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Ethnography of the Forest Guard

Contrasting Discourses, Conflicting Roles and Policy Implementation

For agenda setting and policy design, public policies that involve or affect local communities are often negotiated in the field rather than the office, yet development literature has surprisingly neglected the characteristics, social conditions, perceptions and attitudes of field-level implementers of policy. In the context of Indian forestry for instance, forest guards are the representatives of the forest department in rural society, who interpret and explain forest policies to local people. Thus far, little literature has been devoted to their perceptions of forest policy and administration and the social context in which they function. This essay presents an ethnography of the social and professional life of forest guards in Himachal Pradesh with a view to understanding the pragmatic realities of implementing forest policies in India.

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Policy implementation is a complex social process that involves far more than a mechanical translation of stated goals into activities. It is a process influenced and mediated by the perceptions, attitudes, and compulsions of multiple stakeholders, including implementers and beneficiaries. Most public policies are reinterpreted and translated in ways by individuals charged with the responsibility of implementing them. These translations of policy are influenced by the nature of the policy as well as the context in which they are implemented. In the socio-political context of rural Indian society, such deviations between policy goals and outcomes are often significant. The outcomes of several development policies have been decisively influenced by the process of implementation. Therefore, implementation failures have received considerable attention in the rural development literature.

This literature has focused on the administrative apparatus, the characteristics and compulsions of bureaucrats, and corruption in such systems [Nair and Jain 2000; Ahmad 1995; Joshi 1998; Singh 1988; Pai et al 1983; Korten and Alfonso 1981; Gould 1980; Heginbotham 1975; Weidner 1970; Jacob 1966]. The attention of this work has been almost entirely on civil servants, i e, the higher-levels of bureaucracy. While this is important for agenda setting and policy design, public policies that involve or affect local communities are often negotiated in the field rather than the office. On the other side of the spectrum, a number of studies have highlighted the inequities in society that influence implementation, as well as the impacts of such implementation failures [Chambers et al 1989; Romm 1989; Roniger and Gunes-Ayata 1994; Rosenthal 1977]. However, the particular characteristics, social conditions, perceptions and attitudes of field-level implementers of policy have been surprisingly neglected (exceptions include Palit 1996; Kaufman 1960 and Lipsky 1980). These front-line staff are part of the state bureaucracy charged with implementing policies and programmes. They are non-bureaucrats who represent the state bureaucracy in rural society. In the context of Indian forestry for instance, forest guards[1] are the representatives of the forest department in rural society, who interpret and explain forest policies to local people. Yet, little literature exists on their perceptions of forest policy and administration, social context in which they function, or their perceptions of policy.

The forest guard, as other field-staff in government bureaucracies, is the primary bridge across the public-private divide. In the traditional ideal type of public bureaucracies, this public-private divide is sacrosanct. Relationships crossing this divide are strictly restricted to the professional sphere. Personal relationships between citizens and individual bureaucrats are viewed with suspicion. Since such relationships are associated with corruption, they are expected to have only negative consequences for development. Following this assumption, bureaucrats in India are not posted to their home areas and they are frequently transferred to avoid the development of any close relationships with local people whom they serve [Harriss 2001]. The reverse principle however has been applied with success in east Asia, where the embeddedness of officials in society contributes to the synergy between the state and society [Evans 1996]. I demonstrate in this essay that the separation between private and professional relationships of field-level staff fails in Indian rural society. Forest guards are embedded and entrenched in the rural society in which they serve. Their identity is shaped by both their professional role as implementers of forest policy and also

by their role as villagers in rural social networks. The conflicts inherent in these roles are reflected in their contrasting discourses in different social situations, and significantly influence the implementation of policies.

This essay presents an ethnography of the social and professional life of forest guards in Himachal Pradesh with a view to understanding the pragmatic realities of implementing forest policies in India. It is an attempt to understand the multiple pressures that influence the actions and discourses of the forest guard. It is based on participant observation over a year (1996-1998) of the work and social interactions of forest guards in Kullu forest circle[2] of Himachal Pradesh and on interviews conducted in July 2001 at the Chail Forest Training School, with 24 forest guards from all regions of the state. The names of forest guards are suppressed or changed to allow them the safety of anonymity.

Contrasting Discourses, Conflicting Roles

Daniram built a large house in village Dhoori[3] for his expanding joint family using seven large cedar trees. When questioned on where the trees for his house came from, he replied, "from our forests. We gathered all our people, went up to our forests and brought the trees down". "Our" forest happens to be a protected forest in the terminology of the forest department, and Daniram's action happens to be a crime for which he can be arrested and fined. Such examples of differences in the perception of rights and discursive politics between a state department and a broadly conceptualised local people abound in recent literature [McCann 1997; Li 1996; Pathak 1994; Ferguson 1994; Dove 1985]. This literature has shown that the politics of meanings and language has significant material impacts on conservation policy and practice. However, what is intriguing in this case is that Daniram happens to be a serving forest guard in another region of Himachal Pradesh. His main responsibility is the detection, recording and punishing of such forest offences as the one described above. While it is easy to dismiss Daniram's actions as corruption, it is intriguing that he is also recognised as a conscientious forest guard by his colleagues. In a long informal interview on the status of local forests and forest use, he had diligently lectured on local people's

illegal and indiscriminate use of forests. In that context, the discussion highlighted legal categories such as 'reserved forests' and 'protected forests' rather than peoples forests. Both answers at the time of the interviews seemed perfectly honest and equally ardent. Future interaction also revealed that Daniram probably believed and accepted both these statements to be true. This presents a curious dilemma that is resolved only through an analysis of the social roles and identities that a forest guard negotiates, and understanding the contexts in which these narratives are produced.

