

migratory traders of Baragaon

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This paper is a preliminary report, a discussion of seasonal migratory trading patterns of the population of Baragaon. The villages concerned are located in the Kagbeni and Muktinath Panchayats in the central part of Mustang District, Nepal.

Background

Baragaon is an area located along a traditional trade-route between Tibet, the middle hills of Nepal, and the plains region of the Nepalese Terai and northern India. A number of articles have been written about the trading history of the very successful Thakali entrepreneurs just south of Baragaon.¹ The people of Baragaon were also salt-traders at the time that the Thakalis gained supremacy in the area (late 19th and early 20th century), but for reasons that have been discussed elsewhere,² the people to the north of Thak Khola never made large profits in the way that the Thakalis did.

Now that the salt-trade has declined in importance, the economies of both Thak Khola and Baragaon have begun to take new directions. These areas have always had mixed economies. The region is so arid that agriculture alone is not sufficient to sustain the population. Thus, most households combine agriculture with animal-raising and trade.

The main innovations have occurred in the area of trade. The emphasis has shifted from north to south, and salt is no longer the staple of trade. Salt from Mustang and Tibet is now both less available and in less demand, but there is nothing to replace it. The area has few resources that can be carried south by individuals and marketed. Increasingly, it is capital (itself scarce), mainly in the form of loans and profits from local animal trade that is taken south. It is by leg-work (buying an item and carrying it to a place where its price is higher), wits (knowing what, where, and how to sell) and luck that profit is made, loans paid off, and bags of grain and perhaps a few consumer items are brought back to supplement a family's yearly crops.

One of the most popular trade items of the past few years has been factory-made sweaters; bought in Ludhiana (in N.W. India) and carried for days on trains to sell in Assam and Nagaland (extreme N.E. India). For those who are clever and lucky enough not to fall prey to thieves, the profit can be good, but there are also losses and debts that increase year after year. Many, perhaps the majority of traders, return with no loss but negligible profits,

managing only to feed themselves during the winter months and to reduce some of the strain on the family store of grain.

The trading of sweaters and various other items in India (herbal medicines, for instance) is almost exclusively a male pursuit. Young women who engage in migratory trade are mainly involved in the production and sale of barley beer (chang) and distilled alcohol (raksi) along the trade-routes. They may also run small shops in Pokhara or in nearby villages, usually in the company of a small group of friends or relatives.

Profile of the Trading Population

The typical pattern is for old people and children to remain in the villages and youths and young adults to travel south for the winter. In Jajarkot (Muktinath Panchayat) for instance, 62% of the males between the ages of 20 and 54, and 51% of those between 15 and 54 migrated south this past winter. This compares with 36% of the total male population (156 persons) who migrated south. The migration of women is somewhat less, but still considerable. 44% of the women between the ages of 20 and 29 migrated south, and 33% of those between the ages of 15 and 39. Of the total female population (152), 19% migrated south. Of the total population of Jarkot (male and female combined), 28% migrated south for the winter, and with the exception of children under the age of 15, most of them were engaged in trade of some kind. (see Figure 1).

The "trading age-bracket" seems to encompass individuals from about 15 to 54 years of age; the age-range being slightly narrower for women. The mean age-bracket for men who migrated is age 30-34 and for women age 20-24. If children under the age of 15 are eliminated (since they are generally non-traders), the mean age for male traders is still 30-34 and that for women is the same.³

The Decision to Migrate

When one asks a local person why he or she goes south, the answer is usually one or all of the following: "We have to go south because the food from our fields isn't enough." "It's very cold here in winter - no one likes to stay," or "Everyone goes south - only the old people and the children who can't walk stay in the villages." As far as these explanations go they may be accurate, but as can be seen from the statistics above, only a certain percentage, and not the whole population in the trading age-bracket actually did migrate south last winter. Positive reasons "why people go south" cannot very well be used to explain or predict why some do and some don't.

