



## **Laiko Thau, Chirui Trees and Fruit Bats— Conservation and Livelihoods of the Chepang of Nepal**



Photo: Local Chepang kid plucking Chiuri (Indian Butter Tree) fruits

**A report by Sudeep Jana  
Community Development Organization (CDO) Nepal**

## **Executive Summary**

The study report illustrates example of indigenous community conserved area of highly marginalized Chepang indigenous people from central Nepal. The CCA is a cluster of five hill tracts where valuable Chiuri (Indian Butter Tree) endemic in the area are being conserved by local Chepangs. The site is a natural habitat of Chepangs rich in forest and agro biodiversity sustained over more than four generations due to their cultural relation and livelihood dependence with the forest ecosystem. It is being informally governed with customary practice and norms. Chepangs, the real custodians of Chiuri conservation have a strong cultural, livelihood and ecological relation with the tree. The report exemplifies a fascinating connection between Chepangs, Chiuri tree, Chiuri flower and fruit berries that attract wild bats.

One of the most pressing threats of in the area is a problem of Churi tree bearing declining number of fruit berries as well as Chepangs' lack of legal entitlement to lands and forest lands they have been occupying for from olden times. Increasing influence of Christianity has also affected cultural identity as Chepangs are alienating from nature. The customary conservation practices of Chepang in the area are not recognized by the government like most of the CCAs in Nepal. Local Chepangs are however sceptical of any formal laws and rules governing their control, access and use of natural resources in the process of recognition. However, a sensitive and well thought out facilitating intervention could reinforce and enhance the CCA coinciding livelihood security as well as goal of conservation.

## **Methodology**

The Community Development Organization (CDO) to which the author of this report is affiliated has experience working with the Chepang Indigenous People especially on issues of land and citizenship rights in collaboration with national association of Chepang called Nepal Chepang Association (NCA). The idea and purpose of the grass roots dialogue on ICCA was first discussed with activists and leaders of NCA. Site selection for the dialogue was based on the consultation with NCA. Archive of news on Chepang's in National Daily's was also reviewed. The key contact in the community was established through NCA, which then informed in advance members of the community related to the chosen ICCA.

One day dialogue at the site of CCA was then organized in the presence of local youth, women, elderly and leaders of the community. The author also separately interviewed youth, women and elderly in the community to capture their diverse perspective, and organized a meeting with Chepang activists and leaders in Kathmandu to discuss issues concerning the grassroots dialogue.

## **Basic Description**

The site of CCA is a hill tract of Kankada Village Development Committee (VDC) located in Makwanpur District, in central Nepal. The CCA is a cluster of five hill tracts<sup>1</sup> that stretches from ward number 1 to ward number 7 of Kankada VDC. The hill tract is

---

<sup>1</sup> Bangey Danda (Hill) in Silingey, Ward number 1 ; Majh Danda/Chorang, Koreng, Maluwa and Khalwang all are located in Ward Number 7 in Kankada VDC.

habited predominantly by Chepang Indigenous People. Chepangs are one of the highly marginalized ‘Janajatis’ (indigenous nationalities) of Nepal among the existing 59 categories of indigenous nationalities in Nepal.

The history of CCA dates back to settlement of Chepang in the area more than five generations ago. The CCA is therefore a natural habitat of Chepangs sustained over the years because of their close relation with nature and traditional life style intertwined with forest ecosystem. Though local Chepangs may not conceive the area as a CCA as defined in the ToRs of this study but they perceive their area as Chepang *Chetra* (Territory) or *Afno Thau* (*Laiko Thau* – our place in Chepang language). They have a strong sense of their own territory. The ‘Conservation’ (in Nepali ‘Samrachyan’) does not exist in Chepang dialectic. However ‘Syasta Parana’ (*Jogauney* in Nepali i.e. to conserve) is a term used by local Chepangs for ‘conservation’. Though there is not a clear demarcation of CCA, the area identified is based on their perception of territory that constitutes majority of Chepang inhabitants, the topography and the presence of ‘*Chiuri*<sup>2</sup>’ (Indian Butter Tree) species that are found mainly in Chepang hill slopes. The area thereby consists of settlements, hill slopes, ravine, cliffs and forest patches.

