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BEYOND FOREST MANAGEMENT: THE POLITICS OF FOREST USER GROUPS IN CHITWAN

Sanjaya Mahato and Romain Valadaud

Abstract

Taking the case of Chitwan district in Nepal, we argue that Forest User Groups (FUGs) are key to the understanding of the politics in the country. Throughout their existence, FUGs have been both a nursery for leadership production and a machine reproducing social hierarchies. The article is an exploration of complex politicized histories of forest management, between social groups and political parties. We argue that FUGs are the product of pre-existing relations of power and, subsequently, of the power plays of political parties. Through qualitative methodologies, we have explored how FUG are a politicized construction, both in terms of forest and social boundaries. Our fieldwork explains how FUGs are part of the strategies of political parties to build power locally. We detail how individual can build social, economic and political capital through FUGs, and, as such, are considered as an essential cog for the control of constituencies by political actors. In doing so, FUG have the potential to push for social transformations, both in terms of social and gender inclusion. However, we conclude by showing that, without a real acknowledgment of their inherent political nature, FUGs have been and still are institutions driving the reproduction of power relation in the Nepali society.

Key Words: Community Forest, Participation, Political Party, Politics, Chitwan

Introduction: Nepal and Its Forest – An Apolitical Management?

Forests in Nepal have historically been a crucial resource to support local livelihoods. Consequently, as population grew, forests have been more and more exploited, reaching a depletion peak in the early 1980s. From this decade on, Nepal's government progressively reformed its forest policies. From a centralized management, it shifted toward a decentralization through the empowerment of local government institutions (Gautam, Shivakoti

and Webb 2004). This did not, however, stop deforestation. Facing a growing concern from increasingly powerful international donors, the new democratic government initiated in the 1990s a participatory reform of forest management (GoN 2049 v.s.). A new legal framework allowed the implementation of development programs financing the creation of Forest User Groups (FUGs) throughout the country (Pokharel *et al.* 2007). These groups, in which members elect their representatives, elaborate their own constitution (rights and responsibilities of the members) and their operation plan (OP)¹ under the watch of the Department of Forest (DoF).

Devolution of forest management to the people was supposed to establish a sustainable and fair use of forest products. Besides FUG regulations, other factors such as transformations of livelihoods, better access to LP gas and electricity, and foreign labor migrations have contributed to the betterment of forests in the country (Libois *et al.* 2022). As Nepali society is changing, the overall pressure on forests of Nepal is decreasing. This relationship between FUGs and the forest is well documented (Caldecott 2021; Chhetri *et al.* 2013). Similarly, there is also a lot of literature related to gender and social inclusion in forest governance (Poudel and Pandey 2008; Agarwal 2009; Leone 2019; Pandey and Pokhrel 2021). However, few studies have been led on the political aspects of FUGs. Thoms (2007) briefly explained how local elites dominate the FUG governance. Basnyat *et al.* (2023) has described the power plays in the forest sector, mostly in relation with the government agencies. But little is known about the decision-making processes which have governed the selection of forests, villages and households of FUGs in Nepal. To our knowledge, no detailed history of the “how, why and who” of FUG implementation at the local level has been written. And, as such, very few mentions are made of the impact of user groups on the social reconfigurations of modern Nepal. With this article, we hope to contribute to this (so far) quiet academic discussion in Nepal on the politics, past and present, of FUGs.

Beyond trees, we explore the politicized intertwined histories of social groups, political parties and individuals involved in the management of forests. We explain how FUGs are intricately mingled in the political history of Nepal and are an important cog of modern Nepali politics. In this

¹ An operational plan is a document prepared by FUGs and issued by the Department of Forest (DoF) for conservation, management and utilization of community forest (GoN 2079 v.s.).

article, “political” refers to the power relations existing between people and social groups, whether these relations are social, economic or cultural. These relations define a social hierarchy more or less accepted, and one that can be contested. We argue that FUGs have been created in and by pre-existing power relations, and therefore are inherently political. However, we understand FUGs as part of the participatory policies promoting user groups that are deployed on the Nepali social territory since the early 1990s (Valadaud 2021). As such, they bring their own sets of democratic rules and regulations, of competitive practices and imaginaries that can create leverage to contest social hierarchical power structures.

This article is thus an attempt to discuss how FUGs participate in the reconfiguration of power relations in Nepal. To do so, we first explain our understanding of Nepali politics, and the role user groups play in it. From there, we describe how we brought up the political aspect of FUGs with the actors themselves, thereby showing both the little attention that was previously brought to this topic, and the great potential of further developing it. We then set on describing specific case studies in Chitwan District to show how politicized FUGs have been from their inception, and how much they are part of the strategies of political parties in Chitwan District. We then evaluate the politics of FUGs with the principle of “consensus” in Nepal to understand their impact on local governance.

The Politics behind the Trees

Power Relations and Participatory Management in Nepal

Before we dive into our case study, it is important to understand the “political rationality” of Nepal—that is, the dynamics underpinning the power relations between people and groups of people. Nepal’s political culture, as in India, is characterized by a challenged but still prevalent ascriptive social hierarchy underlined by strong patronage relations (Ramirez 2000; Joshi and Mason 2008). We discuss these issues here because they are transversal to religious, cultural, social and political norms and practices in the country (Galey 1980). According to Piliavsky (2014), patronage is much more than an old-fashioned power structure: it is central to the organization of modern democracy, especially in South Asia, where patrons and clients have reinvented clientelism through political representation. Explaining this is important to understand the power dynamic that has structured the reality

of FUGs today in Chitwan, as they are themselves being thought of as a local embodiment of representative democratic institutions (Fischer 2017).

The South Asian form of patronage is characterized by the existence of patrons, that is to say individuals with enough social, economic and political capital to act as “gatekeepers” and “intermediaries” or “brokers” between resources (goods and services) and the majority of the population, their clients. In Nepal, Stone (1989) describes perfectly this logic of brokering in the development world, showing how *thulo mānche* (powerful person) in villages act as though they are the only way for people to reach government agencies and international donors. This relation is described by Gilmartin (2014) as an “unequal reciprocal exchange,” where both patrons and clients are dependent on each other, but where patrons maintain a monopoly on resources crucial to the sustenance of client’s livelihoods (Kaufman 1974). Through a fragile equilibrium between strength and compassion, patrons wind clients into a net of social, political and economic obligations. This is often characterized as “politics of survival” for both patron and client (Migdal 1988). The relationship is founded upon unequal mutual material benefits such as providing jobs and money in return for support and cooperation, such as voting and attending rallies (Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith 2002). Such power relations are entrenched in the social strata of Nepali society (Gellner and Snellinger 2017), but have been challenged by the advent of democratic forms of power.

