

# Development as Symbolic Violence? The Case of Community Forestry in Nepal<sup>1</sup>

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Dr Hemant R Ojha  
Email: hro@forestaction.wlink.com.np

## ABSTRACT

Community Forestry (CF) program in Nepal is considered a world innovation in the field of participatory environmental governance towards meeting the twin goals of conservation and poverty reduction. Yet, growing evidence indicates that the poorer groups of beneficiaries are not gaining as anticipated, reflecting the continuing worldwide challenges of achieving democratic and equitable environmental governance. This article explores cultural politics that take place around CF to better understand conservation and livelihoods impact. Using Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence, I seek to explain how rules and practices of forest governance and benefit sharing are legitimated through historically created and tacitly held presuppositions in a particular field of practice (CF in this case). I will show how local level practices of forest governance are actually a site of symbolic violence, exercised by the state officials, development actors and political leaders over ordinary people and socially marginalized groups. Through in-depth analysis of Nepal CF case, I hope to demonstrate an alternative framework to understand environmental and distributional outcomes of a development action by bringing to bear on the underlying processes of symbolic violence.

Key words: community forestry, Nepal, governance, policy, Bourdieu, field, habitus, symbolic violence

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Community Forestry (CF) program in Nepal is considered a world innovation in the field of participatory environmental governance towards meeting the twin goals of conservation and poverty reduction. The program was launched in the mid-70s as part of curbing the widely perceived crisis of Himalayan degradation when government forest officials realized that preserving forest was almost impossible without the active involvement of local people. Through a series of practical innovations and legislative development over the past 25 years, the program has entrusted over 14 thousand local Forest User Groups (CFUGs) with necessary rights to manage over one million hectares of forests as community forests mainly in the middle hills region of the country (Kanel and Kandel 2004). With this shift of power from government to communities and consequent expansion of forest based livelihoods opportunities<sup>2</sup> today, CF has been one of the few promising aspects of Nepal's development field, and as such it has often been used as a face-saving instrument by development actors who have been engaged in, if not responsible for, the five decades of "failed development" in

Nepal<sup>3</sup>. The positive image of CF is being articulated not only in the field of development and natural resource management, but also more widely in the field of democratic governance, with the assertion that CFUG and their networks provide a model of democratic governance (Ojha and Pokharel 2006).

Alongside these claims of successes and optimism, a growing evidence indicate that the success of CF is mixed on both livelihoods (Malla 2000; Malla 2001) and ecological impact. First, evidences suggest that marginalized groups have lost their legitimate share, as CFUGs have largely been captured by the local elites (Paudel 1999; Ojha et al. 2002b), despite donor and government strategies of poor focussed community forestry. Second, community forests are under more protectionist approach to management, indicating little attention paid to harnessing the optimal and sustainable production of forest products from both subsistence and market perspectives (Pokharel and Nurse 2004). Third, in contrast to the participatory rhetoric, CF has often been considered a mechanism to extend centralized and technical ideologies of government and development actors, leading to disempowerment of the local poor and marginalized groups in the decision-making processes (Nightingale 2005). And finally, either passive or timber-oriented management of forests as promoted by current forest management approaches are not necessary and sufficient conditions for the improvement in biodiversity (and hence long term sustainability of the flow of benefits), beyond the quantitative increase in greenery (Acharya 2004).

Most common approaches to understanding the problems of natural resource governance - such as institutional and property rights theories (Ostrom 1999) - are actually framed in ahistorical and objectivist fashion (Mosse 1997; Cleaver 2000), and offer little insights into the dialectical relations between the *agency* and the *structure* of resource governance practices. While political ecology approaches have made significant contributions to bring power into the center of governance analysis, I still find them falling short of explaining how power is enacted in practice in more socio-culturally grounded sense. Despite wide ranging political ecological approaches - from structural (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987) to post-structural (Peet and Watt 1996), they offer limited conceptual tools to understand enactment of power relations in day to day practices of resource governance. My approach differs from both of these. Unlike the emphasis of common property theorists, I argue that Nepal's CF does not just mean some village communities managing forest areas in isolation. And unlike political ecology approaches, I contend that we need a more nuanced view of agency-structure dynamics as it relates to practice of governance. From my perspective, the forestry practice of local communities is a result of a complex web of relations within themselves, and between them and a range of non-local social agents, who take various positions in the field of CF.

My approach is informed by Bourdieu's theory of practice which provides a unique framework for analyzing the dialectical interactions between agency and structure (Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 1990, 1998). Bourdieu considers social practice as the central issue of sociological research, and offers powerful conceptual tools to understand the practical manifestations of relations of power and domination. I particularly take on his notion of symbolic violence, which is a tacitly accepted, and hence "mis-recognized", form of relations of power among social agents enacting a social practice. I will explicate the symbolic structures legitimating the current practices of inequitable distribution of different types of material and non-material benefits in the field of CF. I will demonstrate how the powerful actors (bureaucrats, forestry experts, development professionals and political leaders) are actually serving their own interests in the name of enhancing livelihoods of the local people, and how such processes are legitimated through underlying symbolic violence over local, marginalized and forest dependent peoples.

The empirical material of the article is largely based on my own reflections as a participant of the field of Nepal CF for over a decade (since the early nineties) during when CF moved from a nascent stage to the most complex one. This approach to epistemology draws inspiration from Bourdieu's idea of "reflexive sociology" which means that sociological inquiry is most powerful and enriching when social researchers point to the methods of science towards themselves as participants of the relevant fields of practices (Bourdieu 2003, 2004). I particularly draw on experiences of working with diverse groups of people in the field of CF – from local communities, government officials, policy makers, civil society activists, researchers to international aid agencies. This reflective analysis is supplemented by theoretical research which I did recently.

