
BEYOND KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION

Making Sense of Local Management

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Rights and control over natural resources pose an increasingly serious problem all around the world and have given rise to public debates on biodiversity, environmental sustainability, and democracy in relation to local development and the management of resources. Accompanying these trends has been a shift in national and international policies. Policies have evolved in the context of a growing consensus among international aid agencies and among some governments, both in the global North and the global South. This confluence of forces in previous decades contributed to bringing political decentralization and the participation of local people in development action and the management of environmental resources onto the mainstream environmental agenda. More recently, this rhetoric has shifted to the need to include new actors in environmental management, especially private interests. Local management or participation for the sustainable development of rural areas and forests, what Sheona Shakleton, Bruce Campbell, Eva Wollenberg, and David Edmunds (2002) called a paradigm shift in questions of resource management, has been added to by calls for partnerships between civil, public, and private actors. The shift from the language of state controlled resource management to that of local management, partnerships, and collaboration has its counterpart in the field of environmental sciences. Scholars have stressed the need to integrate knowledge from many disciplines.¹ Knowledge of people outside academic communities is considered imperative. It is clear that environmental problems cannot be handled within a narrow sector approach. The need for knowledge and the free flow of information has been advocated as important to be able to meet the challenges of sustainable

environmental management. The question that this poses is, then, what kinds of environmental leadership are needed in such situations? Or is this the question that we need to be asking?

The assumption that greater integration of knowledge and more communication would automatically lead to better management is problematic. This chapter advocates a somewhat different perspective. It takes up three different and yet interrelated issues. First, what we call different kinds of knowledge are not amorphous or disembodied knowledge on particular subjects but are usually associated with different groups of people. Having said this, it is important to note that while groups (whether communities living within the environments, academics, policymakers, etc.) are seen to be associated with particular kinds of knowledge, the process of knowledge production is by no means hermetically sealed. People are influenced by outside currents, and a body of knowledge on a particular subject may be the result of a process where ideas and thoughts may come from different locations. A second related issue is that the same body of knowledge can look very different from different perspectives: knowledge for what and for whom? Last, but importantly, communication and free argumentation about environmental issues is not enough when we come from positions of power that are accorded differing legitimacy with differences in power. Using the example of villages in Orissa in India, I study how attempts at local management of forests brought up these three issues. Organizations for local management were formed in the villages in opposition to what was seen to be distant and autocratic management by state authorities. There was some effort to involve women in these

otherwise male dominated local organizations, partly to ensure efficiency but also to garner greater legitimacy as a people's organization. Many women were interested in being involved, but several also organized within their own women's groups. This parallel organizing by the women, initially supported by the local forest organizations, began to be looked upon as a challenge to the forest organizations. The women's organizing questioned assumptions made by both local forest organizations and state authorities on what kind of knowledge is needed for the local management of the forests. Although both men and women believed that it was important to be able to have rights in forest management locally, the question of why they wanted local management and the meanings that different social groups ascribed to local management became a source of differences.

Academics and development practitioners have advocated greater heterogeneity in local organizations working with environment and development issues as a means to represent different interests, and dialogue and argumentation as a means for a more sustainable environmental management. However as the case shows, there is a need to go beyond the free flow of information and open communication. What is needed is structural change that enables different groups to represent themselves despite their different social locations and gendered inequalities. It also calls for environmental leaders, men or women, who are able to respond to gendered and other social inequalities and the care and management of the environment. By looking at the attempts at local management in Nayagarh district in Orissa from the women's group and not "community" organizations (that were in essence men's groups), I choose to take a vantage point that is seldom taken in analyzing development activities in the countryside. Leadership, especially in organizational studies, is often examined solely from the perspective of the organizations that the leaders are meant to lead. Taking a vantage point from outside of the organizations in Orissa brought into relief, not just the leaders, but also the role and responsibilities of the organization itself in relation to the rest of the community that it purported to represent. Such a perspective gives rise to a different kind of knowledge or rather knowledge about the forests and the organizations for its management but viewed from a different perspective.²

In the following section, I begin with a discussion on local forest management, gender, and its implications for what kind of questions we might need to contend for democratic and sustainable environmental management. The section after that examines these questions on the ground and presents the case study of forest management groups in Nayagarh district in Orissa, India. Examples from the case study are then used in the following sections to analyze the three issues identified above: different kinds of knowledge and the need for communication between them, knowledge for whom and for what, and the limits of dialogue on this knowledge to act upon environmental

issues. I conclude with a discussion on the need to acknowledge different spaces for environmental decision making and what implications this may have for studies on environmental leadership.

