

RETHINKING COLLECTIVITIES:

Institutional Innovations in
Group Farming,
Community Forestry and
Strategic Alliances

OCCASIONAL PAPER

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September 2008

Bina Agarwal



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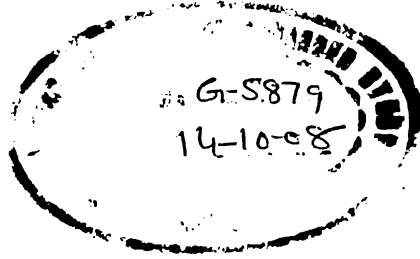
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CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF DEVELOPING SOCIETIES
29, Rajpur Road Delhi 110054 India, Email: csdsmain@csds.in
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Bina Agarwal is Professor of Economics at the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi University, and an honorary visiting fellow at the Ash Institute, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. She has been Vice President of the International Economic Association and President of the International Association for Feminist Economics. She has written extensively on land and property rights; environment and development; the political economy of gender; poverty and inequality; law; and technological change in agriculture. Her many books include *Cold Hearths and Barren Slopes: The Woodfuel Crisis in the Third World* and the award-winning book *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Her most recent book is a coedited volume, *Capability, Freedom and Equality: Amartya Sen's Work from a Gender Perspective*. Her writings have received academic acclaim globally as well as been used extensively in framing policy by governments, NGOs, and international agencies. In 2002, she received the Malcolm Adisheshiah Award for distinguished contributions to development studies, and in 2005 received the first Ramesh Chandra Award for outstanding contributions to agricultural economics. In 2008, she was conferred the Padma Shri by the President of India.

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Rethinking Collectivities: Institutional Innovations in Group Farming, Community Forestry and Strategic Alliances is the 12th **B.N. Ganguli Memorial Lecture** delivered by **Professor Bina Agarwal** on 11th April 2008 at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies.

B.N. Ganguli Memorial Lectures are instituted in memory of the distinguished economist-intellectual Professor B.N. Ganguli, former Chair, CSDS Board of Governors.

Rethinking Collectivities:

Institutional Innovations in Group Farming, Community Forestry and Strategic Alliances

INTRODUCTION

It is an honour to be asked to deliver the B.N. Ganguli memorial lecture. I did not have the privilege of meeting Prof. Ganguli personally and until recently had only limited familiarity with his work. While working on the paper I will present today, however, I was pleased to discover his 1953 monograph entitled '*Land Reforms in New China*', based on his visit to China. In this monograph he writes at length about the benefits of production cooperatives and collective farming. A substantial part of my lecture today, entirely coincidentally, is precisely on that subject.

Today I will revisit an old idea from a fresh perspective - the idea of production collectivities and their central importance in enabling the poor to become agents of their own empowerment.

In the 1980s, when Bangladeshi women formed work groups with support from the NGO, BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), and began working outside their homes, many for the first time, they said: 'The most important thing I learned ... is that we are strong as a group. We can withstand pressure but alone we are nothing. A house cannot stand on one post. Put a post in each corner and it is strong!' (Hunt 1983). Indeed, grassroots action across the globe demonstrates that collectivities of the poor can improve their well-being in ways that individual approaches cannot: they can enhance

their incomes, their self-respect, their ability to challenge oppressive social norms, and their bargaining power in markets, at home and with the state.

Many developing countries today – India, China, Brazil, among others - are seeing high growth but widening inequality, persisting poverty, and a declining ecology and moral order. In this paper I argue that for the poor to gain we need a new approach to development – one that recognises the importance of collectivities and does not place the individual at the centre of all analysis and policy; and which displays low tolerance for poverty, inequality and environmental destruction. The poor, especially in market economies, need the strength that collectivities can offer for their economic, social and political advancement. But for effectiveness these collectivities need to provide the poor with real resources, not just credit; they need to reach beyond micro-enterprises through horizontal and vertical alliances; and they need to be able to challenge hierarchies and not remain embedded in them.

In recent years, we see two opposing trends: a growing attack on the idea of production collectivities on the one hand and the emergence of a diverse civil society and micro-collectivities on the other. Production collectivities, one of the hallmarks of socialism, have come under increasing attack both from practicing socialists and free market theorists. Socialism's history of forced collectivisation, especially under the USSR, with its inefficiencies and high human costs, did little to endear concepts such as common property and collective farming. Equally, most experiments with farmer cooperatives, even outside the context of state socialism, had rather little success, either as production units or as a means of empowering the poor. A complexity of factors no doubt underlay the failures, but a substantial role appears to have been played by inappropriate and inflexible institutional design, coercive implementation, and non-participatory management. Regrettably, however, in the minds of most people the experience discredited even the idea of production collectivities.

Increasingly in both socialist and other countries, economic reforms have strengthened individual property rights. In China, for example, a key element in the mid-1980s reforms was the shift from community-based use rights in land and communal farming to mostly household-based use rights and family

cultivation. These shifts represented pessimism about group property rights and collective functioning, especially in efficiency terms. A similar pessimism pervaded economic theory, be it Olsen's *Logic of Collective Action*, Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons*, or game theory.¹ Rational human beings, driven by self-interest, it was argued, will tend to free ride, and assuming that everyone thinks this way, none will have the incentive to produce the collective good, even if it were in everyone's interest to do so. Only coercion would lead people to act collectively. Is this pessimism warranted, either in theory or in practice?

Recent developments, theoretical and empirical, suggest otherwise. In theory there is growing recognition even by economists that many factors can help cooperation, such as repeated interactions that promise assurance, trust and reciprocity, peer pressure, especially in small groups that can rein in free riders, and shared social and moral norms within communities which can help transcend narrow self-interest. In practice, there exists a long history of group functioning – traditional labour exchange systems, social movements, and civil society formations. Indeed, today we are seeing the emergence of diverse collectivities, including of the poor, linked both with greater efficiency and enhanced equity, with prospects of poverty reduction, dignified livelihoods and empowering the poor. Group farming by women in India, self-help groups in South Asia and Africa, communities protecting forests across the globe, are cases in point.

Unlike the coercive, top-down experiments of yore, these initiatives are voluntary in nature, coexisting within (even drawing upon) market arrangements. Such institutional innovations, as I will term them, and some of which I will describe, suggest that it is time to rethink collectivities, not in terms of forced collectivisation but in terms of voluntary cooperation and participatory management. Such a rethinking is necessary if the poor are to emerge from their mesh of deprivation. We know today that their empowerment can depend critically on collectivities rather than individualities. But this understanding rarely extends to *production* collectivities, the idea of which is still overlaid by assumptions from past experiences in socialist and non-socialist contexts, without due recognition of the factors that led to their

1. See Olsen (1965), Hardin (1968), and for an excellent discussion on the relevant aspects of game theory, Baland and Platteau (1976).

failure and the potential for building alternatives. These assumptions need challenging both conceptually and on the basis of existing success stories. At the same time, most production collectivities are limited either in scale and reach or inclusiveness. To overcome these limitations we are likely to need not only a wider recognition of the potential of production collectivities but also innovative institutional solutions, such as strategic linkages with other collectivities, and efforts to sculpt a new moral order.

I focus here especially on two types of production collectivities: in agriculture and in forestry. My core examples - women's group farming and community forestry groups - are by no means the only types of production collectivities in the region - many other rural and urban groups could be identified. But the two I have chosen both create new systems of property rights. Both relate to major resources - one to agricultural land, the other to forests - access to which is key to the well-being of millions. Both represent a rethinking of conventional property rights systems. And both have transformative potential. They also demonstrate the contrast in outcomes depending on whether collectivities challenge social hierarchies or ignore them. I then induct the example of a third type of collectivity - women's self-help groups - as a potential link for strengthening the other two and transforming itself.

AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION COLLECTIVITIES

Indian agriculture today is in a crisis. We see this in stagnant yields, declining per capita foodgrain availability, livelihood insecurity and an incomplete agrarian transition: 60% of India's population is in agriculture which contributes only 18% of our GDP. Farm size is also falling - over 72% of our farmers operate under one hectare and 80% cultivate two hectares or less. And many farmers are uneducated, possess few skills outside agriculture, and are increasingly female: 51% of male workers but 71% of all women workers and 80% of rural female workers are still in agriculture, and their percentage is growing. The agrarian transition has been slow and highly gendered. As

men move out of agriculture to non-farm work, those left behind on farms are increasingly women. We thus see a growing feminisation of agriculture. An estimated 20-35% of households are defacto female headed, and 40% of all agricultural workers are women. The demographic profile of the Indian farmer today is thus rather different from that of the 1970s, and certainly a far cry from the young, articulate, new-technology seeking profile popularised in the Krishi Darshan TV programmes of that period. Social alienation has deepened, which, combined with debt burdens and the failure of high-risk crops, has created tendencies toward farmer suicides. Landlessness has also been growing (Rawal 2008).

Agriculture today needs higher productivity as well as the ability to provide viable livelihoods to large numbers. To fulfil these goals, it appears critical to recognise the changed demographics of this sector. In the recent preoccupation with the financial and technical fix for agricultural ills there is little discussion on the institutional framework for dealing with the crisis. For example, it is indisputable that Indian agriculture urgently needs more investment in infrastructure (irrigation, roads, etc), as well as research and extension. But we need to ask – by what institutional arrangement will the infrastructure be delivered for effectiveness? How will we ensure access to it by the small and marginal farmers? A new more collective approach to farming could address these concerns, and provide a way by which investments can promote both growth and sustainable livelihoods.

Of course, the idea of collective agricultural management is not new, but historically it was conceptualised and implemented in a top-down fashion, often involved coercion, was based on large production units, and typically led to negative consequences both for productivity and human well-being. A new approach will require bringing to bear on it lessons from past failures as well as current success stories.

(1) Lessons from history: top-down collectivities

Historically, agricultural collectivities have been mainly of two types: production collectivities involving some form of joint cultivation, and service collectivities for providing credit, inputs and marketing support.

Typically production collectivities failed and service cooperatives (single or multipurpose) had mixed success.²

Production collectivities

Joint cultivation was linked mainly to socialist collectivisation, such as in the USSR, Eastern Europe and China, but during the 1960s and 1970s there were also significant experiments in many non-socialist countries – such as Ecuador and Nicaragua in Latin America, Ethiopia and Tanzania (the Ujaama experiment) in Africa, Israel (the Kibbutz) in the Middle East, and on a minor scale in India. Below I present these early experiences in broad brushstrokes as a background to my discussion of the current period, rather than as a comprehensive assessment of the past.