The article is organized as follows. Section two will provide a conceptual framework of symbolic violence within the universe of Bourdieu's practice theory. In section three, I will provide an overview of the field of CF using conceptual tools laid out in section two. Section four will present detailed empirical analysis of how varying degrees of symbolic violence legitimate distribution of different types of capitals in the field of CF. In section 5, I will identify some trajectories through which symbolic violence may be discursively challenged or further entrenched. Finally in section six, I summarize key conclusion of the paper.

## **2. HABITUS, FIELD AND SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE – A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Bourdieu has sought to explain social practices in terms of culturally inscribed human agency (*habitus*), differentiated social domains in which social agents interact (*field*), and various types of goals which the agents pursue (economic, social, cultural, economic and symbolic capitals). He argues that any social practice results from the interaction among *habitus*, rules and rewards available in the particular *fields*, and the structure of access of human agents to different types of *capitals* – social, economic, cultural, and symbolic. I take CF as Bourdieu's field, and the conception of CF as a 'field' shifts attention away from the particularistic characteristics of individuals and groups towards social relations – including the social conditions of the productions of these relations, and the resulting outcomes. For Bourdieu, all practices and interactions are legitimated through some form of symbolic capital. I will show that practices of CF are material as well as symbolic at the same time, and why it is essential to understand the political economy of *symbolic capital* (and hence symbolic violence) to understand the political economy of material resources in a field. Symbolic capital, symbolic power and symbolic violence are used more or less synonymously in this paper, the common element of all being a form of mis-recognized relations of power.

Also, practices will be conceived as not only resulting from discursive or conscious choice by the social agents within or among themselves, but in large part shaped by the naturalizing tendencies of human agents to fit with the external environment and accept the on-going practices and knowledge as the given and unquestionably acceptable (*doxa*). Depending on the actual access to various types of resources in the social position, participants develop certain form of practical dispositions, tastes and distinctions as part of their strategies of survival within the competing domain of social economy. In the field of Nepal CF, I identify four broad types of habitus groups engaged in the practice of community forestry: technocratic habitus of mainly foresters and forest officials, developmentalist habitus of mainly project and NGO staff, feudal-political habitus of politicians and ruling elites, and fatalistic habitus of the ordinary and marginalized groups. I will establish that practices of CF and their outcomes are eventually shaped through the interaction among these habitus groups in the structural as well as symbolic arena of the field of CF.

Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital relates to actors' legitimacy and authenticity to categorize and interpret social worlds and practices, including the power to enforce a legitimate definition of all types of capitals. As he writes:

*... we have to be able to discover it in places where it is least visible, where it is most completely misrecognized - and this, in fact, recognized. For symbolic power is that invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it" (1991:164).*

Symbolic power thus relates to the production and reproduction of the belief systems which legitimates the relations without questioning, very much like Gramsci's notion of ideological hegemony (Gramsci 1971). Bourdieu argues that all forms of capitals eventually are transformed into symbolic capital which is "capable of producing real effects without any apparent expenditure of energy" (1991: 170). Here Bourdieu is trying to emphasize the subtle and usually misrecognized forms of power. And when a particular relation is "misrecognized" as something to be actively resisted, then the actual power relation become "recognized" or unquestionably legitimated. He further elaborates:

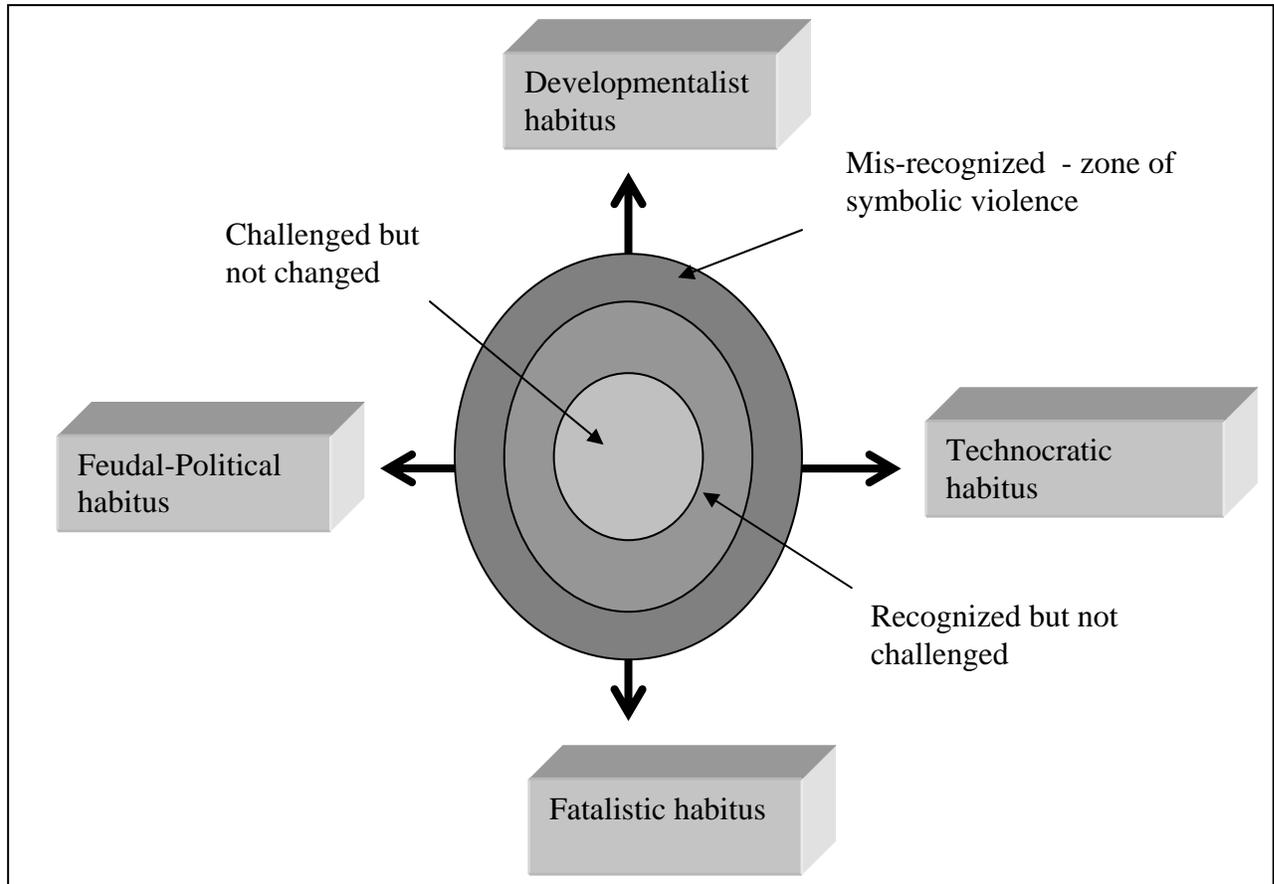
*Symbolic power - as a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself, an almost magical power which enables one to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained through force (whether physical or economic), by virtue of the specific effect of mobilization - is a power that can be exercised only if it is recognized, that is misrecognized as arbitrary (1991:170).*