For some authors, such as Piliavsky (2014), this type of relationship is indeed being weakened by the increased pressure of democratic rules and regulations (such as quotas, user groups, the creation of political parties), as well as by the increased influence of free trade allowing an easier access to a greater amount of resources (Kuo 2018). Kuo (2018) argues that business organizations pushed parties for programmatic and policy reforms increasing “fair” political competition. Increasing the competition for leadership would improve the governance of natural resources management through a fairer redistribution of its benefits and increased involvement of the citizens. Hangen (2009) says that local participation is an integral part of a vibrant democracy. The increasing politicization of Nepal, through the multiplication of political parties and through the development of these user groups across the society, could be interpreted as an increased possibility for citizens to voice their concern directly, bypassing the traditional brokers. The possibility to choose from different leaders and the direct access to resources, which are

both possible through user groups, have been interpreted as ways to weaken traditional hierarchical power relations and therefore empower historically disadvantaged people in ascriptive societies (Hickey and Mohan 2004).

But for others (e.g., Cooke and Kothari 2001), patronage relations in South Asian societies, if indeed challenged by the penetration of liberal democracy, are being reinvented rather than declining. Modes of access to power in the Indian and Nepali democracies still closely copy the social ideal of patronage. Politicians reach for power positions through the construction of an ever-wider circle of middlemen² (Kettering 1988) by skillfully playing between a benevolent image and a practical ruthlessness (Gilmartin 2014). As such, user groups, beyond their management roles, have become key stepping stones to build political capital (Bhasme 2016; Valadaud 2021), because they allow *thulo mānche* to get a hold on resources (natural, economic or social) and to distribute them to the people, or rather to “their” people.

The critique of user groups in natural resource management has developed over the last two decades. Many authors have shown how their “apolitical” frame based on a homogenous conception of “local communities” has, in fact, led to very politicized institutions (Mosse 2003; Manor 2004). User groups’ rules are very often designed by national and local elites, and rarely engage power relations affecting social groups and individuals in everyday life (Valadaud 2021; Acharya, Dhungana and Guragain 2022). Some authors even argue that such user groups reproduce (and even increase) social and political inequalities (Ferguson 1994; Cooke and Kothari 2001) they were meant to weaken in their original intent.

There is, therefore, a debate on the role of user groups, and therefore of FUGs, in politics. What kind of reconfiguration of power relations do they allow? For us, this question has no clear-cut answer and needs to be investigated further. In this article, we try to structure a nuanced answer to this question. The politicization of Nepal’s society—understood as the increased competition for leadership positions—seems to have both hindered and furthered the emancipatory potential of FUGs. How and why are the right questions to move from a binary answer to a more nuanced explanation. To do so, we first develop, in the next part, some methodological thoughts on how to actually study this relationship in the context of the district of Chitwan.

² Usually called *āphno mānche* (one’s own person) in Nepal.

How to Find the Power Hidden Behind the Trees?

In the Department of Forest (DoF) textbooks and policy documents, one can often find very “neutral” definitions of the institutional structure of forest user groups (see, GoN 2049 v.s.). Under the strict legal framework of the forest policies, members of a group are allowed to make their own rules to regulate the forest (such as extraction of forest products like timber, firewood, fodder, fruits, etc.). This group is led by an elected committee, composed of a president, a vice-president, a secretary, a treasurer and members.³ The number of members is contingent on the size and population of the catchment area. This committee is renewed at a fixed term, ideally through elections, but it is rarely the case in our observation. As such, this formal definition says little about the actual political reality of these forest management institutions. Beyond the formality of their description, records about FUGs are characterized by a global lack of detailed historical information on the process of their creation.

During the *Gouvernance Locale des Forêts* (GOLFOR) research project,⁴ our colleagues gathered an impressive amount of data on FUGs all over Nepal. Among them were the GPS coordinates of the patches of forests falling under the management of these user groups, the names of members, the revenue and the expenses of the FUGs and many other pieces of descriptive and statistical information. However, historical elements were often confined to a date of creation, of registration, of handover and of renewal of OPs. Beyond these, there was no information about the group of people itself, such as a list of villages included in the FUG or the proceedings of the user group’s birth. Questions such as “Which villages are included in which FUG?” or “How were they chosen?” are all met, in these documents, with a silence that echoes in the scientific literature. As this question could not be answered through quantitative research, we then resolved to find more about this during our qualitative fieldwork in Chitwan (see Figure 1).

³ Revised in 2018, the Forest Act (GoN 2049 v.s.) provisioned a maximum of 15 members in an executive committee (four “vital posts” and eleven “normal” members).

⁴ This interdisciplinary research project, led by the French INRAE and CNRS in partnership with ICIMOD, is looking at FUGs in 14 districts of Nepal under the lenses of economics and sociology. It started in 2018 and is running until 2024. Both authors were part of the qualitative and quantitative parts of the research.

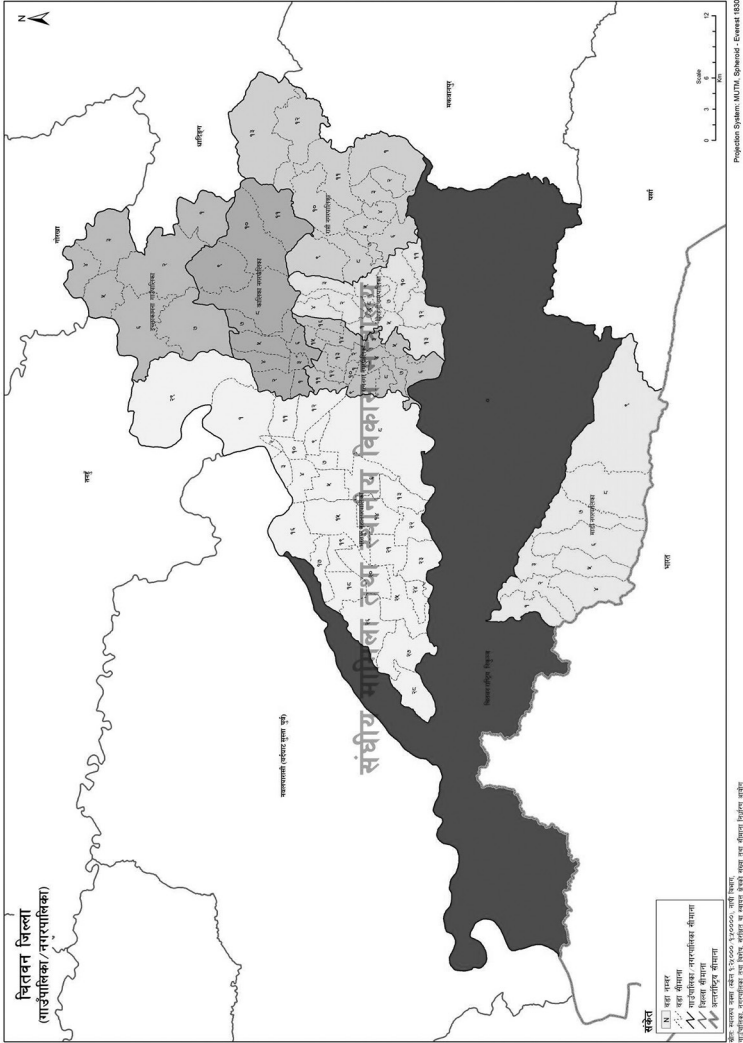


Figure 1. Administrative map of Chitwan District (source: MoFAGA 2023).