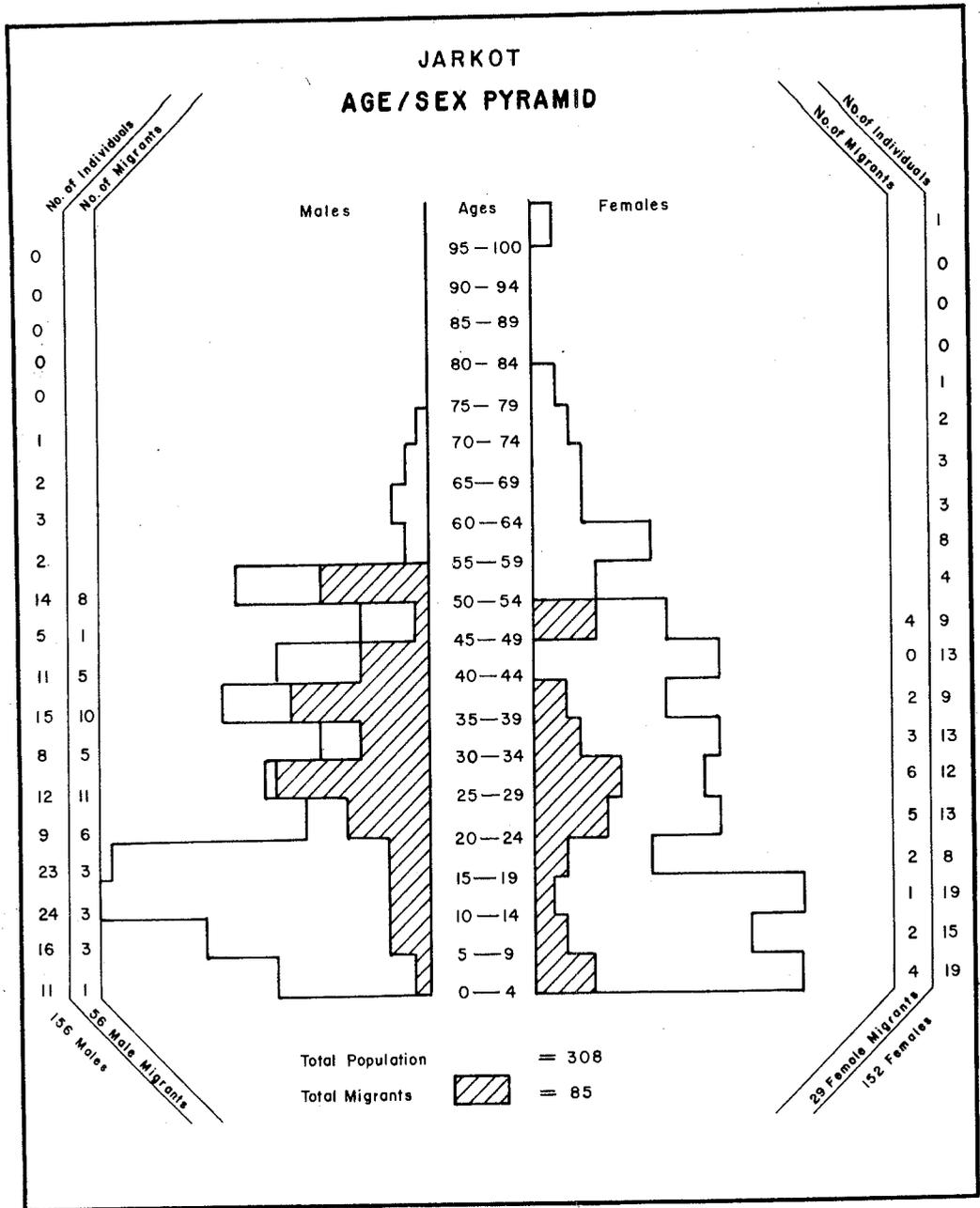


Fig. 1

On this basis I have modified the first of the local explanations ("We have to go south because the food from our fields isn't enough.") by adding its converse, i.e., that when the food from his or her fields is adequate, an individual will probably not engage in migratory trading.⁴ In the following pages, I have attempted to test this explanation by investigating the extent to which trading and non-trading are related to wealth in land.

Methodology

To do so I used the landholding records compiled by the local Survey Office⁵ and my own census data pertaining to household composition, ages, seasonal trade, etc. The methodological problems were substantial and a large number of cases had to be discarded because the reliability of my information was questionable. Since the registration of land by the government was done for the first time in this area only two years ago, there were likely to be inaccuracies. As a cross-check, I obtained an estimate of the amount of land, either in numbers of fields or in ropanis, for each household in my sample. These were supplied in some cases by a member of the household, and in some cases by another villager. Since people are often reluctant to reveal the exact amount of their land, and are not accustomed to thinking in ropanis, this could not be taken as an accurate measure. It was, however, useful in weeding out cases for which the government records seemed implausible.

There was an additional problem: that in the government records land is classified in four categories. In order to proceed it was necessary to reduce these four categories to comparable units. This was done on the basis of the taxation rate for each of these categories in the hilly region: abal - rs. 2, doyam - rs. 1.50, sim - rs. 1, and chahar - rs. .50 per ropani.⁶

My sample includes cases from 5 villages: Jarkot, Kagbeni, Tiri, Dangardzong, and Phalak, each ranging from 15 to 65 households in size. My census data for the first three villages was fairly complete, so I was able to include a large proportion of households from these villages. Because of the difficulties already discussed, I had to exclude from my sample a large number of households from Phalak and Dangardzong. The final sample consisted of 135 households and included 672 individuals. In comparing relative wealth in land with presence or absence of migratory trading, I was uncertain whether to use the individual or the household as the relevant unit. For that reason I have tried it each way. The results are as follows.

