

FOREST RELATED POLICY IMPLICATIONS IN BHUTAN WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE BROKPAS

Pankaj Thapa and Jigme Nidup

Department of Geography & Planning,
Royal University of Bhutan, Sherubtse College, Kanglung, Bhutan.
E-mail: pankajthapa2002@yahoo.co.in, jigsnidup@yahoo.com

Introduction

The tiny land-locked Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan extends from 26°40' - 28°15' N and 88°45' - 92°10' E, and spans over a geographical area of 38,394 sq. km. The country stretches from 160 meters above sea level in the southern foothills to over 7,500 meter towards the northern mountains, and exhibits diverse ecological wealth, which makes it one of the worlds' top ten biodiversity hot spots. The country maintains 72.5 percent of its geographical area under forest cover, including 26 percent declared as nature parks and wildlife reserves, and 9% as biological corridors.

While many countries ignored the inevitable consequences of environmental backlash in favour of quick economic returns, Bhutan pursued a cautious, environmentally-friendly and sustainable approach to development that is guided by the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) rather than Gross National Product (GNP). The need to adapt and tackle the challenges imposed by modernization, globalization, democratization and decentralization have led to the formulation and implementation of various policies and legislations, amongst which forest related issues emerge as the most elaborate and crucial one. This paper examines the implication of these policies on the livelihood of the 'Brokpas' or the herding community in Eastern Bhutan.

Methodology

The understanding of the forest related policies and its implications are primarily based on empirical research methods. The two villages, namely Merak and Sakteng were selected mainly because they represent a unique Himalayan ecosystem and the traditional yak herding communities, whose livelihood are solely dependent on forest resources. Primary data (both quantitative and qualitative) were collected from the two villages through a set of questionnaires and personal interviews. Various documents were reviewed to understand the forest related policies and its implications on the livelihood of the people. Other primary and secondary sources were then consulted and referenced to verify the ground realities and supplement the findings.

Forest Related Policies and Legislations

Bhutan had no definitive forest legislation or policies until the late 1960's. Traditional institutions and local beliefs, including formal and informal rules and norms promoted the conservation of the environment. It was the introduction of the First Forest Act of Bhutan in 1969 which led to the declaration of all non-registered forest land as state property, and nullified the role of traditional institutions. This was followed by the declaration of the first National Forest Policy of 1974, which placed strong emphasis on forest conservation above all other considerations, and asserted that more than 60 per cent of forest cover will be maintained at all times. Though the policies related to collection and use of some non-timber forest products were less stringent and more considerate, communities lost their customary rights and regulatory function over forest resources, and with it many of the indigenous knowledge systems and community-based regimes for natural resource management disappeared (RGoB 2002). It was only after nearly two decades that a new "National Forest Policy of 1991" (yet to be passed by the National Assembly) was formulated. This Policy does ensure a rational management of forest through people oriented program guided by sustainability principles, social justice and equity. The realization that sustainable resource management cannot be achieved entirely through conventional bureaucratic and technocratic approaches further led to the replacement of the Forest Act of 1969 by a new 'Forest and Nature Conservation Act of 1995', that provided greater rights, protection and community participation in forest management. The need and desire to balance economic development with cultural and environmental conservation - referred to as

the 'middle path' is strongly expressed in 'The Bhutan Vision 2020', and further affirmed by a specific vision and strategy for nature conservation (Tshering *et al.* 2003).

Policy Implication on local resources and the livelihoods of the Brokpas

Inhabiting the greater Himalayan region of above 3000 meters the Brokpas (Brog-pasture and pa-inhabitants) synonymous to nomads or herdsman are the semi-nomadic people of Merak (place of fire) and Sakteng (bamboo plain). Their herding territory ranges from about 2500m to 4500m above sea level in winter and summer respectively. Studies carried out in 2000 enumerate the Brokpa population to be about 4034 persons distributed over 15 villages and 543 households (Chand 2004). The nature of their livestock can be imagined from the fact that the composition of yaks, cows, horses and sheep, which constitutes their main livestock amounts to an average of 36 per household, with yaks alone amounting to 20 per household (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic & Livestock composition in Merak and Sakteng villages.

District	House holds	Population			Average Household Size	Total livestock Population				Total livestock
		Male	Female	Total		Yaks	Cow	Horses	Sheep	
Merak	213	1017	891	1908	8.9	4411	1962	1082	2852	10307
Sakteng	330	1089	1037	2126	6.4	6507	484	724	1638	9353
Total	543	2106	1928	4034	7.65	10918	2446	1806	4490	19660

Source: Computed from Chand 2004.

