

Chapter 2

FOREST USER MANAGEMENT: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Forest Management in Historical Perspective

A broad historical sequence of forest resource use in the Eastern Hill Region of Nepal is given below.

In Nepal, although land and forest resources were managed in the form of *kipat* (communal landownership), *raikar* (state landlordism), *guthi* (lands used for temples and charity), and *birta* (State land grants to priests, military personnel, and the nobility) (Regmi 1963) before 1964, there existed primarily *kipat* and *raikar* systems of land tenure in the Eastern Hill Region. Whether it was the *kipat* system or the *raikar*, both land and forest resources were held under the control of *subba*, *jimawal*, *pagari*, and *thari*, who were not only the land revenue collectors of the Government but also used to maintain law and order at the local level. They were responsible for both the sustainable use of the resource in question as well as its allocation.

Although the *kipat* system was abolished in 1968, it remained an important social institution for preserving the cultural and natural environment in the Eastern Hill Region. *Kipat* was a communal system of land tenure, followed basically by the *Limbu* and *Rai* of Eastern Nepal. *Kipat* included all cultivated lands, as well as uncultivated forests, streams, and rivers, within its boundaries. A *kipat* owner derived rights over *kipat* land by virtue of his membership in a particular lineage of that ethnic group and its location in a particular area. *Kipat* constituted about four per cent of the total arable land in Nepal and almost one-fourth

Chapter 2:
Forest User Management: An Historical Perspective

of the total arable land in the Eastern Hill Region. In Ilam district alone, 39.7 per cent of the total irrigated land was under the *kipat* system up to 1964-65 (Caplan 1970).

In the *kipat* area, the *subba* had absolute power over the land and forest resources under his jurisdiction. A *kipat* holder converting 60 *muri* of *kipat khet** (one *muri* of land=1,369 sq.ft.) into *raikar* and paying a fee of fifty rupees to the Government had conferred upon him the minor title of *subba* (Regmi 1963). In the Eastern Hill Region, only a *Limbu* or *Rai* could become a *subba* since only they had *kipat* land at their disposal. A *subba* was also given the *nisan* (sword), *nagara* (drum), and *lalmohar* (royal decree) in his name. Once the *subba* was appointed, he would remain in the post until his death, unless he misappropriated land revenue. To facilitate the job, he was assisted by a *pagari* (either a *Rai* or a *Limbu*) or *thari* (*Brahmin*, *Chhetri*, or *Newar*) who was also appointed by the Government after paying 30 *muri* of *khet* and a fee of Rs 50. The villagers had access to forest products, such as timber or poles, for domestic purposes with the formal approval of the *subba* and *thari*. The relationship was symbolised in the annual payment of tribute made by non-*Limbu* and non-*Rai* dependents to their *thari* and by the latter to their *Limbu* headman or *subba*. All the dependents (*raiti*) were obliged to bring gifts such as sugar, curd, and fruits during festivals, such as *Dasain*, to both the *thari* and *subba*. They were also expected to provide five days of unpaid labour annually either to the *thari* or *Limbu subba*, or any kind of physical labour when asked for. The *thari* collected taxes from their dependents on their landholdings and passed these to the *Limbu subba* for submission to the Land Revenue Office (Caplan 1972). But the *kipatiya* had to pay only Rs 6.50 per household, irrespective of the landholding size or the forest area. Both *subba* and *thari* used to protect the forests themselves, either by sending their own household members occasionally to watch the forest or by hiring a *chowkidar* (forest watcher) on an annual contract basis, paying a fixed amount of grain.

In brief, this traditional forest management system helped to protect forest resources in two ways. Firstly, as the forest was

* *Khet* = irrigated rice land

constantly watched under the jurisdiction of the *subba* and *thari*, nobody was allowed to cut timber or use other forest products indiscriminantly. Secondly, both *subba* and *thari* kept land records of all their *raiti*, making *raiti* virtually dependent on them for everything. Nobody was allowed to do anything without consensus and every villager watched another closely to check the use of natural resources. This process worked as a safety valve to protect the forest in the area. This traditional forest management system was strengthened because of other larger socioeconomic processes as well.

