A History of Forest Politics in the Terai, Nepal:
A Case of Equity *or* Ecology?

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1. Introduction

This paper reviews and explores the equity and sustainability issues in the forestry sector in the Terai, Nepal with a focus on the past and present forest politics and policy in the region. The paper argues that Terai forestry has been historically an inequitable domain that only benefited the State and the ruling class whereas the common Nepali people did not get a fair share of the benefits from it. A review of socio-political and environmental history of the Terai also suggests that concern for environmental conservation was not a priority until recently due to the policy approach of successive governments to exploit the high-value forests for commercial purposes. The upper hand of the State in the control of Terai forests ever since the beginning of the history of Nepal remained as a legacy for a long period, even influencing current forestry policy and practice in the region. This could explain the reluctance of successive governments for transparent and accountable forest governance in the Terai. This also explains the restricted policy of the State to hand over only a few parts of Terai forests for community management.

Despite well-established community forestry practice in the hills of Nepal with local Forest User Groups (FUGs) preserving the forests, controversies and conflicting debates exist on the management of Terai forests as evident by the difference of opinions among the donors, Nepalese environment and development NGOs and the government. Though community forestry has been in place in some areas of Terai, it

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is a fairly new concept. The challenges for the sustainable Terai forestry have been to support the creation of new institutions of community forestry management; increased user group heterogeneity and inequity; existence of large high-value forests; and the proximity to the timber market in India.

If managed efficiently, it is argued, the Terai forests could not only boost the local and national economy but also help in environment conservation (Springate-Baginski *et al.,* 2003; Mitchell, 2001). However, given the historical context of inequitable and ecologically unsustainable forestry practice in the Terai, which has still shaped the current forest politics and policy in the region, the question of how equity and sustainability issues can be addressed remains important. With the recent political change in Nepal after years of instability and conflict, and the emphasis on equity, inclusive democracy and restructuring of the State, it is timely to ask how can Terai forestry be managed in a sustainable way? Who benefits from the Terai forestry, and how? Who – or what - loses, and why? To help answer these questions, I will be looking into a case study of community forestry in the Terai in my forthcoming fieldwork in Nepal to see what impacts community forestry brings in terms of equity and ecological sustainability and whether these two goals of environment management (ecological sustainability) and equity are compatible or in conflict. Putting it other way, the research question is thus: Does community forestry in the Terai help to address the related problems of inequity and unsustainable resource management?

Keeping this main aim of the research in mind, I will however, in this paper focus on the historical review of forestry policy and practice in the Terai. The discussion of forest politics in the Terai in historical perspective provides a research context for the analysis of the implications of community forestry policy on equity and ecological sustainability issues in the Terai. Before reviewing the past forest politics with a touch of environmental and socio-political history of the Terai, I will, at first, briefly introduce Terai and then move on to discuss its socio-economic heterogeneity and inequity.

2. The Terai

The Terai or Tarai[1] refers to the southern lowlands of Nepal (see Fig. 1). This region consists of an extension of the Gangetic plains in Nepal from northern India (generally referred as the outer Terai) and the river valleys located between the Siwalik (Churia) and Mahabharat ranges (the inner Terai), thus occupying generally level alluvial terrain blended into forested hills.[2] The strip runs across the entire length of Nepal from east to west at the foothills with varying width except at Dang and Chitwan districts where it is intercepted by the Someswar range. Thus, the Terai can be conveniently divided into eastern Terai, located in the east of Chitwan; mid-western Terai, streching between Chitwan and Dang-Deokhuri and far-western Terai, located in the west of Dang-Deokhuri (Shepherd and Gill, 1999). The southern parts of the Terai (outer Terai) bordering India are densely populated and most of the area is under agriculture whereas the northern part (inner Terai), known as the Bhabher, has a lower population density with forested areas. While the Terai covers only 17 percent of the total land area of Nepal, more than half of the population lives in the region now (CBS, 2001).

Despite the fact that Terai holds only 10 percent of the total forests in Nepal, the forests are high-value and productive unlike the sparse, low-value, subsistence-based forests in the hills (Ghimire, 1998). Strategically, the Terai has been identified as the region with the greatest immediate economic potential for the forestry sector in Nepal (Mitchell, 2001). The continuous stretch of dense forests from east to all the way to the west of the country was popularly known as *Char Koshe Jhadi (*roughly translated as "four-mile strip", a misnomer though!*)*, which reminds of the vast forest resources existed in the region. Hence Terai remained as a prime source of government revenue from as early as the 18th century (Section 4). The Terai plains still possess about 487,300 ha of forestlands, which are predominated by high value hard-wood species such as Sal (*Shorea robusta*) (43 percent of total stem volume); a single mature Sal tree may fetch US $ 1000 or more (Winrock, 2002).

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[1] Both of these terms are used interchangeably in the literature and common usage. However, I have used 'Terai' throughout the paper.

[2] Though Terai can be distinguished into inner Terai and outer Terai, here Terai refers to mean both areas.