Socialist collectivisation was characterised by five features which had especially negative outcomes: coercive pooling of small peasant farms; compulsory requisitioning of produce; vast sizes of production enterprises; the farmers' lack of voice in management decisions; and hidden as well as explicit forms of socio-economic inequality (especially gender inequality). Forced farm collectivisation was characteristic of the USSR during 1929-1933, which despite its disastrous consequences served as a model for other socialist states, such as Hungary in 1948 (with subsequent reversals), Poland and



USSR, Ukraine collective farms: Massive sizes: 1930s

2. Cooperatives are one form that collectivities can take. Depending on context, I use either term for collective functioning.



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China: Mao with commune workers

Czechoslovakia in the 1950s, and China during the 1950s when, especially during the Great Leap Forward period, people's communes were formed throughout the rural areas. The collectives were also subject to high compulsory deliveries of grain to the state, and were enormous in scale, covering thousands of farm hectares and farming families. In China, by the end of 1958, some 25,000 communes had been set-up, each with an average of 5000 households. The USSR, in mid-1959, had an estimated 59,000 collective farms with an average of 320 households and 13,500 acres of land (Goyal 1966). And even in the late 1990s, long after the fall of the Berlin wall, Russia had an estimated 26,000 collective agricultural enterprises, each averaging 48,000 hectares of arable land (Hanstad 1998). Production and management decisions on land and technology were centralised and individual farmers had little voice. Moreover, no distinction was made between small and big farmers in the formation of collectives – all were placed together – a situation unlikely to have encouraged egalitarian social interaction.

The effects of this massive forced collectivisation were disastrous in most part. In several countries, especially the USSR and China, famines followed, and millions of people and animals died (animals were also



Soviet Union, famine 1933

slaughtered by peasants as a form of resistance).³ Elsewhere also, as in North Vietnam, overall production and living conditions deteriorated after collectivisation (Kerkvliet 2003).⁴ Some countries in Eastern Europe escaped this fate by shifting course fairly soon after initiating collectivisation. Hungary, for example, abolished compulsory deliveries, invested in agricultural infrastructure, introduced high purchase prices for farmers, and allowed households to keep small individual plots for cultivation and animal upkeep.⁵ But elsewhere such lessons were learnt late. In China, Lin's (1990) analysis demonstrates that voluntariness – the ability to stay in or to exit the collective

3. For the USSR, see Robinson (1967) and Nove (1969), and for China see Lin (1990) and Putterman (1997). Lin (1990: 1229, fn) also cites evidence for the Soviet Union indicating that it took 23 years, minus the World War II years, for productivity to reach the pre-World War I level; and that collectivization led to an excess mortality of 5 million during the inter-census period from 17 December 1926 to 17 January 1939. See also Deininger (1993), who compares collective farms formed by forcibly collectivising small farms in China during 1959-61 and North Vietnam during 1958-71, with subsequently decollectivised farms, and shows that productivity was much higher in the latter.

4. Here the process of collectivisation began with persuasion but soon became coercive as pressure for speedy formation of collectives intensified (Kerkvliet 2005).

5. See, e.g., Swain (1985, 1992) and Berend (1990).

– was of critical importance in determining the impact on agricultural productivity. He attributes the collapse of Chinese agricultural production during 1959-61 to ‘the deprivation of the right to withdraw from the collective in the fall of 1958’ (Lin 1990: 2229).

Outside the context of state socialism, experiments in joint farming were different from the socialist experiments in some significant respects and similar in others. Many of the experiments in the 1960s and 1970s were propelled by pro-small peasant land reform (Ghose, 1983), but were influenced by socialist assumptions about large farm efficiency. Broadly joint cultivation was promoted in two ways:

- By pooling the land of small farms into large cooperatives, as in Ethiopia and Tanzania (the Ujaama experiment).
- By constituting cooperatives on state-controlled land that had either been confiscated from large owners under land reform programmes or otherwise belonged to the state, as in Nicaragua, Ecuador and Israel.

In some countries both types of collective enterprises were promoted simultaneously.



Ecuador collective farm workers

A common feature in almost all cases, however, was the large size of the production unit. In Ethiopia, for instance, in the mid-1970s, some 20,000 peasant associations with 5 million members were created within a year. Each collective cultivated on average 800 ha (Alula and Kiros, 1983). The produce was shared equally, but farmers had rather little say in management. In Tanzania's Ujaama experiment, the entire village was a part of the programme, making for a large arena for cooperation, a lack of homogeneity among participants, and an inflexibility in adaptation to local needs. Also, although these initiatives initially sought to follow some degree of voluntariness, most soon graduated to coercion, both in the speed with which cooperatives were pushed forward, and the pressures applied on farmers to join. Evaluations showed that many village committees were controlled by rich farmers since the old hierarchical village structure persisted, long-standing local practices were disregarded, implementation involved excessive speed, and coercion (including threats of imprisonment) replaced the initial emphasis on voluntariness and incentives (Ibhawoh and Dibua 2003, Scott 1999, Apthorpe 1972). These features carried the seeds of failure.

In Ecuador and Nicaragua, however, a large percentage of agricultural production cooperatives were formed not by land pooling among those who already had land, but by the state providing the landless or near-landless access to land released from land reform programmes or government-owned wasteland, on condition that it be cultivated collectively. Between 1981-86, 70% of the new land distributed through agrarian reform was under cooperatives, involving almost 49,000 families (Carlos, 1988).⁶ Here there was no direct coercion of small peasants, but the collectives were created in a non-participatory way, and again were often of very large size (in some parts of Ecuador each collective farm was around 10,000 ha: Borda 1971) making participatory planning by farmers virtually impossible. Israel's kibbutzes were also in most part of this type, allowing voluntary membership by new settlers but in farms of large size.⁷ Large size, lack of voluntariness and top-down management were substantial negatives in these initiatives.

6. This is separate from the legalisation of farmers already cultivating land.

7. Also here the state went much beyond production collectives to the collective organising of community life itself, including the upbringing of children (Mort and Brenner 2003; Gavron 2000).

The productivity and welfare outcomes of cooperatisation in non-socialist regimes were mixed. In Latin America, some early assessments indicate that it led to better adoption of improved seeds, modern technology and fertilisers, and hence to productivity gains (Borda 1971), but crop-wise results were mixed, and the incomes of the landless declined in some regions (Peek 1983). In Ethiopia, food consumption and incomes improved, but in Tanzania the impact on productivity and welfare were uneven, and poverty persisted (Apthorpe 1972).

Service cooperatives

While production cooperatives also performed service functions such as joint procurement of inputs and marketing, solely service cooperatives, unlike production collectivities, did not involve joint cultivation. Established during the 1950s and 1960s in many countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, especially those newly independent from colonial rule, service cooperatives were successful to a greater extent than production cooperatives.⁸ But even they were susceptible to socio-economic inequalities. Where constituted of both large and small farmers, the benefits flowed mainly to the former; and class, gender and other social differences were largely ignored in their formation, leaving the institutions open to domination by men and the better-off. Studies sponsored by UNRISD in the late 1960s to examine the functioning of cooperatives in Asia, Latin America and Africa were especially revealing.⁹ Summarising the findings across these regions, UNRISD (1975) notes: 'It is the better-off rural inhabitants who mainly [took] advantage of the cooperative services and facilities such as government-supported credit and technical assistance channelled through cooperatives.' It added: 'where cooperatives are more community-wide in their membership, the existing structure in the community tends to be reproduced within the cooperative. Those who are better-off control the committees and management, and influence the nature and distribution of the benefits.' (p. xi). For women, both social structure and an inbuilt gender bias proved exclusionary. For instance,

8. See, Deininger (1993) and Inayatullah (1972),

9. See Borda (1971) for Latin America, Inayatullah (1972) for Asia, Apthorpe (1972) for Africa and UNRISD (1975) for a consolidated overview. In addition, for India, which the UNRISD project covered only in a supplementary note, see especially Frankel (1978) and Goyal (1966).

even though women's work in cultivation was vital in all regions, as was their involvement in marketing in many regions, especially in Africa, membership in the service cooperatives was limited to one person per household, which in practice was the male household head (Apthorpe 1972; UNRISD 1975).

Both production and service collectivities were more successful in bringing benefits to communities where socio-economic inequalities were low,¹⁰ solidarity based on social affinities among the participating farmers was high, the units were relatively small in scale, and there was effective democratic authority and a willingness to weed out the non-performers.¹¹ These elements can prove key to successful cooperation, especially as demonstrated by the experience (elaborated further below) of production collectivities in recent years in India and elsewhere.

Early cooperatives in India

India's experiments with cooperatives in the 1950s and 1960s provide similar lessons. Cooperatives were seen as a major instrument of rural economic development which appealed to planners across an ideological spectrum, including both the socialists and the Gandhians (Frankel, 1978). In 1946 the Cooperative Planning Committee suggested both production cooperatives for joint cultivation (by small farmers either pooling owned land or collectively leasing in government land) and service cooperatives (for credit, joint input purchase, machine use, and other services).¹² It was envisaged that in cooperatives constituted through land pooling, members would get wages for their workdays and an extra dividend for the land contributed, and the managing committee would be elected democratically to supervise the operations. In going the cooperative route, Indian planners were also strongly influenced by experiments in China which delegations of Indian economists,

10. Evaluations in many countries indicate that joint farming worked better where the members knew each other and social differentiation was minimum.

11. Inayatullah (1972), for example, in his study of fourteen rural service collectivities providing credit and inputs in Iran, Pakistan and Ceylon, found that the four with a positive impact (two in Ceylon and two in East Pakistan) had all of these features. See also, Borda (1971) and Ruben and Lerman (2005) on the importance of social affinities in the early stages of collectivisation in Latin America.

12. Goyal (1966) provides a clear and useful exposition.

among them B.N. Ganguli, visited in the early 1950s. Ganguli wrote several papers on the subject on his return, including his much cited 1953 monograph in which he outlined the advantages of joint farming at some length.

The few studies of these early experiments in India, however, indicate that joint farming did not go far. There was considerable resistance from large landowners supporting the ruling Congress party; and state governments who were responsible for implementation (since agriculture was a state subject), largely put the idea on a back burner. At best, some states tried it on a pilot basis (Frankel 1978). In his study of six Punjab districts, Goyal (1966:122) found only 111 joint farms in 1958,¹³ typically controlling medium to large sized holdings of over 100 acres, and cultivating them through hired labour and mechanisation, rather than as small owner cultivators. Only half of the 20 such collectivities he sought to study in depth were functional. In these the members were usually constituted from an extended family network, or were of the same sub-caste. They had been formed as a result of various government incentives (including leniency in applying ceiling laws) rather than at the farmers' own initiative.¹⁴

Solely service cooperatives of that period were geographically more widespread than joint farming, and were more successful since they did not require substantial collective effort. Even these were, however, vulnerable to elite capture when constituted of members coming from highly unequal socio-economic strata, and they mainly benefited the large and medium farmers, rather than the small and marginal. As Frankel (1978: 196), notes: 'The dominant landed castes, increasing both their economic and political leverage, gained access to additional sources of credit and scarce modern inputs introduced into the villages of the community development program.' In time, a different type of service cooperative, commonly termed as a 'producers' cooperative, which *did* benefit the small producer, emerged, such as Anand, the highly successful milk cooperative in Gujarat, and the sugar cooperatives of Maharashtra.¹⁵ But

13. Projecting from these six districts, he estimates that Punjab as a whole had 198 joint cooperative farming societies which constituted 44% of all cooperative societies in the state.