Several studies have revealed the varied meanings of shared terms to different people [Bloch 1995; Cronon 1992; Zerner 1996]. Blaikie's (1985) seminal work has shown how degradation is itself a contested term that has various meanings to different stakeholders. In Kullu, the concept of 'illegal and indiscriminate' felling and the 'misuse' of forests had vastly different and significant meanings to different groups of people. For most of the senior forest department officials interviewed, only felling specifically sanctioned by their department was a legitimate and sustainable use of the forests. All other harvests were illegal and a misuse of the forest resources. One of the first comments from most forest department personnel, when interviewed about timber distribution policy,[4] was a lament about how it was often misused by local people. The majority of the villagers in fact agreed with the foresters that there was misuse of the forest and of timber distribution policy. However, the misuse was attributed to outsiders in connivance with a few local people and sometimes with the help of the forest department. The use of forests for building houses, or for fuelwood and fodder, was not seen by local people as misuse. Most people argued that this was a necessity, whether or not they had legal sanction for it from the forest department. This is supported by the fact that although everyone in the village was aware of such harvests, rarely did anyone make an official complaint. Often, the harvesting was done collectively with men from several households helping with the harvest and transport of trees to the households.[5] The legal and the legitimate do not always coincide in the moral economy of rural Himachal Pradesh.

This difference in meaning partly explains at face value the contradictory statements made by Daniram. However, the

conflicting discourse also reveals the multiple roles that a forest guard assumes in different contexts. While Daniram believed, as many forest guards do, that local people harvesting trees for their own needs are not wrong, he would in all probability record such offences and fine the offenders in his role as a forest guard. In interviews, forest guards were unanimous in their view that they would have to charge such offences if they occurred within their forest beats. In different contexts, often in conversations outside their workplaces or in their houses, they argued as villagers do "but what else can we do? We have to build our houses, cook food, and keep warm in the cold mountain winter."

Subordinate state officials working in rural societies often exist in a twilight zone, torn between the demands of the state for which they work, and those of the society, in which they live and socialise. This contradictory role blurs the boundaries between state and society, and warps the implementation of policies. In the forest department, for instance, the conservator of forests and those above this rank do not interact with rural people on any regular basis. It is the divisional forest officer (DFO), the range officer (RO), the deputy ranger and the forest guard who are involved in increasing degrees with the nitty-gritty of implementing forest policies and explaining them to local people. It is they who face the immediate wrath of local people for policies perceived by them as against their interests, and they who reap the immediate advantages of policies that provide them with discretionary power. The most intense state-society interactions occur at the field-level, and the conflicts and contradictions of policy implementation are confronted by the field-staff. Daniram's apparently contradictory statements are a reflection of the incongruous multiple roles he is forced to play as a forest guard and as a villager.

Forest Guards and Professional Identity

Professional identity in bureaucracies is created through a series of processes including recruitment, training, uniforms, perks and promotions. All these processes generally tend to be weaker at the lowest level of the bureaucracy. Understanding the interactions of the forest guard within the forest department and his[6] experiences in completing official duties provides

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insights into the development of his professional identity. There are currently 2,804 forest guards in Himachal Pradesh. The forest department is the largest landowner in Himachal Pradesh owning 66.43 per cent of the geographical area [IIED 2000]. It also has considerable legal powers under the legal provisions such as the Indian Forest Act (1927) and the Wildlife (Protection) Act (1972). This allows the department discretionary powers to decide on legality of forest uses and the authority to fine and arrest those using forests illegally. Since the forest guards are the final implementers of forest policies, these legal powers devolve to them at the field-level. This authority provides forest guards with some degree of power over villagers who are dependent on these forests for their livelihood. The discretionary power that forest guards exert in recording forest offences, deciding the amount of fines, and recommending applications for timber harvests provides a significant amount of power and authority in rural society. This authority and power are significantly mediated by other relations of power and hierarchy within and outside the village as will be discussed later. Moreover, a government job is often a status marker in itself in much of rural India. It is the most sought after career in rural Himachal Pradesh where the state is the largest employer. Although the forest guard is placed at the lowest level of the state, he enjoys the status attached to a permanent government job. These two factors combine to create a positive professional identity in the forest guard. However, the other processes of identity creation within the forest bureaucracy tend to be weak or negative.