Besides existence of high-value forests, Terai is also considered as the "grain basket" of Nepal due to high productivity of agriculture than anywhere in Nepal (Ghimire, 1998; Blaikie *et al.* 2000). Rice, jute, sugar cane, mustard, tobacco, herbs and spices are the main agricultural products from the Terai. The agricultural surplus, particularly the rice surplus (staple diet of most Nepalese) produced in the Terai not only support the food deficit hill regions of Nepal but are also exported to India (both legally and illegally). Thus, the importance of Terai for Nepalese economy is undoubtedly significant. However, increasing migration from the hills and India and the resulting pressure on the forestlands for agricultural expansion might hinder the capacity of Terai for sustainable contribution to the economy and the environment (Blaikie *et al.* 2000).
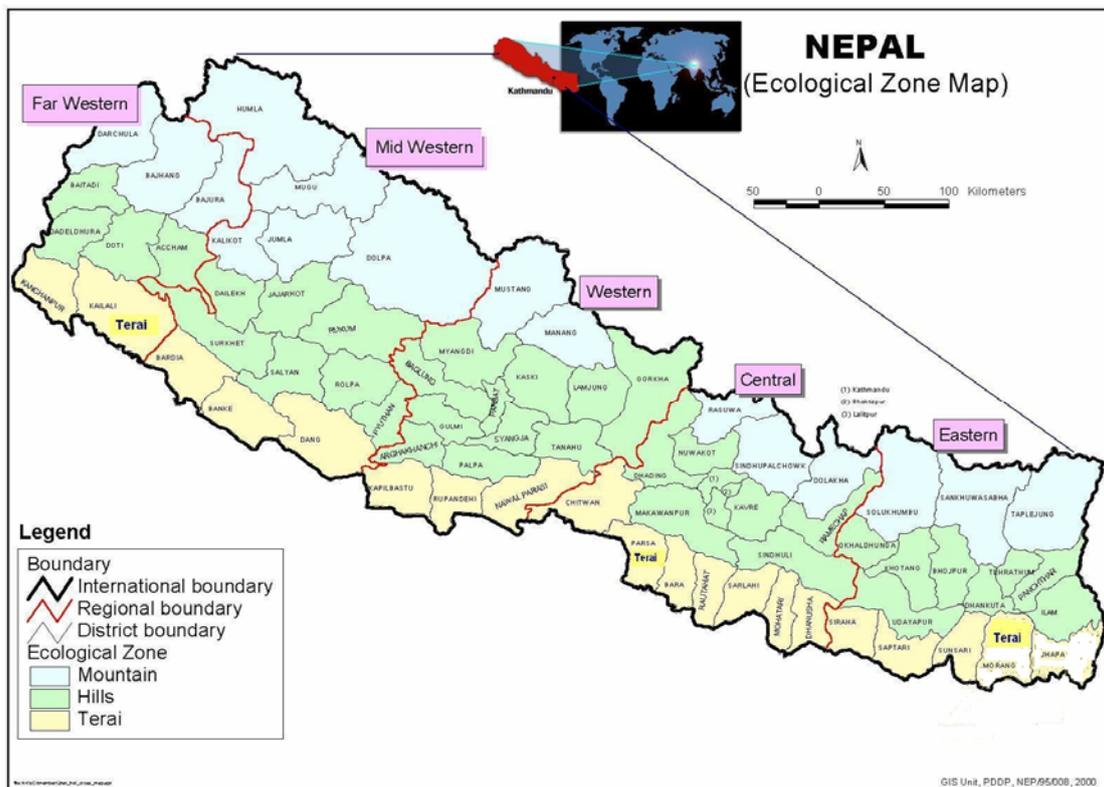

Figure 1. Map of Nepal showing three different regions: mountains, hills and Terai (relative position of Nepal in the world map in the inset)

Source: map uploaded and adapted from www.undp.org.np

3. Socio-economic heterogeneity and inequity in the Terai

To understand the implications on equity and sustainability issues amidst the history of forest politics in the Terai, it is essential to understand first of all the nature of the heterogeneous Terai society with conflict of interests and imbalance of power relations among various diverse groups. In general, the inequities in Terai society mostly reflects the inequalities and differences prevalent in the social and spatial structure of Nepalese society, which is highly stratified in terms of class, income, caste, religion, gender and age. Though there are over 103 castes and ethnicities, at least 92 different languages, and over 10 different religions in Nepal (CBS, 2001, 2004), Nepal remained as the Hindu kingdom (with Hindu monarch as a supreme ruler) until very recently when the reinstated parliament declared it as a secular state.[3]

Traditionally, people from the top two castes based on Hindu hierarchy - Brahmins and Chhetriyas - have constantly shared power with the ruling monarchs and have largely dominated and benefited from the state bureaucracy since the beginning of the state of Nepal. The feudal or semi-feudal nature of Nepalese society with domination of one particular class in the socio-political life and the influence of privilege and patronage, perpetuation of regional and ethnic inequality, and caste discrimination have further aggravated the inequitable power relations.

> "(A)fter unification, Nepal has been under one form or the other of autocratic rule based on feudal hereditary power. The feudal rule aimed to strangle popular sovereignty by putting into practices of untouchability, patriarchy, Hindu domination, and promotion of hill nationalism aimed at excluding the citizens of the Terai.…Kathmandu became the state for the rulers and the rest of the nation was mere colony. ..the feudal rulers in one way or the other kept the state power in their own grips. The ruling system and the mode of production adopted by it did not match with the fast-evolving level of the people's consciousness and the need for providing for the basic necessities of the life for the majority of the people…..the past rule and

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[3] As Nepal made international headlines recently during the 'Spring Revolution' of last April in which increasing anti-king demonstrations and 19-day nationwide general strike forced the King to reinstate the parliament and agree to the roadmap of the major parties for the political future of Nepal. The new government has now started talks with the Maoists with ceasefire in effect, which will now concentrate on the constituent assembly elections.

production relations have created deep divisions among people. There are people who can afford to travel to moon and there is the large majority who are not able to eke out basic livelihoods even after toiling for 18 hours a day. Poverty, illiteracy and backwardness are deep-seated in Nepali society." [4] (Roka, 2006)

The composition of Terai society is complex with some indigenous groups (mainly the Tharus) and increasing migrants from the hills of Nepal and from India. Except the hill migrants, the people of Terai are commonly known as Madhesis ("people of the plains") whose ancestors have long lived in the Terai and who share language and culture with those living south of the India border (Skar, 2005). The caste Hindus (Indo-Aryan origin) from India are believed to have started migrating towards the end of the second millennium BC and chose the bases of the hills on the northern edge of the Terai as their preferable destination, probably because it was easier to clear forest for agriculture there than nearer the Ganges across the border in India (Whelpton, 2005; Skar, 1999).

Although Madheshis are often regarded as a single group, these include caste Hindus, Muslim minority and various ethnic groups, including the original inhabitants, the Tharus. The Tharus were the main original inhabitants of the Terai living there as forest-dwellers and making their living as hunter-gatherers since they were immune to *aul or aulo*, a virulent form of malaria prevalent in the region until the 1950s (Whelpton, 2005). While the migrants in increasing numbers thereafter bought large tracts of valuable agricultural land, the Tharus became the minority and are still marginalised and severely disadvantaged in many ways.

