

A tragedy on the commons

OLD PREJUDICES AND PARTIAL SCIENCE COMBINE TO DESTROY A PARTICULAR FORM OF MOBILE PASTORALISM IN THE DARJEELING AND SIKKIM HIMALAYA

“They stopped issuing (grazing) pattas in 1992, soon after the Park was notified, but we resisted till 1998. The officials came and broke down the goths, beat up people. Then they threatened to bring in the CRPF. You must understand that this was in the years after the first Gorkhaland agitation, and there was widespread fear of the paramilitary. We had no choice. Finally, a meeting was called in Gorkhay and the DFO issued a deadline. We were promised jobs. Those promises were not kept.”



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Guru Tseten Bhutia, 58, was recounting the days when pastoralists were evicted from the Singalila National Park. “A way of life has ended. It is hard to imagine the Singalila ridge without herders and their stock.” Today, he runs a petty business. Others have fared worse, he tells me.

Conservation policies have impacted historical mobile pastoralism in the Kanchenjunga–Singalila landscape, with policy regimes in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, Sikkim, and the adjoining districts in eastern Nepal causing varied challenges. Today, only remnants of a once widespread practice exist in pockets of this region. Access to traditional grazing areas, migration pathways and markets have been curtailed or significantly reduced. A particular form of mobile pastoralism and a culture have almost been destroyed.

A FORM OF MOBILE PASTORALISM

Mobile pastoralism in this landscape involves herding of yaks, yak-cattle hybrids and sheep between summer and winter pastures across an altitudinal range. Yak herding is limited to the upper reaches of the high Himalayas and the Sikkim trans-Himalaya. Sheep rearing has for long been a feature of this landscape, particularly by Gurung herders in the lower reaches of the high Himalayas and by ethnic groups of Tibetan origin in the high and trans-Himalayas. Yak-cattle hybrids occupy a wider altitudinal range. The males are used as pack animals and are prized because they can adapt to a wider altitudinal range than yaks. The female yak hybrids produce more milk than yaks and are therefore in demand.

Yak pastoralism was introduced to the southern slopes of the Himalayas by settlers from the Tibetan plateau. In some areas in the northern parts of Nepal, this goes back several

hundred years, by some accounts to the 9th Century AD, but in other areas it is more recent. North Sikkim and some of the higher reaches of Khangchendzonga National Park have a long history of yak herding, but going by several personal accounts during this study, mobile pastoralism involving yak hybrids arose sometime during the early to mid century. The herds are moved down to as low as 2500–2700 metres above mean sea level in the winters and moved up to 5500 metres to sub-alpine and alpine pastures in summer. It represents the southern extent of a particular form of transhumance that was adapted to this region.

CONSERVATION LANDSCAPE, CONFLICTED COMPONENTS

A slew of Protected Areas (PAs) were created across the Eastern Himalayas: Sagarmatha National Park (1976), Khangchendzonga National Park (1977), Singalila (Wildlife Sanctuary in 1986, National Park in 1992), Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary (1988) and Kanchenjunga Conservation Area (1997). In all these areas there was a disproportionate interest in ‘grazing pressures’, and ecologists began to talk about the negative impacts on biodiversity and the competition with wild herbivores for scarce resources. In 1998, Sikkim declared a ban on grazing in all reserve forests, around water sources and plantation areas. The move against grazing by yak and yak hybrids in the higher reaches was based on similar arguments, that domestic livestock were competing with wild ungulates for scarce resources and that it was resulting in degradation of forests and drying up of springs. Herders contest both these and say these are mere assumptions. A third argument was also invoked. Nomadic pastoralists were described as ‘outsiders,’ Tibetan herders from Nepal. The numbers of herders and livestock may have increased with Tibetan refugees moving down around the middle of the last century, but the standard narrative tends to highlight this over a longer and more nuanced environmental history of the landscape.

By 2003, the eviction of graziers and their livestock from Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary was complete. In the Singalila National Park, evictions started in earnest right after the declaration of the National Park and most of the goths (herder huts/cattle stations) were evicted. Some held on until threatened with force. The recording and settling of rights was arbitrary, and by most accounts, unfair. Only two herders got ‘jobs’ with the forest department, as a form of compensation, and both remain on the casual workers list even today. Some herders who kept cattle in the lower reaches, and also worked on road maintenance, were settled in the villages on the periphery. Most nomadic pastoralists got nothing.

The creation of PAs on the Indian side essentially transferred ‘the problem’ to the Nepal side of the border with serious implications for mobile pastoralists and their herds. On the Nepal side, community forestry, mediated by external agencies and supported by the government, and legislation on land administration in what were originally ethnic homelands managed under the kiptat system, dismantled traditional pasture management practices and the manner in which these traditional institutions interfaced with the nomadic pastoralists.

THE IMPACTS ON PASTORAL LIVELIHOODS

In India, ecological arguments against grazing and a strict interpretation of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act formed the basis for evicting livestock from protected areas. The strict exclusion has had huge impacts on livelihoods. A minority shifted to tourism services. Many sold off their stock or mixed them in informal arrangements with herds on the Nepal side. Meanwhile, community forestry user groups (CFUG) in Nepal are also placing restrictions on grazing and movement of livestock. The success story of community



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forestry in Nepal masks these exclusions, as well as how rights are determined and what are considered conservation-friendly practices. This has, along with the closure of trans-border ranging between Nepal and Tibet in 1978, reduced ranging areas and affected mobility and flexibility. Herders also say this has led to genetic erosion, with breeding now restricted to and within existing stock. The restricted movement and localisation has resulted in degradation in some areas, further fuelling the argument that mobile pastoralism is bad for the environment.