Forest guards generally enter the forest department through a written examination after schooling up to the tenth grade. However with rising unemployment, there are a few guards who are college graduates. The average forest guard joins at 23 years of age, and is in service for an average of 35 years. About a third of those who are recruited will retire as forest guards and have no chance of any career improvement. For the others, the only promotion in the job happens after 30 years of service, when they are promoted as deputy rangers. Many deputy rangers retire within a year or a few months after their first promotion. Predictably, none of the forest guards interviewed had entered this profession because of any specific inclination or interest in the job specifications. As one

forest guard explained, "Where do you get jobs these days? Even college graduates have to queue up at the employment office. Land is no longer enough for everyone. So when the forest guard openings were announced I jumped at the opportunity. If I had got a clerks job that would have been better, but this is what was available. My family situation was such that I had to take a job, and this was the only one open (Forest guard, Kullu circle, June 1997).

Forty-one per cent of them had at least one other family member who worked in the forest department. Yet few of them cited any prior knowledge of the nature of the job or specific skills. None of the forest guards interviewed wanted their children to continue in their position.

Forest guards are the representatives of the forest department in society. Their job involves implementing various policies decided by the forest department from time to time. Their job is generally field-based. Except for a small minority posted in offices, forest guards are assigned responsibility for a forest beat. Forest beats in Himachal Pradesh cover an average area of 1,500 ha and the physical terrain is generally rugged and in many areas prone to snow, landslides, and avalanches. One of the primary duties of the forest guard is to monitor, record, prevent and punish illegal forest-related activities in this area. This requires continually walking through the entire beat. During these tours, if a forest guard notices a minor offence (harvest of small amounts of fuelwood, fodder, or poles) he is expected to record it in his damage report and fine the offender. For more serious offences (felling trees, poaching, etc), the guard records and reports the problem and higher officials take the case to courts, with the forest guard as witness. The power of the forest guard to arrest and fine illegal forest users places him in a position of power vis-à-vis villagers who are forest dependent. Countering this authority is the dependence of forest guards on villagers to complete these same tasks. In the case of minor offences, the guard requires the offender to accept his/her offence and sign the report. Alternatively he needs a witness. Both of these are difficult unless the guard has authority over the offender, goodwill with villagers who become willing witnesses, or has someone accompanying him during his tour. In the case of larger offences, the problem is even more serious. Forest guards are alone and unarmed[7] but they are expected to deal with smugglers or poachers

who are generally in groups and could potentially be armed.

The guard is also responsible for all public dealings of the forest department. He collects applications for timber and fuelwood from villagers, and informs them of all forest department decisions. Since the forest guards' approval and signature are required on these applications, he exercises discretionary power. This power and influence is particularly forceful on villagers who do not have access to higher authorities. In all cases, when the forest department decides against allowing villagers any forest rights, the forest guard has to inform them and deal with their dissatisfaction. In recent years, participatory forestry programmes have added a different dimension to the forest guards' job. Good public relations have become essential since the guard has to gain their cooperation for participatory forestry programmes. The inducements given under these programmes increase the power and popularity of the forest guard in the village. Many of the guards interviewed confirmed that their jobs have become much easier since they now have positive incentives to offer villagers. Other guards expressed difficulties in getting villagers to cooperate. They felt an erosion of their authority since now their job involved cajoling villagers to cooperate with them.

The rest of the forest guards duties involve nursery raising and plantation work. These are the more technical aspects of the job requiring specialised knowledge and skills. Since forest guards do not have these skills at recruitment, they often have to acquire them on the job. They learn these skills primarily from experienced gardeners and daily-wage labourers whom they employ. Hierarchy in ideal type bureaucracies is premised on the possession of specialised knowledge and skills. In this case forest guards have to learn necessary skills from those lower in the hierarchy such as part-time and daily-wage labourers.

Training is a major source of identity creation within organisations. Yet, most forest guards in Himachal Pradesh had received no training until the last five years. This changed recently, and 80 per cent of the forest guards have now received some form of training. The change is due to a Department for International Development (DFID, a British government funding agency) project in two districts of Himachal Pradesh that has emphasised training and brought in money for the training of forest

guards. There are currently three schools for the training of forest guards. The oldest school is in Chail and was started in 1938 to train forest guards. This was the only training centre until 1993. Two more training schools in Kuther and Sundarnagar have been functioning since 1993, supported by the DFID Himachal Pradesh forestry development project. The training is conducted by divisional forest officers, assistant conservators of forests and range officers from the department who are posted to the school periodically. The programme lasts five and a half months and covers topics such as silviculture, soil conservation, wildlife management, participatory forestry, forest law, first aid and self-defence. Each batch of trainees consists of a group of 25-40 forest guards who are nominated by their superiors to attend this training. In recent years, forest guards from other states have also been attending these training programmes.

A significant factor of training in Himachal Pradesh is that it is not mandatory at the time of joining this service. Ninety per cent of the guards felt that training was essential at the time of recruitment. Some even suggested that the first year after recruitment should be devoted to training. Seventy per cent of the guards felt the most useful aspects of the training were sessions on forest law and technical forestry. This training gave them confidence. Some of them even realised that they had been using wrong techniques in their nursery or plantation works. Many mentioned that they had been unaware of their rights and duties earlier. However, the majority of the guards were reluctant trainees. They were attending the training because of orders from their superiors. Whether and when a forest guard is sent for training is dependent solely on his circle level superiors. Conservators in some circles are more inclined to send their guards for training than others. Conservators and Divisional Forest Officers select guards for training depending on which ones they are able to relieve from their posting. For instance, trainees at the school mention a case where the same guard was sent for three different training sessions at the school, because (they believe) he was not of much use in his circle posting. Forest guards who had come for training to Chail in 2001 had between four to 19 years of work experience.

