

Who is the Community? Deciding on the Level and Group for Community Forestry

As India moved towards a decentralised *Panchayati Raj*, many people felt that forest protection and management must go through the local *panchayat(s)*, as the lowest elected body representing the people. This led to the concept of the revenue village as a functional management unit. However, many field-level activists, villagers, and field foresters insisted that community forest management be undertaken at the lowest possible level by those actually using the resource most intensively. In most cases, this is at a sub-*Panchayat* level and, often, at a sub-village level in cases where villages consist of several hamlets (Sewa Mandir 1994). Learning from the Nepal experience could be instructive for the joint forest management programme in this regard.

When these new approaches to community forestry were introduced in Nepal, many mistakes were made concerning the level at which management should be controlled. Initially, the *panchayat* was considered the appropriate organisational unit. However, since most of the forest patches were controlled by units operating at a lower level than that of the *panchayat* and were formed long before the introduction of the *panchayat* system, the *panchayat(s)* were unable to function as appropriate management units for community forestry. Consensus regarding management practices, distribution of benefits, and ownership of forests could not be reached at the *panchayat* level.

The question of who were the users of the forest had not been clearly articulated at this stage, although it was recognised that, generally, it was the women and poorer people who depended most on forest products for use and sale. However, their participation in decision-making about new management regimes was marginal, and, therefore, the impact on their collection patterns was not considered. After attempts to establish management committees (dominated by male leaders) at the village-level failed, the assumptions underlying the 'community' were reexamined. These assumptions included the following.

- The 'local community', i.e., a group of people with clear social boundaries, was capable of acting together cohesively.
- The local community and the local forest users were one and the same.
- Forest users would come to a public forest management meeting.
- The people attending a meeting about forest management would speak openly and honestly at the meeting.

- Village forest committees, formed at the first meeting, to discuss forest use and management, would be representative of all forest users and would be able to determine and understand their duties, authority, and responsibilities.