

[Book review]

A reality check on efforts to decentralise natural resource governance

[Kundan Pandey](#)

10 Jan 2025

[India](#)

[Connected Environments](#)



- *After centuries of centralised governance, India has seen a shift in recent decades with policies aimed at empowering local communities in managing natural resources.*
- *The book *Environmental Politics at the Locals: Natural Resource Governance in India* examines whether these constitutional amendments and schemes have made a tangible difference.*
- *Through detailed case studies, it explores the intricacies of local power dynamics, systemic flaws, and the gradual progress in decentralised governance.*

In December 2018, I travelled to Balad Kalan and nearby villages in Punjab's Sangrur district. The fog shrouding the rural landscape was a refreshing contrast to the concrete jungle of Delhi NCR, where I live. The journey became even more intriguing as I was about to meet an activist who, according to police records, was absconding. After navigating a network of intermediaries, a man in his early thirties appeared at a house around 8 PM while we were enjoying dinner with the host family. He was one of the key players in the ongoing conflict over gaining control of reserved common land for marginalised communities. We had a profound conversation about the politics surrounding natural resources. The piece that emerged from this journey focused on the positive change in people's lives after gaining access to land and the uprising of a marginalised community. The struggle, however, had already claimed lives.

Years later, the memory of those villages resurfaced as I read *Environmental Politics at the Locals: Natural Resource Governance in India*. The book includes a chapter that mentions these villages and highlights the politics around common land in the region. Although I had travelled and written about the conflict, the book provided a new perspective on my experience of those villages and the conflict.

Published by Orient BlackSwan, the book is a compilation of nine research-based articles throwing light on ground-level realities from different regions of India. These chapters cover a range of subjects, including resistance to hydropower projects in Himachal Pradesh, flood management policies in Bihar, claims on coastal areas in Mumbai, land management in Sixth Schedule states, joint forest management, and more. While these are widely reported topics, the book remains an engaging read due to the unique lens provided by its editors, Satyajit Singh, a professor at the University of California,

Santa Barbara, USA, and Ajit Menon, a professor at the Madras Institute of Development Studies. Their 34-page introduction effectively sets the stage for exploring the journey of decentralised governance of natural resources in India.

For me, the Punjab experience was an isolated series of events where a marginalised community—facing centuries-old caste-related barriers—fought to reclaim land reserved for them. However, the editors weave a broader narrative, connecting nine distinct ground realities as part of a larger story about governance and its direction.

The book takes readers on a journey from the colonial era when resource centralisation gained momentum as the British sought to expand their empire. Post-independence, as priorities were completely different from present, Jawaharlal Nehru’s vision of a centralised state took precedence over alternative ideas. However, in recent decades, there has been a shift toward empowering local communities to increase their participation in natural resource governance.

Since the 1980s, India has introduced several policy decisions aimed at decentralisation. These include policies in the forest and water sectors, the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments empowering local bodies, and key measures like the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) notification of 1991, the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) notification of 1994, the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act of 1996, and the Forest Rights Act of 2006. Against this backdrop, the book critically examines India’s political economies of decentralised natural resource governance, raising the question: how successful have these interventions been?



Mumbai’s coastal road construction in progress. One chapter in the book examines the impact of land use changes on coastal commons and local communities in Mumbai. Image by Wander-earth via Wikimedia Commons (CC-BY-SA-4.0).

When policy misses the ground reality

With this lens, the reader enters each chapter, essentially a case study of a positive intervention, and remains curious about what has worked and what hasn’t. The narrative navigates the reader through nuances that explain factors prominent on the ground and play a big role in the success or failure of these policy interventions.

For instance, one chapter focuses on flood management in Bihar. Halku Chaudhary, a resident of Katihar district, explains to the writer the different types of floods recognised by the local community. When river water reaches farms and accumulates there, it is called *barh*, which is essential for agriculture. However, if the water reaches residential areas, it is termed *boh*. According to him, locals prepare in advance for both types of floods.