Basic training after several years of service is often seen as an unwelcome compulsion by most guards. It causes major disruption in their personal and professional life. While the disruption in personal life is inconvenient, it could prove costly professionally. There is intense competition for certain postings within the department due to several reasons, such as accessibility, workload, proximity to schools and urban facilities, degree of political interference or access, and safety. Leaving the posting for an extended period of time to attend training brings up the possibility that others may have taken the posting when they return. While the guard is away for training, another guard from the same circle is given additional charge of his forest beat. The guard usually returns to the same post after training, but since he is away from his post, it provides an opportunity for others to apply for his post. Guards who are in preferred postings are particularly vulnerable. Most guards attested that this does not actually happen too often, but they still mentioned this as a potential threat and a concern.

Uniforms are used as another symbol of identity creation within organisations. For the forest guards the symbols of the forest department often serve to reinforce their lowly position within the organisational hierarchy. Only those below the rank of the range officer are expected to wear a uniform. The uniform is in khaki and very similar to the uniform of a police constable. This has been criticised by many authors writing in the context of participatory forest management, for its police-like qualities. "Men in uniforms with a paramilitary orientation continue to create social distance between foresters and villagers" [McGean, Roy and Chatterjee 1996]. Forest guards in Kullu often did not wear this uniform in the village. They wore it only when they visited offices of higher officials and when higher officials or outside experts were visiting them.

Hierarchy within the forest department is modelled on the rigid system in the police or military. Thus forest policies are passed down the hierarchy as orders and there is little flow of information or ideas up the bureaucratic hierarchy. This introduces many problems in the field. There is a strong disincentive against bringing any anomalies to the notice of higher officials. The forest guard in one beat in Kullu recounted how he felt that monkeys were likely to damage saplings if a plantation was developed in a particular area without fencing. But he felt that if he mentioned this, his officers would only think he was 'acting smart'. So he decided to simply do his duty and plant the saplings as he was asked to. On the other hand, he also added, "there's not much our officers can do either. Once the funds and project are here, we have to do the plantation. If there is no money for fencing in the budget, what can our officers do?" (Forest guard, Kullu circle, July 1997).

Such stories are also recounted about nursery techniques, plantation timing and species selection, issues on which guards are uniquely positioned to provide practical feedback.

Forest guards identify themselves as members of the forest department, but there is also a prevalent sense of dissatisfaction and alienation. Several forest guards mentioned that they were alone on the job, and did not feel the strength of the bureaucracy supporting their actions in the field. How can we catch offenders if we have no backing? We are worried 24 hours a day – about who will complain against us, about where the phone call is going to come from. If police catches a murderer, it goes to the court and he gets a promotion. If we catch an offender, the case is lost. No one comes forward to help us, we can't get witnesses, and officers won't support us. We get nothing except people with grudges against us. Better to mind our own business (Forest guard, Kullu circle, July 1997).

Such discourses need to be interpreted also as strategic responses to a sympathetic interviewer, often used to justify their position and generate empathy. Forest guards like most other groups do not remain passive objects of oppression or neglect. They are active agents who make rational decisions given the circumstances in which they are forced to function. However, these discourses also reflect the self-identity of the forest guard within the forest department. Forest guards are well aware of alternative discourses about them. In a discussion with a group of five guards from the Kullu region, the most vociferous of the group explained: "Our officers think we are lazy and take bribes. (Officers) think we just drink (alcohol) and lie around. Some mischievous local people who don't like us make complaints like this about us. But look at us. If we took bribes we would not be living like this" (Forest guard, Kullu circle, July 1997).

When further pressed on the issue of bribes and alcohol, guards admit that there are a few people who manage to line their pockets with bribes; and a few others who may drink on the job and not perform their duties. But they contend that this is not the

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norm. Politicisation of their job is instead a problem that most forest guards cite as a significant issue.

Forest Guards and Local Politicians

Electoral politics influences not only policy design but also the process of implementation. Forest guards negotiate their position not only with villagers and forest department officers, but also with politicians such as local panchayat leaders, state legislative members and ministers. The main incentive or weapon that politicians can use to influence guards is their control over transfers. Forest guards are generally transferred every three years to ensure impersonal policy implementation. These transfers introduce uncertainty in their private lives and certain postings are invariably more sought after by forest guards than others. Forest beats that are closer to their homes, have fewer problems with illegal activities, have better access to roads and urban facilities are coveted postings. Conversely, most forest guards try to evade remote postings. While technically these transfers are departmental decisions, political leaders exert considerable influence in this process. A third of the guards interviewed had used political influence at some point in their career to obtain a posting of their choice.