14. Goyal nevertheless remained an advocate of joint farming and extolled its many economic benefits, while also emphasising that positive outcomes were more likely if cooperation was voluntary and the group had kinship or other affinity ties.

15. See Somjee and Somjee (1978) and Mascarenhas (1988) on the Anand milk cooperative, and Baviskar (1980) on Maharashtra's sugar cooperatives.

in such cooperatives there is no joint production, simply joint marketing of individual producers' goods.

Gender bias

It is notable that these collectivities all took the family as the participating unit. Hence, although there is rather little discussion of gender effects in the literature on cooperatives, it can be surmised that in the collectivities formed within non-socialist regimes – with the exception of the kibbutz – women remained embedded in traditional social roles and positions of disempowerment.¹⁶ Even within socialist regimes, women workers got an unequal deal. In the Soviet Union, women in collective farms were concentrated in manual jobs that were designated less skilled and received lower remuneration. Only 0.8% of tractor drivers and 1.4% of machinery handlers were women, and 85% of women employees relative to 66% of male workers in collectivised farms were in jobs labelled 'unskilled' (Swain 1985: 99). Similarly, in Hungary, women's concentration in work that was seasonal and designated as low skilled brought them lower earnings in agricultural producer cooperatives than men. In China, again, women earned less work points than men – in 1973 the gender differential in average work points was 2.5 (Swain, 1985:98-99). In Vietnam as well, women were given harder tasks with fewer work points than men (Kerkvliet 2005: 91). In India, the family was represented by the male household head, except in women-headed households, and production cooperatives (few though they were) were constituted by family units rather than individuals. It was also the family unit that sought membership in the service cooperatives. This needs emphasis since the successful cases of group farming I will describe further below break this pattern and are constituted of women alone.

In overview then, the historical experience of collective farming within the socialist context, characterised by coercive formation, large sized units, compulsory grain requisitioning, and top-down decision making, was marked

16. In Latin America even in service cooperatives, as already noted, the head of household, who was typically male, was the member.

by strong disincentives for the farmers, and brought little of the expected gains in productivity and human welfare. Collectivities in non-socialist regimes, while somewhat more voluntary in scope, were yet not free from coercion, had large production units, top-down decision-making and little adaptation to local conditions. There was also inbuilt gender inequality in both the socialist and non-socialist contexts. It is notable that in countries where the initial large collectives were subsequently downsized, and peasants allowed an exit option, many survived. In Nicaragua, for instance, in 1989, long after the collectivisation drive, the rural cooperative sector covered 21% of agricultural land, 20% of the population and 24% of agricultural production (Ruben and Lerman 2005: 33).

(2) Potential gains from bottom-up production collectivities

A successful framework for small farmer Indian agriculture requires a substantially different kind of production collectivity than these historical examples. In particular, from the lessons learnt we can say that collectivities should be framed around at least six principles:

- Voluntariness;
- Small size, constituted of say groups of 10-12 or 15-20 farmers;
- Socio-economic homogeneity of members – the groups be constituted of farmers from broadly the same socio-economic strata;
- Participatory decision-making in production, management and distribution, including on which crops to grow, what technology to use, what contract to enter into, how to distribute the produce, and changes therein as conditions require;
- A system of checks and penalties for containing free riding and ensuring accountability within the group; and
- A fair distribution of the production returns which would belong entirely to the group for reinvestment and distribution, as decided transparently by the group.

The collective activity could range from simply joint investment in a lumpy (physically indivisible) input, to land pooling and joint cultivation by small owners, or even joint acquisition of land by purchase or lease. What are

the potential advantages of such bottom-up collectivities as compared with individual production units?

A group approach in agriculture would be especially helpful where there is a predominance of small and marginal farmers who could reap both production benefits and bargaining power in acting jointly rather than individually. Individually-operating small farmers face resource constraints in input purchase and scale diseconomies in capital investment. These problems are compounded if the small farmer also happens to be female. In India, for instance, even as the face of the farmer is becoming increasingly female few women have direct access to the farmer's main resource – agricultural land. Families transfer land mostly to male heirs, the state transfers land largely to male household heads, and markets favour men over women, since they have more financial resources (Agarwal 1994, 2003). Women are also seriously disadvantaged as farmers due to male bias in extension and credit access, as well as social restrictions on their mobility and free interaction in the marketplace for input procurement and product sale (Agarwal 1994, 2003). Rather few are themselves members of service cooperatives. A bottom-up, more collective approach to farming can address these constraints. Indeed it can do a great deal for reviving small farmer agriculture, which is an imperative both for increasing agricultural growth and for providing subsistence to substantial numbers.

Potential Advantages of Group Farming

Group farming can:

- **Improve access to land**
- **Increase cultivable area**
- **Enhance ability to invest in irrigation and other lumpy infrastructure**
- **Expand prospects for crop diversification**
- **Enable labour sharing**
- **Enlarge pool of skills, knowledge, and talents**
- **Enable risk sharing**
- **Increase prospects for higher value agricultural production and crop insurance**
- **Enhance bargaining power with institutions providing credit, inputs, technology and information**
- **Help move from deficit to surplus producing farmers and so take advantage of agricultural price rise**
- **Improve ability to adapt to or mitigate climate change effects**
- **Reduce social isolation**
- **Increase social clout and community status**

To begin with, a group approach can prove key to increasing market access to land for the landless. If supported by state subsidised credit for land purchase or leasing in, groups can prove much more effective than individuals for accessing land through the market. This would especially benefit women who, as noted, are predominantly landless without the financial resources at an individual level to operate effectively in the land market.

A group approach could also enable small and marginal farmers to undertake lumpy investments by pooling financial resources. It is not economically viable for small farmers operating one or two hectares, especially if further fragmented, to invest in irrigation or machinery such as tractors or even keep a pair of bullocks all year round. An active rental market can help with tractors and bullocks, but water leasing requires other essentials such as negotiating passage for water channels and managing water flows, all of which are more difficult (if at all possible) to undertake through rental arrangements, if the fields of non-participating farmers fall in-between. Joint investment by small farmers with contiguous plots could provide an answer. Groups can also establish water harvesting systems more economically than can individuals.

Pooling land and cultivating it collectively in small groups involves a much higher level of collectivity than simply investment in inputs, but it can also bring more productivity gains and social empowerment. First, it can spread the risk of farming among a larger number and increase potential opportunities. Cultivating as a group, farmers would be better placed to experiment with higher value, more risk-prone crops with larger payoffs. It would also enlarge farm choices for crop diversification since a collective pool of land is more likely to have different types of soil.

Second, land pooling can increase the area available for cultivation, since boundaries and bunding between fields would become unnecessary and the saved area could be added to the field (see also Ganguli 1953). It would also overcome the disadvantage of land fragmentation by enabling consolidation.

Third, sharing labour under joint cultivation can especially benefit marginal farmers. When functioning as a group, farmers can, as seen from the

examples below, substitute for a member who may be temporarily unable to work due to illness or other exigency. Marginal farmers dependent only on family labour, with little access to hired labour, could especially gain by such pooling for peak labour needs. There would also be less conflict/competition between farmers for obtaining extra labour during peak seasons (see also Ganguli 1953). Traditionally labour exchange systems served these needs to some extent, but such arrangements have declined substantially over time, except among women for female operations in certain regions (Agarwal 2000). Also, a collectivity would bring together a greater diversity of skills, talents and knowledge than found in one person or family. Skill pooling can lead to higher returns. For women farmers, in particular, a group could bring into the fold women with leadership qualities or scarce managerial skills.

Fourth, a group would be in a better position to enter into non-exploitative contract farming arrangements. It is now becoming increasingly common for companies requiring an assured supply of agricultural raw materials or running food processing and retailing chains to enter into contracts with farmers. Typically these arrangements are with individuals rather than with farmers' groups. Evidence from Latin America and India shows that such arrangements seldom benefit small and marginal farmers, except in the rare cases where the contracts are with *a group* of farmers and there are protective laws in place.¹⁷ Companies usually contract larger farmers (Singh 2000). Small farmers, where involved, are vulnerable to exploitative terms: prices are often low, capital and input transfers rare, and farmers risk crop rejection on grounds of uneven quality.¹⁸ Women in farm households often lose out since their workload increases while men control the cash generated (Collins 1993); nutrition can suffer if the money generated from commercial crops is not spent on food which was earlier grown for self-consumption; and intrafamily tensions are noted to have increased in some countries (see Bulow and Sorensen 1993, cited in Kumar 2006). In India, the rare examples of small and marginal farmers benefiting are those where they have entered into contracts in collective ways.¹⁹ In Punjab, for instance, the Mahindra Shubhlabh Services

17. For Mexico, see specially, Runsten and Key (1996); for India, see Singh (2000) and Kumar (2006).

18. See, Warning, Key and Soo Hoo (draft) for case studies on Mexico and Senegal on why small farmers get excluded.

19. Also, except in Haryana, there are no laws to guide contractual terms.

Ltd followed a consortium approach, with contractual safeguards for risk protection in maize farming. In South India, the United Planter's Association of South India signed contracts with women's self-help groups for tea cultivation, with some companies buying 90% of their tea from self-help groups (Singh 2000). Basically, unless the small and marginal farmers are organised into self-help groups or cooperatives, their bargaining power with companies remains weak. As a group, however, they can negotiate better terms, afford legal aid to ensure non-exploitative contracts, and obtain crop insurance (which is currently highly state subsidised, inefficient and unequally distributed: Ghosh and Yadav 2008). Contracts given to women's groups could also ensure that both men and women gain.

Fifth, groups would be better placed than individuals to deal with short-term shocks such as rising food prices and long-term disasters due to climate change. The rural poor in agriculture are net buyers and not net sellers of foodgrains. The recent rise in prices is estimated to add millions more to the numbers of the poor globally. As a group, they would be better protected both as producers and consumers. As producers, they would be more able to move from deficit to surplus producers and gain from the price rise in the various ways noted above – by better access to infrastructure and production technology, and by taking advantage of the potential of higher value crops or contract farming arrangements. As consumers, they would be in a better position to undertake income smoothing. Steps to adapt to or mitigate climate change similarly requires local implementation of projects such as soil improvement, water harvesting systems, tree planting, crop diversification, and so on – all of which are more viable as group projects. Although some of these can be undertaken by farmers cultivating individually and cooperating only for creating common goods, others such as soil improvement require reciprocal arrangements on farmers' fields which would have scale economies when undertaken collectively.

