Performance of success and Failure at the grassroots Conservation and Development Interventions: Gender dynamics in Participatory Forest Management in India

Dr. Sailaja Nandigama
BITS Pilani, Rajasthan, India
& Wageningen University (the Netherlands)
Today’s presentation

– women’s participation in Forest management and the performance of success
– Four cases studies of C&D interventions, from 4 different corners of India
– AP (Kadapa), Telangana (Khammam), Gujarat (Valsad) and West Bengal (Birbhum)
(Ethnographic fieldwork done in these areas on C&D interventions during last 10 years)
Commonalities!

– Gender Mainstreaming is a common thread in all these cases
– our cases are culturally and geographically distinct
– and were implemented in different time periods
– yet, they displayed similarities in terms of the participatory trajectories experienced by the women
– they employed similar strategies to benefit from their participation in the interventions.
Methodology

- Ethnographic qualitative case study
- Purposive selection of study locale for contextual exploration of the case
- Immersion (Ethnography) method for data collection
- Draws inferences applicable to similar contexts elsewhere
- Looks at interactions, situated agency, power relations and everyday practices by the women and the poor
- Observes actual operation of formal participatory spaces and informal practices undertaken by actors on the ground
Puzzle!

• We found ourselves struggling with the same puzzle in each case
• Research showed that communities, and especially the women FPC members were often found performing success in the C&D initiatives, despite complaining of the shortcomings in practice, why is this so?
The question!

• "Why women performed success (empowerment) even when they have experienced marginalization in the FPC?“
• Hence, the study of performance of success by these women members is taken up
Policy and Practice!

- In all our cases, with the help of international bilateral aid, C&D interventions aimed at the creation and utilization of more spaces for women’s participation to increase their livelihood security and empowerment
- All our cases proved to fall short of delivering these benefits at some level or the other

• One of the common criticisms is that empowerment of community based actors, like women and the poor often occurred only on paper, and that the real power to set the terms of reference or allocate resources continued to be monopolized by few others.
Performance of success!

• Although the women in the villages were structurally marginalized by the interventions, it did not prevent the women from performing successful participation and allegiance in the formal spaces such as official meetings and project evaluations.

• Although they complained about their marginalization to different audiences, they did not think of withdrawing from these performances of success.

• This intrigued us. What was going on here? And why?
Dynamics of women’s participation

• In practice everyday informal norms eg. patriarchal control over women’s behavior, patronage, favoritism etc. prevailed

• In practice, the upper caste women in general stayed away from the meetings, because among others it was not expected of them or was not normal for them to take part in public meetings of this nature

• Even though it is normal for the lower caste women to attend public meetings, they came to these meetings only when they were explicitly invited by their men, as it was not expected of them to go against the wishes of their men
Dynamics of performance

• The formal participatory spaces served as leverage points for the women to engage in performances of success.

• Performing success increased the capacity of women to negotiate for parallel gains, such as mobility, visibility, livelihoods and social status elsewhere.

• De-politicised application of gender-equal measures in different states and districts of India resulted in political gains for the women elsewhere in their every-day life.
Situated agency of women

- Often it was observed that, in principle, the formal and informal institutions had mutually conflicting codes of conduct and behavioral expectations from the women.
- The formal institutions required these women to perform gender-equal participation, while the informal, everyday life required them to adhere to the community based norms and regulations stipulating the proper feminine behaviour.
- Women were pragmatic in underwriting and exploiting the opportunities available in each situation through the interventions, along with playing their traditional gendered roles as was expected of them.
Conclusions!

• Despite their structural marginalization, women performed success to show their loyalty and allegiance to the local leaders through being submissive in their formal roles, and used this as leverage for gaining informally in their every-day life.

This should not be analyzed as women being in complete control or as taking so-called rational decisions on their course of action; but as an attempt to exercise their situated agency in each of the contexts.

• Analysing participation as performative practice opens up possibilities for re-conceptualizing the debates around women’s empowerment and the evaluation of participatory development and community based natural resource management.
Thanks!