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Participation in a Gendered Environment: The Case of Community Forestry in India

Manjusha Gupte¹

Women are important stakeholders in natural resource policies since rural women in developing countries are responsible for most of the collection of food, fuel, and firewood for commercial and domestic use. When it comes to the management of these natural resources, gender inequality due to societal traditions could limit the ability of women to participate in policy-making, even when they are not formally excluded. This paper analyzes the effect of gender stratification on women's participation by undertaking an empirical study of a participatory environmental policy program in Indian villages. It endeavors to answer the question of how gender stratification affects participatory environmental policy-making. Using the case study of a community forestry program, it finds that women are still marginalized in decision-making, even in participatory environmental policies. Gender stratification continues to impinge upon forms of democratic decision-making in developing societies. Using facilitating policy tools that seek to empower such marginalized groups would be one way of making participation meaningful for all groups in society.

KEY WORDS: community forestry; developing countries; gender; participation; social stratification.

INTRODUCTION

Many environmental policy scholars and activists advocate forms of decentralized decision-making in environmental policy. This has manifested itself in the form of community-based conservation projects in many developing countries. While emphasizing community decision-making, the differences within communities have been overlooked—differences with regard to

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power, influence, religion, ethnicity, caste, and gender (Agrawal and Gibson, 2001; Kothari *et al.* 1998). Moreover, the effect of social exclusionary practices that may undermine participation of certain groups also needs to be fully explored. For instance, gender inequality due to societal traditions may limit the ability of women to participate in policy-making, even when they are not formally excluded. This article examines the application of participatory policy-making in the context of rural women in developing countries. It seeks to understand how gender stratification affects women's participation in participatory environmental policy.²

PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING

The normative underpinnings of participatory environmental policy-making lie in the literature on strong democracy. Theories of strong democracy subscribe to the notion that more active citizen involvement would result in a better polity. Pateman (1970) draws upon the work of Rousseau and Mill to argue that citizen participation is an essential element of a viable democratic theory. Barber (1984) posits strong democracy as an alternative to liberal democracy. He makes a case for strong democracy as opposed to one that is thin, since in the thin or liberal model, democratic values are merely the means to individualistic ends. Scholars espousing participatory democracy advocate active citizen participation in the process of governance through discussion in multi-stakeholder forums, public meetings, referenda, and interactive polling (see Brewer and DeLeon, 1983; DeLeon, 1992; Dryzek, 1990; Fishkin, 1991; Hayward, 1995; Kann, 1986; Pateman, 1970). It is argued that a stronger form of democratic participation will complement processes for interest group and expert participation in policy-making by bringing people as citizens into the policy choices that affect their lives. Participation in collective affairs is also valued because through such activity, people define themselves as citizens, and become educated about collective problems and democratic principles (Mansbridge, 1980; Morrell, 1999).

This exploratory research examines the application of this mode of decision-making in heterogeneous societies, where cultural differences may inhibit the participation of women and other marginalized groups (lower classes, ethnic groups) in the policy process. These societies are characterized not only by heterogeneous groups, but also by stringently hierarchical social stratification (based on caste, ethnicity and gender), divergent value

²Social stratification can be understood as hierarchical ordering based on different ascriptive categories like class, ethnicity, occupation, and caste.

systems, a large rural population, and extreme social disparities between higher and lower classes, which may result in some marginalized groups (such as women and lower castes) being left out of the process of participation.³ Women may be left out even in participatory policies due to gender stratification. Women are important stakeholders in natural resource policies since rural women in developing countries are responsible for most of the collection of food, fuel, and firewood for commercial and domestic use. When it comes to the management of these natural resources, however, women have traditionally been denied any role in the decision-making process (Agarwal, 1992). Gender inequality due to societal traditions limits the ability of women to participate in policy-making even when they are not formally excluded. Thus, even formally participatory policies may prove to be detrimental to women as gender stratification hampers real participation. As Sundar and Jeffery argue, local actors are already part of a system of inequality that may preclude any negotiation, and not all conflicts can be resolved without certain structural transformations (Sundar and Jeffery, 1999, p. 41). Hence it is imperative to realize the effect of culturally determined processes of exclusion on policy-making.