Local Forest Management, Gender, and Leadership

The forests occupied and used by villagers in many parts of India are typically state property. Local groups composed mainly of men have been taking over the protection and in some cases the management of forests in India (see Jefferey & Sundar, 1999) and are engaged in struggles with authorities for a measure of rights. However, in the multitude of local action groups working with local development in the countryside and in the context of devolution of political responsibility, what local management and development mean is not necessarily self-evident. Research has shown that the groups that hope to herald a new form of local democracy might be far from democratic (e.g., Sarin, Singh, Sundar, & Bhogal, 2003). Women in particular are excluded in different ways: They either are physically absent from local forest management forums or they find it difficult to actually influence the decisions taken (Agarwal, 2001; Arora-Jonsson, 2008; Lama & Buchy, 2004; Sarin & Ray, 1998). Bina Agarwal shows how these new organizations and committees may even erode former customary rights and access that women had to the forests. At times, a shift to new institutions could replace older customs, causing a breakdown in traditional rules of reciprocity and mutual aid with regard to the forests (Agarwal, 1994).

Research also has shown the degree to which women are responsible for everyday activities that make forest protection and the existence of the communities possible (e.g., Harcourt, 1994). Despite the fundamental importance of their work, women are either marginalized in decision-making processes or their possibilities for exercising agency are curtailed vis-à-vis men. The goals of environmental sustainability and local democracy may well undermine those of gender and social equality and entrench inequalities. Development practitioners and others working with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have called for the inclusion of women and other marginalized groups in these committees and organizations. Scholars have advocated the need for a critical mass of women (Agarwal, 1997) in these institutions for more equitable resource management. The assumption is that once women are represented in these structures different groups would be able to bring forth their interests and argue for them. As Marcel Stoetzler and Nina Yuval-Davis note, conflicting interests and competing claims to truth are not always reconcilable, but at least the notion of dialogue shifts the discussion to a terrain where standpoints can be argued about, rather than treated as givens (2002).

In this chapter, I discuss the importance of this dialogue as well as its limitations given the structural inequalities in a community. I focus on the challenge that the women's groups in Orissa posed on how to organize for environmental management and the associated question of what kind of leadership this presupposes. An important insight was that we need to acknowledge the many different ways that people organize for environmental management (Arora-Jonsson, in press). Consequently, this means that environmental leaders need to be able to recognize multiple ways of caring for and managing the environment. The important question that they need to confront is that of what management and their leadership is for, especially keeping in mind social inequalities, such as gender.

Literature on gender and leadership comes mainly from countries in the North and from within the field of organizational studies. The absence of women in formal leadership roles has been an important concern. Scholarship has demonstrated that leadership is strongly connected to hegemonic masculinities and a "male norm" privileging traits such as control, competition, independence, efficiency, and reason that function as excluding mechanisms for women leaders (e.g., Acker, 1990). In the little research on rural leaders, this appears to be also how rural leaders in agricultural politics are defined—as strong, aggressive, risk taking, and knowledgeable (Pini, 2005). The desire to open leadership positions to women saw the emergence in the 1990s of the "female advantage" literature, which posited the existence of superior female leadership traits such as empathy, communication, and relationality (Binns & Kerfoot, 2011). Despite their celebration of the so-called feminine side of leadership, critical gender analyses revealed that the new leadership discourses were firmly located within the old masculine paradigm of rationality and control (Sinclair cited in Binns & Kerfoot, 2011, p. 258). Others also consider the idea of the masculine and feminine division as problematic, arguing that this discourse perpetuates differences, making them seem natural, and that we need instead to understand the varieties in the categories of men and women (Billing, 2011).

