

Changing Patterns of Cattle Herding in the Dorokha Region, Bhutan

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Abstract

The tradition of herding cattle has been practiced in the grasslands of Dorokha for centuries. However, the number of migratory herders coming down to Dorokha from Haa district has declined significantly in recent years. The passing of the Land Act of Bhutan, and its implementation in January 2017, led to the nationalization of grasslands, thus taking away the private ownership that the herders once enjoyed. This Land Act, coupled with wider social and economic changes, now pose a threat to the age-old tradition of cattle herding in Dorokha. These changes, even as they have some positive impact on environmental conservation, place great strain on the traditional livelihood of the herders and their families. This article explores this current scenario.

Introduction

Grasslands have long played an important role in the livelihoods of around 120 families in the Dorokha region. Located in south-west Bhutan, Dorokha is a sub-district under Samtse district and lies between an altitudinal range from 600 meters to 3000 meters above the sea level (Dorokha Geog, 2017). The tradition of herders staying in these grasslands with their cattle is an old one. These migratory cattle herders from around the Dorokha region, who derived their livelihoods from the grasslands for hundreds of years, not only have a very close connection and attachment with these grasslands, but also with their livestock and their occupation of herding.

Changing patterns of livelihood in the region and changing government policies have not completely abolished the tradition of herding, but resulted in new challenges, institutions, and policies that the cattle herders and their families now need to mitigate. The grasslands (*Tsamdro* in Dzongkha) owned and used by cattle herders have now been nationalized through the Land Act of Bhutan 2007, which reads: “*tsamdro* land shall be reverted and maintained as the government land” (section 235). With the enactment of this Act, the grasslands thus became the property of the government. While the earlier owners have been compensated, they are yet to enter into other occupational domains. Given that the Land Act was implemented only recently, its consequences on the lifeworlds and the livelihoods of the herders will take some time to become clear. What is evident, however, is that, besides this Land Act, wider processes of globalization and economic development, have in the past ten years or so, brought about significant changes in traditional and customary practices in agriculture, horticulture and

livestock, along with changes in forms of government and governance in Dorokha and in Bhutan at large. It seems increasingly unlikely that cattle herders will continue herding in the long run. They will be forced to embrace new means to carve out their living. This paper discusses the future of this declining tradition, and the impact this decline will have on herder families.

For the purpose of this paper, semi-structured interviews were conducted with herder families in the Dorokha region. Today, there are only 12 families in the region who are actively involved in herding cattle and have remained in the *tsamdro*. Additionally, 11 families have continued to stay in the grasslands, but they do so without rearing animals. I interviewed all active herders in this region, in addition to a few farmers. Table 1 details how and by whom the grasslands are being used today.

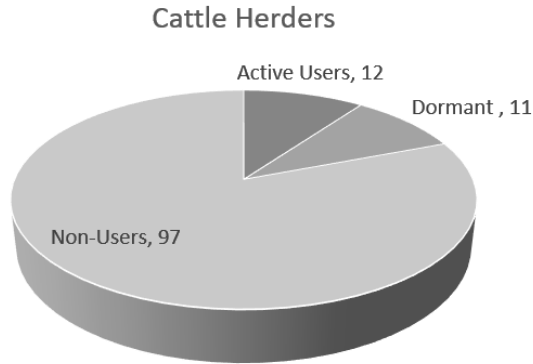
Table 1: Types and number of herders

Active users	Dormant users	Legal users(with ownership)	Users without ownership (illegal)	Using others pasture/rangeland
12	11 (staying in the jungle but have no cattle)	89	35 Local Estimate	10 Local Estimate

Background

While earlier there were around 120 families who depended on grasslands for herding in the Dorokha region, today only 23 families carve out a living from these grasslands. The grasslands are located at a far distance from regular settlements, up to 12 hours walk from the herders' permanent dwellings. These families have not been able to forgo their grasslands and are also not willing to leave the area. As Karma Dorji, the district livestock officer, told me: "*Tsamdros* owners have received compensation but some of them are still reluctant to leave those pastures". Statistical data from the Samtse Dzongkhag (district) livestock office shows that, legally 89 families owned grasslands in the region amounting to 12913 acres, but the actual land in occupation was more than double of the legally owned land. Some of these cattle herders have chosen to stay deep inside the forest, either on their own grasslands or by making use of grasslands that are not formally in their possession, and so distancing themselves from the rest of the world.

