



## Analysis

## Access to benefits from forest commons in the Western Himalayas

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## ABSTRACT

Little statistical evidence exists on the effects of forest management regimes and wealth on forest access rates in South Asia. To determine the magnitude and significance of these effects, this paper analyzes a dataset of communities from Himachal Pradesh, India, with a fractional logit model. The investigation considers three specific forest management regimes including a regime under complete state control, traditional community regime and a co-management regime known as Joint Forest Management. Communities with higher incidence of land poverty have lower forest access rates for grazing and fodder extraction, whereas communities with a higher incidence of land-rich households have higher forest access rates for fodder extraction. Forest access rates for fuelwood collection are lower under traditional and co-management regimes. However, the interaction between land-poverty and co-management regime increases forest access rates for fodder collection and livestock grazing.

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## 1. Introduction

The bulk of empirical research on the issue of forest access has focused its attention on uncovering how socioeconomic characteristics of users influence forest access (Adhikari, 2005; Adhikari B. et al., 2004; Beck, 1994; Beck and Ghosh, 2000; Beck and Nesmith, 2001; Cavendish, 2000; Coulbaly-Lingani et al., 2009; Jodha, 1986, 1995; Kamanga et al., 2009; Khan and Khan, 2009; Mamo et al., 2007; Narain et al., 2008a,b). Although this focus on internal social structure is essential, most studies are relatively silent about the effect of forest management regimes on access. The issue is crucial: management regimes determine access and distribution of benefits from resources (see Larson, 2008; Larson et al., 2010; Ribot and Larson, 2005).

In South Asia, management regimes are particularly of interest due to a rise in the popularity of community forestry initiatives. Indian forest policies, for instance, have adopted community forestry in a remarkable turnaround from policies with roots in colonial “scientific” management. Touted as a win-win approach for rural livelihoods and forest conservation, structured community forestry initiatives in India have received the financial blessings of international aid, development and conservation agencies. According to one estimate, the adoption of community forestry in the country has resulted in its coverage of 27% of the national forest area across 85,000 village committees (World Bank, 2005).

Advocates of the community forestry have pitched this policy to developmentalists as an approach that potentially increases access

to forest benefits and hence improves rural wellbeing (World Bank, 2005). It is argued that this policy will foster equitable and inclusive outcomes on account of devolution of power to local communities (e.g., Bromley, 1992; Ostrom, 1990; Wade, 1988). In light of research suggesting that the much vaunted community forestry programs in South Asia are associated with unequal forest access (Adhikari, 2005; Adhikari B. et al., 2004; Agarwal, 2001, 2007, 2010; Beck and Ghosh, 2000; Iversen et al., 2006; Thoms, 2008; Wilshusen, 2009), there are doubts about the desirability of this policy. Yet research into the level of access across different forest management regimes has received sparse attention (but see Adhikari M. et al., 2004).

A central objective of this paper is therefore to examine the effects of forest management regimes on access to forest benefits in forest communities in the Indian Himalayas. Although forests in India are state property, co-management initiatives undertaken by the state have not fully replaced state management regimes; these two regimes, moreover, exist alongside traditional community forest management regimes. Utilizing the statistical method of generalized linear models (GLM), the paper tests whether forest access differs across state, co-management and traditional forest management regimes. A second objective is to investigate the effects of wealth on forest access and specifically to ascertain the impact of community forestry on forest access to the land-poor households. The paper aims to contribute to the discussion on the desirability of community forestry initiatives.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section describes the data collection and survey methods utilized. Section three discusses the concepts of forest access and forest regimes and describes the sample. Econometric results are reported in section four. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and policy implications.

