

Moving Yak Herds towards Tourism: A Linkage between Yak and Eco-Tourism in the High Mountains of East on Nepal

Jiban Mani Poudel^{1*}, Sanjeev Paudyal², Shova Shiwakoti³, & Sandhya Gurung³

¹Central Department of Anthropology, Tribhuvan University

²Mechi Hilly Region Tourism Promotion Development Committee (MHRTPDC), Ilam

³Nepal Mountain Academy, Kathmandu

*Correspondence: jmpo483@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.3126/jtha.v4i1.46301>

Abstract

This paper is study about the intersection between yak herding and tourism. The main focus is on how the concepts of yak festival and *gothstay* are transforming the conventional notion of animal husbandry, in particular yak herding, in the eastern high mountain region of Nepal. It is based on ethnographic study among the yak and *urang* herders in the region. Triangulation methods i.e., observation, interview, household survey and GIS were used. The yak festival and the concept of *gothstay* are giving new meaning, value and symbol – something different from the customary usage – to yak and yak herding. The concept of yak-tourism is not only a connection of yak and yak herding with tourism, but also gendering of the yak through language, image and form in public spaces. Thus, the rational, instrumental and conventional way of describing of yak is not sufficient in the context of livestock tourism. Moreover, the concept of *gothstay* is transforming the traditional notion of *goth*; i.e., from herders' place to touristic site for learning about Himalayan pastoral culture and lifestyle. It would be a potential alternative of livelihood source for the Himalayan herders who have very limited options for making a living.

Keywords: *Tourism, yak herding, gothstay, yak festival, Himalayan*

Introduction

The Himalayan environment is complex and dynamic (Fisher, 1986; Guneratne, 2010; Pandit, 2017). It could mean different things to different groups of people. In recent decades, mountains including the Himalayas have become a key icon of adventure tourism (Wall & Paudel, 2021). It is, however, necessary to look beyond adventure tourism and turn towards history, power relation, politics, global warming (Carey, 2007) along with culture and cultural heritage, unique biodiversity and so on (Pandit, 2017). With such diversity, the Himalaya can offer a platform to learn and know about the distinct mountain culture and lifestyle for the outsiders. In this context, Himalayan pastoralism can be a part of learning and experiencing a unique mountain culture.

Mountain regions cover 27 percent of the earth's land surface (Ebi et al., 2007), inhabit about 10 percent of global population (Kohler et al., 2010). It is also a home to many indigenous people. About 97 percent of the 278 indigenous people live in the vastly dissected morphological landscape of the southern face of Himalaya, while only 8 tribes inhabit nearly the entire Tibetan Plateau region from east to west (Bisht & Bankoti, 2004). Therefore, the southern Himalayan slopes, with complex topography, numerous valleys carved out by tectonic events, a huge network of rivers have witnessed a vertical human cultural

diversification compared with horizontal uniformity of the northern Tibetan Plateau (Pandit, 2017). Moreover, Nepal Himalaya has wonderful landscapes and is rich in cultural and natural heritage and biodiversity. Out of 59 indigenous groups of Nepal, 18 groups live in the mountain region as they have been practicing and preserving distinctive tangible and intangible cultures for ages (Bhattachan, 2015).

Yak is a unique domesticated cattle of the Himalaya. It is raised in 10 Asian highland countries of the world including Nepal (Joshi et al., 2020). In Nepal, it is found in 29 northern districts (Government of Nepal, 2018) above 3,000 masl (Poudel, 2020). Yak herding is the primary source of livelihood for Himalayan people due to harsh climate and topography (Miller 1995; 1998; Bishop 1998; Campbell 2018; Poudel 2020b). Rhode and others have argued that availability of yak dung as a fuel was a potential critical factor for colonization of the high Plateau (Rhode et al., 2007). Indeed, yak provides dairy products (milk and cheese), meat, fibers, manure, cash, draft energy, and transportation, etc. (Bishop, 1998; Brower, 1991; Miller, 1995, 1998; Spoon, 2013). Besides material usages, yak is needed to some mountain dwellers for sacrificial offerings to the local deities in various rituals (Ning, 2003) to maintain a harmonious relationship between cosmology and the living world. Yak is also a symbol of social prestige and wealth to them. Therefore, the material and non-material lives of people in the region are intertwined with yak (Pandit, 2017). Many groups give the names of their clans, areas, mountains, rivers after yak (Keliang & Changxin, 2004). Numerous legends and songs are also attached with yak (Hellman 2019). Similarly, indigenous ecological knowledge and life narratives are also produced by yak herders (Poudel, 2020c). Hence, yak is not just a biological species to the Himalayan dwellers, but an economy, culture, power, identity as well as a total way of life.

Recently, a lot of changes have taken place in yak herding in the Himalayan region. Yak is no longer a milking cattle or a means of transportation, but it is seen as a pleasing animal as some mountain communities have begun to organize yak festival to promote ecotourism (Joshi et al., 2020). This gives new meanings, values and symbols to yaks, different from their usual convention. The linkage with eco-tourism, as suggested by Cloke and Milbourne (1992), Phalaut Grazing Range (PGR) yak herding has become a context where pastoral culture is crafting, packaging and marketing with an aim of promoting pastoral tourism is ready to enter the realm of global economy.

In PGR of the eastern Nepal Himalaya (see Map 1), yaks were merely kept for breeding with cows and cross-breed for calf and dairy products till 2016. Now, the process of blending with eco-tourism through the concept of *gothstay*¹ supported by government and non-government organizations has started. Before introducing the concept of *gothstay*, yak used to be perceived as a symbol of wilderness, rigorous and fearful creature of the Himalaya which has now changed. It has become a symbol of beauty, attentive and pleasing animal to tourists. Yak and yak herds have become an 'object' for watching, seeing, and pleasing. Thus, the concept of yak-tourism is changing the conventional notion of yak from wilderness Himalayan cattle (masculinity) to pleasing animal (femininity). In this context, this paper will provide theoretical and empirical evidences about the linkage between pastoralism and tourism

1 The term *gothstay* is composed of two words, *goth* and *stay*. The former denotes herder's shelter where pastoral activities carry out and the later means living for a short period as a visitor or a guest. However, Red Panda Network (2020) defines it as an alternative source of income opportunity for livestock herders in rural Nepal and lead to thriving sustainable livelihoods, and also offers a unique opportunity to experience the rich and authentic culture and tradition of nomadic lifestyle of the mountain region and enjoying the experiences of local biodiversity including forests, landscapes, wildlife and birds to visitors.

addressing the fundamental question i.e., how the concept of yak herding has been changed from customary usage to symbol of tourism in the eastern Nepal Himalaya.