It turns out that this question was, at first, met with a certain amount of incomprehension from the local actors, whether they were FUGs members, political activists or DoF staff. “Why would you want to know that?” or “Nobody never asks these questions!” were common answers to our requests. These reactions are very significant in themselves. They show that the construction of the FUG’s social territory has been little questioned by researchers so far in comparison to the forest territory. With some clarifications of our requests, we ended up sparking a lot of interest from local actors. These discussions were particularly interesting once we provided maps of Chitwan.



Figure 2: Participatory spatialization of a FUG social territory (picture: Valadaud 2021).

Using digital and paper maps, we sat for hours with villagers and FUG leaders to draw out the borders of their FUG’s social territory (see Figure 2). Precisely tracing the limits with them allowed us to question anomalies, such as a delimitation cutting a village in two or two parts of a social territory being divided by the social territory of another FUG. Drawing FUGs borders on the map made visible socio-historical dynamics that would have stayed invisible had we only made formal interviews. Through this methodology, we were able to discuss, in a detailed manner, the process of inclusion of the people in these FUGs, and reveal the negotiations behind the actual boundaries of these user groups. As we went on around Chitwan, we started to draw a map of what we came to call “catchment areas” of the FUGs of Chitwan. Figure 3 shows what they look like for eleven of the FUGs we visited in the eastern part of the district. We led 42 discussions of that sort over the course of a few months.



Figure 3: "Catchment Area" of FUGs in the eastern part of Chitwan District.

This methodology is interesting in itself, as it highlights the “people” dimension of the FUGs. This allowed us to ask directly to the FUG members how and why the delimitations were made and, most importantly, by whom. It turned out that many social borders of FUGs are based on both administrative borders (mostly former VDCs) and natural and man-made landmarks, such as trails, roads and streams. These geographical and administrative borders, however, hide deeper power plays.

Creating these maps was very relevant for our questions about the local politics of each FUG, as it eased our interviewees into discussing, in detail, the history of their FUG. Stories started to pour out from the memories of FUG members. In Hariyali FUG, for instance, we were told about the first contact with the rangers of the DoF. In Kalika FUG, we heard about all the walking and biking that was needed to explain what was happening to the people on each side of the theoretically agreed border. This collection of stories, put together, helped us to paint a broader and more nuanced picture of the history of the FUGs in Chitwan.

All these testimonies were then cross-checked with information gathered through interviewing forest specialists and DoF staff. Through a literature review of the FUGs’ historical frame in Nepal, we connected local voices, expert opinions with the wider history of community forest management in Nepal. At this crossroads between a participatory map-making, interviews with experts and a careful literature review, we propose in the second part of this article an insightful account on the politicized nature of FUGs in Chitwan. We first take a step back to give some national context to the creation of FUGs in Chitwan, before diving into precise stories that came out of our fieldworks.

A Political History of FUGs in Chitwan District

The intentional political nature of these FUGs can be best read through the history of their creation, in the early 1990s, showing how they are more than a simple management institution. In this part of our article, we first explain how FUGs are political before illustrating it with examples drawn from our fieldworks in Chitwan.

The (Very) Political FUGs of Nepal

From our fieldworks, we identified three elements explaining the political nature of FUGs: their intent as a participatory tool, the top-down creation

process, and the subjective “technical” criteria they are subjected to. First, we observed how much FUGs have been thought of as leadership programs in Nepal. As a retired District Forest Officer (DFO) in Kathmandu explained to us, “FUGs were seen, at the time, as the seeds of local leadership, as a tool to serve the coming democratic Nepal” (interview, 02.12.2022). He added that “[DoF] rangers were trained in participatory methods and leadership creation” before being sent to the villages where Potential Community Forests (PCFs) had been identified. FUGs, as much as other user groups around the world, were seen as leadership building tools to foster people’s voices and build a bottom-up democracy. This is very much the “textbook” version of participatory development initiatives, as Chambers (1997) described.

However, these participatory tools often fell short of the expected empowerment of dominated populations and of democratization of natural resource management. Most of the time, participatory policies were implemented in a top-down fashion, far from the bottom-up approach advised by Chambers (1997). FUGs are an example of this. “Usually, rangers contacted village chiefs first, and with them they made the forest boundaries, and chose the people who should be included in the group” (interview, 02.12.2022). From the information we gathered, the political elites involved in the creation process were mostly heads and deputy heads of the local bodies such as VDCs, and villagers were very rarely invited to the meetings. This is typically a politicized process that we can find in the inception of other user groups, such as Water User Groups in Nepal and abroad (Bhasme 2016; Valadaud 2021).

Going through the traditional hierarchical structures while decentralizing management allows local elites to grasp new powers over natural resources and access financial resources associated with forest management devolution. This “elite capture” process is well documented in the literature (Thoms 2007) and found a strong echo through our case studies across Nepal during the GOLFOR project. People who were not connected to village chiefs, or who lived far from the forest, would be left out of the decision process, and as a consequence, they were often left out from the FUG, preventing them from accessing crucial forest resources. Proving our point, a Tharu man told us in the village of Bahera (Chitwan), speaking about the creation of the Kankali FUG: “One morning we woke up and we suddenly found our access to the forest we used to go to was forbidden!” (interview, 22.11.2022). When only a few individuals of higher social positions are invited to discuss the creation of the FUGs, they are most likely bound to reproduce social hierarchies.

Another politicized process often underestimated in the evaluation of participatory policies is the “technical” criteria. The creation of FUGs came with a set of rules and procedures defined in the legal framework. These rules are far from being politically neutral. For instance, the *Van Niyamāvalī* or Forest Regulation (GoN 2051 v.s., 2079 v.s.) explains that the demarcation of the catchment area of a community forest should include the households that are in a comfortable proximity to the forest and can easily access the forest in order to conserve it. These criteria of “comfortable proximity” and “easy access” are, evidently, very subjective and have been used as such. Such loose criteria, open to negotiation, can be wielded politically in the sense that it can be manipulated to reenact historical relations of power.

Moreover, the definition of “comfortable proximity” is not only vague but also contingent on many other variables beyond the “technical,” such as political allegiance and ethnic groups. As we will detail below for Chitwan, we have seen, in the mountains and in the plains of Nepal, FUGs’ boundaries being defined according to leaders’ wishes, and wielded as power tools to exclude portions of a population that should have been included in the FUGs. Technical criteria have often been overruled by other social and political criteria. Technical criteria are therefore politicized in their nature, and in the way they are interpreted, making FUGs inherently political, as they are the results of contested negotiation between interest groups. As such, the outcome may very well reflect pre-existing power relations.

FUGs are then two times political. First, in their intent, as they were devolving decision-making power to local people, with the aim of empowering local communities through the management of a patch of forest. Second, in their top-down implementation: following power hierarchies made them selective tools of empowerment. As such, they reinforce the power of local elites. In the end, if FUG creates the potential for more democratic competition, it also furthers the risk of elite capture. We illustrate this dual process in Chitwan in the following part.

The Politics of Community Forests in Chitwan

The district of Chitwan, originally inhabited by Tharu communities, was covered in forest until the Rana prime ministers and the reinstated Shah kings took interest in clearing the forest to develop agricultural lands (Krauskopff and Meyer 2000). Deforestation started in the 1950s and skyrocketed in the 1960s, when Nepal opened its borders to foreign investments (Robertson

2018). Getting rid of malaria opened up new opportunities for the Nepal government, who facilitated the migration of hill populations towards the Tarai. Land grabbing has since been a common practice in Chitwan (Ojha 1983; Cox 1990), and patches of forests have progressively been cleared to make room for fields and housing.