Statistical Patterns

(see Figure 2). A significant pattern emerges when the household is treated as an economic unit (engaging or not engaging in migratory trade) and the individual as a land-using unit (i.e., a food consumer). The pattern is that the greatest number of trading households in proportion to non-trading households come from the second-lowest landholding group, the group in which each individual holds 5-9 units of land. The lower group (0-4 units per individual) contains proportionately fewer trading families. In fact, apart from the second-lowest landholding group, there is no significant difference in the proportion of trading and non-trading families within any of the landholding groups.⁷

I suggest the following explanation, that:

1. Individuals in the lowest landholding group tend to be so poor that it is usually impossible for them to accumulate sufficient capital for migratory trading.
2. The lands of this group are so meager that they are forced to take up employment in their own villages. This group would include blacksmiths, tailors, goatherds, house-servants and fieldhands. These types of employment (with the exception, perhaps, of fieldhands), are not seasonal, but are generally paid monthly by the village as a whole or by patron households.
3. The individuals in the second-lowest landholding group, the trading group, tend to be rich enough to accumulate or borrow some capital for trading.
4. Individuals in this group have enough land so that during the agricultural season they work mainly in their own fields rather than others'.
5. However, the agricultural produce per individual in this group is insufficient to sustain everyone in it through the winter. Thus an alternate source of income is necessary and therefore migratory trading is likely to occur.
6. The groups in which individual landholdings are higher may be able to produce enough to sustain them through the winter, provided that they exploit all their lands. Migratory trading among households from these groups may be a matter of individual preference rather than strict necessity.⁸

Jarkot, Kagbeni, Tiri, Dangardzong & Phalak.
GRAPH OF LANDHOLDINGS
 FOR
TRADING AND NON-TRADING HOUSEHOLDS