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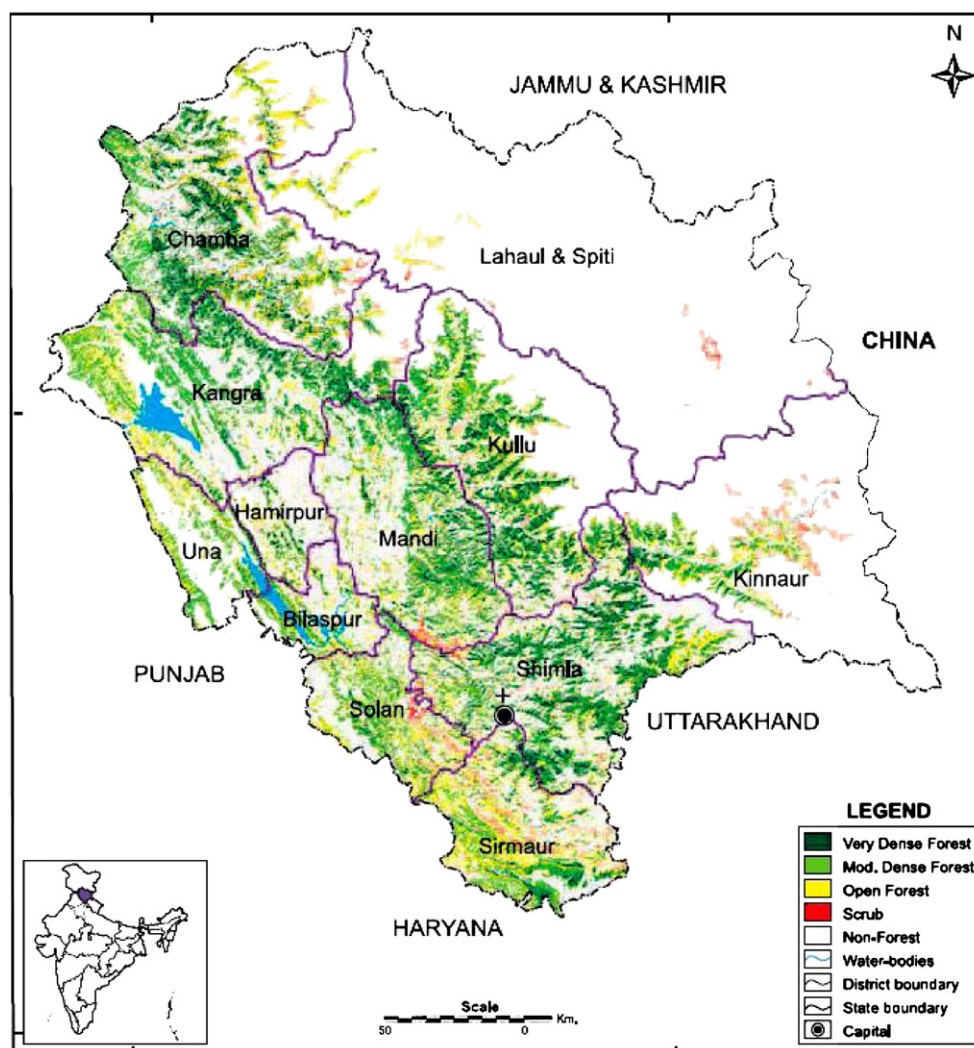


Fig. 1. Map of Himachal Pradesh. Source: Forest Survey of India, 2009.

## 2. Study Site, Data Collection and Survey Methods

Data were collected in 2004 during fieldwork in Himachal Pradesh, a state situated in the western Himalayan region of India. Despite being a relatively small state, with a total geographical area of 55673 km<sup>2</sup>, there is significant variability in altitudes (i.e., 350–6795 meters above sea level), climate and geology, contributing to an ecologically diverse environment (Gol, 2001). According to the 2001 Census, 91% of the approximately six million population is rural (Gol, 2001). Eighty-seven percent of the rural population is dependent of forests for a variety of daily requirements (Gouri et al., 2004); this underscores the importance of forests for rural livelihoods.

As part of a larger study aimed at investigating collective management and forest use, four sub-watershed regions in the districts were purposively selected on account of the variability in the region's forest management regimes. Usufruct rights in both districts lie with the community rather than the individual (see Chhatre, 2003; Morrison, 2001); thus households in a forest community<sup>1</sup> have equal rights to forest extraction. This characteristic allows for an investigation of group or social outcomes, i.e., it allows the analysis of differences in the extent of forest use across forest communities with comparable forest rights. Thus, the forest community is the unit of observation in this paper (Fig. 1).

After consultation with local NGOs and Forest department officials in the selected areas, a sampling frame was constructed of forest communities with the following characteristics: a) their location was in the Middle Himalayan range (1000–2200 meters above mean sea level); b) communities were not engaged in commercial extraction of forest resources; c) communities were not engaged in explicit conflict with outside agents<sup>2</sup>; and d) communities were situated within two kilometers of a forest. These conditions enabled control of geographical diversity and required the sampling frame to be consistent with the population of interest. A random sample of 56 communities was drawn from the sampling frame though there are missing data in not more than four cases.

Data were collected from March 2004 to September 2004. During this time, the author made multiple trips to the selected communities to gain a better understanding of the local community and gain the trust of community members. The survey questionnaire was pretested during these trips and modified for efficiency. The formal data collection process used semi-structured group interviews.<sup>3</sup> Each survey group

<sup>1</sup> The community is defined as a group of households with rights to community forests (also see Agrawal and Gibson, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Mining is carried out in some forests. Mining contracts, however, have been awarded to outside agents with significant political influence and this fact is a source of conflict. Communities engaged in such conflict were excluded from the sampling frame.

<sup>3</sup> The interviews were typically conducted on the day of village community meetings.

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