

CULTURE AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT FOR SUBSISTENCE:

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The Problem

There are a variety of resources on the surface of the earth which were not produced or made by humans. These exist as a part of nature; hence they are called natural resources (Malla and Shrestha 1983:1). While people have used natural resources from the dawn of civilization, technological development is the major variable in conversion of natural resources into human resources. One could say that land is the basic resource, since most natural resources are inseparable from the land. Humans need the soil for their existence (F. Trewartha and others quoted by Malla and Shrestha 1983: 2).

Resources are of two types: renewable and nonrenewable. Resources such as water, forests and pasture are renewable. Others, such as minerals are non-renewable and cannot be used again once consumed. The consumption of environmental resources such as land, soil, water, air, minerals and energy are increasing throughout the world. Unfortunately, humans often irrationally use their natural resources to the extent that they endanger themselves by destroying the means of their existence. By understanding the nature of their impact on the environment, humans can learn to change and repair the face of the earth in a rational and constructive fashion (Thomas quoted by Malla and Shrestha 1983:3).

The present need is an integration of environmental management with development. The concept of environment needs to be not only a development oriented one, of resource exploitation, but also one of resource management (R. Bharadvaj and D. V. Ramana quoted by Malla and Shrestha 1983:6).

Resource management has been around much longer than the formal term for it. In Nepal, the various ethnic groups had their ways of conserving, sustaining, and reproducing the resources that provided the base for their subsistence according to each one's culture. Each ethnic group has developed a specific mode of production from the land. This mode of production results from a long history of development of technology and ideas and relates each group of people

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to the natural resources and social conditions. Because the mode of production relates people to their natural environment, its development also implies ecological change.

This paper is an attempt to describe the traditional hill dweller's culturally defined patterns of resource management for economic activities. Broadly, culture has been found to be a deterministic component of rural economy, by which various ethnic groups of Nepal have experienced and managed their communal as well as other economic capital resources for a long time.

Historically, the various hill ethnic peoples controlled many resources and properties communally, such as the *kipat* lands of the Rais, Limbus, Sherpas, Tamangs, Majhis and so forth. These groups had their own identity due to their cultural practices and other numerous characteristics. But social processes brought them into contact with other groups, and these diverse groups intermingled with each other in a sort of melting pot of cultures.

While aspects of this intermingling were beneficial and functional for the society, after the abolition of communal resources (*kipat lands*), the intermingling process created tragic economic hardship among some ethnic groups. This hardship resulted from the introduction of social and cultural hierarchy, which introduced economic differentiation within and among the various groups. Ultimately, upper class or privileged peoples obtained more chances than other lower stratum groups in various aspects of life.

This paper focuses on these problems as they were experienced by the Majhis of Amchaur, in the Kabhre Palanchok District of the Bagmati Zone. The Majhis have been influenced by their natural environment since their origin. They have depended on the river, and the river has been the center of their culture. This culture has been the group identity and a resource for subsistence. But with social changes such as the fall of the Ranas, the introduction of the Panchayat system, and other social reforms, the Majhis have been losing their traditional privileges.

The Majhis live mainly in the Tarai and hills, but not in the Himalayan region. They have adopted a specific type of life-style. They traditionally practiced boating, fishing, and agriculture. They are influenced by the natural environment and surrounding groups. As Sherpas of Solu and Pharak are able to grow winter crops of wheat and potatoes, the Majhis also grow winter and summer crops like rice, wheat, maize and vegetables for their subsistence.

The Majhis of Nepal believe in the Hindu religion, but they are Mongoloid in their features; in this way they are similar to the Tharus of the Tarai and the Magars of the hills. They are dark skinned and muscular, with semi-oblique eyes. They have resource management

patterns appropriate to their subsistence and life style. They distinctly differ from other ethnic groups in various ways, although the number of Majhi speakers is disappearing, and the Nepali language is increasingly becoming the first language.

Majhi culture is a minority culture. As the Majhi people are scattered over the countryside, they intermingle with people of other cultures. They base their subsistence on the resources at hand and adopt the cultural values of the locality.