I examine these assumptions in the following sections and examine their relevance to questions of leadership in the environmental struggles of the forest communities in Nayagarh in Orissa, India. The male leadership that I describe in the following pages did not necessarily fall into these categories. Yet ideas on the importance of control, efficiency, and the need to take on challenges systematically, one by one, influenced the ways in which their struggles progressed.

Local Forest Management in Nayagarh District, Orissa

Nayagarh is a district in the inland area of the state of Orissa in southeastern India. In the villages of Nayagarh

(first in 1993 and then in periods from 1998 to 2000) where the fieldwork was carried out, the population was predominantly Hindu. Most belonged to what were called the general castes in the area, and many were small agriculturists. For most of them, their small landholdings made living off the land precarious and many were dependent on produce from the forests. There were also several *dalit* communities (lower castes) and tribal communities in the more forested areas. Accounts of scattered and active protection of the forests in the villages of Nayagarh in Orissa exist from as far back as the 1950s. They were given form in the village of Kesharpur and spread through networking activities all over the district from the mid-1980s onward. The villagers formed the Bruksha O' Jeevar Bandhu Parishad (BOJBP—Friends of Trees and Living Beings), a network that spanned several villages. Many areas had been severely degraded, but consistent protection efforts bore fruit, and after relatively few years, the forests took root again, springs that had turned to a trickle started flowing, and wild animals began to be sighted in the new forests. Forest protection and management were carried out at great cost and at great personal sacrifice. The forestland was owned by the state, and the villagers had no legal authority for the work that they put into the forests. By 1992, the movement had spread to almost the entire district, and the men from the villages formed a larger federation called the Nayagarh Jungle Suraksha Mahasangha (The Nayagarh Forest Protection Federation). On my first visit to the BOJBP in Kesharpur in 1993, the movement was already regarded within development circles both nationally and internationally as a beacon for community forestry. I found that women had been actively involved in activities such as *Padayatras* (footmarches), in *dharnas* (protest actions), and in arranging forest festivities but were not members of the BOJBP—nor were any women part of its decision-making arenas. They spread their message of forest protection and care through music, theater, and song at folk ceremonies and religious gatherings. This relational and communicative approach tapped into a "vein of green spirituality in rural Hinduism" (Human & Pattanaik, 2000, p. 80). Further, the leaders' emphasis on involving everyone, their attention to social issues, drew both women and men into its fold.

Further fieldwork in 1998 in the area showed that the women in the villages of Nayagarh had formed several groups in order to work with issues of interest to them and to be able to avail themselves of funds from government agencies and nongovernmental organization programs for women's development. In group and individual interviews, several spoke of needing to have a federation of their own if women were to have any meaningful role in the joint forums for community forest management. The spirit and purposefulness of the women were contagious as I tried to understand how they exercised agency in questions of development and management. Their agency lay uncomfortably in the accepted descriptions of local management

given by the men in the movement or in discussions both within academic and development circles about how women were to be involved in forest organizations. Conventional development interventions often call attention to the need to make women aware, to educate them in order to increase their capacities to be able to take part in environmental and development decision making. The underlying assumption in such thinking is that the women are deficient in what is needed for development and environmental decision making. The usual allusions to “needing to make women aware” or “have them join the associations” were far from the ways in which the women themselves spoke about their actions. I realized that it was from the vantage point of the women that I wanted to understand local management.

Different Kinds of Knowledge

Much has been written about women’s knowledge about the environment and traditional knowledge that gets ignored in scientific management of the forests and other natural resources. In Nayagarh, the women argued for the need to look at the work that they were doing in the forests to be able to formulate management plans that took account of their interests. Since the early decades of development work in the South, there has been growing concern with the distinct roles and interests of women as the managers of natural resources, especially forests (e.g., Agarwal, 1992; Guijt & Shah, 1998; Harcourt, 1994). Feminists have linked gender differences and resource management in ways that cover a wide spectrum. The bonds of the feminine to nature and women’s unacknowledged work in the forests in Orissa and more generally in India have been the subject of considerable research (Abramovitz, 1994; Apffel-Marglin, 1996). Ecofeminists contend that there are parallels between environmental degradation and the oppression of women and a mistreatment of both by a male-dominated instrumentalist science (Mies & Shiva, 1993; Shiva, 1989).³ Ecofeminism has been important within feminist thinking for treating the nonhuman world as an active subject, not as a resource to be mapped or only a cultural construction. However, such a perspective also essentializes women and gendered concerns (cf. Agarwal, 1992), and it is not always useful in understanding and problematizing the complexities and differences among and between women and men in their relationships to the environment.