Sixth, a farmers' collectivity would be more socially empowered than individuals. It can improve the clout of farmers with government agencies and institutions and so their access to formal credit, inputs and information (see also Braverman et al. 1991). In this sense the collective serves as a bargaining unit. Also cooperative risk pooling via joint liability for default can enhance the

credit worthiness of the borrowers (Deininger 1993). It could also enhance their bargaining power and social respect within the community. For dalit (low caste) farmers, for instance, enhanced respect from community members means enhanced dignity. Also networks and relationships developed in working together can come in handy in times of illness or personal misfortune. And by reducing both the monetary risk of farming and social alienation, membership in a group could reduce suicidal tendencies among farmers in times of financial crisis (see also, Kurien 2007).

These benefits of land pooling, joint investment and collective cultivation need not be confined to those who already own land, but can extend to the landless leasing in land.²⁰ Moreover, all these advantages would be further enhanced if the collectivities were formed of women farmers, given the constraints the latter face in operating individually - their lack of control over land and major assets, their resource and financial constraints in input purchase and capital investment, the social restrictions on their mobility and public interaction, and their greater vulnerability to market swings and climatic shifts.

The groups, however, would need to be small and socio-economically homogenous to overcome the classic problem of free riding, such as in the form of work shirking in group cultivation.²¹ Small-sized groups constituted of people who know each other can enforce penalties for shirkers through weekly meetings, management committees, or other methods. Moral pressure can also be brought to bear where groups are formed by people who know each other socially.

Can this potential of production collectivities be realised in practice? Ground experience gives room for optimism. There are several examples of farmers in India successfully working collectively, ranging from joint

20. As described above, in some of the non-socialist regimes, collective farming was commonly undertaken by forming production cooperatives composed of landless peasants and was an important means of helping them to access land.

21. See especially Olsen (1965) on free riding. Since then, economists have recognised that many factors can contain free riding, including norms of trust and reciprocity within societies and peer pressure and vigilance within small groups.

investment in lumpy inputs such as irrigation technology to the pooling of purchased or leased in land for joint cultivation.

(3) Joint investment and Group Cultivation: ground examples

There are historical as well as current examples of group investment in infrastructure such as irrigation wells in north India. Group investment in irrigation wells goes back a long way historically, such as the long-standing *Sanjh* system in Punjab where two or more farmers with adjacent plots often dug a well together (Goyal 1966, and Darling 1947). In the mid-1980s I also personally observed farmers owning several fragments of land jointly investing in tubewells with other farmers in Alwar district, Rajasthan. To illustrate, one farmer with three plots invested in tubewells with three sets of eight farmers each who owned contiguous plots. By investing collectively such a farmer effectively owned 3/8^{ths} of a tubewell with which he could irrigate his entire land. This would not have been possible on an individual basis.

Group cultivation, however, is a much higher scale of collectivity than group investment in infrastructure. The successful examples of this, to my knowledge, all involve poor women farmers, supported by local NGOs and state schemes. These initiatives embody an important and innovative shift – the abandonment of the age-old assumption that farms are to be cultivated only on a family basis and the promotion of collective farming by groups of women.

A success story of group cultivation

The earliest and best-known example comes from Andhra Pradesh in south India.²² With the support of the Deccan Development Society (DDS), which works in drought-prone Medak district, poor low-caste women have been leasing in or purchasing land in groups, through various government credit schemes. The central plank of DDS' approach is to ensure food security in an environmentally friendly way, through organic farming and multiple cropping.

22. For elaboration see Agarwal (2003), the discussion in which is based on Sateesh (1997a, 1997b); Hall (1999); Menon (1996); DDS (1994-95); my fieldvisits to DDS in 1998 and conversations with several women's sangams and key women informants; and my discussions with P.V. Sateesh and Rukmini Rao over 1998-2002.

The group leasing programme, initiated in 1989, now involves about 700 women, organised in groups of 5 to 15 each, across 52 villages. About 25% of the rent is paid by members of these groups or sangams, and the rest through interest-free loans from DDS, which the groups then repay. The groups are financially viable. After paying the rent and other costs, as well as DDS's loan (in instalments) and keeping aside grain for seed, the harvest is shared equally by the members. Many high-caste landlords now want to lease their land to these groups, confident that they, unlike individual leasers, will not default. Typically, when the lease of say 3-5 years ends, the group negotiates a new one; sometimes the members reconfigure into new groups. The state government has also allowed women's groups to use loan money from other anti-poverty schemes, to lease in land.

A related innovation has been group farming on land *purchased* by groups of women. This draws on a state government scheme that provides subsidised credit to groups of landless scheduled-caste women for buying agricultural land in a group. Half the money takes the form of a grant and half of a loan repayable within 20 years. Catalysed by DDS, women form a group (a sangam) and apply for the loan after identifying the land they want to buy. The purchased land is divided equally among the group members and registered in individual names. Today, 24 women's groups in 14 villages are cultivating some 500 acres (about 200 ha) of purchased land. Each woman owns one acre but cultivates it jointly, in a group of 8-10 women. None of them would have been able to purchase such land or viably cultivate it on an individual basis.

Usually leasing precedes purchase. This helps women judge the land's quality, potential productivity, and ability to function as a group. In some cases, good harvests on the leased land allow women to save enough to buy land. As a lease group, the women can build trust and solidarity and learn to tackle conflicts and free riding, before venturing into purchase. Defaulters can be evicted. Only 5% of the lease groups have failed so far. On both leased and purchased land, women practice organic farming and multi-cropping to reduce the risk of crop failure and provide a balanced subsistence diet. Some grow upto 24 crop varieties a year.



DDS

DDS: Sangam women sowing

Benefits and challenges

Group cultivation has not only helped realise many of the potential benefits noted above, it has brought additional gender-related gains since rural women face particular constraints, including those arising from less experience in public dealings on production matters. The sangam women have learnt to survey and measure land, hire tractors, travel to town to meet government officials, buy inputs, and market the produce. Collective cultivation allows flexibility in labour time, cost sharing, and the pooling of their differential skills in farming, accounting, and public dealing. As women themselves affirm: 'Collective cultivation is better; both labour and produce is shared. It builds a better feeling.'

Standard collective action problems are solved by peer pressure. Work-shirkers are penalised in the groups' weekly meetings. The fact that the women are all from the same village and are co-dependent in other ways creates pressure against default. Sometimes groups do split, but usually they



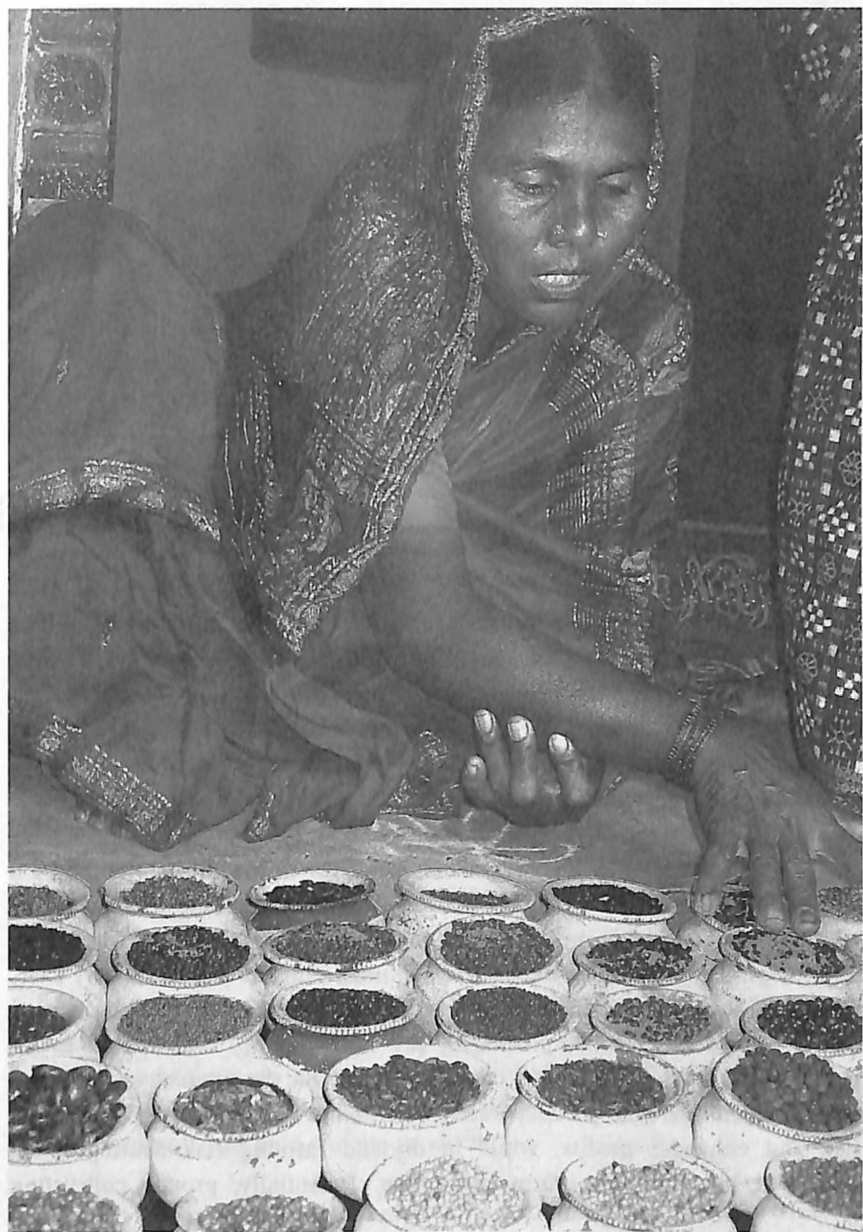
DDS

DDS: Sangam women weeding



DDS

DDS: Sangam women cleaning grain



Michèle Pimbert

DDS: Sangam woman preserving grain varieties



DDS

DDS: Sangam women – weekly meeting

reconstitute into new more cohesive ones, and restart joint cultivation. The voluntary nature of group formation allows this realignment which we had noted earlier is key to institutional success. Moreover, having worked together they see the advantages of collective farming and build a habit of cooperation.²³ These groups have all the features that even Mancur Olsen would have recognised as conducive to containing free riding.

Of course other challenges can arise; for instance, there could be a conflict of interest if the sangam woman's family owns land and needs her labour. In practice, this problem is minimal since an individual's time input into the group's land is not excessive, and most sangam women, in any case, belong to landless families. Another difficulty can arise when individual cultivation becomes more profitable, say if the family unit can invest in irrigation. In such cases, there can be pressure on the woman to leave the group and cultivate her plot separately. Assured irrigation reduces cultivation risk and enhances profits, while in dryland farming risk sharing is an important incentive for group cultivation. Potentially, groups cultivating

23. On cooperation being habit forming, see Seabright (1997).

purchased land are more prone to splitting, since women have an exit option. In practice, such splits are rare. If they occur some reconstitute into new units, others settle for a lower level of jointness by investing collectively in irrigation, marketing, etc.