In Chitwan, many Tharu settlements were situated next to forest areas (see Figure 4). In the late 1950s, the Nepal government promoted the migration of populations from the hills to the Tarai, including Chitwan (Regmi 1994). This led to forest clearing in order to create new settlements, shifting forest boundaries away from Tharu settlements. For example, the village of Bahera was the closest village from the northern forest in the early 1960s. But in the 1990s, it was 4.5 kilometers (km) away from the forest edge, and is now even a little further away. This process of land grabbing is important to understand, as it plays a central role in the politics of Chitwan's FUGs. In this context, FUGs re-enacted the land grabbing process and transposed it in the forest sector: many Tharu villages were not included in the creation of the first FUGs of Chitwan, whereas Pahadi villages were because they sat closer to the forest front in the early 1990s.

We had a long talk, on a sunny November 2022 afternoon, with a former ranger of the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC). He was the first ranger assigned to demarcate patches of forest and catchment areas for community forest in Chitwan. In his own words, he was strategically chosen for this task because he is a Tharu. As we went down the flow of his memories, it became clear that the biased technical criteria of “comfortable proximity” has, in Chitwan, played a crucial role in the creation of the FUGs. He told us “we were selecting forests and villages which were closest to the forest, that is to say people who could easily access the forest to manage it” (interview, 20.11.2022). This led to a very narrow and top-down decision-making process, where a few people decided on the repartition of community forests. “We sat with interested village chiefs, and discussed which part of the forest should go to whom” (interview, 20.11.2022). In Chitwan, the first president of the interim committee—which was, by law, formed to register a community forest—was either chair or vice chair of the Village Development Committee (VDC)⁵ or a person appointed by them. Village leaders including chair and vice chair of the VDCs, at the time, were mostly high-caste male elites (Nirvachan

⁵A VDC used to be a local administrative unit.

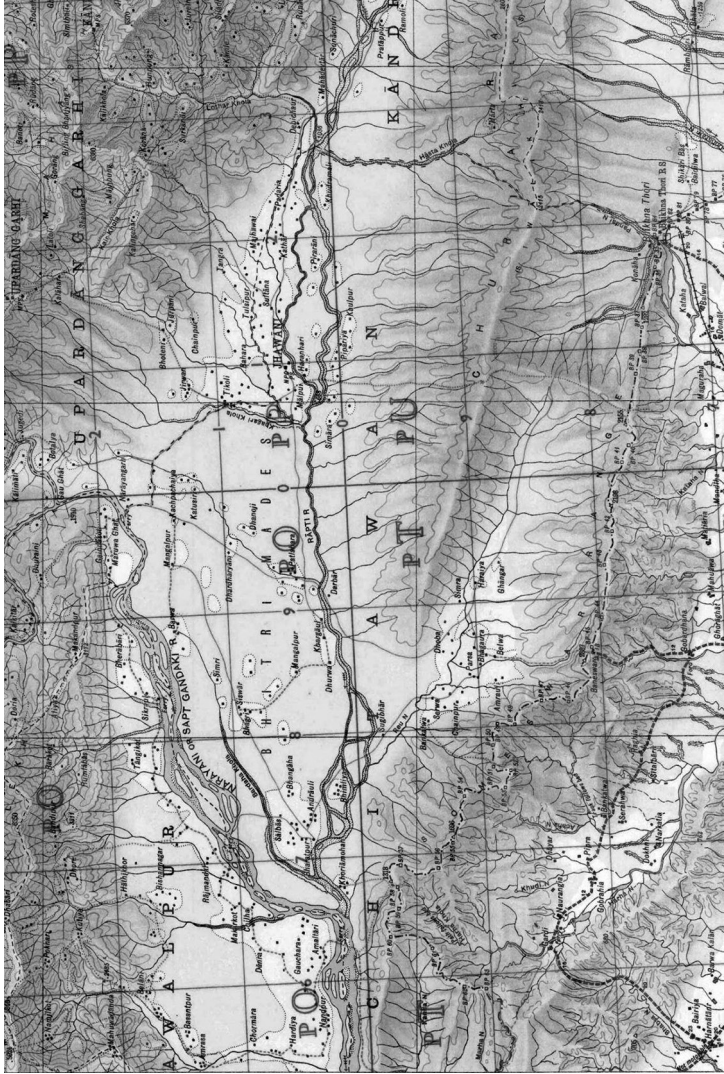


Figure 4: Map of Chitwan showing human settlement and the forest area in the second half of 20th century (source: NTNC 2022).

Ayog 1993, 1997; Subedi and Kandel 2022). Authority over who was to be included and made responsible for which forest then became a prerogative of these local elites in their negotiation with representatives of the government. Such a biased process left people with little to no link to either politicians or government staff without the possibility to influence the process of creation.

According to a former DFO, “this process of selection left many people out” (interview, 02.12.2022). These “mistakes,” whether intentional or not, were biased by both the type of people leading the surveys and the type of people that were, through a land grabbing process, closer to these forests. For instance, Tharu people living in the southern settlements of Bahera, Belsi, Hajipur, Bansi, Phasherwa, Phasherni, Jabakoli, Sahaloli, Khairahani, Tulasipur, and Parsa (cf. Figure 4) were not included in any community forests created in the northern hills, despite the fact that they had been using the forests there for a long time. All these Tharu settlements were *de facto* excluded from using forest resources. “We did not know people came to make FUGs,” we were told by a member of the neighboring Ajingare FUG. “We only knew when we were forbidden to access the forest. [...] How could we know, when we did not know anyone from the government?” (interview, 21.10.2022). “Honest mistakes” do not absolve them of being socially biased. But beyond a “naturally” biased process reproducing social hierarchies, the creation of FUGs in Chitwan has everything to do with intentional political plays. This is what we show next through the “hidden” history of the most famous FUG of Chitwan, i.e., Kankali (see Figure 5).

