

Traditional Wisdom, Equity and Community Participation Making the Commercialization of Grasses in Bhyundar Valley, Uttaranchal Himalaya a Success

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INTRODUCTION

Most of the societies residing in the remote and far-flung areas often use the resources from land to which they do not possess legal title. Although many legal systems recognize forms of traditional rights based on long residence and membership in a given community, they often compete with property rights held under individual title or under community ownership and sometimes by the state. Harvesting of grasses for domestic consumption is a glaring example in the Himalayan societies, where the traditional communities have been harvesting and storing grasses for use as a feed for their livestock. In most cases grasses are either collected or harvested from community/common lands, besides few government or privately owned land. This is an age-old practice in the mountainous state of Uttaranchal and is still prevalent in this region. The practice is based on the community decision of resource sharing, and is for the domestic livestock consumption during the lean periods and is thus stored in the courtyard (Farooquee and Rawat, 1997). In recent past as result of the growing market forces and growing concept of the commercialization, in parts of this region local people have started selling the grasses for money, and this has become an important economic activity in the Bhyundar valley of the Garhwal where these grasses are grown in abundance. Realizing the importance of grasses in the economy of high altitude societies, this study was carried out in the Bhyundar valley with the major objective of finding out the flow of economy with various user groups.

STUDY AREA

Bhyundar valley is situated in the Chamoli district of Uttaranchal state (30°41' to 30°48' N and 79°33' to 79°46'E) and is a part of the world heritage site, Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve.

River Bhyundar flows through middle of this valley that meets with Alaknanda, a major tributary of Ganga. There are three types of forests found in this valley viz., Himalayan temperate broad leaf forests, Himalayan temperate fir forests and sub-alpine fir-birch forests (Kala and Uniyal, 1999). Alpine meadows and grasslands are located above the sub-alpine forests and treeline zone whereas the sub-alpine meadows and grasslands are found below the natural treeline. The upper portion of the Bhyundar valley has the famous Valley of Flowers National Park and the only high altitude Sikh shrine (Gurdwara) the Hemkund Saheb located near the Hemkund Lake.

There are 3 villages in Bhyundar valley of which Pulna is the permanent village and Bhyundar and Ghangria are the summer migratory villages for the villagers of Pulna. Around 2.5 lakh pilgrims and tourists visit this valley every year during June to October (Table 1). To cater such a large number of tourists there are a number of *dhabas* and hotels all along the 18 km trek from Govindghat (1,800 m) to Hemkund Saheb (4,300 m). To cover such a continuous climb and arduous trek tourists use ponies, porters and *palkies*. To meet the feed requirement of these mules and horses, the local people from these three villages collect and sell grasses to the prospective consumers at Ghangria and on the way to Hemkund Saheb.

Table 1: Profile of Bhyundar village and profile of tourism in 2001

Altitude	2,600 m amsl
Total number of households	84
Total population	400
Average family size	4.76
Grass collection families	40
<i>Tourism Profile</i>	
Pilgrims to Hemkund	Nearly 2.5 lakhs
Tourists to Valley of Flowers	2,460
Mules to Hemkund	279
Porters	343

METHODS

In order to understand the role of grasses on the economy of the rural people residing in these three villages, a door to door social survey was conducted using semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire for the survey was also developed on spot following group discussions with the villagers, *Van Panchayat*, *Gram Sabha*, contractors and other user groups. The local resource persons of Bhyundar valley were also interviewed, and the local market with middlemen at Ghangria was also surveyed and interviewed. The total quantity of both dry and green grass was measured by weighing on the spot and also by collecting secondary information from grass contractors. The economy generated by various user groups was also quantified by assessing the prevailing market rates.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In Bhyundar valley in 2001 there are 84 families with the total human population of 400 whereas, in 1997 there were only 63 families with a total human population of 332 (Kala, 1998a). From 1997 to 2001 (within 4 years) there is an addition of 21 families with an average of 5 families per year. The past four years trend indicates that in Bhyundar valley the birth rate is 17 individuals per year, however the average family size has reduced from 5.27 to 4.76.

