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THE WOUNDS OF NEGLECT

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Background

Politics and development without reforms are pointless. In their absence, social and economic turmoil collectively provide a backdrop to justify armed struggle. Of biological resources and their conservation processes, it decimates human resources and their productivity, with many forms of community impairment. This has happened in Nepal. The purpose of this paper is to describe the state of insurgency in Nepal that may endanger linkages of biodiversity conservation.

After the 1990 Constitution of Nepal guaranteed a multi-party democracy, it was thought the change would do good to the well being of Nepal's rural societies (Gurung, 1999). However, the state failed to deliver societal progress and justice to rural poor. As political parties became Kathmandu-centered, its force was spent to win the numbers game in the parliament. Elected lawmakers merely became extension agents making the parliament unpromising and partisan interference ruined state institutions (Panta, 2000). Meanwhile, the government spending over runs its budget with ineffective programs and wasteful spending, suggesting widespread corruption. All these together with hunger and neglect have led the rural poor to believe in the arm struggle that assured them freedom from the bondage of poverty and social injustice. Therefore, the movement is intertwined between social and economic issues, produced and sustained by failed development (Pandey, 1999).

In the early 1990s, the United People's Front (*Sangyukta Jana Morcha*), became the third largest party, which would split into two before the 1994 mid-term elections, renouncing parliamentary politics. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), the first splinter group, then organized its own political and military fronts with 40 - point demands. The other faction chose to disband. In 1996, the Maoists began their armed struggle in the far-western districts of Rukum, Rolpa, Jajarkot, and Salyan, which are known for their difficult terrain and neglect. These food-deficit districts are the worst in Nepal, where people are forced to migrate into India each year as food runs out. As of now, the Maoists have spread out throughout Nepal.

Is Insurgency New ?

All neighboring Indian states that share boundaries with Nepal, have had a fair share of insurgency in them. Of these, northeast India (west Bengal, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Nagaland, Manipur Meghalaya, and Mizoram States) have had a long strife connected with ethnicity, governance and development (Verghese, 1996). The geo-political basins between the lower Ganges – Bramhaputra and the upper Yangtze which include northeast India, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Burma, have a large identity crisis with over 30 indigenous armed groups. Leaders of these groups have entered Nepal one or more time for transitory refuge as the border walk is free and wide open. For Nepal, two reminders are important because of loss of lives within Nepali-speaking communities and carryover effects on forest resources: 1) The 1986 - 87 violence in and around Darjeeling District, which was more political and less ethnic; and 2) the on-going reassertion of cultural identity over a large influx of immigrants in Assam – Bhutan area, to grasp the economic development of natural resources such as gas deposits and forests. Obviously, insurgency makes forests vulnerable. For example, all 11 reserve forest along the Assam-Nagaland State boundary have been denuded by timber lobby and smugglers and the northeast India lost 900 km^2 of prime forest in two years (1993 – 95) (Verghese, 1996). Having such colossal mishaps at its door, Nepal knew what was in the offing in the event of failure of societal justice.

Costs of Violence

The loss from insurgency in Nepal, adds up to 10 percent ($ 512 million) of the GDP, which include infrastructures, industrial production, trade and tourism. The insurgents have attacked everything from army garrisons, police stations, banks, hydropower plants, and telecom stations to schools, community houses, forest offices and health posts. Of the 3,995 village development committees (VDC) under 75 districts in Nepal, which are basic administrative units, one third are severely affected. Loss of human lives is another incomprehensive reckoning. As hundreds of villagers have been either mutilated or murdered and countless

resigned from village and district level committees for fear of persecution, the insurgency has its toll on the villages, farmlands, and forests. Thousands of those who could afford a little more, have fled to nearby district towns and Kathmandu. Others work as laborers in India and elsewhere. In villages, women are the only work force left, over worked in their houses and farms. All these signal the beginning of a void in community participation and managing common property resources.

Pervasive Poverty

In Nepal, corruption has become integral to political landscape, which seriously undermines development. In this context, elected politicians in any decision-making body, become real threat to good governance. With the coming of political pluralism, the state increasingly ignored or discounted corruption because its apparatus had mustered a rent-seeking attitude (Guru-Gharana, 1996). Likewise, fraudulent activities have engulfed both public and private sectors. Therefore, the growing volume of aid money that has been channeled into 'governance' activities, may not help as hoped. For example, a few months back, the minister and state minister of the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation, battled each other for a larger share of illicit timber-felling. To finish even, the state minister went public alleging his supervisor (the minister) for accepting a bribe worth of $2,600 from a parliamentarian who asked him to override irregularities (Anonymous, 2002). Under the state of emergency, both were forced to resign because the media flared and flapped towards the ruling party. Many such undoing have ruined the 12 - year multiparty democracy, with a catch of 10 million people in abject poverty.