This paper is based on traditional anthropological research methods. The primary data were collected through intensive fieldwork. The secondary data were collected from the available literature. Some key information was taken from experts and research scholars who had made contributions about various hill ethnic groups in Nepal. This is a descriptive explanation of the culture and subsistence activities of the Majhi.

An Anthropological Perspective on Resource Management for Subsistence

Anthropology, as the most holistic of the human sciences, studies humans in their totality. Therefore, it studies also the economic aspect of human life. Traditionally, economic anthropology was the study of the economic life of primitive peoples. It focused on the economic conditions of preliterate, preindustrial, unmechanized and nonpecuniary societies.

This is a rather old conception of anthropology. In fact, the broader definition of anthropology is that it is the study of humans in all times and places. Economic anthropology studies both preliterate and modern economies. Until 1940, anthropologists ignored the economic aspect of society. Afterwards, anthropologists started to study it in detail. Economic anthropology focuses on the appropriation of nature, human subsistence requirements, and the mode of production of any primitive or modern society.

Anthropologists have long distinguished three main types of subsistence economy: hunting and gathering, domestication of animals (herding), and agriculture and animal husbandry (Mair 1984:161). According to Herskovits (1974:68), subsistence economy means the ability of people with simple techniques to manipulate their resources effectively (Herskovits 1974:68).

Every society has its own type of subsistence, even though not all are specifically subsistence economies, as defined above. They all have specific ways of producing food, shelter, clothing and income. "Most of the preliterate societies had an economic deterministic style. There is no society without methods of production, distribution, consumption and some form of exchange" (Herskovits 1974:143).

Formally defined, each society has a method of rational allocation of scarce means to competing ends. Economic anthropology focuses on this problem of how people exploit or manage resources for their subsistence.

Cultural Patterns and Resource Management Activities of Majhis

The Majhis of Nepal have long been scattered over the country. They occupy the three main ecological regions of Nepal—the mountains, hills, and Tarai—which has led to different cultural traits and management patterns reflecting the dominant ones of each region. This study focuses on Majhis of the hill region, which is inhabited by a mosaic of ethnic and racial groups and is characterized by a variety of resource management patterns. The study area is Amchaur (also called Anpchaur by the local people), a ward of the Chandeni Village Panchayat. The Panchayat lies in the northeastern part of the Kabhrepalanchowk District.

Amchaur has been home to a Majhi community for two and a half centuries. There is one Chetri household within the village and a Brahman village nearby. The Majhis have their own characteristic way of life. They have nuclear, joint and extended families, though the nuclear family is prominent. Marriages are for the most part arranged, monogamous and patrilocal. Their houses distinctly differ from those of the neighboring Brahmans and Chetris. Six types of Majhi clans inhabit the study area with three types of kinship systems: consanguineous, affinal, and ritual (*mit*). The Majhis worship all Hindu gods and deities and celebrate all common Hindu festivals. They consume common foods and drinks in the manner of other *matwalis*. Both traditional and modern types of dress and ornaments are found in Amchaur.

Except that the Majhis celebrate a death ceremony called *pitara*, their life-cycle ceremonies are similar to those of other upper caste Hindus (Brahmins and Chetris). They have no priests in the manner of other castes. The priestly work is performed by the head of each household.

The Majhis lack education. Few can even sign their names. Young children only know the alphabet. There is no health post for the sick and diseased, and no sanitation programs at all. Some households have utilized family planning schemes to limit the size of their families. Their native language has completely disappeared due to long-term sociocultural interaction with non-Majhi peoples. Every aspect of the culture is undergoing change.

Types of Resources and their Contribution to Subsistence Economy

The rural area of Nepal is endowed with various kinds of natural resources, and the patterns of their exploitation also vary according to

time, place and culture. Most of the Majhi people work for mere subsistence and suffer from poverty, although they have some sorts of natural resources. Predominantly, they practice agriculture, but this does not fully supply their needs. Although the Majhis are agriculturalists, they are forced to supply agricultural labor to their Brahmin neighbors because of the scarcity of their own land, capital, and other resources.