Fig. 1: Number of Cattle herders in Dorokha



The graph above shows that there are only 12 families who actively use grasslands whereas 97 families, who were earlier herders, have now abandoned this occupation. It is also interesting to note that there are 11 families who actually do not use grasslands for herding but have still been staying there (dormant users). Most of the families who used *Tsamdro* (both legally and ‘illegally’) in the Dorokha region were migratory herders from Haa district. One such herder explained: “We don’t find good grasslands in Haa, which is why my parents brought down cattle to Dorokha”. In fact, Dorokha region has not just been a semi-home for the herders of Haa district, but for long was also a gateway to India and Sikkim for those engaged in barter.

Socio-economic aspects of Grasslands

The Bhutanese economy is not diverse and only few sectors contribute a notable amount to the national exchequer. The majority of the work force (56.2%) in Bhutan (in 2015) is employed in the agriculture sector (MoAF, 2015), which increased by 1.8% to a total of 58% in 2017 (NSB, 2017). However, the contribution of agriculture to the country’s Gross Domestic Product is rather minimal with just 0.6% (Passang, 2017). While the agricultural sector is the main contributor to the primary sector, the overall growth in the primary sector is declining (NSB, 2017).

Within the agricultural sector, livestock husbandry may not have contributed significantly to the GDP, but has nevertheless made a great economic contribution to nomadic families across Bhutan. Although the occupation of herding, according to most of my respondents, did not come as a deliberate choice but rather as a traditional obligation, they for long received adequate economic returns for their labour. For long, therefore, the hardships that come with herding were well compensated by the income these herders reaped. The gross income from the sale of dairy products has been overwhelming, to the extent that herders were not always aware of the amount they had earned. As such, their venture was profitable. One respondent said

thus: “The tradition of us staying in the jungle with cattle would have been long lost had there been no profit”. Economic incentives have not just encouraged herders to continue this old tradition but also, in a way, prevented them from exploring other occupations. While not all traditional occupations provided equally lucrative economic rewards, herding was long seen as profitable. One herder claims, “the amount of money I make from this occupation doesn’t allow me to even think of doing any other work”.

For all this time, families have been able to meet their expenses through the income they made from dairy products and the sale of cattle. The market has been quite lucrative as the demand for their products was often greater than what they could supply. The proximity to Indian markets (West Bengal State) and growing demand from the domestic market continuous, in fact, to provide cattle herders with good business. “I used to go to Charmarchi carrying 20kg of butter. It took the whole day to sell it but now it takes only 2 hours” claims a herder. Another herder also expressed his excitement, “the demand is so high now and people come here to buy products without me even having to go to the market”. The time factor for trading has been shortened for herders due to road connectivity, which benefits the ease of doing business. However, some herders feel that the monsoon hampers their business as one herder expressed: “during the monsoon very few people come to buy my products and it is difficult for me to go to the nearest market”. Herders have catered to the needs of the villagers in supplying not only dairy products but also oxen for agricultural purposes and milking cows, thereby, further increasing their revenues.

Not just as an economic undertaking, the herding of cattle also comes with a strong emotional bonding on the part of the herders. Tradition plays an important role in justifying the occupation as morally right and as an important duty that needs to be preserved. Many believe that the age old tradition cannot be changed and that they have a moral duty to continue it. “We cannot leave what was done by our parents”, as one herder explained this sentiment. The claim and attachment to the profession are strong, to the extent that herders disregard other forms of labour. A herder thus claims: “Other works possess less value and very few people are blessed with the kind of livestock we have”. Some feel that they were chosen to be herders. As one herder states: “my ancestors and few others were chosen to continue this task”. The task is often connected with religion and faith. People see their task of herding cattle in terms of doing justice to their faith. “Hindu and Buddhist cannot do any rituals without milk and butter and we provide this to everyone. We are contributing to religion in this way”, claims one herder.

Herders thus make a connection between their work and traditions and religion. Leaving their profession, therefore, is something they find difficult to do. One herder explains: “we should not disrespect what our parents have done and it is our duty to follow”. This occupation perhaps has the largest emotional attachment, which results from the long and intimate time they spent with their livestock. Some people don’t even see the world outside of their grasslands.

One respondent claims: “when I happen to go to town and see vehicles moving, I feel like my cows are moving and I cannot stay any longer there”. This relationship that herders have with their cattle makes them happy and content with what they do. While many find solace in staying in the forest with their cattle, others have different reasons for keeping themselves away from home, as one herder explains: “There is so much nuisance at home and so, I choose to stay in the jungle free from the troubles of the world”. This is not just an act of escaping, but also manifests itself as a form of meditation. Some herders indeed feel that there is complete peace in the jungle, and see it as a place where they need not worry about all the problems happening around their homes and beyond. “I don’t need to hear about political drama or people killing each other as long as I stay in the forest”, says one herder. In this way, herders seemingly enjoy a high degree of peace and happiness.

