

# Securing Livelihoods: The Watershed Plus Approach and Emergence of 'The Social' in a Watershed Project in Odisha

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*Critiques of the fact that traditional watershed development approaches favour the landed and richer sections in villages have led to the growth of the watershed-plus approach that ostensibly tries to address the needs of the landless and the poor. The present essay provides a review of the relevant social science literature on watersheds in India. Drawing upon fieldwork undertaken in an ongoing participatory watershed development project in Kalahandi, in the Indian state of Odisha, it tries to establish interlinkages between the emerging importance of livelihood-related concerns in watershed development and the ways in which this new focus is related to, what this paper calls, the emergence of 'the social' as a site and trope of governmental action.*

**Keywords:** Watershed, Kalahandi, Odisha, Livelihoods, Social

## INTRODUCTION

With the traditional water resource development paradigm becoming contested, watershed development is increasingly being seen as an important strategy for the development of marginal areas wherein rain-fed agriculture is prevalent. Critiques of the fact that traditional watershed development approaches are iniquitous and favour the landed and elite sections of rural areas have led to the growth of the watershed-plus approach. A key aspect of the watershed-plus approach as opposed to the traditional watershed development approaches is the importance given to livelihoods in the former.

The watershed-plus approach and its focus on livelihoods and user groups as delivery mechanisms for projects (and the use of such mechanisms for ensuring 'participation') is often seen as part of a de-politicizing process that purportedly subverts the functioning of multipurpose local government (Baviskar, 2004; Manor, 2004). Thus, the assessment of such a process has often been a normative one. In this article, we try and offer a narrative with a slightly different focus. Instead of judging whether the new generation watershed-plus projects do indeed deliver on the promises of livelihood generation for marginalized communities, and whether or not they are effective or equitable, we try to shift the narrative into a perceptual and descriptive domain. What we try and do is to map out the consequences of such a change in the

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focus of watershed projects in the ways in which project beneficiaries and lower level staff perceive such projects. We also try and elaborate the effects that such changes have with respect to the ways in which certain social processes operate on the ground at the study sites, and the modes in which people on the ground perceive the government and its apparatus.

We do this by drawing upon fieldwork undertaken in the project area of an ongoing watershed-plus project—the Western Odisha Rural Livelihood Project (WORLP)—in Kalahandi district in south-western Odisha, which is being implemented under the aegis of the Odisha Watershed Development Mission (OWDM). We posit that one of the important results of this process of refocusing on livelihoods has been the growth of ‘the social’ as a site and tool of governmental action. The emergence of ‘the social’ through the refocusing on livelihoods is reflected in the organizational structure and project priorities of WORLP<sup>1</sup> as well as the perceptions of the project staff working at various levels of the project. By doing this, we side-step the issues surrounding ‘de-politicization’, and offer a slightly different account of the processes set in motion on the ground by focus on livelihoods in the case of a specific new-generation watershed-plus project. Thus, the overall thrust of this paper is empirical in nature.

#### **A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF WATERSHED DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA**

In order to be able to better contextualize the recent changes in the approaches in watershed development, we trace a brief history of relevant processes and events here. During the colonial period, watershed development initiatives consisted of preventing soil erosion in the catchments of river valley projects and other programmes for conserving soil and moisture. These initiatives lacked a holistic approach towards watershed development (Samra and Sharma, 2009). The period immediately after Independence was marked by the dominance of the water resource development paradigm, which was characterized by the building of big dams and multipurpose river valley projects (Klingensmith, 2007). Over the last three decades, the canal-oriented, water resources development framework based on big dams for meeting the irrigation, water, and livelihoods needs of the country has been increasingly critiqued by social scientists and those involved with social movements (Dhawan, 1989; Singh, 1990). Commentators in India have suggested that the watershed approach could function as an alternative to mitigate the adverse effects of the water resources development approach (Mehta, 2000; 2005).