The village of Pulna is located at 2,200 m altitude is a permanent village while Bhyundar and Ghangria are the summer settlements of Pulna villagers. The villagers of Pulna, except school going children and few elderly people migrate to the Bhyundar and Ghangria village during the month of May. Women stay back at Bhyundar with kids while the men folk move further 4 km uphill to Ghangria, a central place for tourist activities from June to first week of October. At Ghangria the local people of Pulna have their lodges, hotels, and *dhabas* (small roadside restaurant) run by themselves. Besides, all along the way to Hemkund (4,300 m) from Govindghat (1,800 m) there are *dhabas* at almost every 300 m distance.

CHANGING SCENARIO

Before 1980, the flow of tourists was very less

and comprised of few trekkers, Sikh pilgrims and researchers who mostly visited the Valley of Flowers (VOF) and Hemkund Saheb (Singh and Kaur, 1980). However, the flow of tourists has increased after 1980 due to wide spread publicity of Hemkund Saheb. In the year 2001, the total number of tourists to visit VOF was around 2,460 while the figure was manifold for the Hemkund Saheb (approximately 2.5 lakhs). This large-scale influx of tourists in this region has changed the entire scenario in this serene valley. The sudden increase in the number of tourists has greatly influenced the local economy and indigenous socio-economic relationships of this region. Earlier the local people were mainly dependent on the marginal farming, indigenous agro-forestry and livestock, but now the local people have turned to the business and now almost each family has a shop either on the way to Hemkund or at Ghangria. Many families of Bhyundar valley have more than 2-3 shops. They occupy few hectare of land anywhere on the way to Hemkund, which seems to be ideal place for resting of tourists and have constructed temporary *dhabas* by erecting poles and a roof of ringal (*Thamnocalamus* sp). If concerned person is not able to look after the *dhabas*, due to many others *dhabas* at different places, he has rented it out to any of the prospective buyer on Rs 5,000 to 10,000 depending upon the suitability of the locality for business.

Since the money has started flowing in this valley, the desire to earn more money has also increased amongst the local communities. Now, they have turned to a typical business community and have started exploring money by selling even the natural resources, which they gather with tremendous hard work. Due to the availability of market for everything during the tourist season, they do not want to loose the knocking opportunity. Unfortunately, there is a scarcity of fertile agricultural land and the feasibility of growing crops species are also few in this valley. A traditional variety of potato that grows here has a good demand in and outside this valley. The market for the local fruits and vegetables has also grown at Bhyundar and Ghangria, during the season pears, plums and apples are absorbed by the tourists.

COLLECTION OF GRASSES

Due to the migration of manpower to Bhyundar and Ghangria for five months to cater to the tourists, and due to the inhospitable climatic conditions around the Bhyundar valley, the option to harvest the grasses grown in abundance in the region is also limited for a short period of time. Out of 84 families in Bhyundar valley, around 40 families were involved in the collection and sale of grasses in 2001. Women folk were mainly responsible for the collection and sale of grasses, and they collect the grasses from August to first half of November till the snowfall begins. After the first half of August they begin harvesting grasses from the nearby mountain slopes, and gradually they proceed to distant locations, and cover as much area till the beginning of snowfall. Collection of grasses is a very tedious job and every year few women are injured and they have been reported of even dead due to fall from the mountain slopes. From the nearby mountain slopes of Bhyundar village the grasses are mainly collected in August and September as after 15th of August most of the families shifts back to Pulna. In October and November women collect grass from the nearby mountain slopes of Pulna village, which is at lower elevation than the Bhyundar village. Most of the collected grasses become dry as they are collected during the end of the season, however, if the grasses are green they are sun dried and then stored. The residual of agricultural crops are not sold in market rather stored for own domesticated animals for winter which is the lean period as far as fodder and feed is concerned.

COMPOSITION OF HARVESTED GRASSES

Based on the predominance of grasses, there are four types of grasslands in India, such as tropical, temperate, sub-alpine and alpine grasslands. The alpine and sub-alpine grasslands in Himalaya are best-known storehouse of nutritious fodder species. The severe cool climatic conditions and major precipitation in the form of snow hide these grasslands for major parts of the year and disclose them for accessibility only during summer and rainy seasons (June-October). With the melting of snow after May shepherds gradually move to high reaches of Himalaya in

search of good quality grasslands for feeding their livestock whereas the grass harvesters move for harvesting grasses much later in August when grasses become mature and attain the maximum height. Livestock plays a major role in the economy of many ethnic communities of high altitude areas and there is a greater importance of these grasslands for both sedentary and transhumant pastoral societies.