This means that without a background or underlying symbolic relations of power, it is not possible to undertake a practice or an exchange of other types of capitals. For instance, the cultural capital of foresters (knowledge about forest) is accepted by villagers when that is recognized as legitimate, not necessarily based on a knowledge of what exactly s/he knows and how. So all practices and exchanges are embedded in the symbolic relations of power, which as Bourdieu argues, is most of times considered as the natural order of the society, and social agents both dominated and dominant, may not recognize the immanent symbolic violence being incurred through the exercise of such power relations. This is because the relations are in harmony with the embodiment, dispositions, schemes of perceptions and thought, and structures of motivation.

In the practice of community forestry, four habitus groups bring their doxa to relate themselves with one another (see Figure 1). This interface constitutes a symbolic space that legitimizes actions, interactions and relations of power. There is at one extreme a zone of full misrecognition (the outer most ring), which means that the historically constituted relations are considered natural and held at the deepest level of unconscious. I would consider this as the highest level of symbolic violence, wherein the involved habitus does not have to observe and analyze situations to define positions as the existing doxa provides naturalized interface. At the other extreme, a doxic domain of power relation may be challenged due to various internal and external breaks (central ring) but still the challenge may remain at the level of discourse, not necessarily getting enacted into practice. The middle ring constitutes a situation when the dominated has recognized the relations of domination but has not yet been able to launch discursive challenge. At the risk of over-simplification, these three layers are located from the outer to inner layers, in order of intensity of symbolic violence. The

differentiation of the three layers is for analytical purposes, and in practice, a relation of power may constantly shift from one layer to another, never getting fixed to any position.

**Figure 1. Habitus Patterns, Symbolic Space and Three Levels of Symbolic Power Relations**



Source: author

### 3. COMMUNITY FORESTRY AND DIFFERENTIATED PATTERNING OF HABITUS

I identify four different groups of habitus which constitute, and in part are constituted by, the field of community forestry<sup>4</sup>: a) technocratic habitus, b) developmentalist habitus, c) feudal-political habitus and d) fatalistic habitus. Technocratic habitus – which include technical foresters working with the government bureaucracy – is constituted mainly in the bureaucratic and technical forestry fields. It sees political problems of resource governance through technical lens. Developmentalist habitus - which include projects and NGO workers – is constituted through the larger field of development for the last five decades. It advocates material and economic measures of social change without critically questioning the existing socio-political structures. Feudal-political habitus – which includes the political activists and ruling elites in Nepal – is constituted by the feudal political field, which values nepotism, favouritism, and patronage, rather than a deliberative political interaction with the ordinary people. Fatalistic habitus – which includes all ordinary groups of people, including the marginalized and socially excluded – are constituted through the cultural field of production that values fatalism, *karma*<sup>5</sup> and underestimates their own political agency, thus subordinating themselves to the mercy

and patronage of other three groups. Although local people are divided sharply along the lines of caste, class, education and gender, I am not looking at these local level differences. I admit that the categorization of social agents is not always so straightforward as this typology suggests, as, in the actual practice of governance, social agents tend to shift their positions and alliances significantly as part of their strategy to secure better access to diverse types of resources in the field. My intention is to foreground a basic pattern of socially embedding of human agency from which derivatives can be identified according to contexts.

The practice of CF at local level is determined largely by the dialectical relations between the fatalistic *habitus* of the local forest dependent people and technocratic *habitus* of the forest officials. Foresters' perception of themselves as technical authority of forestry practice has not totally eroded even after popularization of CF, and this indeed continues to be "mis-recognized" by the fatalistic *habitus*. Technocratic *habitus* sees forest as a technical field to be addressed through the lenses of technical science (Ojha et al. 2006). They always advocate centralized management of the forest for enhancing public treasury, and they often fail to appreciate the effectiveness of the decentralized governance of forest resources in actual practice. Likewise, their forest management doxa is rooted in taking control of nature through a dominant and manageable product such as timber, towards which the entire silvicultural wisdom has been concentrated since the emergence of forest science in colonial times (Shivaramakrishnan 2000). Indeed, the technical doxa of foresters has remained a key challenge to democratic practice of community forestry.