There are also other gains for group members: improvement in diets, health care and children's education, and better gender relations with the community and family. Women bargain for higher wages when they need supplementary work since they now have a choice and can refuse jobs which pay too little. Bonded labour and caste indignities have also declined. The observations of Ratnamma, a sangam member, (cited in Hall, 1999) are illustrative: 'They [the high caste people] used to call us by the caste name which was very derogatory. Now they put the respectful suffix – amma – and seat us on an equal basis [in public gatherings]. It is only because we have an organisation that they [the landlords] won't touch us – that they are scared to cross us.' Women also report that local government officials give them priority over individual men. On the personal front women note a decline in domestic violence and greater control over their own earnings. About half control the income from their land. Some husbands have returned to their wives after the latter purchased land, and most women said spouses listen to them now. In general, P.V. Satheesh (founder member and Director of DDS, cited in Hall 1999) notes:

The first sense of empowerment came to women and men in the community when the women started leasing in land. Men, and especially powerful men in the villages, had the perception that women were useless, as agricultural labourers they could only work under supervision. This perception was slightly internalised by the women. The land leases completely debunked this view. When women acquire land, there is a win-win situation for everybody. The landlords who are not cultivating get money. Women improve the land and get produce.

There have also been community benefits in the form of enhanced food security. In several dozen villages, supported by the Ministry of Rural

Development, DDS initiated a programme to bring fallow land under cultivation by extending loans to poor male farmers through a committee of women who manage the programme.²⁴ Each participating farmer can enter two acres, and gets a loan in instalments over three years. In return, over five years, the farmer gives a specified amount of the grain he harvests to a community grain fund managed by the women. The women's committees (usually consisting of 5 women overseeing 20 acres each) ensure that the farmers use the loans for cultivation, supervise the operations, encourage the use of organic manure and mixed cropping, and collect the harvest share for the community grain fund. The committee also identifies and ranks the poor from the most needy upwards. The poorest are eligible for the most grain, sold to them at a low price. This alternative public distribution system adds to the community's food security.

Some of the important ingredients of these collectivities, such as a gender-progressive NGO, a group approach, and a focus on landless women, are also found in many other grassroots initiatives. But the focus on land linked with group farming is rare, in contrast to the usually less-effective income-generating work promoted under many government and NGO schemes for the poor. Also, these collectivities allow women to access land through the market (access which individual women seldom have) without depending on male-biased inheritance from families. And pooling land for cultivation helps overcome problems of small size and fragmentation. That the groups I have described are all women's groups is important in that it gives women independent access to assets, control over income, self-confidence, and social support from group members which they would not easily gain in family-centred cooperative farming.

These initiatives have all the six ingredients I mentioned earlier as conducive to collective functioning: they are voluntary in nature, socio-economically homogenous (in terms of class as well as gender), constituted of people who know each other, small sized in both membership and production units, participatory in decision-making with methods instituted for dealing with free riding, and in control of the produce which is shared equitably.

24. In many cases, the men had received the land under land reform programmes but been unable to cultivate it without infrastructural support.

Gender equity is not an issue here since these are all-women groups. Hence, in initiation, size and functioning, they are unlike both socialist collectivisation and the early non-socialist joint farming cooperatives, described earlier. They are also rare in being constituted only of women and not of households.

In this context, it is also worth considering another type of collective arrangement first suggested by me in Agarwal (1994) but so far tried on a very small scale. This alternative would involve the government giving poor rural women *group rights* over the land it distributes under various schemes. Effectively, the women would be stakeholders in a kind of land trust. Each woman in the group would have use rights but not the right to alienate the land. The daughters-in-law and daughters of such households who are resident in the village would share these use rights. Daughters marrying outside the village would lose such rights but could re-establish them by rejoining the production efforts, should they return on divorce or widowhood. In other words, land access would be linked formally with residence and working on the land. If such a scheme were initiated simultaneously in a group of villages within which there are intermarriages, and which constitute what could be termed 'a marriage circle', then daughters leaving the village on marriage would gain rights in their marital village and so obtain livelihood security there as well. In other words, this form of collectivity would give economic security to poor women, whatever their marital status, encourage long-term investment in the land, and bypass problems of the land reverting to male hands via inheritance.²⁵

Although all these examples relate to landless women, many aspects of their functioning and experience could equally be applied to cases where women have acquired some land through inheritance, purchase, or state transfer, which they then pool and jointly cultivate. In fact, the women who purchased land via subsidised credit are effectively owners pooling their land. Hence group farming offers potential benefits not only to landless women but also to women who own or have customary rights over small plots.

25. Although women, if they own land, can legally bequeath it to anyone they wish, there is social pressure to bequeath it to male heirs. Moreover, women themselves often feel that since daughters leave their birth village on marriage, giving land to daughters would effectively transfer it into the hands of the daughter's in-laws.

Moreover, the formation of groups need not be limited to women; they could also be constituted of marginal *male* farmers pooling in land and cultivating with family labour, given that most landowning rural households in India own less than one hectare. Indeed, some landless beneficiaries of West Bengal's 1970s land reform programme are now pooling their land for cultivation. At the same time, where families pool land under predominantly male management, although the potential productivity gains can be realised the gender equity effects could be minimal, in contrast to women-only farming groups. For example, women in families pooling land are likely to remain unpaid family labourers and gain few of the empowerment benefits that pooling land with non-family women tends to bring. Also we might ask: Is gender homogeneity an enabling factor in the success of group farming?

Gender homogeneity and ecological vulnerability

There are several reasons why women's production collectivities may work better than men's. Rural women are more interdependent on each other than men because they have fewer livelihood alternatives and hence exit options. They share similar constraints set by gendered social norms. In many areas, their work exchange systems continue to survive even when men's work exchange systems no longer operate.²⁶ And their social networks of marriage alliances and everyday forms of sharing are often different from men's and in large part do not overlap with the latter. Since these networks also provide a foundation for women's solidarity, it is likely that women's production groups could successfully be built on them. Moreover, since rural women's dependence on these networks for everyday survival is often greater than men's, and given their intersecting nature, women are likely to be less tempted to free ride, since doing so would reduce their ability to seek cooperation from fellow women on other counts. The overall cost of sanctions would also be greater for women than men because women usually have fewer alternatives. For similar reasons, women might also be more compelled than men to resolve conflicts faster and better sustain collective action. In Andhra Pradesh, for instance, when I asked a women's collective farming group whether there

26. For elaboration, see Agarwal (2000).

was any difference in conflict resolution between men's and women's groups, I was told:

'Men have bigger fights; they get physical. We women may shout but finally we resolve the conflict before getting up from the meeting.'

Author: 'Why is there this difference?'

Women's farming group: 'Men say: Why should we sit here. If we get up and leave, the problem too will go away. Women reflect more. *They say: even if I am fighting with her now, I have to go together with her for weeding or water, or if I don't have flour in the house, I will have to borrow from her. This is always at the back of our minds.* We also understand each other's problems and mistakes better' (emphasis mine).

It is notable too that DDS, when first established in 1983, worked only with male farmers until, as P.V. Sathesh reports, the village women challenged this exclusivity and asked: 'Why don't you work with women?' Subsequently, DDS set up both men's and women's groups, initially as credit and thrift groups. As problems of corruption and non-cooperation undermined the men's groups, DDS shifted almost entirely to all-women sangams. The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh too began with men's savings groups and then moved almost entirely to women's groups. Self-help groups in India are again predominantly constituted of women. All this does suggest that gender could be a factor in successful group functioning in particular contexts, likely stemming from the specificity of women's socio-economic position. That there is group homogeneity – the women are all poor and interdependent – could also be an enabling factor.

Yet another factor that is likely to impinge on farming collectivities is the extent of ecological vulnerability. Group farming may be more successful at two ends of the spectrum: first, in ecologically vulnerable contexts where there is subsistence rainfed agriculture and a high risk of crop failure – here

cooperation can reduce production risks, as observed in DDS' experiment above; and second in areas where irrigated farming and high value crop cultivation is possible, but small farm size and high individual risks are a constraint. Here again cooperation can have high payoffs. All these aspects warrant exploration.

The agricultural production collectivities I have described represent imaginative and effective institutional innovations which have created collective property within market systems, and provided dignified livelihoods. They have also challenged existing social hierarchies of caste and gender. But are they replicable?

Apart from Andhra Pradesh, small-scale experiments by NGOs in women's group farming can be found in states such as Gujarat and Kerala. Some women's groups are also doing tea cultivation on contract, as noted above. In addition, a few years ago an UNDP-GOI project involved 50,000 women in three states (Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa) in group farming, by forming small groups, although their economic and social effectiveness needs more probing.²⁷ In Bangladesh, again, there is a striking example of landless women forming cooperative groups with the help of the NGO, Proshika, to acquire minor irrigation equipment and the rights to sell water to male farmers. In turn, this has encouraged the male farmers to form cooperatives, since to take advantage of this service they need to pool their plots and cooperate with each other in the command area of the water source (Wood and Palmer-Jones 1991).

The question of scale and reach, however, remains. One innovative way of enlarging both would be through strategic alliances between collectivities of the poor, as described further below. But first consider my second somewhat different example of a production collectivity – community forestry groups.

27. For initial positive evaluations, see Burra (2004) and GOI-UNDP (2004-05).

COMMUNITY FORESTRY

Unlike peasant farms, forests are a common pool resource, but communities as management units are also collectivities which, like other production collectivities, embody potential challenges of coordination and cooperation. And just as the project of group farming has to overcome the negative history of top-down collectivisation, so the project of community forestry has had to overcome the hurdle of pre-existing ideas and entrenched structures. Although today the idea of communities managing forests is fairly well accepted in India and in a growing number of countries globally, it is not practiced universally, nor was it seen as an obvious organisational form even two decades ago. Rather it was subject to substantial contestation theoretically in what came to be known as the property rights debate.

(1) The Property rights debate

The debate was focused on the question: what kinds of property rights and institutional arrangements would best promote environmental conservation - state, private, community, or co-management – each of which involves a different property rights regime?²⁸ At the heart of this debate were two interlinked issues: people's incentive to conserve and their ability to cooperate. Prevailing economic theory painted a pessimistic picture on both counts. Drawing on three interrelated 'models' - Hardin's (1968) 'tragedy of the commons'; the prisoner's dilemma in game theory; and Olsen's *The Logic of Collective Action* – it was argued that guided by individual self-interest, people would tend to free ride, each person expecting the others to do the same, leading to over-extraction of natural resources on the one hand and failure to cooperate on the other.²⁹ In Hardin's classic example of two herders grazing their animals on the commons, for instance, an individual herder would keep adding animals to his herd for immediate benefit rather than for long-term common interest, leading to overgrazing and the 'tragedy of the commons'.³⁰ Olsen added to this

28. For a useful discussion on property rights regimes, see especially, Schlager and Ostrom (1992).

29. All the models rested on the assumption of the self-interested utility maximising individual which dominated orthodox economics.