Feminist environmentalism, as articulated by Agarwal (1997), argues that people’s responses to the environment need to be understood in the context of their material reality, their specific forms of interaction with nature, and their dependence on its resources for survival—a gender division of labor, property, and power. Such an approach in the case study in Nayagarh is a useful point of departure to understand the different groups of women and their

relationship to the forests. For the women in the higher castes, it was not seen as appropriate to go to the forests on their own, though they did spend time on the outskirts of the forests, collecting seeds and planting fruit trees. Although not all groups of women were active in the forests or dependent on fuelwood from the forests, the forests were an important part of their lives. The women, especially from the *dalit* hamlets in the villages and the tribal villages spent almost entire days in the forests collecting fuelwood and other nontimber forest products, such as berries and herbs. Despite being a place of hard and heavy work, the forests were in many ways also a social space for the women to meet. For many younger women, it was a space away from the confining rules of the home, the men, and older women.

The focus of the local forest organizations was on protection of the forests and the economic distribution of the produce from the forests. According to them, the women’s concerns were different and not immediate and could be taken up later once the main questions had been looked into. However, the women’s groups in Nayagarh thought differently. First, in their view, these issues were inseparable and needed to be viewed together. Second, to be able to take part in the forest organizations in any useful way, they needed to be able to deal with issues that marginalized them and discriminated against them. As one of the coordinators for the women’s groups said, “There is no point in talking about the environment if the women have no power themselves” (personal interview, 1998). The different knowledge that the women had due to their different experiences needed to be recognized. But it was equally important for them to be able to communicate that knowledge and their concerns at the forestry forums themselves. It was important to have a communication between the groups on their own terms in order to be able to achieve a sustainable and democratic environmental management. The “gendered science of survival” (as elaborated by feminist political ecologists Dianne Rocheleau, Barbara Thomas-Slayter, and Esther Wangari, 1996) in relation to the forests showed that the knowledge needed for forest management in Nayagarh was not only about economic benefits of timber and fuelwood. It was also about the use of the forests for daily sustenance and as a social space.

Knowledge for What and for Whom

“Struggles over resources are shaped not only by material forces and political power but also by the ideologies and understanding of what is meant by the environment” (Bhavnani, Foran, & Kurian, 2003, p. 16). Closely tied to the issue of different knowledge was the issue of what counted as work in the forest and whose definitions of the forest were taken as legitimate. By excluding the women’s issues as less important and something that would be taken up at a later date once the important issues were sorted out,

the men had assumed the privilege of defining what knowledge was important for forest management. Both women and men in Nayagarh, by and large, welcomed the idea of local management, but they tended to give different meanings to it. At one or two meetings that the women did attend and were able to speak out, they spoke of the work that they did in the villages as important to take into consideration, such as keeping community areas clean, tending to backyard plantations, and other such work in the villages and the forests.

In the opinion of the women, the knowledge among different groups in the community needed to be taken in the community perspective and not separated into different categories or limited to the protection and management of the forests. In the early days of the BOJBP, the movement had centered on activism by men, women, and children from several castes. The inclusion of the everyday, the spiritual, and the interlinking of development and environmental needs proved to be BOJBP's success in the early days. The BOJBP male leaders had advocated eradicating caste differences and the need for overall social development and women's upliftment was an important part of their ideology. However, with the increasing formalization of rules and routines, the larger social agenda gave way to a concentration on the environmental agenda. Outside knowledge and discourse also had a major part to play in these developments. Organizations working on environmental issues seized upon this example of community management and the intense focus on the forest issue by development practitioners, and nongovernmental organizations contributed to the overshadowing of the larger social and political agenda that had made the movement strong in the villages.