The evolution of the field of CF in Nepal has passed through various critical stages. Until 1957, in most of the rural Nepal, especially in the western hilly areas of the country, local communities (mainly feudal elites) used to control and manage forests. Nationalization law in 1957 was a critical break in the traditional system, and this created a loss of local ownership encouraging forest destruction. In 1978, when a King-led Panchayat political system was in place, Panchayat forest regulations were instituted as the early form of community forestry. This was done by feudal-political *habitus* at a time when anti-Panchayat resistance was growing internally (thus forcing the government to thwart the pressures by offering better economic and symbolic spaces in the local Panchayat), and decentralization pressures from outside donors.

During the seventies, Himalayan degradation was projected as a crisis<sup>6</sup> which created increased moral pressures on the Western governments to contribute to conservation of degrading Himalaya (Eckholm 1976). This led to an environmental turn of development discourse away from an emphasis on infrastructure and technology transfer (Cameron 1998). Nepal's strategic geopolitical situation and fragile environmental condition attracted bi- and multilateral donors, whose developmentalist *habitus* took forestry and environment as the key element of integrated conservation and development projects. During the 80s, both developmentalist and technocratic *habitus* engaged cooperatively to develop decentralization policies<sup>7</sup>, discourses of which came in part as a response to environmental crisis, and in part to the wider decentralization movement in the development debate.

In 1989, several donors assisted Nepal government to formulate the nation's most comprehensive master plan for the forestry sector, which stipulated conditions and possibilities of conservation and management of country's forest resources. The plan clearly set out participatory and decentralized development imperatives to guide the management of forests resources, identifying CF as a prioritized program area for meeting livelihood needs of people (HMG/N 1988). At a time when the plan was finalized and formally adopted by the government (1989), people's movement for democracy culminated in the promulgation of multi-party democracy in the country. Subsequent

governments adjusted and adapted the on-going practices of Panchayat forestry and sections of the policy in line with democratization, involving users of forests directly in the management of forests, moving beyond Panchayat forestry (which involved transfer of rights only to local elites). These innovations were legalized through the new Forest Act in 1993 by the first elected multi-party parliament, which guaranteed the rights of local people in forest management. Since then, Nepal has made dramatic change in formulating policies and regulations that devolve rights to local people, and reorient government forestry staff towards providing better technical services for the management of forests. Forest Act 1993 is a landmark development in this regard which legally recognizes local forest user groups as perpetually self-governed institutions to claim 100 per cent of the benefits from the management of forests handed over to them. In the post 1990 environment of openness, there was a prolific growth of civil society in the forestry sector. Bilateral projects and International Organizations also found more conducive environment to undertake CF activities. Reflections of Nepal's CF became a truly international enterprise – through research, networking and collaborative activities. CFUGs have come to form a nation-wide network, Federation of CF Users, Nepal (FECOFUN), which is a key player in forest policy debate.

Many would consider CF as a government program to promote production and distribution of forest and environmental goods for the benefit of local communities. But what is ignored or misrecognized is that in the course of generating such environmental goods at local level, a whole array of opportunities for production and circulation of other types of goods or capitals also exist, for which a whole range actors engage in competition, collaboration or even conflicts. Because of these multiple arenas of capital accumulation and exchange, the simple practice of CF on the ground – forest harvesting, drawing up plans or a village level meeting – are actually a result of the complex web of exchange relations around these capitals at different layers of the social field, and that who controls or benefits from these local practices and why cannot be understood only by focussing the analysis at local level. Both at the level of practical discourse and theoretical representations, there is a tendency to isolate local problems from non-local domains. Here I seek to capture the tacitly held relations of power among actors at different scales, and explain how the local practices of resource control are entrenched within multiple arrays of symbolic violence.

#### **4. SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE IN COMMUNITY FORESTRY PRACTICES**

By and large, developmentalist, technocratic and feudal-political habitus exercise symbolic violence over the fatalistic habitus of the ordinary people, who include poor, socially marginalized, geographically segregated, and the women. In the first place, the economy of CF is hidden from view when the first three habitus groups present themselves as the enabler, policy-maker, technical service-provider and funder to the efforts of the local people, and succeed in getting their interests mis-recognized by the ordinary people. The actual volume of capitals which are traded at local level in the form of forest products timber, fuelwood and fodder – the most visible economic capital - is indeed only a fraction of the total volume of all types of capital actually traded outside of the communities but still in the name of CF – such as project grants, consultancies, research services, jobs, scholarships, and government taxes. The fatalistic habitus always see these external *Vidhata* (creators of their fate) in their service, and because of their doxa of *karma*, they blame their past, their past *Juni* (previous life) as being responsible for the present, not the inadequacy of political rights and capacity of agency of the present life. As a result, ordinary people hardly question how much a project staff is drawing as salary when the latter comes to provide “technical assistance”.

The overall economic domain of CF is expanded to a significant degree by donor funding of government and NGO projects, and the logic of donor funding and their influence on CF practices can be better understood by unravelling the underlying economy of interests, instead of closing the space of inquiry by considering just an altruistic donation from a concerned friend. Two arenas of interests are identifiable – global and local. At the global level, donor support in CF is primarily sparked by the alarming news of Himalayan degradation and forest depletion, and this was tapped by western donors to sell their growing body of environmental experts, as well as earn symbolic credits through making support to address a globally significant threat to the biosphere, of which they are themselves a part. The going developmental paradigm of “basic needs” in the eighties means that such environmental projects had to be framed as integrated environment and development project. Interestingly, such projects have been gradually reduced to CF projects in their subsequent phases, although there is often an attachment to “livelihoods” as reflected in the names of several “livelihoods and forestry” projects in Nepal.

