

Livelihood Patterns of Majhi and Kumal Communities in the Arun Valley, Eastern Nepal

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to portray the livelihood patterns of two marginalized communities such as Majhi and Kumal of Kumaltar village in the Arun valley, eastern Nepal. Data were collected from all 28 households of both communities. The findings show that agriculture and livestock now are the main occupations for their living. Prior to these, ferrying, fishing and pottering were their traditional occupations when they moved to Kumaltar in several years ago. As the production from agriculture and livestock is inadequate, other activities such as mobile trading of merchandise goods and local goods, pig and poultry farming, bamboo and ropes making, and local grains based country alcohol making have been adopted by them as alternative strategies for sustaining their livelihood. In addition, recently, the youths of these communities have migrated to different parts within the country, as well as in foreign countries for employment for better living in the village.

Introduction

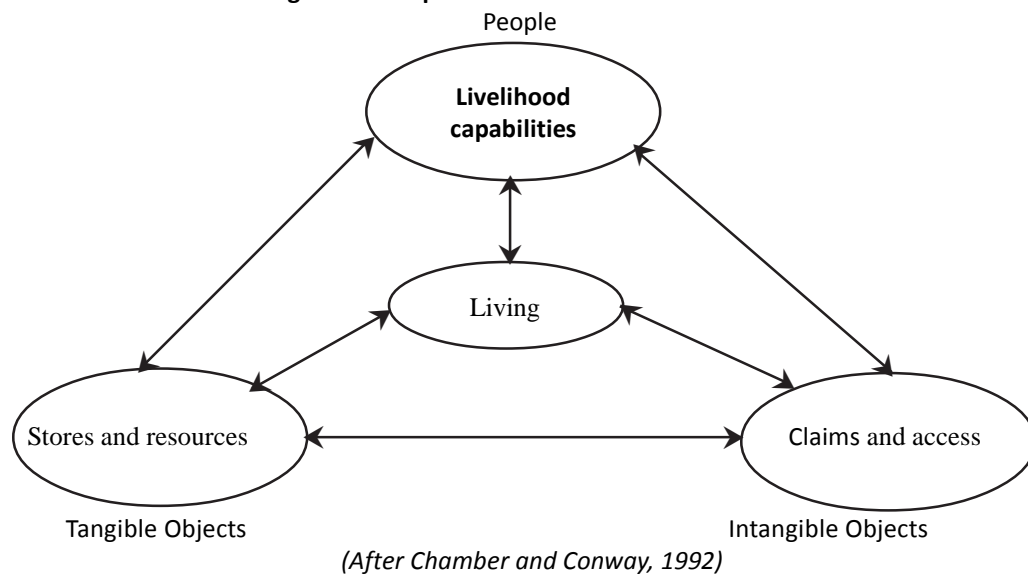
Livelihood strategies are defined as the things, individuals and households for making a living or survive. There are various plans of actions including occupations, jobs and production activities that a household or an individual undertakes to overcome or cope with the stress and shocks that he or she has are known as livelihood strategies. According to Chamber and Conway (1992), a livelihood comprises the capabilities assets (resources, stores, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living and a livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation. Livelihood strategies are the range and combination of different activities and choices of individuals or households in order to achieve their livelihood needs.

The strategies of earning livelihood demonstrate continuity as well as change over space and time. Or, the context and content of livelihood strategies can vary in accordance with time and spatial dimensions (Paudel 2003). Most rural and agriculture households rely on multiple income sources and adopt a wide range of livelihood strategies for food security due to inadequate income from a single occupation. Therefore, basically the livelihoods adopted by the rural communities in Nepal are derived from the traditional economic activities based on locally available natural resources such as agriculture, livestock, forestry, etc (Banskota and Pradhan 2007). This paper is an attempt to portray the livelihood patterns of indigenous communities and the strategies adopted by them over time in the eastern mountain of Nepal.

