ABSTRACT

The thesis looks at decentralisation and democracy from a natural resource perspective, with a focus on forest resource management in the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu, India. Decentralisation is seen as deepening democracy measured in terms of its outcomes like participation and empowerment and how that in turn affects the quality of forest management. For analytical purposes, it is postulated that in a decentralised institutional setup that is characterized by the presence of both state and community initiated decentralised institutions the level of participation, empowerment and democracy will be relatively high. This in turn will result in more effective forest resource management. Conversely, it is hypothesized that a decentralised system that includes only state initiated decentralised institution will rate low on the participation, empowerment and democracy scale and may also result in less effective forest resource management. The study uses a comparative case study method as a good comparison exists in the region. As a control, these cases shall also be compared against a centralized forest management system where no decentralised institutions exist.

This study looks beyond the conventional understanding of decentralisation as merely the third tier in the federal structure and takes the concept back to its roots, in terms of decentralisation being a means of deepening democracy that empowers the people at the local level, enabling accountability and participation. Further, the focus is on institutional choice in decentralisation that includes governmental, non-government and traditional institutions. The task of this study is to systematically understand the phenomenon of decentralisation in this respect and how it thereafter affects the management of the resource, for which the institution has been created. Using political variables on one hand and extraction data on the other, the study measures the effectiveness of these systems on the management of the resource. Data has been collected through primary household surveys, interviews, focused group discussions, and non-participatory observations. Other necessary data required for the research has been collected from the following sources - government documents in the Forest Department, Agriculture and Revenue Departments, village level records, annual reports and files with community initiated institutions and archival records.
The thesis has been detailed in six chapters. Chapter 1 is the introductory chapter where we discuss the literature review, research questions, research gaps, objectives and methods. In the next chapter, Chapter 2, the laws, policies, programs and judicial pronouncements dealing with Forest Resource Management are discussed. The chapter focuses on critically reviewing the central and Tamil Nadu specific laws and policies that apply to the field area. Here, we list the laws and critically look at how they set down the rules of the game or the parameters within which the various actors work. The third chapter focuses on the institutions of decentralised forest resource management. Two levels of inquiry have been undertaken; one at the institutional level and the other at the household level. Based on data collected, using quantitative and qualitative methods, the chapter looks at the effect the presence of civil society organisations has on the functioning of government initiated institutions. The chapter enquires into the extent of deepening decentralisation. The degree of decentralisation is integrally linked with the management of the forest, which is the focus of Chapter 4. This chapter discusses the multi-institutional setup, with both state-centric and community-initiated institutions operating in the management of forests. Here we look at how decentralised institutional setups affect the perception of people to the forest. Also, we enquire into the impact institutions have on the outcome of natural resource management and conservation attitude of the people. Chapter 5 is dedicated to understanding the effects decentralization of resource management has on the effectiveness of forest management. This chapter looks at the importance of the institutional environment when we try to understand resource governance systems. It shows how relative to centralisation, decentralisation functions better. It opens up the black-box of what we mean by ‘decentralisation’ and highlight the need for a nested structure with plurality of bodies and networking that is crucial. The final chapter 6 brings out the conclusions and recommendations for what can be done to further improve the system.

In this thesis, we have analysed the factors that influence natural resource management using a comparative framework in which we have looked at different decentralised institutional arrangements and the centralized government institutional setups as well. The result of this study has demonstrated the relevance of institutional arrangements and the extent to which they foster cooperation and complementarity among the governance actors who may affect forest management. We find that
institutions help explain the varying levels of performance in this sector. The success of natural resource management as a tool to conserve the forest is closely linked to how public policies affect local-governance patterns. Because of their expressed intent to empower local-governance structures, this thesis has paid close attention to the effect of decentralisation. The results of the study demonstrated the relevance of institutional arrangements and the extent to which they foster cooperation and complexity among the governance actors who may affect forest governance outcomes at the local level. One of the most significant conclusions from this analysis is that, even though legal reforms and economic incentives are often necessary components of effective natural resource governance, they are insufficient to improve outcomes. In addition to those components, a successful forest governance regime requires a combination of state initiated or community initiated local institutional arrangements that are capable of providing participation, accountability and deepening democracy. Such arrangements need to provide an incentive to conserve, information and ability to empower. Hence to answer the question of ‘how best can natural resources be managed?’ In this thesis we find that it should be a decentralised management system that is characterised by deepening democracy, multiplicity of institutions, nestedness to name a few, keeping in mind the limitation of this study that the conclusions can be generalised only to similar cases but cannot be extended to causally dissimilar cases.