Historically and even today, in the public discourse, Madheshis are naturally felt to be outsiders with an identity of the "other Nepali" and are excluded from all spheres of national life.[5] As will be clear later (Section 4), the development of the sense of

[4] Scholars have highlighted the rise of resistance movements, including the success of the Maoists movement in Nepal to its ability to capture the increasing inequity of Nepalese society and the continuous apathy to the problems of ethnic minorities by the State (see for example, Karki and Seddon, 2003; Gellner, 2003). Despite political changes in Nepal, notably in 1951 and 1990 establishing multi-party democracy, albeit briefly, real change in the conservative, feudal structure of Nepalese society did not really take place, contributing to the frequent rise of resistance and popular movements (for example, Maoists movement since 1996 and the most recent popular movement of 2006).

[5] The Parbatiyas or Pahadis ("people of the mountains and hills"), who were the original speakers of Nepali were and still are the ones who dominated/ dominate the state politics and bureaucracy.

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common identity and hence Nepali nationalism has largely meant the sense of belonging to the hills rather than the Terai. Furthermore, the rhetoric and portrayal of Nepali nationalism by the State as the dominance of Nepali language and the loyalty to the ruling elites mainly benefited hill Brahmins and Chhetriyas who share common cultural characteristics, spoke same language and were generally loyal to the successive rulers. However, this form of Nepali nationalism in particular excluded the people of Terai, most of whom spoke other languages than Nepali (mainly Awadhi, Bhojpuri and Maithili, Maithili being spoken by largest number of speakers in Nepal after Nepali itself) and were linked closely to North Indian culture (Whelpton, 2005). The worst form of exclusion for many Madhesis is manifested by the continuous apathy and neglect of successive Nepali governments to solve the citizenship problem. Majority of the Madhesis have migrated and long lived in Terai for generations, however, many have not got Nepalese citizenship yet due to the cumbersome naturalisation process laid down in Nepalese law (Whelpton, 2005; Ghimire, 1998). However, finding out who is or is not a "genuine" Nepali among the Madhesis in Terai is also difficult due to the existence of centuries-old porous border between India and Nepal, thus inviting easy and continuous migration.

Among Terai inhabitants, only a handful of those who were successful in forging alliances with the ruling elites captured the advantages from the State. The wealthiest Tharus and Madhesis with political connections across Nepal and neighbouring Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh felt relatively secure whereas ordinary Tharus and Madhesis peasants were preoccupied with day-to-day economic survival (Skar, 1999; Whelpton, 2005). Only few well-off Tharu landlords were able to improve their social status by what Krauskopf calls "Sanskritizing" their life style (using Brahmin priests, giving up pork and alcohol, preaching the Hindu monarch etc) (Krauskopf, 2003; Gellner, 2003: 17).[6]

Though the Terai people were neglected in the national domain, the region as such still got enough privileges mainly due to the naturally advantageous easy terrain of Terai, unlike the steep hills and rugged mountains of Nepal. The extensive road networks and other physical facilities and services in the Terai (mainly the eastern

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[6] See Krauskopff (2003) for the discussion on the history and origin of Tharu Welfare Society, an organization set up by a bunch of wealthier Tharus largely to serve their own self-interest than to work for the welfare of ordinary Tharus.

Terai) are impressive despite the Kathmandu-centric development patterns in Nepal (Whelpton, 2005; Gellner, 2003). Kathmandu's special position can be easily noticed by a traveller visiting Nepal for trekking or sight-seeing purpose. Here a quote from the World Bank report would suffice:

> "Urban Kathmandu Valley and the rest of Nepal, in effect, are two separate and unequal countries… In one, around the capital, where around 5 percent of the population live, the incidence of poverty is around 4 percent and illiteracy is 24 percent; in the rest of the country, poverty is ten times as high and the chance of being literate almost three times lower." (World Bank Report, December 1998; quoted in Whelpton, 2005: 225).

The rural-urban difference on income inequality is generally worse in Terai than elsewhere. The concentration of development and services in the cities, mainly the Kathmandu valley highlights the general bias against the rural areas though Nepal is mainly a country of villages. Even if some small towns along the highways are considered as semi-urban areas, only 12 percent of the population live in the cities: majority of the population live in villages with farming as their main source of livelihood (CBS, 2001, 2004; Whelpton, 2005).

As a reflection of east-west inequality[7] and biased development policy of the State concentrating on Kathmandu and the eastern region (the 'core') while neglecting the west (mainly the unprivileged Karnali region as the 'periphery'), the western Terai districts suffer from greater-than-usual inequality in terms of all kinds of development and health indicators (CBS, 2003a, 2003b). The society is still feudal with a high concentration of landless agricultural labours working as bonded labour *(Kamaiya)* or seasonal agricultural labours *(Haliya)* (Skar, 1999). On the other hand, in the eastern Terai cities, the level of development is to some extent comparable to the Nepalese capital.

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[7] It is interesting to note here that the Maoists movement originally started in 1996 from the remote hill district of Rolpa (still considered as the Maoist headquarters) in the Western Nepal. Many see this as a consequence of State's continuous failure to address the sufferings of the disadvantaged areas of the Western region.

4. The History of Forests Politics in the Terai

The equity and sustainability issues in Terai forestry can not be understood in historical and socio-political vacuum, therefore it is important to know the socio-political and environmental history of Terai, which could explain how the past forest politics and policy has still influenced the present day forest management in the region.

It will be clear from the discussions that follow, in the past, the State and ruling elites remained the major (only) stakeholder of the Terai forests, exploiting the forests disproportionately for various purposes. The ruling monarchs and the Ranas used Terai forests to generate funds and resources mainly from exploitation of natural resources in the Terai in the form of forests and agricultural lands to pacify and co-opt political rivals and keep the large army as they needed to contend with rebellion, treachery and uprisings (Regmi, 1977). A closer look into the political economy of Nepal in historical perspective suggests that only a few ruling elites at the centre and the local elites created thereafter as a result of autocratic political system and feudal social structure were able to benefit disproportionately from the Terai forestry. The major beneficiaries from the Terai forestry included members of the royal family and ruling elites, repatriated Nepalese, ex-servicemen, politicians and individuals having good connections with the royal palace and higher authorities in the civil service (Regmi, 1977; Ghimire 1998).