INDEX
 --- Trading Households
 - - - Non-Trading Households
 — Total Sample

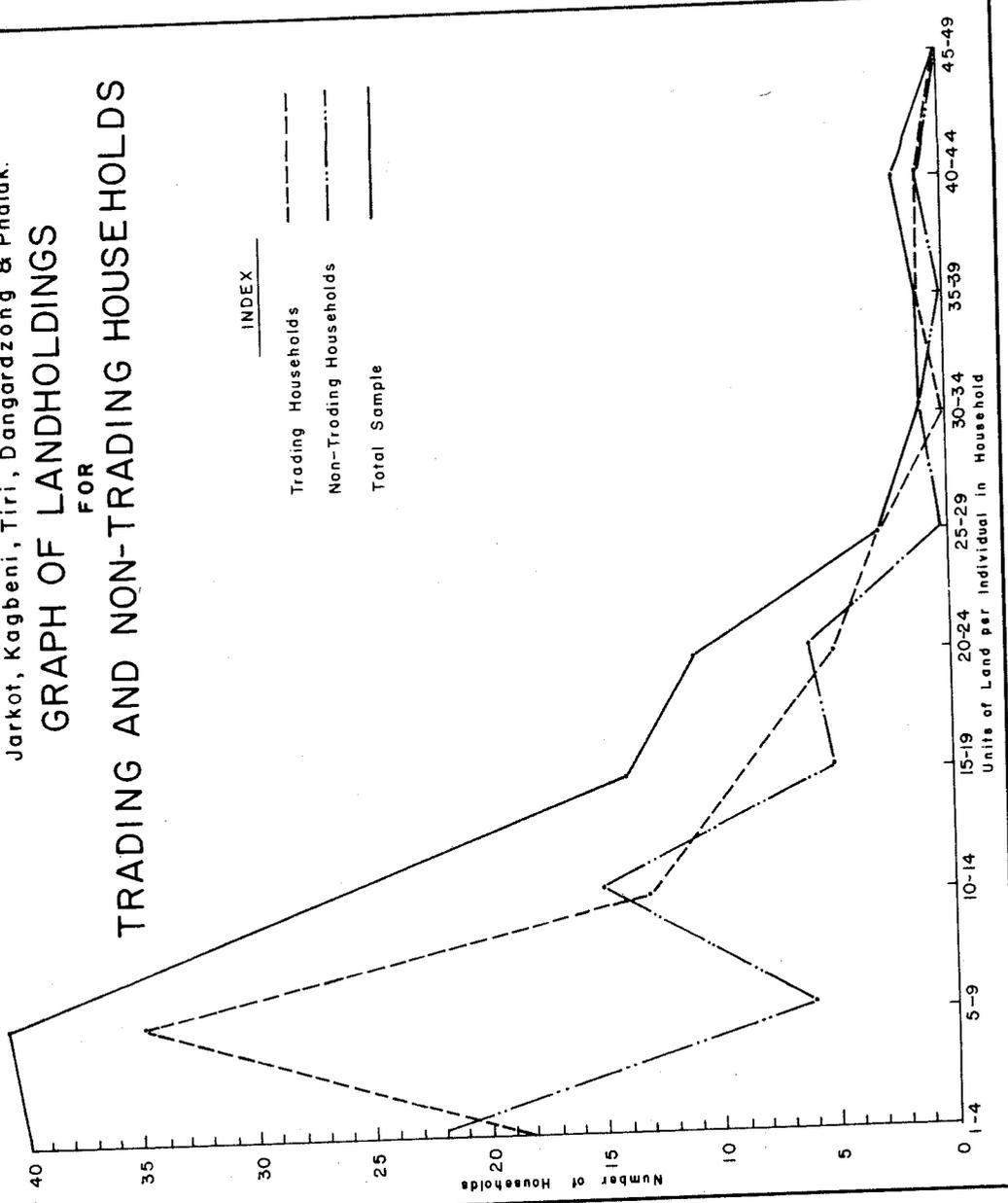


Fig. 2

(see Figure 3). When land units were calculated on the basis of the household rather than the individual, no significant pattern emerged. This suggests that the propensity for a household to engage in migratory trading is a function of the relationship between food-producing capacity and number of consumers. It seems that the total land resources of the household are not so relevant as the question of whether a household can grow enough food to feed all its members.

(see Figure 4). When traders as well as land-users are taken as individuals rather than as household members, the pattern seen in Figure 2 is visible, but less distinct. On this basis I would speculate that in the decision whether to engage in migratory trading, the family rather than the individual is the relevant economic unit. A household may choose to consolidate its economic resources and send only one individual to trade, or it may send more, or even migrate en masse. According to this data, it is not the number of individuals who migrate, but the factor of whether or not a household engages in migratory trade that is related to landholdings.

Additional Factors: Trading and Household Size

There are undoubtedly other important factors which play a part in determining whether or not a household is likely to engage in migratory trading. Family-type, for instance, may be relevant; that is, whether a family is based on monogamous or polygamous marriage, whether it is nuclear, extended, or consists of a single adult with or without children. Unfortunately my data is not yet complete enough to examine the relationship between family-type and migratory trade in a satisfactory way. I have, however, graphed the relationship between household size and migratory trading for the same five villages discussed above. (see Figure 5).

The patterns shown are these:

1. A larger household is more likely to engage in migratory trading than a smaller one. This is true of households of up to seven members.
2. A two-person household is more than twice as likely to engage in trade as a three-person household, and five times as likely as a one-person household.⁹ The latter may be a reflection of the relative poverty of the one-person household. This will be discussed later.
3. In considering individuals rather than households, the ratio of traders to non-traders is roughly the same for each household size, with a gradual increase in number of traders as household size increases. This will also be discussed further.

Jarkot, Kagbeni, Tiri, Dangardzong & Phalak.