This research presented here intends to examine the effect of gender stratification on women's participation. It contends that local village level institutions in developing societies are gendered institutions that do not easily facilitate the participation of women in the decision-making process. The ability of women to effectively participate in policy-making is contingent upon institutional and structural factors that may be beyond their control. Thus, existing societal inequality may inhibit meaningful societal participation.

PARTICIPATORY ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

One can assess the functioning of participatory democracy in developing countries by studying public policy requiring participation. Many developing countries have shifted to decentralized approaches from centralized management within the last couple of decades. According to Thompson (1995, p. 1521), there are a number of reasons for this devolution of responsibility. First, the fiscal crises that many Third World states found themselves in prompted the move to shift the developmental costs onto the non-governmental sector and in some instances to the people themselves.

³While no doubt multiculturalism and gender disparity exists in Western societies too, the differences in developing societies are much starker and on a much larger scale.

Secondly, pressure from international donor agencies such as like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund resulted in the enactment of participatory polices in areas like forestry and watershed management. The third reason was the recognition of the failure of earlier centralized policy approaches. One indicator of this failure was the increase in conflicts, often violent, between government authorities and local communities in rural areas. And finally, evidence of successful decentralized governance emerged from certain sectors.⁴ A combination of all these factors prompted the shift towards decentralized governance in some developing countries. According to Sundar, Jeffrey, and Thin, there was “a reconceptualization of the idea of governance, which was broadened so that the responsibility for development planning and implementation was viewed as a negotiated set of partnerships among state, civil society, and private sector partners like the World Bank” (Sundar *et al.*, 2001, p. 3).⁵

Several developing countries have begun experimenting with participatory environmental policies, for example, Sri Lanka’s National Forest Policy of 1995; Nepal’s Master Plan for the Forestry Sector, 1988; Pakistan’s Forest Policy Statement, 1991; Zimbabwe’s CAMPFIRE; and India’s National Forest Policy, 1988. These policy programs have aimed at securing willing participation of the local population to protect and manage forests and wildlife for their sustainable development. At the same time, they also seek to give the local people a sense of involvement in the decision-making process affecting their lives. Policy planners also favor community management as a means of integrating development and environmental objectives (Jackson, 1993, p. 650).

NATIONAL FOREST POLICY, 1988, AND THE JOINT FOREST MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

While several developing countries have begun experimenting with participatory environmental policies, India has been one of the first to introduce national forest policy and guidelines to make the natural resource management process participatory. Cultural diversity, a large rural population, and the existence of the caste system in India, are all factors that make it a good

⁴Some of the successful examples are community forestry in the Kumaon region through the creation of *Van Panchayats* (Agrawal, 1994), Arabari in West Bengal, 1972, and watershed management and soil conservation in Sukhomajri in Haryana, 1980 (Sarin, 1996).

⁵Participatory policies have found favor with environmentalists and environmental theorists as a means of better informing environmental decisions, achieving distributive justice and for intrinsic reasons like the value of active citizen participation as a part of, good life (Hayward, 1995).

testing ground to ascertain the success of participatory policies in the context of developing societies.⁶

Before the British colonized the Indian forests in the eighteenth century, forests were common property resources (Gadgil and Guha, 1995). However, the Forest Acts 1865 and 1878 emphasized the commercial use of forests. Forests were viewed as a valuable source of raw material to support British industry. Local people's access to forests was restricted after the state took control of the forests. This system of centralized management and the state's disregard for their community-based resource management traditions resulted in building up hostility towards the state apparatus (Kothari *et al.*, 1998). The conflict between forest authorities and the local communities increased during the decade of the 1980s and new thinking finally emerged in 1988 in the form of the National Forest Policy.

