

## Management of Terai Forest

### Depleting forests, silent spectators: who should manage Nepal's Terai forest?

Dr Jagadish C. Baral

Western Forest Directorate Pokhara Email: jbaral@wlink.com.np

#### Abstract

*The paper, based on observations drawn from Siraha district, highlights some of the complexities involved in the management and use of Terai forests. It is argued that while the Terai forest needs a decentralized management approach, it requires a participatory approach different from the hill model, which tends to focus on people living in the proximity of the forest. The paper argues that it is critical to embrace multitudes a/stakeholders extending up to miles away to the south of the Terai despite the complexities involved in the intervention.*

*Key words: community forest, stakeholder, sustainability, equity*

#### THE CONTEXT

Forests in the Terai are receding at an alarming rate of 1.3 per cent (HMG, 1999) and that this reality has been a matter of concern to the foresters and the non-foresters alike. The government's concerns are reflected in the Forest Act, 1993, which aims to manage forests under various regimes namely community, government, leasehold, religious and protection forests. Government recognizes the roles of various institutions to manage these forests under various management regimes. For example, government till now has handed over nearly 15% of the forestland to communities. The recent decision of the government (HMG, 1999) reflects its intention to translate the provision of the Forest Act (1993) into practice by categorizing Chure as 'protection forest'. Drawing from the experience of the Siraha district, the paper focuses more on the institutional arrangement required for the protection and management of forests of Churia and Terai region.

Siraha is one of the Terai districts in the eastern Nepal. The area is 1,118 sq. km, and has been settled by over 572,000 people. Population growth rate is as high as 2.17 per cent. The district comprises of three sub-physiographic regions along the North-South axis, namely: Churia hills, Bhabar foothills and the Terai plains. The East-West Highway of the country transects the district from east to west, which roughly demarcates Bhabar from the Terai. The forests in the Terai plains disappeared long time ago, which can now be seen as agricultural land or the settlements. All that remains as forest is essentially a narrow tract of Chure in the north, whose average width is around 5 km. This too is disappearing very rapidly. The forest with over 10 per cent crown cover in 1978 was 28,075 ha., which by 1992 had dwindled to 14,108 ha. (AGEG 1996). Whatever forest remains now are mostly shrubs and the trees of relatively unwanted shape, forms and types. Scattered households have settled inside the forest, majority of whom are relatively new migrants and are considered as "forest encroachers" in the legal sense. The existing forest continues to serve a large number of people ranging from the new settlers residing into the forest in the north, to dense indigenous communities as far as the Indian border in the south.

## **PAST ATTEMPTS AND THE CURRENT ISSUES**

Some donor funded projects attempted to manage the Terai forests with different approaches. The World Bank funded community forestry project, for example, was commissioned about a decade ago, which basically carried out plantations in whatever areas available and named them as community forests. The project basically failed to try finding an alternative way towards sustainable forestry.

GTZ funded Churia Forestry Development Project and CARE Nepal are currently involved in promoting community forestry in some Terai districts of the east and the west respectively. Apparently both of these projects concentrated on degraded forest patches near dense settlements, and so far, have not given much thought about conserving the larger tracts of forests in the Terai. I am critical of the activities that have been carried out so far and would say that the initiatives have not adequately addressed the fundamental issues regarding the 'control' or the 'tenure' of the resources as well as appropriate institutional development. I would argue that the logical way to be able to hit at the problem would be to ask more fundamental questions regarding the tenure, the way we have asked it in the hills. *'Who should control the forest?'* Was the critical question we have constantly posed in the hills and have succeeded in getting an appropriate answer (see for example, Gilmour and Fisher, 1991 about basic concepts of community forestry in the Hills). But unfortunately, we have largely failed to ask such questions in the Terai and no wonder the answers are far from being received to date.

For the last few years, the Department of Forests has made some attempts to manage Terai forests in a scientific manner through the technically prepared Operational Forest Management Plans (OFMPs), but without success. The implementation of the plan was handicapped both by the financial constraints and non-financial matters. Some Non Government Organizations raised the issue that implementation of such plans would jeopardize livelihood system of the local population. Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN) and some other NGOs activated the people living in and around the Terai forests. Their intention was to discourage the government's move to implement the OFMP and, instead, build up local pressure to get the resource handed over as community forests.