This external emphasis on CF as the principal dimension of local livelihoods does not find a corresponding priority at the local level. A recent ranking exercise with some villagers in the central middle hills districts of Nepal found out that forest is only the sixth priority after agriculture, health, education, roads, and drinking water. Similarly, the national legislative framework of forestry which emerged as the key outcome of donor support in participatory forest management in Nepal, is strictly oriented to conservation of forested ecosystems, and even in the context of community forestry, the forest law 1993 does not allow reduction of forest canopy to allow spaces for case crop cultivation for the poor villagers. Ironically, CF is romanticized for its potential for livelihoods of the poorest people, irrespective of the fact that, most of the community forests which have been established in the hills of Nepal are actually very small and too insignificant in relation to the demands for livelihood opportunities<sup>8</sup> (with per capita forest area of 0.77 ha<sup>9</sup>, and with poor stocking levels).

Over the course of two decades or three, each bilateral forestry project has nurtured a specific group of Brahmin-Chhetri or Newar (the three most dominant ethnic/caste groups in Nepal) elites of urban areas, whose affluent livelihoods is based on the donor project funds. Their symbolic distinction is explicit on high salaries (as high as 50 times that of their government counterpart), riding of blue plate diplomatic vehicles (despite being Nepalese and residing in Nepal), and engagement with an exclusive circle of expatriates. Some modalities of project organization continue even after 30 years, with limited discursive crisis and learning. This is mainly because of the interests of social agents who reproduce bilateral projects. The interests of expatriates as development tourists, who usually locate their residences in southern side of Kathmandu valley to see golden images of mountains in the morning from bed, converge with the local urban elites to create projects of one phase after another, for which community forestry, with all of its quantitative successes and qualitative merit of having laid democratic local foundations, provides a sound symbolic ground. This resonates with one Project manager’s frank acceptance that the project team work hard not to create independence of the local beneficiaries but to justify a new phase to work with. Consistent with this, another senior project staff admitted in private discussion – “yes poverty of my family has been eliminated for sure but I do not think my project has been successful in eliminating the poverty of the villagers”.

Another aspect of symbolic violence legitimating inequitable forestry practice is the uncritical acceptance of the technical knowledge of the foresters by the fatalistic habitus. Despite the rhetoric of participation, the technical knowledge of foresters is considered the only authentic knowledge to guide the management of community forests. In one instance, I observed a ranger suggesting a thinning formula to forest users:

measure the girth, multiply by sixteen and measure that distance between the two trees; this would give the distance between the trees to be retained' (Ojha 2002).

Here the forester doxa reflects a belief in a generic formula, without recognizing the need for development of knowledge that matches with the local context. I argue that if he gives this training to all forest users, and if they also apply the same formula, all community forests of Nepal would look perfectly similar after some years, irrespective of species, community needs and environmental conditions. And since forester habitus is dominant in relation to the ordinary users, what he suggests is legitimate and needs to be followed in the practice of forest management.

The power of technical knowledge is further strengthened by the “officialization” and “bureaucratization” of forestry knowledge, as technical advice given to local community groups is mandatory (Ojha 2006). In some instances, forester’s knowledge is recognized as not being useful by marginalized groups but the latter were not able to challenge it fully. In a CFUG with a pole stage Sal forest, foresters advised the group to undertake thinning so that the Sal trees grow faster (Ojha and Bhattarai 2001). The group is close to Kathmandu valley, about 30km to the south west in Dhading district. Because of easy road access to Kathmandu valley, many of the small holder farmers in the area have started to cultivate cash crops such as beans, cucumber and others, which need small supporting sticks. Before a CFUG was organized, the forest was de facto open access and the farmers could collect sticks for their vegetables without any restrictions. But after the establishment of the CFUG, the local leaders and the technical forestry staff developed a forest management plan which prescribes clearing of all bushes in the Sal forest. When the bushes were cleared, the forest became clean monoculture of Sal trees as per the wishes of the local elites and the forest officials. But majority of the land poor farmers who were trying to maximize the production through cash crops had no supply of the small sticks from the forest. On an average, each household need of about 1000 sticks per year means that the forest could have better remained as bushy and shrubby for them but since they could not exercise their voice in the decision-making and planning, now they have no alternative but to convert the bushy forest to a Sal monoculture.

As a forester in early 90s, I have myself have encountered a technical dilemma in advising a FUG which had a plantation forest of pole size. I visited the forest with a group of local forest users to discuss thinning of trees. The pole size trees were too dense, and I suggested them to undertake heavy thinning so that there is enough space for the left out trees. The village leaders did not accept my suggestion. They said “if we cut too many trees this year, then we will have problem of fuelwood in subsequent year. So we will cut only a few this year, so that we will have some left for the subsequent years too”. I was stunned by the careful matching of social needs. I noticed that my advice was based on maximizing timber volume, where as villagers were careful in ensuring steady supply of the fuelwood. This indicates a misfit between the technical doxa of forester and the practical sense of the local people. As Bourdieu argues, no theory can precisely be put in any concrete practice, which is enacted through the practical sense of the social agents in the specific social contexts. This and similar observation has constantly challenged me to think through more holistic ways of understanding practices, and is a source of inspiration to move away from technical doxa, which I acquired through training and as a participant of the forestry field.