The Indian National Forest Policy, 1988, was radically different from the existing policies because for the first time there was a move away from the commercial management of forests for timber and revenue generation and towards addressing subsistence issues of the people. As part of the changes ushered in by the National Forest Policy, 1988, the Joint Forest Management program was created on June 1, 1990. The logic behind its creation was that the problem of deforestation could be better handled if the state Forest Departments worked out joint management agreements with local communities to reforest degraded forest (Ravindranath and Sudha 2000).⁷ Degraded forest is classified as having a crown canopy of 40% or less. Joint Forest Management also acknowledged the role of NGOs as intermediaries between the Forest Department and communities (Ministry of Environment and Forests, 1990). This program sought to link the economic interests of the local villagers to their surrounding forests, which would create a stake for them to invest in its protection. Villages that were effectively protecting their surrounding forest would have exclusive rights to that forest's produce; this included rights to Minor Forest Produce as well as a share in the timber harvest (Murali *et al.*, 2000). Minor Forest Produce includes non-timber items such as resins, fruits, seeds, honey, medicines, tobacco, betel leaves, bamboo,

⁶Joint Forest Management in India has been used as a case study of participatory environmental policy. As scholars like Yin (1984) point out, case studies help generalize to theoretical propositions rather than populations or universes. So cases should not be construed as sampling units or observations. This research relies on an embedded single case design with states and villages being the embedded units. The states were selected based on Mill's method of difference, and a combination of the method of difference and method of agreement was used for the villages (Skocpol and Somers, 1980). A combination of the method of difference and method of agreement can help isolate the effect of gender stratification on the process of participation (Przeworski and Teune, 1970).

⁷Recent Ministry of Environment and Forest (2000) guidelines recommend that Joint Forest Management should include standing forests also (crown canopy above 40%) but not the protected area network (national parks and wildlife sanctuaries).

etc., that comprise important sources of income for forest-dependent populations. If the villagers failed to cooperate in protecting the area, the benefits would be withdrawn without any recourse to compensation (Sundar *et al.*, 2001). The forest would continue to be owned by the Forest Department and there would be no transfer of ownership or lease rights under Joint Forest Management. The program seeks to develop a cooperative partnership between the local communities and state Forest Departments through the creation of Forest Protection Committees. These committees were to be formed at the village level and were responsible for drafting microplans for the management of the village forest. Microplans are the official plans for forest management, which would include how different areas would be managed—whether through natural regeneration or plantation, the species to be planted, when they would be harvested, and so forth.

The participatory approach is all the more significant because presently about 90% of India's 64 million hectares of forest is under state ownership while the rest is under community and private control (Ghate, 2000). At present 27 states in India have implemented Joint Forest Management and about 63,618 Forest Protection Committees have been formed, managing 14.1 million hectares (Ministry of Environment and Forests, 2002).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To facilitate effective comparisons between regions and grasp the internal social dynamics that come into play, two states, Maharashtra and Rajasthan, that had issued the Joint Forest Management resolution around the same time (1991 and 1992) were compared with respect to women's participation in the Forest Protection Committees.⁸ Maharashtra is one of India's most urbanized and industrialized states (see Table I). Basu (1992) argues that a high level of capitalist development in Maharashtra is partly responsible for its progressive culture. Women in Maharashtra in general have had a history of active participation in political life, from the social reform movements of the nineteenth century to the struggle for Indian independence (Desai and Krishnaraj, 1987). The state of Maharashtra was the first state to introduce legislation to ensure adequate representation of women. The Maharashtra *Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti Act* 1961 provided for the nomination of one or two women to Village Panchayats (Assemblies) in case women were not elected (Jain, 1996).

Rajasthan comprised 18 princely states during the colonial era. The Rajputs, a group of warrior clans with strict codes of honor, headed these

⁸Field research for this project was carried out in India between September 2000 and August 2001.

