), their fluidity is not total (Brown and Purcell, 2005). Swyngedouw (1997) uses the notion of scaled places and describes them as 'the embodiment of social relations of empowerment and disempowerment and the arena through and in which they operate'. Howitt (1998) also encourages us to focus on the relational aspect of scale that includes a complex mix of space, place, and environment.

While there is an explosion of literature on the politics of scale, there is relatively little exploration of how scale or power relations at different scales are experienced by people inhabiting or traversing through these scales. How does democratic space differ across scales? Are there some scales that are more amenable to democratic organizing and expression of marginalized voices than others?

Smith (1993) uses the notion of ‘jumping scales’ to suggest that ‘groups at a disadvantage at one scale can pursue their aims at a different scale, hoping to turn the balance of power to their advantage’. I build and expand on the notion of ‘jumping scale’. Jumping scale suggests an arenal concept of scale and implies that when a scale is jumped there is some form of escape from the ‘entrenched structure of scale’. I suggest that the idea of traversing scales provides a more useful way of analyzing power relations at different scales and their material manifestation. What does the scale of a village mean for women who live in the village, and how are relations of power expressed and experienced differently across scales? How can traversing, i.e. moving to and fro, across scales be used by marginalized people to gain political skills and find ways to circumvent and challenge power relations that are differentially expressed at different scales? I use the ideas of democracy and democratic spaces, and their expression at different spatial scales, to analyze women’s organizing and action within community forestry in Orissa.

The Setting: Community Forestry in Orissa

In Orissa, 8,000 to 10,000 villages independently protect almost 15 to 20 per cent of the state-owned forests through community-based arrangements (Kant et al., 1991; Conroy et al., 2001; Singh, 2002). Orissa is one of the most forest-rich states in mainland India. It also happens to be economically the most under-developed. Almost 40 per cent of Orissa’s geographical area is legally categorized as forests, with actual forest cover being about 23 per cent. A majority of the rural population lives in forested landscapes and depends on forests and marginal lands for subsistence and livelihood needs. Poor women especially depend on forests for gathering fuel and a variety of forest products for

their own use and sale. This dependence on forests has led to community-based initiatives to protect and manage state-owned forests. Villages have invested in elaborate patrolling and management arrangements even in the absence of formal legal rights. Some villages started protecting forests as early as the 1930s, while a majority started in the mid-1980s.

The forest-protecting villages in Orissa have come together as federations at different spatial scales to improve collective bargaining positions, resolve conflicts, and learn from each other (Singh, 2002). At the local scale, clusters of villages often come together to collaboratively protect a patch of forest or to support their respective forest protection efforts. Building on these examples, 'federations' of forest-protecting villages have formed at other spatial scales. These federation-building efforts have often been facilitated by NGOs, influential local individuals, or by the Forest Department staff. In the early 1990s, some NGOs facilitated the formation of district-level federations. A state-level federation called Orissa Jungle Manch (OJM) was formed in 1999. As of 2007, there were 25 district federations and other local-scale federations in Orissa. But as mentioned earlier, these community forestry groups are not necessarily very democratic internally. While traditional community institutions help in fostering collective management of forests (Kant et al., 1991), they also hinder democratic inclusion of women and other socially marginalized groups in forest decision making.

Various studies indicate that women face hardship in the initial years of forest protection. They have to walk longer distances to gather fuel or face humiliation at the hands of local 'forest guards' as their access to local forests is restricted (Sarin et al., 1998; Agarwal, 2001; Singh, 2001). Some of these problems ease as forests regenerate

and access to forest products is gradually restored, but the exclusion of women from decision making in traditional community institutions continues. Community forestry federations also face the problem of male dominance and tend to have very little representation of women and their concerns. But community forestry groups and their federations are not static; they continually interact with other processes of social change and formal institutions of democracy. MMJSP represents one such case of transformation.

Maa Maninag Jungle Surakhya Parishad

MMJSP³¹ is a federation of forest protecting villages in Ranpur block of Nayagarh district in Orissa. Ranpur block is a drought-prone area, and forest-based livelihoods play a critical role in the lives of the poor, especially of *adivasis* and *dalits*. The total geographical area of the block is about 142 square miles and almost 35 per cent of the geographical area is recorded as forest. Almost 39 per cent of the households in the block are landless. Landlessness is especially pronounced among *adivasis* and *dalits* with 70 per cent of them being landless. For the landless, dependence on forests is especially high. Of the 271 village settlements, 187 are involved in conserving forests. A few villages began protecting forests in the 1960s, while most others started in the early 1980s. These initiatives were prompted by local dependence on forests for products and services. In the past ten years, after being encouraged by MMJSP, some additional villages have initiated forest protection.

³¹ *Maa Maninag Jungle Surakhya Parishad* means 'Mother Maninag Forests Protection Forum'. It is named after a local deity and its namesake hill, Maa Maninag. *Parishad* means 'forum' or 'solidarity group', and MMJSP is locally referred to as the Parishad.

MMJSP was formed in 1997 with an initial membership of 85 villages. The experience of informal networking among villages in the area formed a basis for this federation. In 2007, its membership stood at 187 forest-protecting communities clustered into 18 groups with membership ranging from 4 to 14 villages. The cluster groups are based on historical social and cultural ties, often through shared dependence on a common forest.

Methodology

I used qualitative research to explore women's experiences and action in everyday life and sites of engagement across scales. I explored issues of power across scales through what Marcus (1998) terms 'multi-sited' or 'multi-locale' ethnography. Marcus (1998) encourages 'a shift away from the ethnography that is so centrally place and local-world determined towards an ethnography that is aimed at representing the operation of the system'. The different spatial scales of collective action and engagement in my research and analysis include community-scale, block-level (an aggregation of approximately 200 villages), and state- (or province-) level. In this analysis, I follow Brenner (2001), who insists that 'analyses that are specifically analyses of scale must examine a range of scales at once and focus on the relations among scales'. To this multi-scale analysis, I bring ethnographic depth and attention to everyday life processes, and action-orientedness, all of which are hallmarks of feminist methodology (Fonow and Cook, 1991; Reinhartz, 1992).

This research is based on several months of fieldwork spread over 2004 to 2007 when I lived and worked in Orissa. My extended presence allowed long-term participant

engagement in the processes that I was studying. I participated in several of the women's group meetings and various federation and village meetings at different scales of analysis over this three-year period. Further, I draw on insights from my long-term work in Orissa on community forestry issues as a practitioner. In 1991, I founded an NGO, Vasundhara (which means 'Mother Earth' in Hindi and Sanskrit) to work on forest conservation and local livelihood issues in Orissa. Vasundhara was involved in facilitating the formation of MMJSP. Through my work with Vasundhara, I was closely associated with MMJSP from its inception. In the tradition of 'radical objectivity', I embraced my 'bias' and both the burden and advantages of my positionality and past association with MMJSP.

My methods included conversational interviews with village men and women, leaders of MMJSP, study of MMJSP and women's group meeting records, participant observation of meetings, focus group discussions, and interviews with NGO staff. Following feminist principles (Oakley, 1981; Kirsch, 1999), my stance towards my interviewees was interactive, collaborative, and non-hierarchical. I interviewed 11 women leaders, including 3 women *sarpanches*³² associated with MMJSP, 6 male leaders, and 4 NGO staff. With several research participants, a follow-up interview was conducted after several months to understand the process of transformation. These interviews were taped and transcribed and coded for themes. I attended several of the women's monthly meetings, and participated in different advocacy strategy meetings and events. I also analyzed records of MMJSP meetings from 1997 to 2007 to trace the process of

³² *Sarpanches* are the elected representatives in the Indian local self-governance system, the Panchayati Raj. Since 1993, through the 73rd amendment of the constitution, one-third of all *panchayat* seats have been reserved for women.

transformation over the years. Three focus group discussions were held with women in village settings to understand constraints to their participation. To understand the context of women's action, inclusion, and exclusion within community forestry, I undertook a detailed study of forest decision-making processes in six villages, and in two clusters of villages. The next several sections document my findings relating to constraints to women's participation at the community level and how opening of space at the block level impacted spaces at other scales.

Restricted Space at the Community Level: How can we go uninvited?