Methods

This study was conducted among the yak and *urang* (yak-cow crossbreed) herders in the PGR (located at 3,000 to 3,600 masl), a mid/high-mountain range of the eastern Nepal Himalaya². In the region, yak and *urang* herders have been organizing *Chauri Parya-Paryatan Mahotsav* (Yak Eco-Tourism Festival) since 2017. The festival is celebrated every year on 1st Baisakh (the new year of Nepali calendar) with the aim of promoting eco-tourism in the area. Recently, a few herders have been running *gothstay* to provide hospitality services to tourists while linking to the past through performing traditional pastoral activities. Thus, the site was suitable for the researches to know about the intersection between yak herding and tourism in the mountain region of the eastern Nepal.

This study was based on mixed method. Hence, both qualitative and quantitative data were used; collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected by using mixed methods (household survey, interview, and observation). Secondary data were gathered from published and unpublished documents. The census survey of herder's households was carried out to collect the socio-economic data. Interviews were carried out with the herders, government representatives and tourists who visited the Yak Festival on the 1st Baisakh, 2078 (14 April 2021). Key informants were identified and selected for in-depth qualitative information such as the history of yak herding and its changes, and linkage between yak herding and tourism. They were selected based on the recommendations of herders who could provide more detailed information on yak herding and tourism. At the location, the researcher interviewed 4 local herders, 4 government representatives, 2 political leaders, and 1 hotel owner to understand their views on the linkage between yak and tourism in the area.

As an ethnographic study, the researcher observed the geographical location, grazing areas, *goths* (shelters), and herders' daily activities as well. Interview was conducted with the informants freely in natural environment as far as possible for the researchers to know how the herders of PGR understood their environment (livestock and tourism) and how they lived in it in the changing context. GPS coordinate (latitude, longitude and elevation) of each goth were also recorded that helped to identify the location of goths in the region. The collected quantitative data were presented in tables or figures and analyzed by using a simple statistical method and qualitative data were thematically presented and logically interpreted.

Phalaut Grazing Range (PGR) as a multi-space

Phalaut has occupied multiple spaces to the outsiders. It is a unique geographic and natural wildlife space. It has a distinct cultural, social, historical and economic feature. Speaking through geographical and natural spaces, PGR is located in the eastern mountain region of Nepal situated at the border of India which lies approximately at 3,000 to 3,600 meters altitude from sea level (masl). It extends about 22 km south-north from Sandakpur of Ilam district to Tinsimana of and Panchthar districts respectively. It is a gentle slope meadow and inhabited by wildlife, especially red panda, Himalayan bear and leopard and traditional grazing place to the Phalung herders. About one-third of the rural municipality area is covered with forest and pastures and the four winter months (from Mangsir i.e. mid-November

2 3,000-4,000 meters of Nepal Himalayas is categorized as mid/high mountain (Moran, 2008).

to mid-December) to Falgun i.e. mid-February to mid-March) are mostly covered with snow (Phalelung Rural Municipality, 2017).

Natural scenery seen from PGR is an attracting factor to tourists. The panoramic view of the 4 world's tallest mountains, Mt. Everest, Mt. Lhotse, Mt. Makalu, and Mt. Kanchanjanga can be seen. The first 3 mountains are standing on the left and the last one is on the right. Mt. Kanchanjanga and its family peaks are famously called the sleeping Buddha. The scenic views of sunrise and sunset can also be seen.

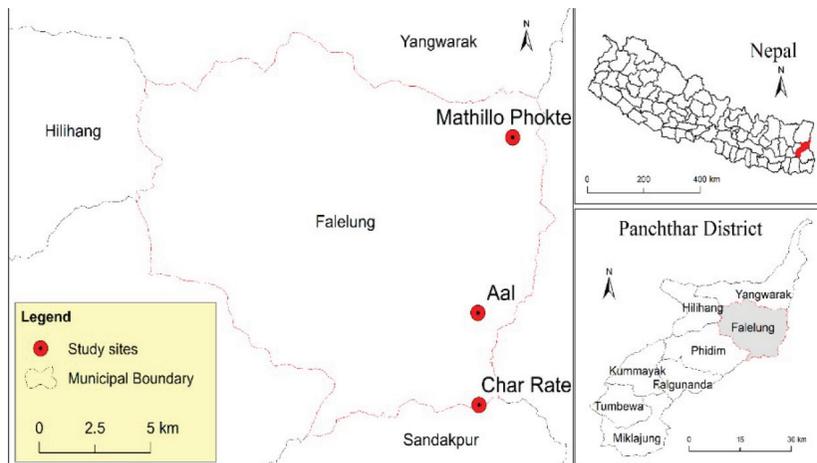


Figure 1: Study area

From socio-cultural and economic spaces, the name of the village– Phalelung - is derived from a stone located at Phalaut that looks like a cock. In Limbu language, *Phal* means cock and *lung* means stone. If we look at the naming system of the village, it has two connotations i.e., a sense of place and the history of people residing in the area. The local explained how closely Limbu ancestors observed their environment and named the place, Phalelung. This symbolizes that Limbus might be the oldest inhabitant in the region. Even today, Limbu is the largest group in the village³. The naming system, therefore, is not merely a name, but it intersects with places, history, and landscapes, thick and insightful observations and knowledge of people with their environment (Basso, 1996; Cruikshank, 2005). But not details are included in this paper.

On 13 April, yaks, *dee*, and *urang* herds were grazing on the green meadows. It looked like a spotty curtain (see photo 1). However, the highland cattle herding is a recent phenomenon. It only started in 1984 for producing *urang*. From then, the place began to be known as ‘The Land of Yak’. This new identity is being crafted, packed and marketed by the herders through organizing yak festival and introducing the concept of *gothstay* (center for hospitality to tourists and learning institution to mountain pastoral life) which is a pathway towards mountain livestock tourism.