Mixing Poverty with Biodiversity

The examples on the relationship between poverty and biodiversity conservation are few where stern activities are potentially responsible for incidence of poverty because of large-scale displacement of native people and subsequent deprivation of economic opportunities. Nepal distinctly holds opposing views from these scenarios. A recent drive by donor agencies to alleviate poverty instead of biodiversity has become a grave concern because they have reasoned that poverty alleviation will result in biodiversity conservation. This is contentious. Incidence of poverty in Nepal, is connected with issues of good governance, economic freedom and lack of true participation. Therefore, poverty alleviation adheres more to the freedom of choice (Sen, 1999), suggesting social constraints are the biggest hindrance and the remedy is outside the domain of biodiversity conservation.

It is well understood that biodiversity is a key element to sustainable development because all poor depend on natural resources. Undermining management of biological resources including forests, which are the basis for subsistence living, may marginalize community-based governance and emancipate participation. Therefore, investment in conserving biodiversity for development, holds much more prospect than connecting it with poverty. Also, linking causally the two issues of different origins may result a greater loss for both rural poor and biodiversity (Redford & Sanderson, 2002).

More Degraded Forests

Nepal's forest cover has decreased from 37.4% to 29% (DFRS,1999) — decimation of some 12,353 km^2 of forests. Despite having 74 district forest offices, 92 forest area offices, and 698 range posts under 5 different administrative regimes, forest degradation continues. Loss of forest cover is complex because encroachment and illicit tree felling are intertwined with local politics, state machinery, timber lobby groups and smugglers. In this context, forests are further aggravated by the insurgency. According to the unpublished Department of Forest report, the Maoists have destroyed 9 (7%) district offices, 33 (31%) area offices and 142 (21%) range posts. In sum, forests in 27 districts are identified as insurgent 'hotspots' and 25 districts are affected (fig. 1). As insurgency has brought more illicit tree felling and timber smuggling, a further loss in forest will not surprise analysts. But its implications will bear large, long-term scars of both environmental degradation and lost opportunities in conservation.

Community and Conservation

In rural settings, community forests and conservation areas are the finest examples of forest management regimes that have progressed from the state to communities ensuring protection of rights, bearing responsibilities and sharing of benefits.

The impact of insurgency have been so much in the wrong that it will be difficult even to guess the extent of damage in social capital to maintain biodiversity and agriculture production. Although a full length information is awaited, a large proportion of the 10,969 community forest user groups benefiting 1,196,199 households, may have different levels of management problems and/or crisis arising from the insurgency. In addition, the on-going conflict connected with logging benefits and buying-off registration processes to manage forests, may decimate its social strength which took decades of persistence to build. For now, steering a cohesive move amongst rural communities and the state will be crucial to demonstrate that resources will not be degraded as the viewpoint of community forestry is sustainable use. In this regard, it is important to note that community forestry has sustained management practices in some 8,473 km^2 of forest (Sharma, 2002)

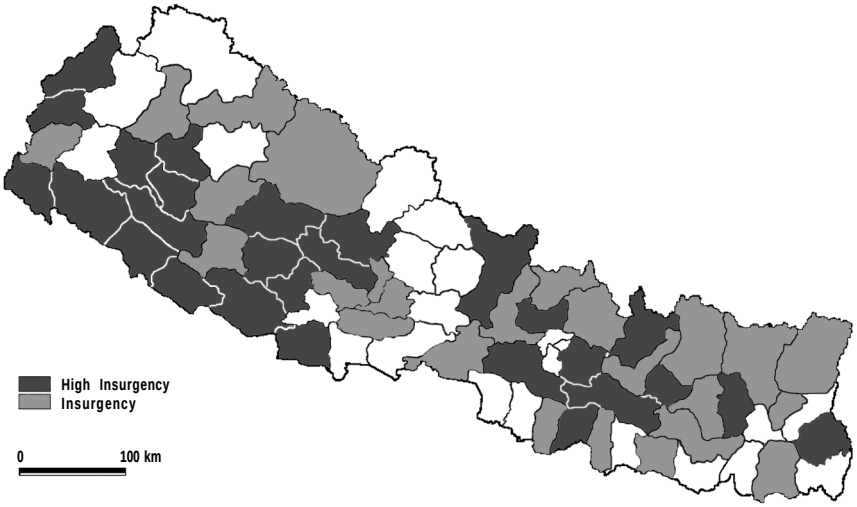

Figure 1. Insurgency in district-level forest areas.