Conceptual Framework

Chamber and Conway (1992) are the ones who have first put forward a normative model about the sustainable rural livelihood taking account of three major components - capability, equity and sustainability (Fig. 1). These three components are interdependent and interrelated to each other. Capability refers to ability of an individual or household to make a living by mobilizing different kinds of assets. Assets could be tangible and intangible. Stocks like grain, gold, jewelry and savings and resources comprising land, water, minerals, livestock, trees, equipment, utensils, which a household commands are tangible assets. Claims are the appeals and demands that can be generally made at time of stress and shocks for moral, material and other supports. Access refers to the practical opportunities to use resources and services (transportation, education, health, communication, market, etc). Equality implies a less unequal discrimination of assets, capabilities and opportunities. It includes an end to discrimination against marginalized groups and communities (women, untouchable, and minorities). Livelihood sustainability is a function of how assets and capabilities are utilized, maintained and enhanced in order to preserve livelihood. This can be separated into two levels - local and global. This concept is widely used in the filed of sustainable livelihood analysis. The analysis adopted in this paper is entirely based on these concepts.

Figure 1: Components and flows in livelihood



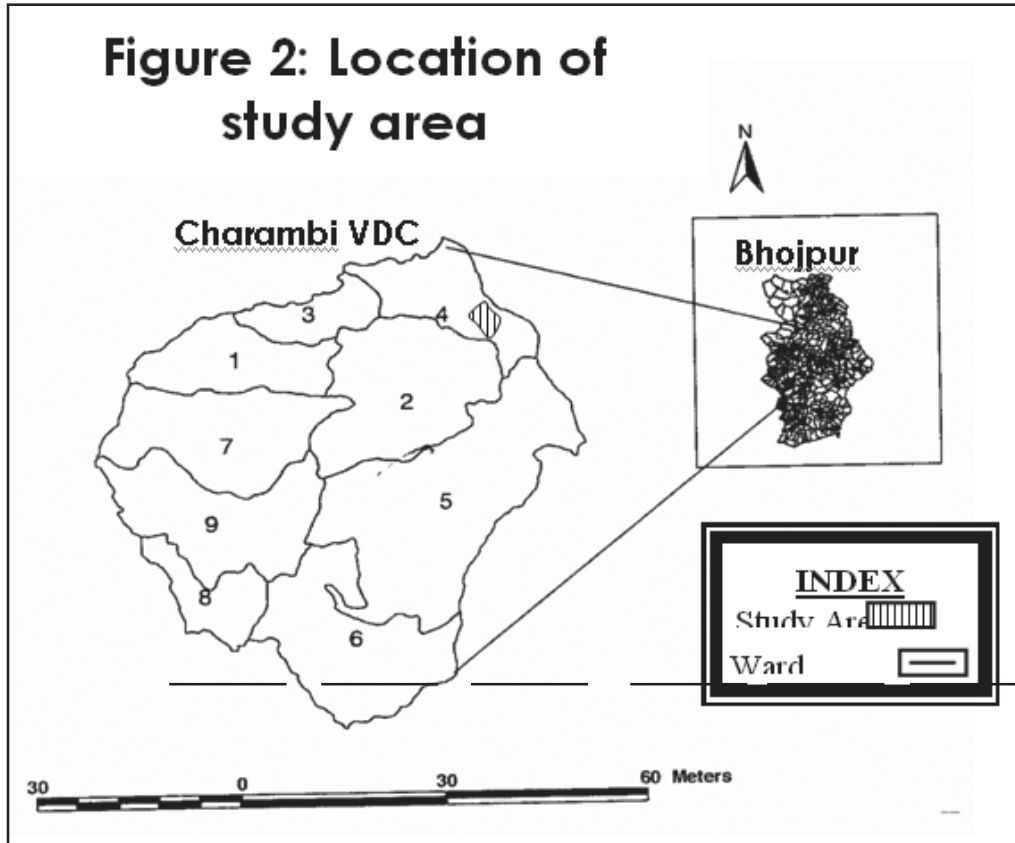
Data and Methods

This study has been based entirely on the data collected from the field survey in a village of Kumaltar in Bhojpur district, eastern Nepal. Being a small size village, comprising two indigenous communities such as Majhi and Kumal with their 14 and 14 households respectively, all of them were covered for the survey. A set of questionnaire was used to collect the data related to landholding size, production of grains, livestock husbandry, occupation, income sources and other socio-economic aspects of the household and coping strategies under stress. Focus Group Discussions were also used to acquire information on changing pattern of occupations and economic condition, attitudes towards employment in abroad, etc. This method was carried out separately for each of two communities.

Results and Analysis

Study Area

The village Kumaltar is situated in Charambi Village Development Committee of Bhojpur district (Fig. 2), which is located in the remote area, quite far away from the district headquarters – Bhojpur town. The village situated at the altitude 410 m above sea level is an isolated settlement near the Arun river.



