

# Working Towards Environmental Justice

An Indigenous Fishing Minority's Movement  
in Chitwan National Park, Nepal



Sudeep Jana  
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# **Working Towards Environmental Justice**

**An Indigenous Fishing Minority's Movement in  
Chitwan National Park, Nepal**

**Sudeep Jana**

**International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)**

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# Preface

For many indigenous peoples in the Himalayan region, access to natural resources is an integral component of daily existence. At the same time, nature conservation policies being implemented over the last decades have created conflicts of interest between the preservation of biodiversity and local people's aspirations to secure their livelihoods. Retaining access to environmental resources, and obtaining environmental justice where there are conflicting interests, is a crucial feature of people's existence throughout the region.

ICIMOD recognises inclusive and participatory management of common property resources as a precondition for sustainable development. Especially for indigenous and marginalised people in rural areas who depend on the natural resources to secure their livelihoods, loss of access to resources can have dire consequences for economic and social security. In this context, ICIMOD, supported by the Ford Foundation, implemented a project on 'Advancing Minority Rights to Environmental Justice in the Hindu-Kush Himalayas'. The present publication summarises the findings of one of the case studies prepared under the project, and provides an example of a people's movement helping to secure a measure of environmental justice. It looks at the problems faced by fishing communities living in and around Chitwan National Park in the Terai region of Nepal from a social activist's perspective.

Chitwan National Park was established in 1973 after having been a popular hunting ground among Nepal's royalty and British colonialists for over a century. Since then, it has become a prominent example of successful biodiversity protection and tourism development, renowned for its rare animal species such as the tiger and the one-horned rhino. But this picture has another side, that of the indigenous people who historically have used the forest and river resources to supply their daily needs. Indigenous fishing communities known as Botes, Majhis, and Musahars, marginalised groups in Nepal, live along the rivers in and close to the Park. Many are landless and their livelihoods have traditionally depended on fishing and ferrying on the river. In response to measures taken by the park management and to increasing marginalisation, these indigenous groups formed a grassroots movement to claim their rights for more democratic procedures in local decision-making. This publication describes the struggles of the Majhi Musahar Bote Kalyan Sewa Samiti (MMBKSS) and analyses the organisation's successes and failures.

We hope that this book will help to further understanding of the livelihood problems faced by indigenous groups and the difficulties they face in obtaining environmental justice. It will be of interest to all those concerned with integrating the concerns of local people in conservation approaches, as well as the overall situation of indigenous peoples.

Michael Kollmair  
Programme Manager, CEGG

# Acknowledgements

This study captures the history and trajectory of a local struggle by indigenous fishing communities residing on the fringes of Chitwan National Park facing the impact of protected areas policies in Nepal. It is their predicament, suffering, resistance, and resilience that triggered and sustained their movement. The study is dedicated to activists and leaders of Majhi Musahar and Bote Kalyan Sewa Samiti (MMBKSS) – the organisation of indigenous fishing communities that led the movement. Amar Bahadur Majhi, a bold and committed leader, deserves special gratitude. I am thankful to Hom Bahadur Musahar, Sukmaya, and Madhumaya Bote, Khor Bahadur Majhi, and the fishing communities in general from Piprahar, Shergunj, and Laugain villages.

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There was no comprehensive documentation of the movement prior to this initiative. Somat Ghimire, coordinator of Community Development Organization (CDO) – one of the chief allies during the movement – supported the study with valuable information, reflections, and insights. I thank him for his advisory role throughout. Krishna Giri, Chitwan-based journalist contributed during the primary information collection. Most importantly I extend my gratitude to Bela Malik who edited the first draft report, probably her last work before falling into a coma.

Sudeep Jana

# Summary

The book is an outcome of a case study that inquires into and traces the history and trajectory of the struggles of the Bote-Majhi-Musahars – marginalised indigenous fishing communities residing along the periphery of Chitwan National Park in south-central Nepal. These communities depend on natural resources for their livelihoods, and have been facing serious restrictions for more than four decades as a result of biodiversity conservation measures introduced in the name of protected area management. Their concerns have never been seriously considered in the development of plans for conservation management nor has their struggle for environmental justice been the focus of research. This initiative is an attempt to present the predicaments, aspirations, and knowledge of these marginalised indigenous peoples and traces the origins of the success of their struggles, as well as the problems faced in sustaining the movement.