Created in 1995, it is one of the largest FUGs in the country, with a forest area close to 760 hectares, very rich in Sal trees. As we interviewed people living in Bahera, we quickly gathered testimonies drawing a very politicized creation of Kankali FUG. One of our informants, who chose to remain anonymous, told us: “It was created through the political connections of the first president of the FUG. He was a powerful Bahun from Chainpur (a Pahadi settlement, north of the highway) and, with the help of the DoF rangers, selected only settlements who had a majority of Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) followers” (interview, 19.11.2022). This resulted in a selection based on political affiliation during the creation of the FUG. This excluded Tharu settlements close to the highway, like Bahera, because, as we were told, “our households [from Bahera] mostly supported the Nepali Congress” (interview, 19.11.2022). If, in their case, an argument could be made about their “uncomfortable proximity” to the

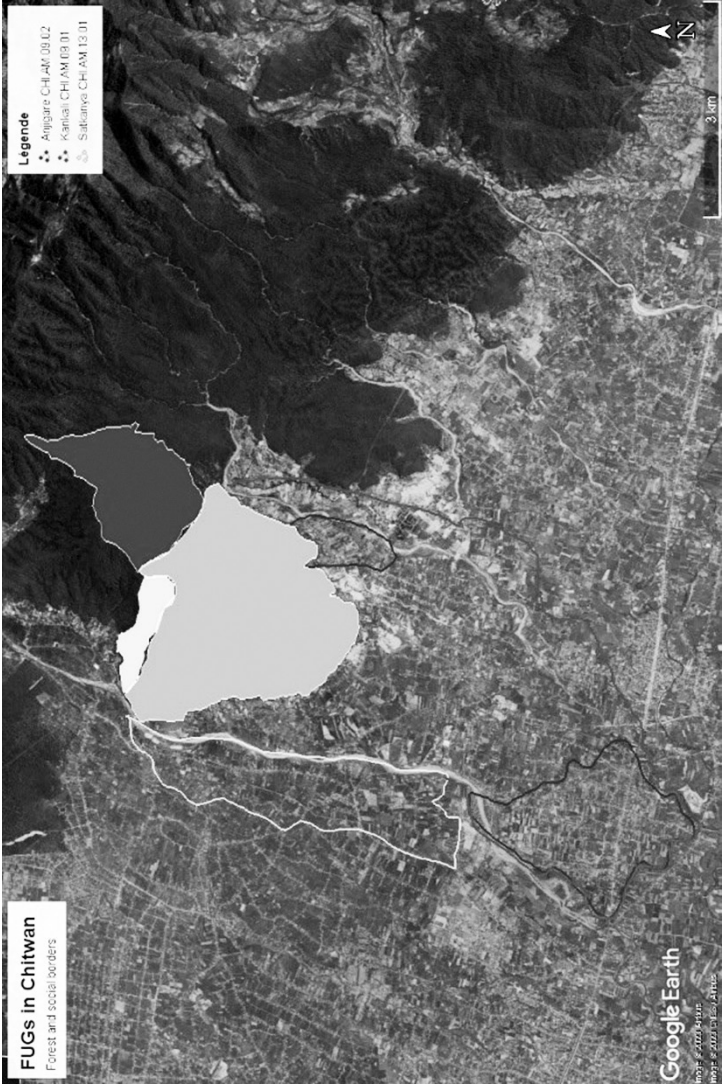


Figure 5. Map of Kankali Catchment Area with neighboring FUGs of Udayapur, Ajingare and Sankanya.

forest front, another outright exclusion seals the case. The creation process also excluded a settlement of Magars and Gurungs close to the forest, on the pretense that “they were wood poachers,” according to the president of the neighboring Ajingare FUG (interview, 14.04.2022).

The story goes on, however, to reveal more insights. Among the households of the villages excluded, mostly *Janajāti* from the hills and the plain, lived one Bahun household. He was a DoF officer but not a CPN-UML follower. Through him, Tharus and *Janajātis* who were excluded were able to make their cause heard at the DoF, who had previously remained silent to their outcries. As villagers in Bahera explained, a compromise was found: “another FUG was formed: Ajingare” (interview, 22.10.2022). The patch of forest is smaller, farther away from Tharu settlements, and if people do not complain today about the quality of the forest, it is nonetheless not the place where they originally went to gather forest products. Such an episode illustrates how ad hoc the creation of these FUGs was. Beyond the “technical” criteria, the will of a few powerful elite villagers can quickly ban or include a population with an ancestral right of use over forest resources. This politicized aspect of FUGs goes on today. We illustrate this through another insightful anecdote collected during our fieldworks.

Just next to the Kankali FUG, separated by the small river Kair Khola, is Pithuwa VDC. According to the president of Satkanya FUG, “people from Pithuwa were also using the forest before the formation of Kankali FUG” (interview, 02.04.2022). Leaders, at the time, in this VDC, did not pay much attention to the creation of FUGs and did not participate in the negotiations creating Kankali FUG. On its western side, the border of the Kankali FUG has been set on the Kair Khola river, therefore excluding the Pithuwa households from using a forest they had been traditionally using. Pithuwa households also used other forests on the northern border of the VDC, but these are farther than Kankali. However, these northern forests were soon after converted into Udaypur FUG. Pithuwa leaders, “still not really caring about the forest situation” (interview, 02.04.2022), did not petition for the inclusion of Pithuwa VDC in Udayapur FUG. As such, citizens of Pithuwa VDC found themselves without forests to go to. They complained directly to the Forest Office of Chitwan, and were provided with another patch of forest far from their settlement. It is now known as Satkanya FUG. The criteria of “comfortable proximity” here is not respected, as these villagers

find themselves more than ten kilometers away from their community forest, with a steep slope to climb and a depleted forest.

This shows how dependent on social hierarchies the creation of FUGs was, and how technical criteria are wielded in a very subjective manner. But it is even more telling if we investigate the current situation. For a few years, the committee of Satkanya, under the pressure of Pithuwa households, has been appealing to the committee of Kankali to be included in Kankali FUG. Kankali's committee has always refused so far. When asked, the Satkanya FUG committee members gave straight away a political explanation. "Kankali is an area controlled by the CPN-UML. They control most of the user groups there. [...] In Satkanya, households are mixed in terms of political affiliations, or neutral. Therefore, they [committee members of Kankali FUG] fear to be overthrown if we bring our voters to their FUG!" (interview, 11.11.2022). The balance of voters in user groups, including FUGs, is indeed carefully watched by political parties in order to assert control over population, territory and resources. We explore this relation deeper in the last part of the article. Nonetheless, these explanations show how FUGs' borders were, and still very much are, determined by power relations, at the more structural level of social inequalities and at the level of day to day politics.

From these insights, it is obvious that there is much more to FUGs than decentralized forest management. FUGs are, at heart, a political institution in the way they were designed and how they were implemented. Consequently, the way they are "lived" and used is also inherently political: they are a crucial cog of the political reconfigurations in Chitwan and beyond. It is what we show in the third part of the article.

The Political Life of FUGs in Chitwan

Having discussed the politicized history of FUG in Chitwan, we now dive into the "real politics" of everyday community forest management in Chitwan. In this part, we explain consensus politics in Nepal, and how it plays a role in the governance of forests. Then, we show why political parties have a particular interest in FUGs. We will end up questioning the outcomes, in terms of good governance, of this involvement. If literature suggests that higher competition makes for better governance (Fukuyama 2013), a closer look at how the politics of FUGs actually work in Chitwan leads to a more nuanced answer.

The Politics of Consensus in Nepal

Patronage as politics in Nepal found its most obvious institutional embodiment at the turn of the century. What is called consensus politics in Nepal has a long history but was renewed very strongly in the wake of the “People’s War” waged by the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (1996–2006). Following the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) in 2006, Article 139 of the Interim Constitution, 2007 entails that the “interim bodies shall be constituted at the District, Municipality and Village levels by consensus among all consenting parties” (GoN 2007). This led to the creation of now infamous “All Party Mechanism” (APM) in 2008, which aimed at a betterment of the government’s legitimacy and accountability (Sijapati 2017; Dhungana and Dhakal 2018).