Grasses belong to the family *Poaceae* or *Gramineae*. Based on the number of species *Poaceae* comes under top 10 important families of Chamoli district. In the Bhyundar valley a total of 40 species of grasses have been reported so far (Wadhwa et al., 1987; Kala, 1998a) of which *Agrostis pilosula*, *Agrostis munroana*, *Calamagrostis emodensis*, *Calamagrostis pseudofragmites*, *Danthonia cachemyriana*, *Festuca gigantea*, *Hierochloa laxa*, *Phleum alpinum*, *Themeda triandra*, *Themeda anathera* and *Trisetum spicatum* are the most dominant species. The lower valley in Bhyundar upto 2,400 m is chiefly dominated by *Themeda anathera* whereas above this altitudinal range upto 4,500 m is dominated by *Danthonia cachemyriana*, *Calamagrostis emodensis*, *Calamagrostis pseudofragmites* and *Agrostis munroana* species. Therefore, the composition of harvested grasses depends upon the altitudinal range of grass collection areas.

COMMERCIALIZATION OF GRASSES

Earlier, the grasses were collected and stored for feeding to livestock mainly during the winter season. But now after 1980s there has been a shift in grass collection pattern, and the change is more towards commercial utilization, earlier they were collected for the domestic use. Due to the increasing number of horses and ponies, which is used by the tourists, the demand for their feed and grasses has also gone up tremendously. For example, in 2001, some 289 mules were registered in the district panchayat office at Gopeshwar as pack animal to be used between Govindghat and Ghangria whereas this number could be more, as few locals were reported for not having registered in this office. District Panchayat office at Govindghat has a list of fixed rates for hiring mules, porters and *palkies*. As per district Panchayat rates the cost of hiring a mule from

Govindghat to Hemkund and back to Govindghat is Rs 620 plus Rs 200 for night stay on the way. Generally, tourists don't approach to district panchayat office at Govindghat which takes care for the arrangement of ponies and porters and fixing rates. Rather they directly approach to mule owners or porters and fix prices themselves that fluctuates a lot depending upon the number of tourist on the respective day.

At Govindghat, the mules mostly feed on hay, which is brought from Ramnagar and Haldwani's markets but when mules carry tourists or luggage to Hemkund they halt at Ghangria and nearby areas for night stay. Many of the local mule owners of the side valleys of Chamoli district prefer to stay nearby Ghangria. Besides giving hay and gram (*channa*) to the mules, they also purchase grass from the local villagers. Such a large number of mules need a sizeable quantity of grass, which is supplied by these local villagers. Thus, the practice of grass selling began in the Bhyundar valley and became an important economic activity.

MANAGEMENT OF GRASSECONOMY

Prior to the large scale commercial transactions of grasses, the mule owners used to approach few prospective grass sellers in Bhyundar valley whom they knew as grass sellers, but there were no fix rates for grasses. Since, the mountain slopes with dense grass cover fall under the forest council (*Van Panchayat*) land and so nobody was the real stakeholder of the land, which always invited disputes among the villagers for acquiring land for grass collection. As a matter of fact, few influential landowners from the region had hired Nepali workers for grass collection and selling it to the consumers. Thus, all these issues collectively brought a lot of conflicts among the different stakeholders and the local communities in Bhyundar valley.

To mitigate these disputes, the *Van Panchayat* and village council (*Gram Sabha*) of Bhyundar valley approved a resolution in 1995. According to this resolution, *Van Panchayat* selected 6 families from the Bhyundar valley through the random selection process for a period of one year on an rotational basis, care was taken that till all the families of the valley were nominated no family was repeated for this assignment. These

6 nominated families deposited Rs 15,000 to *Van Panchayat* by contributing Rs 2,500 from each nominated family, and the *Van Panchayat* donated Rs 5,000 to the *Gram Sabha* for the welfare works of the villages of this valley. These six families were entrusted the rights to purchase and sell grasses collected by the individual women folk of the region.