Since the 1970s, there has been a growing interest in watershed development and other localized, decentralized ways of resource usage and management. The Rural Works Programme (RWP) launched in 1970-71, which had watershed-related components, can be seen as a precursor to the Drought-prone Area Programme (DPAP), which is, in many ways, the mother of all watershed development programmes in India. During the mid-term appraisal of the fourth Five-Year Plan, the RWP was re-designed as the DPAP (GoI, 1994). Many commentators also trace the roots of modern watershed development projects in India to purportedly successful village level

projects of the 1970s, of which the most talked about ones are Sukhomajri in Haryana and Ralegaon Siddhi in Maharashtra (Kerr, 2002).

Following the publication of the Report of the National Commission on Agriculture in 1974, the Desert Development Programme (DDP) was started in 1977-78 (GoI, 1994). During the period covering the 1970s and the early 1980s, the performance of watershed programmes was measured mainly through indicators with a biophysical focus such as soil loss and water tables (Turton, 2000). The Swaminathan Committee Report of 1982 re-emphasized the ecological goals of watershed development programmes, and recommended schemes that had a component of community participation (GoI 1994). In 1987, the DPAP was re-organized around water harvesting. The late 1980s saw a change in priorities with the focus shifting from measuring progress only through improvements in natural resources to the more overtly social concerns such as ensuring livelihoods and broadening participation (Turton, 2000).

During the early 1990s, the Union Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) became the nodal ministry for watershed development in India after which one of its chief initiatives was the issuing of, what was called, 'Common Guidelines for Watershed Development' in 1994. Apart from other objectives such as an increase in agricultural productivity and employment, regeneration of village commons, and checking migration, among others, these guidelines also promoted a 'community-based' approach. This was part of a larger push towards participatory watershed management in India in which many important Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as the Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency (MYRADA) and donor agencies such as the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID) played an important role by emphasizing the new participatory watershed development approaches that focus on livelihoods and poverty alleviation (Chhotray, 2007).

In the year 2000, guidelines for the National Watershed Development Project for Rainfed Areas (NWDPR) were revised by the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), which followed the overall thrust on participation, equity and sustainability. The guidelines issued by the MoA were named as 'WARASA-JAN SAHABHAGITA Guidelines'. Following this, the MoRD revised the Common Guidelines in 2001 and then again in April 2003, which were then called the Hariyali Guidelines. Since the implementation of these changes, watershed development has become central to the process of governmental interventions in rural development with its focus on livelihoods and poverty alleviation (GoI, 2006).

The shifting focus from biophysical regeneration to livelihoods and poverty reduction has seen the emergence of 'the social' as a site and trope of governmental intervention as opposed to the technical and the scientific. The implications of such a change of focus need to be understood. This is done by drawing upon fieldwork undertaken in an ongoing participatory watershed development project—WORLP—that has an explicit livelihood focus, in one of the most 'backward' districts of the country, Kalahandi, in the state of Odisha. Kalahandi is infamous in India as the land

of hunger and starvation deaths. The district is seen as being beset with droughts and water-stress. It is also overwhelmingly a rural district with a high incidence of poverty. The initiation of livelihood programmes based on the sustainable usage of local natural resources has been advocated as a developmental intervention that can meet the needs of the district (Pradhan, 1993). In this context, the district is a productive site for studying the operation of a new-generation, livelihood-focused, watershed-plus project such as WORLP.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE AND THE FIELD**

### **The Area and the People**

Kalahandi is perceived to be one of the most backward districts in India. It forms a part of a broader region in the south-west part of the state of Odisha called the KBK (taking the initials of the undivided districts of Kalahandi, Bolangir and Koraput) region, which is characterized by widespread poverty, lack of healthcare and other public services, and low levels of attainment in terms of socio-economic indicators (Dash, 2007). The economy of the district is primarily agricultural in nature, with very little industrial activity seen here (Pati, 2001). It was a princely state that was incorporated into the state of Odisha after Independence. The area of the district is 7,920 square kilometres, and it has a population of around 1,573,054, according to the 2011 Census.

Tribal groups comprise a major proportion of the population of the district, with their share at around 29 per cent of the total, whereas the other numerically significant demographic group, that of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) comprises around 17 per cent of the population (Banik, 2007). The district has become synonymous with hunger in India because of frequent reports of occurrence of starvation deaths there (Currie, 2000). Kalahandi is generally seen as a drought-prone region; this is perceived to be resulting in resource degradation and the concomitant erosion of livelihood opportunities. Politics in the state and the region have focused on the logistics of elections rather than tackling the issues of deprivation, and many development programmes have been launched there without taking into account the basic underlying causes of poverty and deprivation (Mohanty, 1998).