The APM entailed the formation of committees at the VDC level composed of local political parties’ leaders. These bodies were usually dominated by three parties: Nepali Congress (NC), Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) and the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) [Dhungana and Dhakal 2018]. Members of these committees were not elected by the people, but appointed by the respective party’s district leaders, and therefore were only accountable to the political parties or the leaders. The assumption of APM was that these bodies would represent the public and their interests and fill the political vacuum left by the monarchy and the Panchayat system. According to Sijapati (2017), this mechanism allowed local political elites to mobilize municipal and VDC funds mostly in their party interests. Public interests were highly ignored, and clientelism flourished, which Dhungana and Dhakal (2018) branded a “tragedy of consensus.”

Despite the dissolution of APM in 2012, this non-inclusive form of consensus politics remained alive in many forms and scaled up in user groups such as community forestry and water user associations. Indeed, these user groups slowly imposed themselves, since the People’s War, as crucial places for local governance, sometimes acting as proxies for the government (Nightingale and Sharma 2014). As such, they were identified early on by political parties as places to invest efforts on. Party elites who were active in local areas would often meet and make a consensus to form local user associations, therefore effectively taking, without larger consultation, the mandate to decide and form the user association’s decision-making bodies.

For it is these decision-making bodies of FUGs that have the powers and resources political parties need to build support in the population.

FUGs' Politics of Consensus

At the hearth of the FUG sits its committee (CFUG). It is composed of a variable number of members and in particular the so-called four “vital” posts (president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer). Across most of the FUGs we have researched in Chitwan, it is clear that these positions, as well as the “normal” members, are not elected by the all users. They are chosen by consensus between a few people who are not necessarily members of the FUG. The following description of the selection of CFUG members is an attempt to essentialize this “carteling” process from the various testimonies gathered in the field. We try to provide here a clear outline of a process that was described in part or in full by political parties’ activists and CFUG members, who have all requested to stay anonymous. This description is not to be thought of as exact for each and every FUG of Chitwan: it is a way to shed some light on a general process of politicization retaining its specificities and having more or less strength in different contexts. We nonetheless believe that the elucidation of the process is necessary to further discuss the political nature of FUGs in Nepal.

When the term of a CFUG approaches its end, the heads of the local sections of the political parties meet to choose the members of the FUG’s electoral commission (see Figure 6). This commission is very often to be found as a written rule in most FUGs’ constitutions. It is supposed to be formed of forests users, and its role is to organize the election process. However, in practice, its composition quite often deviates from the rules. This commission is composed mostly of members from the major three parties (i.e., Nepali Congress, CPN-UML and CPN-M) in the FUG catchments area, in proportion to the strength of each party in said area. The proportion is carefully estimated based on the last elections, but also more informally between their representatives at the *tol* (settlement), ward and district levels. Political parties’ members see these negotiations as a normal consensus “because heads of the political parties are elected by the people, so we have authority to negotiate a consensus for the electoral commission” (interview, 10.12.2022). President of Amritdharapani CFUG remarks: “Consensus saves money and also includes people from all parties that provides impetus for better forest management” (interview, 05.11.2022). Party leaders and some

CFUG members are thus convinced of the legitimacy of this non-inclusive mode of leadership selection. This illustrates how political parties tend to infringe on the electoral rules of FUGs. This is a first interference in the democratic process of FUGs, because an FUG's electoral commission should be decided by the existing committee of the FUG. But in practice, the appointees are often party cadres and not necessarily users involved in forest management.

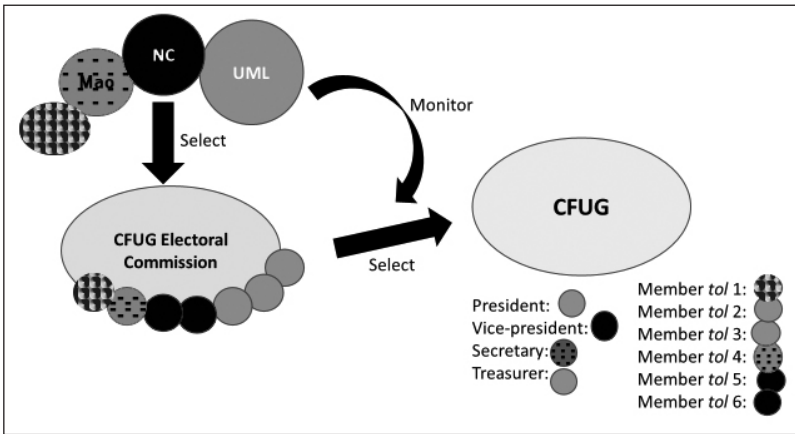


Figure 6: CFUGs selection process in Chitwan.⁶

In theory, this commission should organize the selection of the FUG committee. In practice, it chooses which person will occupy which position within the CFUG. It coordinates with the local heads of political parties to choose a proportional distribution corresponding to the local party forces. In 2022, for a member of Dudhakoshi CFUG, “We meet once or twice, depending on how much competition there is for the vital posts and members posts. . . . It is political parties that make the consensus in CFUGs” (interview, 22.10.2022). In general, this consensus on the list of “vital posts” is found after a few meetings. In this case, the newly elected “appointees” are informed, and a formal meeting is organized, with interested users, to endorse the new leadership. In some cases, this meeting takes place only on paper. It is validated *ex post* by the District Forest Officer (DFO). In some cases, there

⁶ NC = Nepali Congress; RPP = Rashtriya Prajatantra Party; Mao = Maoist Party; UML = United Marxist-Leninist.

are blockages: 1) if political parties do not agree, 2) if individuals oppose the choice of parties, 3) if the DFO opposes the consensus. In case 3), the solution depends on the balance of power between the political connections of the DFO and those of the local party leaders, who can appeal to the party's central or provincial committee to exert pressure on the DFO. In cases 1) and 2), after rounds of interpersonal negotiations, a vote can be organized among users. But this is an expensive and complex option to organize because "you have to campaign from house to houses, and sometimes pay for votes" (interview, 20.10.2022). It also makes the result dependent on many unpredictable variables for political parties which most generally seek consensus, the stumbling block often being interpersonal conflicts, sometimes even within a single party.

For instance, in Kankali CFUG election of April 2023, after a round of consultations and negotiations among the parties, they reached a consensus and shared the positions: president went to the Nepali Congress, secretary went to the CPN-M and vice-president and treasurer went to the CPN-UML. But because of a conflict within the Nepali Congress' leadership, the CFUG's election committee had to hold an election for the position of the president. The former president of Kankali CFUG, Ram Mani Neupane, aggressively remarked: "This election is a tussle between the municipality level Nepali Congress president Gunaraj Shrestha and the Nepali Congress mayor Sahi Khaniya" (interview, 16.04.2023). Devi Prasad Neupane, the candidate supported by the Nepali Congress president, won the election against Tilak Neupane, the candidate supported by the mayor. Once the vital positions of the FUG have been chosen, the other members of the CFUG are chosen, usually guided by these "vital" members who go around the different *toles* to recruit specific people. One way or another, once all the actors have agreed, the new committee takes up its duties.