As is common in rural India, women tend to be excluded from community decision making. In Ranpur, patriarchal relations are particularly strong and lead to women's marginalization within community-based forest management. This marginalization is exemplified by women's marginal presence in forest protection committees. Of the 111 villages surveyed in 2005 by Vasundhara and MMJSP, only 23 villages had women representatives on the community forest protection committees. Only 7 per cent of the office bearers in these committees were women. Representation of *dalits* and *adivasis* was equally low at 7 per cent and 16 per cent respectively. Women's actual presence in the committee meetings and effective participation tends to be minimal.

At the village level, it is hard for women to participate given strong social and cultural taboos that restrict their participation in the public sphere. Mostly, women's non-participation in community decision making is attributed to culture, and simply accepted as the way things are done locally. Some of the common remarks that recurred in my interviews were, '[The] village story (situation) is different than cities'; or a male leader's

comments, 'We are not so modern that we will involve women'. Women also talked about cultural taboos. 'Someone is a father-in-law or uncle-in-law, how can we go and sit with them...won't we feel shy? Men will say, how immodest she has become, she is coming and sitting with us. We have to take care of our honor, and behave appropriately.'

Women also point out constraints related to confidence. 'If we go once, we will get the courage, (but) we have never gone—that is why (we feel shy). How can someone who has never opened her mouth speak? She won't be able to speak. Once she speaks up, then she can.'

In many villages, women have been included in recent years due to the institutional provision for women's representation on JFM committees, called the *Van Samarakhan Samities* (VSS). The Government of Orissa's policy resolution for JFM requires that at least three women serve on the executive committee of the VSS. Generally, the women included as members of the VSS do not attend VSS meetings. In a focus group discussion, one woman member said, 'Men decide when they will meet. They fix a time as per their convenience and sit for a discussion'. Another added, 'They never inform or invite us. We could go if they invited us. How can we go uninvited?' About whether they are informed about the discussion at these meetings, women wryly said, 'We do not ask, and they do not tell. Maybe they inform other men, but we don't get to hear what is discussed'. Of course, they do get to know when the committee frames rules that affect their access to the forest. In many cases, the proceedings of the meetings are sent to women for their signatures, and they are expected to sign without bothering to read them.

As is widely noted in the literature relating to constraints to women's involvement, meetings are scheduled without taking into account women's time availability or the convenience of the meeting venue. Meetings are often held in late evening hours on the village temple premises, to which women's entry is restricted³³. Time- and space-related constraints add to keeping women and often *dalits* out of these decision-making forums. The case of *Das Mauja Jungle Surakhya Samiti* (Ten-Village Forest Protection Committee) illustrates this. This committee, one of the oldest such cluster formations in the area, is a committee of ten villages protecting a contiguous patch of forest for over 25 years. An executive committee of 20 persons, 2 representatives from each village, meets every Sunday evening to coordinate forest management. The meetings begin at 6:00 or 7:00 in the evening and continue until late at night. Women cannot attend these meetings given the inconvenient time and local cultural taboos. Men do not feel the need to make any changes in the meeting venue or time to accommodate women's presence. While traditionally this committee was all male, three women have been included since 2005 in accordance with JFM norms about women's representation. Even though formally a JFM committee has been formed, for all practical purposes the informal committee continues to function. Women are invited to attend only when outsiders such as the Forest Department or NGO staff attend their meeting. At other times, men simply get the women members' signatures on the proceedings.

Many villages in Ranpur organize an annual party to celebrate community forestry and to encourage village youth and children to protect the forest. Like similar community

³³ For example, menstruating women's entry to temples is a traditional taboo, and in many villages, *dalits* are still kept out of temples. While these barriers are breaking down, they are by no means gone.

feasts, women cannot join in and surplus food is sent home for them when the party is over. Women's absence from these formal spaces of community forestry is at odds with their otherwise active role in forests.

Space for Women at the Federation Scale

Marginalization of women at the community level is further amplified at higher spatial scales within community forestry federations, as leaders from the village level, who tend to be male, become members of the federations. As is the case with other federations, MMJSP was initially dominated by men. No village women attended the initial local meetings that led to the formation of MMJSP. Male leaders initially resisted involvement of women within MMJSP's governance structure. At one of the meetings of MMJSP in 1997, male leaders expressed reluctance to involve women. After persistent interventions by Vasundhara, men agreed to make space for women in the governance structure, but this was done mainly to appear gender sensitive and progressive to outsiders (Singh, 2007).

In 1997, the first year of MMJSP's existence, no women attended any of the eight meetings held during the year. In 1998, a couple of higher-caste women attended MMJSP meetings. When the presence of women remained marginal, the problem was discussed at a meeting in May 1999. Following this discussion, it was decided to form a women's sub-group within MMJSP. The decision was prompted by Vasundhara. Vasundhara staff who were involved in the process said, 'We were committed to bringing women in, but did not want it to be as an external imposition. It was a sensitive issue. We wanted to respect the

autonomy of a people's organization, but at the same time we wanted to see more women and other marginalized sections included. So, we kept raising the issue.'

MMJSP initially decided to form a task force for improving women's involvement within the federation as well as within community forest management efforts. This task force's first meeting was held in July 1999 and was attended by one woman and nine men. It was then decided to organize women's meetings at local levels to discuss the issue. Several village meetings for women were then organized. Following this, it was decided to have separate women's meetings at the block level on a regular basis. On 26 September 1999, the first 'women's meeting' was convened. At this meeting, participants decided to form a women's sub-group within MMJSP, called the Central Women's Committee (CWC) that would meet every month on the 18th day of the month. Women refer to these meetings as '*mahila* meetings' or women's meetings, or simply as '*athraha tarikh*³⁴ meetings'. Even at the initial meeting where CWC was formed, women's presence was low; only 7 of the 25 participants were women. Despite a preparatory process, it was difficult to get women to come. However, as a result of space being created for women at the block level, women started trickling into the monthly meetings and gradually started asserting themselves within the block federation.

Space for Women through the 'Athraha Tarikh' Monthly Meetings

The '*athraha tarikh*' meetings serve as an 'open space' for women to come and discuss their problems, meet other women, and learn from each other's experience. Since 2000, a tribal woman has presided over these meetings. Having a woman preside over

³⁴ Athraha means '18th' and tarikh means 'date' in Oriya and refer to the meetings held on the 18th every month.

these meetings was an improvement from their initial stage, when male federation leaders facilitated 'women's' meetings and encouraged them to speak up.

The male leaders still attend these meetings. In a way, this helps maintain linkages between MMJSP and the women's group and provides women an additional way to influence MMJSP's agenda. The secretary of the MMJSP often attends these meetings, and his presence sends a signal to women that their discussion is of importance to the federation, but at the same time his patronizing attitude often hinders open and free-flowing discussion.

These meetings are held in a big hall in the office premises of MMJSP and Vasundhara in Ranpur town, which is centrally located and easily accessible. The meetings are scheduled at 10:00 a.m., although women tend to arrive late, due to transportation problems. The women travel 3 to 20 miles to get to Ranpur. Some walk, others request a ride on a bicycle or motorcycle from male relatives, and most take a public bus that can be erratic and unreliable. Due to logistics, the meeting does not effectively last more than three hours. Initially, predominantly middle-aged and older women attended these meetings, given their relative freedom to travel and the household help they receive from daughters or daughters-in-law. Increasingly, younger women have started attending as the CWC has begun focusing on forest-based livelihood activities that engage younger women.

When women gather for their monthly meetings, the informal interaction before, and after the meetings, are as important as the formal discussion during the meetings. Women exchange news about family and friends, and seek advice on common problems. These

meetings provide a sense of purpose, and a social outing. One woman pointed out, ‘Men can stand for hours in a local tea-shop and gossip, while we cannot. We also need a place to go to’. These meetings have thus become important as a place to go.

Women’s Action and Expansion of Spaces

In this section, I discuss how women have acted in the democratic spaces within MMJSP and expanded spaces available to them through their actions. Specifically, I discuss how women who were engaged in plucking *kendu* leaves³⁵ used this space to advocate for their livelihood rights. As women gathered every month for their monthly meetings, they brought problems associated with their livelihoods to this space. Problems that were otherwise ‘invisible’ thus became visible and a part of MMJSP’s advocacy agenda. In the process, MMJSP gained more visibility and popular support thanks to women’s advocacy concerning these problems. Male members thus came to appreciate women’s role in MMJSP.