Until recent years the forest related policies of Bhutan had very little influence on the livelihood of the Brokpas, mainly because of their isolation, unrestricted utilization of the resources, and lack of monitoring and implementing agencies. But, of late there have been several reports of conflict between the Brokpas and the local residents for their winter pasture land over grazing rights. This can be attributed to increasing livestock and human population, family fragmentation, and shortage of grazing land. The conservation policies of the government also led to the establishment of the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in 2003, which covers 650 sq. kms of Sakteng's geographical area. The park officials complain that girding, looping and illegal poaching, had caused major damage to the environment, and without the policy initiative it would not have been possible to check the degradation of forest in this area. But the local communities feel that their movement and grazing rights have been restricted and they have been deprived of the forest resources. They also fear that the new rules and regulations could further deprive them of their right over pastureland and threaten their livelihoods. Wangchuk *et al* (2006) reveals that the conflict over the natural grazing land between the two communities of Merak and Radhi is due to the shortage and tremendous pressure on pasture land, which is utilized by the permanent inhabitants of Radhi during summer and grazed by the cattle of Merak during winter. Independent sources report that the tension created by the rules and regulations for conservation vis-à-vis the pressing need for modern development has led the people to believe that environmental protection and conservation is an obstacle to economic prosperity (Pelden 2007), and the life of the Brokpas have been made more difficult after the establishment of the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary (Dema 2007).

A random survey of 72 persons in Merak and 57 persons in Sakteng was carried out to understand the problems related to forest resources. Analysis of the various complains related to firewood, fodder and grazing land indicated by the respondents revealed four common problems, namely the difficulties in obtaining permission, restriction, distance and shortage. People of Merak complained about getting permission, restriction and the long distance they have to travel to obtain firewood. Restriction and shortage of fodder emerged to be the most persistent problem related to grazing land (Table 2).

Obtaining the permits, restriction and shortage of firewood, restriction and shortage of fodder, and the distance and shortage of grazing lands were reported as the major problem of Sakteng village (Table 3). Problems related to restriction and shortage of firewood, fodder and grazing land emerged to be the most common complains of the people in both the villages.

Table 2. Problems faced by the people of Merak.

Problems related to	Firewood	Fodder	Grazing Land	Total
Permission	21	8	14	43
Restriction	17	27	15	59
Distance	16	3	15	34
Shortage	7	21	19	47
Unspecified/others	11	13	9	33
Total Respondents	72	72	72	

Table 3. Problems faced by the people of Sakteng.

Problems related to	Firewood	Fodder	Grazing Land	Total
Permission	17	5	7	29
Restriction	18	23	9	50
Distance	4	2	11	17
Shortage	13	18	24	55
Unspecified/others	5	9	6	20
Total Respondents	57	57	57	

The assessment of the ground realities in the study area indicates that the policies related to the control, use and management of forest resources tends to overlook the needs of the local people. Firewood, timber, fodder and grazing land have become less accessible to people, and the distance they now have to travel to maintain their lifestyle is increasing beyond their normal territory. The 'Forest Management Code of Bhutan' (FMC); the Integrated Conservation and Development Programme (ICDP), and the Participatory Forest Management Project (PFMP) provide good examples that aims at strengthening the capacity of local communities to utilize and conserve forest resources, and address the conflict arising out of forest related policies, which are yet to make much impact on the livelihood of the Brokpas. There is also a need to neutralized strict conservation policies with alternative means of meeting basic needs of the affected population. Biological conservation can be of interest to the local community only when it benefits and provides utility value.

Sharma *et al* (2005) illustrates how policy intervention for pilot testing by opening up collection of Cordyceps in some areas of Bhutan provided economic benefits legally to the local communities, generating interest amongst them for sustainable harvesting and conservation of its habitat. Harvesting of mushroom, medicinal plants and other NWFPs, and eco-tourism are some of the promising alternatives for the local communities of this region. Effective silviculture; system that guide the management of forest ecosystems according to defined values and objectives; well-defined planning and monitoring systems including property rights and resource security; attention to the livelihoods of forest-dependent people; and development of appropriate institutional or management structures and frameworks, suggested by Brown *et al* (2005) can serve as the necessary conditions for successful forest management and policy interventions.

Conclusion

The physical, cultural and socio-economic setting of Bhutan makes it necessary to maintain at least 60% of its geographical area forested in perpetuity. While the nation is currently placed at the comfortable environmental zone, the brunt of placing conservation above economic development have often been felt by the communities whose livelihood directly depend on forest resource. The case studies of the Brokpas have revealed that they are facing difficulties due to forest related policy implementation. This signifies that the role of forest resources needs to be revitalized and supported by compatible management strategies and policies. The meaning of conservation is best derived when the socio-economic needs of the people are fulfilled. Therefore, the adaptation of the community to emerging forest policies; maintenance of a close linkage between the people and forests; supporting institutional arrangements, are some of the areas which need to be further scrutinized and explored by researchers, planners, decision and policy makers at the national, regional and international level.

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