Table I. Comparison of Maharashtra and Rajasthan Using Social Indicators

	India	Maharashtra	Rajasthan
Total population (millions)	1027.01	96.75	56.47
Rural population (millions)	74.16	55.73	43.26
Urban population (millions)	28.53	41.01	13.20
Urban (%)	27.78	42.40	23.38
Males (millions)	53.12	50.33	29.38
Females (millions)	49.57	46.41	27.09
Total literacy rate (%)	65.38	77.27	61.03
Male literacy (%)	75.96	86.27	76.46
Female literacy (%)	54.28	67.51	44.34
Fertility rate (1997; %)		2.7	4.2
Infant mortality (1997; per 1000)		47	85
Age of marriage for females (years)	20.0	19.7	17.5

Source. 2001 Census of India, International Institute of Population Sciences and National Family Health Survey.

princely states or kingdoms which accepted suzerainty of the British Crown but were able to retain autonomy as far as local governance was concerned. Although the kingdoms were abolished after Independence in 1947, their cultural and social legacy of feudalism, patriarchy, gender segregation, and enforced seclusion of women in *purdah* continues today in many areas of Rajasthan (Weaver, 2000). As Weaver (2000, p. 53) argues, the Indian women’s movement seems to have largely bypassed Rajasthan, and it is only recently that civil rights groups and women’s development groups have begun engaging in women’s issues.

Comparing Maharashtra and Rajasthan with each other and against the national average brings out the differences between the two states. These social indicators reflect the status of women in these states. While Rajasthan has made considerable strides in the literacy sectors in recent years, this progress has not been uniform for males and females. Female literacy is a mere 44% as compared to 76% male literacy. As seen in Table I, Maharashtra with 67% female literacy ranks way above the national average for female literacy while Rajasthan is considerably below. There is considerable disparity between the two states in terms of fertility as well as infant mortality (see Table I). Thus, women in Maharashtra as compared to Rajasthan have relatively more autonomy in decision-making and are more likely to work and control resources (Jejeebhoy, 2000).

Two villages within each state were chosen on the basis of their cultural context and presence of an external agency.⁹ Villages with a single habitant community were classified as homogeneous and those with more than one

⁹To protect the identity of the villagers, the names of the villages have been changed.

community (either in terms of caste, religion, or tribe) were classified as heterogeneous. Village 1 in Maharashtra and Village 3 in Rajasthan were both homogenous tribal villages, Village 1 comprising of *Gond* tribals and Village 3 of *Bhil* tribals.¹⁰ Village 2 in Maharashtra and Village 4 in Rajasthan had heterogeneous populations, with people of eight different castes living in Village 2 and of two different religions living in Village 4.¹¹ Since Joint Forest Management is a top-down initiative, usually an external agency, either the Forest department or an NGO, is associated with its implementation. The presence of an external agency in assisting the villagers to implement Joint Forest Management was used to ascertain if the role of an external agency makes a difference in facilitating or hindering women's participation. In the case of Villages 1 and 3, NGOs have been associated with the functioning of Joint Forest Management, while in Villages 2 and 4, the respective state Forest Departments have provided support to the Forest Protection Committees.

Semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted with the villagers and also with NGO personnel and Forest Department officials for the purposes of data collection. Since the perspectives of local stakeholders were central to the research, direct participation, participant observation, observational walks, and local secondary sources were used in addition to the interviews.

Women's participation and participation in general was ascertained in terms of formal membership of Forest Protection Committees, attendance at Forest Protection Committees meetings, speaking at Forest Protection Committees meetings, and initiating and formulating Forest Protection Committees resolutions (see Table II). Participation was classified as nominal depending on the formal membership of the Forest Protection Committees, as Instrumental depending on the formal membership of the Forest Protection Committees as well as attendance at Forest Protection Committees meetings. Representative participation included formal membership of Forest Protection Committees, attendance at Forest Protection Committees meetings, and speaking at Forest Protection Committees meetings. Formal membership of Forest Protection Committees, attendance at Forest Protection Committees meetings, speaking at Forest Protection Committees

¹⁰Gond tribals are found mainly in Central India in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh. Gond is a generic name and there are 53 subtribes having their own social organization in their respective territories. The Bhils are a major tribe of middle and western India found mainly in the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh. Just like the Gonds, Bhils is a generic name and there are numerous subgroups that fall within this tribe. Along with the Gonds, they are among the numerically most important tribes in India, each group being approximately around 400,000 in number (Vidyarthi and Rai, 2000).

¹¹In Village 2 there are Buddhists, Gond, Dhivar (Koli), Gowari, Mana, Madi, Lohar, and Kunbi. Hindus and Muslims live in Village 4.

