

INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONS AND PASTURE MANAGEMENT
IN HIGH ALTITUDE NEPAL¹

Reprint Files -- CPK

Man B. Thapa²

INTRODUCTION

Rural communities in many parts of the world are known to maintain indigenous institutions for the management of natural resources³. Such indigenous institutions in many cases are formal as well as informal. In Nepal, there are several strong formal as well as informal indigenous institutions. These indigenous institutions (IIs) carried out effective communal management of natural resources (particularly forest, pastureland and irrigation water) and are largely responsible for the continued productivity, proper distribution and use of these resources.

In Nepal in many cases, these indigenous institutions are "Councils" represented by all the permanently settled households of the village. The councils decide, usually by consensus, the rules for the management of natural resources. Often again, the councils nominate one or a small number of the households in rotation for a specified period (usually one year) to act as the "enforcer" of rules for the management of natural resources. In some cases, the council may elect such enforcer.

Animal husbandry is the primary source of socioeconomic survival of the population inhabiting in the high altitude northern areas of Nepal. The agriculture sector in these areas pivots around it, while the centuries-old trans-Himalayan (Nepal-Tibet) trade depends on animal husbandry for pack animals. It is also an important element in the social structure of the population. The successful practice of animal husbandry and natural resources management in this area has been based on indigenous pasture and natural resources management systems, which is basically implemented by the IIs.

There are several indigenous pasture management systems existing in different parts of the country. Sustained development of animal husbandry through local management of pasturelands will bring economic betterment of the inhabitants of the northern areas of Nepal. Due to various factors, however, these prospects

¹ Paper prepared for the Fifth Annual Common Property Conference of the International Association for The Study of Common Property, Bodo, Norway, 24-28 May 1995.

² Research Officer, Winrock International, P.O. Box 1312, Kathmandu, Nepal. Fax: 977-1-222904.

³ In the Europe Alps prior to the sixteenth century, highly formalized local institutions existed to control access to and usage of communal grazing (Netting 1881, quoted in Gilmour and Fisher 1991).

have so far been left largely unexplored.

Available information bear witness to the fact that the practice of animal husbandry in the northern areas of Nepal in the past and today owe their continuity primarily to the successful indigenous pasture management systems which is implemented by IIs.

METHODOLOGY

The information for this study was collected from primary and secondary sources. The primary information were collected basically from two districts Solukhumbu in the east and Mustang in the west. Farmers were interviewed with structured and open ended interview schedules. Information were also collected from the direct field observation/visit. Published and unpublished literatures related to indigenous institutions and pasture management were collected from different sources within the country and reviewed as the secondary information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Local Organizations:

Rural communities everywhere are known to maintain indigenous institutions for the management of natural resources. In Nepal also, there are several strong formal as well as informal indigenous institutions. These indigenous institutions carried out effective communal management of forest and pasture by applying the wisdom of conservation measures and by effective enforcement of rules against over exploitation of these resources. These institutions were largely responsible for the continued productivity of the forest and pasture (Messerschmidt 1981).

As stated earlier, in most instances, the indigenous institutions are "Councils" represented by all the permanently settled households of the village. The councils decide, usually by consensus, the rules for the management of natural resources. Often again, the councils nominate one or a small number of the households in rotation for a specified period (usually one year) to act as the "enforcer" of rules for the management of natural resources. In some cases, the council may elect the enforcer.

Among the Sherpas of Solukhumbu, an "Official" known as *nawa* heads the institutions of pasture management (known as *shing-o-nawa*). The position is filled annually on a rotational basis from the households of the village. This official ensures that the decisions of the village regarding the access and use of pasture resources are enforced, and that all households receive equitable access to resources. For example, *nawa* enforces rules regarding

where and how long the livestock are pastured. *Nawa* also enforces rules concerning when and where hay may be cut for winter forage. Among the Sherpas of Solukhumbu, the traditional village headman (*murmin*) exclusively controls the right to dispense permission for grazing to shepherds (Cox 1985).