30. Other scholars extended the example to diverse contexts, such as local forests and fisheries (Ostrom, 1990).

pessimistic outlook, suggesting that people would simply free ride on the efforts of others, and assuming that everyone in a community thought this way none would help produce the collective good without ‘coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest’ (Olsen, 1965:2).

These writings had enormous influence especially among economists, many of whom concluded that it was ‘impossible for rational creatures to cooperate’ (Campbell cited in Ostrom, 1990: 5). Some suggested that the solution to a potential tragedy of the commons lay in centralised state control over forests, pastures, etc.³¹ Others suggested privatisation of the commons, assuming that private owners would have more incentive to conserve the resource, since they would reap the rewards.³² However, as several people pointed out, for state control to result in efficient outcomes would require the fulfilment of a number of conditions such as accurate information of local commons, the ability to monitor and sanction, no enforcement costs, etc.³³ These conditions are seldom met in practice. In practice, centralised forest management has been plagued with problems of rule enforcement among resistant local populations deprived of traditional use rights; high monitoring costs; inadequate information on local ecology; corruption in the forest bureaucracy; and so on.³⁴ Not surprisingly, centralised state management of forests across the developing world speaks substantially of state failure and inefficient outcomes.

Similarly, private property regimes could also be inefficient in practice.³⁵ Apart from the practical infeasibility of dividing vast resources among private owners, private monitoring would also be prohibitively costly, especially where access has been historically determined and would now be unequal. Moreover, there is no reason to expect private preferences to favour conservation over profitable exploitation, or individuals to be well informed about ways of conserving complex ecosystems. Forests are also a communal resource with many externalities, a global public good held in

31. See, e.g., Heilbroner (1974); and arguments in Ostrom (1990).

32. For elaboration, see Baland and Platteau (1996).

33. See e.g. Ostrom (1990), Baland and Platteau (1996), among others.

34. See, e.g. Baland and Platteau (1996), Agarwal (1986) and Ostrom (1990), among others.

35. See Baland and Platteau’s (1996) discussion on the stringent conditions needed for privatisation to work.

trust for future generations, in which millions of communities, and not just a few individuals, have a stake.

Acceptance of village communities as managers of local commons required crossing the hurdle of prevailing theory both by questioning narrow assumptions about *homo economicus* driven mainly by self interest, and by taking account of ground experience wherein many communities have historically cooperated for protecting the commons, under a range of common property regimes. A number of developments helped overcome these barriers. Economic theorists began to recognise that cooperation could indeed arise under specific conditions and moved toward less pessimistic predictions.³⁶ Empirical studies showed that free riding was not a dominant trait in village communities.³⁷ It was also recognised that in describing the ‘tragedy’ what Hardin had in mind was a situation of open access rather than regulated common property under community protection. Parallel to the academic debates was the 1980s debate among practitioners and public intellectuals on community involvement in forest governance. Some focused on critiques of the top-down social forestry programme in India and the importance of participatory forest management by communities (e.g. Agarwal 1986); others highlighted the importance of village communities as longstanding users and custodians of forests, and so offering the best solution for greening India’s villages (Agarwal and Narain 1989); yet others cautioned that the unequal character of village society could undermine cooperation and equity (see Agarwal 1986, among others).

Communal management of common pool resources were argued to have several potential advantages, including village knowledge of local ecological, economic and social conditions and constraints, the ability to effectively monitor the resource, and a small enough size to make rules through consensus, change rules if conditions so warranted, and resolve conflicts at low cost.³⁸ Incentives could be provided through access to the

36. Baland and Platteau (1996) provide an excellent summary discussion on the theoretical developments.

37. See e.g. Bromley and Chapagain (1984) and Wade (1988).

38. See Ostrom (1990), Baland and Platteau (1996), among others.

forest products regenerated. Globally, the link with community management and conservation was specifically mooted in the Bruntland Report (1987). In other words, both theoretical and empirical developments, interactively, opened up the intellectual space to convince a larger group that had influence in policy circles that communities could successfully govern the commons. Convincing forest departments (that have controlled forest management for decades in many countries) to relinquish control over parts of forest land to communities, has been an equally complex process and one that is still ongoing.

Community forestry embodies a notable shift in the idea of forest governance from top-down to participatory, creates a new system of communal property rights as co-management by civil society and government, and sets the basis for a new form of collectivity. In fact, over fifty countries are today pursuing partnerships with local communities to better protect their forests (Agrawal and Gibson 2001). Basically the shift involves a recognition that there are contexts in which free riding can be contained and cooperation succeed, especially if groups are small, cohesive, and norms of trust and reciprocity prevail.

Community forestry groups, like group farming, can be seen as a production collectivity, although the nature of the labour process is different for agriculture, since forests have a different production cycle from crops and do not need the same intensive labour input. Forests have also historically been a common pool resource in most countries. Moreover, just as millions of rural families depend on agriculture for survival, so millions of rural families depend on forests for basic necessities and supplementary livelihoods, providing villagers with firewood, fodder, small timber, and other products. Especially for the poor and women who own little private land these sources have been critical for survival.

How have community forestry groups functioned as collectivities in practice? As I will argue below, the effects in India have been mixed. On the one hand, the formation of these collectivities has been a step in the right direction; on the other hand, much more needs to be done to enhance equity and efficiency. The discussion below provides the broad argument and is not

meant to be a detailed analysis of community forestry in India, on which there is already a voluminous literature.³⁹

(2) Community forestry groups in India

The formalisation of decentralised forest management in India took the form of the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme, initiated through a central government order in June 1990. The basic idea behind JFM was to establish a partnership between the state forest department and village communities, with a sharing of responsibilities for and benefits from the regeneration of degraded forest land. There are today over 84,000 JFM related community forestry groups (CFGs) involving 8.4 million rural families protecting 17.3 m ha or about a quarter of India's forest area in a co-management arrangement (Bahuguna et. al. 2004). In addition these are a few thousand groups of other types, including the van panchayats (forest councils) of Uttaranchal formed in the 1930s under colonial rule and self-initiated groups found especially in eastern India that trace their history to several decades of protection. The JFM groups constitute one of the fastest growing forms of collective action in the country. The state-level orders allow the participating villagers free access to most non-timber forest products and to 25-50% (varying by state) of the mature timber when finally harvested. The CFGs can make rules for extracting non-timber forest products. NGOs can act as catalysts in group formation.

Broadly, JFM groups have a two-tier organisational structure, consisting of a general body (GB) with members drawn from the whole village and an executive committee (EC) of some 9-15 persons. Both bodies, interactively, define the rules for forest use and benefit sharing, the structure of fines for rule violation, the method of protection (e.g., guards, patrol groups, etc.), and so on. Which category of person has a voice in the GB and the EC bears critically on how well these institutions function, and who gains or loses from them.

Typically community management requires forest closure (restricting the access of people and animals to the protected area), to enable the rootstocks

39. See e.g. Sundar and Jeffery (2001) and its bibliography.

to regenerate. Restrictions can range from a complete ban on entry to allowing limited extraction of selected items such as firewood and fodder. Protection can involve hiring a guard or setting up a village patrol group or both, in addition to keeping an informal lookout as people go about their daily tasks. A system of penalties is defined for rule breaking.

How well have the CFGs functioned?⁴⁰ In terms of immediate forest regeneration most have done well. Even simply restricting human and animal entry can lead to forest revival if the rootstock is intact. Within five to seven years, many severely degraded tracts in semi-arid India have been covered with young trees (see pictures below). India's forest cover increased by 3.6 m ha between 1991 and 2001, a reversal of the earlier, alarming, downward trend. In many ecological zones, incomes and employment have risen, as have the land's carrying capacity and biodiversity.⁴¹ Hence on efficiency grounds CFGs are deemed by many to be a success story of collective functioning in many regions.

On the equity front, however, the picture is often grim, especially from the perspective of women, and especially of poor women who are critically dependent on local forests and commons for essential daily needs, in particular firewood. In most Indian states, over 80% of rural households use firewood as domestic fuel, of which 85% is gathered from forests, village



Malekpur forest area prior to protection



Malekpur forest area after five years of protection

40. For elaboration, see also Agarwal (1997, 2000, 2001, 2006).

41. See, for example, Arul and Poffenberger (1990), Chopra and Gulati (1997), Kant et al. (1991), Raju et al. (1993), and Viegas and Menon (1993).

commons and personal land (Natrajan 1995). In the decades prior to community forestry, firewood shortages had intensified in many regions with the degradation and decline of local forests and commons (Agarwal 1986). In the initial years of JFM, with strong restrictions on forest entry, this situation worsened in many regions, and women's firewood collection time and distances travelled increased manifold as they searched further afield for fuel (Sarin 1998). The landed made do with firewood from their own fields and inferior fuels like cropwaste. The landless (with no land or cattle), were compelled to forage for driftwood and twigs, and even steal. It was expected, however, that over time as biomass availability increased in the protected sites, CFGs would allow more firewood collection, and shortages would decline. However, most groups continue to maintain strong restrictions on extraction. In most places, firewood shortages continue even 8-10 years after protection began. Paradoxically, many are worse off than before protection started. As some poor women I interviewed said: 'We go in the morning and only return in the evening. Since the end of the rainy season we have been going every day... Earlier too there was a shortage but not as acute.' Substitute fuels, such as cropwaste, twigs and unsuitable wood varieties increase cooking time and smoke emissions, with adverse health effects for women and children, due to



DDS

Firewood shortages: Lengthening journeys



DDS

Cooking with twigs on a smoky stove: India

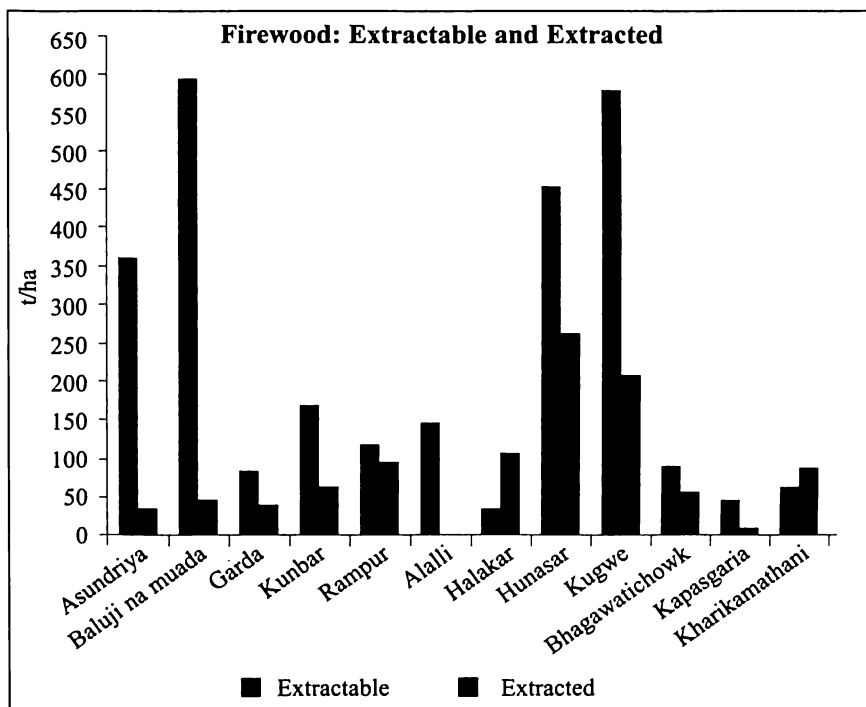
indoor air pollution (Misra et al. 2005). Women's mortality rate is found to be 50% higher than men's from smoky kitchens. Usually women from both middle and poor peasant households report such domestic energy problems, but the landpoor are the worst off.