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the surplus from agricultural production and forestry was largely channelled toward the maintenance of a military establishment with the objective of territorial expansion after the unification of Nepal. During the Rana (1846-1951), forests were used for maintenance of their parasitic aristocracy and state bureaucracy. Though the oligarchic regimes of the Shahs[8] and Ranas before 1951 always depended on select classes of society for the subsistence of their authority, the practice continued thereafter in the post-1951 era even when the

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[8] The hereditary Shah dynasty of monarchs in Nepal has been now ruling the country for more than 238 years with Prithvi Narayan Shah, an ambitious king from the State of Gorkha unified several small principalities into the Kingdom of Gorkha (present day Nepal) and started ruling the country. Gurkha, a mis-spelt English word now, attached to the original name of Nepal as a Gorkha kingdom, is still used for Nepalese soldiers serving in the British and Indian Army.

regulation of forestry sector was managed by the Forest Department.[9] The legacy of this intense exploitation and inequitable stake of the State and select classes of people in the Terai forestry still remain unchanged despite the context of changing forest management practices in the form of community forestry in most hills of Nepal (since 1978). The post-1991 period remained an important era in the recognition and development of community forestry in the hills, however, the forestry politics and policy in the Terai in particular remain unchanged, retaining the image of Terai forestry as an inequitable and unsustainable sector.

On the basis of major turning-point events in the history of Nepal and subsequent change in the forestry policy, the history of (State) exploitation (and management) of Terai forests can be conveniently divided into three distinct phases[10]:

4.1 Pre-1951 (Past History)

Before the establishment of the Gorkha kingdom (pre-1768), Nepal was divided into many small principalities across the country, including in the Terai region, which were usually involved in fighting with each other. The frequent fighting distracted these principalities to concentrate on any form of sustained and organized extraction of forest resources from the Terai. After the Gorkha ruler Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered Kathmandu and laid foundations for unified kingdom in 1768, he continued his "unification" ambition by further conquering most of the hill areas and parts of the Terai. During the Gorkha kingdom phase, the forests in the Terai were still retained as a form of natural defensive barrier against any enemy aggression, mainly by pre-colonial Indian rulers and British invasion (Whelpton, 2005). To maintain the integrity of Terai forests as a natural defence, royal decrees were ordered for decolonization of the Terai in various occasions, notably in 1817, 1824 and 1826, which would ban settlements and cultivation (Gautam, 1993; Regmi, 1977). Guthman

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[9] The reinforcement of patron-client relationship in the feudal Nepalese society as a legacy from the Ranas and Shah rulers (Malla 2001; Ghimire, 1998: 120-123); the existence of *afno manchhe* (one's own people) culture in Nepal (Bista, 1991) and the culture of nepotism and favouritism are seen to be responsible for hindering real positive changes in Nepalese society, state bureaucracy and general public life. Like in other sectors, these factors also have had impacts on the forest bureaucracy, as only few selected individuals could participate and benefit from the Terai forestry (Malla, 2001).

[10] The history of Nepalese forestry has been studied previously by some authors, for e.g. Hobley (1996); Malla (2001); Gautam *et al.* (2004); Acharya (2002). Malla (2001) provides a comprehensive and critical analysis of the environmental history of forestry in Nepal. He argues that a set of alliances and patron-client relations have generally persisted in the forestry sector despite a number of important policy changes over the years.

(1997) considers this as a contradictory stance of the State environmentalism and selective forest politics in Nepal: "(a)t least as far back as the sixteenth century the state created incentives to convert hill forests to agriculture in order to reap land taxes,...(on the other hand,)…protected the Terai forests as military security until the late nineteenth century" (Guthman, 1997:47).

After the "unification" of Nepal, the ruling Shah monarchs began granting large tracts of land (including some part of Terai forests) lavishly with exemption of tax to select classes of people and political favourites (Regmi, 1977). This measure, a tactics also used by the Ranas, was necessary in order to consolidate the position of the rulers. In addition, Terai forests provided a source of revenue to keep the increasing military required for continuous geographical expansion of the kingdom and also provided opportunities for agricultural expansion in some selected areas after forest clearing.

From 1846 to1951, when Nepal was run by hereditary chief ministers, the Ranas superseding the monarchy pursued a deliberate policy of stagnation and isolation, building grand palaces for themselves while investing little in public works (Whelpton, 2005)[11]. The Ranas exploited Terai forests as a major resource to award to their trusted adherents and political opponents alike. Certain amount of Terai lands were granted on temporary or permanent basis in the form of either *jagir*[12] (the land assigned to a state servant temporarily in lieu of salary)*, birta* (permanent tax-free landholdings) or *guthi* (revenue-free landholdings for religious bodies).[13] Majority of the land holdings in the Terai were appropriated as *birta* by the Ranas themselves. It was estimated that by the first half of the twentieth century, the ruling classes in Nepal possessed almost half of the cultivated land (Regmi, 1977: 186), out of which three leading Rana families alone owned as much as 227,00 acres (quoted in Ghimire, 1998: 34).

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[11] Though Nepal was never colonised by any foreign power, the oligarchic regime of Ranas made Nepal a colony, suppressing education and cutting of the country from of the world. Nepalese people have had "all the troubles of colonialism with none of the benefits" during the Ranas (DFID, 1999: 14).

[12] The word *jagir* is still in use in modern Nepali to refer to a salaried government post.

[13] These land grants covered both the cultivated and uncultivated areas. In the uncultivated areas (mainly forested areas), the grant holders were expected to encourage peasants to clear forests and bring it under cultivation and increase the land revenue generation from renting. For historical analysis of different systems of landownership, taxations and property rights in land in Nepal, see Regmi (1977).

The Ranas sought to strengthen their control in the Terai by introducing a new category of officials known as *jimidars*[14] to take collect revenues from lands and crops. These *jimidars* were predominantly the hill men, Madheshis were never a part of inner core of the state's administrative and political structure (Section 2). The *jimidars* with the control of local peasants and close ties to the Ranas at the centre later became locally-based elites, who "long remained the main bastions of Rana rule in Nepal" (Regmi, 1977: 225). The Ranas also encouraged the hill people to migrate into Terai. However, since the plains were an alien environment, and the unbearable heat and endemic malaria made it further unattractive to migrate, the *jimidars* helped to bring a majority of cultivators into Terai from India (Whelpton, 2005; Regmi, 1977; Ghimire, 1998). With this, the Ranas opened up new forested land for agricultural expansion and thus generated increasing revenues from land taxes and agricultural surplus for the ruling class and the military.

