

CHAPTER 2

BETWEEN MICRO-POLITICS AND ADMINISTRATIVE IMPERATIVES: DECENTRALIZATION AND THE WATERSHED MISSION IN MADHYA PRADESH, INDIA

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Summary

This article examines the Watershed Development Mission in Madhya Pradesh, India, where the pressure to show tangible ‘success’, combined with the bureaucratic imperative to retain control, subverts the decentralized structure of participatory resource management. Project and funding imperatives have helped to undermine the very processes that they purport to support. Yet, decentralized management is not simply empty rhetoric, but rather its success or subversion depends on the active collaboration of the state government and villagers. Villagers and lower-level bureaucrats bring diverse agendas and perspectives to development projects, co-opting new institutions and assimilating them into ongoing individual and collective projects of social survival and gain. In conclusion, I suggest ways to improve accountability in resource management.

Introduction

The principle of decentralized management of natural resources has gained considerable legitimacy among policy-makers and practitioners in India [*Kolavalli and Kerr, 2002*]. Since the 1990s, legal and administrative provisions have facilitated the creation of new participatory institutions for managing degraded forests, branch canals and micro-watersheds. In some cases, however, the consensus in development circles about the virtues of decentralization has created a curious paradox, leading to a situation where centralized strategies are employed to demonstrate the ‘success’ of decentralization. In this article, I examine the Watershed Development Mission in the state of Madhya Pradesh in central India to argue that the pressure to show tangible results, combined with the bureaucratic imperative to retain control, has subverted the decentralized structure of resource management. Project and funding imperatives have helped to undermine the very processes that they purport to support, such that neither the goal of ecological restoration nor social justice is achieved. At the same time, decentralized management is not simply empty rhetoric that can be dismissed as a top-down, donor-driven discourse. Instead, it is based on existing political networks and transactions between the state government and villagers, and its success or subversion depends on their active collaboration. What does decentralization actually accomplish and for whom? I attempt to answer this question by drawing attention to the differentiated nature of village communities as well as state bureaucracies, operating under historical conditions of structured inequality. This article argues that villagers and lower-level bureaucrats bring diverse agendas and perspectives to bear on development projects, co-opting newly-created institutions of decentralized management and assimilating them into ongoing individual and collective projects of social survival and gain. In conclusion, I suggest some directions for analysis and action that may help to make the new structures and processes of resource management more accountable to their members.

The Area and People

This article is based on a larger study conducted in Jhabua district¹, Madhya Pradesh (MP), an area notorious as being drought-prone and poverty-stricken. Jhabua has a history of a sharply fractured polity, where the tribal population of Bhil and Bhilala *adivasis* (Scheduled Tribes) has been dominated by a bureaucracy of caste-Hindus and a trading class of caste-Hindus and Muslims. According to the 1991 census, 86 percent of Jhabua's population belongs to the Scheduled Tribes. The MP Human Development Report 1998 notes that 75 percent of Jhabua's population lives below the poverty line. The literacy rate for rural Jhabua is 14 percent, with rural female literacy at 7 percent. The infant mortality rate in rural Jhabua is 130 per thousand live births. The average life expectancy is 51 years. Only about 9 percent of the district's agricultural land is irrigated [GoMP, 1998a].

Jhabua's landscape, once described by the distinguished environmentalist Anil Agarwal as a moonscape, is semi-arid, undulating terrain, where *adivasis* customarily supplement the small plots of farm land that they legally own with *nevad* (literally, new field) clearings in the forest. Since *nevad* is carved out of land held by the Forest Department, the state treats it as an encroachment. The illegality of *nevad* enables field-level forest officers to bully and extort money from farmers, enmeshing *adivasis* in an insecure, impoverished existence. Unable to invest in making agriculture more productive, denied access to forest-based resources and deprived of state developmental inputs, *adivasis* increasingly migrate out of the district in search of work². Besides *nevad*, conflicts over dam-induced displacement and the failure of social welfare programs in the district have also been central in shaping *adivasi* consciousness about the state. *Adivasi* political mobilization in the district has taken a variety of forms [Baviskar, 1997], ranging from participation in a militant peasants and workers' union (KMCS) in south Jhabua, to participation in the ruling Congress party, to membership in religious sects.

