



Village voices from the Himalayan forest

N. Rasaily, R. Pokharel and D. Messerschmidt

Narendra Rasaily and **Ridish Pokharel** are instructors at the Institute of Forestry, Pokhara, Nepal.

Don Messerschmidt is social forestry research adviser to the Institute of Forestry.

There is increasing recognition that the participation of rural people is essential for sustainable development. Therefore, as concern over the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources, including forests, continues to rise, it is crucial to consider the perceptions and priorities of local people with regard to environmental issues.

In Nepal, the Institute of Forestry at Pokhara is implementing a programme to give both teachers and students insights into the social issues of forestry development, and to ensure fuller incorporation of these issues into forestry training curricula. As one part of this effort, undertaken with assistance from FAO and Yale University's Forestry and Environment Studies School under a grant from the United States Agency for International Development, the Institute of Forestry has started a programme of field research. This article reproduces comments of local people recorded during a field trip on 16 and 17 January 1990 in and near the villages of Lahchowk and Ghachowk, Kaski District, located in the mid-Himalayan hills of Nepal.

Morning meeting at the Ghachowk village tea shop, Kaski district, Nepal

The members of the Ghachowk forest committee (*ban samiti*) sit cross-legged on mats put down on the grass in front of the tea shop where we've asked them to come and "talk trees" with us. Bhakta Bahadur, the local forest committee chairman, is an old man, well into his seventies. He wears a scarf around his head like a turban it's cold so early in the morning. His suitcoat is dun-coloured, over a tattered shirt, and he wears a kilt-like white cloth wrapped around his waist to the knees, secured by a broad belt in the Nepalese fashion. The turban and a stubble beard frame a face wrinkled with age. His gentle eyes and white brush moustache give him a look of wisdom and infinite patience. Bahadur has come to this meeting from his sickbed, he says, because he is so intensely interested in what his neighbours, and we visitors, might have to say about *Shyal Phe Ban*, "the Jackal's Forest".

Padam Bahadur is also here. He's the committee secretary (*sachib*). And there is Kashinath, a local schoolteacher, who acts as *de facto* spokesman of the group. We have drawn quite a crowd; several dozen curious villagers stand behind us, watching,

listening. There are men of the Brahmin and Chhetri castes, and a few ethnic Gurungs. The group is all men, no women. The women are at home, cooking. We've got their menfolk out well before *bhat*, the morning rice meal.

Hot, sweet milk tea is being passed around, 50 rupees' worth, 50 glasses, our treat, well worth it. They've all come, they tell us, because the forest is important, a vital resource. Important enough to come and sit in the sun to sip tea with us on this cold winter morning, to listen and talk about a resource that provides them with essential cooking fuel, fodder for their animals, poles and timber for building, and a multitude of other products of nutritional and medicinal value.

[Sitting with Nepalese villagers to "talk trees"](#)

This meeting is the highlight of our two-day-long walking tour of neighbouring Ghachowk and Lahchowk villages. We have come to observe and to ask many questions: How are trees and forests used? Who "owns" them? Who makes the rules? Whose responsibility is it to protect forest resources? What role do village women play? What forest products are most important? Most abundant? Most scarce? How is the government helping with village forestry?

We have come to Ghachowk, we tell the group, because we are interested in the history and management of their village forest reserves. We want to hear their wisdom, and listen to their knowledge about trees and forests.

Kashinath begins to speak in Nepali. Other conversations drop to a murmur around him. At first he describes several kinds of forests in and around the village: "We manage the *panchayati ban* (community forest)", he says, "and the *nursari* (tree nursery) that we built with government help. We also have *guthi ban* (religious forests), so sacred to us Hindus that not even a single piece of wood can be cut.

"And, up there," he continues, pointing to the high hills above the village, "up there is *sarkari ban* (government forest). It is protected, but we must sometimes go there to cut poles and fuelwood, and to pasture our sheep and cattle.

"Of course," Kashinath goes on, "there are also our own private trees. We plant individual trees on our farmstead according to need, but mostly for *ghaas* (literally grass, meaning tree fodder) for our livestock.

"In the past," he explains, "as the forest was cut back, our supply of fuelwood and fodder disappeared. So we planted many trees on our own farms. Now, with those trees and the others coming up in the newly planted community forest, our women and children do not have to work so hard to collect firewood, and our cows and bullocks and buffaloes have more fodder to eat, and are more productive."

He speaks with pride of the work he and other villagers, and the local *heralos* (forest guards), all men, and a nursery *naike* (supervisor), a young woman, have done so far to help bring back the forest, and to create a ready supply of seedlings to plant.

Old Bhakta Bahadur is stirring with impatience. When he hears us ask what the forest was like in years past, he shifts his stance and, squatting on his haunches now and gesturing with his hands, he breaks in on Kashinath's talk. The old man's status as a village elder allows him that privilege, and Kashinath defers. The crowd grows quiet as Bhakta Bahadur begins to speak in Nepali.