The book begins with a brief history of Chitwan National Park (CNP), the first protected area in Nepal, followed by a section that demystifies the ecological crisis and challenges popular stereotypes and myths constructed around the fishing communities. It locates the local ecology, traditional knowledge, and traditional livelihoods of the Bote-Majhi-Musahars as indigenous ethnicities. Against this backdrop, a section puts into context the erosion of the traditional livelihoods and rights of these communities, and portrays the costs and vulnerabilities in the light of conservation policies and the militarisation of CNP.

The main sections of the book sketch out the struggles, sufferings, resistance, and triggering incidents that gave birth to the Majhi Musahar Bote Kalyan Sewa Samiti (MMBKSS), the organisation established by the fishing communities. The next sections trace the entire experience in which local resistance is transformed into a movement. It discusses the achievements and political impacts of the movement as translated into their daily lives. A section critically inquires into the implications of foreign funding to the community in general, and their organisation in particular. This is followed by impressions on how the spontaneous vibrant movement staggers and withers. Finally, the book explores contemporary conflicts with the conservation authorities, synthesises the experiences of the local movement, and discusses issues related to the democratisation of protected area management and governance in Nepal.

# Acronyms and Abbreviations

BZUC	buffer zone user committee
BZUCFUG	buffer zone user committee forest user group
CDO	Community Development Organization (NGO)
CFUG	community forest user group
CNP	Chitwan National Park
DDC	district development committee
DNPWC	Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation
FUG	forest user group
IUCN	The World Conservation Union
MMBKSS	Majhi Musahar Bote Kalyan Sewa Samiti (Majhi Musahar Bote Welfare and Service Committee)
MP	member of parliament
NGO	non-government organisation
NPWC	National Parks and Wildlife Conservation
NTFP	non-timber forest product
PPP	Parks and People Programme
RCNP	Royal Chitwan National Park
RNA	Royal Nepal Army
SWC	Social Welfare Council
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VDC	village development committee

## **Note:**

1 acre = 4,068 sq.m

In 2006, NRs 73 = US\$ 1 approx.

# Glossary

adar	the practice of grazing cattle inside the forest
Bagheysari	tiger god
banihari	the practice by landlords of engaging agricultural labourers for snacks instead of a fair wage (also called bhagad)
Barna Garney	locally observed day on which the natural world is given rest
bhagad	the practice by landlords of engaging agricultural labourers for snacks instead of a fair wage (also called banihari)
Bhairu	forest god
bida	knife handle
bigha	a measure of land equal to five-eighths of an acre
chapadi	a small hut located next to the river
chauhadi darkhasta	application
chautariya	local leaders of indigenous fishing communities (also called mukhiya)
chital	deer
dhadiya	traditional hand made basket used to collect the fish catch
doko	traditional hand made basket for carrying loads
Gainda Kunja	rhino sanctuary
gaur	a large species of ox
ghat	ferry point
ghatwarey	ferryman
gherao	a siege or strategy of collective action
gyapan patra	an appeal
Jal Devi	water goddess
jal kapur	a local variety of fish
Janajati	indigenous people in Nepal
jharang dhan	a bunch of black paddy
kattha	1/20 of a bigha of land
khadai	a variety of thatch grass
khar	a variety of thatch grass
khurpa	a carving knife
kraits	a species of snake
malik	local landlord or land-holding elite
mriga kunja	deer sanctuary
mukhiya	local leaders of indigenous fishing communities (also called chautariya)
namlo	traditional rope used to carry a doko
pathi uthauney	the traditional practice of ferrymen collecting food from villagers
prashasan	administration, national park officials
sahar	a local variety of fish
sal	tree species <i>Shorea robusta</i>
than	sacred spaces in the forest
thulo jaal	a large net with a small weave