Despite such expressed concerns from different segments, neither the government nor the non-government sectors have been able to make any strategic move towards managing the Terai forests. All that the government has been able to do so far is essentially to continue the traditional practice of forest patrolling without doing any critique on whether it would work. Similarly, what the NGOs are doing to date is basically to show their concerns about implications of OFMP implementation in the livelihood of the local people without paying much attention about the broader implications of leaving the forests unmanaged. I would say that neither approach could save the fast receding forest resources of Terai.

## **FOREST-LIVELIHOODS LINKAGES**

Multiple uses of forest resources by various groups of local people should be understood in the context of local social structure and systems of livelihoods. Rapidly increasing population in the Terai has little opportunities for employment and income besides the subsistence farming in the fast degrading soils. This is why a large mass of rural people, particularly the poor, find little alternatives to relying on the forest lands in chure for their livelihoods. The following case (see box 1) provides an example of how the poor get victimized in forest related 'crimes', thus questioning the current government approach to forest protection from the livelihood perspective.

***Box 1 The forest offence: the poorest are the victims***

The following is a sad story of Hem Bahadur. It is noteworthy and may be applicable to many of timber transporters. A 15-year-old boy named Hem Bahadur Biswakarma (Socially an untouchable caste, which is basically blacksmith) was caught by the patrolling team from the DFO near Lahan Bazaar. He was carrying a sawn timber to the bazaar (size 3" X 5" X 12") from his village in Bhasuwa (settlement inside Churia). Hem Bahadur's father had a second marriage and migrated elsewhere after the marriage. All those are left in the family now are himself, his sick mother and a small infant sister. These circumstances have forced the boy to take the responsibility of a guardian in the family.

In one occasion the family had bought a kilo of meat worth Rs. 50 from a man called Asha Rai on credit. After some months Asha asked to return the money but the boy had no money to pay. However, Asha would not reconsider. He pressed the boy to accompany him with the piece of the referred timber to Lahan for which he would receive a sum of Rs. 100/-. The boy had no alternative but to accept Asha's proposal. He thought that out of the total money earned, he would be able to clear the dues and buy some salt and spices as well.

But bad luck! The patrolling team from the DFO encountered the boy with other three. Apparently the three others were clever and managed to escape because they had an experience of this kind of illegal activities before. These guys managed to escape by throwing the timber they were carrying and the boy was the only one to be caught and to be interrogated. The timber that was left behind by the escapee had no attendant and the patrolling team found it convenient to charge the boy of some of those as well. Circumstances thus made the poor boy a real escape goat who had to take burden not only of the timber he was carrying, but of all those that the patrolling staff had decided to stack upon him. The poor boy thus was brought to the DFO for further interrogation. He looked desperate particularly because he thought that some millet flour the family had before he left home might have run out and his sick mother and the small sister might have nothing to eat.

Such are often the situations where the patrolling staff may find ways for manipulation. Unofficial transaction may result into filling a small case involving few hundred rupees and a failure to do so might imply a bigger case with higher fine or even imprisonment. The poor people often decide to spend money in an unofficial manner hoping to keep the petition at a lower level. Such money might go to some of the village leaders, who tend to act as rescuers and to the government solicitors, who needs to give consent on whether or not the official case may be filed and if so for how much, and to the forest staff, who actually file the case. This however is not to suggest that this is always the case. There are of course exceptions involving more transparent behavior. Nevertheless, there are hundreds of cases such as this in which the poorest are the victims of the forest offences like this. Terai forests are to be managed to address the issue of forest destruction and the livelihoods issues of people like hem Bahadur.

## ECOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF FOREST DEGRADATION

Chure is the ground water recharge zone for whole of the Terai. Besides, several rivers that flow in this vitally important agricultural belt of the country, originate from Chure. Conservation of Chure leads to more secure agriculture and its destruction, on the contrary, brings deleterious results. Unlike in the midhills where ecological destruction may be visible even in the immediate vicinity (such as landslides on the hill top affecting the settlement or agricultural fields immediately below), deforestation in the Churia have far reaching effects in the downstream Terai than in the Churia itself (see box 2). These effects are seen usually in the form of lack of water for irrigation and drinking and devastation of extensive areas by way of riverbank cutting, siltation and flooding. It can thus be easily realized that conservation or destruction of Chure has important bearings in the lives of tens of thousands people in the Terai.