Politicisation of transfers also ensured that forest guards desisted from actions that might cause local resentment. Disgruntled villagers were often seen as responsible for transfers to unwanted posts or locations. Forest guards often maintain good public relations, particularly with villagers who have political connections, partly to avoid such transfers. This is a positive aspect of representative democracy in a small state where local people can replace a government representative by choice. The problem arises only when it prevents forest guards from carrying out their regular duties and implementing legitimate policies. For instance, both villagers and forest guards claim that smuggling and illegal trade in forest products is carried out mainly by individuals who have political influence. Often, allegations of particular traders being involved in illegal trade of forest products are common in the local area. Although proof is hard to come by, there is public consensus in identifying such traders. Forest guards are conscious of this and often discussed this dilemma. If they actually caught the offenders who were politically and economically powerful, they were in fear of physical danger as well as economic and political ruin. They were also unsure of support for such actions within the department. On the other hand, if there was too much smuggling in their beat, they could be taken to task within the department. The actual practice in the field is therefore governed more by the counterbalance of these social pressures rather than merely legal statutes.

Such dilemmas are intensified in particular postings such as check posts,[8] where guards are specifically expected to monitor transport and trade of forest products. Seraj forest division is a typical example where the largest shop owners in this valley are involved in legal forest product trade. Medicinal herbs are exported from this area, and they are a major source of cash income for many rural households. Large shop owners are the final collection points for all these herbs in the valley. They are involved in most of the transportation of valuable goods such as medicinal herbs, mushrooms, and fruits from the valley. Most of these goods need permits from the forest department to exit the area. Guards at the check post are expected to check these permits, the quantity and type of goods transported, and prevent illegal or excessive export of these products. Traders in the valley enjoy considerable political influence, since they can finance political candidates during an election. They also maintain good relations with higher officials of the forest department from whom they obtain the export permits. Forest guards see this contradiction between their expected duties and actual power equations clearly. Most guards saw such postings as problematic. However some who were more confident saw this as an opportunity to enhance their contacts and gain influence. Occasionally, forest guards do have significant political influence and are in a dominant social position. In a rare case, one forest guard was so well connected politically, that his superior officers were unable to give him orders. But this remains an exception rather than the norm.

Forest Guards in Rural Society

The identity of the forest guard in rural society is based on his professional role as a forest department employee as well as his family position in village hierarchies and networks. There is a constant interplay between power and dependence that is manipulated by both the forest guard and other villagers. To understand the self-identity of the forest guard it is necessary to understand the strata of rural society from which guards are recruited, their social status, and relationships with villagers. Recruitment, postings and transfers of forest guards are all done with the goal of discouraging the integration of the forest guard in the society that he serves. Yet, field-staff by the very nature of their work need to have some knowledge of the local area and language. Forest guards are recruited in each forest circle. Once recruited, transfers of the forest guards occur within that forest circle except under special circumstances. While anyone can apply for recruitment, people within that forest circle are most likely to apply and are recruited. Forest guards are never posted in the forest beat where their home is situated. They are also transferred every three years. Both these rules aim to discourage the development of personal relations between villagers and forest guards. In practice, these rules tend to be breached. In Himachal Pradesh, most people own small pieces of agricultural land. Even those who seek and get jobs in the government or other sectors, generally assist in the cultivation of these small landholdings. Most forest guards also manage agriculture in their villages and seek postings close to their homes so that they can contribute labour and time during peak agricultural seasons. This ensures that the forest guard is well integrated into the social relations and hierarchies of the society in which he functions.

Forest guards as government employees enjoy a degree of respect in the village. Yet, this is a government job at the lowest level and requires minimal school education. It is most sought after by families with little agricultural land or apple orchards, whose members also have a low level of education. Ninety-six percent of forest guards interviewed come from rural areas and small towns, and a vast majority are small or marginal land-owners. Per capita landholding of forest guards averages a meagre five bighas per adult family member. Large landed families are able to support themselves from the land, and do not enter government service unless it is at a higher level. Thus while government service provides some pride and power to forest guards among villagers, they are still lower in the village hierarchy compared to large agriculturists, orchardists, traders and government officers. This hierarchy affects

the forest guard's ability to exert authority and implement forest policies in the village.

Many villagers from upper-class households in the village have more direct relations with the higher-level forest department officials than forest guards. They are able to supersede or overrule the forest guard's decisions. In fact guards rarely communicate directly with officers above the rank of the range officer (RO). As a guard from Solan division (July 2001) said: "RO is the mukhiya (head) of our house. Therefore, the DFO talks to him and he conveys it to us. DFO usually talks to us directly only to scold us when we make mistakes." Some guards mentioned that they took permission from the RO if they wanted to meet other officers. Some ROs and DFOs insisted on this to ensure that the ROs authority is not superseded or eroded. There are exceptions to this rule. Some DFOs tour the beat more often and guards felt they could talk directly to these officers if the need arose. The respect that guards receive and the authority they command from villagers in general also reflects this hierarchy within the village. There are a few lower caste poorer households in the same village that hold the forest guard in esteem and fear. There are other households where the guard enjoys an equal social status – this includes houses of government clerks, or small landowners. A typical indicator of this difference is that most villagers refer to the 'RO saab'[9] or 'DFO saab' but it is only the least powerful who used this epithet for the forest guard. The guard can assert little authority over members of more influential households.

