

Chapter One

Introduction

Indigenous people are often dependent on natural resources for their livelihood. In many parts of the world, their lives have been affected by wildlife preservation (conservation) policies and, more recently, by the fashionable concept of biodiversity conservation. New policies are predominantly generated at the global level and then transformed into national policy. The concerns of indigenous people are not given priority, and indigenous people are not adequately represented in the policy making and implementation processes that affect their daily lives. Instead they tend to be the 'subject' of interventions made by the state and foreign funding agencies.

New policies are quite often the outcome of discourses that attract public attention. One of the discourses that is of much concern in South Asia is poaching of the Asiatic one-horned rhinoceros. The alarming decline in the number of one-horned rhinos has been well covered by mainstream media, creating a sense of urgency about the prevention of poaching. But amidst the concern for rare wildlife species, the miseries and struggles of indigenous communities living in the same areas have been overlooked. In comparison to the prominence of national-level struggles (such as the Maoist movement and the 19-day people's uprising for democracy in April 2006) in the national and international media, the everyday struggles and historic movements of local people have been neglected. In a similar vein, mainstream research tends to under-represent the agency of marginalised and historically oppressed communities.

Chitwan National Park (CNP) in southern Nepal illustrates the divergence between conservation policy and the needs of indigenous people. Ill-conceived policy prescriptions emanating from internationally dominant discourses have neither helped to preserve wildlife and biodiversity in CNP, nor to secure the democratic participation of the people most dependent on park resources in the decisions that shape their lives. This study seeks to investigate the relationship between biodiversity conservation policy formulation and the livelihoods of the indigenous people who are affected by such policies. The study finds that concepts such as wildlife conservation and biodiversity preservation are of marginal importance to the indigenous populations that depend upon national park resources. As CNP remains under the control of the forest bureaucracy, the Palace, and the Nepal Army, local people are not sufficiently engaged in guarding the biodiversity of the resources that they depend upon. Protected area management has not been democratised, despite generous foreign aid towards this end.

Located within this broader framework, the study focuses on the history and trajectory of the local movements of three indigenous fishing communities dependent on the riverine tracts: the Bote, the Majhi and the Musahar. Both inhabit the CNP buffer zone, Nawalparasi district in south central Nepal (Figure 1). After giving an overview of the

basic problems that these indigenous people face due to conservation policies, the study describes the emergence of a grassroots movement.

The findings of this study are predominantly based on oral information and the analysis of documents and reports. Research methods include participant observation, interviews with key informants, formal and informal interactions, and community dialogue. After a short overview, the study looks at the development of an organisation (MMBKSS) out of this movement and describes the activities, strategies, and achievements of the organisation, as well as its difficulties, conflicts, and interactions with other actors. In this way the study aims to contribute to the analysis of the livelihood struggles of marginalised groups around protected areas in Nepal and generate insights in relation to the democratisation of protected area management. It was action by the indigenous people studied that resulted in an enlargement of the political and social space for them to secure their rights and which gave them the confidence to claim the rights that already existed.

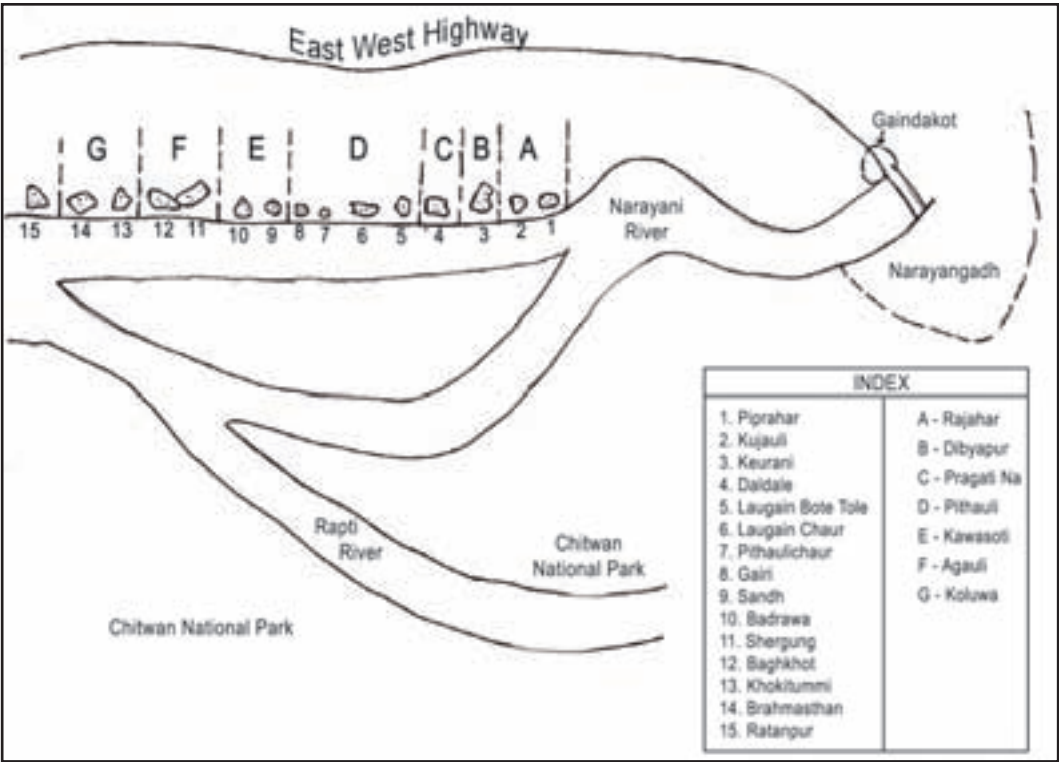


Figure 1: Social map showing the location of settlements of indigenous fishing communities, the River Narayani, and Chitwan National Park

Source: Created by Bote-Majhi and Musahars of Nawalparasi district