

# Knowing our Lands and Resources

Indigenous and Local Knowledge and Practices  
related to Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in Asia



# 6. Indigenous system of pastureland management: A case of Limi in the Kailash sacred landscape, Nepal

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## Abstract

Indigenous systems of the management of natural resources are deeply embedded in cultural values espoused by local communities both as groups and as individuals. Under this project, we explored the role of customary arrangements and the enabling factors that allow the informal local and community-based institutions to effectively manage pastureland in Humla District, a part of the Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative (KSLCDI) in Nepal where the grasslands are important livelihood resources. This study focusses on how the locally designed institutional arrangements have managed the pastureland in Limi valley of Humla district. The study revealed that the community governance institutions are long enduring, have evolved through generations and are embedded in the social hierarchy. These community institutions have effectively managed the pastureland by aiming to ensure the sustainability of the resource base while enhancing equitable resource use.

Key words: Kailash Sacred Landscape; Humla; Pasturelands; traditional resource governance

## 6.1. Introduction

The Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative (KSLCDI) is a transboundary collaborative programme among China, India, and Nepal that has evolved through a participatory, iterative process among various local and national research and development institutions within these countries (Zomer and Oli 2011). The project has been initiated in Nepal as a collaborative project of the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation (MoFSC), Government of Nepal; International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD); and Research Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ReCAST), Tribhuvan University, Nepal with financial support from the Department for International Development (DFID), United Kingdom and German Corporation for International Co-operation (GIZ). The programme aims to achieve long-term conservation of ecosystems, habitats, and biodiversity while encouraging sustainable development, enhancing the resilience of communities in the landscape and safeguarding the cultural linkages between local populations at a transboundary scale.

The Kailash Sacred Landscape (KSL) in Nepal comprises four districts Baitadi, Bajhang, Darchula, and Humla, located in the far and mid-western regions of the country (Figure 6.1). High

biogeographic, climatic, geological, and altitudinal variations as well as topographic complexity contribute to the high biodiversity of the landscape over a relatively small area. The landscape thus forms a complex mosaic of ecosystems unique to the mountain system (CDB-TU 2010).

Generally, pasturelands dominate the land use type in the higher elevation of the landscape and animal husbandry plays an important role in the household economy. In the past, overall socio-ecological systems and several sub-systems in the region were largely shaped by the barter economy practised in the region (Adhikari 2008). Large quantities of salt from Tibet used to be exchanged with grains from the region, the southern part of Nepal, and the Indian plains (Haimendorf 1988). The salt-grain trade linked the communities at different elevations and united them in the larger economic system. As the trading system survived with the maintenance of large flocks of sheep and goats and herds of yak to haul the loads of grain and salt, the economic system was well-linked with the management of pastureland and forest areas. People used to rear large flocks of sheep and goats and herds of yak and exploited pastureland and grazing areas at different elevations. As this economic system continued, intricately planned systems of managing pasturelands in higher reaches and rules for accessing forest areas for caravans of animals in lower elevations were developed.

Traditionally, herders from Yari and Limi village development committees (VDC) would take their animals to pasture lands, now in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of China, during the winter season, as the pastures there are better and wind blows the snow away. However, with the new political arrangements between the two countries, such a practice of cross-border winter grazing has ceased. This has had a severe impact and the number of animals herders can keep has greatly reduced. The political boundaries do not match the ecological and traditional livelihood boundaries of the region.

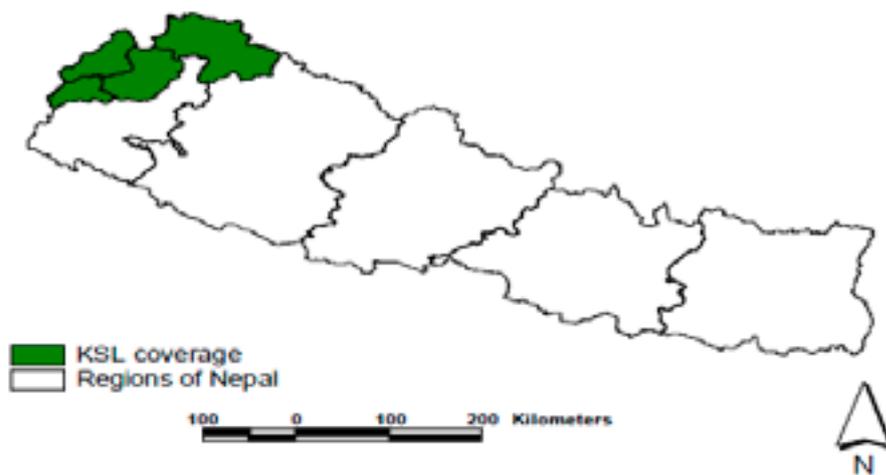


Figure 6.1 Kailash Sacred Landscape in Nepal

People have managed pasturelands over generations through community institutions which are rooted in social systems. Over the years, the dynamics of interaction and the interface between the components of socio-ecological systems have changed owing to various internal and external pressures. This study attempted to explore the role of community-based institutions in the management of pastureland in Limi valley of Humla, one of the districts of the landscape.