It covers an area of 4 km². Being in the valley, the climate is of sub tropical type. Here, drought is common that poses a great problem. Agriculture is the mainstay of those two communities, which is entirely based on rain-fed.

Livelihood Activities

Agriculture – as a major occupation

Agriculture was the major occupation of Kumal and Majhi. The field survey shows that it provided employment to over 80 per cent of the total households. It was followed by livestock raising. However, they adopted two farming in an integrated form, as in other rural areas of Nepal. Table 1 shows that majority of the households lie in the landholding category with 10 *ropanis*

and below and even of this, Bari an inferior in productivity quality occupies larger area than Khet. There were few households with large landholding size with over 15 *ropanis* of Bari. Only one household had Khet with over 20 *ropanis*. The average size of landholding was 15.8 *ropanis* with Bari 9.8 *ropanis* greater than Khet 6 *ropanis*.

Table 1: Distribution of households by landholding size category (*Ropani*)

Community	<5		5-10		10-15		15-20		>20		Total	
	Bari	Khet	Bari	Khet	Bari	Khet	Bari	Khet	Bari	Khet	Bari	Khet
Majhi	5	3	5	2	1	2	3	-	-	-	14	7
Kumal	3	1	3	4	3	1	2	-	3	1	14	7
Total	8	4	8	6	4	3	5	-	3	1	28	14

Source: Field survey, 2008

Note: 1 Ropani= 0.051 hectare; Bari = un-irrigated upland terraces and Khet = irrigated farm land.

Both Majhi and Kumal farmers grew maize, rice and *Junelo* (a kind of grain especially used for making liquor and sometime for rice) as principal crops. Other crops were tobacco, pulse, bean, almond, and *Philunge* (a kind of oil seed related like sunflower). Rice is grown in Khet, mainly in the Raghua basin. Large households with landholding below 5 *ropanis* have grown *Junelo*, while those of 5-10 *ropanis* grew paddy. Larger households growing paddy belonged to Kumal (Table 2). The yield of *Junelo* was lower than other grains although it has been cultivated regularly as a winter crop. *Junelo* is used for making liquor (country beer), which is a common drinking item of both ethnics. Most Majhi households cultivate rice as share cropping on the Khet belonged to other ethnics such as Rai under *Adhiya system*. Some of the households of both ethnics with small landholding also have adopted *Khoriya* (slash and burn farming) in the public forest areas for growing *Junelo*. Later, *Khoriya* has been converted into sedentary system on Bari terrace fields; this has been the case of two Majhi families and one Kumal family.

Table 2: Production (Kg) of major grain by household

Ethnicities	Paddy				Maize				Junelo			
	<5	5-10	10-15	>15	<5	5-10	10-15	>15	<5	5-10	10-15	>15
Majhi	1	8	3	-	6	6	2	-	13	1	-	-
Kumal	1	2	3	2	3	4	5	2	11	2	-	-
Total	2	10	6	2	9	10	7	2	11	3		

Source: Field Survey, 2008

Note: 1 Muri Paddy = 48.77kg, 1 Muri Maize=68.05 kg, 1 Muri Junelo=65kg.

