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Sociological Remarks on
"Community Forestry" in Nepal

Klaus Seeland

PREFACE

Forest policy and environmental policy amalgamate in local politics. The way in which both are accepted by the public opinion and shared in and performed as daily social life has to be referred to as the background for decisions concerning the environment. Whether it will or will not be binding for most of the members of whatever community, will be the result of the process of negotiations over socially legitimate rules of access and use. These negotiations between and within local communities in areas prone to natural calamities, scarcity and administrational neglect cannot be overrated as the foundation to come to terms of locally approved patterns of environmental management. Once this process proceeds, it will unavoidably lead to changes in national forest policies. The scope of nation-wide community forestry schemes will have been overcome in their technical and utilitarian pretensions. Thus the use of forests is a contest in a transitional period of social change and a process to identify a political legitimacy that reflects the prevalent situation of local environments as new socio-political contexts.

Another prominent idea put forward by the author of this paper is the balance of power between central and local authorities and their respective legitimacy at the national and local level. The development of a political margin to enact the broadest possible scope of democratic decision-making is another important step to what a community can be, not only in a utilitarian, but in an ultimate political sense of the term.

The contribution of Dr. Seeland on what is nowdays still widely perceived as community forestry, covers important aspects of forest management all over the world and in developing countries in particular. The constitution of user groups within communities raises questions whether synthetic social institutions that have been either induced or sometimes even imposed on local village communites are prone to social and/or ethnic conflicts. The legitimate access to the use of forest and forest products is disputed wherever generally accepted and paramount power structures cease to exist. Modernization in the remote hills of the Himalayas may thus mean the social and cultural evolution of appropriate codes of conduct to manage one's surroundings on the basis of a new type of mutual consent. To share a common sense on a legitimate use of a common environment across ethnic boundaries and caste barriers with respect to an agreed mode of consumption could be one step forward towards sustainable resource management.

F. Schmithüsen

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades the forests in Nepal have been claimed, with only a few exceptions, to be in a severe crisis. In 1979 a World Bank Report stated that "without large scale afforestation programs, the accessible forests in the Hills will have largely disappeared by 1990 and those in the Terai by the year 2000" (1979:30). Blaikie et al. (1980) saw the remaining forests suffering from overexploitation for fodder and fuel wood leading to massive deforestation particularly of the middle hill region, where about two-thirds of Nepal's forests are located. Among most of the environmental experts the decreasing forest cover was the widely accepted reason for land degradation, soil erosion and the increasing number of landslide calamities. It was assumed that Nepalese soil, being transported by its rivers down to the Gangetic Plains, leads to the siltation of the lowland river beds and was responsible for the aggravation of floods in the Ganges delta (Eckholm 1975). This internationally widespread and popular view was counterbalanced by more detailed research and led to a moderate picture of the environmental situation in the Nepal Himalaya about ten years later (HMG 1983, Mahat et al. 1986, 1987). According to Gilmour & Fisher (1992:32) the findings of the "Land Resource Mapping Project" show a good to fair forest cover across Nepal and "the loss of actual forest land is not yet significant" (HMG & IUCN:51). This was the situation in the mid-eighties. Two other factors, however, are threatening the forests of Nepal in the last decade of the twentieth century. One is the rising local demand for forest products due to the rising population in the middle hill region. The other is the mismanagement and unregulated use of fodder, fuelwood and timber and the unsolved question of a legitimate entitlement to own or use forests and forest products. With these two factors, the question arises, what could be a politically and socially legitimate "user group" or "community" management pattern within the framework of a democratizing and decentralized constitutional monarchy, in which the reigning Hindu king is considered to be an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu by his people and the sole owner of all land. Thus the question of legitimate political representation of enacting power over the use of resources in a multi-ethnic and Hindu - Buddhist caste society arises with respect to the modalities of a common and sustainable use of forests on government land as well as on private land. This contribution investigates, what the social and political conditions are under which a legitimate resource management may become feasible.