PRG herding community is not only diverse by caste and ethnic composition but also different in terms of their wealth, possession of landholding and number of livestock, household income, and so on⁴. Notwithstanding, it is somehow homogeneous as regards to characteristics

³ Limbu has 42.83% population in Phalelung (Phalelung Rural Municipality, 2017).

⁴ The average landholding size is 1.09 hector ranging from 0.2 to 4.75 hectares. The largest number of livestock at a *gothi* is 86 heads (including large and small) and 16 in the smallest one. Herders’ annual households income

of livestock that they possess. Household is the major unit of herds management. Economically active male members of the households generally live in the *goth* for livestock caring. In 2021, in 6 households, however, female and children were also supporting to care the *goth* and livestock supervision. In case of absence of active human resources at household, male herders were hired. Herding of mountain region through excluding division of labor based on age and sex was thus, not seen.



Figure 2: Yaks on the grazing at PGR, (Photo by Chandra Nepal)

The herding communities does not completely depend on livestock for a living (Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Moran, 2008). This also appears true in the case of PGR herders. Besides animal husbandry, some economically active members of households are also involved in different occupations such as agriculture, foreign employment, small business, and services. The diversification of livelihood is also a coping strategy of a community. In 2021, 19 out of 29 households were engaged in animal husbandry and agriculture spontaneously; family members of these households lived separately in two places i.e., mid-highland (3,000-3,600 masl) and village (1,500-2,000 masl) to manage animal husbandry and agriculture side by side. The economically active male members of a household stay at *goth* and supervise the livestock in the highland, whereas the rest of the family members including elderly people, women, and children live in the village doing farming and managing stall-fed livestock and caring the children. Maize and potato are commonly grown in village. In addition, paddy and millet are grown in small amounts by some households. These cereal crops are grown for household consumption but surplus is also sold. In addition, big cardamom, broom-grass, kiwi, orange, green beans are mainly produced for earning cash. Several factors such as individual households' choice, human resource, landholding size, access to market, water resources, quality of soil, climate, attitude, and others are responsible for the selection of crops grown by a household.

Yak and *urang* herds are kept away from private land throughout the year. The landholding size, therefore, does not have a significant role in shaping the herds management. Locals

from by animal products (ghee and dried cheese) is from NRs. 210,000.00 to NRs. 870,000.00.

graze yak in highland meadows throughout the year while *urang* are taken for grazing in the highland meadows during summer and lowland forest areas during 3 winter months (mid-December to mid-February). However, both quality and quantity of landholding size have a significant value to support the household economy through generating cereal grains and cash crops as well as fodder to low-dwelling animals like cow, ox, buffalo, and goat.

Goth: a cultural space

There were 29 yak and *urang* *goths* in PGRs scattered in different locations (see figure 3 & 4). Generally, *goth* is made with wooden flakes in a rectangle shape (see figure 3 & 4). The walls of the *goth* are made and roofed with wooden flakes with mud and stone flooring. Goth are divided into two parts. One half is open for keeping baby calves and milking *urang*. There is no shed for *urang*, but they live under the open sky. During milking time, they are brought inside *goth* and moved out for grazing after milking. The non-milking *urang* hardly brought to the *goth*. The 2nd half of the *goth* is used for living by herders. Most of the *goth* has only one room. It is used as a kitchen, a bedroom, and a living room. We noticed one to three beds in a *goth* determined by the size of herds and numbers of herders. In large herds, there are three beds and small herds have only one bed. There are no separate rooms and beds in *goth*, except a few cases⁵. Visitors have to share the bed with others. Bed-sheets and blankets are turned black with smell due to lack of outlet for fire smoke.

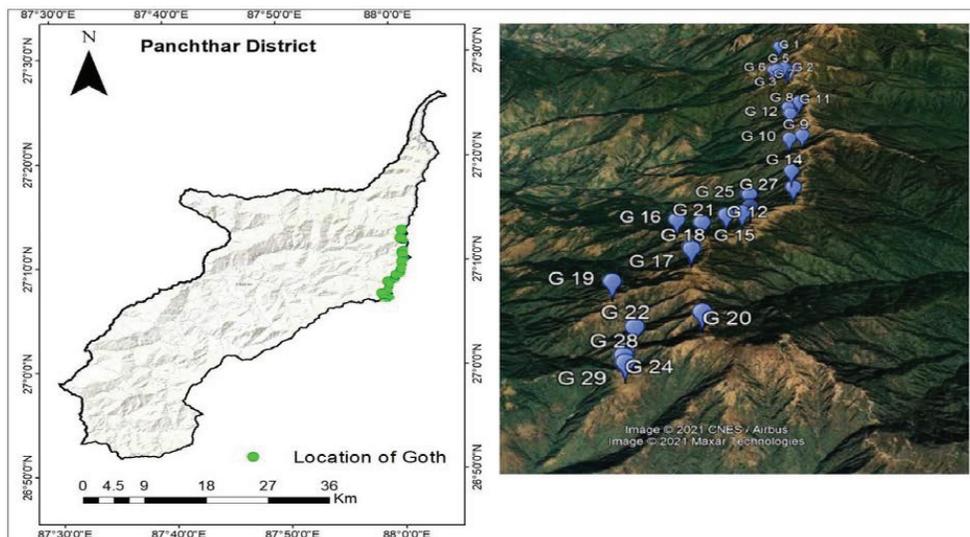


Figure 3: Location of Goths at PGR

Goth is indeed a cultural space where everyday life of herders move around. Thus, it is more than herder's permanent shelter. Herders' everyday activities like milking cattle, making ghee and dry- cheese, caring of baby calves, cleaning of *goth*, preparing fodder, cooking food are done within the *goth*. A hearth is placed at the center of the room which is used for cooking foods, boiling milk, and water. The hearth also heat the rooms. There are Himalayan bamboo sticks (locally called *bhar*) arranged in a row above the hearth for drying up of raw cheese sticks.

