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JNR CATALOG TITLE: Is Community Forestry a New Concept? An Analysis of the Past and Present Policies Affecting Forest Management in Nepal
ARTICLE TITLE: Adhikari, J
ARTICLE AUTHOR: 3
ISSUE: 3
MONTH: 7
YEAR: 1990
PAGES: 257-257
ISSN: 0894-1920
OCLC #: [TN: 593289][ODYSSEY: 206.107.42.94/BERRY]
CROSS REFERENCE ID: VERIFIED:
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Is Community Forestry a New Concept?
An Analysis of the Past and Present Policies Affecting Forest Management in Nepal

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Abstract. Forest management policies in Nepal have undergone considerable change in recent decades. The main thrust of the current forest management policy is the handing-over of control and responsibility for the management of forests to local people. In this paper it is argued that the ideas of the current policy are not new. Local communities have their own traditional forest management systems that vary slightly by region and ethnicity. The handing-over of government controlled forests to local communities was also in practice a century ago. Thus, the current policy, best articulated in the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector, is essentially what was in operation in the past. It is recommended that while formulating forest management policies it is essential to understand the lessons of the past.

Keywords Nepal, forest management, resource management.

Background

Nepal, one of the world’s poorest countries, has been pressed hard for economic development by overpopulation, rugged topography, a declining resource base, and lack of infrastructure. Geographically, it can be divided into the high Himalayan mountains bordering China, the middle hills, and the Terai plains bordering India (see Figure 1). Its population—nearly 90 percent dependent on agriculture and 96 percent living in rural areas—is more than 17 million, with an annual growth rate of more than 2.6 percent. Per capita annual income is less than US$200, and half of the people earn less than US$100 (National Planning Commission [NPC], 1986).

Subsistence farming has remained the way of life of the majority of the people who live in rural areas, and forests play an important role in their daily lives. Fodder for livestock, leaf litter for manuring, firewood for cooking and heating, timber and poles for making houses and animal sheds, and many other products like medicinal herbs, rootcrops, fruits, thatch grass, and charcoal are derived from the forest. These forest products are very important to sustain the lives of the people of Nepal. Currently, it is felt that the forestry base of the country is in serious decline due to interplay of many factors.

The author thanks William R. Burch, Jr., and Donald Messerschmidt for their suggestions. Thanks are also due to the people of Lochak and Rivan villages who provided information.
Prior to the mid-18th century, Nepal was divided into many principalities. During 1768-1769, the Shah king of Gorkha, one of the principalities, started the unification process and provided the foundation for modern Nepal. Political power passed from the Shah king to Rana in 1846. Ranas remained in political power until 1951. Ranas are the people closely related to the king. Their families ruled the country for a period of 104 years under the constitutional form of a hereditary prime ministership. Their administration was centralized. Top appointments in the bureaucracy were conferred personally by the prime minister. Administration at the district level was under a district governor, who was also appointed by the prime minister. One of the ways Ranas used to give permission or authority to people was through lamohar, a document given as a proof, like a deed. Political power of the Shah king was again restored when the Ranas were overthrown in 1951. The period from 1951 to 1955 was characterized by political instability. After a brief period of a democratic system of government, a constitution promulgated in 1962 made the king the prime source of authority. The political system was named a “partyless” Panchayat system. But this political system has been changed recently.

Culturally, Nepal has been a meeting ground for people belonging to different ethnic groups. People of Nepal are divided mainly into two races: Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryans. The original inhabitants of Nepal, for example, the Gurungs, Magars, Rai, and Limbus belong to the Tibeto-Burman race. The Indo-Aryan race consists of people such as the Brahmin and Chetri and different types of occupational caste (untouchables) people. The economic and social position of the occupational caste people is low compared with other people.

During research about the indigenous system of natural resource management in relation to ethnicity and household economy in Lachok and Ribha village, a lamohar is

Forests in Nepal and Their Decline

Nepal’s forest resources vary enormously between ecological zones, and they have been exploited in various ways in recent years (Mahat et al., 1986; Wallace, 1983). But the problem of deforestation is more serious in the middle hills region because of overpopulation. At the same time, the pattern of settlement and forest use is more fragmented and intertwined in the hills than elsewhere. In recent decades, pressure on forest resources in the hills has not been so much due to encroachment for agriculture, but to the demand for fuelwood and fodder as inputs to the farming system (Mahat et al., 1986). Forest density is reduced, gradually resulting in shrubland and grassland. In several studies researchers have concluded that there has not been much reduction in the forest area, but the productive capacity of the forest has been seriously depleted (Wallace, 1980). In the 15-year period from 1964 to 1978, it has been estimated that the amount of forest area with greater than 70 percent crown cover has fallen from 40 percent to 13 percent in the middle and the high mountain areas; whereas in the Terai, reduction has not been so dramatic, as the main change has been the clearance of the forest (WBCS, 1986). It is expected that fuelwood and fodder will be in short supply in the future. Forest degradation has also contributed to the decline in soil fertility, to erosion, and to hydrological problems (MPFS, 1988), but some researchers have questioned the extent to which such problems are attributable to deforestation (Gilmour et al., 1984).