2. FOREST - A POLITICAL ISSUE

As it is the case with most statistical figures in economically developing countries, those indicating the size of the forest area in Nepal are disputed. It is officially estimated (HMG & IUCN:51) that forest covers between 29% of the land at the basis of 50% tree crown cover and 43% if forest shrub land is included (according to aerial photographs taken in 1978/79). Provided that at least 10% tree crown cover indicates forest, there are 5.6 million ha (38%) of forest in Nepal. The Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (1988:15) indicates 5.518 million ha for "forested lands and forest plantations", i.e. 37% of the total land use in 1985/86. At present, less than 5% or approximately 100 000 ha are officially under community forestry management.

According to Ives & Messerli (1990:44, 46) it was overexaggerated when experts claimed a 50% loss of forests over approximately 30 years for Nepal in the 1970s, and they agreed with other researchers that the former had most probably extrapolated the loss in the Terai and the Siwaliks during the period of 1964 and 1978, when a comparison of aerial photographs showed a regional decreased forest area of 250 000 ha for the Terai and 148.500 ha for the Siwaliks in this fourteen year's period. For these two regions it is a significant loss, yet it seems that the hill's situation had not been largely affected and suffered from a substantial loss, although severe local denudations and shortages had been reported. Most of the reduction of the forest cover to its present degree seems to have taken place during the rule of the Ranas in the last third of the 19th century. The sale of wood from government forests, predominantly in the Terai, was an important source of income for the feudal Rana regime[1] and its taxation policy favoured the conversion of forest to agricultural land. Tax payments were changed from kind to cash assessments and fixed in 1910. Due to the constantly rising prices for agricultural products after 1910, the tax level on land used for agricultural purposes was de facto decreasing. This fact made the conversion of forests into arable land even more appealing.

In post-Rana times, after the nationalization of the forests in 1957, it is only the agricultural land on which the state can levy taxes, whereas forest land is directly owned by the state and not subject of taxation. The economic appropriation of the state ownership rights over the forests and forest products could only be enacted by either taxation of the sale of wood in large quantities or by auctioning of forest trees to wood contractors. The de facto state monopoly over forest products and their use by private consumers against payment of fees or fines that are levied on abusers are sources of income which are extracted from this non-agricultural land use. It is a fact that on the one hand the state revenue from forests after the restoration of the legitimate government increased[2] remarkably, but the revenue from agricultural land has immensly increased during the same period.

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[1] D. Bajracharya, Deforestation in the food/fuel context, historical and political perspective from Nepal. In: Mountain Research and Development 3 (3): 227-240 estimates that about 40% of the national income of the Rana state in the 19th century was collected from the sale of Terai forest products. (cit. in: Gilmour & Fisher 1992:26). According to Griffith et al. the rate of revenue in post Rana Nepal from the sale of timber deminished from 14.6% (1st Five Year Plan, 1956-61) to 3,6% (5th Five Year Plan, 1975-80) and the importance of forests as a source of income thus declined, emphasizing the taxation of cultivated land within the sector of primary production. However, the share of the taxation of agricultural land in total revenue fell from 30% to 6% between 1967/68 and 1977/78 (World Bank 1979:55).

[2] Main Sources of Revenue in Mio. Nepalese Rupees

Years	1958/59	1959/60	1960/61	1961/62	1962/63	1963/64	1964/65	1965/66	1966/67	1967/68 estim.
Land revenue	17.3	16.2	20.9	28.2	53.0	40.0	43.2	49.5	56.6	89.0
Forests	9.7	11.6	15.5	8.7	9.8	16.4	20.9	19.4	16.5	15.0

Source: HMG Budgets cf. Y. P. Pant 1969:97 (no. of categories reduced)
It is useful to know that the estimated expenditure for forestry projects in the first Five Year Plan (1956-61) was 20 Mio. Nepalese Rupees or 6.6% of the total financial outlay over the whole period. (Pant:41).

3. THE COMMUNITY FORESTRY PROGRAMME AND THE HISTORY OF FOREST LEGIS-LATION

According to the Community and Private Forestry Programme, community forestry is a "... phased handing over of all accessible hill forests to the communities to the extent that they are able and willing to manage them." [3] The historical background of this programme is that after the nationalization (Private Forest Nationalization Act of 1957) all privately owned forests and those under birta tenure (state-granted land to be used tax-free by individuals)[4] came under the administration of the Forest Department. A national forest policy was set up in 1959 classifying Nepal's forests into three major categories:

"1. Forests in the vicinity of rivers and indispensible for preventing landslides and floods were included under 'protection forests', 2. those expected to yield revenue to the Government were classified as 'production forest' and 3. forests to be maintained for meeting local requirements were designated as 'community forests'."