The formation of CFUG and the operation of forest harvesting is invariably a symbolic relation of power between the local people and the foresters, and the way foresters are treated at a time when they visit to inspect the harvesting operations has had significant impact on the political relations between the forest officials and the CFUGs. So the leaders of CFUGs are equally worried to strike a

balance with forest officials by not arguing against them, doing proper greetings, treating them with good snacks and also providing them with a per diem. Many CFUGs, especially in the Teri region where timber is extracted for sale, forest rangers and forest guards are given *prabidhik Bhatta* (special field allowance) which goes counter to the civil code. These obligations imposed on the locals in exchange for the transfer of ownership over forest resources lead to subtler ways of political control by the officials over the local people in the realms of forest governance. The result is that local elites who are elected as the leaders of CFUGs have remained accountable to the elements of bureaucracy rather than to the larger mass of people they claim to represent.

The knowledge dimension of technocratic habitus is further complicated by the policymaking privileges of the foresters. The technocratic habitus of foresters is considered a legitimate actor to exercise policy-making authority, with little consultation with the concerned groups of people. High ranking forest officials in the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation tend to view themselves as policy makers, and this is also to a significant degree granted by others. In a recent multi-stakeholder meeting in Kathmandu, when there was a question of NGO involvement in CF programme, a 'policymaker' declared – "we at the Ministry are preparing the NGO guideline which will soon come in force and then there will be no confusion". There were several NGO representatives including myself in the meeting but none of them did question how an NGO guideline can be a legitimate policy instrument without the involvement of NGO representative in the process. He spoke authoritatively, without a fear of getting questioned on the legitimacy of an action upon NGO, and also without any sense of guilt or shame of not having invited any NGO representatives in the process. It was all natural for him to exercise policy making authority. And so natural for the civil society to confine their reaction to some moments of disgust and irritations rather than question publicly, ignoring or even violating the rules of the game – in relation to who is allowed to speak, when and for how long. The dominance of technocratic *habitus* in forest policy making is reported as a rule rather than exception (Timsina et al. 2004; Pokharel and Ojha 2005; Ojha et al. 2006).

The policy making authority of the technocratic habitus corresponds with the dominated self-image of the CFUGs. Despite the opening up of spaces for civil society in national policy processes in the post 1990 period, there is still a limited sense of civic resistance against the technocratic domination. A CFUG head supported by a bilateral forestry project in Kavre district for over two decades responded that, in a question to describe their relations with the lowest unit of Forest Department (Range Post), their CFUG is "under" the Range Post (Ojha et al. 2002b). This means that they are unquestionably inclined to accept themselves as subordinate to the government officials. Staff of the corresponding Range Post also confirmed that if they do not directly supervise the forest management operations in the community forests, then the local CFUGs are likely to carelessly undertake harvesting operations, apparently indicating that the staff are the supreme protector of forests in the community controlled areas.

The political questions of forest governance were are left to the discretion of either technocratic habitus. Analyses of forest policy making suggest that feudal habitus of political leaders are guided more by 'administrative will' of the respective line ministry and bureaucrats rather than 'public will' (as stressed in the ideal of deliberative democracy) (Ojha et al. 2006). This was partly because of the collusion of private interests of the political leaders and the bureaucrats, and partly because of the liberal democratic *doxa* acquired through Westminster style norms of democracy, which does not require political leaders to deliberate with their constituent citizens on matters of the latter's concerns. Representatives are considered authentic to make decisions on behalf of the larger mass of people.

This has legitimated several top-down decisions on law and regulation without consulting the affected public (Pokharel and Ojha 2005).

One of the important ways through the technocratic habitus derives symbolic power in the field of CF in Nepal is through what is commonly regarded as *hakim* of people. Literal meaning of hakim is boss, but in Nepalese context boss is much more feudalistic than a western, liberal counterpart. Bista (1991) discusses at length how Nepalese society is embedded in the culture of feudalism, a key aspect of which is that ordinary people, who are expected to unquestionably obey and respect the views and instructions of officials. In a recent CFUG gathering of Nawalparasi district, a forest ranger came and announced that their group had been selected as a pilot site for testing new wellbeing criteria under Livelihoods and Forestry Programme (LFP) funded by DFID. He said “what all you have to do under this scheme is to develop some criteria of wellbeing and then divide the 700 households associated with the group into rich, medium and poor”. I was familiar with the group’s initiatives on wellbeing ranking and support to the poorest groups. It had indeed already had such criteria, identified poorest groups and even constructed small houses for 25 poorest households, apart from providing other assistance in goat farming, and skill development. I looked at the face of the FUG chairperson to read his reaction, but he was nodding to endorse ranger’s proposal without any question. A reflection later revealed that because of ranger’s authority and influence, the chairman did not ask ranger to first look at the progress and then build up the needed processes.

The high level of inequality of symbolic capitals among the four categories of habitus (and sub-groups within them) means that even when the dominated is aware of the domination, the latter is compelled to obey the conditions imposed by the dominant. Although CFUG is recognized as the perpetually self-governed institution by Forest in the Forest Act 1993, in practice there is very limited sense of independence of CFUG from forest officials, who hardly respect the legal autonomy provided to CFUG. In fact, the CFUG is given birth by the district forest officials in the legal sense, and a district forest official reserves the right to define and recognize (or de-recognize) a civil group like CFUG, which has to obey the instructions of the former on matters related to forest management. Officials force the local communities to sign extra-legal contractual agreements that often overrides the basic tenets of law, and requires the CFUG to abide by the verbal and non-verbal instructions of the forestry staff. While in some cases such conditions are considered legitimate by the local FUGs, for they come from a naturally legitimate “above”, which has always existed in the sphere of governance of social and political life in Nepal, and was particularly acute during Rana regime. Where CFUG leaders understand that they are being denied their legal space, they either compromise for some private gains that would accrue through having good relations with the staff, or if they are more accountable to their communities, just accept the conditions so that ‘something is better than nothing’.