5 At night, we four people (two researchers and two local villagers) had to share the same bed.



Figure 4: *Goth* (left) and *gothstay* (right) at Mathilo Phokte, PGR

In one corner, there are different sizes of wooden or bamboo pots for making butter. Recently, some herders have brought hand-machine for separating cream from milk to save their time and energy. Notwithstanding, the introduction of new technology will be replace traditional instruments and knowledge of making butter in near future. After the cream separation, herders boil milk in a big bowl that stand over the hearth. It helps to separate solid from liquid. The solid item is locally called *chhana*. The separated *chhana* is put on jute sack and kept on a big wooden flack and pressured. It helps to remove remaining liquid from solid. It is then kept on *bhati* above the hearth until ready for selling. All these activities, observed and experienced at the *goth* reveals that *goth* is a cultural space to the outsiders or researchers for knowing the Himalayan pastoral culture and way of life.

Changing the pastoralism in PGR

Agro-pastoralism is one of the traditional adaptive strategies of Phalelung people. However, it has changed a lot over the last four decades. In the past, it was an integral part of local subsistence agricultural system. Agriculture, therefore, would be impossible without livestock due to lack of modern technology, chemical fertilizer, and pesticide. Like other mountain regions of Nepal, yak, *nak* (female yak locally called dee), *urang* (female cross-breed of yak and zebu cow), cow, ox, goat, horse and Himalayan dog are commonly raised for meat, cash, dairy products, wool, reproduction, transportation and safety. Urang and goat are the dominant domestic livestock in terms of number (see Table 1), although the herders rarely talked about goats which could bring cash to them when needed. Besides material usages, some livestock, especially sheep, pig, and goat are needed for sacrificial offerings to the local deities in various rituals to maintain harmonious relations between cosmology and the living world.

Table 1: Primary purposes for keeping livestock at herders household

Livestock	Household	Current number of livestock	Average number per household	Primary purposes for keeping
Urang	28	515	17.8	Dairy products
Goat	21	303	10.4	Meat and cash
Cow	21	108	3.7	Cross-breed reproduction
Dee	10	36	1.2	To promote tourism
Horse	24	54	1.9	Transportation
Yak	28	42	1.4	Breeding & tourism promotion

Himalayan dog	15	24	0.8	Safety
Ox	7	10	0.3	Plowing
Buffalo	3	8	0.3	Milk
Sheep	3	5	0.2	Meat, wool

Pastoralism has changed a lot in the region over the last three and half decades. The changes have been largely shaped and reshaped by market economy and development interventions. Until 1984, for instance, animal husbandry was a part of subsistence agriculture. Cows and buffaloes were kept for milk and milk products, especially ghee, goats for meat, and sheep for meat and wool. Manure was important to fertilize the agricultural fields. In the winter, temporary sheds for animals would make on barren farmlands for manuring the field.

In the mid-1980s, yak and *urang* herding was introduced in the region. Devi Nepal introduced it and passed the knowledge on to other herders⁶. That event brought a turning point in pastoralism in the region. When they began to raise *urang* herds, they were able to produce more butter and dried cheese. It demanded a new market for dairy products. They began to sell their dairy products to Indian markets like Rimek and Darjeeling in cash or barter. The supply of ghee and dried cheese connected them to regional markets. In 2008, Himalayan Dog Chew Company came to the village to buy dried cheese. After a few years, two more companies like Godawari and CD Dairy Industry also entered. The arrival of new companies not only provided more economic values to the dairy products, but also expanded their network from regional to global market. The companies exported the PGR dried cheese to the USA and Europe as dog food. In 2020, 28 *urang* herder households produced 10,422 kg dried cheese and ghee each and earned more than 163 million NPR.

An interesting fact is that both the numbers of high altitude dwelling cattle like *urang*, dee, and yak population and these animal raising households have been increased whereas small livestock (goat and sheep) and low altitude dwelling livestock (cow and ox) and these livestock raising households have been declined (see Table 2) due to the introduction of cash crops and fodder trees at village, lack of human resources and ecological constraints.

Table 2: Growth of domestic livestock at Phalaut Grazing Range

Livestock	Increased		Decreased		Differences in number of household response (+/-)	Differences in number of livestock (+/-)
	Household response	Number	Household response	Number		
Urang	17	244	6	45	+11	+199
Dee	9	53	1	10	+8	+43
Yak	11	20	2	3	+9	+17
Horse	3	12	3	4	0	+8
Sheep	0	0	3	192	-3	-192
Cow	7	37	17	267	-10	-240
Ox	3	7	9	22		-15

6 Devi Nepal brought some yaks and *urang* from a Tibetan refugee who had fled with his herds from Tibet in the late 1950s. The Tibetan refugee not only sold his herds but also taught him how to produce cross-breeding by crossing yak-bull and low altitude dwelling cow.

Rotational grazing was a traditional livestock management practice in the area. Cows and goats were raised and sheep flock in private fallow-lands during winter and high altitude meadows in summer. Over the last decade, the villagers began to grow big cardamom, fruits, fodder trees, herbal medicine in the farmlands for making money by giving up traditional cereal crops farming. Such cash crop farming activities restricted grazing areas for cow and sheep herds inside the private farmlands which was the main winter grazing lands. A highland-dwelling cattle herder shared his experience;

The situation has changed a lot. In the past, villagers would consider a herder as a manure provider. Each villager would welcome cow and sheep herds to graze in his/her fallow lands for manure. At present, they think us as crop destroyers. If herds enter the farmlands, the herders will have to pay the penalty in the name of damaging the crops and plants. (T. Gurung, 58, personal communication on 15 April, 2021)

Mr. R. K. Rai (42 years old), who started to raise *urang* herds by giving up cow herds, had the same experience.

There were many grazing lands in the village when there were enough wheat and barley fields. But now there are more cash and fodder trees and plants than wheat and barley fields. So, we do not have more grazing lands in the village and its surroundings. (Personal communication on 19 May, 2021)

These statements remark that rural peasant community is not entering to capitalist economy through adaptation of cash-oriented agriculture and stall-feeding livestock management⁷ but also indicating that high-value cash crops are gradually displacing cereal crops on one hand and producing obstacle to rotational seasonal movement of livestock in Phalelung on the other, which is recent phenomenon throughout the mountain regions of Nepal (Bhusal et al., 2018; Poudel, 2020c; Uprety, 2021).