Then there is *humma*, a flood where water rises to window level, often drowning cattle. This occurs once every 20–30 years. In extreme cases, when people are forced to let their cattle perish, the flood is referred to as *saah*. Catastrophic situations are termed *parlay*. Interestingly, locals view certain floods as opportunities—they wait for floods to cultivate *aghani*, a rice variety specific to the region and one of three types of paddy grown there. These examples illustrate how floods are integrated into the local culture, with communities adapting and utilising them as a resource.

The chapter argues that agrarian societies historically did not perceive floods as disasters. In contrast, policymakers see floods as crises requiring dams and embankments as solutions. Local people argue in the book that constructions like dams, etc., increase the intensity of floods and *humma*, *saah* and *parlay*, have become more common.

This example is about traditional knowledge, but the chapter is not limited to it. The chapter delves into fascinating ground realities, such as the availability of fish during floods, conflicts between riverside and countryside communities, and the treatment of genuine flood victims in relief measures and compensation.

All nine chapters, written by scholars, are rich with similar insights, highlighting these subtleties and keeping readers engaged. The book explores the execution of welfare schemes like the Public Distribution System (PDS), policy interventions like the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ), and constitutional amendments aimed at decentralising governance. Through these examples, writers explore why such efforts have largely failed to bring the desired change.



An aerial view of flood-affected villages as relief material is dropped by an IAF helicopter in Bihar. A chapter in the book, focused on flood management in Bihar, delves into local perspectives and policy gaps. Image courtesy of the Ministry of Defence, Government of India, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Decentralisation: A journey in progress

In social discourse, there is always a risk of either becoming overly enthusiastic about announcing any new intervention or excessively pessimistic about ground realities. The book helps its readers avoid falling into either of these extremes.

I recall a reporting trip to tribal districts in Madhya Pradesh, where I explored the high prevalence of malnutrition in the community. During my interactions with families, I realised that many were hungry because of food scarcity, not for the first time. The immediate question that came to my mind was whether the food grain distributed through the Public Distribution System (PDS) was not reaching these remote areas. Their response was affirmative, but they added that the grains were of no use to them. Many families had mortgaged their ration cards to influential people in the area to take loans for medical emergencies or other urgent needs. The moneylenders in control of these ration cards used to collect all the grains allotted to the cardholders and sell them in the market until the families, already struggling for food, repaid their loans. Experiencing such crude ground reality is a common experience for journalists that can easily lead to pessimism.

A chapter titled ‘Reshaping Food Security in India’ picks a similar subject based on the experience of the Jalaun district of Uttar Pradesh. It highlights the problem with PDS. A villager narrates to the writer that the shop in the village only opens for two to three days a month and distributes a limited ration. “It (shop) becomes a site of favouritism and differentiations. This chapter talks about a grain bank, a local initiative as the alternative to PDS, and its success and failure.

Here, the book explains the ground reality without allowing the reader to sink into despair. Each chapter examines local power dynamics and systemic flaws yet frames them within a sense of progress—acknowledging the steps taken while recognising the remaining work. The editors note in the concluding chapter, “While so much has changed, much has also not changed.”

This reality check highlights areas for improvement, asserting that “Decentralisation has a short history, is not a one-time phenomenon, and is a work in progress.”



A gram sabha meeting in Maharashtra. Since the 1980s, India has introduced several policy decisions aimed at decentralisation and empowering local communities. Image by Mendhalekha via [Wikimedia Commons \(CC-BY-SA-4.0\)](#)

The book incorporates the perspectives of all stakeholders, including the community, power structures, local deities, and NGOs, while acknowledging their limitations. That may be helpful in the next phase of policy reform.

This book is necessary for understanding the journey of empowering local communities in the management of natural resources, particularly when “India seems to be moving in the opposite direction, namely that of more centralised decision-making...” The book doesn’t forget to remind us.

Banner image: Women in rural areas in India often have to walk large distances to fetch water for their families. The book highlights nuances that hinder common people’s access to natural resources in India. Image by Arpan.basuchowdhury via [Wikimedia Commons \(CC-BY-SA-4.0\)](#).