Table II. Classification of Participation

Type of participation	Measurement indicator
Nominal	Formal membership of Forest Protection Committees
Instrumental	Formal membership of Forest Protection Committees Attendance at Forest Protection Committees meetings
Representative	Formal membership of Forest Protection Committees Attendance at Forest Protection Committees meetings Speaking at Forest Protection Committees meetings
Transformative	Formal membership of Forest Protection Committees Attendance at Forest Protection Committees meetings Speaking at Forest Protection Committees meetings Initiating and formulating resolutions

Source. Adapted from Cornwall, 2000, and Agarwal, 2000.

meetings, and initiating and formulating Forest Protection Committees resolutions altogether comprised Transformative participation.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Villages 1 and 3 are similar in terms of their homogeneous ethnic composition and association with an NGO, but differ in terms of gender stratification. The Forest Protection Committee and the Village Council in Village 1 are one and the same, so the Village Council serves as the participatory forum where Joint Forest Management issues are discussed. The Village Council that has been functioning regularly for the last 10 years. All of the village, are members of the Village Council and hence by default are part of the Forest Protection Committee. Moreover, there are no membership conditions, e.g., property, literacy, etc. The Village Council meets every Monday regularly from noon until about 4 PM, depending on the issues being discussed. The Village Council’s decisions are based on consensus, meaning that there needs to be some basic agreement among the villagers on an issue and even though not everyone may completely agree with the decision, no one is completely against it. The villagers explained that they preferred consensus decision-making since they felt it reflected a more democratic process. Its source is traced back to the tribal system of governance. The villagers also participate in study groups to inform their decisions in the Council.¹² An NGO has played a major role in the self-governance process

¹²Study groups are informal gatherings organized to gather information on different issues. Earlier tribals were exploited by outsiders due to their illiteracy and lack of adequate knowledge. To overcome these lacunae, acquisition of knowledge was as a means of empowerment to deal with outsiders and government officials. This was initiated in the form of study circles where people could brainstorm, interact with outsiders, and seek answers to pressing

in Village 1 since its inception. It has provided systematic learning opportunities through the creation of study groups, helped the villagers realize their collective strength and provided the necessary information and moral support (Bhatt and Banerjee, 1999). But most importantly, it has been instrumental in making the villagers conscious of their rights and inculcating self-awareness. Their conveners have stayed in Village 1 for a year and half and even today continue to be associated with it, although now mainly in a consultative capacity.

Women in Village 1 have been actively involved in village activities for over a decade now—since the struggle for prohibition—and also head committees in the village. The struggle for prohibition began when the village women decided to come together to protest against alcohol consumption by men. For the village women, alcohol consumption meant financial loss for the family in addition to beatings by their husbands. Unlike some other cultures, consuming alcohol had both religious and social sanction in Gondi society. One day the women stood guard at the entrance to the village and stopped all the drunkards from entering. With help from village elders they went after the culprits who brewed as well as drank liquor. A system of fines was imposed, both for drinking and brewing, and gradually prohibition became a way of life in the village. The women felt that an important consequence of this was that it created a niche for the village women to participate in public affairs. Thus women in Village 1 do have access to local institutions and are “visible” in public life. Women are active in women’s groups (called *Mahila Mandals* involved in activities like managing savings schemes and ensuring financial security, ensuring continued prohibition of alcohol, supporting victims of alcohol abuse, managing the stone quarry in the village, including taking care of labor payments, government royalties, and so forth. As one senior woman put it, “in a way women work effectively as a pressure group.”

In Village 3 in Rajasthan, the local NGO was largely responsible for starting and implementing Joint Forest Management. The NGO’s focus encompasses village development, livelihood issues, and natural resource management. The NGO began work in natural resource development when it realized that the villagers’ livelihood and well-being were inextricably linked to the good health of the surrounding natural resources. It began organizing meetings on a regular basis and now the Forest Protection committee

questions. Today these study groups provide the basis for making informed decisions in the Village Council. With help from various NGOs, different study circles have been formed like the Friends of the Birds, which is studying the birdlife in the region, the Forest study circle, which is studying the impact of Minor Forest Produce collection on the productivity of the concerned species, and the Honeybee study circle, which is working on the extraction of honey without destroying the honeycomb.

meetings are held twice a month. According to the NGO, the meetings are held regularly to keep up the momentum and maintain continuity. However it does feel that so far people’s involvement has been confined to employment and protection activities.