The Terai forests were also exploited for the supply of timber across India. As the British India expanded railway systems across the border in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the Terai was the ready supplier of hardwood for railway sleepers (Ghimire, 1993: 173). In an effort to appease British colonialists and thereby retain their grip in power, the Ranas set some areas of Terai forests as natural reserve, even taking their British counterparts for hunting in the Terai, besides sending massive exports of timber and agricultural surpluses to British India (Regmi, 1977; Malla, 2001). Therefore, these natural reserves were initially developed to protect the game in order to satisfy recreational interests of aristocracy, rather than for wildlife or forest conservation *per se* (Ghimire, 1992: 190). Parts of Chitwan and Bardia (both in Terai) designated as hunting reserves for trophy-hunting by the Ranas now remain as examples of biodiversity conservation in the form of Royal Shukla Wildlife Reserve in Bardia and Royal Chitwan National Park in Chitwan.

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[14] Similar officials in the hills were called *'talukdars'*.

4.2 Post-1951 (Recent History)

The next phase of forests politics in Nepal started in 1951 after the end of Rana regime.[15] Regmi (1977: 197) argues that social and economic equity became the directive principles of state policy in Nepal in 1951 for the first time ever in its history. The political change saw initiation of some major reforms by the new government on two main sectors: land and forestry, which formed important pillars of social and economic life of Nepal. *Birta, jagir* and *jimidari* forms of landownership were abolished. Through the Private Forest Nationalisation Act (1957), most forests were nationalised and brought under State control, the system was strengthened by the first elected Congress government (1959-60). This nationalisation of the forests under the Forest Department was seemed necessary since some forests had previously been held as personal property of the Ranas and the king's own brothers (Whelpton, 2005). However, short-term impact of introduction of central management of forests proved negative since some forests were cleared in the Terai by private individuals converting them rapidly into agricultural land so as to evade the new provision. Moreover, the recently established Forest Department was unable to act and enforce rules effectively, mainly because of its inefficiency, shortage of enough staffs and increasing corruption (Malla, 2001).

In the post-1951 period, the Terai timber remained an important source of revenue for export in India. Emphasis was given to exploitation of the Sal forests and nationalisation of the forests in Terai provided the government with a major source of income (Malla, 2001). The upper hand of the State as the major stakeholder of Terai forestry further consolidated after 1960 takeover of King Mahendra, when he abruptly dismissed the Congress government and took direct control of the government under the party-less Panchayati system that lasted for 30 years until its fall in 1990. During Panchayat, the introduction of controversial resettlement projects into the Terai from the mid-1960s onwards was closely linked to the opportunities for timber extraction for sale in India (Ghimire, 1998: 173). As a result of this, there was a massive deforestation in the region, losing 25 percent of its forest cover in just fourteen years

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[15] After the end of Rana rule, the sovereignty of the monarchy was restored, and anti-Rana rebels in the Nepali Congress Party formed the government. Nepal started to enter in the international stage with membership of the United Nations in 1955 and thereafter establishment of bi-lateral relationships with the countries of the West. Nepal also started to receive grants and loans to use in various sectors of development.

from 1964-65 (Whelpton, 2005). Another driving factor was the proximity of Indian timber market, which still has been a contributing factor for deforestation in Terai. Though only limited timber-sales were licensed legally, a great deal of wood and timber was smuggled into and sold in India through various routes, the existing river, road and human transport systems (Ghimire, 1998:149). Moreover, the construction of East-West Highway and the linking of other urban centres with Terai made the felling of trees for commercial timber more profitable. However, as the price of wood and timber across the border in India was considerably higher than in Nepal, the Indian market remained attractive (*ibid.*). The forest officials and district level administration officials would not allow people to collect fallen trees and rotten wood for household use but the same officials would directly or indirectly involve in illegal logging and sale of timber (Malla, 2001).

The eradication of malaria,[16] increasing population pressure in the hills and opening of the previously inaccessible places made the Terai plains more attractive for new settlements. Due to the high production potential of land and the greater economic prospects in the Terai, land became one of the most sought-after commodity for which many ruling elites and royal members sought to possess land (both cultivated and forested) in the region. It was reported that as many as 31 families associated with the royal palace obtained 2,108 ha of land and other palace officials obtained land ranging from 17 to 136 ha each (quoted in Ghimire, 1998: 65-66).

In the 1950s and 1960s, a great majority of migrants moved into central and eastern Terai whereas from 1970s onwards, the western Terai also became an important destination due to more land availability from forest clearance. The political context in which such migration took place is worth mentioning here. As most of the Terai inhabitants, the Madhesis with Indian roots were more used to multi-party democracy and liberal policy across the border, as new migrants they found themselves restrained in a new repressive political climate in Nepal. Therefore, discontent and dissidence grew up naturally in the Terai than elsewhere in Nepal. In fact, popular opposition to the Rana regime had started and grown in Eastern Terai town of Biratnagar in the

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[16] After a successful pilot project in 1953 by the World Health Organisation, malaria eradication programme began in 1954 in the Terai and some parts of mid-hills and by 1960s, the threat of malaria was significantly reduced in the Terai (Whelpton, 2005; Ghimire, 1998).

1940s and later in other urban pockets of Terai and Kathmandu. Similarly, the Terai saw much of the growing opposition to the royal rule under the Panchayat system (Whelpton, 2005). Hence the State helped to encourage (both officially and unofficially) hill people (who were believed to be more loyal to the Hindu monarch and Panchayat system) to migrate and encroach forest areas for new settlements and dwellings in an effort to politically integrate the Terai people into the Panchayat system (Ghimire, 1998). For the very reason, even repatriates, mostly Nepalese of hill origin serving in the British and India army, were encouraged to return with provision of land in the Terai. By mid-1970s, more than 7,000 ex-servicemen households were able to get land in Jhapa, Sunsari, Rupandehi and Banke districts (quoted in Ghimire, 1998: 65).