## 6.2. General features

The Limi Village Development Committee (VDC) in Humla district is the northern-most VDC in Nepal and has three main settlements namely Halji, Tila, and Zhang. Halji, with four wards, is the largest settlement located between two other settlements. Tila has two wards and Zhang has three. People here subscribe to the Dhikung Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism and follow polyandry system of marriage.

However, over the years, the polyandrous system of marriage is yielding ground to the monogamous system of marriage. Crop production and animal husbandry aided by seasonal employment in Taklakot (Tibet) are the main livelihood strategies adopted by the people in the region. Farming is mainly of subsistence type and crops can only be grown in one season. Animal husbandry is an important integral component of the farming system. The priority animals are dairy cattle, sheep, horses and yak. Raising livestock is an integral part of the household economy of all inhabitants of the district. In lower Humla, cattle and buffaloes are reared in limited numbers. As one moves to higher elevations, dzo, Jhuma, cross-breeds of yak and local cattle become common. The herding of yak involves seasonal moves to high pastures.

Local people have developed an elaborate system of breeding of local breed of cattle, called Lulu, and yaks. Many Lama communities keep a few Kirkoo bulls (Lulu) to cross with Tsauris (Yak cows). Jhuma, the female offspring, is prized for its higher milk yield. Similarly, Djos, the male offspring is highly prized as a pack animal. Offspring of Jhuma and Lulu bulls are called Tolba (male) and Tolbini (female) and are of relatively little value (CDB-TU 2010).

## 6.3. Results and Discussion

### 6.3.1. Institutional arrangement

#### ► Social hierarchy system

The community system is very closely weaved with cultural practices. Hierarchy in the society and the selection of authorities for the management of the community system are closely linked with the property inheritance system associated with the polyandry system of marriage (Lavine 1988). People here follow impartible primogeniture system of property inheritance, where the eldest son inherits the property and the property is not normally divided among the brothers. In case a family does not have a son, the uxori-local son-in-law inherits the property. The eldest son of the family who inherits the property becomes a Dhongba. If younger brothers do not share the same wife and separate, they get a smaller proportion of the property and become Dhongjung. The unmarried sisters who separate from their brothers become Bhomdang.

Bhomdang get an even smaller proportion of property than Dhongjung. Dhongba refers to both individuals and the estate. The number of Dhongba in a village always remains the same; however, the number of Dhongjung and Bhomdang may increase or decrease. A Dhongjung can never become a Dhongba, however, a son borne to a Bhomdang can become a Dhongjung. The number of three different types of households in three villages is shown in Table 6.1.

**Table 6.1** Compositions of households in Limi VDC, Humla, Nepal

Name of settlement	Dhongba	Dhongjung	Bhomdang	Total
Halji	29	31	20	80
Tila	13	11	15	39
Zhang	15	33	14	62

In the ladder of social hierarchy, Dhongba are at the top followed by Dhongjung and Bhomdang. This hierarchical order is also manifested in the property ownership, with Dhongba owning more properties followed by Dhongjung and Bhomdang. Being a Dhongba also requires taking on more responsibilities, especially in religious matters. They are obliged to contribute more towards religious rituals and ceremonies. For example, if a Dhongba family has two sons, one has to join the monastery and become a monk, but in the case of Dhongjung, such a requirement is imposed only if the family has three sons.

#### ► Selection of authorities

Since there have not been any elections of local VDC bodies for over a decade, people elect the VDC chairperson and ward chairpersons locally following a system called Hipsing, wherein lotteries are drawn in the name of each individual household (Dhongba and Dhongjung only) for a period of five years. In the case of Tila village, which has two wards, one chairman is elected from among Dhongba and the other from among Dhongjung households. However, in the other two settlements, they are selected from either Dhongba or Dhongjung households. In earlier times, only the Dhongba households were eligible to hold the posts of chairman, but the societies have become more egalitarian over the years and no such discrimination is made today. The system of Hipsing, a mystic equity arrangement, ensures that all the potential households have equal opportunities. It is adopted in other activities as well like deciding turns on drawing water, selection of pasturelands etc. Selection of authorities, even when the official elections in the country were held, followed more along the social arrangements than along the political party lines as commonly practised in other parts of the country. The position of the village chief is held exclusively by a male, and other positions are also generally held by men, clearly manifesting gender discrimination.