The Chepang CCA in the area is informally governed by its inhabitants that are exclusively Chepangs. There are no formal institutions governing or managing the area at a moment. However, due to their traditional and historical connection with the area and forests local norms have evolved in the course of time. These norms concerning use of natural resources and conservation of forests have passed from elderly to younger generations. The



Photo 1: Local youth and elderly drawing a territorial map

The inhabitants have been occupying the area distributed among respective households based on community consensus and local norm. Despite a sense of collective territory, lands are either occupied or owned by individual households. Each household are then custodians of their respective land and forests in the vicinity. Hence, rather than as ‘commons’, the forests and lands have been distributed among households as private resource but that forms a part of the common territory.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Chiuri’ is a Nepali name for an Indian butter tree (*Diploknema butyracea Roxburgh*). Chepang name for Chiuri is ‘Yosi’, ‘Yo’, ‘Welsi’.

### Value, effectiveness, sustainability

The Chepang CCA is rich in forest and agro biodiversity. The area has a high density of Chiuri (Indian Butter Tree), native to Nepal. It is the relative abundance of Chiuri trees in the area that makes it a unique area. Local Chepangs during the community dialogue also expressed their immense sense of value and care for Chiuri trees. They suggested that their locality is relatively richer in Chiuri trees than other nearby villages in Kankada VDC. “*There are one thousand Chiuri trees in my land*” remarks a local leader in the community. The print media also testifies that out of estimated two hundred thousand Chiuri species in the whole district, one hundred and forty thousand Chiuri trees are found in and around the CCA.

The community strongly feels for Chepang territory and more importantly demonstrates strong affinity for Chiuri trees. Conservation of Chiuri trees by Chepangs can be attributed to their close cultural, livelihood and ecological relation with the tree. The tree bears sweet and juicy fruits. They mainly consume Chiuri fruits as a healthy and nutritious fruit. However, some of them are also found to sell such fruits in the local market. Chiuri seeds are then used to extract ‘ghee’ (butter) which has been an important source of earning for Chepangs. Ghee is also used to light a ‘*diyo*’ (traditional household lamp) that has a huge significance in a village deprived of electricity. The ghee is also used for household consumption. Many Chepang households still sell ‘Chiuri ghee’ in the local market. Remnants of seeds after extracting ghee are also used as organic fertilizer and sometime to fish in the river.



Photo 2: Forest cover with ‘Chiuri’ trees in Chepang settlement, Kankada -7, Makwanpur

*“Chiuri gives us fruit, fodder and shed. While other trees become dry, leaves of Chiuri remain green”* – a local Chepang.

Likewise, Chepangs perceive possession of Chiuri as a sign of prosperity that is an equivalent to owning an asset. Their enormous affection for daughters is reflected in their tradition of offering Chiuri saplings or

even trees as a dowry to their daughters. Chepang kids and youth also perceive playing and plucking Chiuri fruits as a common form of recreation. Govinda Ram, a Chepang

leader recalls an interesting memory with Chiuri “*I bought a trouser for the first time in my life by selling Chiuri seeds when I was fourteen years old*”.

Chiuri ‘*palney*’ (Nurturing Chiuri) was a common expression of local Chepangs during the grassroots dialogue. ‘*We nurture and take care of Chiuri*’. They claim that they take care of trees like a part of their family. They have a practice of clearing bushes, climbers, and unwanted plant species in and around the Chiuri tree. This is intended to allow Chiuri to grow undisturbed. There is an informal rule that prohibits felling of Chiuri tree. While it is self imposed voluntarily by locals, strangers, outsiders as well as non Chepang villagers are not allowed by local Chepangs to graze, chop branches and collect fruit berries in the Chiuri tree. It is also a common value among Chepangs to protect tall tree crowded with leaves.

There is also a fascinating connection between Chepangs, Chiuri and *Chamero* (wild bats). The tree attracts wild bats during fruit bearing season and also when white flowers bloom. They traditionally hunt bats by creating traps in the Chiuri tree. Some young kids also affirm that Chiuri tree is important as they could hunt bats.