When the official resettlements plan was initially started in 1955, it was targeted to ordinary farmers who were allotted some parts of lands. However, despite a ban on sale for initial three years, many plots were sold to the members of Kathmandu elite, who became absentee landlords and thus put a grip on the landholdings. On the other hand, a large numbers of *sukumbasis (*squatters) cleared forests for settlements and cultivation without official authorisation, however, their "illegal" action was not checked. Though land reform and redistribution have continuously dominated the political agenda,[17] the reason behind the reluctance to act on the problem of *sukumbasis* can be understood from the hidden self-interest of the local politicians who would still want to see them as squatters as they represented their "vote banks". These "illegal" settlers were also used to raise money for local forestry officials, in addition to the money generated from the sold wood and timber from the settlement area. In fact, the local forestry officials would encourage such settlements and would not report it to the Forest Department at the centre until "a large permanent village got transformed from what was an initial tentative settlement scheme" in the "land officially designated as forests in paper" (Ghimire 1993: 71).

To understand the pressure on Terai forests from migration and the resulting forest-land conflict, it is worth mentioning here the way peasantry was operating. Most of

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[17] The slogan "land to the tiller" was not only taken up by the communists but by most other political parties, including the centrist-left socialist Nepali Congress party. Even after the political change of 1990, Sukumbasi Commission was formed to solve the problem of *sukumbasi*, it was allegedly reported that the commission was used to provide free lands to party-activists after clearing some forested lands in the Terai.

the peasants were landless or owned a very small piece of land whereas some few large landholders owned big farms. Due to this unequal land holding structure, many peasants were paying up to 80 percent of their main crop as rent in the Terai in the 1950s and 1960s. The 1964 Land-Reform Act set land rents at 50 percent of the gross product (later amended to 50 percent of the main crop), which still made the position of tenants insecure in the time the crop failed as they were also required to bear the costs of cultivation *(ibid.)*. Successive political changes in various times thus have promised to reform the landholdings structure thus reducing the amount of holdings the owner can keep, however, real changes seem difficult to happen.[18]

The rhetoric and sloganeering believed to be coined by King Mahendra "*Hariyo Ban Nepalko Dhan*" (green forests are Nepal's wealth), during the "Panchayat Raj" and spread proudly by the Forest Department through national radio and pamphlets highlights the importance of the forests as perceived by the State for the Nepalese economy. However, general perception of the common people was that the State and the ruling elites disproportionately benefited from the forestry sector (mostly from the Terai forests) as the same phrase was ridiculed by the public as *"Hariyo Ban Mahendra Sarkarko Dhan"* (green forests are King Mahendra's wealth) (Ghimire, 1998). Furthermore, alleged reports of handover of large number of felling permits to finance the Panchayat campaign in 1980 did not help to reduce the monopolistic image of State's supremacy on Terai forests (Whelpton, 2005).[19] Additionally, the sole government agency with the monopoly to extract and sell timber, the Timber Corporation of Nepal used to sell timber to selected customers at a fifth to a third of the market rate and was abused by the officials working for it.

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[18] For example, the efforts to regulate land started as early as Chandra Shumsher's time during Rana rule. Land reform efforts were continued at various times, notably during Congress government (1957); King Mahendra's direct rule (1964); Deuba government (2001-02). King Mahendra's 1964 Land Reform Act imposed ceilings of 16.25, 2.5 and 4 hectares in the Terai, Kathmandu valley and hills respectively. Sher Bahadur Deuba's 2001-02 government put a bill through parliament to reduce the ceilings on land holdings from 17 to 7 hectares in the Terai and from 4.2 to 2.75 in the hills but was faced by opposition from a minority in Congress as too radical and rejected by UML as inadequate. UML had actually inquired the problem six years before that had recommended a flat 3-hectare ceiling. Still today after the political change of last April, land reform and redistribution is likely to be one of the major political agenda. On the other hand, the Maoist rebels, in the past, in their areas of control have confiscated large tracts of lands from the big landowners and redistributed it to local farmers for collective/communal agriculture.

[19] This referendum was held to decide whether to opt for multi-party system or reformed Panchayat. The outcome of the result was however marginally in favour of reformed Panchayat. Many believe that it was made possible by vote rigging and abuse of authority by the government.

When concern for environmental protection and conservation grew in the 1980s due to the increasing debate on the "Theory of Himalayan Degradation"[20], forest protection measures served only the private interests of senior bureaucrats and forestry officials of various levels who actually involved in organizing the management and commercial exploitation of forests (Ghimire, 1993: 175). The nationalisation of forests in the 1950s was reversed only in 1978 when community ownership and management of forests were recognised and established in the hills in an effort to save the declining forests and reduce the chances of "Himalayan degradation" (Gilmour and Fisher 1991). However, in the Terai, the State control of forests remained forever, taking more strict and forceful form when more national parks were created for conservation purpose. The protectionist approach of the State with conservation agenda did not however change its image as the sole exploiter of Terai forests, nor did it gain the trust from common people as the guardian of Terai forests (Malla, 2001).

4.3 Post-1990 (Present Forest Politics and Practice)

Having discussed the past (Section 4.1) and recent history (Section 4.2) of forests politics in the Terai, I will now turn to the present forest politics and practice in the region with its implications for equity and sustainability issues. It is now evident from the historical account of past forest politics that the continuous State control of Terai forests, its revenue-oriented approach and commercial interests, and the lack of proper forest management policy in the region contributed to the rapid transformation and degradation of Terai forests. Even today, the image of the State as the major stakeholder in the control of Terai forests has not changed despite opening up some areas for community and collaborative management. The upper hand of State in the forest politics and policy and the reinforcement of patron-client relationship in the Terai forestry (Ghimire, 1998; Malla, 2001) have further hindered the active forest management in the Terai. At the same time, illegal logging and cross-border

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[20] Around 1970s, the Himalayas became the focus of an intense environmental debate with assertions of 'environmental supercrisis' as claimed by the 'Theory of Himalayan degradation' (Eckholm, 1975; Myers, 1986). The theory claimed that Himalayas and its southern plains (i.e. the Terai) were heading towards an environmental catastrophe of epic proportions ultimately due to rapidly growing population (2-3 percent per year), intensification of agriculture, overgrazing and massive deforestation in the Nepal hills. This narrative of Himalayan degradation based on neo-Malthusian theory was later challenged (see for example, Ives and Messerli 1989; Thompson and Warburton 1985; Blaikie 1985) and an alternative body of literature emerged over the years focussing on socio-economic and political approaches to explain environmental change in Nepal (for example, see Blaikie 1985; Gilmour and Fisher 1991).

