

Chapter Eight

The Tide Ebbs

One of the major lessons learned by MMBKSS during its cooperation with foreign funding agencies was that conservation policy and practice has to be made more accountable and democratic. Without this, there can be no empowerment of marginalised social groups who depend on natural resources. MMBKSS and CDO reiterated that campaigns have to extend beyond the locality and should address conflict between nature conservation and people in other locales as well. This might eventually lead to a questioning of the entire conservation policy and its institutional arrangement. The project was finally terminated by the local partners.

While foreign funding was abandoned, internal struggles and dynamics contributed to a decline in activism by the movement.

Internal Dynamics

Organisational work began with the involvement of the Majhi community. However, gradually, as the organisation began to gain strength and expand its ambit of mobilisation, the need to include Bote and Musahar activists became clear. After all, Bote and Musahar also depend upon the rivers, land, and forest and were equally at the receiving end of Park rules and regulations. Bote and Musahar were victims of the same historical process that marginalised the original inhabitants of the land.

One notable event propelled the much-needed unity. Park authorities confiscated boats from Daldaley and members of the Bote community were unsuccessful in reclaiming their boats. After this, for one year Bote community members were in a state of retreat and stopped fishing in the river. Many took up other occupations that are less natural-resource depended. When they joined force with the Majhi activists, the collective pressure led to the boats being returned.

Bote and Majhi tended to look down upon the Musahars as lower in the social hierarchy of the marginalised. Musahars were formerly treated as 'untouchable.' Jit Bahadur Majhi and Amar Bahadur Majhi competed for leadership. It was believed that Jit Bahadur gave priority to Musahars and excluded Bote and Majhi. Under Jit Bahadur's presidency, the organisation (MMBKSS) received external funding of NRs 60,000 as seed money for income generating activities (shops, raising pigs, etc.). Amar Bahadur had contributed NRs 14,000 as a loan to the organisation. This amount was never recovered. Jit Bahadur got into a scrap with Hom Bahadur's father over political differences. This conflict was aggravated when Hom Bahadur's father raised objections over the issue of travel allowances being given to participants in a workshop organised by MMBKSS. Hom Bahadur also did not approve of the MMBKSS not extending financial support during the land occupation campaign in Dhakaha. Jit Bahadur was

accused of corruption. He could not dispute the charge and this led to the credibility of the organisation being affected. His whereabouts are not known. This was the context in which the organisation came into contact with Sahamati. Sahamati was concerned over reports of inner conflict and charges of misappropriation. Internally, this led to MMBKSS accepting Sahamati's control over its financial affairs. Slowly there was a movement of activists towards Sahamati. This trend continued until the project expired and the members returned to MMBKSS.

Some MMBKSS Activists Become Inactive

Hari Bahadur Majhi, Ram Lakhan, Suklal, Raj Kumar, Bikram, Buddhi Ram, Suk Ram, and Sam Fuliya, some of the most dedicated activists, have left MMBKSS over the years. Suspicion of corruption within the organisation was a contributing factor. CDO realised that income-generating schemes, such as the ones it had initiated, were breeding grounds for transparency issues. CDO distributed money to fishing people to buy pigs as part of a poverty alleviation project. Some of the pigs died and losses were incurred. Hari Bahadur Majhi found more use for an ox and proceeded to use his money for that. This unilateral decision gave rise to internal conflict. Internal tensions dissuaded some activists. Another source of ill-feeling was the derogation reserved for members who became Christians.

Women activists complained that their involvement affected their family relations causing some to become inactive. Others, however, had different reasons. Some older members left to make way for younger leaders, or because they felt that they were unable to contribute as much as they would like. Some were disillusioned with the lack of progress in the improvement of their livelihoods. Some campaigns took immense energy and dedication and involved spending time away from other resource-seeking activities, but did not necessarily result in any substantial change (such as the Laukhani land occupation). In some cases, there was disappointment over the lack of support given by MMBKSS, for example, as alleged by Hom Bahadur in Dhakaha.

Withering of a Vibrant Movement

Internal discord and the ebb of enthusiasm among key leaders led to a decline in the vibrancy of the movement. The entry of foreign funds played a particular role. Earlier, there was a sense of a united struggle. Mobilising local resources for struggles played a role in maintaining the movement's vitality, although this also contributed to internal conflict.

Donors require regular reports and fund activities only within certain boundaries. This put organisational constraints on the movement. A foreign-funded project meant that some activists were paid, while others were not, which contributed to further internal misunderstandings. CDO went ahead and took the campaign beyond Nawalparasi district. It could not, however, commit constant and immediate support to MMBKSS. Other NGO partners, some of which were inexperienced, started to cooperate with MMBKSS. As a result, MMBKSS forced itself into the frame set by the donors.

Meanwhile, younger Bote-Majhi and Musahar people, equipped with formal education and more exposed to the world, began to question the very purpose of the MMBKSS,

which struggled to retain livelihood security from a traditional point of view. The younger people are more attracted to 'modern' sources of sustenance, which are less arduous, require a different skill set, and are more remunerative. CDO's physical presence in Nawalparasi has decreased over the past few years, although MMBKSS now and then still seeks their thematic and strategic support in campaigns. CDO is now focusing its campaign on Chitwan and protected areas in other parts of the Terai. Now, MMBKSS is launching its campaigns with two other Nawalparasi-based NGOs, Sahamati and the Vijay Development Resource Centre. MMBKSS still receives funding from Action Aid, Nepal. Serious concerns are being raised in the consortium of NGOs that includes MMBKSS and CDO about the need to enhance the synergy of all such organisations towards a collective campaign. So far, this has not yielded any satisfactory collective actions. Several NGOs are working in the one constituency for the cause of the Bote-Majhi and Musahar people. Ideas of alternative livelihoods for fishing communities are debated in the consortium. The potential danger of marginalising discourses about traditional livelihoods and the usufruct rights of indigenous fishing communities to rivers and forests have also been raised.