(Shrestha 1969:23).

The task to implement the new national forest policy overburdened the capacities of the forestry service by far and it was practically not in a position to administer all accessible natural forests and concentrated predominantly on the management of the Terai forests, from which a high economic benefit was extracted and where the necessary infrastructure for timber harvesting and transport was at hand. In 1961 the management of village panchayat forests to the benefit of the villagers became legal under the Forest Act. In 1967, however, the Forest Preservation Act introduced more and stricter laws against abusers of forests. By these laws the Forest Department acquired its unpopular image of a forest police which became by and large responsible for the distrust and reluctance of the local villagers to come into contact with the forestry service at all, least to speak of voluntary cooperation with it. The expropriation of private, mostly aristocratic forest owners and the alienation of peasant communities from the forests surrounding their villages in 1957 cut both groups off from their previous sources of income or stock of raw materials and energy sources that matter so much for the self-reliance of their almost independent peasant life-style.

The National Forest Plan of 1976 again was a step in the direction of community forestry and tried, among other measures, to encourage the local panchayats to raise tree plantations either on government- or community-owned land. With the promulgation of the Panchayat Forest[5]

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[3]The Community and Private Forestry Programme in Nepal. Forestry Development Division, Dept. of Forests, HMG 1991. Cit. in Campbell & Denholm 1993:32.

[4]For more details on this form of land tenure see Regmi 1978:25ff., 348f. Birta tenure was legally abolished in July 1959 by the Birta Abolition Act.

[5]The definition of Panchayat Forest is given in Fisher & Malla, 1988:34f.: "A Panchayat Forest is a section of originally government land, **needing tree planting on at least 2/3 of the area**, which is handed over to the control of the Panchayat. Panchayat forest land may be located in one place or scattered in several small patches in different parts of the panchayat. [...] A Panchayat can have up to 2 500 ropani (125 ha) in the hills and up to 200 bighas (135 ha) in the Terai either in one lot or in different lots." (emphasis added). "[...] The villagers will be able to get fodder, firewood, timber, grass

Rules and the Panchayat Protected Forest[6] Rules in 1977/78 the community forestry scheme was legally introduced and the Forest Department expected the local population of the concerned panchayats (in 29 hill districts and 14 districts in the Terai)[7] to participate actively in it. When in 1982 the Decentralization Act favoured the constitution of consumer committees for forest conservation and afforestation, this finally paved the way politically for a real self-management of local forests through user groups and their full entitlement for the use of all forest produce out of the locally self-administered forests that was granted in the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector of 1987/88. The political to-and-fro of the Forest Department over the transfer of the accessible hill forests back to local communities and to keep the claim of official authority over them that happened from the mid-fifties to the mid-seventies resulted in a principal insecurity among the local villagers what rights they have over the forests in the vicinity of their villages and how these rights would be guaranteed by the government in the long run. Politically speaking, the appropriation of rights over forests by the state at the cost of the expropriation and alienation of the people from a resource of major importance for agriculture was a fateful threat to the credibility and legitimacy of an administration under an autocratic rule. The revenue extracted from forests was outweighed by far in the long run by the loss of trust and confidence in the forestry service and its role as a powerful representative of the central government as well as by the rising costs of administering the forests even only to a limited extent in the middle hills. Decentralization and a growing sense of democratization among the rural population together with the lack of sufficient management capacity of the Forest Department over all the accessible hill forests, which are often degraded and of poor quality, favoured the idea of handing over 100% of the products of these forests over to "user groups".

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and litter free of charge from the forest. All the income from the sales of products from this forest will go to the village fund."

The legal procedure to get Panchayat Forest is described by Fisher/Malla, 1988:36: "The village/ town panchayat should first submit an application for panchayat forest to the appropriate District Forest Controller (DFC). The DFC shall conduct necessary inquiries. If he decides it is appropriate to hand over the government forest area, or any section of it, he shall submit a recommendation to the appropriate Regional Director of Forest. The Regional Director of Forest shall conduct necessary inquiries in respect to the recommendation submitted by the DFC. If he decides it is appropriate to hand over Panchayat forest to the concerned Panchayat, he may issue orders to the DFC accordingly. The DFC, after having received the orders, shall allot Panchayat Forest to the concerned panchayat. The DFC shall issue a Certificate of Panchayat Forest."