The Watershed Mission

In the last five years, the government of Madhya Pradesh has been receiving rave reviews because of the success of its Watershed Development program in Jhabua district in bringing about an ecological and social transformation through successful decentralization [Agarwal *et al.*, 1999: 33-56; Hanumantha Rao, 2000: 3945; Shah, 2001: 3407]³. Jhabua's transformation is attributed to 'political and administrative will for decentralizing administration' in the sphere of

¹ Baviskar, forthcoming.

² This situation is not unique to Jhabua, but prevails in all the forested parts of MP state [see Baviskar, 2001; PUDR, 2001].

³ Curiously, no independent study is cited in support of the claims about the achievements in Jhabua. Agarwal [1999] quotes a GoMP study of results from 18 'best case' micro-watersheds. Hanumantha Rao, the chair of the review committee for watershed development programmes under the Ministry of Rural Development's Drought-Prone Area Programme (DPAP), simply asserts that 'the success story of Jhabua is too well known to need repetition... Although only about 5 percent of the problem area in Madhya Pradesh is now covered by the watershed development programme under DPAP, anecdotal evidence points to good performance in qualitative terms' [2000: 3945]. Even a usually meticulous economist like Amita Shah does not cite a source for her statement that 'the watershed project in Jhabua is a testimony of the fact that, if designed and implemented properly, these kind of micro-level initiatives can help check the incidence of out-migration at least during a normal rainfall period' [2001:3409]. I would speculate that the desire to identify some sign of hope on the dismal development landscape has overtaken these scholars' critical sensibilities.

environment and development [Hanumantha Rao, 2000: 3945]. Led by the Congress government of chief minister Digvijay Singh, decentralization has been effected under two broad heads: one, the Rajiv Gandhi Technology Missions, and two, the *panchayati raj* (local government) system.

Formal political decentralization in Madhya Pradesh has been effected under the provisions of the *Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act* of 1996. This Act applies to those parts of the state that are designated as Scheduled Areas under the Indian Constitution, by virtue of having been numerically dominated by Scheduled Tribes (*adivasis*). In these areas, the work of the village *panchayat* (elected local government) will now be monitored by the *gram sabha* (body consisting of all adults in the village). The power to approve the *panchayat's* plans regarding local resources, including forests and minor water bodies, is now vested with the *gram sabha*. While this appears to be a radical transformation towards participatory development, a movement from representative to direct democracy, a closer examination of the provisions of the Act shows critical lacunae and ambiguities. No financial powers are allocated to the *gram sabhas*; control over forests is still vested with the Forest Department; the *gram sabha* is powerless to stop land acquisition by the government. Thus what appears to be a far-reaching move towards making *panchayats* more accountable to the people they represent may be greatly limited by its failure to specify powers and procedures for the *gram sabha*. Notably, the decentralized management of watersheds was not entrusted to the *panchayats* but to separate bodies formed under the rubric of the Rajiv Gandhi Technology Missions.

Under the Technology Mission for Watershed Management, the MP government has used funds from the central government Ministry of Rural Development to design a program combining integrated natural resource planning and decentralized management. Integrated natural resource use planning adopts the watershed (and its division into smaller micro-watersheds) as its unit of operation. Action is oriented towards regulating the movement of water through the ecosystem, encouraging water percolation and storage through stabilizing catchment area soils and improving vegetative cover. In addition, the watershed mission also encourages the establishment of women's micro-credit groups, grain banks, and other developmental activities that combine savings and income-generation for improved livelihood security.

It is claimed that the transformation of the physical landscape—the increased availability of subsoil moisture, greater vegetation, and increased agricultural productivity—has been achieved through decentralized management. At the grassroots, a Watershed Development Committee (henceforth Committee), elected by the *gram sabha* and representing one to five villages, is free to decide and implement various activities. The Committee consists of elected members of whom at least three must be women and another three *panchayat* (local government) representatives, an appointed secretary (a local unemployed youth who is paid a salary to maintain records and oversee the work), and a project-in-charge from the Project Implementing Agency⁴. A villager is elected president of the Committee. The Committee's work is facilitated by a Community

⁴ The Project Implementing Agency (PIA) can be an NGO but, in Madhya Pradesh, the state government has appointed government organizations and line departments such as the Forest Department, and the Public Health and Engineering Department, to oversee the bulk of watershed work. While NGO PIAs are seen as more effective on a small scale, it is argued that only government PIAs have the institutional capacity to replicate the watershed mission across the entire state.