GRAPH OF LANDHOLDINGS

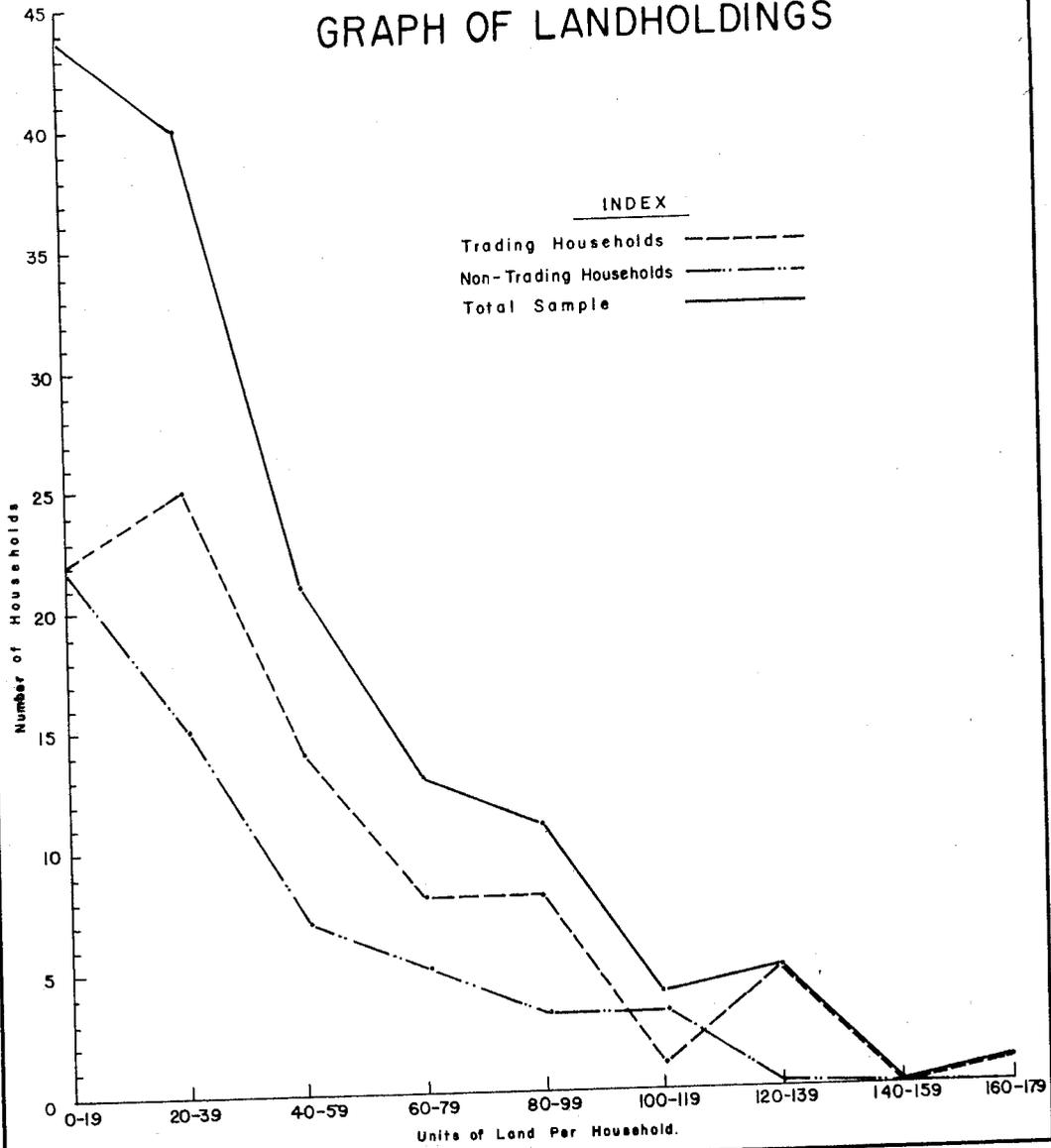


Fig. 3

Jarkot , Kagbeni, Tiri, Dangardzong & Phalak.