Kendu leaves are an important source of livelihood for the poor in central India, especially during the lean summer months when few other sources of employment exist. In Orissa, about 30 million person-days of work are created in the collection of kendu leaves within a short span of three to four months. The trade in kendu leaves is nationalized in Orissa and hence they can be sold at only government-run collection centers called *phadies*. In Ranpur, there were no *phadies*, and women gathering kendu leaves were forced to sell to private traders who operate illicitly and offer only a fraction

³⁵ Leaves of the *kendu* tree (*Diospyros melanoxylon*) are used for wrapping tobacco to make *beedis*, the local cigarettes.

of the government-fixed prices. Women raised this problem at one of the women's meetings in 2000. At the *athraha tarikh* meeting in January 2001, women decided to take up this issue, and subsequently decided to organize a rally in Ranpur town. In April 2001, about 2,000 women from 95 villages rallied to demand *phadies* and sent a petition to the chief minister of Orissa. In response, in 2002, the government established two *phadies* and promised to set up more *phadies* later. However, it did not.

Women continued advocating for additional *phadies* through MMJSP. When these efforts failed, women staged another mass demonstration in Ranpur in November 2004. About 2,500 *dalit* and *adivasi* women gathered to demand additional *phadies*. After the administration did not respond, the women decided to hold a sit-in demonstration (*dharna*) in front of the State Legislative Assembly. From 9 to 16 March 2005, 19 women participated in a *dharna* in front of the Assembly in Bhubaneswar.

The process of advocating for kendu leaf *phadies* has taken women into territories and spaces that they usually do not inhabit. Travelling to these places and spaces both physically and metaphorically has been liberating and empowering for women. This has also made them see and realize their power and potential as political actors.

For women, their action for kendu leaf *phadies* was an important turning point. In my interviews, they recounted this struggle, and saw their first rally at Ranpur in 2001 as an important marker in their becoming political actors. At a meeting in 2004 to discuss future courses of action, women were fast to suggest, '*Puni rally kariba*' ('let us do another rally'). The women who had benefitted from the first kendu leaf *phadi* felt

obliged to continue with advocacy efforts. They said, 'Because of everyone's efforts, we got a *phadi*. How can we now sit silent?'

Two women *sarpanches* were actively involved in these strategy meetings. They brought to these meetings their experience from the formal political arena. This advice, as well as counsel from male leaders of MMJSP, helped women design multi-pronged strategies. In the process, women learned how to become political actors and citizens. For many of the women who went to Bhubaneswar for the *dharna*, it was their first visit to the capital city. Being in spaces and places alien to them and finding their feet was in itself an experience. There was also the rare freedom from the drudgery of household work.

The 'streets of power' in Bhubaneswar became their training grounds in the arena of political action and activism. There they met other people who had come with similar demands, befriended other women from other regions, and shared stories and problems. They learned to deal with policemen, who tried to drive them away, and stray onlookers who stopped by, as well as the media and elected Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). MLAs from the opposition party especially expressed support and incited women to continue their fight. In the process, women also became very agitated at the lack of response from their own elected representative.

The MLA from their region was a woman; she also held a ministerial charge. Women were particularly hurt by her apathy because during her election campaigning, she had invoked 'sisterhood', and claimed to understand women's problems. However, this *Apa* (elder sister) changed after getting elected. Women said, 'Now she does not recognize us.

We are still the jungle-people, while she has become an urban dweller'. Another woman added, 'She is not a woman. She has become a man'. After six days of *dharna*, Ranpur women went to meet this MLA at her residence. In the interaction that ensued, Kuntala Nahak, a *dalit* woman from Mardakote village, took on the woman minister, and reprimanded her for not doing anything about their problem (Singh, 2007). In this exchange with the MLA, Kuntala, as a woman neither awed by a 'minister' nor bound to correct etiquette, was able to speak to power directly —challenging authority and demanding accountability. Following this encounter, the MLA called representatives of MMJSP for another meeting and, responding to pressure from the women's *dharna*, the government promised to open another *phadi*. While this fell short of their demand for several *phadies*, it was seen as an achievement, and the women felt that they were not returning home from Bhubaneswar without any results. They were aware that it was the first time that representatives from Ranpur had come to the streets of Bhubaneswar with demands.

Advocacy on the Kendu leaf issue is not the only action taken by women in the newly emergent space within MMJSP; they have also taken the initiative to organize around other forest-based livelihood issues. Biskia Jani, an *adivasi* woman leader says, 'When we started meeting, we said, "Forest protection in itself is of no use, unless we can get some income out of the forests that we protect." So, we thought about what we could do. We looked at our existing activities (in the forest). For example, the collection of *siali*

leaves³⁶—we decided to improve our incomes from siali'. Women decided to acquire machines to stitch siali leaves into plates and to market them collectively. This collective action was effective at a specific scale, and women were able to act at this scale as a result of organizing through MMJSP.

Transformation in Spaces across Scales

In this section I summarize the transformations in democratic spaces available for women's participation that have taken place at the block (regional) and village levels.

At the Regional Scale within MMJSP

Through their advocacy efforts and action in emergent spaces within MMJSP, women have displayed their power and determination to take control over their lives. In the process, the men have come to appreciate the women's role and, more importantly, their power as mobilized masses that can rally in the streets and display MMJSP's strength.

Over the years, there has been an increase in women's representation in the governance structure of MMJSP. The governance structure consists of a general body, an executive committee, and a working body. In addition, there are an advisory committee, a special task force for conflict resolution, and the women's sub-group. Initially, the general body consisted of the president and secretaries of all the village-level committees. Given the male domination at the village level, this entailed that no women were part of the MMJSP's general body. In 2000 this changed, and now the entire executive committee of cluster-level groups is part of MMJSP's general body. This has created more space for women, but it has only been an incremental change. However, this

³⁶ Siali leaves are used for making leaf-plates to serve food.

institutional change is reflective of how, at an organizational scale, space can be created by favoring one scale over the other. If community scale had continued to define membership criteria to higher-order organizational structures, then women would have had little scope and space to participate.

The executive committee of MMJSP is usually elected by the general body. Considering that the general body tends to be all male, under normal circumstances the executive committee would not include any women. Based on Vasundhara's intervention, special provisions were made for including women in the executive committee. The initial ad-hoc executive committee of MMJSP in 1997 consisted of 24 men. At the time of MMJSP's registration as a society in 1998, 3 women were included in the 11-member executive committee. These 3 women included one *dalit* and two *adivasi* women. This inclusion of women remained notional. The current executive committee of 17 people has 4 women; however, until early 2006, none of the women were office bearers.

A working body was constituted to increase direct participation from a larger body of villagers in the functioning of the MMJSP. The initial working body in 1997 consisted of 30 people, with only 1 woman member. The size of the working body and the proportion of women have grown steadily; by 2006 the working body had 84 members with 31 women. Thus, there has been a constant increase in the membership of women in the working body. The representation of *adivasis* and *dalits* has also been increasing. This is in stark contrast to membership of women at the village level, which is about 7 per cent.

Even though the CWC started as a separate women's group, there is synergy between men's and women's actions. As one woman leader said, 'If we (women) are in the fore,

they are behind (us). And if they are in the fore, we support them. When we inform the men about a problem they cooperate with us to solve it'. The women also feel that they now have more respect. As Kuntala said, 'Earlier, when we used to speak they did not listen. Now, things are different. Our opinion is heard (*katha suno chanti*).'

At the Community Level

How does women's organizing at a higher spatial scale help to overcome the patriarchal relations that are so deeply entrenched at the community scale? Identities and subject positions that are deeply entrenched at one scale become more fluid at another scale. At the village level, a woman is more easily seen as someone's daughter-in-law, mother, or sister-in-law; it is harder for her to be just a woman, much less a person. Cultural taboos are also more relaxed outside of the immediate village boundaries. As Kuntala's story shows, when a woman is able to take advantage of reduced cultural obstacles to successfully engage in democratic spaces at a higher scale, her success gives her both the prestige and the confidence to expand her role at the community scale. After her participation in the demonstration at Bhubaneswar and her exchange with the woman minister, Kuntala refused to sign a village resolution and demanded changes in it. Previously this would have been unthinkable.

