

# New Directions in Community Forestry Management

While the integrated nature of rural livelihood systems and forests (both with farming system linkages and market/employment linkages) and the breadth of social/community forestry programmes kept the discussions wide-ranging, the most strongly identified new directions in both countries were related to **management of existing government forests by the local community**. Called **Joint Forest Management (JFM)** in India and **Community Forestry with User Groups (CF/UG)** in Nepal, these were the topics which most interested participants -- the topics which elicited surprise, shock, confirmation of old lessons, and the most new learning.

Strictly speaking, neither JFM or CF/UG are new -- a characteristic which probably underlies their strength. Various forms of joint forest management, involving local villages and the Government, were set up in India (as well as Nepal) over sixty years ago through the establishment of *Van Panchayats* (forest villages), in the U.P. Himalayas and various tribal areas, as well as through the Himachal Pradesh **Forest Cooperatives**. These examples were by no means the first, having been preceded by many different kinds of arrangement with local rulers and landowners. Similarly, user group community forestry, where local users organised the protection and management of local forests (whether owned by them or the government), has a long history in Nepal and India. Indigenous or traditional forest management is documented throughout the Himalayan Region (and elsewhere) to extend back beyond the oldest farmer's memory to forefathers' generations.

What is new and exciting is the manner in which both India and Nepal are gearing up to support these approaches to community forestry, based on documented field successes on a large scale. **Both countries have prepared new policies and legislation, are examining new**

## *Uphill and Downhill*

Bal Ram Bhatta, reflecting on his many years of field experience with the Forest Department of HMG, gave the seminar an animated presentation of the Bhatta Theory of Uphill and Downhill Movement. Forests, he claims, are moving uphill as lowlands are being cleared for agriculture, making it an increasingly 'uphill' task to manage them as they become increasingly inaccessible and limited by a smaller range of climatic and soil conditions. The downhill movement refers to the direction of soil loss and the general loss of productivity resulting from forest degradation.

Bhatta stressed that community forestry programmes are being over-emphasised by donors and planners. There is room for a variety of approaches, particularly those which support private planting initiatives as well.

*-- Bala Ram Bhatta, Hattiban*

**technologies and forest management options, are rethinking institutional needs and resources, engaging in social science research, and coming to new understandings of local communities and their roles in forest management in a changing economic environment.**

Yet, surprisingly, these approaches to public forest management are also very different in Nepal and India. In part, these differences reflect differences in socioeconomic conditions -- the continuing preponderance of subsistence farmers isolated from markets in roadless areas of Nepal versus the increasingly commercialised and market-driven rural economy of India. But they also reflect differences in approach and philosophy. Both the differences and commonalities are mutually instructive.

**While India provides Nepal with a window into their own future when roads and markets increase commercialisation of the economy, Nepal provides India with a window into their past where the successful ingredients of indigenous systems of forest**

management can still be studied and seen and adapted to the present. Where India provides examples of a more conservative approach of incremental forest benefit-sharing with local villagers, Nepal has conducted a nation-wide, bold experiment by handing over 100 per cent of the benefits of government forests to local users.

## Joint Forest Management in India

### Definition of JFM

Joint management of forest lands is the sharing of products, responsibilities, control, and decision-making authority over forest lands between forest departments and local user groups. It involves a contract specifying the distribution of authority, responsibility, and benefits between villages and State forest departments with respect to lands allocated for JM. The primary purpose of JM is to create conditions at the local level that enable improvements in forest conditions and in productivity. A second goal is to support a more equitable distribution of forest products than is currently the case in most areas.

-- Marcus Moench, *Training and Planning for Joint Forest Management, Working Paper No. 8, Sustainable Forest Management, Ford Foundation, New Delhi (1990).*

Joint forest management (JFM) in India represents a convergence of approaches developing out of new experiments, old co-management efforts, and social forestry programmes. The two most often cited recent inspirations for what is now called JFM derive from an innovative programme developed in two villages: Arabari in West Bengal and Sukhomajri in Haryana. In these two villages, separated by a thousand kilometres, creative forest officers developed strong, villager-run forest protection systems based on new revenue-sharing arrangements. These efforts provided renewed interest in earlier systems of *Van Panchayats* in the Himalayan region of Uttar Pradesh and paralleled the evolution of more effective social forestry, village forest committees in Orissa, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu & Kashmir.

## Village Forest Protection Committees in West Bengal

An innovative approach for dealing with the problem of progressively degrading natural forests was started on an experimental basis in the village of Arabari in Midnapore district in 1972. This approach involved eliciting the help of local villages in the protection of coppicing sal forests through the formation of forest protection committees (FPC) in return for free usufruct of all non-wood forest products (NWFP), first preference for employment, and promise of a 25 per cent share in the net cash benefits from sale of short rotation sal poles.

