A CASE STUDY ON VAN PANCHAYAT OF KASHIYALEKH IN KUMAUN HIMALAYA

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ABSTRACT

Village communities in Uttarakhand hills in India have been involved in community forestry management known as Van Panchayat (VPs) that present a unique example of natural resource management and environmental governance at local level. People in Uttarakhand depend highly on these VPs for fodder, fuel-wood, timber, NTFPs etc. This paper deals with a case study on Kashiya-lekh VP (Mukteshwar, Kumaun Himalaya). We documented the major plant species, management practices for the forest protection, dependency on forest products, etc. of the local communities. The rules and regulations devised by the VP for management of forests are responsible for management and grazing, collection of fuelwood, fodder, timber and forest protection that also ensure equitable use of forest resources within their village communities.

Key Words: Van Panchayat, Forest resources, Kumaun Himalaya, Uttarakhand.

INTRODUCTION

Forests are the most important parts of Himalayan ecosystem, which not only regulate ecosystem services, but also rejuvenate several inter-dependent life forms in and around an ecosystem. In India, there is a long history of traditional conservation and management practices implemented for sustaining forests and rational use of forest products. During the British Colonial Rule, several regulations were enforced for reducing the exploitation and burden on the forests (Babu and Nautiyal 2015). At the national level, the National Forest Policy 1894 was the crucial milestone that provided impetus to conserve India's forest wealth with the prime objectives of maintaining environmental stability and meeting the need of the fringe user group or stakeholders (Joshi et al., 2011). In Uttarakhand, forests are rich sources of wood, grass, medicinal plants, wild edible fruits, etc., and thus they not only sustain all life forms (Singh and Singh 1987; Agarwal 1990) but also become instrumental in providing employment opportunities to local community in several ways. There are more than 12000 Van Panchayat in Uttrakhand, which are contributing to protection and development of forests including distribution of products among the stakeholders in an equitable manner (Balooni et al., 2007; Pala et al., 2012).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A case study was performed in Kashiya-lekh VP (Mukteshwar, Kumaun Himalaya), covering local areas of Sunkiya, Buribanna, Chakhuta and Gazaar villages (Table 1). Some of these VPs are quite old
and spread over large area. At this study site, the Oak forest was dominant. During the study period, several rounds of interviews were conducted involving Surpanch, VP members, Self Help Groups, Van Suraksha Samiti and community people. The questionnaires and interviews were focused on understanding and documenting the major plant species, management practices for the forest protection, dependency on forest products, etc. of the local communities in the study area.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Resource Management Practice

The van panchayat plays an important role in the maintenance and production of forest products. In this study, mostly the Oak (Quercus spp.) species are considered suitable for fodder and fuelwood, whereas the Pine (Pinus roxburghii) is utilized for leaf litter and resin by the Forest Department and community people. However, some other species such as Myrica esculenta (Kaphal), Rhododendron arboreum (Buransh), Prunus domestica (Plum) and Prunus armeniaca (Apricot) are used as the other sources of raw material and income by the local communities.

Table 1. Some characteristic of the VPs studied in Kumaun hills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village name</th>
<th>Sarpanch</th>
<th>VP Area (ha.)</th>
<th>Formation year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunkiya</td>
<td>Mr. Virenda Singh</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>1936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buribanna</td>
<td>Smt. Ganga Bisht</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>1946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chakhuta</td>
<td>Mr. Gopal Singh</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>1932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gazaar</td>
<td>Mr. Gopal Singh</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A Van Panchayat comprises of a total of 9 members (4 female and 5 males including 1 Sarpanch). Wood cutting, grazing of cattle, mining are strictly restricted in van panchayat. It permits to collect only dry fallen wood and otherwise levies fine of Rs. 50/- and Rs. 500/- in case of cutting green leaves and wood, respectively. For safeguard and protection of forests, a security guard, is appointed who get salaries by the collected/ pooled-in money contributed by each household periodically. For collection of dry leaves and woods in the Van Panchayat area there are standard criteria: (i) it will be open during the months of May-June; (ii) only one member of each family is allowed to enter and pay Rs. 10 per household for collecting one sac (approx. 35 kg) and one head load (approx. 40 kg) of fodder and fuelwood, respectively. The money collected from this standard practice is deposited into the Van Panchayat account as “Royalty” and utilized by the village people through consensus of VP. Village people told us that the condition of forests was not good earlier, but later on they started following Van Panchayat’s Rules and managed to protect the forest from depletion, land degradation, etc. through participatory approach among the community people. Observing the significance and critical roles played by the forest for ensuring a sustainable ecosystem, the local community people agree that the forest management practices should be strictly followed, such as a fine should be levied and the defaulter should be punished. Use of rake which is used to collect fallen dry leaves should be prohibited as it affects natural regeneration of the VP. Van Panchayat members organize meeting monthly along with Van Suraksha Samiti (VSS), Self Help Group (SHG) etc. and give their suggestion for the betterment of forest. This shows people are aware towards their forest protection and management. Every year they celebrate Van Mohotsav in which they doing plantation activities for the enrichment of forest resources. Women actively participate for the betterment of forest and also prepared thematic songs on protection and management of van panchayat. Community people felt that if they adhere strictly to Van Panchayat Rules and Regulations, the forests resources can be protected and sustained effectively for next generation.
REFERENCES


