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Exclusions in Afforestation Projects in Pakistan

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Through a case study of the Billion Tree Tsunami Afforestation Project in Pakistan, this article shows how afforestation and forest conservation projects often lack in-depth understanding of community dynamics.

I was standing in the town centre of Jabori waiting for my host to arrive. Amir, 22, approached me and asked if I could give him some money. He said that he had been looking for work for the last three days without any success. He had no money to buy lunch. As we headed to a nearby hotel, he said he was herding his father’s flock and they had around 150 goats. In 2015, their landowner contracted with the forest department for tree plantation. Consequently, his family lost tenancy to that land and could not feed their herd anymore. They tried to get another plot of land, but it had become scarce as everyone wanted trees on their plots. Then, they tried to buy fodder from the market, but it was too expensive.

Before the Billion Tree Tsunami Afforestation Project (BTTAP), another option was using the (state-owned) reserve forests, but that is gone now because the government had revoked all rights of grazing, passage, or living in state-owned forests. Another possibility was to bribe local forest officials, so that they could get them fodder, but it would not be enough to raise a herd of 150 animals. Initially, they started selling goats to get money to buy fodder for the herd. But, eventually Amir’s father gave up the idea of keeping a herd and sold the entire herd. Amir stayed with his parents in Jabori and had started working as a construction labourer, although there was not much work available. His elder brother had moved to Mansehra (a nearby city), where he worked at his uncle’s shop. Their father was at home, taking care of the only cow left with them.

It is perplexing that efforts to mitigate climate change (afforestation in this case) are the reason for destroying the livelihoods of many people. Efforts to restore degraded forests and afforestation of
new areas are now at the heart of the global forest sustainability agenda. The paradox of climate change mitigation and livelihoods of people is not captured in conservation projects that are often framed as “apolitical ecologies” (Robbins 2012: 18). In this framework, the purpose of afforestation projects is “to ensure long-term ecological and financial sustainability” (Adams and Hutton 2007: 148). In contrast, a political ecology perspective argues that social, political, and environmental aspects are connected, and “actions to conserve biodiversity are inherently political” (Adams and Hutton 2007: 147). Moreover, environmental change tends to bring uneven distribution of costs and benefits (Bryant and Bailey 1997) and, therefore, certain sections in society get benefits from environmental change, while marginalising the rest. This has wider implications for inequality in a society, as any environmental intervention that is not fully informed of local realities (caste, ethnicity, power dimensions, and land tenure) often results in exacerbation of existing inequalities. This article provides an empirical evidence of marginalisation and worsening inequality in Pakistan’s largest afforestation project, the BTAP, using a political ecology perspective (BTAP 2018).

This research was done in the Hazara region in the north-western province of KPK in June 2017 as part of my master’s thesis. Different qualitative methods were used to collect data, including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, qualitative interviews, and participant observation.

**What Constitutes BTAP?**

Against the backdrop of the debates over accelerated deforestation, environmental degradation, and climate change in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) started the Green Growth Initiative (GGI) in 2014. The GGI is aimed at an environmentally sustainable and climate change resilient economic growth model. Forestry was one of the six priority areas of intervention. In the forestry sector, the projects included the BTAP, the KPK National Parks project, and the Community Micro-Hydel project. This article focuses on the BTAP, a project that has proposed to plant a billion trees in the KPK province (Government of KPK 2015: 3–5).

The government had set a target of increasing the forest area in KPK by 20% to 22% by 2018 under the BTAP (Government of KPK 2015). At the very least, the government’s target for increasing the forest area amounts to an additional 30,000 hectares of forestland. Additionally, the tree cover of existing forests were to be increased from anywhere between 20% and 30% by 2018 (Government of KPK 2015). Around 550 million tree saplings would be planted in two phases and the remaining 450 million saplings are being naturally generated in forest enclosures (Government of KPK 2015). The species that were planted include oleander, Aeasia arabia, chir pine (Pinus roxburghii), walnut (Juglans), ziziphus, palosa (Aesias modesta), Indi an rosewood (Dalbergia sisoo), and safeda (eucalyptus).