smuggling of Sal timber is continuing in an unsustainable and destructive way. This is mainly linked to little focus and attention Terai forestry have received in terms of its management despite considerable international and government interest focussed on the forestry sector in general and on community forestry in the hills in particular. [21]

The Forest Department and Forest Ministry still suffer from the historical legacy of corrupted image due to their increasing involvement in politicisation of the Terai forests and misuse for financial and political benefits. In the recent past, particularly during Panchayat and even in 1990s, there were alleged reports of Forest Minister personally involved in abuse of authority and malpractice since massive, illegal concessions could be handed out to the local contractors to win political favours, elections and make quick-money. However, there has not been any reported case of granting concession rights to multi-national logging companies so far: one of such attempts was resisted with huge public and media uproar. As a result, in 1996 the government had to drop its decision to grant a Finnish Company, Enso International, concession rights in some parts of Bara forests in Terai in the name of Bara Forest Management Plan.[22]

Most area of forests in Terai is still under the State's control with a monopoly on the harvesting and marketing of timber by its subsidiary, Timber Corporation of Nepal (TCN). Lately, although its domination has been removed, the sale of timber is still far from a free market situation.[23] Though the timber is currently shared 50:50 between TCN and District Forest Office, endemic corruption and mishandling of the collected revenue by the top officials are reported frequently.

National forests in the Terai are in the form of either protected areas or under government management. In the forests falling under protected areas and national

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[21] For a brief review of forestry sector in Nepal focussing on Terai forestry, see Satyal-Pravat (2004).

[22] Under the plan, Enso International in conjunction with three Nepali companies were going to be handed over 32430 hectares of Sal forests in Bara. The plan was offered as a 'pilot project' with the goal of extending similar initiatives across the Terai belt- incorporating eventually, about 300000 hectares of Nepal's remaining hardwood forests. It was also reported that FINNIDA was threatening to withdraw their aid programmes if these forests areas were not handed over to the Finnish Company. However, other stakeholders, particularly the poor people who depend on the forest resources for their livelihoods were not consulted before the management agreement. For details, see Shrestha and Britt (1997).

[23] A study supported by the World Bank recommended, among other things, that TCN be liquidated, however, a Cabinet decision in 2001 endorsed a recommendation to downsize TCN as an interim step rather than liquidate at this stage (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001).

parks, illegal logging and poaching of wildlife are common. While park boundaries are guarded by the Nepal Army with high security expenses for conservation, at the same time it has invited frequent park-people conflicts. In order to mitigate this, large sections of the forest in the vicinity of the park have been converted to Buffer Zone Community Forests (PPP, 2000). However, especially after 2000, mobilization of the army due to the increase in the Maoists' violence, political instability and royal takeover affected the conservation of the protected areas. Many districts of Terai – Parsa, Bara, Rautahat, Chitwan and Dang- saw a sharp rise in the incidents of logging (Bhat, 2005). Even now, taking advantage of the interim and transient nature of the current government, organized illegal logging and massive felling of trees have increased in the Terai (mainly in Kailali and Nepalgunj districts), even involving direct or indirect support of the local forest officials and some senior members of local FUGs Committee.[24]

It is worth mentioning here the approach and activities of the Maoists rebels in the Terai forests. When the Maoists expanded their violent tactics in the Terai (mainly in Sarlahi, Siraha, Nawalparasi, Kailali and Jhapa), some parts of the Terai forests (mainly in Churia hills) were used as a refuge or base for their activities. The forests also provided a source of income as they would sometimes take control of FUGs committee and/or control the timber trade (for e.g. in the case of Kailali district). Elsewhere, Maoists deliberately targeted ranger posts and forestry officials, giving the illegal loggers a free hand in cutting trees for timber. However, in some parts of Terai, the Maoists showed a conservation streak by hunting down timber poachers or regulating forest use.[25]

When it comes to the management of Terai forests, Terai forestry has been a very complex, hotly debated and controversial issue in Nepal.[26] While the NGOs and civil society want the handover of Terai forests for community management, the State wants to retain them under its own control (Baral, 2002). The position of international multi-lateral and bi-lateral donors in Terai forests has also been divided: some directly

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[24] *Kantipur* daily, June 2nd 2006

[25] For example, in Udayapur district, there were frequent reports of Maoists apprehending timber smugglers heading towards the border whereas in some areas they control the forests and regulate the forest products sale by slapping a fixed tax on the rare medicinal plants.

[26] *Pers. Comm.*.with Hemant Ojha, ForestAction, Kathmandu, 2006.

or indirectly supporting community management (mainly GTZ, CARE and DFID) whereas some supporting the government's protectionist approach for biodiversity conservation (SNV and WWF). In an attempt to come to a meeting point for multiple approaches of various stakeholders, the government has recently enforced a new policy of "co-management" (like the management of Indian forests under joint management model) in which district-level stakeholder consultations are conducted along with some provision for community forestry in the region (Nepal Government, 2000; MSFC, 2003). [27] In line with some of the provisions laid out in this policy, the government made a controversial decision through a Finance Ordinance (2003-04) that 40 percent of the sale of forest products from all the national forests handed over as community forests would be deposited in the government fund as revenue. Remaining 60 percent should be spent on forest protection, forest management, environment protection and activities related to local development. However, there was hue and cry among the Nepalese NGOs and civil society when this controversial decision was made (Satyal-Pravat, 2003).

Many, mainly the environment and development NGOs and civil society organisations in Nepal, accuse the government of using this revenue-oriented policy of co-management to safeguard its control over nation's valuable forest resources. Nepalese NGOs and Federation of Forests User Groups in Nepal (FECOFUN) have been long advocating for people's rights in Terai forests and pushing the government to handover the Terai forests to the local users under the policy framework of community forestry. They make the case that those forests that were handed over as community forests before this policy of co-management are by and large protected and managed much better than the earlier government-controlled situation, benefiting in several cases the poorest groups.

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[27] Currently, SNV, DFID, CARE –Nepal,WWF-Nepal are working with the government in the Terai. DFID and SNV have been working on collaborative forest management by setting up committees in Terai districts who could help prioritise forestry issues. However, they have not got very far. Livelihood and Forestry Programme (LFP) funded by DFID is completing strategic district forest plans in three Terai districts working with a District Forest Coordination Committee. WWF-Nepal is working with Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation on Terai Arc Landscape Programme from central Nepal to West of Nepal, whereas SNV is working in the Biodiversity Sector Programme for Siwalik and Terai Project. The work by GTZ-funded Churia Hills Community Forestry Project (ended in Dec, 2005) in the inner Terai is said to be quite effective in introducing community forestry into the Siwaliks of Terai. (Source: *Pers. Comm.* with Peter Neil, 2004; and James Bampton, 2005, DFID-Nepal).