### **The Western Orissa Rural Livelihood Project (WORLP)**

Increasingly, watershed development, especially the livelihood-plus approach, is seen as an appropriate developmental intervention in areas perceived as marginal drylands such as Kalahandi. WORLP, a watershed project operational in Kalahandi and promoted by the Government of Odisha (GoO) and DFID, follows a watershed-plus approach. Apart from Kalahandi, it is operational in three other districts of western Odisha—Nuapada, Bolangir and Bargarh.

The project is managed by the OWDM, which is an autonomous agency under the control of the Department of Agriculture of the GoO. At the district level, the District

Watershed Mission (DWM), Kalahandi, manages the project, with the Project Director as the head. He is assisted by Assistant Project Directors (APDs) and Capacity Building Team (CBT) members. At the sub-district level, Project Implementing Agencies (PIAs) are involved in the project at the level of the blocks. WORLP is operational in six blocks in Kalahandi with three PIAs being NGOs, and other three being managed directly by the government. The project team at the level of the PIA has Watershed Development Team (WDT) members and Livelihood Support Team (LST) members. One of the WDT members is in charge of the 'social' aspects of the project, and is primarily involved in managing the 'plus' aspects of the project's activities.

Each PIA has the responsibility for around ten village level watershed development committees (henceforth called Committees), which at the most primary level of the project are responsible for the execution of the watershed development work. These Committees have been registered legally as societies, and each has a president, a secretary and committee members. Each Committee is supposed to have four Cluster Level Workers (CLWs) to assist it in the work; one of the CLW posts is that of the CLW social.

Before the commencement of the actual project activities, the households in the project villages were divided into four categories—very poor, poor, manageable, and well-off. On the basis of these categories, the households were given numbers and were colour-coded. The project has four broad heads under which activities take place—administration, community development, Natural Resource Management (NRM), and the watershed-plus component comprising a Revolving Fund (RF) and grant. In the last category of project activities, Self-help Groups (SHGs) of women got loans at zero per cent interest for livelihood generation activities. Grants ranging from Rs. 4,000 to Rs. 7,000 were supposed to be given to only those households that fall under the 'very poor' and 'poor' categories in order to help them enhance their livelihood options.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Fieldwork was undertaken following a primarily qualitative methodological approach for the study over the period January 2009 to February 2010 in the district of Kalahandi at the project site of WORLP. Various methods such as in-depth unstructured interviews, observations, and participant observation were used for conducting the fieldwork. Two PIAs (with one being an NGO, and the other a governmental one), and one village at the project site of each of the two PIAs were studied. At the village level, in-depth unstructured interviews schedules were conducted with 154 villagers. Thirty-one village level functionaries of the project, 13 PIA level staff members of the project, six district level staff members of the project, and three staff members of the OWDM were also interviewed.

Observations were made of 15 monthly meetings of Committees, out of which eight took place in the two villages under study. Three district level review meetings of DWM, Kalahandi, were observed. Seven PIA level review meetings were observed. Two training programmes held under the auspices of DWM, Kalahandi, were observed,

out of which one was a three-day long affair. Fifteen monthly meetings of SHGs of women were observed in the villages under study. Apart from the observation of these formal processes, a large part of the ethnographic fieldwork involved watching and following the village level, PIA level and district level staff (related to WORLP and DWM, Kalahandi) who were pursuing their routine activities, as also in observing the everyday life of the villagers including the project beneficiaries.

## **DEVELOPMENT THROUGH LIVELIHOOD ENHANCEMENT: NEW SITES OF GOVERNMENTAL INTERVENTION**

### **Implications of the Focus on Livelihoods: A Short Note**

In many ways, the current focus on livelihoods in watershed development has turned matters through a full circle. When programmes such as DDP and DPAP were started, they had a broader mandate of rural development. In the 1980s, with increasing criticism surrounding the ineffectiveness of the programmes and the lack of observable results in terms of biophysical criteria, and following the recommendations of the Hanumantha Rao Committee, at least 75 per cent of the project amount was mandated to be spent on NRM-related activities. Following changes in the international and national policy atmosphere and governance agendas, non-NRM activities have again started gaining prominence. This has happened not through the trope of rural development but through tropes such as 'livelihoods', 'process focus' and 'participation,' and the emergences of 'the social' as an important site of governmental intervention.