The farming system is of primitive one. Limited and small landholding, rain-fed farming due to lack of irrigation facilities, dry land due to frequent drought, and lack of other agriculture facilities are found to be responsible for subsistence farming that rarely supported them for year round consumption. In addition, particularly the Majhi farmers found not take care in producing crops properly. They used to spend more time for entertainments like visiting bazaar, celebrating festivals and other traditional ceremonies and the like. This is also justified by the findings of study carried out by Khatry (2002) on Majhi community.

Further, the livelihood from mere cultivating of crops is becoming harder and harder to both communities. Till 1988, all Majhi and Kumal households had paddy field or *Khet* – a productive farm land. By 2008, only seven each of both households had the Khet due to sold out of *Khet* to

their neighbor communities. All the households however have till now owned *Bari*, though its area has been decreasing. Losing ownership of land, especially Khet and its fragmentation was higher among the Majhi than those of Kumal. For instance, during 1988-2008, four Majhi households had sold their Khet to Rai and likewise, some of them also sold Bari to Kumal. Two Kumal families became Khet less, as their all Khet land was swept away by the stream (Raghuwa) flood.

Livestock Farming - an important occupation

As indicated above, the Majhi and Kumal adopt animal husbandry together with crops as an integrated farming system. Both communities have commonly reared cow, goat and fowl, whereas pig is found to be reared in small number in the both communities (Table 3). Only one household of Kumal family has kept buffalo.

Table 3: Distribution of livestock by household

No. of livestock	Majhi					Kumal				
	Buffalo	Cow	Goat	Pig	Fowl	Buffalo	Cow	Goat	Pig	Fowl
<25	-	6	5	12	3	1	3	3	12	2
5-10	-	5	1	-	4	-	5	4	-	4
> to	-	1	8	-	7	-	3	4	-	8
Total	-	12	13	12	14	1	11	11	12	14

Source: Field survey, 2008

Most of the households have raised a pair of oxen for ploughing and manuring and keeping female cow is not for milk purpose, but for producing male cow. Kumaltar was favourable for raising cows until some years ago owing to adequate grassland for grazing. But in the recent years, the naturally grown grasses are being invaded by a plant species, locally called as *Banmaara* and therefore rearing of cows has been a great problem. Besides, there is also lack of sources of water in the village for grazing animals. The main purpose of pig rearing is nowadays to produce piglets for selling. In the past, they used to keep pigs for meat and manure.

Changing Pattern of Occupations

According to the old Majhis, they had come to Kumaltar from the Dudhkoshi river basin about 250 years ago. They were brought by the inhabitants of the Arun Valley for involving in boating work for the people crossing over the Arun river. During that time, the people of Bhojpur used to cross the Dudhkoshi river on the traditional route to Kathmandu. After this the Majhis adopted boating and fishing as their major occupations for their livelihoods. Nowadays, they are involved in the boating only as wage worker, due to the provision of local government of free competition in which the Majhis are not being able to compete with other educated, exposed or migrated people. They are still involved in fishing and boating activities at small scale, but these activities are not adequate to support their livelihood. They have to shift to agriculture mainly due to the construction of suspension bridges over the river, entry of other people in boating, decreasing of fish population in the river and growing population of Majhis.

The Kumales have a different story. According to old Kumales, they had come to Kumaltar for making clay pots due to very suitable soil available here. Initially, the Kumales were involved in

making pots as the main occupation for livelihood. They were partially involved in agriculture and livestock farming during that time. In recent years, their traditional occupation of making clay pots has been totally abandoned due to import of utensils made of plastic, steel, silver, brass, and copper. This has made them involved in adopting agriculture for their livelihood. By tradition, Kumal is an occupational caste of clay pot making throughout the country. This traditional occupation of Kumales has been gradually disappeared and shifted towards agriculture even in other places like Dawa, Bokhim and Taksar (Bhojpur), Tumlingtar (Sankhuwasabha), all lie in the Arun Valley.