In addition to the VDC chairman and ward chairpersons, there are two more types of officials called Loiba and Lora, which are rotated annually within a settlement. Loiba are responsible for monitoring forest areas and, in some cases, pastureland, and Lora are responsible for ensuring that animals do not stray into the fields. Each village has two Lora and only the Dhongba households are eligible to become a Lora. If animals are found straying into the fields, the owner has to pay a fine consisting of both grains (about 4 kg. of naked barley) and Rs. 50. The cash component of the fine goes towards the community fund and the grain is kept by the respective Lora. The number of Loiba who look after the forest ranges from four to six, representing both Dhongba and Dhongjung households. The social organization that has evolved in alpine environments coordinates socio-political systems, high altitude agro-pastoral activities, and indigenous resource governance systems (Rhoades and Thompson 1975).

Religious institutions have played an important role in the management and conservation of resources. In many northern societies of Humla district, religious institutions like monasteries, monks, and shamans play a key role in the way resources are extracted and managed (Photo 6.1). In fact, even today, they play a major role in dispute settlement, maintenance of the social order and conservation of resources. The conservation ethos promoted by religious leaders like abbots of monasteries has been found to be very effective in reducing hunting activities. The religious institutions are key units in addressing the symbolic aspects of resource management like appeasing various deities of water, rain, good harvest, forest; officiating ceremonies of agricultural activities; and transferring the knowledge and tradition of resource management.



**Photo 6.1** Monasteries play an important role in resource governance

### 6.3.2. Resource governance

The village authorities set the rules for access to the forest, agricultural operation, and pastureland management. They decide certain dates when dried firewood can be collected from the village forest. Loiba check each load of firewood collected just before people enter the village and if anyone is found picking fresh twigs, he/she is fined up to Rs. 5,000. People take oaths before religious idols that they will not collect any fresh twigs or fell any trees. Such oaths are respected by every individual. People are strictly prohibited from hunting animals. If anyone is found using a gun, he/she is fined Rs. 50,000. The community decides the calendar of operation of agricultural practices like the date of sowing seeds (usually allowing two days), weeding the crops, cutting grasses from the field, irrigation and harvest. All people strictly adhere to such decisions.

Although generally each settlement has its own forest, they hold pastureland in commons among the settlements. If important decisions are to be made among the villagers - for example, deciding the turn/rotation of pasture land - ward chairpersons meet at a supposedly neutral ground located at Sunkhani.

Moving animals to the high pasture is co-ordinated among the three villages. They resort to Hipsing (lottery system) to ensure equity among the resource users.

### 6.3.3. Pastureland management

People here practice transhumance, moving their herds to pastures of different elevations called Soika, Yarka, Tonka, and Ghunka based on the seasons (Photo 6.2). They follow a seasonal calendar in grazing their animals. All the animals are taken to the high pasture called Soika in the summer after planting of crops.



**Photo 6.2** Transhumance is a major livelihood strategy in Limi, Humla

Generally, pack animals dzo and horses are not taken to the higher pasturelands and are grazed near the villages. However, sometimes they are also taken to the higher pasturelands and are brought back to the villages from the high pastures if there is a need to carry loads. The pastures for rainy season called Yarka are higher. Usually, around August, with the onset of Tonka, pastoralists start bringing their animals down to lower elevation pastures. The Tonka pastures are the same as Soika pasture (Photo 6.3). Around the end of the Tonka season, crops are also harvested and animals are brought back close to the village when the Ghunka or winter season begins. These rotational grazing systems are closely monitored and regulated by the community.

If any individual is found grazing animals in Ghunka pasture in other seasons, he/she is severely punished.

Even within a particular seasonal pasture, the community makes decisions on where to take animals so that pasturelands are maintained. For example, people take their animals to Ning Khola, Talung, Artang in Soika; to Shakya Khola, Gyau Khola in Yarka; Talung, Ning in Tonka, and in the villages, Rak, and Ning Khola in Ghunka season (CDB-TU 2010).

Not all the households go with their animals to the higher pasture. People with only a few animals request their neighbours or relatives to look after their animals as well. In such cases, those absentee owners provide food and other required materials to the herders. In the case of collective herding of milking animals, ghee (butter) and dried cheese (chhurpee) are divided among the animal owners in proportion to number of milking animals or the amount of milk produced by the animals.



**Photo 6.3** A Soika pastureland in Limi valley, Humla District, Nepal

## 6.4. Conclusions

The institutional arrangements for governing community systems and resources have evolved over the years becoming more egalitarian and allowing people belonging to even lower rungs of the hierarchy system to represent themselves in resource governance.

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