Adding to this position with little authority is the dependence of guards on villagers. At a minimum, "One always needs a roof over one's head and a friend/ companion in the (forest) beat." (Forest guard, Solan forest division, July 2001). This dependence often makes forest guards obligated to particular villagers. About 41 per cent of the guards interviewed lived in forest department houses. The rest rented accommodation from villagers in areas where they worked. Living in a village implies interacting and depending on the close kinship and reciprocity arrangements that are essential in rural life. This interdependence affects everyday aspects of life such as assistance in emergencies, socialisation between families, or merely children playing together. Good neighbourly interactions are essential rather than casual. As a forest guard from Rajgarh

division (July 2001) puts it "If villagers boycott us, we cannot live there."

Forest guards also depend on villagers for completing their official duties. One of the main job responsibilities of the forest guard is to monitor all activities within his forest beat. This involves walking through his beat periodically, an area of about 1500 hectares, that often requires overnight halts. Few areas may have commercial establishments for boarding and lodging. Still fewer may be affordable for the forest guard. Not many guards can afford or are willing to pay for this job requirement from their own pocket. These needs are met instead through good relations with villagers who provide accommodation and refreshments on such visits. Such hospitality is provided generously in almost all the villages based on friendship and reciprocity at an individual level.

Secondly, the forest guard is held responsible for all forest offences that occur within his beat. It is physically impossible for a single individual to keep track of all the activities within such a large geographical area, particularly one with difficult mountainous terrain and lack of communication facilities. Thus the guard depends on his personal connections and friends among villagers to inform him of activities within his forest beat. Interestingly, the relationship of forest guards with forest officers is also often mediated through villagers. Guards get information about higher-level forest department officials who may be arriving for inspections. This takes the form of mutual help between villagers and guards. A forest guard from Rajgarh (July 2001) opined "only villagers can save you. Complaints do not reach officers if you have good relations with villagers." Or it can become a threat that they need to neutralise as another guard from the same division stated "Villagers threaten us that they will complain to officers, or that they will hurt us, or send a petition to the minister to transfer us." While both are rhetorical statements and not everyday occurrences, they reflect the threat perceptions of the forest guards.

Thirdly, the guard depends on villagers for his safety in the area, from illegal smugglers as well as from disgruntled local people. "Somebody angry with you may throw a stone at you and break your head. What can one do?" (Forest guard, Kullu circle, June 1997) It is the guard's good relations with villagers that can create enough moral outrage against any such action against him. Legal protection makes little sense in a region where the punitive authority of

the state is weak. Finally, one of the major responsibilities of the forest guard is to file damage reports whenever he catches an offender in the forest. The damage report requires the signature of the offender, the guard and a witness to the offense. The guard depends on local people to serve as witnesses for any offense he might record. The 'pradhan' or the elected village head often serves as the witness in such cases. Social pressure is also required often to convince the offender to sign the damage report. These are again achieved through the personal goodwill that the guard cultivates in the village. An additional dependence of the forest guard on villagers can be expected in the panchayati raj[10] system, where it is proposed that the pradhan will comment in the confidential report[11] of the forest guard. This will make the forest guard even more indebted to some local people for his professional advancement.

Villagers act as informants and witnesses, and provide hospitality and protection to guards. Forest guards depend on villagers for crucial information on all activities that occur within their beat. This includes information on illegal felling and smuggling as well as surprise inspections by senior officers. All these services are essential for the performance of the forest guards' official duties. Yet, they are provided informally by villagers and are not officially recognised.

A forest guard is a villager who is well entrenched in rural society and culturally integrated in the society in which he serves. In terms of language, urban exposure, lifestyle and belief-systems, the forest guard is closer to the villagers than to higher-officials in the forest department. At the same time, the rhetorical statements of guards used in this section are also strategic discourses used in a particular context. They reveal the necessity the guard feels to negotiate with villagers rather than subjective helplessness. He is neither the dominant aggressor as has been often assumed in the literature nor the passive implementer. There is a constant interplay of power, dominance and acquiescence in relations between the forest guard and villagers.

Reconciliation of Social and Professional Roles

The common discourse of the forest guard about his profession is generally one of dissatisfaction, lack of respect and helplessness. The forest guard is in an unenviable position where he is forever being

pulled in different directions by the obligations of his multiple roles. "(I) don't like the forest guard's job. There are problems everywhere. Everyone pulls the forest guard's leg – officers, people, politicians too. Everyone pulls him. The forest guard hangs suspended in the middle. You never know who is going to complain tomorrow. We have to forever live with this worry." (Forest guard, Kullu circle, June 1997).

However, as is being increasingly shown in studies of other groups previously thought of as helpless, forest guards manage to accept and manipulate this situation in many ways. Almost all the forest guards describe strong personal relations that they develop in the villages within their forest beat. The guard develops these relations in a new posting through the help of earlier forest guards, and daily wage labour employed by the department. In several houses within his forest beat, the guard can expect to be invited for tea or a meal. In some cases, the guard has relatives in the village who, though distant, still consider themselves kinsmen. They exert their agency in negotiating and reconciling the discordant situations in which they are placed. Forest guards use a variety of strategies to reconcile conflicting social and professional roles depending on the context. They actively engage in discursive politics, isolate their dual roles in time and space and ignore or avoid recognising the contradictions.