GRAPH OF LAND-HOLDINGS

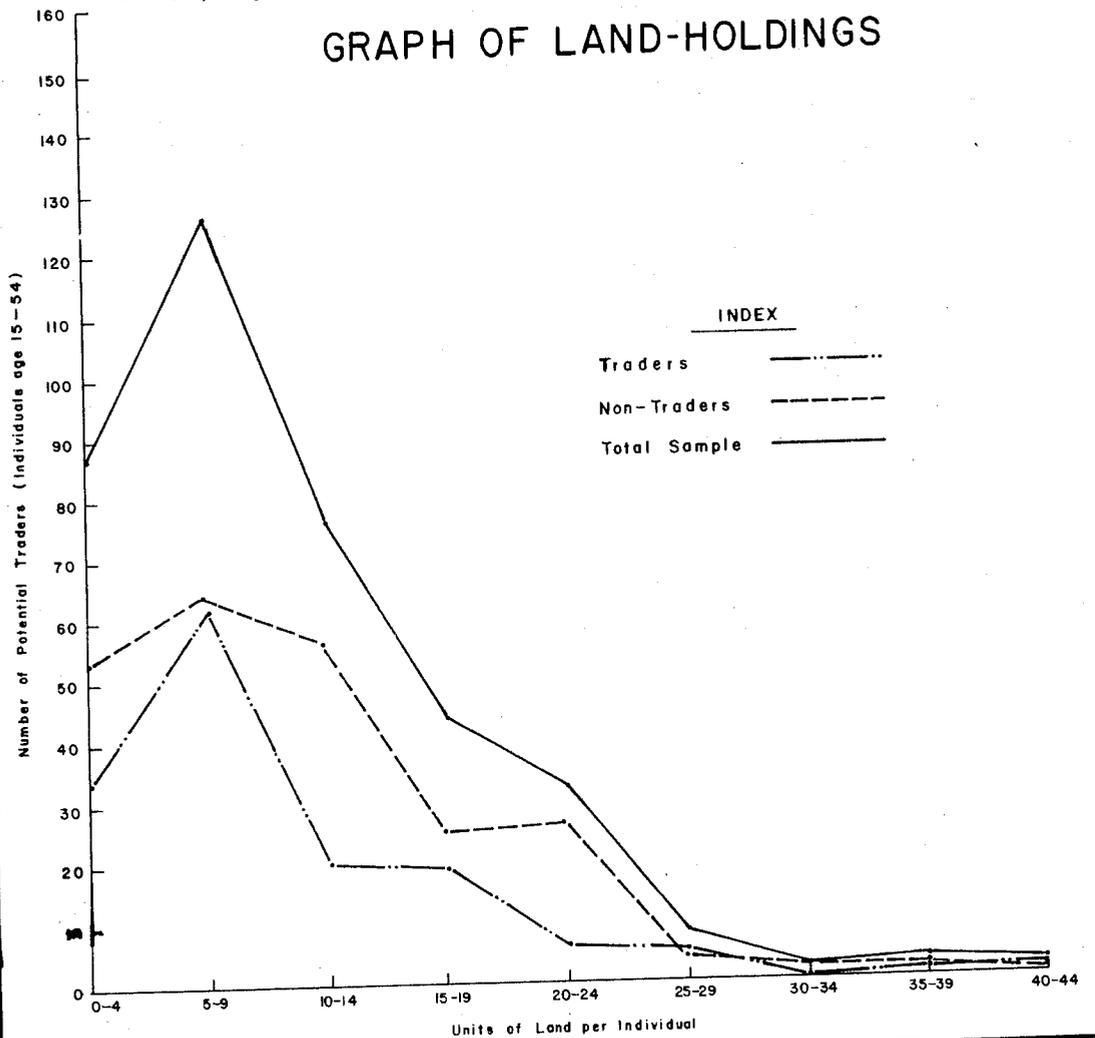


Fig. 4

Jarkot, Kagbeni, Tiri, Dangardzong & Phalok.
TRADING & HOUSEHOLD SIZE

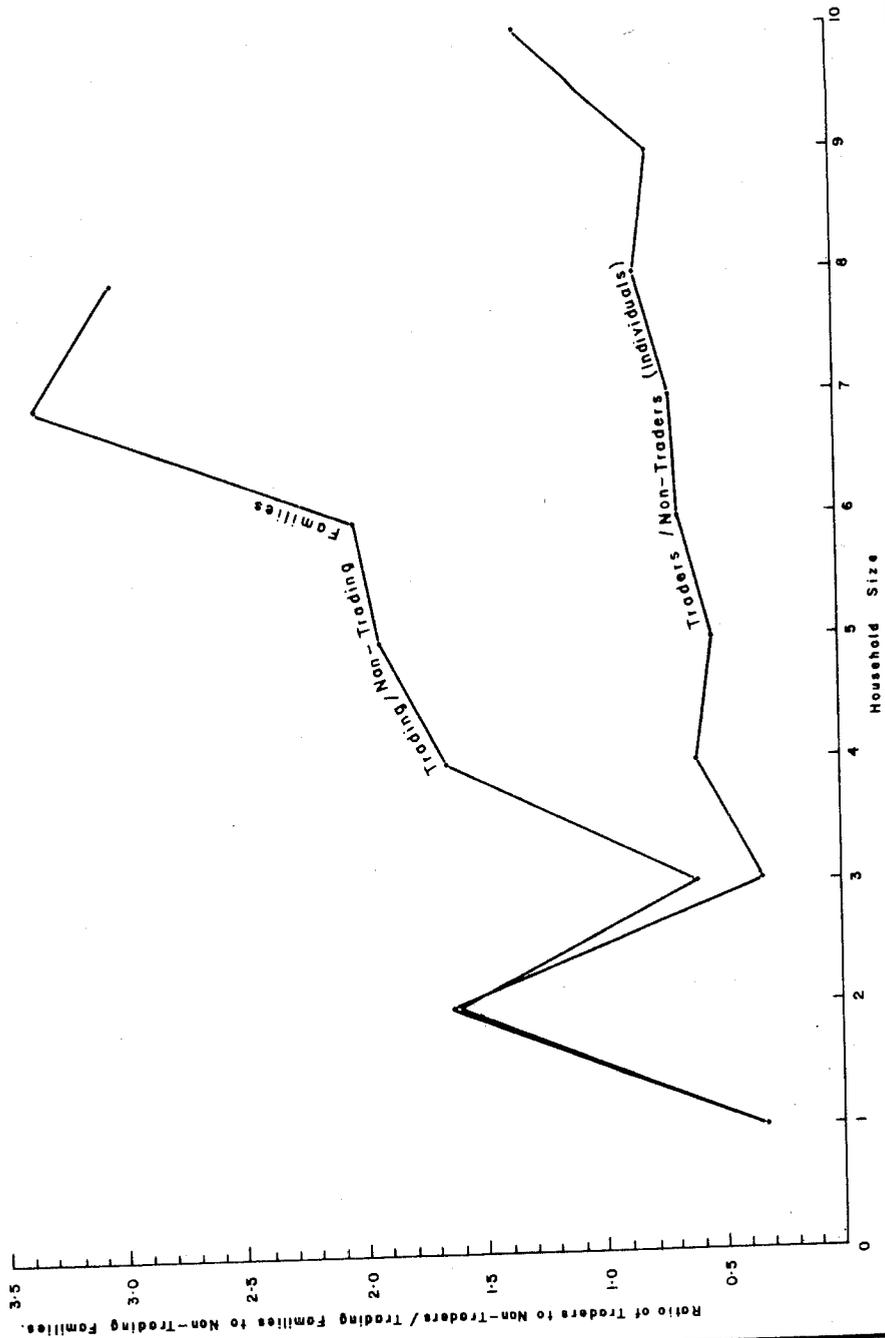


Fig. 5

4. I am unable to explain the sharp difference between the ratios for the two and the three-person households. It might be helpful to examine the relative compositions and the ages of the occupants of these households.