This has also happened as a result of critiques of older watershed development approaches that were seen as being inequitable and as favouring the landed, elite sections of village society (Sangameswaran, 2006). The argument of this article is as follows: by refocusing on watershed development as a livelihood-related intervention (as opposed to an intervention only/primarily focused on environmental regeneration), 'the social' has emerged as a distinct site of governmental intervention. The watershed-plus approach is not a way of 'socializing' the former technocratic approaches to watershed development; rather it is one way (amongst many other parallel interventions) through which the state 'seeps' into village society. This 'seepage' is made possible by the practices that are operationalized through new tropes of governmental intervention.

### **Emergence of the Social Watershed**

The watershed-plus approach is not merely about adding 'social concerns' to an already existing biophysical intervention. In Kalahandi, though the names of the micro-watersheds generally do not have the name of the village(s), the so-called micro-watershed is not a bio-geographical unit, but a social unit composed of one or more villages having around 500 hectares of treatable area. The units that were chosen for interventions in WORLP constituted a village or a set of villages, and not micro-watersheds. The only reference to micro-watersheds seems to be in the names that

the Committees give to themselves. The government has identified villages that need 'watershed treatment' on the basis of certain criteria, which also include certain 'social' criteria such as the proportion of SCs, Scheduled Tribes (STs), very poor, and the poor in the population. The basic units of intervention in watershed-related treatments have thus been villages (a social unit) and not any 'biophysical' unit. This fact was emphasized by middle level officials on deputation from the soil conservation department, who tended to criticize this 'unscientific' categorization of micro-watersheds. According to these officials, prior to the period when watershed development work started taking place under the OWDM, 'technocratic norms' for site and intervention selection prevailed, and watershed development had a strong 'technical' focus.

Earlier, the soil conservation department dealt primarily with farmers or peasants; the landless used to primarily play the role of labourers, not beneficiaries. Because of the adoption of the watershed-plus approach and work undertaken through the state and district level watershed missions, the government apparatus now has to deal with new population groups, such as the primarily landless SC groups as well. These groups generally did not come into contact with the state apparatus through the soil conservation department.

Questions surrounding livelihoods are central to the watershed-plus approach, as it is premised upon the understanding that there are significant unaddressed social concerns surrounding the exclusion of the non-landed in the 'traditional' watershed projects. This changed focus on the livelihoods of hitherto marginal groups also tries to address the concerns surrounding the capture of watershed-related interventions by the landed elite.

However, this felt and expressed need for a 'plus' to the traditional watershed development approach presupposes that the 'technical' aspects such as the building of tanks are not seen as 'social' interventions. However, the generation of livelihoods is seen as a specifically 'social concern', which unites both 'technical' interventions such as building of tanks and wells (that are put under the accounting head of NRM in WORLP) and 'social interventions' such as livelihood-related loans and grants.

This is reflected in the organizational structure and recruitment practices of OWDM, in general, and WORLP, in particular. In WORLP, the concern surrounding livelihoods has led to the creation of the LST in addition to the WDT at the level of the PIAs, whose stated job profile focuses on the promotion of livelihood-related activities. The LST members are expected to support the effective implementation of livelihood-related interventions, and their mandated roles include extending help to form women's SHGs, to help these groups diversify their livelihood options and to build federations, and to facilitate access to the various schemes of the government, among other objectives.

The project mandates that each LST should have four persons, at least two of whom should be women. This team is expected to have competencies in various social techniques as participatory methodologies, gender analysis, monitoring and evaluation, running of micro-enterprises, and group formation, and is supposed to

facilitate the development of processes such as those of leadership development, and conflict management (Johnston, *et al.*, 2002). As this job description shows, most of the aspects of their work are related to what can be considered as 'social' interventions, which are a part of the more 'technical' aspects of the project that deal with natural resource management. Thus, the institutionalization of livelihood concerns inside the project design and structure of WORLP has led to its 'socialization'.