The project has two major components: plantation and regeneration through enclosures. Under the plantation component, 550 million tree saplings were planted over 2,500,000 hectares. These plantations were done on the government’s fallow land, communal land, and private land. In the case of communal land, the village development committees (VDCs) select the acreage for plantation. In the case of private land, owners can directly contract with the forest department. These plantations are done by the forest department in collaboration with private entrepreneurs. Private landowners receive hefty sums for these contracts in addition to rights to timber products after a stipulated number of years. The other major component of the BTAP is natural regeneration. For this purpose, around 450 million trees are being generated in enclosures, patches of forest where no socio-economic activity is allowed. These enclosures are in reserve forests that are legally state-owned forests, but historically people used these forests for grazing and collecting fallen timber, and other non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Around 3,500 enclosures have been established throughout the province, with a total area equivalent to 3,75,000 hectares (Government of KPK 2015). These enclosures are closed for three consecutive years for grazing and other activities. Even the rights to passage, fallen timber collection, and grass cutting are withdrawn.

**Blind to Heterogeneity**

The BTAP is envisioned as a project that is sensitive to community participation and co-management. While assuming community participation, the BTAP remained blind to the heterogeneity of different groups within a single community. The heterogeneity of groups means that there are groups with different and often competing interests, agendas, and power. Similarly, in forest communities of KPK, there are different actors and stakeholders (Shahbaz et al 2011). The local communities in the Hazara region can broadly be categorised into three groups in relation to landownership and forest access. The first group consists of landowners who have forest on private land. The second group consists of users, who are not landowners but have historically defined access to the common forest called shamilat/Guzara forest. The third group is of landless users, who neither own land nor have access to the common forest (Sultan-i-Rome 2005).

In KPK, land distribution intersects along ethnic lines and is highly skewed because of historical developments. Major ethnic groups of the area are Pashtuns, Syeds, and Gujjars (Shahbaz 2011). Pashtuns and Gujjars are of keen interest here as Pashtuns are landholders and Gujjars are landless herders (Shahbaz et al 2011).

In the 16th century, different Yuzufzai Pashtuns from Afghanistan invaded and settled in the north-western mountains of the Indian subcontinent, now called KPK. These Pashtun tribes captured most of the land, which made them the biggest landowners in the area (Sultan-i-Rome 2005, 2016). Land occupies a central role in the livelihood of people in these areas because of two reasons. First, landownership is the basis of social position in the community. Second, landownership is tightly connected with forest access. As Sultan-i-Rome (2005) has identified, although everybody had access to minor forest products and
grazing, “the right to sell timber was vested in certain clans who held propriety rights.” In such a context, it was pivotal to keep and retain landownership. In addition, the Pashtun ethics code, Pakhtunwali, prohibits selling land (Naz et al 2012). Although the Pashtun tribes are not into land trading, they do rent it out to others. It is both economically viable and socially beneficial, as tenants not only pay rent, but are socially obliged to serve the landlord outside the tenancy agreement by helping with the harvest.

It is important to note that “the Gujjars and those who had no share in the land had no share in the ownership of the forests” (Sultan-i-Rome 2005). Thus, they have to rent-in land. The mountainous geography and low availability of water in the area allow small-scale subsistence farming, as is evidenced by the fact that 81% of the total farms in KPK are under five acres (Government of Pakistan 2010). These factors also limit crop yield in addition to higher transportation costs and, thus, the surplus is not enough to be marketed. Subsequently, agriculture alone is not a lucrative option unless combined with livestock farming. Thus, the Gujjar community uses rented-in land as grazing pastures in the winters. During the summer, they move north to the pastures of Kaghan Valley. When the winter begins in September, they move back to lower altitudes (Ali 2005: 13). For Gujjars, land holds a central position in their subsistence economy. If they do not have land, they cannot have grass for animals in winter, which has the potential to hurt their livelihood.

Exclusion and Marginalisation

In this section, I explain the dynamics of exclusion and marginalisation that have disproportionately affected the communities in KPK. I make the case for how exclusion and marginalisation have occurred through landownership and institutions of community participation.

Landownership in KPK is skewed along ethnic lines, largely between Pashtuns and Gujjars. Landownership also defines access to forest resources. To promote afforestation on private land, the forest department had designed a subsidisation mechanism. According to this mechanism, landowners could contract with the forest department to plant trees on their land in return for protection of these plants for five years. After the stipulated years, the landowner would have the right to cut and sell timber products from these plantations. Furthermore, the choice of species to plant is also at the landowner’s discretion, which in most cases is eucalyptus due to its rapid growth. Along with these benefits, the seedlings are provided free of cost and substantial payments are made as plantation and maintenance cost. This subsidisation policy assumed that everyone in the province owns land. Thus, they can benefit from the cash subsidies and future forest products from these plantations.