Women in Village 3 have not been active in village life traditionally and still take the *pardah*, i.e., cover their faces in public. According to the local NGO personnel, while initially the women in Village 3 were not active in Joint Forest Management, they gradually became active after being involved in the NGO-initiated women’s groups, where they come together to discuss issues like domestic violence, reproductive health, and education. The NGO coordinator points out that the women have been quite aggressive at times, such as when the older men neglected them in drought relief activities—the women vociferously complained till the older men finally rectified their mistake. The women mentioned that the Forest Protection Committee also decided to rotate protection and consumption zones so that they did not have to walk long distances for firewood. It was observed that the women were even urging older men to talk during Forest Protection Committee meetings. The women accept that they have become more outspoken over the course of time and have become used to sharing the same forum with men, but men still take the major decisions.

In a comparison of Village 1 and Village 3, one is able to ascertain the effect of gender stratification on participation while holding the cultural context and external agency constant. Participation of women in Village 1 is higher than in Village 3, where women have traditionally not been as active. Thus women’s participation in Village 1 can be classified as Representative, while women’s participation in Village 3 is Instrumental (see Table III). Overall participation is Transformative in Village 1 and Instrumental in Village 3. The women of Village 3 have become more active participants in the Joint Forest Management process with the help of the NGO. But women in Village 1 have been more intrinsically involved in the entire

Table III. Comparative Analysis

	Village 1	Village 2	Village 3	Village 4
Ethnic composition	Homogenous	Heterogeneous	Homogenous	Heterogeneous
External agency	NGO	Forest department	NGO	Forest department
Gender stratification	Liberal	Liberal	Traditional	Traditional
Women’s participation	Representative	Instrumental	Instrumental	Nominal
Participation	Transformative	Representative	Instrumental	Instrumental

village development process. The liberal context of the state of Maharashtra facilitates women's participation in Village 1 as compared to Rajasthan's stringent gender stratification that hampers participation in Village 3. Both Villages 1 and 3 are homogenous tribal villages with active NGOs working, but the difference in gender stratification is one of the main reasons for the differing levels of women's participation. Thus one can infer that gender stratification is the likely reason for the difference in women's participation between the two villages.

Villages 2 and 4 are similar in terms of their heterogeneous ethnic composition and the Forest Department's association with the Joint Forest Management process. So while holding the cultural context and external agency constant, one can examine the effect of gender stratification on women's participation. In Village 2, the villagers began holding monthly meetings a decade ago to discuss forestry issues, especially the problems they faced due to the depletion of their forest. Communal meals were organized and a dramatics club was started to bring the different caste groups together. The Village Council meetings are now held according to need; there is no fixed time or schedule. Some villagers claimed that "no Village Council meeting had been held for quite some time now since there were no pressing problems to deal with." The initiative regarding decision-making in most cases is taken by the single leader who has played a key role in the forest regeneration process that was started 20 years ago. The village has worked closely with the Forest Department in terms of its forest regeneration process. A Forest Department official relates an incident that illustrates the villagers' commitment to forest regeneration—when a forest fire broke out during a marriage ceremony, all those gathered, including the priest and the bride and groom, rushed off to put it out.

It was observed that women are less active than the men in Village 2 and are not very vocal in Village Council meetings. The women became a part of the Joint Forest Management process largely due to the efforts of the leader who played an instrumental role in the village's forest regeneration process. Whereas women do have representation on the Forest Protection Committee's executive council, and many of them attend the meetings, they do so more at the leader's insistence—"because they are required to go," as one woman pointed out. Initially they were hesitant to come out and talk in the meetings, feeling that "norms regarding how women should behave and what they can say constrain their public participation." When men were questioned about women's participation, they responded that they are village women and "they will speak on issues they understand." At present there are three women members on the Forest Protection Committee's executive council. Initially some women in the village were against the felling ban that meant that they were not allowed to cut wood in the forest, and could take

only dried wood, twigs, and wood that had fallen on the ground. But eventually the women were prevailed upon to use the forest resources only for emergency purposes and were gradually convinced of the long-term benefits.