[6]The definition of Panchayat Protected Forest is given in Fisher & Malla, 1988:37: "A Panchayat Protected Forest is a section of originally government forest where **proper management including an enrichment or interplanting is necessary and which is handed over for this purpose to the Panchayat**. Such forest may be located in one place or scattered in several small patches in different parts of the panchayat." (emphasis added). [...] "A Panchayat can have Panchayat Protected Forest up to 10,000 ropani (500 ha) in the hills and up to 400 bighas (approx. 275 ha) in the Terai either in one lot or different lots within the limits prescribed. [...] The villagers can benefit from this forest by obtaining dry fuelwood, grasses and forest litters free of cost. 75% of the income from timber sales goes to the village and the remaining 25% of income goes to the government fund."

[7]King, G. C. & K. R. Shepherd, 1987, A Proposal for multi-tiered forest management planning. In: Banko Janakari 1 (4):82-87 speak of 67 districts where community forestry is performed. Cit. in: Nepal - Australia Forestry Project, 1988:60f.

The perspective from which the phenomenon of rehabilitation of forests was approached, to get into a position to fulfill the basic needs of the rural population as far as the supply of fuel-wood, timber, leaf-fooder and other non-wood products are concerned, was that of an administration backed by development planners. It was assumed that under conditions of time pressure regarding political "modernization" and environmental issues, there had to be a socially integrative solution to serve the daily needs of the farm families in the hills. What then seemed to be a more reasonable and suitable social unit than the "user group" concept? However, the term is an abstract denomination for something that did not exist in the Nepalese hills before. As a senior sociologist of the World Bank put it:

> "...afforestation strategies or projects must start with the identification (or the establishment) of such a viable unit or group; aim to engage the rural users of fuelwood in patterns of collective action for producing the fuelwood they need...".

<div align="right">(Cernea 1989:7)</div>

and on the the same page he continues as follows:

> "Group formation is an acute need particularly in development programs that involve (even to a small extent) natural resources that are either (1) under a common property regime, or (2) lend themselves to group use and management even if they are under a state property regime. To ensure both the immediate use and the long-term renewal and sustainability of a commonly owned natural resource, the owners must act in consensus, as a group that subjects itself to the same norms."

<div align="right">(ibid.)</div>

With these few sentences Cernea pinpoints the core problems of Nepal's community forestry. Social action that has no mutual desire of people to do, get or achieve some common goal as initial event, will hardly ever succeed to survive for long. And to "build" a community from outside with the assistance of a department that has thirty years ago taken from the villagers what it now wants to retransfer to them under its own supervision faces severe difficulties.

If we agree with the French Sociologist Emile Durkheim, there are two principal patterns of solidarity through which cohesion in societies is performed. The one is "mechanic solidarity" by a kin group through blood relationship and the other is "organic solidarity", by a group composed out of the free will and capacity of its members. The formation of a social unit in the way of organic solidarity definitely needs a degree of social agreed liberation from the socio-cultural constraints of tradition in the sense of established individual freedom. Nepal, however, is a multi-ethic and hierarchized Hindu caste society and its heterogeneous settlement composition of different ethnic groups and occupational castes is far from what we may call a liberal and individualistic society. Social organization is based on mutual obligation along traditional patterns of mutuality. Caste, clan and family are "user groups" in the very basic sense. May other groups under the circumstances of social reality in the remote Nepalese hills as well be called a community or user group?