Tsamdro Uses and Management

The management practices of grasslands are steeped in traditional practices, rather than vested in formal training and education. Pema Jamtsho (2002, p. 82) states:

The ability of the rangelands to meet the traditional and new demands would much depend on the way it is managed for any one purpose as this will invariably influence the ability to meet other demands.

However the purpose of the use of *tsamdros* has not really been diversified. *Tsamdros* in the Dorokha region were never used for purposes other than mere grasslands until 2006 when few started growing cardamom. Farmers from nearby areas now grow cardamom in the grasslands based on a 1/3rd profit sharing with the owner. Although the land could have been used for agricultural cultivation, it was never used for this purpose owing to the fact that the herders moved to different grasslands and nobody stayed back to take care of the crops. Due to the limited size of the available labour force and common traditions, the herders only focused on livestock and therefore the grasslands were left uncultivated.

Tsamdros, in this region, are located away from settlements and the permanent dwellings of the herders, making it difficult for these grasslands to be used for multiple purposes. This may be inferred as the reason of the singular use of it. More importantly, natural grass germination was not to be disturbed to ensure that there is enough fodder for the livestock. Although Roder (2002, p. 51) claims that “this system follows the widely used slash-and-burn system found in many subtropical and tropical regions of Asia”, no herders in this region ever practiced slash-and-burn cultivation. This may be related to entrenched beliefs that no big fires should be made near cow sheds (structures built in the grasslands to shelter both calves and herders). One herder said thus: “Making big fire and burning the grassland will disturb our deity as well as the

livestock”. Some also recall that they were told by government officials not to make fires in the grasslands: “One official told my father not to make fires else forest department will impose fine”. Herders thus had the conviction that there existed a policy that restricted them from taking up forms of slash-and-burn cultivation.

The Forest and Nature Conservation Act 1995 doesn't permit the lighting of fires in grasslands or the felling of trees. However infected and unwanted trees were cut down by herders for better growth of fodder trees. As one respondent explains: “earlier, while I was a kid, we used to cut as many trees as we wanted and no one bothered, but now we are no longer allowed to do so”. The management of many *tsamdros* in this region has not been as effective as it could have been due to the inter-district migration of herders. Many herders who migrate to Dorokha from Haa did not legally possess *tsamdros*, but used someone else's land, or the government forest, depending upon their preferences and time. The duration of the stay is flexible. “Some herds pause for varying durations, from ten to 30 days, in different places along the route. Other herders, who do not have their own rangelands along the way, travel without a break to their destination-rangelands” (Ura, 2002, p. 10).

The impact of the Land Act, 2007

The passing of the Land Act 2007 led to the nationalization of all the *tsamdros* owned by individuals, communities and any other institutions (those grasslands owned by religious organizations). The details of the *tsamdros* owned by them have been deleted by the Land Commission of Bhutan, and these lands now belong to the state. A fee of Nu. 105, collected from *tsamdros* owners (fees for the use of grasslands, which is often understood by them as tax), was also discontinued, while compensation has been paid by the government to the *tharm* holders, depending on the size of their registered land. Although the majority of herders have left the practice of herding, some continued to stay and use these *tsamdros*. Many owners who have leased their *tsamdros* still continue to collect the payment (compensation for the use of their grassland), both in cash and kind as was practiced in the past. However many in the region and beyond have stopped leasing and sub-leasing. “Some cattle herders of Haa who do not own *tsamdros* have stopped *tsamdros* sub-lease payment claiming *tsamdros* now belong to the Government” (Tshering Gyeltshen, 2010, p. 11).

The Land Act, in itself, appears controversial due to differences in treatment of *tsamdros* located at different altitudes. The Land Act states that “Highlanders who are directly dependent on *Tsamdro* may retain their *Tsamdro* rights under lease irrespective of possession of livestock and their herd size”. Hence, people of Dorokha region, who belong to the lowlands, will not have this right. The leasing out of the *tsamdros* itself has not been made possible for this could be allowed only after a Royal command. This is agitating owners, who worry if leasing will be a

genuine possibility. The Act benefits livestock owners who did not have any *tsamdros* earlier, as individuals with livestock are now eligible to get the *tsamdros* leased by the government. However, such hopes are grim unless the leasing is done at the earliest, so freeing herders' of a sense of uncertainty.