For the women, local management was more than the management of the forests. There was a need to put the forests into perspective. What was needed was a well-functioning community where all members felt able to contribute with their knowledge. The discussion at forestry forums became limited to questions that concerned mainly economic benefits from the forests and expert knowledge about the forestry and associated legal issues. Unfortunately, this proved to be detrimental to the environment since the movement lost much of its support base when people lost their reasons for involvement in the movement. How these issues affected the community as a whole were not taken into account. The reasons for the participation of various groups, the social, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the forests for which people valued the forests, were excluded from consideration. The arguments of the women in several women's groups for taking up multiple issues that they saw as being interlinked was an effort to have a wider perspective on the forests and to link them to everyday life. But it was also a question of power relations—whose opinions (and definitions) were considered to be relevant. By widening the agenda, they also sought to make space

for themselves to be heard—about the forests. It was a question of what constituted community forestry, that is, the meaning of *community* forestry.

Limitations of Dialogue

Efforts by several members of the forest organizations and the forest federation to include women in their organizations may be assumed a step toward more equitable forest management. In political thought, arguments for inclusion usually build on ideas about deliberative democracy that bring into being a platform where different standpoints and knowledge can be communicated to each other for the benefit of the community and the forests. However, not all women were as hopeful of real change by being included in the forest organizations. The pattern to be followed was to have two women and three men from every village. Women who had formed groups in the villages felt that they needed to be present in a group to be able to make any real difference at the forest meetings. In many places, social customs and mores often came in the way of women being able to speak at the meetings. The presence of older men and relatives automatically excluded those women with relatives present at the meetings to be able to speak out or to question the decisions taken. Since at the outset questions taken up by the women's groups were considered less important and their views on the forests uninformed, the question was not only one of if they were able to speak but also one of who would listen. Their presence in meetings served to legitimate the forest organizations rather than lead to democratic management.

The inclusion of a few women does not satisfy the needs of all women, nor do these women necessarily represent all other women. As I cited from Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002) earlier, the inclusion of different groups does lead to the important aspect of bringing different standpoints to the table. Focus on dialogue has the potential of bringing to attention that women may have different interests not only because of their gender but also because of their social locations and power relations vis-à-vis men as a group. Their standpoint can then be discussed rather than taken as *women's views* on particular issues and not worthy of discussion. Sexual identity need not be taken as a guarantor of the worth of knowledge.

Nevertheless, the limitations of relying solely on dialogue were clear to me after attending a meeting of the forest organizations with NGOs from Bhubaneswar, the capital city of Orissa. Several men made long speeches at the meeting. In a large hall with men, there were four women present. However, they did not say anything at the meeting. When I met the women in their village a few days later, I asked them why they had come to the meetings. They told me that they wanted to tell the NGOs from outside about the important work that the women's groups

were doing in the villages and the forests, but that they had been unable to do so in between the long speeches made by the men and an agenda that was already set without them. Interrupting the men and arguing for space for themselves was not an option available to the women.

The question of language is important. As Margaret Kohn points out, language competence is not shared equally by everyone. For the men in the forest organizations who were used to making speeches and talking in public, expressing their views and winning approval for their arguments was not unusual. According to Kohn, a purely discursive vision of politics has a tendency to reproduce the status quo. Empirical evidence indicates that political struggles that take place on the basis of deliberation are heavily weighted in favor of the elites. By appealing to the standards of rationality and reason, discursive democracy masks an irrational core at the heart of its project. She argues for a different definition of politics, rooted in struggle and contestation, for structural or institutional change in the basis of power (2000, p. 417).

The women's groups in several villages in Nayagarh believed that they needed to be together to be able to make a difference at forestry meetings. Two women from every village who did not know each other was not enough to represent women's issues. Women needed to be in a "critical mass" at forestry meetings. But beyond the need for a critical mass, the women's groups argued for their own federation of women's groups. They did not think that waiting for the forest organizations to take up their issues was an option for them. They argued to be able to participate in the forest discussions from their groups as well—given their structural inequalities, such as inability to express themselves and their position at the meetings.