### **Vernacular Usages of the Category of Watershed**

The term 'watershed' itself is understood differently by various groups of people. In Odia, the actual and literal translation of the term 'watershed' is *jala bibhājikā*, but sometimes it is translated as *jalachhāyā* as well. However, in the field, no one uses the Odia term(s) for 'watershed' at all. Everyone uses the term 'watershed' in everyday conversations in Odia, though the word means different things to different people. The dominant understanding amongst watershed staff, especially the middle and the lower level staff at the level of the WDT members and the secretaries of the Committees, about the term 'watershed' is that of a project. They do not talk about watersheds *per se*, but about discrete projects such as WORLP or the various DPAP projects. The top level officials of the district watershed mission use the term 'watershed' in the way it is 'supposed' to be used, as a biophysical/environmental intervention. Most villagers generally talk about 'the watershed' in the same vein as they would talk about the police or the agriculture department; thus, they do not see it as either a project or a 'mission' but as another government department, though different in terms of its orientation and functioning. However, this understanding varies across PIAs; in the NGO PIA, there are a few beneficiaries who see it as a discrete project whereas in the case of the governmental PIA, almost everyone sees it as a government department. For example, people in villages, while referring to the money coming into the village through 'the watershed,' would see it as *sarkāri tankā* or as government money, in the same way that they would talk about interventions by other government departments. Thus, the very meaning of the word 'watershed' is contested socially. The following section tries to trace the contours of the way in which 'the social' seems to emerge as a new site and motif of governmental action.

## **THE FOCUS ON LIVELIHOODS AND THE EMERGENCE OF 'THE SOCIAL'**

### **The Perceived Importance of 'the Social'**

It was a warm day in March; one of those days when one feels that spring in Odisha is not a concoction of the imagination of a slightly delusional poet. There was not even a nip of coolness in the air, but it was not hot either. The first author was travelling inside an old, ratty ambassador car with Mr. Mahanty, a WDT member working with one of the governmental PIAs to attend a meeting of a Committee. The meeting apparently could not take place the previous month due to a lack of quorum. This time, the Secretary had sent an emergency notice to all the committee members to attend the meeting, and Mr. Mahanty was hoping that the meeting would finally take place.

Mr. Mahanty was a reticent man and spoke slowly, emphasizing every word that he uttered. He was curious about the researcher and the work, and after the initial pleasantries, he looked at the researcher in amusement and said, "Your work sounds interesting; during our student days, we could not even think that such kind of work was possible." After talking for some time about his M.Sc. dissertation, his interest in research, and his regret at not having followed a career in research, he said, "These days 'social' is very important." He gave the example of the watershed mission, and said, "See, at every level of the project there is some social person; at the district level, there is a social CBT member, at the PIA level, there is a WDT social, and at the village level, there is a CLW social. Recently, they [have been] thinking about eliminating the posts of the CLW, but one hears that the post of the CLW social will remain. This is only to be expected. When I started working more than forty years back, it was just about doing technical work and distributing stuff. Now it's all about motivating people. When we started working, we never thought that things [would] come to such a pass. Now we have to be servile to these ignorant villagers to get their own work done. Not that I mind it too much. It's after all people's work. But I am not used to this, that's all that's there to it. Now for young people such as you, this new focus on social things is, of course, an opportunity."

As mentioned earlier, this focus on 'the social' is not merely seen in the narratives that the project staff members tell each other and other curious observers. It is there in the very architecture of the project itself. As regards the way in which the accounting heads of the project work, there are heads that are generally perceived as 'technical', and others that are perceived to be 'social'; NRM is seen as coming under the technical head, while RF and Grant are seen as coming under the 'social' head; RF, as mentioned earlier, is an acronym for Revolving Fund. The money budgeted under the RF head was mandated to be given to SHGs. In fact, the tasks of the WDT social and the CLW social, along with those of some of the LSTs, were supposed to focus on the work of the SHGs and other aspects of livelihood enhancement such as ensuring that the livelihood grants were put to productive use.