The above arguments establish the fact that there has been deterioration at least in the quality of forest in Nepal. Many, nonessential controversial, arguments have been put forward regarding the cause of such a decline. Accordingly, different expectations and projections about the future of Nepal forests are being made. Political and social factors
are considered to be primary factors that influence people in the present to cut forests indiscriminately (Bajracharya, 1983).

Current Policy Measures to Improve the Forests of Nepal

Nepal started to take effective measures for rural development only after 1951. Therefore, in this paper I compare forest management policies formulated after 1951 with the pre-1951 system of forest management.

The major change after 1951 was the nationalization of forests in 1957. The Nationalization Act of 1957 placed ownership of all forests in the hands of government:

Forests constitute an important part of the national wealth.... It is expedient to prevent the destruction of national wealth and to rationalize private forests for their additional protection, so as to ensure the welfare of the country and people. (Wallace, 1988, p. 15)

It is said that nationalization of the forests did not produce the expected results for two reasons: First, the government bureaucracy lacked technical and administrative staff to control and manage the forest all over the country. Second, people perceived that their traditional rights of access and use had been curtailed. Bajracharya (1983) and many other researchers also argued that the Nationalization Act changed people's concept of ownership of forest, that is, people started regarding their private and community forests as open access property. To further support the Nationalization Act, another act was passed in 1961 with an intention to bring the forest under effective protection and management of the government, but because of the inadequate forestry administration this act was not enforced.

When it was realized that ownership and control of forest by local people was important for conservation, a new legislation was enacted in 1978 and amended in 1980. Under this legislation, new categories of forests to be managed by local communities, religious institutions, and individuals were defined. Also under this legislation, the management of Panchayat Forests (PF) and Panchayat Protected Forests (PPF) requires the active participation of the people. PF and PPF are actually the forests handed over to people for their use and management. PF are degraded forests entrusted to a village Panchayat for reforestation in the interest of the local village community. PPF are existing forests entrusted to a local Panchayat for protection and proper management. There are also area limits: 126 hectares to a PF and 500 hectares to a PPF in each Panchayat. The village Panchayat receives all the proceeds from the sale of products of the PF, whereas they receive only three-fourths in the case of PPF.

Forest products are considered as one of the basic needs under the Basic Needs Fulfilment Program of the government of Nepal. In pursuit of this need a comprehensive Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (MPFS) was formulated in 1988. This Master Plan recognizes community forestry as the most significant strategy for the fulfillment of people's need for forest products.

The system of handing over forests to the people as PF and PPF is not without contradictions. Some of these, as pointed out by forestry professionals, are as follows:

- The use of both PF and PPF recognizes the fact that forest transfer should be organized on a Panchayat basis, but Panchayat boundaries were not created with reference to the forest resources and their users. Sometimes, forests are in one

Forest Management Systems in the Past

In the past, the right to use and manage forests was gained either through registration of land (bijay) or by having special permission from higher authority through khumbar (sumed, or landed-over forest). This system is more or less similar to the lipum (communal ownership) system of land ownership, but the lipum was given to a community mostly of minority ethnic identity in eastern Nepal (Caplan, 1970; Regmi, 1976). Distribution of products and forest management rules were also clearly specified in the lipum.

There are, at present, four forest management committees in Lachok. In the past, different parcels of forest were managed by different ethnic groups (sometimes clan groups) who obtained their rights either through sumed or bijay or both. Now, however, all the forest is under the central government's ownership, but the people still retain the old perception or notion about this ownership concept. The Forestry Office has also allowed people to manage these forests in the same way as in the past. Each committee has kept its own forest guard, and all people involved in the management of the forest pay the guard either in grain or cash. The rate of payment differs from household to household depending upon their bijay share. Distribution of firewood is also proportional to the household share in total bijay land under the forest. The main reason for different shares in forest production is the land inheritance system. Therefore, the share of those families who had lesser numbers of inheritors remained proportionally larger in comparison to those who had larger numbers of inheritors. Distribution of forest products and payment to the forest guard depend on the ownership of the forest. The situation in Riban, predominantly a Gurung village, is slightly different. There is only one forest management committee in the village, and all the people are involved in the forest management committee. Each household of the village has the same rights over the forest production and they pay equal amounts of cash or grain to the forest guard. These differences might be due to the cultural practices of the ethnic groups, but the system at Lachok seems more egalitarian than at Lachok. Those people in Lachok who are not involved in the forest management have to collect forest products from the high forest, which requires a considerable amount of time. This has led to conflicts and often
to illegal felling of trees. The main groups who suffer are the occupational caste and other landless people and marginal farmers who do not have enough land on which to grow trees.