Organizer, generally a social science graduate or a retired development official, appointed and paid by the District Rural Development Agency. In addition, there is a 'project implementing team' that includes members from the agriculture, animal husbandry, health, public works, public health engineering, and forest departments, to provide technical assistance to the Committee. The tasks of planning and execution, and the finances that underwrite these, are vested with the Committee, subject to review and sanction from a state-appointed Technical Committee. The Watershed Development Committee is thus empowered, on paper, to determine how village common resources should be managed in the collective interest of villagers and to devise context-specific plans. In addition, funds placed at its disposal enable the Committee to translate plans into reality. Using Agrawal and Ribot's analysis of powers of decision-making [1999: 276], the watershed mission seems to empower village Committees to create and implement rules, make decisions about resource use, ensure compliance and adjudicate disputes.

The combination of integrated natural resource planning and decentralized management is being attempted through an unlikely vehicle—a centralized, single-focus Technology Mission. The Madhya Pradesh government adopted the Rajiv Gandhi Technology Missions in 1994 for the tasks of watershed management as well as universal primary education, control of diarrheic diseases, elimination of iodine disorders, rural industries and fisheries development. According to the government, 'the challenges of underdevelopment in these areas required unconventional and radical responses that hinged on concentrated action to make the state take rapid strides' [GoMP, 1998b: 1]. A mission-mode entails 'clarity of strategies and objectives, action within a definite time-frame, fast-track procedures, committed team, inter-sectoral effort, collective action, close monitoring and transparent evaluation' [GoMP, 1998b: 2]. The mission approach is singularly suited for achieving 'targets', preferably single-point objectives that can be secured through rapid coordinated action that is centrally directed (for instance, immunization campaigns). Goals that are not supposed to be target-driven but where process dynamics are important in themselves, and where simultaneous monitoring and evaluation is critical for self-correction, fit awkwardly into the mission approach.

The Mission approach tries to energize and enthuse the MP bureaucracy, widely perceived as being corrupt and incompetent, by generating the collective effervescence and momentum of an intensive campaign. The negative image of the state administration is not only resented by the MP-cadre officers of the Indian Administrative Service⁵, but is also a liability in terms of receiving development assistance. The goal of breaking out of this rut and fashioning a more dynamic image and persona for the administration received encouragement from the chief minister Digvijay Singh.

Achieving targets, avoiding 'politics'

To become a mission, the objectives of watershed development had to be recast into 'targets', as measurable inputs to be achieved within a set timeframe. The meeting of targets and deadlines has inexorably shaped the program: how many Committees formed? How much money in the village account? How many compost pits dug? How many contour trenches? How many check dams built? How many trees planted? How much area treated? Achieving these physical,

⁵ The central administrative service from which officers are assigned to different states. IAS officers occupy the top sub-district, district, divisional and state-level posts in any one state, before being posted in the central government.

measurable targets requires that the slow and arduous work of social organization, for which the Project Implementing Agency is anyway ill-equipped, be rushed through or dispensed with. The obsession with physical targets reflects not only the desire for demonstrating tangible 'success' and generating enthusiasm for the mission among villagers, politicians and funders, but also stems from the need to be financially accountable, to physically prove to state auditors that money has indeed been spent on approved works⁶.

The mission approach, making the administrator in charge of the project accountable to his bosses for the production of visible results, also means that the structures and procedures according primacy to the village Committee have to be short-circuited to avoid delays and ensure measurable outcomes. The elaborate technical rules and specifications about the tasks to be conducted under the watershed mission and the intricate recording and accounting procedures are, in any case, well beyond the grasp of most villagers, including literate ones. The guidelines issued by the government dictate everything from the exact dimensions of a contour trench to the amount of labor that villagers must contribute 'voluntarily'. No village Committee has yet managed to master these norms and employ them to get administrative sanction for its own plans. Most Committee plans therefore conform to a blueprint devised by officials for ensuring a smooth passage through the process of getting administrative approval.