PGR, a common grazing land, is located about two to three hours walking distance from the main village. Climatically, it is suitable for grazing cows and sheep in winter. The low altitude dwelling cattle and sheep hardly survive there in the winter due to their physiological characters. About it, a herder remarked, "If we left 20 heads of cow before onset of winter at PGR, we would have only half number by spring. The half would have already been *killed* by chilly weather"⁸. This indicates that herders' choice of cattle is depended upon the cost of risks. In the process of adaptation, cattle herders chose lower risks and ignored or avoided high risks. They saw higher risks in keeping the low altitude dwelling livestock at PGR whereas less risks in high-dwelling cattle that helped to move them to adapt the high altitude dwelling cattle like yak and *urang*.



Figure 5: Coverage of snow at PGR in 2022; Photo Chandra Nepal

7 17 households reported agriculture as the secondary occupation but only one households reported to cultivate wheat in his farmlands. But his farmland was in Jhapa rather than Phalelung.

8 Herders said "killed" rather than "died" because of cold

Similarly, some herders pointed out that lack of human resources at household as the cause for declining of cow herds and sheep herds. Keeping both low altitude dwelling and high altitude dwelling cattle demands more human resources at household. But it has declined due to the conception of *sano pariwar sukhi pariwar* (small family is the happiest family) concept, although the average family size is 5.72 per household greater than national average (CBS, 2022). Moreover, villagers also see their children's better future by sending them to schools than in *goth*. In 2021, about one-third of the herder's household population were students who were either studying at village or cities. Hence, modern education not only has created a new opportunity for livelihood to the youth, but it has appeared as a driver to detach youth from traditional occupation especially herding (Bishop, 1998; Dorji et al., 2020; Poudel, 2020c). Thus, they have only one option to choose from, i.e., either send their children to school for education or to keep their children with them at *goth* for caring livestock. Villagers chose the first option for securing their children's future. Sending children for higher education may be good for individual but not for animal husbandry in future. The unwillingness of parent to engage their children in *goth* and live with animals not only displaces the future generation from their occupation; but also their traditional ecological knowledge that their ancestor learnt through inhabiting with their land as Ingold and Kurttila (2000) have argued.

Empirical evidences derived from the herders of PGR shows that adaptation of high altitude cattle is more complex and multifaceted phenomenon. It is not a simple story of expansion of economic niche, adaptation to environment friendly livestock but it is a reality about how herders have moved them towards global market through production of more dried cheese and ghee by raising *urang*. Moreover, it is about a diffusion of knowledge, risks taking by the first herder, his individual effort and how other picked up the new practice from him. Now, they have a greater desire to link with tourism by organizing yak festival. The adaption of new pastoralism about four decades ago became a new identity of the area i.e, '*The Land of Yak*'.

In the year 2016, the herders saw the yak herding as a new icon – 'a symbol of livestock tourism'. The next year, they organized yak eco-tourism festival at Chararate with support from International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Red Panda Network (RPN), Tribhuvan University and local government. That was another turning point to connect yak herders with livestock tourism. Then, yak is given new meaning, vales and symbols, different from the traditional usage. They saw their future in yak-tourism. Thereafter, they started to raise at least a dee (female yak also known as nak) in a herd. In 2021, there were altogether 78 yak and dee heads.

A pathway towards the livestock tourism

Open grazing has remained as a traditional livestock management practice at PGR. However, District Forest Office (DFO) was not positive towards open grazing practice. In Nepal, open grazing is considered as the sole cause for biodiversity degradation (Chaudhary et al., 2016). The herders and their open grazing practices were responsible for destroying biodiversity at PGR. The aim of government had guided itself deeply into the process of forest making (the terms used by Agrawal 2005) through controlling open grazing in forests. From conservation perspective, the range is important for red-panda and rhododendron. On the other side of border, the government of India has already declared a national park for conservation of wildlife. However, the local herders considered it as a threat to *urang* and their livelihood.

In 2016, a District Forest Officer of Panchthar visited Phalelung and discussed with local herders and villagers about the conservation of biodiversity of PGR. At the meeting, the officer realized that biodiversity of the region could not be managed without the considering needs of the local herders. He proposed an idea of a *gothstay* – providing shelter to tourists in hospitable manner - for conservation of biodiversity and continuity of livelihood in a sustainable way. The discussion was a turning point for moving traditional usage of yak herding towards livestock tourism, including the concept of *gothstay*. The meeting declared to organize a yak eco-tourism festival on 1st Baishakh, 2074 (on the day of New Year 2017).

This story mirrors the origin of the concept of *gothstay* at PGR and role of different agencies for moving the traditional usage of yak herding towards domestic animal tourism in the eastern Nepal Himalaya. Now, herders organize the festival every year. Different stakeholders like ICIMOD, Red Panda Network, local government, federal government, universities, media, tourism board, local business have also directly and indirectly supported the festival. In 2021, more than 2,000 local tourists visited the yak festival at Phalaut. Mr. Basanta Nembang, Federal Minister of Central Government of Nepal was invited as chief guest. The presence of Federal Minister enhanced the festival's popularity.

Here our question is to look for intersection between yak herding and tourism. The Yak Festival has constructed a new meanings and given new symbolic value to yak. Yak represents a symbol of livestock tourism in eastern Nepal Himalaya. The festival is converting *goth* into a *gothstay* i.e., a herder's shelter to tourist service providing center; from a place of dairy product to a place of experiencing Himalayan pastoral lifestyle and culture, from herder's shelter to hospitality centers. Moreover, the festival is a good opportunity for locals to renew social relationship among kin, between distance villagers. At the festival in 2021, people from different villages of Panchthar, Taplejung, Ilam as well as Sikkim and Darjeeling district of West Bengal of India visited. Similarly, Rai and Limbu, indigenous people of the area, also performed their traditional dances. Such performances also support expanding local culture to other communities.