The responses and narratives of forest guards are often context and audience dependent. The forest guard in the presence of superior forest officials and outsiders is most likely to utilise the officially expected discourse of the forest department. Thus degradation of forests, excessive local forest use, the need to educate local people, and need for participatory forestry dominates his discourses. These discourses coincide well with the expected and established image of the forest guard. This 'official' discourse was also played out within the village when the guard was in the presence of more powerful villagers, who were often closer to higher-level forest officials. In contrast, expressed acceptance of the need of villagers to use forests occurred most often when the forest guard was in a group with his peers, including other forest guards and villagers who socialised with the guard and were seen as his equals. The social context also affected the discourse. Guards when interviewed in their forest beat or when talking about their forest beat were more

likely to discuss issues as foresters. When guards returned to their home villages they interacted as villagers and not as forest guards. The discourse of the forest guard is influenced by his social position with respect to the audience and reflects the least controversial role that the forest guard could assume.

The ability to separate the two conflicting identities also allows the forest guard to reconcile the conflict in role expectations. An incident narrated to me at the forest guard's training school elucidates this clearly. The incident was first related to me in 1997 by one of the trainers at the forest guard's training school and later repeated by two other officers. Forest guards who come to the school for regular training stay in the hostel for five and a half months. During their stay, each batch of trainees used to run a mess cooperatively to reduce the costs of boarding. While the forest department provided the space, guards had to pay for provisions. The cooking had to be done on a fuelwood stove. The fuelwood required was collected by forest guards from the nearby forest. The guards usually borrowed the department vehicle, and the entire group collected wood for their kitchen. The contradiction here is that the nearby forest is a protected forest and these guards did not have the legal rights to collect the fuel-wood. Forest guards are responsible for preventing illegal fuelwood collection by non-right holders, and cutting of green trees for fuelwood. Yet, they saw no contradiction in collecting the fuelwood when they required it. However, the forest guard who was responsible for that particular forest had earlier fined his fellow forest guards when he encountered them in the forest.

The audience dependent change in discourse and the contextual change in identity are partly strategic manoeuvres that allow the guard to reconcile the contradictions of his position. However, these contradictions between personal and professional roles are also partly internalised and accepted within the 'moral economy' [Scott 1976] of rural society through an elaborate process of oversight. Seema,[12] one of my key respondents in Dhoori village, and her family were felling a tree for timber to construct an addition to their existing house. They had informed their relatives and friends in the village and decided on a day when they would harvest the tree and bring it down. They had not applied to the forest department for a permit. When I interviewed them about this they

were confident that they would not be caught, and none of the participants seemed even remotely concerned about the possibility of being caught in the act and arrested. As I persisted with my questioning Seema told me, "the guard will keep away from this area today". The villagers told me that the forest guards of this area had been indirectly and through various channels 'advised' to stay away from this forest. "(The) guard knows not to come here today."

All the guards denied this during my interviews. Of course, they said, if they knew there was going to be an illegal harvest, they would have to go there and arrest the offenders. That was their duty. However while the entire village knew when the harvest was occurring, which trees were to be cut, and who had to contribute to this activity, the guard who was also part of the village claimed he did not know there was even a harvest in the forest. Both forest guards and the villagers agreed that if the guard were to catch them while they were in the forest harvesting a tree without a permit, he would have to arrest them. There was no doubt that this was his duty and only a 'corrupt' official could ignore such a crime. However if the guard did not see them cutting the tree there would be no contradiction. Forest guards, by following this approach of strategic ignorance, manage to remain faithful to both their identities as foresters and as villagers.

Conclusion

The forest guard is the ultimate implementer of forest policy in India. He is the frontline of the forest bureaucracy, and the primary link between state and society in forest management. While the gap between policy and its implementation has attracted much attention in social science research, the actual interactions, conflicts and negotiations that occur between the ground-level implementer and society remains unexplored. The life of the forest guard in Himachal Pradesh has been elucidated here in order to understand the multiple pressures that influence his actions and discourses. Such an ethnography reveals that the unrecognised realities of the multiple roles that the forest guard plays in rural society actually makes many current forest policies unrealistic for implementation.

The existing literature suggests that the social position of the forest guard and his power over villagers varies in different

regions of India. The level and nature of the forest guards' integration in rural society is possibly considerably different in Himachal Pradesh when compared to other states like Madhya Pradesh, where cases of severe harassment and abuse of villagers by the forest department has emerged in the press.[13] However, the emphasis here is not on the power or lack thereof of the forest guard, but on the social reality that squarely positions the guard somewhere within the existing social hierarchy that is predominantly unequal. Field-level state policy implementers are invariably embedded and enmeshed in social networks in the society in which they work. In general both dependence and influence of forest guards on villagers as well as the reverse situation has a critical influence on the implementation of any forest policy.