"Fifty-seven years ago," he says, "in the Nepalese year of 1990 V. S. (1933 A. D.), our

forest was in a poor condition. The need was so great that the people cut and cut, and the surrounding hillsides were rapidly denuded. Our fathers and uncles and sisters and wives, and our neighbours and their kinfolk, all had to cut the forest in order to survive. The elders were worried, and meetings were held to discuss what to do about it. They decided to protect the forest and restrict cutting in some parts, to let the trees return.

"Unbeknownst to most of us," he goes on, "a group of men from only 13 of the 42 households went cunningly, like the jackals of our forest, to the government and claimed the entire forest for themselves. Perhaps they bribed someone, we don't know. But they obtained a secret paper supporting their claim. The rest of us from the other 29 households didn't know what they'd done until eight years later when we decided to reopen our protected forest for cutting. Then, suddenly, the 13 came forward and claimed exclusive rights. They wouldn't let any others take leaves or grass or timber or fuelwood. It was their forest, they said.

"The rest of the village, my father and uncles and others, got angry." Bhakta Bahadur is quite animated now. "I remember it well. I joined in the cries of outrage against the 13. 'What right have they to claim the forest for themselves?' we asked. Then they showed us the registration paper with all the official-looking stamps and signatures. Most of us couldn't read it, but it looked impressive. Still we argued against them. 'Isn't the forest everyone's resource?' we said. 'Isn't access everyone's right?'

[Some of the villagers indicate the disputed forest area](#)

"I joined with the elders - only two of us are still alive now - and together we challenged the 13 in the courts. We won, and the forest was fumed back over to the whole village. Today it belongs to everyone, to all the families of Ghachowk. Since then the Jackal's Forest has been used by everyone.

"We formed a committee," he goes on. "I am the eldest and the chairman, and we have a secretary and ten elected members. We have put the schoolteacher on the committee, because of his good education. He is better able to speak for us to the government. He can read and write.

"The forest ranger is our adviser. We all work to protect the forest area, plant trees for fodder, fuel and timber on the barren lands, and distribute the forest product to villagers as equitably as possible.

"There are now 80 families using the Jackal's Forest. But as the village grows, the forest becomes less able to meet our needs. The current system of managing the forest is similar to the original one. Only now we have to follow the rules of the forest department. such as taking a permit from the range office when we want to fell a tree."

The meeting lasts almost two hours, eventually breaking into several smaller conversations as each of us asks more and more probing questions. "Are the forests sufficient?" we ask. "Were they ever?"

"No," is the unanimous reply. "We need much more," they say. "There are too many households for our small forest to sustain."

"Are there conflicts with the neighbouring village of Lahchowk?" we ask.

" Yes, " someone says, " the Lahchowkis claim part of our forest. " Several men are

now standing to point out to us the disputed boundary on the hillside across the valley.

Throughout the conversation, the villagers' seriousness about the resources, demonstrated by the intensity of their responses, gives us firm evidence of the critical importance of forests in this part of Kaski District, where population and resources are out of balance and the demand for forest products is greater than the supply.

"And what of the future?" we ask.

"Well," says one of the younger committee members, a man in his twenties dressed jauntily in a bright blue shirt and a *rangi-changi* (multicoloured) cap, "much has been done with government help, but we want and need more."

The government forest ranger accompanying us on our trip explains that in the near future he will formally hand over management of the newly planted community forest to villagers. The ranger will continue to help select species for planting and give technical advice in the nursery, but the villagers will have to hire their own local watcher to enforce the rules.

"We don't especially like some of the new species they've brought us, like *ipil-ipil* (*Leucaena leucocephala*)," the young villager goes on. "They grow too fast and are used up too soon. We need slower growing, stronger trees also, trees we already know about, trees to give us fuelwood and fodder and timber for a long time, in our time and in the time of our sons and their sons."

A middle school near the Ghachowk trail, at opening bell

We are passing a middle school just as the children arrive for class. There is a crowd of eager boys and girls gathering around a dozen or so small saplings that have been planted in the school yard. We walk over and watch them carefully watering the trees.

"What trees are these?" we ask.

"*Champ* (*Michelia champaca*)," some boys reply. The girls are too shy; they stand at the back of the crowd and won't talk to us. But the boys crowd around and speak up eagerly.

"We are raising trees as part of our lessons," one says.

The schoolteacher explains. "I teach science and agriculture, and raising trees is part of the student 'practicals'. Each class has a job to do - one to dig the holes, another to carry the seedlings from the nearby government nursery, another to water them, and another to build fences around each sapling so that goats and naughty children do not damage them.

"All boys and girls help, regardless of caste or social status. From this they learn about the value of cooperation and the use of trees in farming, in nature and in building. And, especially, they learn about the importance of the forest. Even the smallest children help. They clean up the school yard and make compost with which to fertilize the seedlings."

"Why did you plant *champ* trees?" we ask.

"It is a good timber species," the teacher says. "In ten years, this sapling will mature and sell for 7000 rupees. If we had planted fruit trees, all the fruit would quickly be

stolen. The timber species is more valuable."