The watershed mission is supposed to work through a divestment of state power and its transfer to institutions at the village level. Curiously, the mission creates an entirely new structure in the form of the watershed Committee instead of using the already existing elected body of the village, the *panchayat*. An administrator explained: 'The *panchayat* is not participatory; it is too political'. This reflects official perceptions that *panchayats* were part of the wheeling-dealing of larger provincial electoral politics. Factionalism and political party affiliations were understood by state officials as undermining the consideration of the welfare of the village as a whole. In contrast, the watershed Committee as a body constituted to manage a specific set of natural resources, strongly guided by the state's developmental bureaucracy, was seen as more 'participatory'. This response shows the official's perceived tensions between the idea of democratic decentralization as a process that could become 'too political' and the watershed mission as a project that needed to be kept away from politics. This perception reflects the idea of watershed management as a development program, where politics is seen as antithetical to development. State officials' anxieties about keeping the mission 'free from politics' are used to justify the political move of separating the watershed Committee from the *panchayat*. Once formed, the watershed Committee's working is not monitored by the *gram sabha*, limiting downward accountability to four-year intervals of re-election and, in extraordinary cases, recall through the filing of no-confidence motions against its members.

In addition, the move towards decentralization is tightly leashed by ensuring that every proposed plan has to be scrutinized and sanctioned by a Technical Committee of government officials. Villagers' work must be inspected and found satisfactory by the Technical Committee before they are fully paid for their labor. Continued state control is justified on the ground of safeguarding public welfare; the state is represented as the bulwark against private appropriation and subversion. Yet the rules and procedures designed to keep politics out insinuate into the

⁶ On this point, also see Mosse [*forthcoming*]. James Scott relates the preoccupation with legibility and simplification to the administrative needs of large, centralized states [1998: 9-83].

watershed mission state officials' agendas of gate-keeping and rent-seeking. Not only must watershed Committees follow stringent state specifications about the work that they undertake, but even if they follow the guidelines to the letter, they cannot get plans and bills passed without paying off engineers, clerks, etc. The notion that watershed work is apolitical introduces into the mission the politics of the state in various ways: it legitimizes bureaucratic control, it allows corruption, and it enables collaborations between state officials and particular individuals and social groups [*cf Ferguson, 1990*].

PRAs and the paper trail

The principle of decentralized management in the watershed mission is not only compromised by the bureaucratic mode of ensuring success but also, paradoxically, by the practice of the very procedures established to ensure villagers' participation. The initial process of planning calls for Participatory Rural Appraisal, a collective activity. Government officials see no reason for going through this exercise; it does not influence any watershed outcomes since the plans are already indicated by the government guidelines. However, if the project bosses require information, the *sarpanch* (elected village head) can simply be summoned and asked to provide the data. The rules of the mission also mandate that decisions be taken in meetings of the watershed Committees, the proceedings of which must be recorded in writing. A decision can only be taken when there is a quorum of one-third members for the Committee meetings and one-third members for the *gram sabha* meetings. In practice, meetings are not conducted thus nor are minutes recorded of the actual proceedings. Most Committee members are illiterate and unfamiliar with the elaborate procedures required by the state. Meetings may be held informally between officials and a few village men, or not held at all (or sometimes villagers sit through a meeting but there is a wide gulf between their recollection of what transpired and what is officially recorded). Since the president and the secretary do not know how to hold meetings as specified by the government, and since the 'decisions' are generally what officials have in mind anyway, the minutes of the meetings are composed by the Community Organizer, a government official. The secretary of the Committee goes to the Organizer's office and copies them out. The minutes of meetings in different villages will often be exactly the same, with only the names changed. In the village, the Committee secretary goes from house to house and collects members' thumb impressions and signatures in a blank register-book, where future minutes will be recorded. Thus an instant record of 'participation', of decentralized village institutions at work, is created and authenticated for posterity. This fiction of one kind of villagers' participation, the kind specified by rules, is perpetuated through the bureaucratic record only through most villagers' participation of another kind, in the circumventions invented by state officials. This participation indicates villagers' willingness to go along with the project in the hope that it will benefit them in one way or another.

