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Q & A

'My country, the United States, is irresponsible as heck'

Rukmini Shrinivasan, Jan 7, 2011, 12.00am IST

What are the implications for commons governance when people who use common resources neither live in the area of the resources nor own them?

The presumption has been that poor people don't have any knowledge and they shouldn't have any authority. But we find that when poor people have reasonable forms of authority, they frequently - not always - do a much better job than if you have a top-down solution. This is why i very strongly support indigenous people's movements in India. I'm not trying to say that all mines are bad, but i object to this form of organising which is intended purely to help the entry of mining companies into rural areas. But it's also naive to assume that once the communities are given rights through NGOs, they can just be left on their own to negotiate with well-experienced negotiators as has happened in places like Bolivia. We can't romanticise something that worked 500 years ago by saying it's going to work in developed economies. We're going to have to innovate and find new ways of doing these things.

Since the effects of environmental damage are not necessarily felt locally, are we going to need several layers of environmental governance?

The only unit of environmental governance so far has been seen to be the international. I and many other people who have worked in the field are challenging this, and saying that a lot of environmental governance should be taking place at the local level, that is, the community and even the individual level. Even emissions reductions can happen at the local level, if local-level incentives are offered. My country, the United States, is irresponsible as heck and it makes me very angry, but if i sit around yelling at elected officials all day, then that's irresponsible too. The risks of not acting are catastrophic.

Are you encouraged by the fact that indigenous people's rights, environmental concerns and the developmental logic are being contested so vociferously in India?

I hope 10 years from now we can really get the sense that we've moved ahead and indigenous people's rights have been well represented and indigenous people now have more effective rights rather than just paper. I'm encouraged to see that with the Indian Forest Rights Act (FRA), for example, some communities are using it to have their rights recognised. However, others don't even know about it. I'm against the FRA if it is seen as a panacea, because i'm against panaceas. We have to get away from the notion that top-down, one-size-fits-all solutions always work.

As the first woman to win the Nobel prize in economics, do you think things need to change for women in academia?

I came from a generation where women in academia really had to struggle hard. I was told repeatedly that i should not be in academia and should not teach, that my place was "barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen". I didn't take no for an answer and struggled. Fortunately, my early experiences taught me not to be dissuaded and to stand up for my rights, which is why i'm always talking about 'empowering'. And that's what we need for some aspects of this problem. If we preach to people that they are helpless, we make them helpless.

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