The Forest Protection Committee meetings in Village 4 are called once every one or two months as needed. The Forest Protection committee makes decisions about managing Joint Forest Management sites, monitoring progress and distributing grass among the member households. It was observed that since this is a Forest Department-initiated Forest Protection Committee, the Department dictates much of its functioning. For example, it controls and makes final decisions regarding the number of trees and species to be planted, harvesting rates, etc. In Village 4, the women come to the meetings mainly at the Forest Department's insistence. It was observed that they do not talk too much by themselves, but reply to questions when asked. This is a strictly stratified society where the women practice of *pardah*, which entails covering their faces in public. There are four women serving on the executive committee of the Forest Protection Committee. On paper women do have access to local institutions in Village 4, but in reality one rarely sees women being actively involved in these institutions. It is only recently that women have begun coming out and participating in public issues, and even sitting on the same platform as men. Rajasthan being a state with a traditional culture, there were initial problems regarding women's participation, and since almost all the forest officials are men, the women find it very difficult to interact with them.

Villages 2 and 4 are both heterogeneous villages with no active NGOs. They do have active liaison with the Forest Department as far as Joint Forest Management is concerned. Both are ethnically heterogeneous communities and participation of women in public affairs is less than that in ethnically homogeneous communities. Women in Village 2 have higher rates of participation compared to those in Village 4, due to stricted gender stratification in Village 4. Women's participation in Village 2 is Instrumental and in Village 4 is Nominal (see Table III). For instance, even if women do attend Forest Protection Committee meetings in Village 4, they do not necessarily speak out. Overall participation in Village 2 is Representative and Instrumental in Village 4. Thus one can see that women's participation is comparatively higher in the villages of Maharashtra, i.e., Villages 1 and 2, in comparison to those in highly stratified Rajasthan. Cultural practices that require women to cover their faces in public and stay away from public forums inhibit their ability to take active part in the activities of the Forest Protection Committees and other village institutions. Women in Maharashtra have easier access to public institutions and can participate easily in village activities. Overall, in the four villages studied, gender stratification does affect women's participation, but factors like enabling NGOs and inclusive institutions make a

difference in terms of facilitating access for women, as seen in the cases of Villages 1 and 3.

Gender stratification adversely affects women's participation in Forest Protection Committees in terms of women's needs not being considered, women being left out of the participatory process, and not being consulted regarding the various forest management options. In Village 2, once the forest was closed off, the women had nowhere to go to collect firewood for cooking, so they ended up flouting the Forest Protection Committee rules and illegally taking wood from the protected area. So initially women were adversely affected due to forest closure, since women's perspectives and opinions were not considered necessary for decision-making. In Village 3 the Forest Protection Committee (in deference to women's demands) did not fence all the degraded forested areas at once but closed a certain area and left open another area for human use and cattle grazing. Gradually the protected and consumption zones were rotated so that both the forest and the livelihoods of the villagers could be protected. In Village 1 women were involved right from the beginning in the functioning of the Forest Protection Committee, and hence they were comfortable with the level of forest protection. By contrast, in Village 4, women's participation in most cases is token, merely to fulfill the minimum legal requirements.

Another important finding was that NGOs can play an important role in facilitating women's participation even in strictly stratified societies. In the case of Village 3, the NGO involved helped women to participate in the Forest Protection committee, in contrast to Village 4, where there is no NGO interface, and women have no separate forum and no outside agency advocating and promoting their participation. Similarly, ethnically homogenous communities may also facilitate women's participation more easily in both liberal and strictly stratified societies. Villages 1 and 3, both homogeneous tribal communities, facilitate women's participation more readily than the heterogeneous communities of Villages 2 and 4. Women perhaps have fewer inhibitions about interacting with men of their own social group. Thus, ethnically heterogeneous communities together with strict gender stratification make it more difficult for women to participate.