Short-circuited democratic participation, 'success' as a self-fulfilling prophecy

The pressure to make evident the success of the watershed mission leads to the creation of spectacular showplaces that visitors can tour⁷. The choice of villages to be adopted for watershed development is guided not by ecological parameters but administrative expedience. Sites are chosen based on accessibility, how close they are to the road, to facilitate official visits. An

⁷ See Baviskar [*forthcoming*] for a more detailed account.

equally important parameter for selecting the villages where the program will be initiated is the political orientation of the villagers. Rather than choosing areas where ecological degradation is most severe, and where lands need the most soil and water conservation, the program is extended to villages where people are likely to be willing partners of the state. Li makes a similar observation in the case of a resettlement scheme in Indonesia: ‘The key from the point of view of the...staff is that the people selected should be keen and willing to participate, interested in receiving what the program has to offer, and ready to play their part in making the program a success’ [1999: 305]. This may in fact mean *avoiding* the people and places for whom the program is designed, but whose actual involvement may in some way endanger the chances of securing program ‘success’ for the administrators. Thus the watershed mission carefully selects villages to ensure that trouble-makers are left out. This means that villages organized by political organizations such as the KMCS, which have a history of being critical of the state and vociferously demanding their rights, are excluded. Ironically, the villages with the greatest levels of political awareness and popular mobilization have the smallest chance of being selected for the watershed project. These villages are probably the most favorably endowed in terms of public participation, transparency and accountability to create viable democratic institutions for watershed management. But their very political strength is a liability from the point of view of the state administration.

Avoiding conflict, without ecological improvement

Even in the villages that are selected, the process of matching management practices to ecological characteristics is compromised by the grounded history of conflicts over access to land. Watershed development demands a ridge to valley approach, with soil and water conservation working its way downhill. In practice, however, wherever hill lands are contested terrain, the hills are left untouched. In most villages in Jhabua, the poorer farmers cultivate hill slopes; only some of this land is legally owned, most of it consists of ‘encroachments’. These villagers perceive state initiatives to undertake conservation measures on this land as an insidious attempt to reclaim land, the thin edge of the wedge that would result in farmers’ eviction. According to watershed management principles, the hills should not be farmed at all but planted with trees and grasses. However, any state attempts to change land use would be an uphill task, inviting instant opposition by farmers who stand to lose their access to food. The poorest farmers who cultivate the most friable soils are thus unwilling to participate in the watershed program. Rather than risk getting tangled in the thickets of tenure disputes, the officials in charge of the watershed mission prefer the easier option of working in the valleys.

Government officials’ tendency to violate the watershed principle by focusing on the valleys also stems from the imperative that state development projects yield visible, preferably dramatic, outcomes—visible to project bosses, donors, metropolitan visitors and the media. Success is demonstrated by publicizing the experience of one or two ‘before-and-after cases’ where subsistence farmers who grew coarse cereals went on to become prosperous by switching to high-value horticultural crops, thanks to the watershed mission. On closer examination, these success stories turn out to be based on the liberal supply of subsidized inputs such as free seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides to a handful of farmers whose valley lands are already well-irrigated. Such selective successes cannot be claimed as the outcome of soil and water conservation measures, nor can they be replicated sustainably on a large scale. The partnership between

relatively well-endowed farmers and state officials not only violates the principles of watershed management but also the program's claims of promoting social justice, since it exacerbates the disparities between hill and valley farmers⁸. In addition, it makes the mission a self-fulfilling prophecy since many of the people it claims to transform already have the attributes expected as the outcomes of the transformation process.