Based on the initial success of Arabari, this FPC approach gradually spread to neighbouring areas in the districts of Midnapore, Purulia, and Bankura and received increasing support from the Forest Department and NGOs. The number of FPCs in various stages of formation has grown exponentially in the last two years to a total of 1,726 FPCs covering over 237,000ha in the degraded sal forest zone of southwest West Bengal. These FPCs cover 55 per cent of the total forest area in the zone and include a total membership of 179,000 families. State Government Orders have provided administrative legitimacy to the benefit-sharing arrangements and specified norms of committee membership and registration (so far 863 FPCs are officially recognised). With support from the Ford Foundation, two regional NGOs, the Indian Institute of Biosocial Research and Development (IBRAD) and the Rama Krishna Mission (RKM), have worked with the Forest Department to conduct studies, develop staff training, and institute microplanning procedures.

In addition to further improving the relationship between forestry staff and local people, the FPC partnerships have proved extremely effective in increasing sal forest regeneration and economic returns to both the FPC participants and the government. The increased availability of non-timber forest products, which are harvested annually by FPC members has provided a strong motivation for increased local protection of growing trees. While the degree of this protection varies by FPC, the amount of sal poles now becoming available for final harvest has increased substantially. Even after deducting the FPC's 25 per cent share, it is evident that the financial returns to the Forest Department represent a net increase over previously declining yields. Furthermore, increased canopy closure provides increased soil protection; however, extensive soil erosion and poor moisture conservation remains a major problem.

## **Observations Based on Sukhomajri**

A State of poverty, induced by years of drought and changing weather patterns, has resulted in denudation and soil erosion in the Siwalik hills of Haryana. The experience of Sukhomajri, a 'model' approach to managing common property resources in the catchment area above Chandigarh, however, has shown how people's participation can be used to achieve forest preservation with the support of all villagers. Gupta observed that people require visible benefits to engender their participation and repeatedly commented that the bureaucracy must be tackled to obtain top-level support in addition to that of the grassroots' level. This, he noted, is more difficult to achieve. All parties involved must be aware of their rights and responsibilities related to forest conservation. The Joint Forest Management approach is for the economic benefit of the people.

**-- J. R. Gupta, Hattiban**

"Joint forest management is an evolving concept, still in its early stages. At its core is the recognition that forest-dependent communities cannot be excluded from the care and control of the forests that surround them, regardless of the fact that legal ownership may rest with the government.... "[JFM] is an admission that old custodial protection systems have been generally unsuccessful in protecting the forest. It is an attempt to forge a partnership based on evolving joint management objectives in which communities share both responsibilities and proceeds.' As Poffenberger and Chhattapati Singh state: 'joint forest management represents a process of decentralised empowerment, benefiting some of India's most disadvantaged groups.' Each State forest department and local forest protection committee is approaching the experiment in different ways. There are, however, a number of common elements which, together, form a loose pattern linking policy, training, field implementation, and research.

At the forest department level these elements include: State orders and regulations, State working groups, training programmes, forest protection committee registration procedures, management planning, monitoring and assisting committees, sharing of benefits, and research into ecological and economic issues. NGO groups are taking an active role in documentation, training, research, and community-level organisation and facilitation."

**-- Jeffrey Y. Campbell, Joint Forest Management in India: Regenerating and Managing Degraded Natural Forests in Partnership with Local Communities. Ford Foundation, 1992.**

With support from the Ford Foundation, State Working Groups have been formed in a number of States to bring together government forestry officials and NGOs that are active in training and research to develop a coordinated approach to JFM in India. In addition, bilateral and multilateral donors such as SIDA, the World Bank, GTZ, USAID, and CIDA have been providing support to the pioneering efforts of Indian foresters and social scientists. These received a strong impetus from the Government of India in the form of a GOI Resolution of June 1, 1990, strongly endorsing JFM on Reserve and Protected Forests despite lingering contradictions to earlier forestry legislation. It has been estimated that almost half of India's 75 million hectares of forest land could be managed through JFM (Campbell, Jansen, & Molnar, *Institutional and Environmental Considerations for Forest and Wasteland Development*, World Bank Background Paper, 1992). Approximately 550,000 hectares, or 1.5 per cent of the potential area, can currently be considered to be under officially sanctioned JFM -- a figure which signals both the challenge and the constraints.

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## **Community Forestry in Nepal**

"Community and Private Forestry is at present the most important aspect of forestry development in Nepal. It is supported, directly or indirectly, by the entire forest administration. Within this Programme those who control land use in reality, the local communities and farmers, are given real and legal powers to implement good and sustainable land use. In often inaccessible terrain there is no other way. People, not government administration, must take the responsibility for forest management".