During our discussion with our interviewees, they have also identified variables other than the political allegiance contributing to the choice of FUGs' vital posts. The caste and ethnicity of candidates is considered in the negotiation leading to the consensus. This seems to happen in relation to the composition of the population in the FUG and each of its *toles*, but also in relation to the identity of the local party leaders. The geographical origin (hill or plain, but also more precisely which district the candidate originally migrated from) is also considered. The local popularity of a character matters as well (sometimes against party membership), especially if the individual is

already seen as a community worker. A great popularity can cancel out the other variables, a character imposing himself, especially if he has a past of engagement with the FUG. Finally, arbitrations, external to the FUG, between political parties or internally, can cause an individual to be “dropped” in the committee, even though he does not have any history with forest management. For instance, in the FUG of Udayapur, we met a president who was given his position as a compensation to settle a dispute inside a party, and it had very little to do with actual forest management. More studies would be needed to comprehend fully the interactions between all these variables.

The implication of political parties in community forest management has everything to do with the FUG’s capacity to further the control over a social territory, that is to say a population. Indeed, it provides a space to mobilize resources (natural, financial and social) and transform them into political capital. FUGs do so because, as we showed before, they are designed to be institutions empowering local leaders. This function, much less “visible” than the management of the forest, is what connects forests to local politics. The involvement of political parties in the process of selection of FUG leaders is very important, especially regarding FUGs which are in a socially heterogeneous territory that has a large population, important forest resources and a competitive political environment. We detail this in the next part of the article.

FUGs as a Cog of a Larger Political Game

Political parties are involved in the selection of committee members for a number of reasons. If parties put so much attention in the process of selection of CFUG members, it is because FUGs are used both as a nursery for local leaders and as a cog of a bigger political game. Indeed, FUGs are places of power because they generate financial, social and political capital. First of all, there are personal advantages to be gained in this venture: leadership positions in FUGs create opportunities for the extraction of financial capital through institutionalized corruption. Institutionalized corruption is a trend in Nepal that goes beyond forest management and is rampant in all sectors where the government agencies are involved. It is a fact little explored in the literature, although a few authors have tried to quantify it (Iversen *et al.* 2006), and even their underestimated evaluations reveal how much money is being generated through administrative grey areas. This is a well-known fact from all the actors involved in forest management, from FUG members

to DoF staff and sawmill owners. They will not tell it outright, of course, but through personal connections, we managed to gain the trust of a few knowledgeable actors. We have been able to decipher these processes through careful interviews with different actors in Chitwan, who have chosen to remain anonymous for obvious reasons. As a local politician explained us, “FUG leaders and DoF staff have their tacit agreements actively managed by sawmill owners. Timber in the forest can be overestimated. During the processing of timber into planks, some timber can be set aside. And DoF staff gets a share of that for keeping quiet. There are many ways to extract money illegally out of community forest timber” (interview, 29.10.2022). This capital can be reinvested to further social and political capital. “Some money is used for personal business, but some money can be donated to a party, or can be used to help people around you. Basically, you convert money into trust” (interview, 19.11.2022). Translated into patronage language, this extraction allows one person to slowly rise as a local *ṭhulo mānche*.

Being president of a FUG also gives power because it puts a person at the center of crucial operations of forest management. “As a president of the FUG, I have to estimate the number of trees that can be cut ... and also I have to negotiate, when necessary, with the staff of the DoF” (interview, 26.11.2022). As he does this, the president gains legal and procedural knowledge and also increases his social network, that is, under a patronage terminology, his reach (*pahūca*). This also contributes to the rise of a *ṭhulo mānche*. But such a person is also supposed to have connections with the people. A president of FUG is also supposed to know much about the members of the FUG. “I go around a lot to inquire about people’s needs from the forest. And we have records of what they use. So we know the people around here, and they know us. If we do a good job, they trust us on matters beyond the management of trees” (interview, 15.10.2022). As such, a president of CFUG has a high value for political parties: he is known by the people who ultimately give vote to parties, and he knows the socio-economic profiles of a big pool of voters. “For us, CFUG presidents are the best *āphno mānche* we can recruit because they know people, and they can help us to convince them to vote for us” (interview, 28.11.2022). CFUG presidents, as potential *ṭhulo mānche*, are one type of brokers of the Nepali patronage system. This shows how deeply political FUGs now are: they are a cog of the political game but also have been fully integrated into the political rationality of the country.

Secondly, there is a great opportunity for political parties in securing the rise of their community forest *āphno thulo mānche*. By placing individuals who are loyal or accountable to the party in a CFUG, a party is investing in this individual and hopes to extend its influence through him. So political parties invest time and funds into getting a specific person in a power position in the forest user group, as we showed before. A CFUG president told us, “If I work hard for the FUG, I can convince people to work for the Nepali Congress [the party he is affiliated with]” (interview, 26.11.2022). As a “community worker,” a FUG president can gather the support of FUG members, and, during the elections, transform this pool of supporters into a pool of voters for the party who helped him to reach that FUG president position. For a CFUG member, there is an interest in helping the party during the election in order to ensure a renewal of the position in the CFUG, and to continue to capitalize personally on the position.

Beyond the relationship between local leaders and political parties, FUGs are also part of broader strategies of political parties, at the scale of a district, or even beyond. As a FUG president explained us, “When we [ward level political party leaders] discuss who should become president of the FUG, we also discuss the composition of other user group committees, such as the drinking water association or the irrigation water association” (interview, 27.11.2022). The selection by consensus in one user group is also, for local political actors, an opportunity to negotiate broader power balances through the other user groups managing resources across a social territory. “If we [local Nepali Congress leaders] agree to leave the FUG president post to a UML leader, they agree to give us the president post in the water user association” (interview, 27.11.2022). The consensus around the representation of each party in the committees of user groups is then carefully negotiated and balanced across these participatory institutions with real local powers. “We make deals that usually reflect the power of each and every party in the ward or in the district. ... Sometimes it is harder when two political parties have the same strength. Then we might go to elections for the user groups committees” (interview, 27.11.2022). As such, FUGs are part of a very carefully woven political net, regulated by a few persons. They are a cog of a larger political machinery. Used as a mechanism to foster local leaders, FUGs and other user groups are a well-known strategy to grab votes for political parties.

All parties are doing this, for a long time. ... If a well-regarded leader of a FUG is also a member of our party, then there is a good chance that he can convince the members of his FUG to vote for us. They trust him, he trusts our policies, and therefore the people will trust us as well, through him. ... This is how it works in Nepal. (Interview, 28.11.2022)

FUGs are used as a way to foster local leaders devoted to the party, in order to push its political agenda through the governance of natural resources. Bypassing the democratic processes of participatory user groups is then seen as a normality, as these have been integrated into the patronage system of Nepal. Whether this practice improves the governance of forests and other natural resources, is another question we tackle below.

Social and Gender Inclusion in CFUGs: Symptoms of a Dysfunction

There is, of course, a great concern of representativity in this practice of “consensus politics.” When only mostly high-caste older males make the decisions, the inclusiveness of community forest management, beyond the official statistics, is to be scrutinized with attention. The concern is twofold. First, it excludes most of the households of the FUG from the selection process, and second, it leads to a non-representative leadership. We illustrate this through the example of gender relations in FUGs.