Why isn't more firewood extracted? In some cases, a part of the answer could lie in inadequate firewood availability, but this is clearly not a full explanation since estimates in a number of regions suggest that much more can be extracted sustainably from the protected sites than is being done (Ravindranath et al. 2000; see also graph on p. 45). Apart from monitoring costs an important part of the answer lies in women's poor representation in CFG decision-making. In formal terms, CFG membership is open to all village households and the groups are based on modern ideas of equal citizenship rights, irrespective of class, caste or gender. In practice, in most CFGs, women constitute less than 10% of the general bodies and their representation in the executive committees – the CFG's main decision-making unit – is also typically low and sometimes non-existent. Landless women are even less

visible. Hence women have rather little voice in influencing the overly strict rules made for extracting forest products (Agarwal 2001).

Would women's better representation make a difference? My recent research, based on primary data collected in 2000-01 for Gujarat (India) and Nepal, shows that women's greater presence in decision-making bodies would indeed makes a significant difference on many fronts. Where women are present in notable strength on the EC I find that it enhances their effective participation in decision-making, influences the nature of decisions made, increases the likelihood of an improvement in forest condition, and reduces the likelihood of firewood and fodder shortages.

To elaborate, women's greater presence in the EC helps them move beyond nominal membership to effective engagement in decision-making. In



Source: Constructed from information given in Ravindranath et. al. (2000).

the presence of other women, they are able to transcend conservative social norms and personal diffidence to attend meetings, speak up at them, and hold office. Especially in an EC with 25% or more women, women members feel more empowered to attend meetings and to speak up at them. But the inclusion of *landless* women in the EC makes a particular difference. If present in sufficient numbers, landless women are found significantly more likely to attend and voice their concerns in EC meetings, since they are less constrained by social norms and more compelled by circumstance (e.g. acute firewood shortages) to raise their voice.

Women's greater proportionate strength in the EC also enhances the efficiency of forest conservation and regeneration. In Gujarat, CFGs with more than the mandatory two women in the EC, compared with two women or less, and in Nepal all-women CFGs relative to other CFGs are linked with better quality forest and greater improvement in forest condition. There are many reasons why women's presence is beneficial: it enables a wider dissemination of information about rules, since women can reach other women better than men; it inducts into the protection enterprise a larger pool of people committed to resource conservation, and it provides more opportunities for women to contribute their knowledge of plants and species and convey their preferences when the micro-plans for forest development are prepared. More generally, even if the rules that the EC eventually makes are hard on women, so long as they are part of the deliberation and decision-making process they are more likely to follow the rules themselves, as well as persuade other women to do so.

Also villages with mixed-gender CFGs with a large percentage of female EC members are found less likely to have firewood and fodder shortages. Where groups have a large proportion of women on the EC, the latter are able to put pressure on the men to make rule changes, to allow women greater access to firewood and fodder, thus reducing shortages. Women's voice, therefore, does count in getting the community to extract more from the protected area. In other words, the composition of the management committee in a collectivity can prove key.

Forest collectivities excellently demonstrate that there is potential for creating new forms of property rights and for cooperation in diverse contexts.

Joining the CFG is voluntary but those who do not join also have to follow the rules since this is a communal resource. Although the membership size of the general body can be large (depending on the village population), the EC which manages the day-to-day operations is typically small – about 11-15 members. Free riding is checked by peer pressure and sanctions, and products are usually distributed in a transparent fashion based on specified rules. As currently instituted, however, the collectivity also reveals its limitations if traditional hierarchies, such as social norms and perceptions that exclude women from public decision-making, go unchallenged. Few committees have a high proportion of women, and especially of landless women. These ‘participatory exclusions’ as I term them, within an otherwise innovative collectivity, arise from embedded gender inequalities which take both material and ideological forms. Much of the social capital and collective action literature which celebrates traditional norms as providing the cement for cooperation misses this gendered dark side of norms. And, as recent critics of social capital point out, it also misses the economic and social hierarchies within which many networks that constitute social capital operate.⁴² Nevertheless, CFGs represent an important step forward from the earlier top-down form of forest management, and there are ways (discussed below) by which they can be made more gender inclusionary.

(3) Overview

Both types of production collectivities that I have described – group farming and community forestry groups – represent institutional innovations that have created new forms of property rights – neither strictly individual and private, nor strictly socialised, but something in between. Both represent new forms of organisation within a market economy. Both seek to involve poor rural communities in greater or lesser degree: all the women’s farming groups and half the forestry groups are constituted of the poor (low castes and tribals).⁴³ Both contribute to livelihood enhancement. Both involve inputs by NGOs and the state. Both are voluntary in nature – state-supported but not state controlled. The state is a

42. See e.g. Van Staveren (2003), and Knorringa and van Staveren (2007).

43. On the social composition of the JFM groups, see Bahuguna (2004).

participant either minimally and indirectly (as in group farming) or directly as in community forestry. In this sense, these institutions represent community, civil society and state cooperation. Both demonstrate success in and advantages of group functioning. In addition, women's group farming has provided decent livelihoods and dignity for the most disadvantaged – poor, low-caste women.

At the same time, the contrast between the two types of collectivities is notable: group farming by poor low-caste women explicitly challenges social, especially gender hierarchies, while forestry groups often further embed them. Group farming requires intensive NGO support in the beginning and is still geographically confined. Community forestry is geographically widespread but mostly gender exclusionary in practice. Bringing women into public decision-making hits a wall of social norms and perceptions, although the impact of a critical mass of women is palpable and positive. In other words, the form that collectivities take and the principles on which they are founded are key to whether they help or hinder the disadvantaged.

For furthering the case that these collectivities represent institutional forms that warrant support and promotion, we need to ask: can these collectivities overcome their limitations of geographic coverage in the one case (group farming) and of inadequate social inclusion in the other (community forestry)? A possible way of overcoming these limitations is by forging lateral and vertical strategic alliances with other collectivities of the poor.

STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

(1) Horizontal linkages with SHGs

A substantial potential lies in building horizontal strategic linkages between CFGs and collectivities of women for increasing women's effective involvement in mixed gender CFGs. In particular, I have in mind linkages with village self-help groups (SHGs) in India. There is a similar potential for SHGs taking up group farming. I briefly describe SHGs as a third type of collectivity and then examine their potential for forming joint farming groups and strengthening CFGs.

There are over 2.2 million SHGs in India, almost all constituted of women.⁴⁴ An SHG is typically constituted of economically homogenous groups of 10-12 self-selected women who pool their savings and rotate lending within the group. One village can have several SHGs. Groups that have a proven record of working together for about six months are eligible to apply for a bank loan as a proportion of their group savings deposit.⁴⁵ Loans, if taken, go to the whole group which then decides its use. Many SHGs, especially those catalysed by NGOs have, however, graduated beyond loan disbursements to becoming social advocacy groups which put pressure on village councils to complete longstanding projects for village improvement (EDA 2006). Although most SHGs begin as savings and credit groups, they differ from micro-credit groups in important ways.⁴⁶ The latter are formed basically around credit,⁴⁷ often involve women with no proven record of working together, loans go to individual women, and there is usually little focus on social advocacy.

Until the early 2000s, two-thirds of the SHGs were being promoted by NGOs, although now they are also being catalysed by state governments and banks. For many NGOs, forming SHGs around savings and credit is simply an entry point for working toward women's empowerment. MYRADA, in south India, is a case in point.⁴⁸ Since the early 1980s this NGO has catalysed what it terms 'Self-help affinity groups' formed initially to fulfil social needs and moving onto savings and credit when the groups so decide. 'Affinity groups' are based on the idea that there is mutual trust among the members based on shared social (e.g. kinship) ties or a common geographic origin (e.g. same ancestral village), or the same livelihood source, or shared gender bonds, or some combination of these. These 'affinities' enhance solidarity and discourage free riding.

44. See, EDA (2006), Tankha (2002), Nair (2005), APMAS (2007), Ramesh (2007), among others.

45. The bank assesses SHG functioning in terms of its savings, regularity of meetings, internal lending, repayment record, book keeping, etc. I understand that this SHG-bank linkup is a uniquely Indian innovation (Ramesh 2007).

46. See also, Ramesh (2007) and Harper (2002).

47. Typically structured like Bangladesh's Grameen Bank model.

48. Established in 1968, Myrada works with poor communities in three southern states of India - Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamilnadu. Increasingly it has focused on women-only groups (Fernandez, 2005).

Recent surveys show that a fair percentage of SHGs are formed of poor and socially disadvantaged women. Half the SHG women in EDA's (2006) survey were below the poverty line, and 55% belonged to the lowest castes or tribes. Similarly, an all-India survey of 2750 SHGs (some formed by government, others by NGOs) in three states, found that in 41% of the SHGs surveyed the majority of the members came from low caste or tribal households; and in 42% the majority came from landless families (Nirantar 2007). Moreover, special efforts can be made to include the poor, such as by promoting a number of SHGs of different socio-economic strata in each village so that all socio-economic categories, and especially the poor, get included (Fenandez 2005).⁴⁹

At the same time, in terms of economic activity, most SHGs, with few exceptions, are involved in family-based micro-enterprises and do not usually deal with other aspects of women's needs, such as access to agricultural land or local forests. Here involving SHG women in group production, especially joint farming, on the one hand, and building strategic linkages between SHGs and CFGs on the other, could strengthen all three institutions. The typical 10-14 person SHG, for instance, is the right size to successfully take up group farming based on leased or purchased land. They also have financial resources and links with banking institutions. Some are already involved in group enterprises such as leasing in ponds for pisciculture. Graduating toward group farming would thus be possible for many such groups, if encouraged to do so. This would help expand the scale and geographic reach of women's group farming and, in turn, move SHGs out of the narrow confines of savings-credit and individual or family-based micro-enterprises toward economically stronger and more poor-inclusive group enterprises.

