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**[Book Review:] Rucha Ghate, Narpal S. Jodha and Pranab Mukhopadhyay (eds):  
Promise, Trust and Evolution—Managing the Commons in South Asia**

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**Rucha Ghate, Narpal S. Jodha and Pranab  
Mukhopadhyay (eds): Promise, Trust and  
Evolution—Managing the Commons in South Asia**

**Oxford University Press, New York, 2008, 402 pp,  
ISBN: 978-0-19-921383-2**

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Based on almost 10 years of research by the South Asian Network of Development and Environmental Economists (SANDEE), this book gives an interesting overview of the state of common property resource management in South Asia. A book about common property resource management is very important and topical as recently also pointed out in *The Economist* (2 August 2008, p. 73) ‘It is not simply that three-quarters of those living on less than \$2 a day still depend in some way on commonly held resources. The concept of the commons is also spreading to new areas (...) and it may yet prove a useful way of thinking about (new commons) problems, on which policymakers need all the help they can get...’. Dasgupta adds to this in the first book chapter by pointing out the lack of economic theory and analytical rigor underlying research in this area. Economists cannot neglect the (informal) mechanisms that coordinate the use of common property resources, and this is what the book is essentially about, a series of studies of common property resource management arrangements in South Asia by a group of economists.

The book is roughly divided into four parts. The first general part introduces the main issues and challenges, the second part presents ‘evolution and transition’ studies, part three considers livelihood and distributional issues and the final part statutory and customary law. Although the grouping of the papers under the different headings is not always apparent, the book succeeds in providing a broad overview of the issues at stake.

Outstanding in the book is the summary of the analytics of common property resources by Dasgupta in the first general part, with interesting extensions of the general theory. Jodha revisits the sites that formed the basis for his groundbreaking work on common property resources in the 1980s and Shyamsundar provides a fine synthesis of the literature on devolution, decentralization and collective action worldwide. The parts that follow focus on specific countries and regions in South Asia and present case studies of common property resource management, such as forests, fisheries and irrigation. The first group of case studies is a rather broad collection of papers addressing common property resource management. Some of the papers address issues of institutional change, but none of the studies truly is dynamic as the

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heading ‘evolution and transitions’ suggests. The second group of case studies reflects much of the literature on group heterogeneity and collective action and includes some original new work, such as the impact of heterogeneity on transaction costs. The collection of case study presentations in the last part of the book describe conflicts arising from common property resources use due to differences between statutory and customary law, for instance related to forest management.

Overall, the book succeeds in giving an impressive overview of the state of common property resource management in South Asia. The role of economists to improve the analytical rigor of the common property resource management literature remains, however, underexposed. With some exceptions, most book chapters are descriptive studies of common property resource management arrangements. This is partly due to the inherent nature of the research focusing on common property resources management, which requires an extensive analysis of the local institutional arrangements that coordinate actions and control non-sustainable resource use. This also hampers the construction of larger databases, which would allow for a statistically more robust analysis of the variety of case study approaches. More use could and should be made of existing economic theory, however, while some contributions might also have benefited from a change in focus, away from specific local conditions to external factors and their impact on incentive structures for local cooperation and institutional change.

Still, the book presents a good overview of the state-of-the-art of common property resource management in South Asia, and is a ‘must read’ for both scholars and policy makers to learn more about successful arrangements for common property resource management and the driving factors for local cooperation and institutional change.

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