This form of consensus not only fosters clientelism but also cartels the grassroots democratic practices (Sijapati 2017). This mode of decision is nonetheless widespread among the FUGs of Chitwan. We visited 42 CFUGs of Chitwan, and all reported consensus to form an executive committee. Since party leaders decide who will be in the CFUG, avoiding all the participatory process, users are prevented from participating in the selection process. Many users interviewed have never been informed of their basic rights and duties, such as asking for the list of the households eligible to participate in the selection process, the date of consultations, the process to become a candidate, etc. One of them told us, “We have nothing to say in the FUG. It is managed by some *thulo mānche*, and they tell us what has happened after it has happened!” (interview, 21.11.2022). The lack of democratic deliberation about the candidates limits the effect of competition to the few candidates backed by political parties. This is often detrimental to actual forest management and resources redistribution.

Indeed, the consensus reached by political leaders is not based on knowledge, skills and experience of the candidates, but more likely on their connections to the party and on the potential votes he can muster through his position as a CFUG member. The consensus is based on variables going beyond the CFUG's prerogatives. To follow up on a previous example, in Udayapur FUG, a contractor was pushed by a party as the FUG president because he did not get a ticket for the 2022 local government election. From his own words he had "no previous involvement in the FUG of Udayapur" (interview, 15.11.2022). Using user associations as a platform to settle intra-party disputes is hardly a good sign for a fair and sustainable forest management. Rather, it confirms the embeddedness of user groups in patronage networks, which are characterized by the durability of a strong caste and gender hierarchy. Because of this process, we suspect that most CFUGs are not representative of their users, even though they are constrained by a national regulations on caste/ethnicity and gender.

As we have seen, consensus in FUGs is mostly in the hands of party leaders. They are often high-caste hill older male individuals. For example, in Chitwan, 60 percent of the ward presidents of Nepali Congress Party are male Brahman/Chhetri, followed by 30 percent *Janajāti* (NC 2022). Similarly, for the CPN-UML, 70 percent of heads of the ward are high-caste male elites (CPN-UML 2022) followed by 30 percent of Janajati. Political party leaders tend to select people of the same gender and social background. Therefore, most of the community forest chairs are male and are from high castes. For instance, in 2022 in Chitwan, 93 percent of community forest are headed by males, and 70 percent of them are from a high caste. The correlation between these statistics speaks for itself.

The Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007 has been a landmark document when it comes to ensuring representation of diverse social groups. It ensured that there must be at least 33 percent of women in every level of governance. This is also applicable in FUGs. In 2009 and 2015, the forest policy was amended to bring the percentage to 50 (DCFN 2015). The revised Forest Regulation of 2022 also stated that there must be at least 50 percent of women in the vital positions (GoN 2079 v.s.). The gender gap closed rapidly after 2015, as it somewhat constrained political parties to include the women variable in their negotiations of the composition of CFUGs (see Figure 7). It mostly stays, however, an argument to serve party politics. For example, if party A got the president post, and Party B got the secretary post, Party

A may try to impose party B to have a woman as a secretary because forest policy says so. It is doubtful that this type of manipulation of the gender quota would result in a meaningful participation of women, especially because the negotiations are still massively led by males.

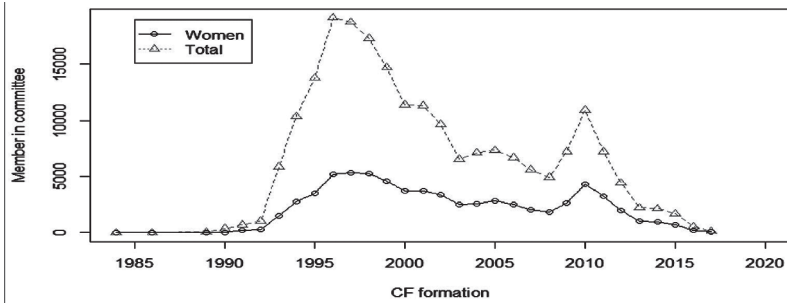


Figure 7: Total members and women members in the executive committee of CFUG in Nepal (Source: Pandey and Pokhrel 2021: p 7).

Indeed, this becomes quite obvious when one actually listens to women voices in CFUGs. The forest policy clause treated women as a single category, and hence, chances to include women from marginalized communities are smaller. For instance, in Dudhkoshi CFUG, out of five women, three are from high castes. Similarly, in the Kankali CFUG, all women are from high castes. Thus, in the 42 FUGs we have been to, only one had a woman president. In others, women were usually vice president, secretary or treasurer. Even for the single president, a competent leader by the words of her neighbors, life as female president of a FUG is not easy: “I have to run around to manage the forest and still take care of the children and the house” (interview, 30.11.2022). In some of these FUGs, upon interviewing the women, their husbands, not officially registered as CFUG members, stepped in and explained that he was the one running the post in the FUG. In Ganeshwori FUG, women told us that they are able to exert power from their position in the CFUG, but that it is hard to compete with men. These testimonies show an improvement in the representation of women in community forests, but also show how the “technical” criteria of inclusion is biased by actual relations of power.

This bias is even more visible in the many CFUGs selection process where the gender regulations are still ignored. For example, during the April

2023 selection process of Kankali CFUG, the Maoists got the secretary post and were supposed to name a female. They, however, named a male, arguing that they do not have a female candidate available. According to our information, the underlying cause was that they had to settle a party dispute. But none of the actors raised the point. As a (male) forest officer assigned to check the selection process commented eloquently afterwards: “After a long negotiation, parties made a consensus and I do not want to stop the process” (interview, 12.04.2023). This shows how this non-inclusive selection process is heavily biased by the gender power relations prevailing in the patronage network fighting for CFUG control. This illustrates how FUGs can serve as a catalyzer mostly toward, in the present circumstances, reproduction of social hierarchies.

Conclusion

One can question the politicization of FUGs by saying it should not happen. To say so is to entirely miss the point of community forest management. As FUGs do not exist in a social vacuum, and as they have powers over valuable natural resources, they are, by nature, political. We have shown in this article how community forests have been designed as political tools from their very inception. Since then, FUGs have been integrated to local governance and power plays in various ways, and in context specific intensities.

If we take some perspectives, away from Chitwan, the politicization we have described can be found in other parts of the Tarai, where Sal trees are predominant and where the population is a real melting pot. We also have observed these tendencies in the mountains, where Saj, another valuable tree, is dominant. If it is too early to make generalizations about the factors increasing the chances of “political” FUGs in Nepal, we suspect that the value of the resource managed and the heterogeneity of the population in the catchment area may explain the great differences in activeness between FUGs in different parts of the country.

At any rate, we have argued here that FUGs are one of the key elements through which modern Nepali politics is working, both as an engine of leadership creation and as a mechanism of reproduction of social hierarchies. FUGs definitely create capital and opportunities for those who are able to grab them, and has been integrated into the Nepali patronage system, reducing their empowerment potential for historically dominated parts of the population, in particular women. And as such, it should get more attention from researchers

who hope to understand the modern vibrant political life of Nepal and contribute to make FUGs a tool of actual social reconfiguration. In that regard, we hope our contribution will open a broader scientific debate on the topic.

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