The recognition of this crucial factor demands the reconceptualisation of policy and implementing mechanisms, in order to ensure effective implementation. One of the primary assumptions challenged by this understanding of the forest guards' perspective is that of a homogeneous unified state that is involved in forest management. Clearly, although forest guards are part of the state, their needs, motivations and positions are significantly different from other state representatives such as officers or politicians. Other divisions within the state such as between politicians and officers, or between different departments have been previously highlighted by other authors [Gupta 1995, Saberwal 1999]. Here the horizontal divisions within a single state bureaucracy are emphasised.

Moreover, while both the state and rural society are heterogeneous in themselves, they also overlap with each other. Those at the middle of this continuum such as the forest guard show loyalties to both sides. Implementation of forest policy, and in general all policies, is significantly influenced by the Janus-faced nature of the policy implementers at the middle of this continuum. Contradictory discourses and actions expose the means by which these contradictions are constantly negotiated and reconciled.

Given these two conditions of a heterogeneous state that works towards multiple objectives, and a personalised and politicised implementing organisation, policies and programmes need to be redesigned. Policies need to account for ground-level capabilities and capacities of the implementing organisation. They also need to account for the compulsions and requirements of implementers. Backward feedback within the implementing organisation is essential for such sensitive policies. In the short term, establishing channels for informal and sometimes anonymous intra-departmental communication is essential. In the longterm, traditions of such backward feedback can be established. However, this study has highlighted the challenges and compulsions of merely one of the crucial stakeholders in the process of policy implementation. Ultimately, a pragmatic policy would be possible only through a process that allows all stake-holders to participate in the process of policy making.

A more fundamental theoretical and practical problem that this analysis underlines is that the assumption of the existence in India of a Weberian modern bureaucracy that functions mechanically and impersonally is untenable. Current Indian policy implementing structures are a legacy of colonial bureaucracies where the maintenance of the public-private divide was essential for control of the bureaucracy by

a colonial state. In the current system of democratic politics, such a separation is impractical if not impossible. Functioning of implementation institutions today in India is personalised and politicised. The distinction between professional and personal life is often indistinct. The vast literature on corruption in third world bureaucracies only highlights the failure of this institutional model in most developing societies. The challenge therefore remains to envision a policy implementation structure that can account for the embeddedness of implementers in society. 〖EPW〗

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Notes

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1 Forest guard is the lowest level functionary in the hierarchy of the state forest department in India, which is called the department of forest farming and conservation in Himachal Pradesh. The main positions in the hierarchy of the forest department at the state level (from the lowest to the highest) are: forest guard, deputy forest guard/forester, range officer, divisional forest officer, conservator of forests, chief conservator of forests, and principal chief conservator of forests.
2 Circle is an administrative unit of the forest department in Himachal Pradesh. The administrative units of the forest department from smallest to the largest are: beat, range, division, circle and state.
3 Dhoori is a pseudonym used for an interior village in the Seraj forest division.
4 Timber distribution is a policy in Himachal Pradesh that provides most landowners in this state the right to harvest unto two trees once in five years from specified forests for the sole purpose of construction and repair of their own house.
5 This is traditional custom called juari in the region where there is mutual exchange of labour for agricultural activities as well as animal husbandry and forestry. This custom is fast eroding and was common in 1997 only in the interior villages with less access to roads and markets. In villages near the tourist town Manali, juari was extremely rare in the last ten years and was found only in poorer households. Instead, most households employed labour, particularly Nepali migrants, to transport the timber to their houses.
6 I use the pronoun 'his' rather than a more gender-neutral term to refer to forest guards since female forest guards are rare in Himachal Pradesh. There are currently less than half-a-dozen female forest guards in the state. My interview sample included two female forest

guards.
7 Some of the continual demands of the forest guards union in the state have been the issue of firearms and wireless sets to guards, and field assistants to accompany them. The provision of firearms and wireless sets was accepted in principle by the state government in 2001.
8 Check posts are barriers set up along major roads that are meant to monitor all transport of forest goods. Permits for transporting forest goods are checked at these barriers. All vehicles can be stopped and inspected at these posts.
9 'Saab' is the approximate equivalent of 'sir' and is usually used for officers and others in official positions of power.
10 Local self-governance system, where elected representatives from a cluster of villages (panchayats) are given some discretionary powers and money for implementing local development programmes. Panchayati raj has seen a rejuvenation in Himachal Pradesh in the nineties, and there is a general expectation of more money and power being devolved to these bodies.
11 An official and confidential record maintained for each forest guard that is crucial for increments, promotions and similar benefits.
12 Seema (pseudonym) is an upper caste villager and an employee in a non-governmental organisation working in this area. Due to my long-term interaction with this NGO, she was familiar with me and was a key respondent who helped to ease villagers' fears about my intentions in asking questions. I was also privy to more information about 'illegal activities' because of this trust.
13 See *Hindustan Times* dated June 2 2001 for an article 'Paticipation at Gun Point' by Nandini Sundar. The full report of the public hearing held at Harda on the Dewas firing incident and harassment of villagers by forest department is also available with People's Union for Democratic Rights, New Delhi.

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