However, the people who are most dependent on forests for their livelihood are landless herders. The subsidisation programme suddenly changed the use value of land. The landowners have been found to be increasingly taking their land back from tenants for contracting with the forest department. These landowners have two rationales for getting into contract with the forest department and evicting tenants. First, the landowners themselves were previously not cultivating the land and thus are not affected if the land is now reserved for plantation for the next five years. Second, the high timber prices in Pakistan ensure much more returns as compared to the low rent of the land. In my research, I found that a majority of the landowners believed that eucalyptus will generate more income than the rent from tenants in the upcoming five years. Therefore, many Gujjars have lost their access to land and now do not have any land that can be used as pasture in the winters. As a result, they have to sell their means of production, resulting in the proletarianisation of the already marginalised ethnic group.

Another process of exclusion that is happening is through the very institutions of community participation. The BTTAP has a strong emphasis on community participation. This is envisioned through the creation of VDCs and joint forest management committees (JFMCS). Both these committees play a crucial role as they are at the interface of state authorities and communities. These committees identify areas to be enclosed for plantation, appoint a forest nighaban (caretaker), and distribute payments of subsidies and nighaban salaries. Because the members of the VDCs and JFMCS are locals, they are likely to ensure that the benefits of these activities trickle down to the community. Although VDCs and JFMCS appear to ensure community participation, the formation of these committees is not without conflicts. Rather, local politics and power dynamics influence who gets into the committee. It becomes even more contested when important decision-making roles (such as identification of enclosures) are vested with these committees. In the BTTAP, the state authorities have deliberately overlooked local politics in this whole process, as a community development officer (CDO) said, “We do not intervene into community’s conflict. We ask them to resolve their issues and then come to us” (personal communication with the author).

The policy and state authorities are blind to how these “issues” are resolved. For example, many of these VDCs consist of the landowning class of the area. There is little to no representation of the landless tenant class in these communities. Consequently, the VDC members are not affected by the enclosure. The actual forest users (herders) are the ones being affected by the decision, but they have little to no say in the decision-making process.

Similar dynamics are at work if we look into the selection of nighabans. As the VDCs are supposed to make the final selection of nighaban, they give preference to their relatives or ethnic group as many of these VDCs represent ethnic and class interests. This selection process is also a way for the ethnic and social class of landowners to consolidate their power. During my interviews in Agror Tanawal, I was informed that all members of the VDC were Swatis and had distant kinship ties to each other. The VDC appointed three nighabans who were also Swati and were related to the members of the VDC.
Although there are many Gujjar families in the area, there is no representation of their interests. In the same area another case explains the extent of power politics behind the façade of community participation. Younus lives in Sherwan, part of the Agror Tanawal region. He has a small patch of land that he was using for grazing for his small herd. His land is surrounded by the land of a Swati family from all four sides; three members of the Swati family are members of the local VDC. The Swati family has contracted with the forest department for plantation and thus the land surrounding Younus's land is protected for the next five years. He cannot take or leave his herd in his own plot as it may damage the surrounding plantation, resulting in litigation or feuds not only with the Swati family, but also with the state authorities. Such is the extent of the role of local politics and power dynamics along with landownership and forest access in inclusion or exclusion or people in community participation.

Conclusions

In this article, I have examined the dynamics of exclusion and marginalisation of Gujjars in a forest conservation project. The article concludes that the nature of exclusion and marginalisation is through multiple processes that intersect and are connected with each other, referred to as the "inter-locking nature of alienation" (Bluwstein et al 2018). The affected communities, contrary to policy belief, are not homogeneous. There are competing ethnic and class interests within communities. These interests interlock with landownership, access regime to forest resources, local institutions of governance, and community politics. One of the most important factors is the highly unequal access regime to land and forest resources. The access regime intersects along ethnic and class lines. The access to resources also influences the distribution of benefits of environmental intervention. In addition to landownership, institutions created for the community's participation to promote equality have paradoxically resulted in further exclusion. The exclusion is the result of local politics of class and ethnic interests.

The policy implication of this study is that any environmental intervention needs to be sensitive to local cultural and complex sociopolitical dynamics. A policy that is blind to such realities could backfire as exacerbating existing inequalities. That may have implications for political actions in forms of resistance to the efforts of conservation and climate change mitigation.

Notes

1 The different interventions under the BTTAP in study area, Hazaara region have been mapped out on the BTTAP website (http://billiontreeproject.kp.gov.pk/repos/files/2016/04/Map-Region2.png). The interventions in other divisions under the BTTAP are also mapped out on their website (http://billiontreeproject.kp.gov.pk/activity-maps-of-all-divisions/)
2 The research work for this article was done when the author was studying for a masters degree at the International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Netherlands.
3 A Spanish translation of a previous version of this article, "Ecología Política de la reforestación en Pakistán," appeared in Ecología Política (28 June 2018).

References