All in all, the sustainable livelihoods of these herders is now at stake. Leaving this occupation behind and securing alternative ways of livelihood may be a challenging task for most herding families. After receiving compensation for their *tsamdros* from the government, 90% of the herders have now sold their animals. However, after the nationalization of the *tsamdros*, many herders sold their cattle at the same time, and consequently supply was higher than demand, which resulted in herders fetching lower prices for their animals. For instance, herders were able to fetch only an average price of Nu 8000 for a cow and Nu. 5000 for an ox/bull, even though the usual market price was double this amount. Not all herders sold their cattle, however. Religious beliefs and emotional attachments were reasons for them not to do so. They believe that once cattle is sold, they will be butchered, which is the reason for them not wanting to sell their cattle. One herder claims: "how can I let someone kill my animal which is like my child? I will be re-born in hell if my animal is killed by the buyer".

The Land Act has thus impacted the economic system of herding in its entirety. Given that the herders are now left with limited and marginal access to the required land, they are compelled to find jobs in urban areas. Rural to urban migration has already begun with these herders' families moving to urban areas, which could well worsen the scenario of urban migration in the country. However, some farmers, as opposed to herders, feel that the impact of the Land Act has been positive. Previous conflicts with animals in saving and guarding their agricultural field have, as a result, largely been resolved. A farmer stated: "The migratory season of the cattle resulted in losing almost everything from my field earlier but now there is hardly any migration". Problems farmers faced during the migration season now appear to be a worry of the past. The reduction in the number of livestock also resulted in the increase in the greenery and reduction in the land slides. Soil erosions have been further reduced by cardamom plantation in some of the grasslands.

The future of cattle herders and the tradition of herding

Although the numbers of cattle herders have vastly reduced, amongst those who continue herding, the enthusiasm remains high. Herders are looking forward to the lease from the government. The remaining 12 families in the area, who are still using the *tsamdros*, believe that they have no other option but to continue herding. It is their reluctance in finding other occupations, and the attachment they have with herding, that makes them decide to continue this practice.

However, many fear that soon this rich tradition will vanish. The change in likes and preferences of the younger generation also threatens the continuity of pastoralism. Education and globalization certainly seem to have a profound impact on the changing lifeworlds and livelihoods of the people, as is evident from the social change that can be observed in the study area. Younger generations now have different aspirations and are less interested in continuing the herding tradition. A herder claims thus: “My daughter doesn’t want to do what I do as she is educated now”. Today’s youth believe that other professions are better and less arduous. “My youngest son now bought a bolero car and does business. He feels that doing business has lesser difficulties unlike being in the forest with cattle”, one herder explains. With the ageing of current herders and the decline of interest among youth in herding, this tradition might well be on its way out.

Table 2: No of Herders in different period

Years	2000	2007	2017	2018
No. of Herders	120	80	30	12

Table 2 shows that from the 120 cattle herders in the Dorokha region in the year 2000, this number has come down to a meager 12 (excluding the dormant herders), a drop by 90% within just 17 years. With youth exploring other professions, the older generations of herders are left on their own devices. The fear of losing this tradition for good worries many herders. One herder stated: “I am afraid this tradition will be lost now”. Some are optimistic still and envisage the procurement of better breeds of cows to continue with their traditional occupation. The fear however is real, especially in view of youths losing interest in carrying on with this tradition. The few remaining herders are of the view that their children will not do the same work after they themselves are no longer able to practice herding. Herders do love what they do, but they also express that it wasn’t the occupation they wanted to pursue while they were young themselves. Applying the same principle now, we might see the demise of this occupation as – contrary to the past – there are now alternative paths available for the youth. Modern developments have brought new opportunities in types of vocation, accelerated by education, but so at the cost of traditional livelihoods. These opportunities along with the implementation of the Land Act would greatly minimize the pastoral livelihood, not just in Dorokha region alone but in Bhutan at large.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Land Act of Bhutan 2007 and changing livelihood patterns caused by modern developments across Bhutan is likely to completely change the traditional practices

of the pastoral occupation in the Dorokha region. Over the past 15 years, there has been a decline of 90% in grassland users bringing down their livestock. These changes have already threatened the livelihood of those families who depend solely on the income from livestock. A profound occupational transformation in this short time would throw a number of challenges to the affected families. The unemployment rate of 2.1% and youth unemployment of 13.2 % (Rinzin, 2017) in the country is consequently likely to worsen further. The once celebrated traditional occupation is now bound to lose not just its significance but weaken the socio-economic foundations of many families.

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