- i. Up to the first quarter of the 20th century, the population pressure was low, particularly in the hill and mountain regions of Nepal. When population pressure was felt, many people migrated to Assam, Meghalaya, or Manipur to earn cash or to the *terai* for a better livelihood (Caplan 1970 and Dahal 1983). In fact, permanent migration played an important role in preserving forests in the Eastern Hill Region. Because of the bureaucratic landlordism which persisted throughout Nepal's history, there was unequal distribution of land among the people; a few people were controlling a large portion of the land resources and most of the people had to survive on the basis of the little cultivable land available to them. As the forests were controlled by the *subba* and *thari*, it was not possible to expand agricultural land by clearing forests in the hills. Up to 1986, 47 per cent, 36.6 per cent, and 34 per cent of the forests were still preserved in Ilam, Sankhuwasabha, and Dhankuta districts respectively (LRMP 1986). This suggests that the proportion of forest land could be much higher in these districts before 1960 (cf. Bajracharya 1981). As most of the land was under forest cover, the local people had no choice except to migrate permanently elsewhere.

- ii. The introduction of the Private Forest Nationalisation Act in 1957 brought all forests under the control of the Government. Many scholars (Bajracharya 1983; Molnar 1981; Haq 1993; Hobley 1989; Gilmore and Fisher 1991)

argue that Nepal's major forest tracts were felled overnight to establish landownership after the enforcement of this Act. On the contrary, Mahat et al. in their series of papers (1986a; 1986b; 1987a; 1987b) note that deforestation in the middle hills of Nepal is not a recent phenomenon but has a long history. Our field data on the Eastern Hill Region, particularly the FUG study areas (see Chapter III), suggest that mass deforestation occurred only after 1960, a relatively recent phenomenon, and that the 1957 Forest Act alone was not responsible for this disastrous situation.

In the Eastern Hill Region, the process of deforestation was accelerated after 1960 because of many socioeconomic and political factors. Firstly, when population pressure was felt in this region, and consequently the pressure on subsistence as well as on natural resources, such as forests, increased, many people expanded agricultural land at the cost of forests (Bajracharya 1981 and Caplan 1970). Much of this expansion occurred only after 1960 because after 1957 the forest management system was weak. Secondly, the relative inaccessibility of the Eastern Hill Region up to 1960 provided less opportunity for timber extraction on a large, commercial scale. The development of market centres and road construction gradually increased in this region only after the 1970s, thereby more forest products were required, not only for domestic consumption but also for commercial purposes. Thirdly, forest data on the FUG study areas (see Chapter III for details) demonstrate that the political turmoil during the 1980 referendum, the democratic movement in 1990, the big earthquake in 1988, the construction of the Dharan-Dhankuta highway after 1970, and malpractices of loggers and forestry staff led to massive destruction of forests in this region. Finally, when the users of FUGs in the study areas were asked what they knew about the 1957 Forest Act, virtually all users said they knew very little about it.

In order to reverse this dangerous trend of deforestation, the Community Forestry Programme was recognised officially for the first time in Nepal following the 1978 promulgation of the

Panchayat Forest (PF) and *Panchayat* Protected Forest (PPF). These rules established a framework whereby each *panchayat* could be given official control over the local resources, provided they planted, maintained, and protected forests and implemented a scientific forest management plan prepared by the Forest Division Office (Manandhar 1980). According to Sizelar (1985:15) the *Panchayat* Protected Forest (PPF) and *Panchayat* Forest (PF) programmes were started in Sankhuwasabha district in 1981/82. Initially, there were 34.6ha of PF and 110ha of PPF, and the area was expanded to 239.8ha of PF and 398ha of PPF by 1984/85. Fifteen *panchayat* areas participated in both PPF and PF programmes. Likewise, de Pater (1985:5) noted that community forestry in Ilam district was started in 1979/80 and that by 1985 it had 73 PF (1,261.1ha) and 54 PPF sites (2,268ha) In Dhankuta, the picture is less clear. When the KHARDEP phase two programme was formulated in 1979, it covered land use, including forest management programmes.