Photo 3: Chepang households (on the left) in the forest hill slope, Kankada -7, Makwanpur District

The rich forest biodiversity in the area includes wide varieties of wild fruits and vegetables with high food security values as well as medicinal herbs. The majority of Chepangs can not sustain from subsistence farming throughout a year. “*We are just like animals. For us green vegetables are just like rice. It is difficult to survive without these during droughts*” – remarks a local Chepang woman. They believe edible forest products are important when they do not have enough food and crops from their fields. The local knowledge base suggests presence of wide varieties of yam<sup>3</sup> that are found under and above the soil. Likewise, *Niuro* (type of green wild vegetable), *Sisnu* (Stinging nettle), bamboo shoot, mushroom (seven varieties), *Tyaguna* (*Dioscorea kamoensis kunth*), *Bharlang* (*Dioscorea Hispida Dennst.*), *Bhyakur* (*Dioscorea pentaphylla L.*), *Sweet Gittha* (*Dioscorea bulbifera L.*), *Bitter Gittha* (*Dioscorea Bulbifera Z.*), *Chuinya*

<sup>3</sup> Panglang Goi (*Dioscorea pubera Blume*) ; Bran Goi (*Dioscorea hamiltonii Hook.f*), Kui Goi (*Dioscorea deltoidea wall ex Griseb*) ; Panje Goi (*Dioscorea alata L.*) ; Bas Goi ( *Dioscorea esculen var.spinosa*) ; Ghangse Goi ( *Dioscorea alata L.*) ; Kim Goi (*Dioscorea alata L.*) ; Patale Goi (*Dioscorea alata L.*) ; Pindalu Goi (*Dioscorea species*) ; Lokane Kim Goi (*Dioscorea alata L.*) ; Pustakari Goi (*Canna eddilis ker Gawl*) ;

(*Dioscorea* species) and other varieties of wild vegetables found in the forest patches have immense food security value. Local Chepangs who are engaged in subsistence agriculture in the forest land maintain richness in agro biodiversity. The area is also rich in agro biodiversity. Chemical fertilizers and pesticides in the crops have not yet polluted the agricultural fields in the hill tracts.

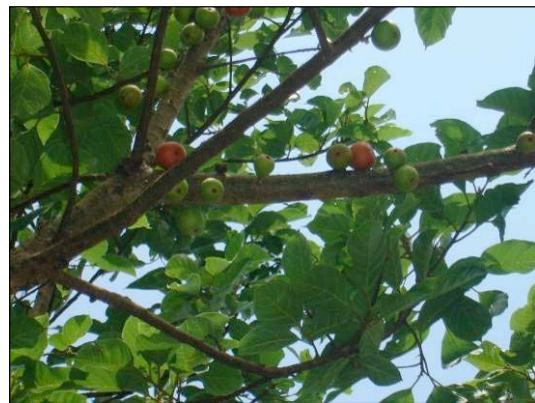


Photo 4: Bharlang (*Dioscorea Hispide Dennst*) – round stem found inside the soil.  
Photo 5: edible root of wild vegetables. Photo 6: green vegetables collected from the forest. Photo 7: Fruit bearing tree (*Khanayo*- local name) in the forest.

Hence, it is the dependency and relation of Chepangs with the forest and forest resources that the present status of diversity has sustained for many generations. Thereby their way of life is closely linked with forest and resources therein. They are concerned that if there are no forests then their lives are seriously threatened.

### **Threats and needs**

One of the most pressing threats in the area is a problem of Churi tree bearing declining number of fruit berries. Local Chepangs believe that it is due to over maturing of Churi tree. While they claim that they do conserve Churi saplings, the pace of regeneration is slow. Chepang activists and representatives of NGOs working in Chepang communities believe that the number of wild bats approaching Churi trees is also declining. Wild bats

are believed to play a crucial role in pollination and thereby contributing extension of Chhuri species. There are contesting opinions concerning the link between non traditional and non commercial hunting of wild bats by Chepangs and its diminishing number.

Secondly, majority of Chepangs do not have legal entitlement to lands they have been occupying from olden times. Those who possess land certificates cover only a small portion of landholding. Chepangs have been occupying and conserving the forest lands that are considered as 'unregistered lands' or state forest. Hence, state's any potential policies of claiming these unregistered land currently occupied by Chepangs is perceived to be a major threat by the community.

In addition to that, increasing influence of Christianity in the area has both pros and cons on Chepangs. Chepang activists claim that the Christianity has given incentives on formal education, encouraged community meetings, collective prayers, cooperation, empowered local women and discouraged 'alcoholism' in the community. There are few concerns as well. The new religion that Chepangs are practicing is threatening their traditional cultural identity as Chepang and alienating their link with the nature and forest in particular. Increasing trend of out-migration among Chepang youth in the community in search of better economic opportunities is also threatening so far as their affinity with their territory and forests are concerned. The urge to pursue modern lifestyles and settling in urban areas is a common trend among youth.