### **The Social as 'Messy'**

'The social', in many accounts of work given by staff of the project, was seen as something messy. Once, in the NGO PIA, all the staff members, apart from the PIA himself and the WDT engineer, had gone on leave because of a long weekend. The work in the village of Kalampada has been stuck for quite some time, and even the Committee meetings were not taking place. The secretary of Kalampada had fixed the meeting at a time when the meeting of another Committee was also taking place. Thus, the PIA went to attend the meeting of the other village, and sent the WDT engineer to Kalampada, along with the researcher.

The WDT was very reluctant to go, and we left a little late. For a change, when we arrived at the venue, viz. the village school, everyone was already there including the President and the Secretary. When the meeting started, it emerged that the reason

for the stalemate in the work of the Committee was something relatively small, but symbolically big. One of the Committee members, who had taken the contract as the head of a user group to construct a drain in one of the hamlets of the village (as a community development initiative through WORLP), had apparently done sub-standard work, and had overcharged. The problem was that he had refused to share the spoils with anyone else. In the meeting, people almost came to blows, but the WDT did nothing to diffuse the situation. Ultimately, the relevant Committee member agreed to donate a couple of thousand rupees to a temple that was being constructed in the village, and agreed to give bricks for the construction of a platform around a big tree at a public place for the use of everyone.

On the way back to the office, when the WDT member was asked as to why he did not intervene in the meeting at all, he said, "It's beneath me to get embroiled in village politics; I am much better off dealing with estimates. Merely because the relevant staff is absent, I need not deal with all this messy social stuff." He then gave a comparative account of the work he had done in the same block, but with a governmental PIA as an engineering WDT in another project. According to him, that project did not focus on the 'so-called' social aspects of work that much and, therefore, the 'real' work took place in a much more efficient fashion. He gave the example of the village Laimera, where he had constructed three water harvesting structures on a single stream, and he referred to this work as a 'visible' piece of work that people still remember him for. He said, "*Ei social social hei khāli jāhā politics badhuchhi—āu kanatā lābha nahele heuchhi āpana mote kuhantu?*" ("Only politics is increasing because of this focus on 'the social'. Otherwise what's the benefit out of this please tell me?")

This was not an isolated case. The discomfort of the engineering staff in dealing with non-technical/social aspects of the project was very much evident from the manner in which way they did not want to fill in for social WDT members when the latter were on leave. Even senior project staff members, especially some officers drawn from the soil conservation department, saw the overtly social aspects of the project as 'messy'. Many times, during interviews they would voice concerns about the deteriorating quality of the 'technical' aspects of the work because of the need to factor in what they termed as 'social concerns'. Thus, 'the social' was construed as something messy due to the fact that it was difficult to deal with and manage, and it was seen as something that adversely affects the quality of the technical aspects of the work.

### **'The Social' as a Marker between Governmental Organizations and NGOs**

Many PIAs, APDs and CBT members saw 'the social' as a distinguishing marker between governmental PIAs and NGO PIAs. Once, after a review meeting held at the district headquarters, a governmental PIA elaborated informally over lunch about the differences between the way he works and the way an NGO PIA works. He said, "See, the NGOs are slightly better than us in terms of the work related to the social aspects of the project, and this should be acknowledged. Since they have been working in these

areas for quite a few years, they also have a better understanding of social aspects of these kinds of projects. Moreover they are used to work in a contractual fashion; therefore, they find it much easier to deal with the contractual staff of the projects hired under the District Watershed Mission [DWM]. To be honest, we governmental PIAs, who are mostly on deputation, are yet to get a hang of the ways of dealing with the contractual staff. But we are definitely better at doing the technical work. Most of these NGO PIAs, in Kalahandi as well as elsewhere, have never employed proper engineers, and these organizations have very little experience in doing construction work. So the villagers can lead them on whereas no villager can take us for a ride. The NGOs also have better experience in these new things such as community mobilization, and awareness building. But we are also learning. After all, all this new social nonsense is not rocket science.”