In Upper Mustang, the rules and regulations for animal movement from one pasture to another, pasture management, harvesting of naturally grown grasses from communal land and harvesting of grasses/legumes from cultivated land are implemented by the officially designated as *Mukhiya*, the village leader. In the case of Leta, lower Mustang, the group of villagers formed a somewhat formal *Bheda Goth Samiti* (Sheep Herders Committee) to decide on the schedule for the use of pasture and harvesting of forages.

Both men and women are often represented in the indigenous institutions for pasture management. Among the Tibetan-speaking groups of the northern areas of Nepal, the women often make the decisions on pasture management by themselves, as the men are usually away for trading for most parts of the year (ADB 1990).

In recent centuries (particularly since the beginning of the Rana regime), the Central Government of Nepal has asserted increasing control over rural areas and undermined the indigenous institutions. The formal powers of these institutions were co-opted by officially designated "revenue collectors" called *talukdar*, *jimmawal*, *mukhiya*, etc, who were often recruited from among the local feudals. The revenue collectors took over the enforcement of the rules and regulations (often promulgated by the government) controlling the use of the natural resources.

Following the introduction of the Panchayat system in 1960, the local elected councils called "Panchayat" legally suppressed the indigenous organizations in managing the natural resources. This led to the subversion of the authority of the traditional organizations and, in many cases, the discontinuation of the customary, consensually based decision making process. In many cases this also meant the imposition of rules and regulations which went against the local conditions, ultimately resulting in the degradation of the natural resources.

Function:

Among their several functions, the indigenous institutions in the past acted to ensure the sustainable use of local pasture. They ensured the sustainability by defining rights over tracts of pasture, formulating rules and regulations for their management and by imposing sanctions on defaulters.

The rights are guarded by delimiting the grazing areas and by defining rights of households to particular grazing areas. For example, in the Jugal Himal area, ridges are divided into grazing zones, each belonging to a particular village. This territorial arrangement of grazing rights is an old one, which has somehow

remained unaffected by the present day governmental legislation (Schmidt-Vogt 1990). Similarly all communal grasslands (*kharka*) in Thili Kharka have recognized boundaries (Gibbon et al 1988).

Cox (1985) reports that there are five summer herding groups in Langtang and each group has its own territory in which only the animals from that group can graze. The herding groups have their own names, as does the territory they herd in.

Communities in the Kalingchowk area in the past enjoyed a system of the land tenure known as *KIPAT*, in which residual rights over the land was vested in the community itself. Under this system, only the member of particular ethnic groups had the right to pasturage (Alirol, 1979). Today, rights to pasture are defined by residence.

In Khumbu, rights to pasturage are obtained through property ownership and/or membership in patrilineal clans. Gibbon et al. (1988) report that in Chheskam (Solukhumbu), the rights to use grazing land and collect animal fodder are enjoyed only by members of the local clan group.

The Jirel of Central Nepal, prior to the establishment of the royal herding station in Jiri, used local grassland as communal property. The households had access to use the grasslands irrespective of whether or not one had ownership title to a land. After the establishment of the herding station, the Jirel were granted by the rulers considerable autonomy to use and protect grasslands in return for their services for the royal herds (Acharya 1990).

The Jirel community today distinguishes two different kinds of rights - right to cultivate and right to pasture - invested in to different people to the same plot of land. This system, called "*ali-bali*", defines that the owner of right to cultivate is entitled to the grains of cultivated crops, and the owner of right to pasture, the straw and stalks of cultivated crops and the forage there (Acharya 1990).

In Langtang, grazing rights are obtained permanently through patrilineal inheritance or, temporarily through affinal relation. Stock farmers, who carry out summer herding in the alpine grassland, must be member in one of the five local herding groups (Cox 1985).

In addition to the clearly defined rights, the indigenous pasture management systems also have a number of well defined rules. These rules could be both formal and informal depending on the local communities and the local conditions.

The rules, promulgated on the basis of consensus, are generally imposed to ensure a number of ends. First and foremost, the rules are to restrict the number of animals per particular pasture for specific time period and to control the movement of animals there so that the pasture are not overgrazed. Second, the rules are set in a way that all the members of the herding group,

including the weaker and poorer, have equal access to the natural resources. Thirdly, the liabilities such as the animal taxes are borne equitably; the owner of the larger herd pays more taxes. Fourth, should there be disputes, the rules provide the basis for arbitration.