However, strong affinity with Chhuri tree still persists among elders, adults and Chepang women. This indicates their concern towards conservation of forests and revitalizing the area as CCA. The Chepang activists as well as community are enthusiastic about furthering their conservation practice as Chhuri conserved area. Local Chepangs, despite their will and enthusiasm, strongly feel a need of facilitating and supporting organization. External support especially in the area of technical and scientific studies regarding threat to Chhuri species, status and conservation of declining wild bats, creating a democratic governance and management institutions of Chepangs and more importantly advocating with the state for autonomy of Chepang in the area and conservation.

### **Formal recognition**

The customary conservation practices of Chepang in the area are not recognized by the government. The case is similar to other experiences and practices of communities conserving the biodiversity but not recognized by the state. In the face of this, Nepal does not have any legislation and policies to recognize CCAs.

When it comes to a formal recognition of the area as ICCA, there are few local concerns and scepticisms. Local Chepangs are sceptical of any formal laws and rules governing their control, access and use of natural resources in the area. "We don't want this area to be declared as 'community forest' or 'collaborative forest' is a common local perception. Experiences of community forestry and other forms of forest management practices in the area have proven to curtail their customary rights over natural resources. They feel any such provisions would impose new rules and restrictions on their age old practices of resource use. They are equally concerned that the practice of shifting cultivation; current

agricultural practices in the forest land would be constrained in case of any externally imposed institutions and forest management modalities. Likewise, since they do not have legal entitlements to the area they are currently occupying, they fear that their ownership of land will be threatened. Another major inhibition is the erosion of unhindered access and rights over Chiuri trees in the name of collective management of forests.

While some of them also believe that in case of recognition there will be potential external support for conservation and that could be also be invested in other community development initiatives and protection of Chepang culture. If their customary rights and practices of resource use is recognized, protected and promoted then local Chepangs are open to the idea of conserving the area as “Chepang’s Chiuri Conserved Areas”. But they are ambivalent and sceptical on how democratic and participatory the processes of recognition would be.

### **Networking**

The idea of alliance among CCAs was rejoiced by the local Chepangs. They were enthusiastic to learn and gain exposure and exchange experiences with other CCAs and ICCAs. However, they are concerned about strengthening their own CCA and revitalize it so as to ally with other CCAs and their networks. Chepang activists and leaders in particular have a strong urge to be ally with other movements of CCAs so as to contribute their own cause to protect their rights over natural resources. *“We have to create our foundation strong then only it is meaningful”*- remarks a Chepang leader.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

CCA is a new concept in Nepal. So far the experience of Chepangs in Kankada VDC in ward number one and seven is concerned the concept of CCA is still new. It needs further intensive discussion and dialogues within the community, with activists and leaders of Nepal Chepang Association (NCA). Revitalizing Chepang CCA in the area would be critical to livelihood security, cultural identity as well as Chiuri conservation. Following key recommendations would be meaningful to that end:

1. Meaningful technical and capacity building support to the community so as to develop a democratic governance and management institution in the community sensitive to customary practices of conservation. Under the leadership of NCA with assistance from civil society organizations as demanded by NCA can develop in-depth participatory action research on the mechanisms, beliefs and language associated with conservation features in the area. Anthropological advice and input on participatory methodologies would be a constructive support
2. A scientific study on threats to Chiuri species and conservation of bats together with right holders in the community.
3. Understand ecological knowledge base of the Chepangs, identification and documentation of forest and agro biodiversity in the area in a participatory fashion.



4. People centered advocacy and multi stakeholders' dialogues so as to declare the area as Chepang CCA by ensuring democratic governance, autonomy of Chepangs and protection of their rights over natural resources.

**Acknowledgement**

I would like to acknowledge inputs from my colleagues Somat Ghimire, Yuva Raj Subedi and Laxmi Gurung to prepare this report. I extend my gratitude to Govinda Chepang, activists of NCA and local Chepangs from Kankada village for their contribution and cooperation to organize a community dialogue and providing relevant information during the study.