Fifty Majhi households depend upon 163 *ropants* (8.15 ha.) of land. Previously, their forefathers practiced boating for the mail service along the Indrawati River from Dhulikhel to Chautara, but this has been stopped. Some of them go to Kathmandu and elsewhere in search of work. They earn more from laboring and less from their parental land, animal husbandry, poultry and portering. Porterage, animal husbandry and poultry raising are subsidiary activities. Now some Majhi families have started stone grinding mills or *Ghatta* on the Indrawati River side. One household has a hand loom. None of the Majhi of Amchaur are in governmental service, but young boys work as peons in Kathmandu city. Other boys and girls work as cooks and house servants of officials in the city.

The following table shows the types of resources and the average contribution of each to subsistence.

Table 1. Average contribution of various types of resources to subsistence in Majhi households of Amchaur

1.	Agriculture	29
2.	Animal Husbandry	10
3.	Agricultural Wage Labor	41
4.	Fishing	2
5.	Boating	1
6.	Porterage	12
7.	Service	3
8.	Small Scale Cottage Industries	2
Total		100

Source: 1986 Field Survey.

The Majhis are an old and established tribe of Nepal. Like the Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Chepang and Lepcha, they held their land communally on a *kipat* tenure. The Majhi communities received the land as *jagir* in compensation for their boatman services. Presently, their landholdings are greatly decreased because the Indrawati River has flooded their *kipat* land. What land they still have, they cultivate in a traditional way. On the average, their land only provides crops sufficient for four months out of the year. Like elsewhere in Nepal, the productivity of their land is decreasing. Therefore, the agricultural sector is insufficient for the Majhi economy.

To assist their land resources, the Majhis of Amchaur have adopted other resources as well. For the last three decades or so they have practiced animal husbandry. They have some cattle, goats, pigs and poultry. They receive these animals from their rich neighbors and raise them on a share basis. The animals provide meat, manure, plowing oxen and some money income. There is not much profit in animal husbandry for the Majhis, because the share basis is in practice exploitative, and they own no cattle.

Miner resources include the *ghatta*, a water-driven stone mill, and the recently adopted hand loom. But these also are insufficient for their livelihood. A stone mill does not make much profit when the people have little corn to grind. The hand loom, adopted by only one household, also runs irregularly. It contributes little to the loom owners.

These Majhis are extremely exploited by the neighboring Brahmins in many ways and aspects of their lives. Culturally, they are of lower status. They have to show respect to their higher caste neighbors. They supply the bonded labor and herd boys to the Brahmin moneylenders to reduce the exorbitant interest rates on their loans. The *Theki Koseli* and *Dhyake* interest systems never allow them to rise above their debts. In effect, they are slaves.

Various aspects of cultural patterns and economy will force change onto the Majhis. Yet their poverty is so severe that it is difficult to bring positive change without an effective economic program. The Majhis are struggling under extreme economic hardships. Although they have adopted various types of livelihood, such as fishing, service and porterage, these alternatives fail to alleviate their hardships. The main thing is that recently they have become increasingly conscious of their backward status and condition. This downtrodden status is due to illiteracy, lack of economic means, and the existing hierarchy of castes.

The overall findings of this study suggest that the Majhis are suffering from extreme poverty, illiteracy and economic backwardness. Their conservative cultural values also pull them down. These social evils are negative forces in the Majhi community. Therefore, they should be eradicated. The economic, social, and cultural backwardness gives a clear picture of the Majhi future. Since transportation and communication are completely lacking in Amchaur, they must be provided with additional resources for generating income and employment opportunities with which they can uplift themselves economically.

Glossary

<i>Bari</i>	Dry unirrigated and non-terraced slope land
<i>Dhyake</i>	The exorbitant interest rate that prevailed in rural areas. Each day, one rupee is charged as interest against 100 rupees
<i>Ghatta</i>	A small stone mill powered by water through wooden turbine-like devices
<i>Khet</i>	Irrigated paddy land
<i>Khoria</i>	Slash and burn upland where shifting cultivation is practiced
<i>Kipat</i>	Category of communal land tenure allotted to various hill and Tarai Mongoloid ethnic groups by the state
<i>Matwali</i>	People who drink liquor
<i>Pitara</i>	Funeral ceremony practiced by Majhis one year after a death
<i>Theki-Koseli</i>	A traditional ritualized exchange system between moneylenders and creditors characterized by exploitation of the latter by the formals

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