

Book Review

Rucha Ghate, Narpat Jodha and Pranab Mukhopadhyay (eds.) 2008.
Promise, Trust and Evolution, Managing the Commons in South Asia.
Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Reviewed by Minoti Chakravarty-Kaul

This clutch of essays examines contemporary policy issues on “managing the commons” in South Asia, purportedly where “environment-economy conflicts” (p. 1) have emerged as a result of unequal distribution of the benefits of economic growth. Further, it is a timely reminder that the scale of poverty in South Asia is complicated by “the prevalence of ambiguous and poorly enforced property rights” (p. 1). Unless persistently made visible through publication, it is very easy to lose track of such connections in transition economies, where so much confidence is laid on institutions of land reforms to do the trick. For example, these issues had been examined by several unpublished researched studies initiated by the Ford Foundation in the 1980s, in the wake of disturbances over the distribution of common lands to the landless, as it was for example in Kanjhawala, head of a cluster of villages in Delhi in 1977. Congratulations for this publication therefore are due to the South Asia Network for Environmental and Development Economics (SANDEE) who funded some of the research included in this publication.

The representation of commons in natural resources of South Asia is predominant and of these again eight of the 13 contributions are essays specifically on forests, but the bias is made up by the way the sections have been organised. The only two regional studies – that of Goa and of the dry tracts of several Indian states ‘revisited’ – are made to complement the general issues raised about natural resources. There are however some interesting representations of multi-functional resources too, like water in its varied formations: both as stocks for aquaculture and irrigation from tanks in southern India and Sri Lanka; and as flows, as in riparian eco-systems like the *haors* of Bangladesh which are unique eco-systems.

Thus, the case studies have been organised into four thematic sections of which the first one lays down the ‘issues and challenges’ beginning with a chapter

on economic analytics which is what gives a substantive shape to the words 'promise' and 'trust', covering the broad theme for the collection; in another two chapters included are a regional study of several districts in the dry tracts of India which has been published before but there are additional dimensions given to both CPRs and user groups as distinct from village communities; and the third chapter enables comparison of decentralisation, devolution and collective action from international experience.

The second section is an intriguing mix of examples to examine evolution of strategies and transition in managing commons from simple one-resource use to multiple use complex eco-systems. There is a study of a fascinating complex-use resource like the eco-system of the *haors* of Bangladesh followed by a tale of three village forests in central India and two cases studies from Sri Lanka: one which discusses strategies modified by cultural factors involved in the history of a 250 year stake-net fishery association of the Negombo lagoon and the other discusses where transition is taking place in tank aquaculture.

The third section comes to grips with concerns of operational importance, namely the question of access to resources determining livelihoods and distribution of benefits. Illustration is provided by a unique regional study of Goa which has a different pre-1947 tenurial history than other parts of the sub-continent, two cases of forests of Nepal and a comparison of wells with tanks in south India.

Finally, there emerges the section which highlights the primary reason for conflict over the commons – namely the tension between statute and customary law. There is a brilliant essay to demonstrate this in the case of the Dir Kohistan Forests of Pakistan, and competent support is provided by three cases studies from Orissa, Bhutan and Nepal.

The clearest message that emerges from the book is a strong indictment of governmental institution building through statute which subsumes the customs-in-common evolved through long periods of troubled times. There are several variants given here. The possibility of alienating communities 'from their resource-base' and 'from other players' is perhaps the most dangerous of all. Far from creating a good, it undermines the integrity of a promise. This is not to deny that scientific input to test various policy options is valuable to balance the multiple concerns of interdependent natural-resource users, who are also poor, on the one hand and those of efficiency-sustainability of such complex eco-systems as in the case of the *haors* of Bangladesh. However, the indigent of Asia, the 'commoners of a community' of yesteryears, have been subsumed more times than not into a generic nomenclature of 'stake holders' where they are clearly unequal partners in a political economy where property rights are "ambiguous and poorly enforced" (p. 1).

This, however, need not be so, for a variety of reasons all related to historical documentation of these rights and field maps or oral testimony of institutions or customs-in-common; detailed treatment of these issues is in Chakravarty-Kaul (1996).

We learn a few lessons here: first, that the category ‘wastelands’ was not entirely a figment of colonial creation by the British but was perhaps recognised by customary land-use practices, as is evidenced in some of these essays. Thus, there is a need to recognise the seminal contributions of twentieth century economists who, far from being “detached from the environmental sciences” (p. 19), examined the whole issue of commons as fallows in land-use as a conservation measure, as Bosreup’s (1965) study for Africa demonstrates. Second, that intuitive analysis is no less important than quantification, as is in evidence here and confirmed from Carl Dahlman’s (1980) analysis of the open-field systems in England, which is no less precise than the cliometric approach (e.g. McCloskey 1975) on the same subject. Third, that there are cultural values attributed to institutions, such as peace *lamo aman*. Fourth, that there is a possible reversal of a historic trend of solving disputes by a *jirga* as a preferred solution to long-winded court dispute. Finally, that there can be a connection between democracy and stability of decision-making. It may be transaction cost-effective!

However, all is not hopeless for the commoners. One of the editors has faith in institutional reforms which, according to him, can bring about political maturity, and that the market can shift peoples’ priorities to high value products over the older choices.

Literature cited

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