Conclusion

The Government of Nepal, in order to bring sustainable natural resources management and livestock development in the high altitude northern areas of the country, concentrated its efforts to continue to keep the Tibetan winter pasture open for Nepali herds. These efforts were doomed to fail. Furthermore, the efforts and the hope to continue to have access to the Tibetan pasturelands for the Nepali herds ultimately retarded the process of developing and managing pasturelands in the high-altitude areas of Nepal.

Admitting the problem of acute shortage of animal fodder in the northern regions of the country, the Government initiated a small number of high altitude pasture and fodder development programs (DLDAH 1984; Thapa 1990). The government-level efforts in the development of pastures in the northern areas of the country, however, amounted to the technical oriented packages for the physical development of the pasture areas. These technical interventions for the improvement of pasturelands were faulty primarily for two reasons. First, these external interventions were introduced with minimal understanding of the ecology of the area. Second and more serious fault lied in ignoring the importance or at least undermining the existing indigenous institutions and their role in pasture management.

Aside from the fact that the government programmes ignored the existing indigenous institutions and organizational resources, rich indigenous knowledge systems, the government policies led to unwarranted changes in the local pasture management systems. In serious instances, it resulted in a discontinuation of the indigenous institutions and pasture management systems.

This study, clearly indicates that the external efforts to pasture development must recognized and incorporate the components of the indigenous institutions responsible for indigenous pasture management. These should include the learning from the indigenous knowledge and experience, the recognition of indigenous institutions as effective intermediaries for pasture management and the incorporation of many of the traditional rights, rules and sanctions for present-day pasture management. Understanding the components of the indigenous institutions should form the first step for coming up with an appropriate policy recommendation for the development of pasture in the northern areas of Nepal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Acharya, Harihar P.
1990 Processes of Forest and Pasture Management In a Jirel Community of Highland Nepal. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation in anthropology. Cornell University, Ithaca, USA.
- Alirol, Philippe.
1979 Transhuming Animal Husbandry Systems in Kalingchowk Region (Central Nepal). Swiss Association for Technical Assistance/Integrated Hill Development Project, Kathmandu.
- Asian Development Bank.
1990 Strategy for Livestock Development, Discussion Document, Vol.1. Asian Development Bank/ ANZDEC Limited/ APROSC, Kathmandu.
- Cox, Thomas E.
1985 Herding and Socioeconomic changes among the Khumbu Sherpas. Kailash 14:63-74.
- Department of Livestock Development and Animal Health (DLDAH).
1984 Northern Region Pasture Development Program. Department of Livestock Development and Animal Health, Kathmandu.
- Gibbon, David, Michael Schultz, Man B. Thapa, Mitra P. Upadhaya, Yagya R. Joshi and Sharan KC
1988 Report on a Study of the agricultural Potential of Chheskam Panchayat. Technical Paper No. 95. Pakhribas Agricultural Centre, Dhankuta.
- Gilmour, D.A. and R.J. Fisher
1991 Villagers, Forests and Foresters: The Philosophy, Process and Practice of Community Forestry in Nepal. Sahayogi Press, Kathmandu, Nepal.
- Messerschmidt, Donald A.
1981 Nogar and other traditional forms of cooperation in Nepal: Significance for development. Human Organization, Journal of the Society for Applied Anthropology 40(1):1-15.
- Rai, Navin K. and Man B. Thapa
1993 Indigenous Pasture Management systems in High Altitude Nepal: A Review. HMG Ministry of Agriculture-Winrock International, Policy Analysis in Agriculture and Related Resource Management, Kathmandu.
- Schmidt-Vogt, Dietrich
1990 High Altitude Forests in the Jugal Himal (Eastern Central Nepal): Forest Types and Human Impact. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Thapa, Man B.
1990 People's Participation in Range Management: The Case of Mustang, Nepal. Unpublished MS thesis in Rural Sociology, University of the Philippines at Los Banos.