Gendering the yak: transforming herders' perception

We heard a statement - yak as an ornament of the mountain - several times from the herders at PGR. The statement signifies the change in perception of yak and yak herding. However, the narrative 'yak as an ornament of the mountain' has emerged with yak festival in 2017. Yak symbolically has begun to appear as a 'object' that can give pleasing, entertainment and knowledge to outsiders about the mountain culture in particular pastoralism. As tourism has converted mountains from masculinity to femininity (Carey, 2007), the concept of tourism (*gothstay* and yak festival) is gendering yak from wilderness, rigorous, stranger Himalayan cattle to beautiful, pleasing, and entertainment giver cattle to the local herders, tourists and business persons. At the yak festival, yaks were presented with ornaments. In Nepali context, ornaments inherent meaning and symbolic values. A feminist scholar Russell (2010) has argued that ornament connects and interacts with body and body often bound to jewelry. It symbolizes human body differently i.e., as male body and female body. Like human body, the presence of yak at the festival with ornaments (decorated with red cloths and garlands) also symbolizes the forms, image and characteristics of femaleness of yak. In other words, a stranger, wilderness and rigorous yak is presenting in an image of femaleness. At the festival, it has lost its masculinity character and appeared as a characteristics of femininity. This is what we meant 'gendering the yak'.



Figure 6: Decorated Yak at Yak Festival in Phalot, 2021

The local yak herders, tourists and business owners at PGR have different perceptions towards yaks and yak herding. For them, it has a scenic value. They described it as a beautiful creature of the mountain that can give delight, enjoy and pleasure to outsiders. Regarding it, K. Gurung, a 39 years old young female tourism entrepreneur, who visited the Yak Festival in 2021 said,

“You cannot see mountain panorama, rhododendron, wildlife, and yak from hill and Tarai. You have to visit Himal (mountain) to see all of these things. It is impossible to see wildlife and blooming rhododendron at every movement of your visit. But, you can see yak always at PGR. It is a unique thing to low-dwelling people. They can enjoy by seeing it, riding it and knowing it. So, why we should not sell it to outsiders?” (Personal communication on 14 April 2021)

Similar remarks were made by another visitor who came at Phalaut to participate at the yak festival in 2021. She shared her experiences like this;

“Oh! I am here to see yak that I have not seen before in my life. It is really an imaging creator of the mountain. Look at! the body, its long hair, sharp horn and so on. I am really happy to see it in my life. How lovely it is!” (personal communication on 14 April 2021)

Similarly, Davi Nepal, initiator of yak herds in PGR, remarked, “We cannot imagine mountain without yak, and we cannot imagine yak without mountain.” In 1984, he introduced yak and *urang* herds for traditional usage i.e., producing ghee and dried cheese products through expansion of *urang* herds. By 2017, his imagination of yak and their mountain landscape has been dramatically changed. Now, yak has become as integral maker of unique local landscape; Yak and its politics of representation makes the area a touristic attraction. This clearly reflects that yak – high Himalayan cattle – is making the place distinct. Indeed, yak is making a unique cultural landscape for touristic attraction. Moreover, livestock tourism is gradually commodifying the yak and its district physiological characters to outsiders. However, we do not claim that all herders have changed to their perceptions to see yak and yak herding. But it is in the process of change in the eastern Himalaya.

From *goth* to *gothstay*

Transforming *goth* (herder’s shelter) into *gothstay* (hospitality center to tourists) is another pathways towards the livestock tourism in the eastern Himalaya. In April 2021, we reached TP Gurung’s *goth* located at Nepalitar. He had to make his new house nearby his *goth*. The new building was constructed for helping tourists stay rather than traditional uses such as making butter and dried cheese, and staying herders. Making a new house indicates the local

concept of *goth* is gradually transforming among the herders. When we started to talk about the changing perceptions of herders towards yak and *goth*. He narrated :

In the past, *goth* was only a *goth* - a shelter for herders. We milked *urang* and cows. Boiled the milk. We would make butter and dried cheese. Now we think, we have to change it. It should use as a 'stay house' for outsiders. Visitors can visit to us and learn about our (the Himalayan) culture (dress pattern, items used in *goth*, making cheese and ghee, cross-breeding practices, livestock genealogy) and adventure (riding yaks). They can enjoy the beauty of local forests, landscapes, wildlife, birds, and yaks. We provide food, snacks, and tea and bed at night. We can also make money by selling it. Therefore, it is a *gothstay* than *goth*. (T. Gurung, April 15, 2021)

Gurung's remark indicates that *gothstay* is making a new image to *goth* in the local context. It is more than simply a shelter. It can provide an opportunity to learn about Himalayan domestic cattle diversity, cross-breeding practices of low dwelling and high dwelling livestock, Himalayan environment, traditional dairy production process as well as items used in process of preparing animal byproducts, material culture including mountain dresses and items associated with mountain pastoralism. We can, therefore, say *gothstay* is an educational institution for those who want to learn about the past Himalayan environment and the way of life of the Himalayan herders. However, how much tourists learn from the *gothstay* is still a questionable.

Challenges of yak herding at PRG

The data reveal that yak and *urang* herders are moving towards tourism through the concepts of yak festival and *gothstay*. However, there are several risks to them. Climate change, transborder issues, and wildlife-human conflict are major challenges they are facing right now. The annual global warming rate in the Himalaya region of Nepal is 0.56° per year (GoN, 2018). Ongoing global warming and associated climatic and other anthropogenic environmental changes ask questions on how the people in the Himalayas can thrive by giving continuity to pastoralism embedded with their culture and livelihood. Similarly, herders saw higher risks to protect them and their livestock from wildlife. If a herder household will lose a milking *urang*, the household can lose three years of income⁹. At market rate according to the 2021 survey, a herder can lose one hundred nine thousand Nepali currency from the loss of a milking *urang* which is 6.3 percent of an annual income of dairy products of a household. Similarly, human life is also at risk from the wildlife due to lack of life insurance of herders and livestock who were attacked by wildlife in national park area¹⁰.

In the field observation, it was found that herds from PGR were grazing without any restriction inside the national park, although it is restricted for grazing domestic livestock by laws. In other words, there is no conflict with Singhalila National Park and the local herders. This is because people living on either side of this Nepal-India border are mostly from same families, and some even possess dual citizenship, as a result of which they own land on both sides of the border while also enjoying rights over the use of natural resources, including pasturelands (Ning et al., 2016). In case of PGR, either same clans or having a kinship relation with security personals of Singhalila National Park, there are fewer restrictions on the movement of animals in transborder between India-Nepal. Sometimes herds of yaks and *urang* of PGR enter into the national park for grazing in the morning and return back to the respective *goth* again in the evening. If the transborder is closed due to conflict between national park and

⁹ It takes three years to be a milking *urang* from a calf.