Wealth and Household Size

It seemed that the relationship between migratory trading and family size might be further clarified by examining the relationship between household size and wealth in land. (see Figure 6). The findings were that:

1. There seems to be no significant pattern in the distribution of landholding groups except for the following: that in the poorest group there is a relatively large number of one-person households.

2. The average household size, 4.8 persons, is only slightly larger than the household size which tends to have the largest amount of land per person - the four-person household.¹⁰

A single-person household often consists of an old person who has given his or her land away to children, or if childless, has had to sell land to maintain him/herself. There are also a number of landless nomads (drokpa) who have settled in the villages and who live alone. As was pointed out earlier, the ratio of traders to non-traders for the one-person households is low. It can be seen now that this group is relatively poor, at least in land, and so may not have access to the capital needed for trading.

Conclusion

A study of this sort is bound to be limited, since it isolates one or two elements from within a complex of interconnected phenomena. Graphs and figures have a tendency to create an illusion of uniformity that never exists in real life. For instance, there are interesting dissimilarities among the five villages in my sample, which are relevant to a study of trading.

For one thing, Kagbeni and Jarkot residents seem to have considerably more land, on the average, than the residents of the other three villages, yet they do as much, if not more trading. The villages of Phalak and Dangardzong provide another interesting case.

They are located very close together and their populations are roughly equal. The residents of Phalak own more land, on the average, than those of Dangardzong, but to all appearances (condition of houses, clothing, etc.) the people of Phalak are much poorer, and it is said that many of them are heavily in debt.

Jarkot, Kagbeni, Tiri, Dangardzong & Phalak.