Narratives surrounding ‘the social’ were also used as a marker to distinguish between the earlier forms of watershed-related interventions in the soil conservation department, and the work now being done under the aegis of OWDM. The higher-level staff members of the DWM, Kalahandi, see this difference through the trope of participation. As a senior official voiced in an interview, “Earlier when the soil conservation department used to work on watersheds there was no participation by the people. An engineer will go and survey the area and depending upon the availability of funds and the needs of the watershed, he will draw up estimates depending upon technical criteria. And only when the actual earthwork starts, people come to know that a project has come to their village. Now there is people’s participation because of decentralized planning. Therefore, the importance of the social aspects of the work has grown quite a bit.” This focus on ‘the social’ as a marker of difference posits certain aspects of the work of the project as not being ‘social’. For example, the work of accounting and auditing is not seen as being ‘social’ but as requiring technical expertise that is difficult to acquire.

### **Emergence of ‘the Social’ and Imbrications in the Field**

The watershed-plus approach with its focus on livelihoods can be seen as a way in which the watershed projects, and in our case the WORLP, is trying to ‘socialize’ the manner in which the government functions. For example, the way the project is structured—with all the work supposed to be carried out through the village level micro-watershed committees—is in itself a significant move at ‘socialization’. The Committee members and other village level functionaries are not chosen on the basis of education or competence, though the Secretary is expected to be at least a matriculate, as he has to maintain the records of the Committee. This change has meant that ‘the social’ is being incorporated into the machinery of the government through certain institutional assemblages such as watershed committees, SHGs, and user groups, among others.

This focus on ‘the social’ has interacted with many other processes in the field with some interesting results, one of which has been that the project has aided vastly

increased sightings of the state. A large number of the villagers identified project staff from WORLP as the most visible amongst all government departments. The creation of the watershed committees and the fact that the work took place through them meant that at least one government staff member visited the village at least once a month to attend the monthly meetings of the Committees. Similarly, the work surrounding the small grants and RFs involved frequent visits by the staff of the project of both the governmental and NGO PIAs for facilitation and monitoring. Thus, one of the more important results of the focus on 'the social' has been to increase the number of sightings of government staff and thus, in effect, of the government and the State itself.

The focus on 'the social' has also led to a dramatic increase in the number of direct beneficiaries. The livelihood promotion budget, comprising the RF for the SHGs and the livelihood grants for individual households, comprises more than a quarter of the total budgeted amounts released to the various Committees under the project. The minimum amount that could be distributed as livelihood grants is Rs. 4,000, though sometimes Committees distributed Rs. 3,000 per grant to maximize the coverage of beneficiaries. On an average, around 150 households belonging to the 'poor' and 'very poor' categories got livelihood grants in the micro-watersheds (MWSs) of the PIAs under study. The number of households covered under the RF component is at least 100 in most MWSs. Even allowing for some overlap of households that have benefited from both the RFs and livelihood grants, this is a large number of households, considering the fact that most MWSs have around 400-500 households.

In fact, the emergence of 'the social' due to a focus on livelihoods seems to be premised upon such an effect. In many ways, this phenomenon of spreading things thin and ensuring the sightings of the State functionaries seems to be built into the very project architecture. For example, one of the goals for all project staff members, especially for the staff members hired to deal with the overtly social aspects of the project, has been to ensure that at least 80 per cent of households in the project areas are covered through SHGs. This is sometimes resented by the staff members, as it expands the scope of their work, and makes them much more 'accessible' to the villagers.

The promotion of the SHGs in the project area has fed into other kinds of processes in a few cases. The emergence of 'the social' and the attendant establishment and strengthening of institutions such as SHGs have resulted in the increasing penetration of micro-credit institutions in many areas. Because of the existence of a robust network of these SHGs, micro-credit institutions have found it easy to operate in these villages. Most of the SHGs in the micro-watersheds in the project area of the governmental PIA have a relatively poor record of ensuring the return of the loans received through WORLP as RFs. But it would be perhaps unfruitful to judge these institutions as ineffective on these grounds. By creating these SHGs and handholding them during the initial part of their existence, the project has created institutions that have gone on to perform other, and sometimes, similar roles.