Participation and accountability: villagers' perceptions of the watershed mission

The formal decentralization effected by the watershed mission is subverted by the administrative imperatives of demonstrating success and the related need to stay in control⁹. Yet, decentralization is not all smoke and mirrors. By directing public attention and increasing state legitimacy through the media, it has very real effects. It perpetuates a particular notion of neo-Chayanovian rural development that fails to address the political predicament of the vast majority of *adivasis* who are not land-owning peasant-cultivators, but increasingly participate as permanent members of the industrial proletariat in a state where extractive and manufacturing industries are multiplying rapidly. But it is important to note that the subversion of the watershed mission's stated principles is made possible by the participation of key villagers, whose actions are informed by their own understanding and expectations of government schemes.

One such 'participant' is Jhetra, the vice-president of the watershed Committee in Kakradara village, the showplace to which all visitors are taken. Jhetra and his wife Badlibai have represented the successes of the watershed mission on several state trips to conferences. The mission had brought considerable work their way: they had started a nursery to sell saplings to the government for distribution, and Jhetra had supervised the digging of three irrigation tanks in the village over three years. Yet, although deeply involved in the mission's activities, his perception of his role differed from the notion of decentralized participatory management envisaged in mission objectives. Jhetra complains that he was given a *theka* [contract] by the government to construct the tanks for which he was paid Rs 110,000. During a VIP visit, he overheard government officials tell the Minister for Agriculture that the tanks had been built for Rs 200,000. Jhetra believes that government officials embezzled the money and that he has been cheated. When I asked the District Collector about this, he was quick to point out that the discrepancy between what Jhetra was paid and the amount mentioned to the minister was explained by the *shramdaan* [voluntary labor] that villagers were supposed to contribute to the project. The monetary value of the voluntary labor component was Rs 90,000; if the project had been executed by the state, it would have cost Rs 200,000.

⁸ Other studies also indicate that the benefits of watershed projects are unequally distributed. In their survey of watershed projects in Maharashtra, Kerr et al found that only 35 percent of respondents reported receiving any benefits, and '*the perception of project benefits rises steadily with landholding size*' [Kerr et al., 1998, cited in Shah, 2000: 3164] [emphasis added].

⁹ I have discussed elsewhere how IAS officers have a stake in demonstrating the success of projects such as the watershed mission, whereas the structure of rewards and penalties for most lower-level staff makes them either apathetic or even hostile to the changes proposed. In addition, advocacy NGOs and donor agencies (such as the Centre for Science and Environment, Ford Foundation) also have a stake in highlighting new environmental success stories [Baviskar, forthcoming]. Mosse [forthcoming] discusses how NGOs ensure their own reproduction and expansion by promoting participatory development.

The confusion around voluntary labor, Jhetra's proprietary attitude towards the tanks and his suspicions about corruption in the disbursement of funds all reveal interesting glimpses of what the mission looks like from his point of view. According to Jhetra, he was awarded a 'contract' by the government to dig the irrigation tanks. An employee of the Public Works Department, he is conversant with the award and implementation process of construction works. He sees himself as a *thekedar*, a private contractor, bidding successfully to execute a project for the government upon payment. But tank construction and nursery plantation are supposed to be activities undertaken by the watershed committee, jointly planned and executed by all the members. In Kakradara, the collective effort has been transformed into a private collaboration between government officials and one enterprising household, Jhetra and Badlibai's. As a contractor, Jhetra sees himself as employing wage laborers, not as a part of a committee of equals.

In receiving funds from the state, Jhetra is sure that he has been shortchanged, but officials dismiss his suspicions by saying that he does not understand the modalities of accounting for voluntary labor. Yet the decision about how much labor is to be volunteered is not made by the *villagers* who would perform that work, but by the state. There are government rules about 'voluntary' labor in the watershed mission: if the work is on government lands, a portion of the minimum wage is deducted¹⁰ and deposited in a common fund. These rules are not negotiated; they are simply communicated from above. Ironically, villagers don't know that their labor was 'volunteered'; many of them complain that watershed work does not pay as much as other public works. This indicates that they perceive watershed work as yet another form of laboring for the state, and they have no sense of ownership vis-à-vis the project. Government officials who explain that wage deductions are due to 'voluntary labor' never ask villagers whether they would be willing to forego their wages in this manner. The rules change and can confuse even project officials; villagers who cannot fathom them simply assume this is one more way they are being cheated. Jhetra's suspicions about corruption in a project where he is a key actor are telling. Implicit in his complaint is the notion of how a government should work ideally (in an uncorrupt manner) as well as an awareness of the ubiquity of its corruption ('if there is a discrepancy, someone's bound to be cheating') [*cf Gupta, 1995*]. Yet his critique accompanies his collaboration with the watershed project as designed by the state. Jhetra's participation ensures that work is done and visible effects created in the showplace that is Kakradara. For him, the committee structure is a formality, its processes cosmetic. A perfunctory nod at 'community participation' is all that is necessary before getting down to the *real* business at hand, getting the tanks constructed and the illicit profits shared.