However, this Act also could not function effectively as there was little participation at the local level and the forest rules were simply confined to the file of the *pradhan pancha*. The community forestry programme was limited to afforesting a few patches of barren land here and there. The sensitivity of the village people and their forest product requirements were hardly considered by the village leadership.

A Review of Forest User Group Formation in Sankhuwasabha, Dhankuta, and Ilam Districts

According to the KHDP report (1993:6), only 124 FUGs had been formed in the Koshi Hills (Bhojpur, Dhankuta, Sankhuwasabha and Terathum) by December 1992 but, by November 1993, Dhankuta alone had 91 FUGs and Sankhuwasabha had 44, a very fast growth rate. In the Mechi Hills (Ilam, Panchthar, and Taplejung), the total number of FUGs was still less than 40 by November 1993. Table 2.1 shows the rate of FUG formation in the project area over the last five years. The number of community forest user groups by VDC is given in Table 2.2.

Chapter 2:
Forest User Management: An Historical Perspective

Table 2.1: Formation of User Groups by District (1988-1994)

Year	District					
	Sankhuwasabha	%	Dhankuta	%	Ilam	%
1988-1989	0		1	1.1	0	
1989-1990	0		6	6.6	0	
1990-1991	2	4.6	9	9.9	0	
1991-1992	10	22.7	9	9.9	1	6.7
1992-1993	32	72.7	43	47.2	12	80.0
1993-1994	-		23	25.3	2	13.3
Total	44	100.0	91	100.0	15	100.0

Source: District Forest Office 1993

Table 2.2: Number of FUGs in the Districts by VDC, 1993

Sankhuwasabha		Dhankuta		Ilam	
Name of VDC	No. of FUGs	Name of VDC	No. of FUGs	Name of VDC	No. of FUGs
1. Manakamana	9 (20.5)	1. Dhankuta	12 (13.2)	1. Ilam Muni	2 (13.3)
2. Symbun	5 (11.4)	2. Parawidin	7 (7.7)	2. Barbote	3 (20.0)
3. Pangma	3 (6.8)	3. Rajarani	6 (6.6)	3. Maipokhari	2 (13.3)
4. Chainpur	3 (6.8)	4. Dandabazaar	5 (5.5)	4. Maimajuwa	2 (13.3)
5. Malta	3 (6.8)	5. Murti Dhunga	5 (5.5)	5. Nayabazaar	1 (6.7)
6. Barhabise	3 (6.8)	6. Falate	4 (4.4)	6. Jogmai	1 (6.7)
7. Sibhapokhari	3 (6.80)	7. Belhara	4 (4.4)	7. Santi	1 (6.70)
8. Tamku	3 (6.80)	8. Bhedetar	4 (4.4)	<i>Danda</i>	
9. Wana	3 (6.80)	9. Maunabudhuk	4 (4.4)	8. Sulubung	1 (6.70)
10. Tamaphok	2 (4.5)	10. Budhabare	4 (4.4)	9. Sri Antu	1 (6.7)
11. Kharang	1 (2.3)	11. Ankhisalla	3 (3.3)	10. Gorkhe	1 (6.7)
12. Pathibhara	1 (2.3)	12. Mahabharat	3 (3.3)		
13. Madi		13. Tankhuwa	3 (3.3)		
14. Dhupu	1 (2.3)	14. Pakhribas	3 (3.3)		
15. Hatiya	1 (2.3)	15. Chanuwa	3 (3.3)		
16. Num	1 (2.3)	16. Sanne	2 (2.1)		
17. Bala	1 (2.3)	17. Hatikharka	2 (2.1)		
		18. Ghorlekharka	2 (2.1)		
		19. Chintang	2 (2.1)		
		20. Khuwaphok	2 (2.1)		
		21. Budhi Morang	2 (2.1)		
		22. Kurle Tinupa	2 (2.1)		
		23. Leguwa	1 (1.1)		
		24. Jitpur	1 (1.1)		
		25. Muga	1 (1.1)		
		26. Bhirgaun	1 (1.1)		
		27. Teliya	1 (1.1)		
		28. Aahale	1 (1.1)		
Total	44 (100.0)		91 (100.0)		15 (100.0)

Note: Numbers in parentheses refer to percentage.