## **5. FROM SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE TO DISCURSIVE RESISTANCE – CONTINUITIES AND SHIFTS**

In the preceding section I surveyed a range of CF practices and the nature of underlying symbolic violence. Here I would like to identify some conditions and possibilities for fully misrecognized levels of symbolic violence to be recognized and then challenged. Practices in CF range in the three levels of symbolic violence. First, many practices in CF are enacted at the highest level of misrecognition of the existing order by the marginalized groups (and sometimes the dominant groups too to varying degrees), as is evident in a number of examples: the uncritical acceptance of external

knowledge by the local groups, generic thinning formula suggested by foresters and accepted by CFUGs, exercise of top-down policy making authority by technocratic habitus, political habitus following administrative will, and donor project coopting civil society actors through money. Second, there are several arenas where the exercise of symbolic violence has been brought to discursive awareness and reflection but without real deliberative transformation taking place. Examples of this “recognized but not challenged” domain of symbolic violence includes - CFUGs accepting wealth-ranking project, and farmers not happy with the Sal monoculture. In both situations, the dominated are aware of symbolic violence but have done little to challenge.

Third, instances of symbolic violence being actively questioned are also identifiable but due to lack of enough cultural and symbolic capitals accessible to the dominated, no real change in practice is seen. This is evident in the case of CFUGs leaders questioning the extra-legal conditionality in forest management agreements by the forest officials. But they are yet to be sufficiently organized (social capital), to compile legal evidences and develop effective arguments (cultural capital), and engage in discursive politics in this regard. In a case of successfully challenging the symbolic order, social scientists have been able to break the monopoly of foresters in the field of CF, and now the role of social science in CF has been recognized widely even by foresters.

Given the high levels of symbolic violence legitimating inequitable distributional outcomes, the question now is – what makes possible the mis-recognized symbolic violence to be recognized and challenged? The challenge is possible neither from the conscious domain of agency alone, nor it is structurally determined. My contention, following Bourdieu, is that a state of high symbolic violence (mis-recognized) is less likely to open onto discursive, deliberative processes until there is a sort of objective crisis, resulting from the dissonance between doxa and field. The mis-recognized form of symbolic power may get instable due to dissonance between the regularities of the field, and the schemes of perceptions and thought of the habitus groups. This may lead to an awareness of symbolic violence on the part of both dominated and dominant, and the former may start undergoing an active process of reflection, faster than the latter. The process of recognition once triggered may move at accelerated pace, as an uncovering of an element of doxa that has hitherto legitimated symbolic violence may lead to further and faster uncovering of the deeper level doxa, but if there is no concurrent change in the economy of capitals (favouring the marginalized agency to take their agency into action), it remains at the level of recognition, and does not go far enough to challenge the violence at the discursive level.

The case of wellbeing ranking by a project staff (section 4) demonstrates that despite an awareness of violence, there are not enough cultural and symbolic capitals so that local communities could challenge, and this resulted in the repetition and derecognising of the processes established by local people. The example of Sal monoculture in section 4 indicates a critical awareness on the part of the farmers who needed sticks for beans farming. They have alternative ideas of how forest should be managed so that their needs could be fulfilled, but still they consider themselves subservient to the instructions of forest officials and the feudal habitus of local CFUG leaders (both of whom collaborate to promote Sal monoculture). The level and awareness and reflexivity are still not adequate to challenge the immanent symbolic violence fully.

In addition to the critical awareness of the dominated, reflexivity on the part of dominant is also equally important for discursive challenge of symbolic violence. Possibilities of change should therefore be sought on reflexivity and critical awareness of both types of social agents. In my own case of thinning advice (section 4), the challenge by the local people helped me to reflect upon my

own forester doxa and accept the alternative views of forest thinning. This indicates that there is a possibility of generative dialogues between two actors hitherto enacting symbolic violence, if the involved habitus groups are critically self-reflective, and recognize mismatch between the internalized cognitive frames and the realities of the field.

But awareness of symbolic violence and reflexivity are not sufficient for discursive challenge of symbolic violence. Even when social agents have become aware of the need to change their doxa, their temptation to loose capitals does not permit them to do so. An activist of FECOFUN says: “we know that the hill model of CF cannot be copied in the Terai but if I say that CF needs to be rethought, I will be sidelined by my colleagues within FECOFUN”. FECOFUN workers’ social space is grounded in the field of CF, and if the boundary of it is challenged, then they feel threatened. While there are few agents who are reflective, they are still constrained by the possible loss of social capitals. The nascent form of alternative critical thinking can find its full expression in practice only if there is concurrent change in the rule of the game – accept crisis and reward non-traditional models of representing reality.

Sometimes, one type of capital is misrecognized for another. Technocratic habitus is sustained more by bureaucratic capital than cultural capital of technical knowledge. This means that discursive challenge by the dominated has greater optimism if focussed on the bureaucratic dimension of symbolic violence than technical knowledge. I anticipate that technical knowledge if fully brought under the democratic control of concerned people is less likely to exercise symbolic violence. The technocratic habitus continues to enjoy top-down styles of policy-making privileges which is legitimated through the doxa of Karma and hakim which enact symbolic violence over the ordinary people (thus crushing their political agency to demand rights and self-governance).