**Annex 1: Format for the preliminary database of CCA sites being tested for UNEP/WCMC**  
(you may wish to use this form to provide the basic CCA information)

**Basic data (please provide all)**

Site Name (in local language and in English)	Chiuri Conserved Chepang Hill Tracts
Country (include State and Province)	Nepal
Area encompassed by the CCA (specify unit of measurement).	Approx. 150 hectares
GIS Coordinates (if available)	
Whether it includes sea areas (Yes or no)	No
Whether it includes freshwater (Yes or no)	No
Marine (Y or N)	No, Terrestrial
Concerned community (name and approx. number of persons)	Chepangs of Ward number 7 and 1, 1162 (population)
Is the community considering itself an indigenous people? (Please note Yes or No; if yes note which people)	Yes (Chepang Indigenous People)
Is the community considering itself a minority? (Please note Yes or No, if yes on the basis of what, e.g. religion, ethnicity)	Yes, ethnic minority
Is the community permanently settled? (Please note Yes or No; if the community is mobile, does it have a customary transhumance territory?)	Earlier semi nomadic, now permanently settled
Is the community local per capita income inferior, basically the same or superior to national value? (please note how confident you are about the information)	The local income per capita is inferior to the national average
Is the CCA recognised as a protected area by governmental agencies? (Yes or no; if yes, how? If no, is it otherwise recognized?) If yes, legal document? Establishment date?	It is not recognised as a protected area but as a territory of Chepangs.
Conflicts with land tenure, natural resource use?	Yes, in the past with neighbouring Tamang ethnic groups on control over forest and forest

	resources.
What is the main management objective (e.g. livelihood, cultural, spiritual...)	Livelihood and culture
By definition, a CCA fulfils a management objective. To which IUCN management category <sup>4</sup> do you consider it would best fit (this does not imply that the management objective is consciously pursued by the concerned community, but that it is actually achieved)	Category VI. Managed Resource Protected Areas (not consciously pursued but actually achieved due livelihood and cultural significance of the ecosystem)

***Additional qualitative information***

Main ecosystem type	Chiuri (Indian Butter Tree) habitat in mid-high hill forest tract.
Description of biodiversity & resources (ecosystems, species, functions) conserved by the CCA	The area has a high density of Chiuri (Indian Butter Tree) native to Nepal. Out of estimated two hundred thousand species, 140 thousand Chiuri trees are found in and around the area. The area is rich in 200000 such species is found in abundance. The trees attract wild bats seasonally during flowering and fruit ripening season. Chepangs have cultural and livelihood connection with Chiuri. The forest bio diversity includes wide varieties of wild fruits, vegetables and medicinal herbs with high food security value. The area is also rich in agro biodiversity.
Description of local ethnic groups and languages spoken	Chepang Indigenous People, one of the highly marginalized <i>Janajatis</i> (indigenous nationalities) of Nepal. Earlier they were labelled by the government as 'Praja'. The language is Chepang language but they also use Nepali language.
Broad historical context of the CCA	Private and forest land traditionally occupied, used and conserved by Chepangs for more than five generations.
Governance structure for the CCA (who takes management decisions, how?)	Informal governance based on traditional institutions and community consensus. Local community leaders and elderly play key role.
Length of time the governance model has been in place	Traditional system.
Land and resource ownership in the CCA	Private and government forest land but with de facto ownership to the community.
Type of land use in the CCA	Forest managed, used and distributed among households in their respective private territories zoned based on community consensus through informal rules. Also agro bio diversity.
Existence of written or oral management plans and specific rules for the use of natural resources in the CCA	Oral

<sup>4</sup> Please see [http://www.iucn.org/themes/wcpa/wpc2003/pdfs/outputs/pascat/pascatrev\\_info3.pdf](http://www.iucn.org/themes/wcpa/wpc2003/pdfs/outputs/pascat/pascatrev_info3.pdf)

Map and zoning of the CCA (please attach if available and relevant.)	Resource map sketched by the community (Photo 1 in the report)
Relevant pictures with captions (please attach if available)	Attached
Major threats to biodiversity and/or the CCA governance system	Declining number of wild bats that plays crucial role in pollination of Chiuri; over maturing of Chiuri trees and thus bearing less fruits; forest land occupied and conserved by Chepangs traditionally do not have legal entitlements.
Local CCA-relevant features, stories, names, rules and practices	Chepangs have a tradition of worshipping forest and trees to avoid natural disasters. Some Chepangs worship trees as an incarnation of lord Bhimsen with immense power and strength. Traditionally Chirui trees and saplings are offered as dowry to daughters as a possession of Chiuri tree in a family is a sign of prosperity and valuable asset.

***Contact individuals and organizations:***

Suk Bahadur Chepang, Community Leader.

Govinda Ram Chepang, President, Nepal Chepang Association