One small boy, his coal-black hair slicked back, his face bright from a morning scrub at the water tap, notes that these trees will grow quickly and will provide wood for benches and good timber for other school projects. Another boy volunteers that in their fathers' time, the forests around here were badly cut over by *murkha manche* (stupid people). "Not our fathers, of course," he says, out of respect for his elders, "but by others who didn't know any better."

"Sometimes we help plant seedlings on the hillside, where the forests used to grow," someone says.

"Why do that?" we ask.

"For water," is the youngster's reply. "The forests give us water."

"And fuelwood," says another, "and fodder for the animals."

The teacher is beaming. His science lessons have made an impression on this young generation of Nepalese.

On the trail to Lahchowk village below the forest

The hillside above us is barren shrubland, with some scraggy bushes and dried grasses browsed short by cattle and goats. Far above that, the high forest begins, a diminishing resource in an overcrowded land. Below us fallow terraces, dotted with the stubble of last fall's rice crop, drop step-like toward a small boulder-filled stream bed. A few small shrubs and heavily lopped fodder trees dot the brown winter landscape.

Two barefoot young women stop on their way up the mountain to let us pass on the trail. One is in her teens, the other in her early twenties. Each is dressed in a red print sari and bodice, and each carries a *hasiya* (sickle) and empty *doko* (basket). Come evening, they will pass this way again, bent over under the loads of green fodder they have collected. The two women are clearly curious about these foreign strangers on the hillside trail.

"*Kaha jane bahine?*" (Where are you going, younger sisters?), someone asks respectfully in Nepali.

"*Mathi. Ban ma jane, daju,*" the older girl replies. (Up. To the forest, elder brother.) "We are going to cut grass and leaves for fodder, and collect some firewood." The younger one is too shy to say anything and stands looking at the ground.

"Can anyone go into the forest? Are there special rules?" we ask.

[A reforestation poster targeted at schoolchildren](#)

"Anyone can collect fodder and dried sticks, but we can't cut live trees," is her reply.

"And have the resources changed?"

"Yes," she says. "In my mother's time it was not so difficult to collect fodder and fuelwood. Now the rules are more strict, because there are more people, more cattle, and less forest. And now the government has come."

The two women are impatient to get up the hill. They have a long day ahead of them, cutting and collecting before nightfall. And tomorrow, they will return and do it again. And the day after, and the day after that. We bid goodbye and continue on our way.

A few herd boys pass us with their black cows and wide-eyed water buffalo. We move quickly out of the way. Around a bend in the trail we meet a young girl and her grandmother, the village tailor's wife. The old lady is embarrassed when we ask her where she is going and what she is doing.

"Why ask old women and young girls questions like these?" she says. "We are uneducated (*jato* is the word she uses, which literally means 'dumb'). We are women. We sit, we eat, we work, we come, we go. So, what do we know?"

Yet we explain that it is her knowledge that we seek, the wisdom of a forest user about the resources, past and present. After some light banter in the Nepalese way of starting a conversation between strangers, she begins to share her experience.

"Compared with when I was young, like Nani here," she says, pointing to the young girl, "water is a great problem. The source (*mul*) has dried up. We have to go farther now, to find less and less. The problem of water is the problem of the forest."

The old woman turns abruptly to continue her climb up the steep trail to forest. She has no more time for our curiosity.

Later, an old man tending several cows and bullocks that graze the dry stubble by the trailside tells us how the forest here has always belonged to 14 families of his caste group. Concerned that the government will take it over and open it up for all to use, he complains bitterly about change and the breakdown of tradition.

"It didn't used to be that way," he insists, gesturing with his hands. "And we have a piece of paper to prove it is exclusively ours."

The forest ranger doubts the old man's story. "Such old documents no longer hold. Now the forest is for all, not just for a few."

The old man is unwilling to anger the ranger, and compliments him, but then he turns to face the forest and begins to speak again with conviction and even passion. "I love the forest," he says, spreading his arms wide as if to embrace it. "I love it like my son and if I cut it, I feel like I am cutting my son's throat. We all love it so much that we do not cut so much as one piece that we do not need. We cherish our forest. It is for our children. Nobody else would care for it as we do. We've looked after the forest for many generations. We've protected it and watched after it for so long now, and our sons will do the same after us."

Conclusion

What lessons can we draw from this series of brief yet wide-ranging conversations? Unquestionably, local people have well-articulated and strong beliefs with regard to the need for conservation and wise use of forest resources, for both rural development and environmental conservation. Listening to their concerns provides at least three distinct yet related opportunities for improvements in sustainable forest management. First, it offers a chance to obtain direct feedback regarding the actual situation, the effectiveness of current policies and programmes and their relevance to local people. Second, it may be possible to identify locally used methods of resource conservation and management, as well as strategies for collaborative action that have

potential for incorporation (perhaps with appropriate adaptation) on a larger scale. Finally, it provides an opportunity to identify topics about which there are technical misunderstandings or conflicting views among local people, thereby indicating a need for improvements in national programmes or increased efforts in dissemination of appropriate information and technical assistance.