However, there are some practical challenges to translate the success of community forestry in the hills to Terai. Community forestry in the hills is often regarded as one of the few notable success stories in the national context of poor public sector management, has been accredited with improving people's livelihoods on the one hand and conserving natural landscapes on the other. Furthermore, during this critical political juncture with no elected officials at present in the country over the last few years, community FUGs currently operating have remained as the only existing form of democratic governance in large parts of the country, albeit imperfect at times. [28]

Unlike hills, Terai has not a history of "community" for collective action (Section 2 and 4), let alone the history of community forest management, hence the challenge to support the creation of new institutions of community forest user groups. Larger forest sizes, recent settlements and problems in identifying and organizing user groups, existence of attractive timber market nearby across the border, together with wide-spread and organized illegal timber-felling, create additional obstacles in the way of community management in this region. The equity concerns among proximate and distant users also becomes a complex and prominent issue in the case of Terai as most of forests lie quite far away from the settlements, unlike the hill community forests where more readily identified local communities live near the forest patches (Chakraborty, 2001; Shepherd and Gill, 1999).

Due to these problems and the Forest Department's desire to maintain its control over high revenue forests, community forestry has been widespread only in hills while in the Terai, its take-off has been more problematic. The handover process has been slow (as of February 2005, out of total 13,300 FUGs formed across Nepal, only 1,477 are in the Terai) and has been stalling for the last few years (CFD, 2005). On the other hand, the stance of the government and some major donors to enforce co-management models for most of the Terai forests has been marred by active resistance and opposition from the community forestry lobby (mainly the Nepalese forestry NGOs

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[28] However, even in the community forestry in the hills, poor equity between the user groups and preponderance of local elites occupying major positions in the FUGs committees has been highlighted by various researchers (Malla, 2000; Malla *et al.*, 2003; Chhetri *et al.* 2001; Harper and Tarnowski, 2001). According to Harper and Tarnowski (2001: 43), community forestry has been a means by which "'elites are actually able to consolidate and legitimate their existing positions of authority within local arenas of power".

and civil society).[29]. This latest form of forest politics in Terai originating from conflict of interests among various stakeholders of Terai forestry thus highlights the complicated and complex case of Terai forestry. In some way, the present conflict can be understood as the perpetuation and reproduction of unequal power relations and inequitable distribution of costs and benefits from the forestry sector in Terai since its past and recent history.

Due to this, no further progress has been possible in terms of active forest governance as the government has not been able to do much without active support from other stakeholders. The government and donor-supported projects have in reality not been able to create any effective collaborative type of groups as yet, or engage actors in "transformative dialogues". Thus Terai forestry in Nepal at the moment is in a state of stagnation- moving nowhere and intervention is needed to establish appropriate institutional mechanisms that benefit the poor and marginalised and keep the resource intact forever. As the past and present forests politics have now been discussed, in this context of "impasse" in the Terai forestry, it is interesting to see how the general politics in the country in the changed political context will guide the future course of forest politics in Nepal.

5. Conclusion

This paper began by outlining and discussing the historical roots of the socio-economic inequalities amidst the past and recent history of forest politics in the Terai, which still have influenced the current forestry policy and practice in the region. The dominance and monopoly of the State in the forestry sector and thereby unequal distribution of the benefits flowing from the sector were the historical conditions for inequity in Terai forestry. Only relatively few people, particularly those who dominated the State machinery and power politics benefited from the Terai forestry whereas common Nepalese - most of who depended on farms and forests for their survival and livelihood - could not gain an equitable share of the benefits.

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[29] *Pers. Comm.* Hemant Ojha, ForestAction, 2006; and Peter Neil, DFID-Nepal, 2005.

Even today, the legacy of inequitable Terai forestry remains; it has actually helped to shape and influence the forests management and governance policy of the government in the region. The revenue from the forests continues to be a significant portion of the national income, which explains why the State always wanted and still wants to keep its major stake in the forests. Hence the sustainability aspect of the forestry policy thus can also be debated since the main motive of the State has always been to retain the monopoly of the region's valuable forests rather than actually preserve their ecological integrity. From the discussion on Nepal's political economy in the historical context it is also clear that old power relationships are still intact in all strata of Nepalese society, including the forestry sector. Over the last three centuries, the practice of exploitation of the Terai forests has been institutionalized firmly within the State bureaucracy. Hence the question of changing this power-structure to focus pro-actively on equity and ecological sustainability has become an important issue in Terai forestry.

It has been proposed that, if managed efficiently, the Terai natural forests could boost the local economy of poverty stricken areas and could also be one of the most significant revenue sources for Nepal, changing the cost-intensive forestry sector to an income and surplus sector. However, given the consequences of years of political instability and the continued reluctance of the State to engage in a democratic, participatory and inclusive governance mechanism, it is yet to be seen whether transparent, accountable and sustainable Terai forestry is achievable in the near future. The danger of retaining the main stake of the State with its commercial interest in timber extraction without promoting a suitable governance framework involving all other stakeholders, is that Nepal will squander the Terai forest resources with no long-term benefit to the country and its people.

With the community forestry approach dominating the management policy in the hills and the same approach being pursued in some areas of Terai with increasing demands to open up some more areas for community management (mainly by the NGOs and civil society), it is interesting to see how the equity and sustainability objectives of community forestry in the Terai are achieved given the context of forest politics in the region as discussed in this paper. It cannot be taken for granted that any forest management policy such as community forestry would automatically deliver

environmental sustainability and equity or vice versa. As the community forestry approach has been used as a tool for promoting sustainable livelihood and environment management, it is timely to reflect critically on the extent to which equity and ecological sustainability are achieved. In this context at the heart of my further study involving fieldworks in Nepal will be the question of whether these goals have a compatible or conflicting relationship. Analysis of the environmental and socio-economic consequences of community forestry in the Terai will offer a rich body of material to apply to answering these wider questions.

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