More serious is a situation when discursive challenge to orthodoxy is coopted by the dominant to resurrect the pre-existing order. In Nepal CF, as we report elsewhere (Ojha 2006 et al, Pokharel and Ojha 2006), several perceived needs for policy development have been captured by technocratic habitus. More widely in the field of development, there have recently been a series of critical reflections on the practice of development, emphasizing the need for more participatory, inclusive and decentralized practice of development and governance. But these discursive instruments have been hijacked for shallow symbolic profits rather than genuine change. Blaikie and Muldavin (2004) argue that the crisis of Himalayan degradation provided powerful discursive weapon for a tough exclusionary forest policy in India. This reflects wider concerns on participatory development getting co-opted and instrumentalized (Cook and Kothari 2001) rather than allowing genuine deliberation.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This article has analyzed the field of CF using Bourdieu’s theory of social practice (which includes the notion of field, habitus, doxa, and symbolic violence) to develop an alternative framework of understanding the impact of a development action. I have shown how local level mundane practices of CF are actually entrenched in the complex web of relations legitimated upon immanent symbolic violence, which is a tacitly accepted, and hence “mis-recognized”, form of relations of power among social agents enacting a social practice. I have shown how varying nature and degrees of symbolic violence allows the dominant groups to capture material benefits as a natural process. I also demonstrated how, in the complex field of CF, the powerful actors (bureaucrats/forestry experts, development professionals and political leaders) influence and patronize local and marginalized people to enact certain forestry practices, which often benefit the former (material or symbolic) at the cost of the latter. I also explored some trajectories through which social agents may move from

completely mis-recognized forms of symbolic violence to discursive challenge and reconstitution (or reproduction) of power relations.

A key conclusion from this analysis is that all practices of CF at local level are entrenched in the complex economy of production and exchange that is taking place at different levels – from community to nation state to international sphere of development. While many hold that CF is a government program to promote production and distribution of forest and environmental goods for the benefit of local communities, what is ignored or misrecognized is that in the course of generating such environmental goods at local level, a whole array of opportunities for production and circulation of other types of goods or capitals also exist, for which a whole range of actors engage in competition, collaboration or even conflicts. The actual volume of capitals which are traded at local level in the form of forest products timber, fuelwood and fodder – the most visible economic capital - is indeed only a fraction of the total volume of all types of capital actually traded outside of the communities but still in the name of CF – such as project grants, consultancies, research services, jobs, scholarships, and government taxes. And because of the exercise of symbolic violence, many of these bigger transactions are hidden from the view of local people.

The analysis has shown that, by and large, technocratic, feudal-political, developmentalist habitus exercise symbolic violence over the fatalistic habitus of the ordinary people. The policy arena has been the preserve of technocrats who avoid public debate in the process of policy formulation. The current level of symbolic power which foresters exercise as ‘technical knowledge’ is legitimated through bureaucratic centralization of forest governance since colonial times. The technical construction of forests and the silvicultural prescription of what makes forest better has continuously undermined the scope of democratic governance of forest resources, as ordinary forest users have not been fully able to exercise their political agency in the face of symbolic violence. Likewise, feudal-political habitus of the elected leaders – all the way from CFUG to government – have followed administrative will rather than the popular will because of non-deliberative dispositions that characterize political habitus created in the context of several decades of feudal political governance. Developmentalist habitus has reinforced technocratic and feudal-political habitus, by investing on the reproduction of the status quo and coopting the civil political sphere by money. The fatalistic habitus has been the victim of its own doxa of *karma*, dependence and patronage, with limited political agency to challenge the symbolic violence. As a result of all these, CF for the large part has been the industry of those who are not part of “community” but seeks to play the roles of enablers, service providers, advisers, facilitators and funders.

The high level of inequality of symbolic capitals among the four categories of habitus (and sub-groups within them) means that even when the dominated is aware of symbolic violence, the latter is compelled to obey the conditions imposed by the dominant. My contention, following Bourdieu, is that a state of high symbolic violence (mis-recognized) is less likely to open onto discursive, deliberative processes until there is a sort of objective crisis, resulting from the dissonance between doxa and field. Such a crisis may trigger discursive awareness on the part of dominated, and may also lead to reflexivity on the part of dominant. But if discursive crisis is created in the situation of high inequality of capitals, then it may lead to further conservative outcomes (leading to renewed levels of domination). So the possibility of reproduction or transformation hinges centrally around the dialectics between the structure of distribution of capitals on the one hand, and construction of crisis following the dissonance between habitus and the field on the other.

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<sup>2</sup> Such opportunities mainly include increased supply of forest products used for subsistence livelihood. There are some emerging initiatives of community based enterprises to tap the commercial benefits of the various timber and non-timber forest products (Pokharel 2001).

<sup>3</sup> See Shrestha (1998) and Pandey (1999) for development failures in Nepal.

<sup>4</sup> The actual doxa these habitus brings are not fully constituted within the domain of CF but are constituted in their primary field of practice, and brought to the field of CF.

<sup>5</sup> Bista (1991) says that Karma is "a belief system that posits that one's circumstances have been determined by a supreme deity; that their lives have been fated" (p77). It is believed that on the sixth day of birth a god called Bhavi comes at night to write the fate of the baby which is then enacted as the karma of the person.

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<sup>6</sup> In the decades of 60s and 70s, Nepal was projected as a site of Himalayan degradation, and this attracted tremendous international attention. During the early 1980s, Nepal's mountains were perceived as a site of environmental and livelihoods crisis – deforestation and soil erosion were affecting water flows and livelihood resources base locally and beyond (Eckholm 1976; Cameron 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Initially World Bank and FAO, then a group of bilateral and international actors, influenced Nepal government towards the process of devolution of forest governance.

<sup>8</sup> The potential of livelihoods from farming is now under crisis due to declining land productivity, and increasing aspirations through the intrusion of markets. People have started to leave farms for foreign employment as far as possible. Most of the villages lack economically active youth males.

<sup>9</sup> Based on data from Kanel and Kanel (2004)