¹⁰ On April 19, 2021, a herder almost lost his life due to the attacked of Himalayan bear at Aalgairi, a pas-tureland of PGR.

herders, herding will be ended forever.

Moreover, sharing of benefits of livestock tourism among the herders is also another challenging issue. The poor and shared holder livestock herders may not enter *gothstay* as rich herders do¹¹. As suggested by Hardin (1968), if the number of herds and cattle is increased without any restriction in the region that will lead to tragedy of PGR, 'a common grazing land of Phalelung' in the future.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that yak festival and the concept of *gothstay* are transforming conventional notion of animal husbandry, in particular yak herding in the eastern mountain region of Nepal. It gives yak a new meaning, value and symbol, different from their customary usage. Thus, the rational, instrumental and conventional way of describing of yak is insufficient to understanding it in the context of livestock tourism. This is because yak pastoral communities are crafting, packaging and marketing yak and yak herding differently. As Rappaport (1999 cited in Luke, 2006) argued micro anthropology of ethnography and macro anthropology of approaches are essential to understand yak and yak herding in the context of livestock tourism.

The findings of this study allow us to conclude that the concept of yak-tourism is converting yak from masculinity to femininity i.e., wilderness or rigorous animal to pleasing animal in the Himalaya. It is reflected in language and public demonstration of yak and yak herds at the festival. As a result, yak is gradually losing its old character i.e., milking cattle and means of transportation of the Himalaya to means of pleasing animal and riding animals. It is being an 'object' for watching, seeing, and pleasing to outsiders. Hence, it is rapidly commodified by touristic value.

As suggested by Gallenti and Galli (2002), the concept of *gothstay* should account the ethno-gastronomic itineraries to tourists. They are - a present-day view of a main product (ghee and dried cheese) and a series of other products and their production processes; a view linked to the past through traditional dairy products producing techniques and handicraft activities; and a global context, including landscape, cultural activities and hospitality systems. Therefore, the concept of *gothstay* is transforming traditional notion of *goth* i.e., from herder's shelter to learning platform about Himalayan pastoral culture and lifestyle; linking the present with the past, local (herder's kitchen) to global (hospitality services).

Globally, agro pastoralism is popular touristic practice differently like winery tourism (Carmichael, 2005), cheese tourism (Fusté-Forné & Cerdan, 2021); fishing tourism (González & Antelo, 2020; Hall, 2021). It is becoming a part of an alternative source of income to rural villagers globally. This study also allows to conclude that *gothstay* can be a potential touristic site as well as an alternative option for livelihood source for Himalayan herders who have very limited options for making a living. However, different stakeholders like government, non-government organizations, business persons, local herders, community people etc. still have important roles to promote it. Government policy has not recognized *gothstay* till date. Therefore, addressing *gothstay* by national policy is also fundamental for its sustainability.

11 A herder who stay at *goth* by hiring other *urang* paid a fixed amount of dried cheese and ghee to the *urang* herd owner as per head of *urang* annually. In 2021, it was 10 to 14 kg per head of *urang*. In 2021 we met six shared rented livestock herder.

Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge the yak and *urang* herders of PGR who have generously shared their lives and experiences. We are especially grateful to Tharka Prasad Gurung and Chandra Nepal who provided the shelter and helped us to connect with other herders. We also thank the anonymous reviewer for very insightful comments on the paper. We also thank Nepal Mountain Academy and The Haute Ecole de Travail Social Fribourg -HES-SO, Switzerland for providing fund for the research. We are grateful to Tanka Prasad Paudel, Basanta Paudel, Ramnath Gyawali and Uttam Babu Bhattarai for their kind support.

References

- Agrawal, A. (2005). *Environmentality: technologies of government and the making of subjects*. Duke University Press.
- Basso, K. H. (1996). *Wisdom sits in places: landscape and language among the Western Apache*. University of New Mexico Press.
- Bhattachan, Y. K. (2015). Diversity in situation and role of indigenous women in addressing climate change in Nepal. In K. B. Bhattachan, P. Sherpa, & P. D. Sherpa (Eds.), *Climate change and indigenous peoples: policies and practices in Nepal* (pp. 193–206). NEFIN & CIPRED.
- Bhusal, P., Banjade, M. R., & Paudel, N. S. (2018). Pastoralism in crisis: mounting challenges in herding system in high altitude region of Nepal. *Journal of Forest and Livelihood*, 16(1), 56–70. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jfl.v16i1.22882>
- Bishop, N. H. (1998). *Himalayan herders*. Harcourt Brace College Publishers.
- Bisht, N. S., & Bankoti, T. S. (2004). Encyclopaedic ethnography of the Himalayan tribes.
- Brower, B. A. (1991). *Sherpa of Khumbu : people, livestock, and landscape*. Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, B. (2018). Yak on the Move: Transboundary Challenges and Opportunities for Yak Raising in a Changing Hindu Kush Himalayan Region. *Mountain Research and Development*, 38(2), 184. <https://doi.org/10.1659/MRD.MM222>
- Carey, M. (2007). The history of ice: how glaciers became an endangered species. *Environmental History*, 12(3), 497–527. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ENVHIS/12.3.497>
- Carmichael, B. A. (2005). Understanding the wine tourism experience for winery visitors in the Niagara region, Ontario, Canada. *Tourism Geographies*, 7(2), 185–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616680500072414>
- CBS. (2022). Preliminary Result on CBS 2021 Survey.
- Chaudhary, R. P., Uprety, Y., & Rimal, S. K. (2016). Deforestation in Nepal: causes, consequences, and responses. In J. F. Shroder & R. Sivanpillai (Eds.), *Biological and environmental hazards, risks, and disasters* (pp. 335–372). Elsevier Publisher.
- Cloke, P., & Milbourne, P. (1992). Deprivation and lifestyles in rural Wales. —II. Rurality and the cultural dimension. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 8(4), 359–371. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167\(92\)90050-G](https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167(92)90050-G)
- Cruikshank, J. (2005). *Do glaciers listen? local knowledge, colonial encounters, and social imagination*. UBC Press.
- Dorji, N., Derks, M., Groot Koerkamp, P. W. G., & Bokkers, E. A. M. (2020). The future of yak farming from the perspective of yak herders and livestock professionals. *Sustainability*, 12(10).