By various accounts, mobile pastoralism in this area has declined by over 75 percent, in terms of the number of goths and livestock populations. Sheep-herding has been affected the most and the reasons for this need more research. Some herders have managed to retain access to certain areas by negotiating with CFUGs, while others continue to stock their herds along the border, their herds foraging often into the Indian side with clear risks. In at least a couple of CFUGs, there was evidence of emerging conflicts between members and mobile pastoralists. In both cases, the members said they wanted to stop grazing. In negotiating with a wide range of institutions and actors across a shrinking space, some of

the mobile pastoralists preferred a return to the traditional kpat system in Eastern Nepal, as they believe that the management and control of common property resources was better.

PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

The global climate change debate and the dominant symbols used to raise awareness tend to ignore many of the marginal spaces and livelihoods in the Himalayas. It has been predicted that climate change impacts will be far greater on already-stressed ecosystems of the Eastern Himalayas. Of particular focus is the role of water provisioning, since the glacier-fed rivers originating in the Himalayas comprise the largest river run-off from any single location in the world and the Ganga-Brahmaputra alone sustains the highest population density in the world. These concerns are likely to determine the future of conservation interventions and climate mitigation measures in the landscape.

There is little we know in terms of disturbance, recovery and ecological implications in this landscape. Herders, on the other hand, have great historical memory and knowledge of change. The movement of herds was organised around a calendar and involved cooperative grazing agreements, allocations and timing of movement across pastures, and the condition of fodder resources in the summer alpine pastures. In making these movements year after year and assessing the various conditions favourable for movement and stationing, herders have a clear understanding of climate variability and change. They have adapted and taken shocks where the state has been continually absent. In some bad years, the losses have been very severe. The standard insurance against such shocks was to overstock, but with reduced grazing areas and other constraints, even this form of insurance is not possible now.

Herders speak in great detail about changes in this landscape. They talk about summers advancing, evidenced by early flowering, and water sources drying up in some areas. In general, wildlife depredation is up and they attribute it to enclosure. If the forests are coming back, why is the wildlife outside the protected areas, they ask. Wildlife populations, according to them, always fluctuated, and were generally low in the high altitudes. The fluctuations were often caused by extreme weather events, which also took a toll on their livestock, but a run of good years could also result in significantly high populations. Most importantly, they use this to counter the assumptions that grazing is bad for the

environment. They claim open forests are better for wildlife and that some of the arguments about degradation of pastures are flawed, since growth too is dependent on a range of factors, including precipitation, which is variable.

Most mobile pastoralists in the landscape would like to return to their old grazing lands and movement pathways. They see themselves as natural conservation allies who have long borne the costs of conservation even before the protected areas were notified. The predators, they say, preyed on their livestock and some, like the wild dog packs, followed the herds as they moved. Retaliatory killing was uncommon, not the norm. The mobile pastoralists have hardly known the welfare state, be it for service delivery or compensation for losses.

A FUTURE FOR MOBILE PASTORALISM AND CONSERVATION

Current climate narratives take off from conservation narratives of similar urgency. Therefore, it is likely that the current discourses and interventions focused on climate change mitigation in the region will only further such an agenda and privilege conservation concerns. States are already considering and speculating the values of their forests in terms of new financing mechanisms based on forest carbon stocks, among others. The threat to communities from climate finance is probably greater than from climate change. The other concern is that they will feed into unfinished conservation agendas, exemplified recently by the notification of 'critical wildlife habitats' within existing PAs, leading to more displacement of communities whose rights had barely been settled under the Recognition of Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA).

It is clear that more progressive institutional and policy spaces in Nepal have allowed for mobile pastoralism to continue in some form. But here too there are challenges, especially given the manner in which community forestry is being managed and the conflict with traditional land management systems of the region. Today there are rising calls from indigenous groups in eastern Nepal to revert to the kpat system. These calls are being made as legislators are working on a new Constitution and responding to the various demands for ethnic autonomy under a federal set up. On the Indian side, the notification of PAs in response to conservation concerns has resulted in displacement and undermining the realities of various traditional groups in the landscape. This is a conservation agenda that persists: it has gained institutional and policy dominance with severe consequences for local communities, and needs to be challenged with the policy spaces now enabled with the FRA.

Here, it is relevant to recall The Dana Declaration on Mobile Peoples and Conservation, to highlight the predicament of mobile pastoralists in the region. The Declaration calls for a new approach to conservation: one which recognises the rights and interests of 'mobile' peoples, whose "livelihoods depend on extensive common property use of natural resources, and who use mobility as a management strategy and as an element of cultural identity. Mobile peoples are discriminated against. Their rights, including rights of access to natural resources, are often denied and conventional conservation practices insufficiently address their concerns. These factors, together with the pace of global change, undermine their lifestyles, reduce their ability to live in balance with nature and threaten their very existence as distinct peoples."

At a landscape level, it is important for countries in the region to see how these choices can be respected and accommodated across borders, under collaborative management principles that respect the needs for mobility and flexibility. Some of the core issues against grazing can be countered by demanding adequate insurance and sound collaborative research that



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can feed into rotational management strategies, insurance for herders and access to fuel. It is also important to ensure that the argument is not reduced to 'providing alternatives' (although some herders do talk of exit strategies) and compensations for losses. There is also a need for a critical review of the ecological arguments against grazing and the rhetoric that has been used against herders in this context.

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