Clearly the watershed mission creates opportunities for the material and symbolic advancement of entrepreneurs like Jhetra. A project that is supposed to be based on collective planning and implementation can become a vehicle for private profiteering. While elected representatives on the Committee receive no official compensation for their work ('after all, it's a voluntary institution'), there is scope for 'adjustment' by fudging accounts of material and labor. As long

¹⁰ Ten percent is deposited in a 'development fund' for the maintenance of physical works and five percent collected in a 'village fund' to enable further investment in agricultural productivity. If the work is on private land, then only half the minimum wage is paid and there are no deductions for augmenting common funds. I was told this version of the rules by a Community Organizer. The secretary of the Committee in Kakradara told me that 25 percent of the wage was deducted for the 'village fund' and another five percent for the 'development fund'. There was also a discussion about how the rules for works on private lands had been changed in the previous year by the Collector.

as the paperwork is in order, rules can be subverted if officials cooperate. For example, villagers in the next hamlet allege that Jhetra made all the required weekly contributions under the names of different women in his wife's savings group (all the members were his relatives) in order to get a loan for a tractor. Someone who knew how to work the system could thus exploit the availability of soft loans for women's micro-credit groups. The potential for women's empowerment through the savings groups, which has been realized in some other villages, could be negated in Kakradara by the powerful alliance between state actors eager to secure spectacular effects and a male villager willing to supply them with shortcuts for private profit. These collaborations and compromises generally remain unspoken. When I asked the complaining Jhetra why he did watershed work, he replied, '*Gaon ke liye*' [For the village].

The watershed mission has thus brought about a kind of decentralization in that it has changed the distribution of the proceeds of a government project, creating new transactions where villagers who had so far enjoyed limited scope for corruption can participate in skimming off a percentage of the unofficial earnings. The previous experience of government projects has given entrepreneurs like Jhetra a keen eye for the prospects for economic advancement through these means. At the same time, Jhetra is accountable to kinsmen in his hamlet; he must be able to direct some of the benefits of the watershed mission in their direction to ensure their continued cooperation. As a leader and a broker, he has to skillfully negotiate the demands of his dual constituencies. Delays in the disbursement of wages may erode Jhetra's authority in the village, a factor that state officials can use to their advantage. Left out of this process, however, are other, less favorably situated villagers, who cannot create networks of mutually beneficial transactions with state officials. These include those *adivasis* whose membership in political organizations like KMCS, which demand control over natural resources such as forests and land, threatens to undermine state control.

The above discussion demonstrates that creating the impression of project 'success' depends on collaborations between government officials and villagers. Why do the elected members of a watershed Committee, in theory answerable to fellow villagers, participate in subverting the project's mandated processes? While the opportunity for private profit and increased symbolic capital may explain Jhetra's actions, other Committee members may not be so motivated. Part of the explanation lies in the cultural distance between the formal process of democratic accountability constituted in the watershed project and villagers' political experience. The elaborate procedure for eliciting information through Participatory Rural Appraisal and using it to collectively design a community-monitored watershed management project runs completely counter to both officials' and villagers' understanding of how decisions are made and implemented. In the absence of political mobilization, people implicitly interpret the Mission within the framework of their lived experience of social inequality and more or less accept its undemocratic working as 'business as usual'. The formal equality mandated by the project flies in the face of people's everyday knowledge and ingrained orientation that decisions are usually made by a handful of village leaders who have cultivated links with government officials that others cannot easily replicate. Challenging leaders' power is a risky enterprise that, even if successful, may simply result in co-optation and accommodation within a patronage network. Resistance to bureaucratic and elite control and the creation of downward accountability is a complex, difficult process at the best of times; in the absence of organized political mobilization, it seems almost impossible.

