Power and Property in the Community Forests of Bhutan

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Power and property are mutually constituted and continually (re)negotiated throughout the world, including in the Kingdom of Bhutan. Forest governance and access to natural resources are two arenas in which these power relations play out. Through community forestry, the Royal Government of Bhutan has decentralized, but not devolved, decision-making over the resources that people depend on for livelihoods, subsistence, and survival. The government does this by prioritizing certain forms of land use, controlling infrastructure development, and maintaining ownership rights over forests.

During the fall of 2015, I studied abroad with the School for Field Studies (SFS) program ‘Himalayan Environment and Society in Transition.’ During this time, I interviewed villagers in three different villages in the district of Bumthang about their perceptions of rights and access to community forests. I compared my results to the language that the government uses about land and community forestry in official documents.

Throughout the past 60 years, the nature of forest governance has changed several times. In 1969, the National Assembly passed the Forest Act, nationalizing all forests that were not in private hands. In 1996, the National Assembly passed the Forest and Nature Conservation Act, creating a system of community forestry in which the government decentralized decision-making to local officials but maintained ownership rights over forests and resources. Decentralization without devolution is significant because devolution of decision-making over resources, within a capitalist mode of production, provides people with the means of achieving not only subsistence and survival, but long-term security as well.

When land is expropriated, people lose control over their means of survival; this expropriation is necessary in a capitalist system in order to create wage laborers. Having access to land and resources may be the only way to disentangle oneself from the exploitation of labor. At the same time that Bhutan’s economy is developing capitalist characteristics, the government maintains a rhetorical commitment to Gross National Happiness and a recognition of traditional culturally and ecologically sustainable ways of living that have been assumed to exist in Bhutan throughout its history.

If the Bhutanese government is to honor its commitments to preserve the country’s biodiversity and cultural history, it must continue its path to devolution of decision-making over land and natural resources, which form the bedrock of Bhutanese’ livelihoods, subsistence, and survival. The government has made substantial progress in terms of decentralization, but to address the rapid modernization and capitalist changes that are occurring in the economy, political system, and culture, it must remain aware of what is best for its citizens, regardless of pressures from abroad.