



Creating a Garden Paradise out of Forest Farming

by National Land Rights Forum, Nepal (NLRF)

Background

The village of Fulbari is located in Judibela Village District Committee (VDC, a government unit similar to a municipality). It is about 61 kilometers from the Nepalese capital of Kathmandu. Judibela is part of the Siwalik hill range, which is 80% covered by forests. The total forest cover of Nepal is 26%, thus it is easy to see why Siwalik, including Judibela, has greater ecological diversity than most other parts of Nepal.

There are slightly more females than males in Judibela. The Tamang caste has the highest population in Judibela, followed by the Tharu and Chhetris castes.

About 2,553 boys and 2,705 girls are above five years of age, and among them, 821 boys and 1,305 girls are illiterate. Only 168 members have passed intermediate school, including 72 females. Of the 1,156 males and 1,206 females aged 5 to 25 years residing in the area, 290 males and 331 females do not go to school.

There are 1,164 households in Judibela. Most houses are made of wood, a few are made of straw while even fewer are built with concrete. A great majority of the households get water from a tube-well, and 1,101 (94%) households still use wood for cooking. Some 250 families have no access to toilets, and 144 households do not have access to radio, television or telephone.

The main employment in the village is farming, followed by work outside the country. Almost all the residents are not involved in commercial farming, and they grow crops only for their own use. This is why the residents have trouble sustaining their lives through agriculture.

Beginning of the initiative

Fulbari was established on public land in 2003 to resettle people displaced by heavy floods in Hardiya Khola. After their loss, the villagers had to start all over again and raise their livelihood from the limited resources they could gather.





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The villagers thought of securing their livelihood by using the barren portion of the nearby Mahadevsthan Community Forest. But they were not familiar with laws about community forests. Thus, they met with the community forest management committee to discuss their proposal. The committee decided to allot four hectares of barren land in the community forest for the landless villagers.

To effectively manage the villagers' initiative, the land was turned over to an organization formed by the villagers, the Jagriti Women Agricultural Forestry Group, with Ms. Nirmaya Pakhrin as elected Chairperson. The forestry group was assisted by Mr. Kaal Bahadur Waiba who once had the opportunity to visit forest farming initiatives in other areas, and was eager to replicate the insights he gained from those forest farms..

But the group faced a challenge. There were 53 households in Fulbari and only four hectares of community forest land available for farming. If the land was distributed equally among the villagers, it would not be enough for any of them to improve their livelihood. If not everyone got land, those excluded might get disappointed or might not support the initiative at all.

The villagers themselves came up with a solution. The limited land was divided among the poorest of the villagers. Those who were already farming, even on public land, and those who already had jobs were excluded. In the end, 39 households were chosen, each of which was given 0.10 hectare of forest land to cultivate. Not everyone initially agreed with this decision, but eventually all the villagers accepted the resolution.

The allocated land was only partially planted with trees. Hence, the locals aimed to grow more trees, in between their farming initiatives. They first planted seedlings given by a local organization called Social Welfare and Environmental Development Council (SWEDC). It would take decades for those trees to grow. So, alongside this effort, they grew vegetables like garlic, ginger, turmeric and various herbs. This helped the farmers increase their earnings.

The farmers' interest in vegetable farming faded after three years. In any case, growing the same plants on the same plot of land diminishes the productivity of the soil. Thus, the farmers explored



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alternatives to vegetable farming. SWEDC suggested that they plant grasses like maize, cane, Napier, and ipil-ipil, which had wide commercial uses.

Impact of the initiative

Initially, the farmers were doubtful. They thought about the competition in the market as several other farmers also grew grasses. Later, however, they realized that cultivating grass is a good idea especially among farmers who are engaged in the livestock business. It would be easier to source feeds for the livestock and would save the livestock growers time since they used to go into the forest for hours to search for and gather grass. The time saved could be used for other income-earning activities.



Woman farmer taking care of her livestock at Fulbari

With this realization, the farmers switched to growing grasses. Farmers who were not into livestock farming started their own venture. Those who were already in the business bred more cattle and goats. Since the animals were provided with good feeds, their health and yield improved.

Khadka Kumari Shrestha, a Fulbari farmer, commented on the farming initiative, saying, “before, I used to keep only three or four goats as a side business to farming in my home. But then I added some more to start an extensive livestock business after the grass plantation was started in our village. It was an opportunity for me to expand my animal farming and benefit from the initiatives going on around me.”

“It is easier to get into the livestock business since the grass is easily available now. I now own ten goats and five buffaloes. Also there is a dairy in the village where I can make more income by selling the milk from buffaloes. Extra income comes from the breeding of goats as well. We have started a fund within our forestry users groups. Recently, I borrowed the equivalent of US\$ 500 from the fund for my son’s marriage ceremony. The scenario has totally changed from before and we are getting widespread benefits since we started the forest farming,” Shrestha added.

