

FOREST POLICY IN NEPAL: Implications for Social Forestry

Janet Stewart

As the deforestation of the slopes of the Himalayas continues, the resulting environmental degradation is directly affecting most of the rural population of Nepal. The cycle is well known not only to the farmers themselves but to foresters, planners and policy makers. Increasing demand for fuelwood, fodder, timber, leaf litter (for animal bedding and compost) and grazing land directly depletes the growing stock as well as removing nutrients from the forest and reducing its capacity to regenerate. As well as this gradual deterioration due to chronic overuse, forest is cleared from ever steeper and more marginal land to make room for agriculture as pressure on the land increases. The wealth of products collected from forest areas make them an indispensable part of the agricultural system as a whole.

In the 1950s, the importance of Nepal's forests was recognized by the Government, and a Forest Department was set up with a structure similar to the Indian Forest Service. The dangers of over-cutting in mountainous areas were recognized, and the role of the Forest Department in the Hills (the broad band of mountainous land, 60m to 3000m in altitude, immediately to the south of the Himalayas) was essentially to conserve the forests, which were already seen as threatened. To give the Government direct control over cutting, all forest land, which has previously been under private or customary communal ownership, was nationalised in 1956. Traditional rights to forest land and products were suddenly superseded by a national forest policy, according to which a permit had to be obtained from the Forest Department for any cutting, whether of fuelwood or timber. Forest guards were employed to ensure that permits were obtained and also that revenue was received by the Forest Department for all forest products.

Whilst the role of the Forest Department in the Hills was largely conservative, the situation in the Terai, the belt of flat, low-lying land bordering India to the south, was quite different. Malaria was endemic in this region; until the large-scale eradication campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s, the indigenous population was very small and most of the area was heavily forested with the valuable timber species *Shorea robusta* (sal). From the early 1960s, emphasis was given to exploitation of the sal forest, including significant exports to India. In this case the nationalisation of the forests provided the Government with a major source of income.

In the Hills, by contrast, it became increasingly clear throughout the 1960s that not only did the forests provide relatively little revenue, but the policing of forest land by guards was failing to

prevent illicit cutting, and deforestation was in fact accelerating. This was due not only to growing pressure as the population increased, but also to the ill-will generated by the nationalisation. It was widely felt that the Government was taking the forest away from its rightful owners. Immediately before the nationalisation came into effect, villagers cleared forest land and brought it hastily under cultivation so as to retain their tenure.

Another major detrimental effect was the breakdown of traditional communal systems of forest protection. Vestiges of these can still be found in some parts of the country but it is certain that they were previously much more widespread. An example is the '*pathi-pathi*' system, by which a watcher was employed by the village to prevent cutting in a protected forest. Each household donates one pathi (4kg) of grain per year towards payment of the watcher. In some areas rules also still exist concerning rights to collect particular products from the forest, and the times of year at which this may be done. By and large, however, these traditional systems broke down following nationalisation. The districts in which they have survived are often those in which a cadastral survey has not yet been carried out, and so the forest is effectively considered to be privately owned; in these areas, such as Solukhumbu in Eastern Nepal, permission to cut will often be sought from the landlord rather than the Forest Department.

In recognition of the problems associated with State control of forest land, the Government in 1976 introduced innovative and far-sighted legislation whereby the Forest Department could hand over forest land to the '*panchayat*' (the local administrative unit, usually comprising several villages with a total population of 4-5000). A completely new level of land tenure was thus introduced, aimed at encouraging public participation in forestry activities by giving ownership of the resource, as well as responsibility for its management, to local communities. Under the new Forest Act, two types of land are recognized: Panchayat Forest (PF) which is usually bare land ready to be planted (in 1961, the nationalisation had been extended to all uncultivated land, whether or not it had trees on it); and Panchayat Protected Forest (PPF), which is existing forest, usually degraded, which is to be brought under active local management.

There are now several forestry projects working within the framework of this legislation. The first to be successful in involving local communities was the Nepal-Australia Forestry Project based at Chautara, to the North-East of Kathmandu. In 1979 a much larger project, the Community Forestry Development Project, was started with World Bank funding and FAO technical assistance. This project now covers thirty districts throughout the Hills. A sister project has been started to extend community forestry to the Terai, which is also now experiencing shortages of forest products, following the widespread resettlement of hill farmers in this previously densely-forested area. A Community Forestry and Afforestation Division (CFAD) has been set up within the Forest Department to administer the activities of these projects.

The introduction of the concepts of PF and PPF was undoubtedly an extremely progressive move which has made community forestry a realistic possibility for Nepal. In the decade since legislation, however, problems with community participation have unavoidably arisen and these can to some extent be traced back to the earlier forest policies. Firstly, as in so many countries, distrust exists between villagers and foresters. For twenty years forest rangers and officers were seen as police,

and it is hard to reverse this attitude. An attempt has been made to do so by creating a new post, the Community Forestry Assistant (CFA), who works in only five *panchayats* and whose role is largely that of extension agent; but in practice villagers often confuse CFAs with traditional rangers.

The sweeping nature of the land tenure change itself generates further distrust. Villagers fear a re-nationalisation at some future date, after they have sacrificed grazing land to plant trees; they are often also dubious about the possible tenure implications of planting trees privately on their own land.

It has proved relatively easy to establish new plantations on PF land (though protection is often a problem in areas of high livestock pressure). It is now becoming clear, however, that development of systems of communal management, whether of cutting in existing mature forest or distribution of benefits from plantations, is much more problematic. The management of common property resources is always highly complex, and it is rarely possible for outsiders to impose systems. *Panchayats* with community forestry activities form forest committees to manage PFs and PPFs, but these are often inactive, and rarely represent the disadvantaged sector of the community. The committees are encouraged to produce simple management plans, in consultation with the CFA, but in practice these are very rarely implemented. Social Forestry will only succeed in Nepal in the long term if it takes on sufficient momentum to continue after outside project support is withdrawn. For this to happen, the present progressive forest policy must be seen to be consistent, so that local communities become convinced of the benefits to themselves of planting and protecting trees.

Janet Stewart
1986