<https://doi.org/10.3390/su12104217>

- Ebi, K. L., Woodruff, R., Hildebrand, A. von, & Carlos, C. (2007). Climate change-related health impacts in the Hindu Kush–Himalayas. *EcoHealth*, 4(3), 264–270. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10393-007-0119-z>
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1940). *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*. Oxford University Press.
- Fisher, J. F. (1986). Trans-Himalayan traders : economy, society, and culture in northwest Nepal. 232.
- Fusté-Forné, F., & Cerdan, L. M. I. (2021). A land of cheese: from food innovation to tourism development in rural Catalonia. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 19(2), 166–183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2020.1797757>
- Gallenti, G., & Galli, M. (2002). The new competitiveness in rural space: Some methodological remarks about a case study. *Agricoltura Mediterranea*, 132(2), 148–165.
- González, R. C. L., & Antelo, M. de los Á. P. (2020). Fishing tourism as an opportunity for sustainable rural development—the case of galicia, spain. *Land*, 9(11), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land9110437>
- Government of Nepal. (2018). Livestock statistics of Nepal, 2017. www.mold.gov.np
- Guneratne, A. (2010). Introduction. In A. Guneratne (Ed.), *Culture and the Environment in the Himalaya* (pp. 1–16). Routledge.
- Hall, C. M. (2021). Tourism and fishing. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 21(4), 361–373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2021.1955739>
- Hellman, R. (2019). The last yak song: a recount of the decline of pastoral herding in lower Mustang.
- Ingold, T., & Kurttila, T. (2000). Perceiving the environment in Finnish Lapland. *Body & Society*, 6(3–4), 183–196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X00006003010>
- Joshi, S., Shrestha, L., Bisht, N., Wu, N., Ismail, M., Dorji, T., Dangol, G., & Long, R. (2020). Ethnic and cultural diversity amongst yak herding communities in the asian highlands. In *Sustainability (Switzerland)* (Vol. 12, Issue 3, pp. 1–25). MDPI AG. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12030957>
- Keliang, W., & Changxin, W. (2004). Documentation and mining of yak culture to promote a sustainable yak husbandry. The International Congress on Yak, Chengdu, Sichuan, P.R. China.
- Kohler, T., Giger, M., Hurni, H., Ott, C., Wiesmann, U., Wymann Von Dach, S., & Maselli, D. (2010). Mountains and climate change: A global concern. *Mountain Research and Development*, 30(1), 53–55. <https://doi.org/10.1659/MRD-JOURNAL-D-09-00086.1>
- Luke, T. W. (2006). On environmentality: geo-power and eco-knowledge in the discourses of contemporary environmentalism. In N. Haenn & R. R. Wilk (Eds.), *The Environment in Anthropology. A Reader in Ecology, Culture, and Sustainable Living* (pp. 257–269). new york university press. <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=hZ0TCgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA243&dq=%22does+biodiversity+exist%22&ots=fu-kaq00Q1&sig=rXT6jNZlazu1IyBV680ITv1I5fc>
- Miller, D. J. (1995). Herds on the move: winds of change among pastoralists in the Himalayas and on the Tibetan plateau. ICIMOD.
- Miller, D. J. (1998). Fields of grass: portraits of the pastoral landscape and nomads of the Tibetan plateau and Himalayas. ICIMOD.
- Moran, E. F. (2008). *Human adaptability : an introduction to ecological anthropology*. Westview

Press.

- Ning, W. (2003). Social, cultural, and economic context of yak production. In G. Wiener, J. Han, & R. J. Long (Eds.), *The yak* (pp. 347–358). FAO Regional Office of Asia and Pacific.
- Ning, W., Ismail, M., ShaoLiang, Y., Joshi, S., Qamer, F. M., & Bisht, N. (2016). Coping with borders: yak raising in transboundary landscapes of the Hindu Kush Himalayan region. In W. Ning, Y. Shaoling, S. Joshi, & B. Neha (Eds.), *Yak on the move: transboundary challenges and opportunities for yak raising in a changing Hindu Kush Himalayan region* (pp. 3–22) (ICIMOD).
- Pandit, M. K. (2017). *Life in the Himalaya: an ecosystem at risk*. Harvard University Press.
- Phalelung Rural Municipality. (2017). *Phalelung Rural Municipality Profile*.
- Poudel, J. M. (2020c). Pond becomes a lake: challenges for herders in the Himalayas. *Practicing Anthropology*, 42(2), 30–35. <https://doi.org/10.17730/0888-4552.42.2.30>
- Poudel, J. M. (2020c). The rhythms of life in the Himalaya: seasonality and sociality among the Gurung people of the Nhāson Valley. *International Journal of Anthropology and Ethnology*, 4(1), 10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41257-020-00036-z>
- Poudel, J. M. (2020b). Herding in crisis in the Himalaya. *Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 14, 28–36. <https://doi.org/10.3126/dsaj.v14i0.27232>
- Red Panda Network. (2020). 2020 annual report.
- Rhode, D., Madsen, D. B., Jeffrey Brantingham, P., & Dargye, T. (2007). Yaks, yak dung, and prehistoric human habitation of the Tibetan Plateau. *Developments in Quaternary Science*, 9(C), 205–224. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1571-0866\(07\)09013-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1571-0866(07)09013-6)
- Russell, R. R. (2010). *Gender and jewelry : a feminist analysis*. Independent Publishing Platform.
- Spoon, J. (2013). From yaks to tourists: Sherpa livelihood adaptations in Sagarmatha (Mount Everest) national park and buffer zone, Nepal. In Lozny L. R (Ed.), *Continuity and change in cultural adaptation to mountain environments: From prehistory to contemporary threats* (pp. 319–340). Springer Science & Business Media.
- Uprety, L. P. (2021). Peasantry under capitalism in contemporary Nepal: macro and micro narratives. Bina Khatiwada (Uprety).
- Wall, I., & Paudel, T. P. (2021). Adventure and mountaineering tourism. *Nepal Mountain Academy*.