Summary

The struggle of the women's group in Nayagarh to work with issues that specifically concerned them as well as village and forest issues brings to the fore the challenge of going beyond free information and knowledge. First, many women did have different ways of knowing about their environments due to their different chores and positions in the communities, although as women they were not necessarily the sole possessors of that knowledge. Second, women possessed knowledge needed for management based specifically on their experiences, but that was linked inextricably to other parts of village life. However, these links were disregarded as irrelevant to the knowledge needed in the public sphere of forest management, thus, stripping forest management of many of the underlying meanings that it held for many women as well as men in the communities and weakening support for the movement. Third, unequal gender relations in their communities made the idea of dialogue and discursive democracy

limiting. Greater expert knowledge or greater information was not helpful for them if there were not at the same time a change in the structural basis of power relations. The way in which they achieved this temporarily was by having their own groups that could bring up questions that were important for them. There is a belief that greater knowledge and accessibility to expert knowledge would solve many of the environmental crises faced by men and women today. This is undoubtedly important. However, without democratic structures that made this flow of knowledge possible, access to knowledge becomes irrelevant and dissemination of such knowledge without much use.

This has important implications for environmental leadership. In studies of gender and leadership, the organization is usually a given, and the work and knowledge considered relevant is that which takes place in the public sphere. This was certainly not the case in Nayagarh. Women's community work was often an extension of the private and domestic work and not necessarily remunerated. Similarly, in their organizing, the women straddled the public and the private (Arora-Jonsson, in press). They worked with a range of issues, and they justified many of their decisions not only by economic motivations but also in terms of the social. They emphasized the need for spiritual and emotional ties to the environment and to each other in the community. By choosing to organize separately, they also highlighted gendered inequalities in environmental management. This makes it imperative for us as academics, development practitioners, and policymakers to look beyond the obvious and beyond mainstream organizations to recognize different knowledge and forms of organizing for environmental management.

Rather than questioning what kind of environmental leadership we need, we might need to examine what that leadership is for? For the women in the communities, it was impossible to separate the struggle for local environmental management from gender equality in the villages. In Nayagarh, the women in the groups tried to bring in questions of the everyday work that they did in the villages—the social, spiritual, and the emotional—that were intrinsic to the question of forests but remain hidden in discussions on environmental management. They tried to make the micropractices of everyday life congruent with overarching discourses on environmental sustainability and democratic management. And by local, they meant both men and women. They spoke of needing local environmental management for a better life for themselves and their communities and for a more responsive and sustainable environment. By disregarding the everyday or, as Judi Marshall writes, "the grief and pain" (Marshall, 2011) that accompanies the everyday or the joy needed for change, we make it impossible to respond to present challenges. "If change for sustainability is possible we need to pay less attention to organizations and more to broader

notions of society and the textures” (Marshall, p. 277). Leadership needs to recognize how the environment is already being organized and for what purpose. We need to value multiple forms of knowing and leadership needs to work with that. It is important for leaders to acknowledge, as Haraway writes, that “there will be no nature without justice. Nature and justice, contested discursive objects embodied in the material world, will become extinct or survive together” (Haraway as quoted in Marshall, 2011, p. 278).

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Notes

1. For example, see a recent issue of the journal *Environmental Conservation* (Thematic section. Interdisciplinary Progress in Environmental Science and Management, 2011).
2. The approach and the case in relation to environmental governance are described in greater length in Arora-Jonsson (2012). The argument here builds on that work and is analyzed here specifically in relationship to questions of leadership.
3. They share with “deep ecology” (Devall & Sessions, 1985) the conviction for the need for a new cosmology.

notions of society and the textures” (Marshall, p. 277). Leadership needs to recognize how the environment is already being organized and for what purpose. We need to value multiple forms of knowing and leadership needs to work with that. It is important for leaders to acknowledge, as Haraway writes, that “there will be no nature without justice. Nature and justice, contested discursive objects embodied in the material world, will become extinct or survive together” (Haraway as quoted in Marshall, 2011, p. 278).

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Notes

1. For example, see a recent issue of the journal *Environmental Conservation* (Thematic section. Interdisciplinary Progress in Environmental Science and Management, 2011).
2. The approach and the case in relation to environmental governance are described in greater length in Arora-Jonsson (2012). The argument here builds on that work and is analyzed here specifically in relationship to questions of leadership.
3. They share with “deep ecology” (Devall & Sessions, 1985) the conviction for the need for a new cosmology.

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