In several villages, women have taken defunct forest protection systems over from men. In Dengajhari village, women revived the forest protection system after several years of neglect. After attending a CWC meeting on 18 October 2000, women decided to revive the forest protection system, with two groups of women patrolling on a rotational basis. Soon after they started protecting the forests, the women faced a serious

confrontation with a timber smuggling group. When a group of 50 to 60 men tried to steal timber from their forest, 27 women confronted them and seized more than 1,500 logs. The village men, who were too afraid to confront the timber smugglers, were amazed at the women's courage, and this incident became a local legend. The leader of the women's group came to be known as 'forester *mausi* (aunt)'. She recounted the incident frequently and dramatically, thus inspiring women in neighboring villages to play a greater role in forest protection. Men also became open to the possibility of a more pronounced role for women in forest protection.

There are now several instances where women have started protecting forests on their own. As Kuntala said of the transformation in the space for women, 'Due to participation of women, the forest is well-protected. Now the question is whether men will participate in the process, or resign from it? If they want to be involved, then they can join in at the rear, not in front!'

While this transformation is taking place in certain villages, women members of MMJSP committees are beginning to question the exclusion of women at the community level, more generally. In the general body meeting of MMJSP in 2007, Pramila Dash, of Surkhabadi village of the Das Mauja cluster, raised the contradiction between the talk about women's participation at the block level, and the village-level reality that women are simply expected to provide their signatures to endorse men's decisions. Thus changes are occurring both because women who have achieved success at a higher level are beginning to stand up at the community level, and because actors at the block level,

where greater democratic space already exists for women, are lobbying for institutionalizing the same changes at the village level.

Continuing Challenges at other Scales

While there has been a transformation in women's participation in MMJSP, women's involvement in other community forestry federations remains a challenge. This is not unusual considering that the community forest management groups are traditional institutions that derive strength from culture and traditional sources of authority. Their federations also draw on these strengths of tradition and culture and often they do not know how to address power inequalities that come with this tradition and culture. In Orissa, only 3 of the 25 federations have taken steps to improve women's involvement. Most federations do not necessarily see marginalization of women or other social groups as a problem. While NGOs working with federations may recognize this as a problem, they do not necessarily allocate their scarce resources to processes of long-term change.

The institutional norms of representation in federations tend to promote leaders or office bearers from lower scales to higher scales. As women are absent from governance structures at the community level, this absence persists at higher federation scales, unless some corrective measures to specifically include women are taken at other scales. Even when women are included through special provisions, they do not have the same representational authority as the male 'leaders'.

In Orissa Jungle Manch (the state-level federation), women's involvement and participation remains marginal. In addition to having a limited institutional presence, women also remain absent from different state-level policy forums, conferences, and

workshops. Many factors contribute to this. Often it is leaders and those seen as ‘experts’ who attend policy forums. Women find it hard to attain such leadership and expert positions. When district federations nominate one or two representatives to represent the district at the state level, they tend to be men. For village women, travel to Bhubaneswar is also a constraint. It is hard for women to obtain their families’ permission to travel unless they have a woman travelling partner. This constraint, and the travel costs of each additional person’s travel, favors men’s representation in state-level policy events.

When women do come to these meetings, they find it hard to comprehend policy discourse and discussion of issues that seem far-removed from their immediate concerns. Men often do not take the time to fill in the details of past discussion. Women also encounter difficulties comprehending technical and managerial discourse.

Conclusions

Women’s marginalization in natural resource governance, as in other areas of governance, is a critical problem, especially in developing countries. The challenge lies in altering or dismantling existing power relations in societies and contexts where hierarchy and unequal social relations define the prevailing social order. In such contexts, top-down approaches to social reform do not work very well, and bottom-up processes for social transformation are unlikely to emerge from locales where power relations are strongly entrenched. In this article, I have focused on locales and spaces from which change can come. This case is ordinary in many ways. It represents an everyday form of women’s organizing to address their common problems. In the process I have described, women gained voice and confidence to negotiate space at other scales. There are

numerous such examples of women coming together in groups to save and invest, and to fight against multi-national companies that threaten their local environments, health, and economies (see Harcourt and Escobar, 2005 and Gibson-Graham, 2006). What is noteworthy in my example of women's everyday action and activism are the extraordinary possibilities for leveraging spaces at certain scales to create and expand spaces at other scales where women have harder and often solitary struggles to wage. I suggest that closer attention to constraints and possibilities at different scales can help practitioners and development workers design strategies that are able to leverage spaces at meso-scales, while supporting spill-over effects at other scales. This requires recognition of interrelationships across scales, and enhanced communication and connections across scales.

Constraints and possibilities for women's participation are different across spatial scales, and it is important to better comprehend and leverage these differences. While cultural constraints restrict women's voice within their immediate communities, they are often more knowledgeable about the workings of this scale. At the macro-scale of region, nation or globe, techno-managerial discourse and language make it more difficult for village women (or men) to participate effectively. In Orissa, meso-scales—i.e. scales of locality, regions where common struggles of life and livelihood can be clearly identified—provided an easier entry point to addressing issues of marginalization. In the case of MMJSP, women were able to gain voice at the block level, as that was the scale at which they needed to take up advocacy to solve their commonly faced livelihood

problems. This meso-scale also provided a nurturing ground to build confidence and to initiate women into the policy arena and public domain.

Even though the concept of scale and cross-scale linkages has drawn a lot of attention in the social sciences in recent years, there has been inadequate appreciation of how democratic spaces across scales differ. We lack in-depth ethnographic descriptions of how space across scales varies for various social categories and how transformation can be facilitated by allowing marginalized groups to 'jump scales'. As I illustrate with my case, constraints to, and possibilities for, democratic participation across scales do not only vary in degrees, but there are also real differences in the nature of constraints. An appreciation of these differences can lead to better understanding of the constraints that marginalized groups face at different spatial scales and locales. While my case is embedded in the context of forest governance, these findings have implications for work on issues of marginalization in a variety of contexts. I do not suggest that there is a uniform prescription, or that there is a specific scale at which it is easiest to initiate a process altering power relations. Rather, I emphasize the need to pay close attention to differences in the degree of entrenchment of power relations across locales. It is common for practitioners struggling with women's empowerment issues to express frustration that home is often the site most resistant to change. Mendhapurkar (2004), among others, points out that improved livelihoods and enhanced political space do not automatically translate into greater negotiating power within the closed doors of the family. Even though the process of change is gradual, expansion of space at one scale has bearings on space and constraints at other scales. Spatial dimensions of participation often have been

neglected in discussions about participation (O' Reilly, 2006). Lefebvre (1991) draws our attention to the need to pay close attention to social space when dealing with challenges of social transformation.

My research urges us to think outside of the dichotomy of bottom-up and top-down processes and to think creatively about meso-scales. I suggest focusing on locations and influences that draw on the spontaneity of bottom-up emergence, and enrich it with the intentionality of social change driven by ideas of justice and equality that might be missing from the locales at which change needs to be effected. The Orissa case also leads us to become more aware of the need to support 'jumping scales' or traversing scales. This allows ideas to flow across scales, connections to be made, and skills to be gained at one scale and applied at another where it would be difficult to acquire them.

In terms of methodological implications, this requires what Rocheleau and Roth (2007) term as 'seeing multiple' from situated perspectives within polycentric models, i.e. a radical empiricism that seeks to understand complex assemblages by treating them as networks, observing and evaluating them from multiple standpoints (nodes) within a given structure. It necessitates a shift towards a study of connections and flows across spaces, and away from study confined to locales and sites to better comprehend and leverage cross-scale linkages for processes of social change and transformation.

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Chapter 3

Blurred Boundaries: Research, Researcher, and the Researched

Abstract

Feminist scholars insist that the sort of knowledge you make depends on who you are and that positioning thus becomes a key strategy for marking knowledge as situated. While the need to be reflexive about one's positionality cannot be overemphasized, the project of reflexivity is complex. There are limits to 'transparent reflexivity' and to knowing and making visible the interaction between the researcher, the researched, and research. In view of the complexity of positioning oneself in the ever-shifting web of one's research and research relationships, writing oneself into research is challenging. In this paper, I share my attempt to write myself into my research. I draw from my experience of three years of 'field' research and several years of practitioner life in Orissa, India, to explore how complex identities are performed and negotiated in a research setting. I use ethnographic vignettes and poems to explore the blurred boundaries and 'in-between' spaces between researcher and researched, insider and outsider, and action and research.