**-- I.S. Thapa, The Community and Private Forestry Programme in Nepal, Foreword, Kathmandu, Nepal; Community Forestry Development Division, Department of Forests, 1991.**

Community forestry in Nepal was introduced in 1977/78 with radical legislation, permitting the transfer of management authority of government forests to local *panchayats*. Based on the pioneering efforts of Nepalese forest officers and local people in selected areas -- particularly the Sindhupalchok district supported by the Nepal-Australia Forestry Programme -- widespread programmes were launched over the breadth of Nepal with support from the World Bank, UNDP/FAO, bilateral donors (USAID, SATA/GTZ, ODA, and CIDA), and NGOs.

While these programmes initially concentrated on establishing nurseries and community plantations on government forest land, attention increasingly focussed on the management of existing community-used government forests (then called *Panchayat Protected Forests*), where legislation provided for the *panchayats* to retain 75 per cent of the forest product income. Experience showed that these existing forests provided the most cost-effective means for regenerating forests, if appropriate community management could be established. This conclusion was reinforced by an increasing body of social science research which demonstrated the widespread existence of indigenous systems of traditional forest management that continued to be developed by enterprising villages to protect their forest resources.

As a consequence of these realisations, Nepal took further steps of introducing legislation which provided for 100 per cent of the benefits from community forests, managed under an approved operational plan, to go to the community. Furthermore, the new legislation defined the community as the existing User Group rather than the *Panchayat* as whole. Thus, from a programme that was based on Government-*Panchayat* joint management, Nepal moved to a radically community-based programme with no revenue sharing.

Potentially, almost half of Nepal's existing forests (or 1.8 million hectares) is available for establishing community forests, with a similar amount available for community forest plantations. To date, approximately 100,000 hectares, or four per cent of the potential area, has been established as community forests -- a figure which causes concern to programme advocates, but which nevertheless demonstrates a measure of success.

While Nepal's radical approach to providing 100 per cent of the benefits continues to receive strong government support in the hills (Himalayan region), its appropriateness in the plains (*terai*) -- where large tracts of contiguous high-value forest remain -- is still under debate.

### **Lessons Learned from the Nepalese Context**

(1) Handing over 100 per cent of all forest products to the user group in Nepalese community forestry - GREAT!

(2) Decreasing dependency on the Government by phasing out project financing for watchers

(3) Good research on indigenous forest systems in Nepal -- lacking in India -- may be due to less input from anthropologists

(4) Need for insurance for trees and forestry as exists in India

(5) Concept of User Group (not revenue group, village group, etc) and operational plan worth following

(6) Similarity of approaches between NGOs in both countries

(7) Low focus on gender issues in Nepal

**-- Apoorva Oza (Indian Participant)**

## **Community Forestry in the Hills and Terai of Nepal**

A reasonably good and practical policy for community forestry has been established for the hills and mountains of Nepal. While the policy is still in the process of ongoing development, currently it is being successfully implemented in the field.

In the *terai*, however, the community forestry policy is not yet well defined despite attempts to follow the same policy throughout the country. Such a standardised policy is not feasible given the major differences between the situation in the *terai* and the hills.

As defined by current policies and practices, the main processes of community forestry are:

- to hand over accessible forests to the communities,
- to empower user groups,
- to implement development and utilisation works through approved operational plans, and
- to provide 100 per cent of the products and income to the user groups.

In the *terai*, this process does not work as well as in the hills, mainly because the forests of the *terai* are productive and market-oriented, villagers have settled around the forest areas fairly recently, and the foresters are reluctant to hand over these productive forests. Despite the failures in maintaining the *terai* forests as national forests, foresters prefer to manage these resources to meet national needs.

The experiences of Indian foresters suggest that some of the approaches developed there can be used in Nepal's *terai* forests with some adaptations. These could include the following components.

(1) Sharing the output of *terai* community forests between user groups and the Government on a 50:50 or 75:25 basis (in contrast to the hills where 100% goes to the users).

(2) Sharing the financial input provided by the Government between individuals and the group as a whole, e.g., if the labour cost is Rs 50, the market cost is only Rs 30, and the remaining Rs 20 could be divided so that 50 per cent goes to individual users and 50 per cent to the joint fund.

(3) Cash income could also be distributed to individual users, as in West Bengal.

(4) There must be sales' taxes, income taxes, and excise duties on the products, both finished and semi-finished.

(5) A certain percentage of the products could be kept for urban needs, as directed by the DFO, e.g., 25 per cent of harvested timber.

(6) *Terai* forestry should be supported by supplying small-scale industry, equivalent to cooperative societies, in such activities as buying tractors, building extraction roads, seasoning plants, etc.

(7) Local NGOs (e.g., clubs, small farmer credit groups, womens' organisations, etc) could be involved in extension and implementation work.