

# Banko Janakari

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## Unbearable heat of forest flame

In Nepal, forest fire is a very common site during dry period. This year, its intensity seems probably a bit higher than the previous ones. News magazines are full of reports on forest fire from different parts of the country. The prolonged haze throughout the country is attributed partly to the smoke of forest fire and partly to rainless winter. While driving from Kathmandu towards the Terai, the sight of fire is frequent. Some places where sunlight could not penetrate the smoke, reminding partly, that of Sumatra and Borneo, a couple of years before.

Despite such frequent forest fire, no attempts have been made by any institutions - government or non-government to record its cause and effect. We do not know as yet, the area of forest under fire annually and its reasons. Interestingly, as soon as the wet season comes we tend to forget it so quickly, as if nothing had happened in the past and no forest fire would ever occur. Such creeping tendency reminds of the story of a lazy lizard.

Research and documentation on this important topic is woefully lacking. Whatever have been done, are either incorrect, unpublished or publicized. The economic loss of forest fire at a given area has never been calculated, except the one at Bara District which, unfortunately, is such prone to forest fire that almost eighty five percent of the its forest area is on fire annually. And, the annual loss is as high as NRs 2.5 million.

There could be simply three of reasons of forest fire - human negligence, deliberate and natural. Presumably, majority of them are deliberate, and seldom natural. Forest fire are, in some way or other, deeply linked to our socio-cultural practices. Important among them are: *khorea phadani* (slash and burn) for agriculture expansion; rearing livestock in forests and to allow growth of grass; to ease poaching; to ease firewood collection, etc. The Terai forests have been set fire for illegal settlements. Its flame keeps on rising high aired by the politicians. Facilitating the collection of sal (*Shorea robusta*) seed in the Terai, and the growth of morel (*Morchella esculenta*) - a high value mushroom at temperate regions are the other reasons of forest fire. In the mid-hills forests are also set on fire in a hope that the successive

rain would bring nutrient rich soil down in agriculture fields. We have no proof though, smuggling of timber may also have some link with forest fire.

Having known the probable reasons of forest, its solutions should not be too difficult. But, on the other hand, it has no easy solution too. As said, forest fire is intricately linked with our social practices, two approaches of its control seems inevitable at present. The one is, obviously, a precautionary and the other is a gradual change in traditional socio-cultural practices. The latter could be achieved only when local peoples' dependency on forest resources is reduced. It is a very difficult task indeed.

Precautionary measures also seem to be not well implied. Making fire lines, which has though, remained an important activity of district forest offices, is not sufficient. Its maintenance is equally important. And moreover, how to get timely information in case of fire and what can be done thereafter, are the burning questions at present. In fact, we all are helpless at present. Let's over come this situation.

Extinguishing a vast tract of forest fire may be a difficult task even for those who are well equipped. We have nothing so far, and especially looking at the difficult terrain of our country fire extinguishing work even at a small area becomes very difficult for us. But, by saying so we can not afford to keep on losing our already depleting forest resources for nothing. Time has already come that we initiate some effective fire management programmes, beginning with the Terai which has no difficult terrain. The organisational structures, especially after handing over forest areas to community, are in place. The only need is to motivate them against such devastation.

Indian forest officers have often been accused off by their country-men for setting forest fire in order to put screen on corruption. Should we continue to keep quite as we are doing at present, and show no immediate concern towards fire management, no wonder, if Nepali fingers rise against our officers too, who have otherwise done a good job of forest management so far.

Lastly, forest fire is not uncommon, but, its frequency in Nepal has become unbearable. It needs immediate attention.

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