In some instances NGOs may perhaps be better facilitators of women's participation than the Forest Department. NGOs like the ones in Villages 1 and 3 have a broader focus, not confining their work to the forestry sector, but working on village development as a whole. They make a conscious effort to encourage women's participation, using facilitative policy tools like separate meetings for women, women's coordinators, etc. The focus on women's issues also creates solidarity and a space for participation. On the other hand, the

lower rung Forest Department personnel focus more on vegetative results and environmental outcomes and not the process of participation. In fact they may consciously stay away from activities (such as encouraging women to participate in the Forest Protection committees) that could be construed as disrespecting traditional culture.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

In the literature on participatory democracy, few scholars note that marginalized groups could be left out of deliberative practices. This issue merits attention because social stratification hinders real participation for the powerless and marginalized groups in society, even in policy programs that seek to promote societal participation. Evidence from the above cases shows that gender stratification does affect women's participation. The fact that women's participation is comparatively stronger in Maharashtra than in Rajasthan could perhaps be explained by the fact that Maharashtra is more progressive and less stratified than Rajasthan. Thus in highly stratified societies it is difficult for women to be actively involved even in participatory policies (Agarwal, 2000).

What implications do these findings have for participatory environmental policy? It needs to be recognized that merely enacting participatory policies will not automatically translate into a vibrant democratic polity. There is an inherent danger in enacting participatory policies that use participation merely as a means to achieve some other substantive goal, in this case, forest regeneration. In such cases the stress is more on vegetative results, and if these are good, participation is not given much attention. On the other hand, villages like Village 3 that are trying to bring in social equity in the Joint Forest Management process are neglected by the Forest Department because they have not achieved stellar vegetative results. For the Forest Department, the focus is more on plantations and not on the working of the Forest Protection Committees.

Green democracy may be a viable option even in developing countries if greater stress is laid on empowerment mechanisms for marginalized groups to overcome barriers of social stratification. Sometimes even the involved NGOs are not able to discern the need for effective women's participation. As in Village 3, if women's meetings are held separately, then women can get an opportunity to organize separately and assert themselves.

To overcome the traditional cultural barriers of excluding women from public forums, space could be created for women's participation through facilitating tools like the creation of women's self-help groups, conducting separate meetings for women, ensuring a critical mass that emboldens

women to speak, recruiting women into the field staff, and small-scale income generating activities for women (Subramaniam *et al.*, 2002).¹³

The earlier work in this area (see Sarin, 1998; Pathak, 2000; and Kothari, *et al.*, 1998, among others) and the present cases reveal that Joint Forest Management has a long way to go regarding women's participation. Traditional societal constraints, gendered institutions, and lack of interest on part of the implementing agencies has led to women's values, knowledge, and uses of forest produce being largely marginalized in the Joint Forest Management decision-making process (Sundar *et al.*, 2001). As far as women's participation is concerned, there is a need to go beyond the norm of the minimum numbers becoming the maximum numbers in practice (Sarin, 1998).

CONCLUSION

This study shows that forms of discrimination based on gender stratification continue to be firmly entrenched in the societal fiber, and continue to impinge upon forms of democratic decision-making. While they do pose obstacles in the functioning of participatory environmental policy, these problems can be overcome by using facilitating policy tools and reconceptualizing the present models of participatory democracy to make them more inclusive of the "silent voices" so as to make participation meaningful for all groups in society.

By exploring participation in community forestry, this research has tried to highlight the role of gender stratification in limiting women's participation as well as issues that have to be dealt with to make participation more meaningful for all groups in society. Further research on participatory environmental policy could help in understanding the challenges to environmental democracy, the possibilities for strengthening it, and the relationship between participatory environmental policy-making and sound policy outcomes.

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¹³Spaces may be horizontally and vertically linked as temporary realms in which women (or other marginalized groups) interact, share, and strategize for action, and build ties (Subramaniam *et al.*, 2002).

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