Introduction

In the past two decades, issues about reflexivity and voice have gained prominence in critical social inquiry. The undoubtedly problematic 'objective' researcher and 'his' voice, from everywhere and yet nowhere, has been increasingly replaced with a reflexive subjective researcher who embraces the partiality of view from the position from which she chooses to see. Feminist scholars insist that the knowledge you make depends on who

you are (England, 1994; Rose, 1997) and hence positioning becomes critical to the practice of grounding knowledge (Haraway, 1991). It is now recognized that 'the self is the key fieldwork tool' (Van Maanen, 1988) and our consciousness is always the medium through which the research occurs (Stanley and Wise, 1997). Despite this recognition, reflexivity is undervalued and misconstrued as 'navel gazing' and even 'narcissistic and egoistic' instead of being fully appreciated as a 'self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as a researcher' (Moss, 1995).

The task of reflexivity is further complicated as there are limits to 'transparent reflexivity', and the self under scrutiny is not a 'transparently knowable self' (Rose, 1997). More than 'self-discovery' (England, 1994), reflexivity in research involves being open to 'self-construction' (Rose, 1997; Reinharz, 1997). This makes reflexivity and writing oneself into one's research especially challenging. I follow scholars who suggest alternate formulations of reflexivity and ways of looking at researcher-researched relations that explore 'betweenness' between researcher and researched (England, 1994), between the 'field' and 'not field' (Katz, 1994), and between theory and practice (Nast, 1994). I explore blurred boundaries and unclaimed territories between action and research, researcher and researched, and insider and outsider using ethnographic vignettes and poetry.

From 2004 to 2007, I lived in Orissa and conducted research on collective action by rural communities to conserve forests. Prior to that, from 1990 to 2001, I worked in Orissa as an NGO practitioner. Based on my experience of long-term ethnographic inquiry in a setting where I was embedded as a practitioner, I illustrate how complex

identities are performed and negotiated. Building on Haraway's ideas that 'siting' is intimately connected with 'sighting', I illustrate that forms of writing that invite the reader into the text and to share the platform (Ellis and Bochner, 2006) can be acts of 'siting' and 'sighting' that reveal and question power relations in the production of knowledge and seek to democratize it.

Reflexivity, Voice, and Power

In multiple disciplines, feminist researchers challenge the notions of objectivity and propose alternative formulations of objectivity that are rooted in standpoint theory and situated knowledges proposed by Harding (1991) and Haraway (1991). The central concept in feminist epistemology is that knowers and the knowledges (multiple and plural) that they produce are situated (Rose, 1997). In contrast to the 'god-trick' of claiming to see the whole world while remaining distanced from it, subjugated and critical knowledges work from their situatedness to produce partial perspectives on the world (Haraway, 1991; Rose, 1997). They see the world from specific locations, embodied and particular, and never innocent; siting is intimately involved in sighting (Haraway, 1991). Haraway insists that situatedness and the epistemic privilege or authority that comes with it is not given; it must be developed, its technologies revised and invented. She asserts, '[H]ow to see from below is a problem requiring at least as much skill with bodies and language, with the mediations of vision, as the "highest" form of techno-scientific visualizations.'

To Haraway, positioning remains key to the practice of grounding knowledge, as 'position' indicates the kind of power that enables a certain kind of knowledge. Since the

sort of knowledge you make depends on who you are, it is critical to be reflexive about how your 'self' shapes the knowledge that you produce and the choices that you make about your research (Rose, 1997). Rose (1997) points out that feminist scholars suggest transparency in reflexivity process that draws attention to the need to 'shed light' on the research process' (Farrow et al., 1995) and make the relationship between the researcher and the researched 'visible and open to debate' (Gilbert, 1994:90). Rose (1997) critiques such a notion of 'transparent reflexivity' that seeks to produce 'a visible landscape of power, external to the researcher, transparently visible and spatially organized through scale and distribution.' She suggests that this notion of transparent reflexivity depends on 'certain notions of agency (as conscious) and power (as context), and assumes that both are knowable.' Rose suggests alternate formulations of reflexivity and cites scholars who explore alternate ways of looking at researcher-researched relations by exploring 'betweenness' between researcher and researched, the 'field' and the 'not field,' and theory and practice.

Further, England (1994) draws attention to the intersubjective or more broadly dialogic nature of research that involves dialogue between people (or with oneself). Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986) theory about dialogism, she suggests that research can be seen as 'continual interaction between meanings that emerge from conditional and contingent human interaction between researcher and the researched'. This dialogic exchange need not be limited to the process of research, but can be extended to writing and interpretation of results.

In recent years, there has been increased attention to narrative text and evocative ethnography to deal with issues of voice and representation in qualitative inquiry. Narrative texts are being used to tap the potential of 'storytelling as a means to reveal meaning without committing the error of defining it' (Arendt, 1973:107). The difference between stories and traditional analysis is the mode of explanation and its effects on the reader. According to Ellis and Bochner (2006), traditional analysis is about transferring information, whereas narrative text emphasizes communication and creates dialogue by 'staying open to other meanings and sharing the platform with readers'.

My use of a collage of vignettes and poems to illustrate issues of positionality, reflexivity, and voice draws from this increasing use of narrative text in social inquiry. In recent years, qualitative researchers have used poetry to represent data (Richardson, 1990, 1994, 1997; Poindexter, 2002) or to make sense of data (Glesne, 1997; Prendergast, 2006). As Butler-Kisber (2002:235 cited in Prendergast, 2006) suggests, poetry can bring the researcher closer to the data in 'different and sometimes unusual ways that can yield new and important insights.' Poetry has the ability to bring forth a different mode of knowing (Hirshfield, 1997) and offer alternate 'way of seeing' (Allison, 2003). Poetry may be considered a 'special language', to help communicate instances in the fieldwork when we feel that 'truth has shown its face' (Richardson, 1998), a language to access what we feel and to represent it more fully than other modes of representation (Faulkner, 2007), to explore knowledge claims and to write with more engagement (Denzin, 1997; Richardson, 1997), and to reach more diverse audiences (Richardson, 2000, 2002). To me, poetry provided a means of reaching the inner creases of my experience. In the

collage of vignettes (cf. Ronai, 1992) and poetry that I present, I use some of the poems that formed the ‘data’ to reflect on my own role as well as issues of power and voice in my research setting.

Research Context

My dissertation research examines collective action by rural communities in Orissa, India, to conserve state-owned forests, and the role of community forestry federations in democratizing forest governance. It is estimated that 8,000 to 10,000 villages in Orissa protect and manage state-owned forests over which they have no legal rights, through self-initiated collective arrangements.

I first came across these community forestry initiatives when I went to Orissa to work with a Swedish consulting firm providing technical assistance to a social forestry project in 1990. Social forestry projects were based on the premise that valuable natural forests could be saved from local people by creating plantations of fuel and fodder on village common lands. Villagers would thus meet their needs from these plantations and not destroy government-owned natural forests. In amazing contrast, I found that villagers were protecting state-owned natural forests through elaborate patrolling arrangements and by regulating and restricting their own use.

After learning about these community forestry initiatives, I got involved in a research project to document and understand these initiatives. I later founded *Vasundhara* (which means ‘Mother Earth’ in Sanskrit and Hindi), an NGO, to work with these community forestry groups and support their struggle to gain rights over these forests. I worked with Vasundhara until 2001, when I decided to pursue a PhD. This background is an important

part of my positionality that shaped not only what I saw in the field but also how I was seen.

My Positionality: Insider/Outsider

A certain identity is never possible; the ethnographer must always ask not, 'Who am I?' but 'When, where, how am I?' (Trinh, 1992: 157)

May 2004: My 11-year-old son and I settle down in our seats. It is a relief to escape the heat and get inside the air-conditioned compartment of the train. The co-passengers in the compartment appear Oriyas (from Orissa) who are probably going to visit family during the kids' summer vacation. Someone asks the usual ice-breaking question: 'Where are you from?' I tell them, 'From Orissa.' So, what if I have been away? I am returning home. There are signs of disbelief...I don't look like I belong. Why is that so? Is it my appearance, possibly my hair—cut short? Maybe it is my son's American accent, picked up during several years in the US. I wonder and reflect on the dilemmas of belonging or not, of being an insider/outsider in a place I consider home.

(Note: From the train trip from Delhi to Bhubaneswar on returning to India for dissertation fieldwork after three years in the US.)

As an Indian I am an insider in the broadly generalized terms of being an Indian researching in India, but an outsider to the Orissan cultural context. I grew up in Delhi and had very little exposure to rural India until my fieldwork in central India as part of my training in forestry management. Despite living in Orissa for several years, I remain a cultural outsider as I am not a native Oriya.