4. MANAGEMENT BY COMMUNITY - A DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVE

To be very precise, the spirit in which the term user group was coined, always meant user-cum-producer group. The use of forest products in a sustainable way means to manage the respective forest from which these are taken in a way that is agreeable to all, or at least to the vast majority of other fellow users. A local community is the representation of a way of social life which is performed with respect to the possibilities and potentials that are granted by the local environment and may be equated with the "performance of locality" itself. As the distinct form of social organization of each caste or ethnic group represents its pattern of culture, the form of social action will never be arbitrary, but performed according to the customary obligations of one's reference group. Social life in these traditional settings includes the distinction of user groups through patterns of solidarity. In general, there is neither need nor necessity to form user groups concerning any aspect of social life apart from those based on reciprocity or remuneration within the traditional pattern of exchange of services. The existing communities **are** user groups and not only for particular commodities like forest products. Traditional communities are social realities, whereas "synthetic" user-cum-producer groups are social fiction and at present only an objective of administrational planning.

Where development experts and the forestry service propagate not only trees and man-agement concepts, but have to raise social units first, which they consider as adequate for what they perceive to be community forestry, the traditional social norms and cultural values will be under stress. Since 1978 user groups under the community forestry scheme are entitled to full usufructuary rights of the forests managed by themselves. Yet the definite way of management has to be approved in the management plan prepared jointly by the user group and the Forest Department.[8] The making of an "artificial" community or "synthetic" social unit thus becomes a development objective that may contradict social reality, where social strata are already existing dimensions of the multicultural fabric of Nepalese rural life in the middle hills.

User groups which are to restrict themselves to the management of forests only, will sooner or later get into conflicts with other user groups over their respective legal entitlements or with other traditional social units, i. e. with clan, family or caste. Increasing litigation might cause social unrest and favour the economic position of those who are able to mobilize expertise that will favour their case. As customary law will not be easily applicable in the conflicts between user-groups, there will be a new sphere of social contest over forests and access to their products. The share in services which have to be rendered for the proper management of the forests and the benefits to be extracted from them in the short as in the long run have to be negotiated among all members of the user group. A consensus on the terms of access to the

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[8]See for instance the introduction to: Gilmour, D. A.et al., 1989:1: "After forest land is handed over as Panchayat Forest or Panchayat Protected Forest there is a requirement for sound management to be carried out based on a management plan prepared by the user groups with the assistance of Forest Department staff."

forests with other co-villagers is necessary in order to establish norms which are not yet traditionally provided.

How desirable can it be from the different communities' points of view to have a new element of cooperation introduced, which is a superstructure to the already existing social institutions? Regarding the longevity and the "social quality" of the user-cum-producer groups, as far as their economic and political interests are concerned, particularly if one recalls that user groups are a part of the village community and their interests might compete with the interests of other fellow villagers, it is doubtful whether there can be a well working scheme of community forestry. Some people might be organized in forest user groups, but all others are users of forests and forest products as well. There are no non-users in the villages as far as forests are concerned. All villagers are dependent on the forests in their vicinity. The irony involved in natural resource management and forest protection becomes obvious when cases are reported, where one forest is protected by a community out of its own initiative and entirely closed to outside users, but at the cost of other forests in the vicinity from which this community collects its fuelwood and fodder (Pandey 1990:25). To spare one's own resources at the cost of the exploitation of others is a built-in deficiency of forest allotment under the resposibility of a distinct group and an absurd perversion of the spirit of conservation and sustainable management.

It has to be taken into account that due to ethnic and caste heterogeneity of the social composition of the villages in the middle hills there are majority - minority power-configurations of castes and ethnic groups. This caste - ethnic group ratio matters where the composition of a user group is dominated by a particular ethnic group or caste or favours the interests of such a group. In an overall perspective of competing interests and management strategies between user groups, co-villagers and the plans of the Forest Department, the rationale of a management approach that is meant to represent the "community" in accordance with local and national forest conservation goals turns out to be a problematic amalgamation. In the present multipurpose design it seems more prone to create environmental problems than to solve them in a socially adequate way.

It has already been mentioned that the network of obligations to render services in exchange, a model of patron-client mutualism, traditionally shapes the communal agrarian life in a context of Hinduism to a large extent. Kinship ties matter most whenever the use of scarce resources requires social arrangements to distribute benefits. The entitlement of a user group "to take and give" (Nep.: linu-dinu) from and to somebody, in this case the environment through the legal authority of the Forest Department, raises the question whether and if so, the forestry service itself is entitled to decide upon the empowerment of a particular group of people in the Nepalese rural hill society, where by and large equal shares in local power were generally favoured or had to be legitimized by the village community or through social status sanctioned by ritual (see Clarke 1995:96f.).