Variations on these traditional resource management systems are also reported in other parts of the country by several authors (Campbell, 1978; Fisher, 1989; McDougall, 1979; Moomaw, 1981, 1984, 1986, 1987; Von Furer-Haimendorf, 1964).

Now let us look into the system of handing over government-controlled forests to the people in the past, i.e., during the Janap period. This system of returning the government forests to people for their use and management (sana) was established in 1907. Amendments and additions to these rules and regulations were made until 1912. This system was first started in the eastern part of Nepal, but was implemented in the western part of Nepal two years later. The rules stipulate that a certain portion of the forest is to be given to talukdar, the chiefman of the village (in lines 16 to 31 of the lakmojar; see Figure 2). To get the forest as sana, people first had to apply to the forest office, designating the boundaries of the forest they wanted to use and manage (lines 11–13 of the lakmojar).

Guidelines regarding the use and management of forests as mentioned in the lakmojar are given below.

**General Guidelines**

People should not allow others to fell green trees, burn the forest, or cultivate forest land by clear felling. This rule was also applicable to the people to whom the forest was handed over, and they were not supposed to go against that rule (see lines 34–35).

**Guidelines for Firewood Collection**

If people needed firewood, they could use dry and fallen trees but only after obtaining permission from the talukdar. Similarly, an agreement should be made between the people and the talukdar regarding the distribution of firewood (lines 35–36).

**Guidelines for Timber**

Regarding obtaining timber, the rules are more complex. Timber could be taken from the forest only for building a house, cattle-shed, resting place, or trail bridge. A check and balance system was maintained for obtaining timber from the forest for these purposes. The people had to get permission from the talukdar in order to obtain timber, even from the forest managed by them. At the same time, rules were also made to control the misuse of authority by the talukdar: He, in turn, had to get permission from the local people responsible for the management of the forest. This is clearly mentioned in line 37 of the lakmojar, which says, “If the talukdar needs timber, he should ask the people and if the people need timber, then they should ask the talukdar.” Instructions were also given to people to use the forest for timber in such a way as to cause as little damage as possible. They should first try to meet their requirements for timber by using the dry and fallen trees and abnormal and side branches, leaving the main branches so that the tree itself would not be destroyed. If timber requirements could not be met while remaining within that rule, only then could they use other trees, but remain within the following rules (lines 36 to 40).

Figure 2. The lakmojar (official document) that provides guidelines for the use and management of Nepal’s forests.
(1) Protect the nesting place, irrigation channels, water sources, and water collection point.
(2) Do not extract trees from the main part of the forest; rather, take trees from the corner and side areas of the forest.
(3) Extract trees from that part of the forest which is dense, and in a way that is similar to the weeding process.
(4) Use only big, matured, and old trees for timber.

Guidelines for the Protection of Birds
The rules also say that one should not use a lasso trap for birds. Lasso is a certain type of weed that is very sticky, like gum, and a stick is coated with this gummy material. Such coated sticks are placed just over the water surface so that birds perch on the sticks while drinking water, and thus get trapped (line 34).

Authority was also given to the people to take offenders of the forest rules and regulations to the district court for punishment.

Conclusion
Administrators of about a century ago (i.e., during the Rana period) were also conscious of the people's role in forest management, and thus they enacted rules and regulations for handing over forests under government control to the local people for their use and management. Lessons learned from the nationalization of forests encouraged the implementation of community forestry programs under which ownership of part of the forests is again being handed over to the people. The Master Plan for the Forestry Sector, formulated in 1985 in pursuit of fulfilling basic needs for forestry products, recognizes community forestry as the main strategy for the conservation and management of forests. Under this community forestry program, forests are handed over to people as Anchayat Forests (F) and Anchayat Protected Forests (PPF). The usual forests of the past, and FF and PPF of the present are more or less similar. Thus, current policy is clearly not a new concept. If we had recognized the existence and importance of such a traditional system, nationalization of the forests would not have happened.

Regarding the local system of forest management, it existed even before the Ranas, and some aspects are still in operation. But the caste-based management system, as seen in Lachok, may not be an effective method of forest conservation unless people of the whole community have rights to forest products.

Epilogue
The political system of Nepal has recently changed. A multi-party system of government replaced the Panchayat partyless system. As of this date, however, the same development and administrative policies are followed.

Notes
1. The village Anchayat is a political and administrative unit consisting of nine wards with a population of approximately 3,000. It has a council headed by Pradhu Pradhan, the chiefman.
2. Bijan refers to the past system of measurement of land registered by individuals in their names,

References