In contrast to early discussions that assumed that a researcher was predominantly either an insider or outsider, more recent discussions indicate the complexity of the status of insider/outsider and highlight how these statuses and identities are more fluid, complex, and shifting (Merriam et al., 2001). Feminist researchers especially suggest that one can be simultaneously an insider and an outsider within a research setting (Deutsch, 2004). As nobody can be 'socially marked in only one way' (di Leonardo, 1997), all

human relationships encapsulate multiple subject positions that take on different salience and meaning in different contexts (Bloom, 1998). There can thus be multiple ways in which we can be both part of and excluded from almost any social situation. My situation exemplifies these fluid, complex, and shifting subject positions.

In the conversation on the train trip that I describe above, the follow-up question is, ‘So, you went there after getting married?’ (As if, I was following a man who makes such choices). Orissa is considered the backwater of India, and it is considered unusual for someone from Delhi to be there by choice, much less for a woman to do so. Another salient part of the identity that I bring to the field is my gender. Being a woman affects how well I can assimilate in the local cultural contexts. As a woman, I gain easy access to the women’s world, while with men I face the dual barrier of being a woman and a non-Oriya outsider. Due to my outsider status and ‘expert’ position, men show more respect than they would to a local woman. But the relationship is formal and distant.

Other than being a cultural insider/outsider, I also constantly negotiated being an institutional insider/outsider. During my fieldwork, I had to resume a leadership position in Vasundhara. Being in Vasundhara made me insider of sorts within the NGO sector, but my relationship with the state federation of forest protecting communities, Orissa Jungle Manch (OJM) was complex. Due to my involvement in the process of reviving OJM, I was often treated as an insider. At the same time, OJM had ambivalent feelings towards NGOs in general. NGOs often tend to co-opt people’s organizations and are seen to disrupt local processes. My association with Vasundhara brought these dynamics to my relationship with OJM. My additional identity as a researcher, and my part-time and

transient status in Vasundhara, possibly assuaged some of this and put me in a more neutral position within the somewhat murky NGO politics. How I was actually seen will remain unknowable to me.

Identities are not fixed positions. Rose (1997) says that ‘facets of the self—institutional privilege, for example, as well as aspects of social identity—are articulated as “positions” in a multidimensional geography of power relations.’ It is common for feminist scholars to draw attention to the multiple facets of the self (Madge, 1993, cited in Rose, 1997) that are not just brought to but are also created in the field (Reinharz, 1997). Of the ‘multiple selves’ that one brings to the field, ‘being a researcher’ is only one aspect of the researcher’s identity and often one of the less salient ones from the perspective of community members (Reinharz, 1997). It is the intersectionality of race, nationality, age, gender, social and economic status, sexuality, life experiences, and one’s assumed role that shapes the self of a researcher and influences the data collected and knowledge produced. Moreover, the multiple identities that a researcher assumes are not fixed but are ‘performed’ (Butler, 1990) in complex and unpredictable ways.

Blurred Boundaries: The Researcher and Activist Selves

I went to the field with a neat research design which sought to compare and contrast the experience of ‘federated’ villages with that of ‘non-federated’ villages and to study the role of federations in bridging power asymmetries of different forms. I realized that these neat categories of ‘federated’ and ‘non-federated’ villages did not exist in the field in such a cut-and-dried form. Moreover, community forestry federations were struggling with issues of power, representation, internal democracy, and cooptation. While

preparing my research design, I had considered and set aside the possibility of using a participatory action research (PAR) approach since I felt that a dissertation research format was not conducive to a free-flowing collaborative inquiry process. But when I returned to Orissa, I realized PAR was a necessity. Given my embeddedness, it was impossible for me to pursue relatively detached inquiry. When I started my fieldwork, I found that the state-level federation OJM was partly defunct. Instead of changing my research to ask different questions, I got involved in the process of reviving and strengthening OJM, and this process became a central piece of my research. The process of reviving OJM gradually turned into a collaborative learning process. While OJM members did not consciously engage in PAR, they discussed their problems and felt their way through these problems. A process of action and reflection unfolded as the federation leaders discussed problems relating to leadership, representation, communication, funding, and NGO politics, among other things. I became an active participant and an insider/outsider, actor-participant-researcher in this collaborative learning process.

I agonized over some of the ethical dilemmas. Was I mining information and insights and being more of a researcher than a participant in the process? Everyone knew of my role as researcher, as I followed consent procedures at many of the meetings where I brought my researcher self in. At times it did not seem appropriate to bring my researcher self to a meeting. Often, I was an actor and a participant more than a researcher. The researcher in me stayed out on those days. I did not take notes and did not switch on my tape recorder. But what could I do with the insights that came with me out of these

meetings and then shaped the questions that I asked in the interviews that I conducted thereafter?

Why did I feel the need to keep my researcher self separate from my participant-actor self? I think this came from the pressure relating to establishing my credibility as a researcher and concerns for validity. This was also linked to research protocols relating to human subject reviews, consent forms, and procedures that tend to come in the way of a dialogic exchange and meaning-making process in a research setting that goes beyond performed interviews.

There were also other circumstances that aided the process of my getting back into practitioner-activist mode. Vasundhara, the NGO I had founded, was facing a leadership crisis. Since I was 'back', it was natural for my colleagues to expect me to step in and help out. Ethically, there was no way of turning down such a request. After a few months of informal involvement, I agreed to become the part-time director of Vasundhara. I justified it to myself as '20 hour a week' work that I might have taken up along with my research had I been doing my research in the US. The only problem was that this was not part-time work! My involvement in Vasundhara also accentuated power asymmetries. In some of the vignettes that follow, I discuss different dimensions of power asymmetries.

When I went to the field after three years of academic training in the US, I was in rigorous academic research mode. I saw and presented myself as a researcher. However, my prior practitioner engagement came in the way of my maintaining the 'researcher' identity as my dominant identity. My travel to Orissa for fieldwork was seen as return to Orissa instead of a opting for a life in the US. My former colleagues and activist friends

were quick to recruit me into ongoing processes of social change. This gave me incredible access to local processes that I would not have gained if I had been seen as a researcher. Now, as I get ready to embark on an academic career in North America, I wonder if I cheated. However, my life situation and choices changed over time and I had no way of knowing that they would.

For activists and NGO practitioners, academic research is elitist and is seen as an exercise in proving and establishing what people who live the lives that researchers study already know. My Indian colleagues barely concealed their contempt for meticulous interviews and transcribed notes. I have no doubt that I would not have gained access to spaces and processes that I was able to witness if I had not been as embedded as I was, or if I had been seen only as a researcher. 'Siting' no doubt played an important role in the 'sighting' that I was able to do. Moreover, 'sighting' is not a solitary endeavor but a collective process in which one starts making sense of what one sees through a collaborative learning process.

Initially, I spent several miserable months trying to keep my researcher self and activist self separate. I felt guilty all of the time about not being able to do justice to either of these roles. Gradually, I began to find ways of combining research and action and appreciated the need for what Michelle Fine (1994) calls 'working the hyphen' and being more reflexive about the blurred boundaries between researcher and actor, instead of trying to keep the two roles separate. I stopped labeling my days as 'researcher today' and 'day off' and became comfortable as an actor-participant-researcher.

My position as an NGO chief executive possibly accentuated power asymmetries with my research participants and complicated my relationship with women I interviewed. Take for example this description in my journal:

On one hot summer afternoon, I am sitting in my office, the office of Director of Vasundhara, at a huge L-shaped table. I don't like the size of the table, but I am only here in this position temporarily and don't want to fuss over the furniture. A couple of village women from Ranpur, Kuntala and Bisika *mausi* walk ³⁷in. Kuntala is a young woman about 25 years old, and Bisika is older, about 50. Along with other women from Ranpur, they are in Bhubaneswar to sit in a *dharna*³⁸ to demand kendu leaf collection centers in their area. As they pass through my room, they look in. I get up, walk to the door, greet them, and hold their hands and invite them in. They walk in very tentatively, hesitate and then sit on the chairs in front of my table. I step back in, to a revolving computer chair. Even though the office is modest by all standards, no air-conditioning, not many frills; but I can imagine how it would look opulent to Kuntala and Bisika. Not just the office, but with it the realization that I am the boss here. I am instantly acutely aware of the power differentials, and cringe at what that means to my relationship to them. Last week, I was in Mardakote village where Bisika *mausi* lives. I had waited in the verandah of her hut, while she was busy with some household chores. We had sat on the floor of her verandah and had talked. As part of my dissertation research, I interviewed her about her involvement in the community forestry federation. I was all ears for her stories. Today in this setting, we are both feeling very uncomfortable.