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Not only has the economic condition of the farmers improved, but their appreciation for education and the socio-cultural and environmental aspects of their everyday life has also been enhanced.



**Women farmers being engaged
in grass farming at Fulbari village**

Women empowerment, for instance, is evident in the story of the Jagriti Women Agricultural Forest. Almost all members of the group, including its president, Nirmaya Pakhrin, are female. Women are indispensable in forest farming, grass production, rearing animals and planting herbs. Everywhere in the country, women are generally responsible for collecting grass. Since it directly concerns the needs of women, it is imperative that they are also active in forest farming, says Pakhrin.

Women attend meetings and make decisions themselves. They participate in trainings, bring seeds, plant them and harvest crops, all by themselves. They are responsible for all the required farm management. In all these activities, men only play a supporting role. This strengthens the women's confidence and builds their capacity. Generally, forest farming has empowered women.

Similarly, social inclusion is being gradually addressed. Fulbari consists mostly of members of the Tamang caste, while members of other castes are in the minority. However, the other castes have been prioritized either in the organization of local groups or generating participation in forest farming. The involvement of women from those communities has also helped in the prudent and sustainable management of farming activities.

Additionally, the villagers' knowledge about nutrition is being enhanced. As a poor village where people struggle to get two square meals a day, eating fruits and nutritious food in Fulbari has always been a distant dream. But now, each person involved in the community forest is provided with two saplings each of mango, litchi, jackfruit and lemon. These plants were given so that those who could not buy fruits could nevertheless eat the produce from their own forest farms.



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Dealing with obstacles

High tension electric wires traverse several parts of the community forest. It is dangerous to plant trees under the high-tension wires as they might touch the wires after growing and cause serious damage. The land underlying high-tension wires are thus mostly left barren. As this land remains barren for a long time, it becomes hard. So, various local organizations provided the farmers with tractors to till the land. They were then encouraged to grow turmeric and ginger on the land, instead of grasses, because these plants do not grow tall.

Meanwhile, the farmers had to deal with the theft of some grasses and herbs. Domestic and wild animals also started eating and destroying some of the plants. These events created tension in the community. The villagers then decided to hire a forest watchman, with the watchman's salary coming from equal contributions from each household.

Current Scenario

This forest farming initiative is gaining widespread acknowledgement in the larger Rautahat District. Poor people are being assured that the practice is helpful in reducing poverty and securing livelihoods. Perhaps guided by this realization, people outside Fulbari have decided to consider forest farming more seriously. Mahila Bantol Community Forest Group, another forestry users group in Judibela, has replicated the Fulbari initiative, and now has 37 families engaged in forest farming on six hectares of land in a 99-hectare forest.

Similar initiatives have been launched in other areas of the Rautahat district wherein farmers cultivate turmeric, garlic, ginger, vegetables and commercial grasses. Hile Khola Community Forest Users Group, which previously stopped forest farming, resumed the practice after seeing the success of Fulbari.

Fulbari's Inspiration

There are millions of land-poor people in Nepal who demand for their rights to food and land against the government because the distribution of land in Nepal is unjust and many people are still landless. Women and small farmers, squatters, communities from Dalits, and indigenous peoples experience food scarcity despite their hard work. Those who work on the land do not own it, while those who own the land have no interest to farm or make the land productive.





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For over a decade, the National Land Rights Forum Nepal (NLRF), a major organization of landless farmers, has been actively engaged in pressuring government and political parties to implement land reform. NLRF is taking the lead in the land rights movement in Nepal. The movement has contributed enduring changes in the unjust and unequal socio-economical structure in the country through progressive land reform. It continues to advocate for changing the mindset of policy makers to advance the legitimate claim of landless farmers for their rightful share over land resources.

The experience of the farmers of Fulbari therefore comes as an inspiration. The farmers have set a significant example of how the livelihood of poor people can be raised through forest farming. It has not only been their primary means of survival but has also helped farmers become self-reliant and gain dignity. All 39 families involved in forest farming are part of the Sundarpur Village Land Rights Forum. They are actively engaged in the land rights movement. This initiative has disseminated the stirring message that the responsible use of forest land can change the lives of the poor. This can happen only if local institutions and the residents work together. Additionally, the means to improve the people's livelihood can be managed if all stakeholders cooperate for the success of the initiative. Lastly, the success of forest farming can be vastly replicated if the Government of Nepal acknowledges its positive aspects and studies the example of Fulbari.

Fulbari means garden. Fulbari is indeed a garden not only because of the variation of its climate, the variety of its natural resources, and the diversity of its ethnic, cultural, social and religious background. It is also a garden paradise because of the riches that the people, through their hard work and by helping each other, have derived from the surrounding forest.

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