### ***Box 2 A case of Sarre-Dome: A danger that could wash the settlements away***

Forest degradation in Chure has affected the lives of many, through decreased availability of forest products, through loss of agricultural productivity and through incidences of natural calamities. It may however be pointed out that such developments did not occur over night and the local people might have felt the resulting shock slowly rather than abruptly and quickly so as to be a matter of panic to any large extent.

Unlike the case of the 'slow poison' mentioned above, the case of Sarre-Dome (the two rivers) possible union is more like a fatal case affecting the lives of thousands of people. Sarre Khola in Visnupur VDC used to be a small perennial stream spanning less than 50 meters until around three decades ago. Over the years its span has increased and the bed level of the stream has been rising constantly. At this moment, in some places, the river span has widened nearly to a kilometer and the riverbed looks more and more convex whose level in some places elevate higher than the paddy fields on either sides. Only the man-made dykes safeguard the fields from the river, which can become very dangerous particularly during monsoon when the river gets a flood.

The people have lately started to feel the potential danger. They now fear that the increasing span of sarre is aggressively leading to a point where the entire river might flow into small seasonal rivulet called Dome that lies next to it. If this happens, the consequence could be a real nightmare. Important sections of as many as 10 village development committees could be washed away and the corresponding section of the East-West highway too will be washed away in that event.

The local people now have started to be very desperate. They have formed a committee to mitigate the problem and for which they have received a token of support from the central government. While they realize that the ultimate remedy lies on conservation of Chure in the upstream, their current effort limits itself to making a stronger dike so as to prevent Sarre from entering into Dome.

## **EXPLORING APPROPRIATE INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS**

The above observations reveal some of the complexities of forest conservation in Terai. However this is not to present a pessimistic scenario on the conservation of Terai forests. Although the conservation and management of the Terai forest has always been the focus of the government and many other agencies, the appropriate institutional arrangement for the same has remained unexplored. The management issues pertaining to the huge tract of forests in the Terai has remained a subject of theoretical debate. Drawing from these debates, I have tried to summarize the suggested options. The arguments are essentially based upon two criteria viz. sustainability and equity. Here the term 'sustainability' relates to the biological dimension of the forest resource while 'equity' relates to the social justice dimension. I argue that the prime question of 'who should manage the Terai forest?' should be answered based upon the above two criteria.

### **Existing mode of Community Forestry**

Recently small patches of the forest along the east-west highway and north of it have been handed to some FUGs. However, there are a number of problems with this move. Communities who have got the forests handed over to them protect their forests and their needs of the forest products are alternatively met from the mainland Chure forest that adjoins. The institutional mechanism that has been formed to manage the community forests by FUGs neither bother nor is capable to keep people away from unauthorized entry into the mainland Chure. The associated reason for this is that the people entering the forests particularly from the down south tend to travel in larger groups for security reasons. Such groups could even become offensive due to the fact that they, in particular, unlike the people next to the forest who tend to have some alternatives available from community forests, are left with limited alternatives for forest products. The past attempts to check such entries involved violent clashes. Consequently, both the members of the community forests and the people in general enter into the forests with greater intensity than ever before.

### **Greater role of the state**

There prevail arguments which suggest that Terai forest is a valuable resource that could contribute to national economy and thus the state itself needs to control it for the purpose of better national equity. Social 'heterogeneity' is other dimension which, is argued to further complicate the task of engendering the participatory endeavor, thus implying that the DFO should continue the current system of control. Some even go as far as suggesting that the resources need to be entrusted to the Nepalese Army if the valuable forest resource in the Terai is to be saved from disappearing. However, the validity of these arguments may be questioned both on the sustainability as well as the equity ground. Existing unemployment at the local level combined with lack of supply arrangements from the government would put the DFO staff in a position where they are incapable of enforcing effective protection.

Despite the good rhetoric of improving the control mechanism, anyone hardly believes that forest can be protected without the cooperation of the local people- thus difficult to ensure even the sustainability.

### **Extension of existing FUGs or formation of new such groups**

Some suggest that the existing FUGs may be persuaded to extend their areas to the north so that every bit of Chure may go in the hands of one or the other existing FUGs. There are two problems with this idea: first, practical and second, ethical. We are aware that a large number of people, who are placed as far as to the Indian border, have varied degree of dependence on Churia forests.