With village women, I feel, I could still be just a woman (maybe), but with men it was harder to bridge power asymmetries. At the same time, my practitioner engagement helped signal my continued commitment to local processes and generated trust that helped bridge these power asymmetries. It also gave me interesting insights. There was an element of immediacy in the conversations that I had with men and women. The interviews would turn into conversations about what could be done to address the problems at hand. This helped minimize performative aspects of interviews and added more depth and action-orientation to these conversations.

³⁷ *Mausi* is the term used for maternal aunt.

³⁸ demonstration

Feminist researchers tend to focus on power relations between the researcher and the researched. Yet, in research contexts such as mine, power asymmetries between researcher and the researched can be a very small part of the power matrix that the researched negotiate on daily basis. In such contexts, other power relations can be more critical, and academic power might seem remote and be poorly understood. The role of the researcher in bridging other forms of power asymmetries can become more critical. As my research took on the forms of PAR, I reflected on the contours of power in different settings and how people negotiate complex fields of power that permeate their lives. The following section is a collage of vignettes and poems that have helped me to reflect on issues of power and on my own positionality.

The Contours of Power: Visioning Orissa's forest

June 2003: It is 13 years from the time I was first frustrated at the invisibility of community efforts. I am in Orissa for pre-dissertation work. The Forest Department has convened a meeting to discuss and work out Vision 2020 for Orissa's forests. The meeting is being held in a posh hotel in Bhubaneswar. The room seems dark, in contrast to the bright summer day outside, despite being lit with several chandeliers. One of the walls of the conference room has a very large framed painting of dense forests, with no people. A retired forest official points to this as his vision for the forests of Orissa. Years ago, the same forest official had vociferously asserted that people are protecting social forestry plantations but not natural forests (on state-owned lands). He continues to rubbish community forestry, and dream of dense forest, tall trees with no people. In contrast, the visualization of heaven for a tribal is 'miles and miles of forest without any

forest-guards' (Elwin, 1958). The two dreams collide; there seems no meeting ground—even though the rhetoric is of joint forest management.

**

September 2004: There is now more sophistication to the visioning exercise. A consultant has been hired to bring different perspectives together and facilitate the emergence of a vision. This consultancy firm has undertaken widespread consultations all over Orissa. In September 2004, I attended one meeting where the consultants presented the vision document that they had prepared. This vision document, 20 pages in English, was circulated at this meeting and the consultant from Delhi made a power-point presentation, again in English, to an audience that was primarily Oriya speaking. I wrote the following poem to vent my frustration.

'We talked to 625 people over 22 meetings,
different 'stakeholders' were brought to the table'

illicit wood traders,
 sawmill owners,
 the suited forest bureaucrats,
and the poor widow - who gathers mahua flowers
dries
stores
sells little by little
as and when
she needs some cash
for a fistful of rice to fill her stomach...

They are all stakeholders
they all came, talked and you heard,
 filtered these voices
 prepared a 'vision'
that negotiates conflicting dreams needs aspirations...

I feel like asking:
what did you do with the silences?
did you hear them?
Did you have space for them to breathe
pause
yell
scream...?
did the poor widow get any place at the table....
and her voice any ears?

I wonder...
Here I am, at one of your consultations
we are here to provide feedback
and validate the process
you will add this to your number of consultations...

there are no women this time around,
except a couple from NGOs
and a researcher me...

I come to this,
wearing multiple hats
researcher,
activist,
actor,
participant...

Would you call me a stakeholder?

I don't know which one of these is entering the room today,
which one will sit in a corner,
leave in a haste
sustain through the day
we will see...

I sit through this
and watch the drama unfold

There is a faint attempt to address the language problem

some use of Hindi
but then words like 'sustainability', 'sustainable-use', 'eco-tourism'
don't translate very well
no one even attempts...

The agenda of the meeting is structured
'allow us to finish first -
we will take the questions at the end...'

Power asymmetries are huge
language, discourses, scientificity, managerialism,
and the tyranny of agenda
How does one break it?
No one does,
For quite some time....
don't quite know how
The room, the air conditioning,
and the white sheet covered table
with a number of microphones
yet no one quite ready to speak...
There is an 'agenda'
silences and awkwardness are beginning to yell
but no one quite listens

I was hoping to remain a researcher
a mere observer
but the silences are yelling..

I decide to speak
and break the structure of the 'agenda'

Let us question some of the basic assumptions, I ask..

Many start nodding
silences have a voice
the tyranny of the agenda is broken
more concerns are voiced...

The structure of the meeting is disturbed
four hours of presentations, followed by an hour of 'open-house'...

The organizers look hassled
'this is the problem with NGOs
we won't be able to cover anything, why don't we go "point-wise"
what do you think of Section 1.1.12?'

How do we start discussing 1.1.12...
when there are serious problems with the approach
the worldview
and drastically different visions

The response:
Oh...okay...let people write their suggestions
on pieces of paper...
...again the filter!!
the tyranny of agenda and silenced voices...

**

This meeting took place in September 2004, at the beginning of my dissertation research when I was still in researcher mode and would have ideally liked to 'observe' rather than be an engaged participant. This poem as data on my own positionality helped highlight the conflict that I faced in my role as a researcher and as someone who is embedded and is drawn in to participate. This also helps bring out the dialogic nature of interactions in field settings. Though researchers don't typically write about how their presence changes things, it is now well established that even the act of observing changes the observed or the situation. And in situations that involve human interactions, the process is inherently complex. For example, while for me my identity as a researcher was salient, for other participants at that meeting my identity as an 'expert' and advocate of

community forestry was possibly more central. In such a situation, there was possibly a default dependence on the 'experts' to take the lead in questioning the information being presented. Against the backdrop of such an expectation, my presence and choice to remain only an observer would have distorted the outcomes.

This poem marked for me a transition from researcher to researcher-actor mode. A few days before this workshop, I met the consultants who prepared the vision document. I was trying to maintain an emotional distance between my research and me, not in a very positivist frame, but in terms of 'holding back' and not getting pulled into the realm of action. After this meeting with the consultants I felt very angry. Nothing seemed to have changed despite years of being away. The Forest Department and their perspective dominated the vision document. The problem of millions of people who lived on forest lands that they had cultivated for generations was labeled as, 'Oh, the encroachment problem,' even if the state was the biggest encroacher on people's lands and their lives. It was difficult to remain a researcher-observer and not get involved. Writing this poem also helped in reflecting on my own role at that meeting, I realized that I was translating across discourses, and through this translation breaking barriers created by power asymmetries. The researcher in me has no way of knowing what would have happened in that meeting if I had remained a mere observer. Maybe someone else would have broken the barriers. Maybe not. The poem also helped in making visible power asymmetries that framed seemingly open spaces of so-called consultations. Language, discourse, spatial scales, knowledge systems, epistemologies, and world views intersect and create huge

power differentials. Communication formats and structured agendas can accentuate or ameliorate these power asymmetries.

I remained in the meeting until lunch. In the post-lunch session, I heard that the meeting was back to the structured agenda. Different elements of the vision document were discussed section-wise and the problems with the overarching framework remained unaddressed. Suggestions through email were invited. The vision of a poor woman who gathers forest produce, a shifting cultivator who remains an encroacher on his ancestral land, and the communities who protect, regenerate, and create forests and remake themselves and their identities, remained on pieces of papers—blown in the wind.

At another meeting where path-breaking legislation for forest rights was being discussed, a leader from one of the community forestry federations said, ‘It is difficult for us to understand these legislations. They are all written in English. We read the translations provided by organizations like yours. We don’t know if the translations are authentic. When we read through these Bills/Acts/Proposals, all seem great. For example Vision 2020 also had wonderful dreams, and sweet sounding words. It is only when people like you interpret and read between the lines that we begin to see how we are being fooled.’