The constitution of forest user groups is a demonstration of power by the Forest Department at the village level. Once these user groups are identified and Panchayat or Panchayat Protected Forest has been handed over to them, they are integrated into the administrational framework of the forestry service. This becomes obvious by statements like the following in a document of the Nepal-Australia Forestry Project which is cooperating with the Forest Department in the field of community forestry in the middle hill districts of Sindhu Palchok and Kabhre Palanchok:

> "The main aim of community forestry is to develop forest systems for the economic benefit of villagers. To do this the villagers themselves must be involved. They must decide on their needs and they must decide which needs are most important. They must decide how these needs can be met."
>
> (Fisher & Malla 1988:25)

This quotation shows an imbalance of initiative. The terms "to involve" and "must" indicate that there is an overarching policy framework provided by the Forest Department or the forestry project to which people are expected to respond and to cooperate with. In this situation of promoted voluntarism, user groups are usually represented by a management committee, His Majesty's Government by the District Forest Controller and the management plan of the forest alloted to a user group acts as a contract. The identification of user groups and management committees and the contractual character of a forest management plan emphasise the administrational spirit that guides community forestry programmes, at least those in which the Forest Department is actively involved. There are other examples for independent initiatives of managing a forest in self-reliance, which are, however, not officially recognized respectivly recognizable, because they are not fitting into the legal provisions of the Forest Department and how community forestry is perceived by the forest administration (Pandey 1990:35). Community forestry in this perspective is an administrational measure resulting in a joint management pattern to which the forestry service contributes guidance and supervision and the local villagers are expected to render labour services and commitments to protect and enrich the forests they are caring for in exchange with the entitlement to use certain forest products. In fact the question is, what do local village forest users gain from this new arrangement called community forestry, or as the Nepal-Australian Forestry Project (Fisher & Malla 1988:4) prefers to call it, "village forestry"? Community Forestry in the way it is propagated as an administrational measure is a form of labour mobilization that has become politically reasonable in the wake of decentralization and the financial and legitimization crisis of the central state. The change for the villagers through the implementation of this scheme is that they have to pay their share for democratization by getting actively involved in the tasks of forest management and have full legal rights to claim a forest only with the approval of Forest Department officials. The supremacy of the administrational power becomes obvious by the fact that the share in forest products on which people are dependent has become legalized in exchange with people's management commitments.

Labour mobilization for the forests was known under rakam land tenure[9] till 1955. Rakam land was granted to remunerate the services of manual workers and artisans to the state (Regmi 1978:24). Such rakam land, for instance, had been allotted to caretakers of forests to ensure that they perform their services in the very location where their land and assignment for the forest are. Nowdays the state tries to transfer the responsibilty to the management committees to take care for "their" forest by themselves (provided their entitlement to manage a forest as Panchayat Forest has been approved by the Forest Department). This process is a legalization of a prior informal use under administrational supervision, but not a proper democratization in the strict sense of the term. In the process of legalization the legitimation by the Forest Department to enact supervision, however, is no longer taken for granted by the affected communites. There is no more remuneration from agriculture for taking care of the forest as it was the case with rakam land tenure, but the forest products themselves are the declared benefits for the peoples' services.[10]

In this process the question of legitimation of the forestry service itself arises. As long as scientific forest management and forest protection prevailed to be performed as main tasks under an autocratic government, the role of Forest Department officials was more or less undisputed by the villagers in doing their work at the village level, although they were rarely welcome supervisors. Nowadays the introduction of democracy in the sphere of forest management has its effects on the work load of the rural people, particularly on women, and the performance of democratic rights and duties among the villagers the legitimation of the Forest Department has either become doubtful or suspect and seems little justified to them.

5. COMMUNITY FORESTRY AS A SOCIO-POLITICAL PROCESS

If one does not agree with the preconceived notion of crisis-ridden villagers in denuded and erosion-prone surroundings, one may assume that people generally make use of whatever resources they have access to. When resources become locally scarce it has always a social, cultural and political background that is presumably well known to the inhabitants of this setting. The term "indigenous forest management" thus respresents the idea that there is social response to local resource needs and scarcities which are tackled by the people of the affected region themselves. In fact these are not age-old patterns of resource management as the middle hills of Nepal were rather thinly populated and there used to be enough forest for all in the past, although some local scarcities might have been there.[11] Generally there were very

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[9]Rakam land tenure was legally abolished in 1955.