Concluding discussion

Such a tale of sordid deals and engineered ‘success’ is probably depressingly familiar to many development practitioners. What lessons, if any, does it hold for those interested in supporting democratic decentralization, especially regarding rights to natural resources? Clearly, decentralized resource management, even when supported by government policy and financial assistance, may accomplish outcomes very different from those hoped for by votaries of these efforts. At present, government Project Implementing Agencies are headed by IAS officers who, for the most part, have worked hardest at publicizing the successes of the project to metropolitan visitors and political patrons, and at creating a few well-nurtured showplaces where such visitors can be taken. The IAS officers identified with the success of the mission are motivated by the prospect of career advances and other rewards. For the field staff, however, there is little incentive or accountability for achieving anything by way of social organization or even physical works beyond what is immediately visible to one’s superiors. Complex guidelines and norms for undertaking watershed related activities, and unfamiliar procedures that field staff are reluctant to adopt for reasons of control and comfort, mean that decentralization is subverted from within. Without radically restructuring the framework within which government officials, both administrative and technical staff, work, decentralization cannot be achieved. While NGOs are regarded as superior agents for achieving the potential for decentralization within watershed development [Kolavalli and Kerr, 2002; Shah, 2002], their dependence on external funding, and the bureaucratic imperatives of larger NGOs [Mosse, forthcoming], may also create pressures to demonstrate success, especially when project timelines are as short as five years.

How might downward accountability be achieved in this case? Perhaps it is from the tensions within decentralization, from greater scrutiny and criticism of the experience so far, that more effective structures and practices will evolve. The watershed mission has now spurred *adivasi* political organizations to protest, highlighting how it distorts and deflects attention away from the issue of *adivasi* rights to land and water. Left out, disaffected or even envious villagers look at the mission’s operations more critically, voicing demands for a greater share of the fruits of development. Investigative journalists and researchers have begun to probe the consensus around this narrative of success. From this ‘crucible of cultural politics’ [Moore, 1999] may eventually emerge a system of checks and balances [Agrawal and Ribot, 2000: 478]. In such a system, every element of the watershed mission would be closely analyzed to see whether it promotes downward accountability. At the same time, some external agency would have to play a role to ensure that the decisions regarding land and water management take into account the concerns of subaltern groups within the village. A larger issue, one that determines whether any watershed project will succeed in incorporating the interests of most *adivasis*, is the legal status of *nevad* (Forest Department land illegally cultivated by *adivasis*) farmlands. Without resolving the larger legal and political question of *adivasi* rights to cultivated lands and forests, decentralized watershed development cannot be achieved.

In this article, I have examined the paradox of state-led projects of decentralization that ensure their instant ‘success’ by retaining control in the hands of the bureaucracy. I have also argued that, although such projects are conceived by high state officials, their implementation is only possible through the participation of key villagers. Such collaborations between state officials and villagers help to undermine the project’s stated objectives of ecological and social

improvement. Attempting to achieve these objectives requires a rethinking of grassroots political processes. First, strong organization, particularly of subaltern groups, is essential for overcoming government resistance to democratic decentralization. Where local people are unable or unwilling to make demands on state administrators or even on their own elected Committee members, they become collaborators in the charade of decentralization—even more so when they participate in corruption, help manufacture the charade of success and/or benefit economically from it. Second, this article suggests the importance of the complex history of relations between the state and local populations in understanding such collaboration. Third, this article reveals the need for researchers and other third parties to take a closer look at such so-called successes and publicize their findings as another important accountability mechanism. Like ‘empowerment’ and many other aspects of development, decentralization is a process that must develop over time, not a project that can be implemented and declared a short-term success through the measurement of easily-defined target variables. The need to identify such ‘successes’ subverts any real attempt at building the slower, institutional processes that could bring about sustainable long-term change.

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