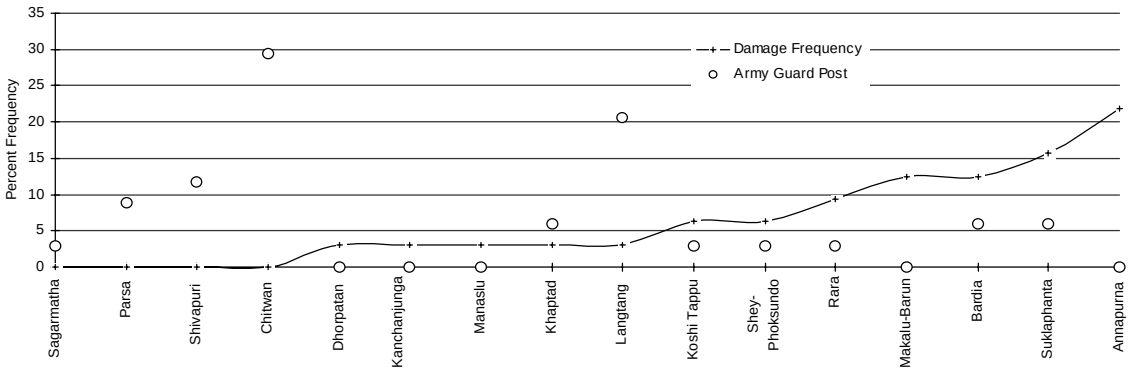

Figure 2. Percent army posts and insurgency-related damages in protected areas.

which is cumulatively larger than the total forest cover (5,827 Km^2) in the protected areas (PAs) of Nepal (Yonzon et al., 1999) (Resources Himalaya, 2001).

Spillover in Protected Areas

Not only Nepal's forest is diverse, its management regimes are equally adaptive. Forest resources are sustained through protected and production forest management, community and leasehold forestry, protected areas and watershed management where custodians include government agencies, army, rural communities, women's group, *Kamaiya* (bonded laborers until recently) and *Dalit* (occupational castes).

In 1975, the forest guards in protected areas were replaced with army. Managing PAs with the involvement of the Royal Nepal Army has been diversely discussed (EPC, 1993; Sharma & Wells, 1996; Anonymous, 1996). Of the 16 PAs including their buffer zones (27,083 km^2) in Nepal, Annapurna, Makalu-Barun, Manaslu, and Kanchenjungha do not have army in them because of community-based initiatives. In addition, Dhorpatan being a hunting reserve for blue sheep, did not need any.

Some 32 insurgency damages have occurred in PAs with the highs in Annapurna (24%), Suklaphanta (16%), Makalu-Barun (13%) and Bardia (13%). In each VDCs, Annapurna has constituted 55 conservation area management committee (CAMC) to promote conservation of natural resources on a sustained-yield basis. The uprising has exiled nine chairpersons and 39 members of CAMCs asking them to abandon their homes and villages. Existing data suggest that damages are insignificant where army postings are high (fig. 2). The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) has received one damage report from Langtang and none from Chitwan where higher no. of army guard posts exist. In those PAs where army posts are absent (3 conservation areas, 1 national park and 1 hunting reseve), insurgents have trained their cadre on warfare. In Makalu-Barun, they extort foreigners $50 each. Therefore, army presence is a significant deterrent factor although they take up about 75% of the budget of the DNPWC (EPC, 1993; Wells, 1994). Exceptions are Bardia and Suklaphanta in west Nepal, which are used by the insurgents as base and escape routes into India.

With the state of emergency in effect and no peace talks in sight, strategic difficulties are many for the state to

contain the insurgency. The key factors being the security forces sparsely deployed over large areas, logistical warfare problems in mountainous terrain, and the open border from where the insurgents can easily flee into India. Therefore, the army has to reinforce their assembly first before securing towns, district headquarters, and forest areas including national parks.

There were 112 guard posts (average: 10.18; range: 3 – 34) in 11 PAs before and now, 34 only (average: 3.04; range: 1 – 10) – an alarming reduction of 70%. Pocket areas with abandoned guard posts within PAs, are proliferated with poaching and illicit logging activities. Knowing these vacated pockets are not frequented by the insurgents, because of the army guards in the vicinity, poachers and timber smugglers have moved in their covert operations. For example, in Chitwan, 38 rhinos were killed by poachers between July 2001 - June 2002. Such high mortality rate including 16 natural death, in a population of 544 rhinos could knock off its finite rate of increase (e^r= 1.026) in the park. Likewise, reports on smuggling of timber to both Indian states and bordering areas of Tibet, have measurably increased. Thus, insurgency has facilitated both poachers and timber smugglers with unknown effects on biodiversity.

Nature and Humans

Social conflicts can cart endless annihilation to biodiversity at a time when conservation is far from stable because of piece-meal approach and limited knowledge on its dynamics. As a parallel exists between ecology and sociology (Leopold, 1946), perhaps the time is now to realign it from the bureaucratic entrapment to benefit many from a few.

Once biodiversity conservation takes its root in rural communities, science, economics and politics to build a peer review culture, perhaps it will become vibrant with a new-found face. Regardless of insurgency which is a reminder of both political mistrust and societal tragedy, biodiversity conservation then may emerge stronger than before because nature is resilient and there is no limit to human spirit and forgiveness.

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