In practice, these 6 families sell their rights to the contractors by bidding, and the contractor with highest amount in the bid was granted the contract. In the year 2000 the bid was made for Rs 25,000 and the figure gradually increased in 2001 to Rs 28,000 which incidentally went to a Nepali contractor. The contractor collects the harvested grasses for the retail sale. In 2001, the villagers sold dry grass at Rs 7 per kg at Bhyundar and Pulna, while at Ghangria the contractor sold them at Rs 10 per kg. Similarly, the contractor purchased the green grass at the rate of Rs 4 per kg and sold them for Rs 6 per kg. Green grasses are mainly collected by Nepali laborers appointed by the contractor to gather grasses from the nearby mountain slopes and valleys of Ghangria. This system has helped in reducing the conflicts in this valley. Moreover, the consumers now know the channel and they go straight to contractor who sells the grass at Ghangria market.

In 1997, the rate of grass was Rs 6 per kg (Kala, 1998b) and now it has gone up to Rs 8 per kg at Ghangria thus there is a yearly increase of Rs 1 per kg. Approximately, a mule eats on an average 8-10 kg grass per day that costs around Rs 100 and the total cost of maintenance of a mule is more than Rs 100 per day which also includes gram (*channa*) which is an essential dietary requirement. Sometime due to less number of tourists it becomes hard for mule owners to bear this expenditure on mules. The local mule owners of nearby valleys go back home and come again once they are sure that the tourists are coming in sufficient numbers. Whereas, the mule owners from larger distances such as (Najibabad, Bijnor, Ramnagar etc) have no option but to stay back till the Gurudwara at Hemkund was closed for winter. There is a similar trend in Kedarnath area as the Kedarnath temple is located at 3,800 m altitude and there is 14 km trek route from Gaurikund to the main temple shrine.

CONCLUSIONS

During June to October of 2001 a total of 35,305 kg of both dry and green grass was sold at Ghangria market, which accounted for Rs 2, 62,050. Out of total quantity sold the dry grasses were 13,305 kg and green grasses were 22,000 kg, and the villagers had earned Rs. 93,135 by selling these dry grasses, while the porters had earned Rs 26,610 and the contractor Rs 13,305. In total the villagers and the porters had earned Rs 2,05,745 and the contractor had earned Rs 56,305. During 2001, the *Van Panchayat* had earned Rs 10,000, while the *Gram Sabha* had earned Rs 5,000. The nominated families had earned Rs 13,000, while the grass-selling families along with the porters had earned Rs 2,05,745 and the contractor had earned Rs 28,305.

It is interesting to note that the traditional institutions created by the local people without any external interference had set an example of community management and sharing of resources by the community itself. In this case study, various issues can be noted and the foremost is the indigenous effort and initiative taken by the community collectively, and the community's acceptance of the *Gram Panchayat's* decision. The successful management of grass economy by the Bhyundar people despite the fact that the grasslands in Bhyundar valley are disputed and Forest Dept. is also one of the stakeholders highlights the concept of collective decision making and full participation of the villagers under the concepts of social equity and incorporation of indigenous management systems. Thus, the traditional systems of utilization of natural resources and the concept of community participation in decision making functions well as long as the laws of social equity are obeyed and external interference is minimal in the decision making system.

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KEY WORDS Himalayan Grasslands. Bhyundar Valley. Grass Collection. Social Equity. Commercialization. Community Participation.

ABSTRACT The present study was undertaken in the Bhyundar valley of Uttarakhand with the major objective of finding out the pattern in flow of economy with various user groups through commercialization of grasses. The study has demonstrated that how the traditional wisdom, concept of social equity and community participation have made the commercialization of grass economy a success in terms of community benefit and has added to the economy of the individuals residing in the Bhyundar valley. The concept of community decision making and sharing of resources between various stakeholders has diluted the ill effects of commercialization of any economy. Due to the high influx of tourists in the study area increased the number of mules and horses and thus the feed requirements, the existing system of grass sale could not handle the increased requirements. How the local people have developed their own system for the management of grass collection and the economy.

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