[10]An important remark has to added regarding the user groups' rights to forest revenue as they were outlined in the proposed forest policy of the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (cf. Nepal-Australia Forestry Project (ed.) 1988:4). One of the principles was: "Entrusting to users' committees the task of protecting and managing the forests, and the right to receive all of the revenue, with an **obligation to spend at least half of the proceeds on forest improvement**; the cost of forest watchers to be covered by the revenue collected by the committees. In the absence of such revenue, temporary support from external sources may be extended." (emphasis added).

[11]"The joint NAFP/ICIMOD study found no case of an indigenous system of forest management which dated back as far as the Rana period. This is consistent with the findings of Campbell et al. (1987)

few, if any, practises that we might call traditional forest management unless they developed out of a felt need quite recently. One reason for this might be the actual or perceived abundance of forests. Another reason might be the perception of resources in general and of forests in particular in relation to customs and religious performance of different castes and ethnic groups (see Seeland 1986a, 1986b, 1994). To care for forests or any other resources in the narrow western economic sense contradicts the Hindu notion of karma (what a being is meant to do by birth), as for a pious Hindu the imagination to protect nature is a transgression of one's own karma and thus a transgression of dharma, the eternal law of existence of all living beings.

Another important question is, whether villagers, even if some or most of them perceive a decrease in the availability of certain forest resources, want to be guided by the forest ad-ministration and be involved in a community forestry project at all. People often expect the Forest Department to manage the forests near their villages in such a way that they should provide them with sufficient and good forest products. Forest mangement is considered to be the task of the forestry service personnel, as they are commonly perceived to be the overlords of all forests. Villagers are more often than not reluctant to venture into the sphere of what is considered to be under the command of the state forestry service. The experience they had to make in the past when the forests were appropriated by the state and they were excluded from free access to them was a subordination to state authority and professional expertise.

The concept of community forestry aims at putting local villagers back in a position to fulfill their needs in forest products on their own management capacity of forests that have been legally transferred to them by the state. The satisfaction of local resource demands by using local resources, however, does not take the national interests in supply and distribution of forest products and the financial aspect of revenue into account. And this lack of a national and democratic perspective of resource use is one major aspect of the poor degree of legitimation the forestry service has in the middle hills of Nepal. The political role of the Forest Department as procurer of a sustainable resource base which is of national importance is either little known or not appreciated by the average village dweller. However, it is this national importance that legitimizes the existence of the forest administration most. Its political role at the local village level is for all practical matters only visible in restrictive and protective measures that are not always perceived as helpful for solving the villagers' needs in forest products. As a matter of fact, the forestry service had a poor social performance from 1957 until now and did not yet succeed to become more popular recently by introducing community forestry. Even if it would embark upon a large retraining of its staff at all levels to gain an image of forest officials as friends and partners, as it has been suggested by critics, the Forest Department will remain an administration. As a part of the state bureaucracy its personnel remain office bearers of rather

[Socio-economic Factors in Traditional Forest Use and Management. Preliminary Results from a Study of Community Forestry Management in Nepal". In: Banko Janakari, 1 (4): 45-54] who found that the average age of forest committees in their sample was 6.9 years." R. J. Fisher in: (Nepal-Australia Forestry Project (ed.), 1988:31).

high status and power in the social stratification of the middle hills. A change in the situation would require a process of mediation and political legitimation of the Forest Department at the village level and would have to coincide with a socio-political process of emancipation from the stereotype of a subordination of the people to an administration as it is perceived by local villagers. This lack of democratic culture and consciousness can only be compensated for in a social process, in which legal and customary rights over the use of resources are negotiated between members of different castes, ethnic groups and the government services. The Nepalese nation building process seems to be nothing more and nothing less than to come to terms of negotiation among these social actors. Such terms cannot be achieved once and for all, but should be acknowledged as a perennial objective. Local resource management has to be seen in the light of overall national interests and political independence in forest management at the village level is a contribution to a national resource policy and the self-reliance of its rural population. Liberalization of forest management with regard to user's responsibility within the framework of a self-sufficient village economy can be a valuable political measure, if people are prepared to perform this freedom out of their own free will. Those who still expect the Forest Department to be the proper agency to run the forests, are still in a state of clientism and this service may righteously be demanded from an administration by the people it has to serve.