The FUGs that are located in the forest fringe simply cannot withstand pressure from an enormous number of people from such a large area.

Still others argue the need for forming new FUGs comprising of people residing within the forests, and the rest of the forests should ultimately be handed over to them. However, this is bound to face the similar problems that have just been described. Besides, many of these settlements are morally too weak to perform the job of good custodian of the forest owing to the reason that the concerned settlements are illegal in an official sense. The problem gets compounded when looked at the fact that people from the south have little alternative and they are bound to rely on the Churia forests for fulfilling their day to day needs.

### **Involvement of local stakeholders**

It may thus be apparent that all of the presented options have obvious flaws either from the sustainability or equity ground or the both. We thus have very little options to choose from. Probably the only option we are left with would be to entrust the control to all of the people who depend on Churia forests - 'stakeholders' may be the better term.

It is to be noted that the number of people who have a sense of 'stake' on Churia forests is varied and very big indeed. People inside or near the forests tend to have more direct form of stake for a variety of forest products including fodder, fuel-wood, bamboo, and other non-timber forest products. As one goes down to the Terai, the scale and the nature of expectations change. Further as one goes south, the quantity of forest products used might decrease only to be replaced by the need of service function that the Chure is likely to provide to sustain the farming system. The expectations of the people thus may vary as one makes North-South transact.

It can, however, be said that they deserve the status of the stakeholders and that all of them in totality need to control the resource rather than just a section of them. Both 'practical' and the 'ethical' matters warrant this. Practical matter is associated with an imperative to conserve the forest and that the ethical matter is associated with 'fairness' of resource allocation. A small section of stakeholders may not effectively protect the forest especially in the context that a large number of them who badly lack an alternative are excluded. Even if they can, ethical reason compels us to consider the stakeholders in totality. How can one entrust the resource to a small group of people when majority of the stakeholders are deprived from participating?

When I say 'the local stakeholders need to control the forest', this is not to suggest that the state machinery needs to completely pull out of the scene. The state is equipped with technical manpower to manage the forest, and needs to furnish all that is required for ensuring forest sustainability and equity. However, their role is to be inspired by facilitative principles rather than the controlling one. Likewise, the state certainly requires revenue out of the forest for investing into the sectors ranging from defense to rural development and there needs to be a mechanism, which ensures a fair share between the community and the state.

The task of identifying the arrays of stakeholders, bringing them into a common forum, discussing issues in a democratic way and finally coming to the consensus about devising suitable forest protection system and benefit sharing arrangements is very intriguing task indeed. The process is pretty vague and the appropriate way ahead will unfold only when actual work begins. It requires a philosophy advocated in action research, which is essentially based on 'learning by doing' principles.

In Siraha district, for the last couple of years, there has been an attempt to address this issue amidst a lot of confusions. Raising awareness amongst the stakeholders was the initial point of

entry to gradually move towards making an institutional arrangement within them for control, management and ultimately the benefit sharing, which culminated into an NGO called 'Forests for the Benefit of All Stakeholders (FOBAS)'. FOBAS has now embarked on identifying the stakeholders and mobilizing them in resource conservation and in benefit sharing. It is yet to be seen how the DFO and FOBAS can collaborate to ensure forest management through the involvement of relevant stakeholders.

### **A FINAL REMARK**

The above discussion on the complexities of the issues in the management of Terai forest based on Siraha experience has some important policy implications. First, management of forest resources has special bearing with the socio-cultural dynamism of a society and thus should be compatible with the existing customary use pattern in the specific context. This means that not a single management approach can be universally applied all over the country but that has to be situation specific. Policy environment should provide enough political spaces for dialogue and public debate, which seek to promote context-specific innovative approaches. This can lead to a situation where more and more pilot tests can be carried out in the way it was carried out in Siraha and the lessons can be learned to promote equitable and appropriate institutional arrangements for forest management in the Terai.

It is good to note that some donors like SNV and DFID have recently started supporting forestry in the Terai. The endeavors are known to involve all forest stakeholders in all stages of planning and implementation of forestry development program. Hopefully, more meaningful lessons may be learnt from these initiatives in the future and we might again have a chance to repeat our favorite proverb *Nepal's forests, Nepal's wealth*, if not instantly, at least after some of years of genuine attempts.

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