Similarly, a strategic link between CFGs and SHGs could empower poor women in both institutions. At present both operate largely in separate orbits. During my fieldwork across several states of India in 1998-99, I found

49. Certain categories of the poor – the chronically unwell, the old, the destitute - will in any case need to be reached through other schemes such as social security coverage, pensions, etc. Hence the lack of inclusion of all poor is not an adequate reason to discourage SHG formation as a means of empowerment, although special efforts do need to be made to include as many of the poor as possible.



DDS

SHGs meeting

that both women and men in villages tended to see SHGs as 'women's groups' and CFGs as 'men's groups', even though CFGs controlled a community resource. In fact, a few (albeit very few) NGOs have attempted to establish such links, thus creating a critical mass of female presence in mixed gender CFGs, and so influencing forestry decisions in women's interest. The India Development Service (IDS) in rural Karnataka (India), and MYRADA in Tamil Nadu are cases in point. MYRADA has gone farthest in promoting the links. In Karnataka's Uttara Kannada region, it specifically formed SHGs of poor women in forest communities to increase women's involvement in forestry groups. The experience of these NGOs indicates that linking CFGs and SHGs would be workable. Of course, for wider geographic impact we need to go beyond experiments to a much more systematic expansion of such linkages.

In short, SHGs if encouraged to take up group farming could extend the reach of this institutional innovation and if linked strategically with community forestry groups can make such groups gender inclusive. In turn, these links would enlarge the scope, inclusiveness and economic effectiveness

of SHGs themselves. Hence, strategic linkages between diverse collectivities of the poor with different strengths could transform each. Their impact can, however, expand several-fold through an additional institutional innovation, namely by forming CFG and SHG federations on the one hand, and forging strategic alliances between CFG federations and SHG federations on the other.

(2) Enhancing vertical reach: federations

A federation is an innovative institutional form for vertical reach, constituted of a network of community-based organisations (Nair 2005). In South Asia we find federations of both self-help groups and forestry groups. Although, to my knowledge, there are no farmers' federations, if SHGs took up group farming their existing structure of vertical linkages could also provide a basis for federating women farmers' groups.⁵⁰ Typically federations link the same form of institution – horizontally and vertically. For instance, SHG federations connect SHGs and forestry federations link community forestry groups. But, as discussed further below, their strengths could be substantially enhanced if federations with differing foci could establish strategic links.

There are an estimated 69,000 SHG federations, 89% in southern India, constituted variously at the village, panchayat or district level (APMAS 2007). Only one SHG federation, in Andhra Pradesh, is at the state level. They vary in size from groups of 10-40 SHGs to a few thousand (APMAS 2007). A typical SHG federation is multi-tiered – the lowest being a cluster of village-level SHGs forming a village organisation. Several clusters/village organisations, with one or two representatives from each SHG may then come together to form an apex body. Federations provide SHGs with bargaining power vis-à-vis the government and the market, as well as the capacity to sustain.

Typically, SHG federations have been promoted by NGOs, a process which began in the early 1990s, aimed variously at moving toward a more just society, reducing poverty, empowering poor women, and building self-reliant village communities (Tankha 2002). Even when not constituted entirely of the

50. On federations of self-help groups see especially APMAS (2007), Tankha (2002), Nair (2005), and EDS (2006), among others.

poor, SHG federations in regions such as Andhra Pradesh have helped the poor by purchasing basic household needs wholesale, and extending credit to the very poor to enable income smoothing. I observed several such cases during my field visit to the state in 1998 (see also TARU 2007). Apart from financial benefits, many federations also focus on women's social and political empowerment, and have been effective as pressure groups at the community level. Indeed, many SHG federations have empowered women by their sheer strength of numbers. As some groups in Andhra Pradesh told me in 1999: 'when we turn up a thousand strong at a local fair, we don't have to say a word. Our strength is there for all to see'. Barring rare exceptions, such as IDS and MYRADA, however, most SHG federations do not focus on natural resource management such as forests, which have their own federations.

Federations of community forestry groups in India are fewer and less geographically widespread (they are found only in a few states) than SHG federations. Most forest federations are confined to village clusters or blocks; only some grow to district level (SIDA 2004). Typically catalysed by NGOs,⁵¹ some of them have been constituted for advocacy purposes, some for marketing non-timber forest products directly, by removing middlemen and helping members obtain better prices. But unlike SHG federations, which by their very composition involve women, forest federations can reproduce the gender exclusions of the CFGs of which they are constituted.

Nepal, however has a country-level Federation of Community forest users (FECOFUN), formed in 1995. It is unusual in its scale (it is national-level), its democratic structure (representatives are elected) and in its attempt at gender inclusiveness (its constitution mandates that 50% of the committee members and office bearers be women).⁵² Ten thousand of Nepal's 14,000 CFGs are members of FECOFUN, representing several million forest users, making it the largest civil society organisation in the country, covering an estimated one-third of its population (Ojha, et al. 2007). The organisation represents the interests of forest users to the forest bureaucracy and even parliament; familiarises the users with their rights and responsibilities toward forest resources; mediates disputes among

51. See e.g. Bose et al. (2006) and SIDA (2004), among others.

52. See, Britt (1993) and Ojha et al. (2007).

forest user groups, and between them and the forest department or multinational companies interested in forests resources; and promotes an understanding of democratic functioning. FECOFUN also has links with a women's network – Himawanti – formed in 1995 to enhance women's voice in community forestry, although it could do more to make women's presence effective. FECOFUN's experience provides important lessons on the potential of large-scale federations that India and many other countries could learn from.

In India, there is enormous potential of forging alliances between SHG federations and forest federations, to broaden the scope of both. India's forest federations would clearly gain by an alliance with SHGs in at least two significant ways: one, they would become more gender-inclusive, and two they would expand in membership and reach, and so be more effective in advocacy with the forest bureaucracy. In turn, SHG federations would gain by improving women's access to a natural resource that is critical for their lives and livelihoods. Since the alliance is conceptualised as a *strategic* one rather than one of institutional merger, there need be no diluting of the agendas of either SHGs or CFGs as a result.

While it may be too early to speak of federations of farmers' groups, since the numbers of such collectivities need to increase and spread, should SHGs become production collectivities on a notable scale, their existing networks could serve as a basis for forming farmers' federations as well.

IN CONCLUSION: TOWARD A NEW MORAL ORDER?

The poor, especially in market economies, need the strength that collectivities offer for creating more economic and social/political space for themselves, for enhancing their socio-economic well-being and voice, and as a protection against free market individualism.

Why would we expect production collectivities to succeed today when they did not earlier? One part of the answer lies in the lessons already learnt in how to build such institutions, in particular the principles of voluntariness, group homogeneity or affinity, small size, participatory decision-making, peer

implemented sanctions for work shirking and other forms of free riding, and equitable benefit sharing. A second part of the answer lies in the mushrooming of civil society groups across the country, especially since the late 1970s. While not all groups are motivated by a desire for social transformation, many are. And a third part of the answer lies in the prior existence today of a wide range of collectivities. Although most are not production collectivities they have the potential for being so transformed. In other words we have three major pillars on which to build the new collectivities – pillars that did not exist in the earlier period. But to deal with persistent inequality we are likely to need a fourth pillar – a new ethical code or moral order.

On the one hand, we would need such a transformative agenda to enhance the prospects of establishing successful production collectivities, which require a context where other-regarding values and not only narrow self-interest prevail. On the other hand, strategic alliances between collectivities of the poor could play a role in helping to create a more ethical moral order if we went beyond strengthening the economic impact of collectivities to releasing their transformative potential, such as by moving from collectivities to collective action, and from economic formations to social movements.

There can be many different visions of what might constitute a new ethical order, but I would like to suggest that it needs to be one which explicitly challenges inequalities and exclusions; which upholds justice over personal gain; which recognises the needs of future generations alongside those of the present generations; and which values non-material well-being and not just material well-being. To some extent the glimmerings of such a moral order already exist, in at least three streams of ideas:

- First, in the idea of equal citizenship, irrespective of race, caste, or gender, enshrined in numerous constitutions across the globe.
- Second, in the idea that human capabilities and freedoms and not simply economic growth be the basis for evaluating human progress.
- Third, in the idea of environmental sustainability which highlights global interdependence, responsibility toward future generations and non-humans, and putting a cap on unmitigated consumption.

Such ideas are already part of our public discourse.⁵³ The challenge is to realise them in practice. But I believe they cannot be realised without including the poor. Here collectivities of the poor, especially engendered collectivities could prove key. I emphasise 'engendered' since it is collectivities of poor women that are likely - due to their social situatedness - to have the most stake in, and possibly the most potential for, helping to shape an alternative moral landscape.

To sculpt such a landscape, we need both resistance and transformation. Examples of resistance abound. That of transformation are few. As I envisage it, we need a transformation both at the group level (where a group takes responsibility for helping others), and at the individual level (where each individual in the group feels empowered). Such transformations have often been noted among women's groups, and the following quotations are simply illustrative. The first is from a women's farming group:

'Initially, ... our families would ask: why are you going to meetings at night? But we found that during the course of these meetings, we became a kind of mutual support group. If any woman fell ill or had a problem, *the others would try and help*. So it became a habit to meet, and we were not afraid of family disapproval. Gradually our families realised the importance of our [group] meetings.' (sangam women to author, 1998, emphasis mine).

The second example, taken from a Bangladesh women's group, illustrates the potential for individual transformation that groups can bring. The women said:

Before the village elders ... threatened us for joining the group, now they are silent... Before we did not know our rights to rations or medical services, now we are conscious and exert pressure to receive our due... Before we did not go

53. There are also numerous examples of individual and social altruism, of trust despite risk, of upholding fairness over personal gain, and so on. It is on this social foundation that many of the collectivities we see today have been built, and which warrants preserving and extending.

outside our homes, but now we work in the fields and go to the town... Before our minds were rusty, now they shine... (Chen 1983:165).

It remains to be seen of course whether a concerted move toward new collectivities, and strategic linkages between diverse collectivities, can provide a wide enough canvas for transformative collective action and the forging of a new moral order.

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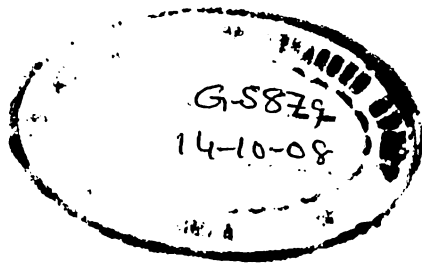
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