**

My present work and past involvement with Vasundhara allow me to enter these spaces, to participate and be an actor, but it also closes spaces. Take for example this case when I visited a district forestry federation to discuss with the federation leaders the possibility of detailed study, expectations from my research and such. I was considering

this federation as a candidate for detailed study - I was still with my neat design. This is an initial visit to discuss. I was surprised at the number of people who came for the meeting. I wrote this in my journal:

The moment I arrived, I realized that the setting was tricky. Several of the Executive Committee members were present. Obviously, this assembly was not for a researcher. I started off by clarifying that today, at that moment; my identity was that of a researcher. I used the word “student”. After leaving this place in the evening, I would step back into my role with Vasundhara. Someone from the group countered that after my role as a researcher was over today, they wanted to have a discussion with me as Director, Vasundhara.

My roles got conflated and confused so hopelessly. It turned out that this federation wanted some support from Vasundhara as they were struggling with a lack of resources. With the power asymmetries coming into play, I am not sure if I as a researcher was welcomed, or tolerated due to this possibility of funding. I decide not to pursue the case study due to the power asymmetries at play.

On reflecting on this choice, I now feel that I should not have overreacted to the power asymmetries that came into play due to the federation’s expectations of funding support. This is one of the oldest and most vibrant federations in the state. I would have gained by studying this federation and my research could have informed and shaped the relationship of this federation with Vasundhara. On reflection, it seems that a productive action-research opportunity was lost due to an attempt to maintain discernible boundaries between research and action.

**

There are also the usual power asymmetries—me as a researcher, and the research participants whose lives I seek to understand and represent. Consider this description of

my interaction with another woman present at one of the OJM meetings. The state federation of community forestry groups is a male-dominated body. Very few women attend OJM meetings that are usually held in Orissa's capital city, Bhubaneswar. In the interaction that I describe, the woman participant came from Koraput district, encouraged by a local NGO to come to the OJM meeting.

She is the only village woman at this meeting. This is the first time that she has come to an OJM meeting. She looks tired and bored. It would have been a long journey for her. About 14 to 15 hours by bus. She looks sleep deprived. When the men go on and on with their discussion she dozes off. She keeps looking at me. We are the only two women here. We are at different corners with a wide gaping space in between. Both of us are silent; our silences have different textures. As soon as the gathering breaks for lunch, we seek each other out. I write the following poem in my journal later.

You searched my face
my hands and feet
for markers defining my identity
perplexed,
you ask me , 'what does your husband do?'

On not getting a prompt answer,
you hesitate..
and change the question and ask about my father...

A woman
defined by the identity of a husband
or a father
nowhere in the picture
yet,
who needs to be located to complete the picture.
You look at me again,
in admiration,
awe,
maybe disapproval?
of my independence and ability to defy the markers
that you seek
our hands held,
and silences overlap,
as we try to bridge the gulf that separates us
and fathom the life worlds that are ours
the disjuncture
and connections
that bind
and separate us

**

In my other interaction with women in Ranpur, where the comfort level is greater due to longer interaction, women ask more directly. Why don't I put on a *bindi*, vermillion in my hair parting, and what about a toe ring to mark my married status? There used to be a time when I would take care to put these markers on when I went to the field. That was years ago. Yes, I had toe-rings and bangles as part of my 'field-kit'. I no longer feel the need to conform, and am comfortable in shaking the norms a bit. Now, I ask them—what

about the man? Does he wear these signs of being married? I wonder what, if any, ripples these questions create. Ripples, simmering fires, and unanswered questions that we carry and deal with, in our respective worlds.

**

There are also numerous individual-level interactions that do not find a place in the writing of the aggregate story that one tends to privilege. For example, the young woman who asks me why don't I have another child? She pointedly asks me if I 'cannot'. She is dealing with infertility, but does not have the money to consult a doctor. She babysits the child of visiting migrant laborers, and then cries for days after the migrant laborers and the child are gone. Or the woman who talks enthusiastically about going from house to house in her village and neighboring villages, getting parents to immunize their kids. Her 11-year-old daughter, born after 16 years of marriage, is affected by polio. Many, many faces, and their stories - what does a researcher do with these? They do not fit in and are not written about.

**

Why do you come knocking at my door?

random memories

of a wistful smile, raised eyebrows,

restrained giggles and

bewildered looks

wondering at the luxury of a researcher, perhaps?

A researcher

who has options...

to be here or someplace else

to wander in your world

share a moment or two
gather stories
pain
hopes
and more...
and then leave...
to weave stories
in solitary places
stories
that may travel and find their way back
or get lost

Why do you come knocking at my door?
Memories of shared life spaces
and broken promises.....

Most of my interactions in my research setting make my researcher identity non-salient. However, there are also some interactions in which my researcher identity is brought center stage and employed in the politics of legitimacy, and in which my researcher voice might or might not count. When I objected to donor funding for OJM on the grounds that it would disrupt the federation-building process, another NGO leader commented snidely that maybe I was concerned that my research would be dead and my PhD in jeopardy if that happened.

**

17 May 2009: I have just finished a nice lunch of *gobhi-paratha*³⁹ and *methi-mutter*⁴⁰. My son walks into the kitchen and I take out another packet of frozen *parathas* from the fridge for him. I slowly take out individual *parathas* separated by plastic foils from a

³⁹ Indian flat-bread stuffed with cauliflower.

⁴⁰ A dish made with fenugreek leaves and green peas.

pack that says 'Product of India'. I am at the last stages of finishing my dissertation and have been relying on frozen food. As I transition from the packaged food to my dissertation packet and get back to writing about environmental subjectivity, I wonder about my own environmental 'subjectivity' and ecological footprints consuming food shipped from India and imported by a company based in California.

To calm my disquiet, I step out into the garden, an artificially constructed landscape, but a 'field' that allows me to explore how my own relationship with the plants that grow here is embodied and shaped by the care (or not) that I put into this space. I walk back and shift from this paper to one that discusses environmental subjectivity in the forested landscapes of Orissa. Despite my commitment to reflexive text, my 'self' is missing from that text, and local voices are missing from this text. I do not know how to bring the two together.

Concluding Thoughts: Evocative Ethnography as a Si(gh)ting Technology

Reflexivity involves constant dialogue between researcher, data, and the research process, and constant scrutiny of the basis of knowing what we know (Hertz, 1997) in order to question the construction and interpretation of one's field experience (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Rabinow, 1986; Van Maanen, 1988). It involves looking both inward and outward, in terms of the researcher's relation to her research and in terms of 'the wider world', while being cognizant of the limitations of the transparently knowable self (Rose, 1997). Instead of keeping research-related dilemmas private, a reflexive text invites readers into the world of situated and partial knowledge construction. In this paper, I have reflected on my positionality and issues of power in my research context. In

a reflexive text, as the analytical gaze shifts to the self, the boundaries between the researcher and the researched, and 'field' and 'not field', become blurred. The self also becomes the researched and the field.

I shared an earlier version of this paper in the form of a collage of vignettes and poems with my practitioner colleagues in Orissa. Unlike my academic writing, which no one bothered to read, my colleagues read this and said that this writing spoke to them. It stirred emotions and brought forth other stories and reflections. I experienced what Behar (1996) describes as, 'When you write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably.' Some of the readers felt like writing similarly. More importantly, it made my colleagues pause and reflect on the richness of their everyday experience and its value. To them, such writing demonstrated alternate ways of expressing, connecting, or making sense of the context that frames their lives. I was struck by the power of narrative writing in helping liberate practitioners' voices. During my work as a practitioner, I have been continually frustrated at the stifling of local voices due to the tyranny of academic speak. Activists involved in processes of social change have special knowledge, but this knowledge tends to get lost due to the hold of 'academic styles of writing' and formal modes of 'presentation', representation and knowledge production.

Furthermore, my colleagues' response and the extent to which they related to this writing made me realize that such writing can help create 'sites' from collective sighting. This allows people to view and make visible the matrix of power that they face, but which they do not always see or find the time and space to reflect and vocalize. It made me appreciate narrative writing as a si(gh)ting technology that allows creation of

spatialized localities from which to see from below and with which to de-center dominant ways of seeing and knowing. In some ways, such writing—especially, for example, the description of the meeting to discuss Vision 2020 for Orissa’s forests—created sites or spatialized localities from which to sight and make power terrain more easily visible. And this form of writing made this process of si(gh)ting a collective process. Such writing draws readers in to show rather than tell, and the ‘sight’ or the ‘show’ quality of such writing opens spaces for speaking to power and for alternate imagination.

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