Many women stated that by being part of SHGs, they have been able to become 'forward' (confident) and that earlier, they would not have the confidence to talk to a

government official, and other outsiders. But now they are able to do so. They see this as a direct result of being a member of the SHGs, and thus a result of their experience of trainings, exposure visits to other areas, and the increased opportunities of interacting with the outside world inside the village.

Another important aspect of the emergence of 'the social' is the importance that is given to 'process' in WORLP. The process dimensions of the social components of the work are stressed upon to a greater extent, as compared to the same dimensions of the 'technical/engineering' aspects of the project work. This may be read as suggesting that perhaps the project managers have greater anxieties regarding the social aspects of the work. But this can be posed in another way as well. The way in which the auditors would want to ensure whether certain social goals were fulfilled or not was by insisting that certain indicators and processes of the social components of the project work were consistently followed. Consequently, a large part of the work took place to ensure that the auditors could be satisfied as and when auditing was carried out.

## **CONCLUSION**

Watershed development is increasingly being seen as an alternative to the traditional paradigm of water resource development based on big dams. Simultaneously, following critiques of approaches to watershed development that lay an emphasis on biophysical criteria, concerns surrounding the non-biophysical issues such as those involving livelihoods, especially in the dryland areas, have come to the forefront during the same period of time. On the basis of fieldwork undertaken in Kalahandi in the project area of WORLP, this paper has argued that the increasing importance given to livelihoods can be read as part of a process of emergence of 'the social' as a site, object and domain of governmental interventions. Such a focus on 'the social' is built into project design, as well as the actual everyday practice of the project. Most of the project staff interviewed tended to foreground the increasing importance given to social aspects (such as the formation of groups, distribution of livelihood-related grants and loans, and following proper processes while doing the work, which they saw as constituting 'the social') in the project.

Although watershed is construed as a technical biophysical category, the meaning of the term 'watershed' is socially mediated and contested. The emergence of 'the social' is seen as an important marker of difference between the work of the NGOs and government organizations, on the one hand, and between the work of the OWDM and the state soil conservation department, on the other. While the NGOs and OWDM are perceived to be better at implementing the social aspects of watershed development, government organizations and the soil conservation department are perceived to be better at overseeing the 'traditional', technical aspects of the work.

The undertaking of new kinds of project activities related to the livelihoods of traditionally marginal communities in watershed development and the concomitant rise of 'the social' has been accompanied by the State reaching out deep into village society through organizational forms such as NGOs as project implementing

agencies, and the evolution of new institutions such as micro-watershed development committees at the village level. The emergence of 'the social' as a site and mode of governance has increased the sightings of the State for villagers by increasing the intensity and the variety of ways in which governmental staff interact with them. It has also increased, to a very large extent, the total number of beneficiaries that come into contact with the governmental apparatus, cutting across NGOs and governmental organizations as implementing agencies. The breadth of such a phenomenon and its theoretical implications need to be teased out by further research.

#### NOTE

1. The project was being implemented at the time the fieldwork took place, that is, during the period January 2009–February 2010. A list of acronyms used in the paper has been provided as Appendix 1.

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## APPENDIX 1

### List of Acronyms

|  |   |
|--|---|
| APD— Assistant Project Director                                | NGO—Non-governmental Organization                               |
| CBT— Capacity Building Team                                    | NRM— Natural Resource Management                                |
| CLW— Cluster Level Worker                                      | NWDPR— National Watershed Development Project for Rainfed Areas |
| DDP— Desert Development Programme                              | OWDM— Odisha Watershed Development Mission                      |
| DFID— Department for International Development (UK Government) | PIA— Project Implementing Agency                                |
| DPAP— Drought-prone Area Programme                             | RF— Revolving Fund  |
| DWM— District Watershed Mission                                | RWP— Rural Works Programme                                      |
| GoI— Government of India                                       | SC— Scheduled Caste   |
| GoO— Government of Odisha                                      | SHG— Self-help Group  |
| LST— Livelihood Support Team                                   | ST— Scheduled Tribe   |
| MoA— Ministry of Agriculture                                   | WDT— Watershed Development Team                                 |
| MoRD— Ministry of Rural Development                            | WORLP—Western Orissa Rural Livelihood Project                   |
| MWS— Micro-watersheds  |   |
| MYRADA— Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency             |   |