Source: District Forest Office 1993

The size of community forests by district is given in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3: Size of Community Forests by District, 1993

Size of Forest	District		
	Sankhuwasabha*	Dhankuta*	Ilam*
Less than 5ha	1 (2.3)	4 (4.8)	0
5.1 to 10ha	4 (9.3)	12 (14.3)	1 (6.7)
10.1 to 30ha	16 (37.2)	36 (42.8)	2 (13.3)
30.1 and above ha	22 (51.2)	32 (38.1)	10 (80.0)
Total	43 (100.0)	84 (100.0)	13 (100.0)

* Areas of one forest in Sankhuwasabha, seven forests in Dhankuta, and two forests in Ilam are not available.

Source: District Forest Office 1993.

The proportions of district forest areas (in ha) handed over to user groups are given in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4: Proportions of District Forest Areas (in hectares) Handed Over to User Groups, 1993

District	District Forest Area*	Total FUG Forest Area	Total FUGs	Average Forest Area by FUG	% Forest Area Handed Over to FUG (in Sept. 1993)
Sankhuwasabha	126,541	2,346	43	54.53	1.9
Dhankuta	30,638	2,327	84	27.70	7.6
Ilam	80,676	1,964	13	151.10	2.4

* LRMP 1986

Source: LRMP 1986 and DFO 1993.

The FUG formation data have some interesting features.

1. After 1991, the rate of FUG formation increased rapidly. Most of these FUGs were formed haphazardly just to meet the target set from above. Most of the FUGs were formed without understanding the forest size, local economy, and culture.

Chapter 2:
Forest User Management: An Historical Perspective

2. In areas where population pressure was high (see Chapter 3), more FUGs were formed. The FUG formation rate was found to be highest within the vicinity of district headquarters where the population pressure was high. For example, Dhankuta municipality area has 12 FUGs (13.2%), Manakamana (district headquarters of Sankhuwasabha) has nine (20.5%), and Ilam has two (13.3%). Although Ilam municipality has only two FUGs, Barbote and Maipokhari are close to Ilam (within a distance of 10km), thus adding five more and numbering seven FUGs altogether or 46.6 per cent of the total FUGs up to 1993. Except for Khandbari, district headquarters such as Dhankuta and Ilam are urban areas also.

3. In areas where government project activities in the agricultural and forest sectors were high, the FUG formation rate was also high. For example, within the KHDP area, the Nepal-UK Forestry Project is located in Dhankuta; the KHDP started its 13 sectoral development programmes, focussing more on Dhankuta than on other districts in the Koshi Hills. As a result, Dhankuta has the highest rate of FUG formation, followed by Sankhuwasabha. Ilam district has the least number of FUGs compared to the other two districts of the project area. Because Ilam district has the highest percentage of forest land than the other districts, even today, the people have not perceived the need for more careful forest management so far.

4. In addition to district headquarters, there were more FUGs in areas where the district forest staff had easy access to motorable roads. In other words, accessibility is one of the main criterion for forming FUGs. In many remote areas far from the district headquarters, there were no FUGs, whether there was pressure on the forest resources or not.

In brief, three major factors, population pressure, proximity to district headquarters, and accessibility (motorable roads), play important roles in FUG formation in the Eastern Hill Region.

**A Review of Forest User Groups:
Case Studies from Eastern Nepal**

In terms of forest size, Ilam has the largest forest size per user group (more than 150ha). In Ilam, it is still not clear how many FUGs are going to be formed to share one forest as many people are still not serious about becoming users. In Dhankuta, since the population pressure is high, more FUGs have been formed in a short period of time. However, forest data indicate that only a fraction of the district's forest is covered by the existing user groups; many more FUGs can be formed within the district without much pressure on forest resources.