Transhumant agro-pastoralism in Bhutan: Does it have a place in the 21st century?

by

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Abstract

This study explored the nature of transhumant agro-pastoralism (TAP) in Bhutan in the context of global changes to pastoralism. Despite the widespread practice of TAP in Bhutan, there has been limited research on the nature of the practice, associated socio-cultural traditions and drivers of change. The findings describe the history, origins and contemporary practices of TAP in Bhutan. Drivers of change were examined and various perspectives on the future of TAP elucidated. Impacts of policy decisions on livelihoods and resource management are discussed along with implications and recommendations for future policies and programs.

A mixed method was used for this study. Qualitative methods were used to interview 24 migrating households from six villages in central east and west Bhutan and nine agency staff in 2010. A semi-structured survey of 75 TAP households from the same villages gathered background quantitative data. Seven focus groups were conducted in 2011 with herders from upstream and downstream villagers residing adjacent to migratory cattle herders’ winter encampments, and with livestock extension staff.

Households practicing TAP migrate with their cattle to lower elevations during winter to access pastures and gain employment. Migration takes place in April/May and September/October, and may take four to 30 days. There are five main reasons for migration 1) avoiding production reduction and mortality of animals from cold weather 2) shortage of forage 3) off-farm-income opportunities 4) avoiding parasites infestation in the south 5) and vacating grazing areas for yaks in the winter.

Among the six study sites the study found there has been a 31% decline in the number of households practicing TAP between 1990 and 2010 due to: farm labour shortage, alternative livelihood choices, government policies and climate change. Nevertheless, TAP practice persists due to heterogeneity in inter-household capability and preferences to adapt to socio-politico, economic and environmental changes, forming the mainstay of many families. The findings revealed TAP is an important part of the living cultural heritage in Bhutan. TAP herders have not only adapted their livelihoods to ecological niches at different altitudinal levels but used resources
sustainably, while synchronizing their socio-cultural activities with seasonality of the transhumant practice. However, the system is under increasing pressure. Today, TAP communities are faced with family labour shortages due to increasing participation of children and adults in education and alternative livelihood options as well as changing policies and climate change making their TAP practice more difficult. TAP is likely to continue to decline as Bhutan develops, however, the pace of change cannot be ascertained as there is a high level of inter and intra household and community resource endowment, capability and personal preference. The transition needs to be carefully handled lest weaker sections of the society, especially the poor and remote citizens like TAP households with marginal holdings, are disadvantaged.

Policies should facilitate transition through education, training, technical extension services and micro credit finance services. There is also a need to provide platforms where TAP and other herders can participate in decision making. Policies need to be designed in such a way that any alternatives suggested are evidence-based, within the pastoral communities’ means and with government support.

On a broader scale it appears advocates of both modernity (modernisation and sedentarisation) and mobility paradigms need to acknowledge that these two paradigms need not be exclusive. Whilst with ever increasing populations, extension of cropping land, urbanisation, and climate change, mobility of pastoralists will continue to be reduced; however, intensification is not an option for some places owing to bio-physical and climatic conditions. The way forward needs to increasingly understand local situations and adopt suitable technologies, through inclusive participatory approaches.