**DISTRIBUTION OF LANDHOLDING GROUPS
ACCORDING TO HOUSEHOLD SIZE**

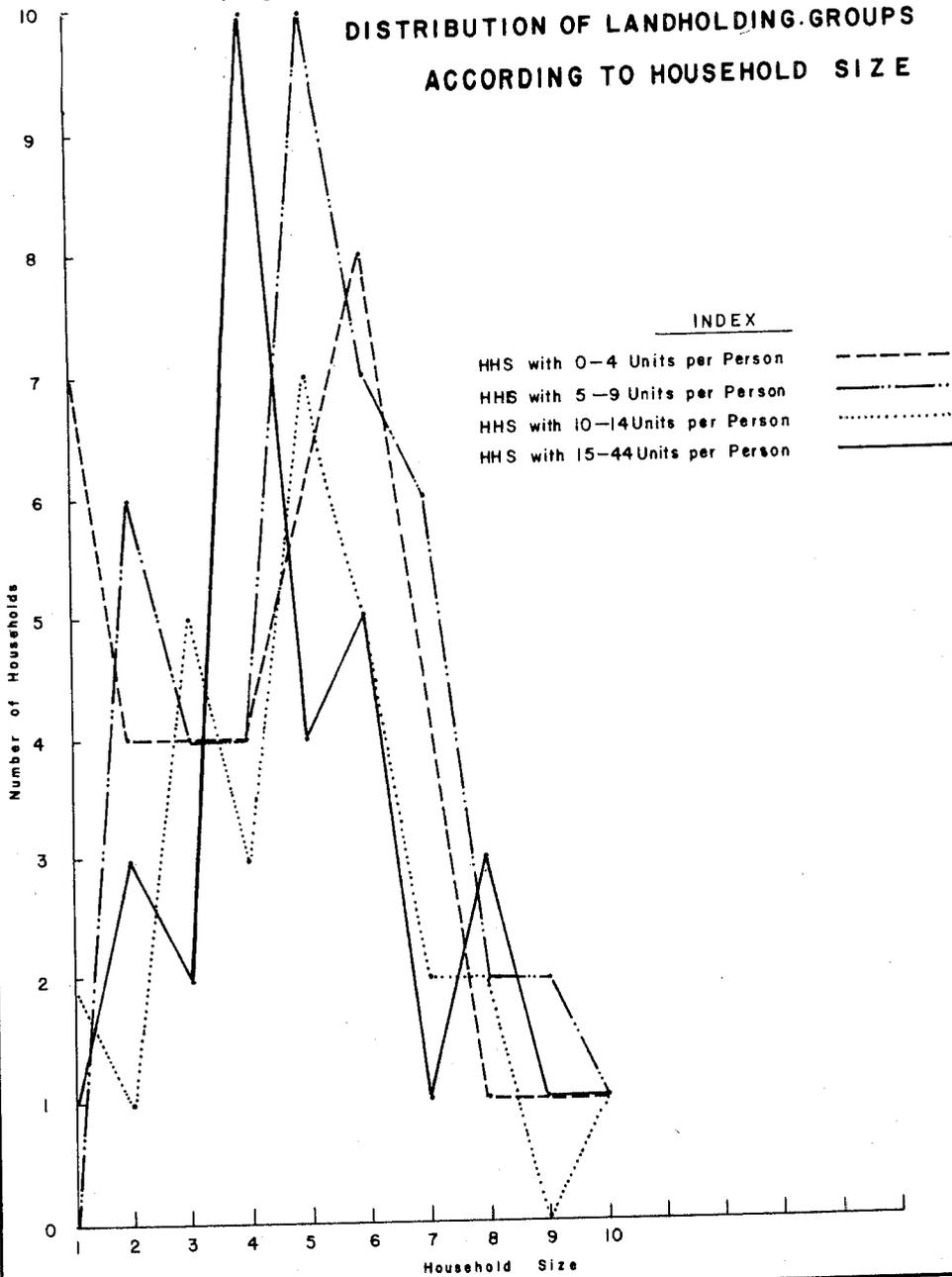


Fig. 6

One explanation is this: that the people of Dangardzong are successful traders, while those of Phalak, by comparison, do very little trading, and therefore have little opportunity to acquire enough money to pay off their debts, many of which are hereditary. This may in turn be related to the fact that the people of Phalak traditionally belonged to a low-ranking status group.

The subject of seasonal migration is of considerable relevance in a developing country, since it is generally desirable to prevent over-populating of cities. The factors that influence decisions to migrate, whether permanently or seasonally, are therefore of interest. While statistics provide a useful base for such a study, a deeper understanding can probably only come from an examination of the ways in which economic decisions are influenced by cultural factors.

Footnotes

1. For instance, von Furer-Haimendorf: Caste and Kin in Nepal, India and Ceylon, pp. 140-160.
2. (See references in Note 1).
3. The difference can be explained by the fact that the number of girl and boy children taken along on migrations is roughly equal. Since the number of female traders is smaller than the number of male traders, the mean age of females who migrated is lowered by the inclusion of female children in the calculation.
4. I am assuming that land distribution is unequal enough that households at the wealthier extreme would be able to raise enough food if they chose to.
5. I am grateful to Mr. Prem Raj Gautam, the C.D.O. in Jomosom, and to the director and staff of the Survey Office for their assistance in supplying this information. I am also grateful to Mr. Gautam for the interesting discussions which helped me to formulate the ideas for this paper.
6. The "land-units per household" figure was derived by adding up the numbers of ropanis of each category held by each member in a given household. This was then multiplied by either 1, 2, 3 or 4, according to the relative value of each category of land. These numbers were totalled for each household. The "land-units per individual" figure was obtained by dividing the household units by the number of members in the household. This procedure was modified in one way: Since children consume less food than adults, and since the infant mortality rate is high, I added together the ages of children under 15 and counted 15 years as one land-using adult. Any fraction

was counted as an additional land-user. For example, if a household contained three children, ages 8, 7, and 5, the 8 and 7-year olds would together count as one land-user and the five-year old would count as a second rather than being excluded.

The taxation figures for the four land categories have, up to this time, not been used for taxation purposes in Baragaon, but the government plans to institute them in the near future. - (C.D.O., personal communication).

7. Since I am still in the midst of my field research, I did not have access to materials for precise and comprehensive statistical testing. I hope that these graphs will reveal general trends that can be used in structuring further data collection.
8. This last point in particular is only speculative. To prove it one would need to calculate the number of ropanis needed to sustain an average individual for a year. Another factor is that the agricultural season is short and intensive. Small families with relatively large numbers of fields require labourers from outside, who are in turn paid in grain. It is possible, then, that even the families with relatively large numbers of fields require an alternate source of income. This could take forms other than seasonal migratory trade, such as local trade in animals and money-lending.

One could go on to speculate that 1) if seasonal migratory trade ceased to exist, permanent migration might be necessary for a large number of people. 2) For the poorer group to exist without trading it is necessary that the wealthier group engage in trade. This may be the only means of creating a local surplus of food-producing fields, which can be worked by labourers who are in turn paid in grain.

9. I have excluded from this calculation households which do not contain at least one person in the "trading age-group."
10. This figure may be incidental, in that there is relatively little fluctuation in a person's landholdings by comparison to other forms of wealth (animals, money and tradegoods). Land is not ordinarily sold on a large scale, and its transfer occurs mainly by inheritance.

It is believed that undivided families (polyandrous), which tend to be large, are conducive to economic success. However, if this is true, the economic gains would be mainly in the form of cash and moveable property. The average landholding per person would not be likely to rise as a consequence of successfully maintaining a large family. On the other hand, a large number of children would mean less land per person.