6. CONCLUSION

In a phase of administrational deregulation and increasing effects of party politics in public life since the political changes in Nepal in the year 1990, the perspective to look at the forests and their socio-political role has to be adapted to the new situation. The official and still largely dominating view of Nepal's ecological crisis, where people have to cooperate with the Forest Department and foreign donors to fight this crisis successfully seems to phase out. Instead of this sometimes overexaggerated and dramatized assessment of Nepal's environmental situation another perception of the phenomenon of resource use in general and in the middle hills in particular is more likely to be adequate. The essential question in this context is how a patchwork of different ethnic groups and castes with a common history of a rural life under feudal domination can come to terms of coexistence with one another. This perception has to take into account different cultural views of nature and environment and their respective economic needs and political interests. The democratic legitimation of resource use depends predominantly on the social performance and the success of this process. If it fails to integrate the different communities, antagonism and even violent disputes over the use of resources and communalism might occur as the greatest hazards to the future development of Nepal. Access to and distribution of resources is a question of socially approved entitlements to share in their use with others. Perhaps it will be the political consciousness among people that might rise with the increasing influence of political parties. Inter-caste and inter-ethnic factions will then constitute the organic solidarity that may transcend traditional kin and caste obligations and antagonisms to a new self-esteem of being representative of political ideas which are shared by political actors. When local villagers identify themselves as actors favouring political ideas, environmental phenomena will appear in a different light. Problems of scarcity of forests and

forest products will be no longer be perceived as environmental problems as such, but in the perspective of giving an idea of the terms of distribution of wealth in a nation wide context. This democratic self-consciousness may not lead to increased rates in afforestation. Yet the altered view of what is politically possible in a multi-ethnic society living in precarious natural surroundings, however, provides people with more options to counterbalance their environmental situation than the conventional cooperation-oriented schemes of participatory "involvement" of the local population in afforestation and preservation measures by government officials or projects sponsored by foreign donors.

The political will to embark on democratic terms of coexistence does not only put an emphasis on a local situation, where decisions are most vital for the future of the affected population. It has to approach an "environmental" problem with a regional and nationwide sense of "ethnic federalism", where political interests at different levels will contribute to the solution and sometimes even complication of a political process to handle a local situation.

Historically, Nepal under the Rama regime had all the favourable conditions of a closed country, a small and by and large well distributed population together with a predominantly private land tenure. Nepal as a country with a constitutional monarchy and political parties to process democratic acitves and opinions will have to find its own way to overcome the present deficiencies in the country's resource management under the specific conditions of rural multi-ethnicity.

In the meanwhile afforestation und forest management projects under the various community forestry programmes go on, sometimes with success, yet more often they are a failure. Forests and their resources are and will be a domain of social contest and political dissent for the coming decades. The experiences out of the community forestry programmes will show how the political process proceeds to find solutions to "local environmental problems" which they are ultimately not, or only in a very narrow sense. They are symptomatic for a political configuration for which an agreeable social concept of sharing in resources has to be found. Here sociality matters most and has to be considered as eminent resource before all the natural ones, which are in fact only accessible through a socially agreed concepts of resource use. Sustainable forest management can only happen where political power is reflected by its people in the use of a country's natural wealth. The social performance of this use has again to reflect the dynamics of modern, i.e. organic forms of solidarity and opinion-building that might transcend the limitations of a caste-structured multi-ethnic patchwork of a vast amount of semi-indedependent village communities by new institutions. Whether these institutions will be more adequate to face the environmental and political challenges to come remains to be seen. Community forestry will become possible once there are communities that will share in the responsibilities for their forests and likewise for their nation as a whole. Thus the state of forests will be a mirror of the democratic margins in a community's perfomance within a nation-wide setting of people who struggle for an adequate pattern of socially legitimate use of

resources. In this process the key-resource is the identification of political terms of reference for community development.

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