Food Security - a Serious Problem

There is not a single household having food surplus over a year. Table 4 shows that only twenty five percent of the households have hardly met their consumption by own production from agriculture. None of the Majhi's households reported that their own production is sufficient throughout the year. Comparatively Kumal's households have better position in food-sufficiency than those of Majhi. It is evident from the Table 4 information that 6 households of Kumal had food sufficiency for over 9 months, as compared to only households of Majhi.

Table 4: Status of food sufficiency of the households

Communities	No. of households by month classes			
	<3	3-6	6-9	>9
Majhi	3	5	5	1
Kumal	3	3	2	6
Total	6	8	7	7

Source: Field survey, 2008

Food shortage is a chronic problem among these two communities of Kumaltar. One of the factors of food scarcity is the inefficiency in allocation of stored grains to the rest of the months. They use to consume foods extravagantly particularly in social and cultural feasts such as marriage, birth and death ceremonies (Rai, 2008). In addition, the Majhis use much more grains for making liquor than the Kumal.

Coping Strategies for Livelihood

The Majhi and Kumal have now adopted earnings from working in other parts of the country, as well as in other countries as an emulating strategy for securing livelihoods.

Table 5 shows that more than 75 percent of the youths (20-35 age groups) of Kumaltar have

Table 5: Labour migration for employment

Destination Places	Majhi	Kumal
Gulf countries and Malaysia	8	4
India	1	1
Within Nepal	5	2
Total	14	7

Source: Field survey, 2008

migrated to foreign countries. Among them, about 97 percent migrants are destined to Malaysia and Gulf countries. The proportion of the youth migration to India for earning is limited. Seven people have migrated to other places of Nepal for earning. The number of migrants of Majhi was nearly two times of Kumal. According to the families of those working in abroad, they have not made a significant achievement over their existing occupation. Despite such condition, however, the youths of both Majhi and Kumal of this place are migrating in the foreign countries for employment.

Livelihood practice is considered as a continual and changing process of individual as well as household's economic and social activities in order to fulfill livelihood needs. There is a continuous search for new strategies and ways for their survived in the changing environment.

Income Sources

Different studies reported the larger the sources of income the greater is the income level of the households (Rijal 2006; Subedi and Pandey 2002). But in the context of Kumaltar, the situation is reverse. Fifty percent of the Majhi households have taken four different sources of income for their livelihood and likewise fourteen percent of the Kumal households have adopted four activities. A large number of household with 50 per cent are related to three sources of income (Table 6). Comparatively the livelihood of Majhi seems to be difficulty than that of Kumal, though the sources of income of the former are more than the latter.

Table 6: Classification of households by income sources

Communities	Number of sources			
	Single	Two	Three	Four
Majhi	-	2	5	7
Kumal	-	5	7	2

Source: Field survey, 2008

Adaptive Strategies by Majhi and Kumal Community Under Stress

The strategies adopted by Kumal and Majhi during stress are different. There are six different types of alternative activities adopted by them as shown in Table 7. Majhis have adopted wage labour in agriculture, selling of their own reared live animals and mobile trading as the most important activities in order of importance as coping strategies during the livelihood stress. In case of Kumal, the three most priority activities in order of importance are livestock selling, borrowing money and grains and mobile trading

A large number of Majhi women are used to work as agriculture labour in the paddy field during the planting and harvesting periods. Recently, the sale of piglets has become a good source of income during the period of adversity. Cows, goats, and chickens are also other income sources for them in difficult situation. They used to go *haat bazaars* (weekly markets) held in Khandbari, Chainpur, Dingla, Champe, Jhyaupokhari, etc as mobile traders for selling merchandise goods (salt, rice etc) they purchased from Leguwa and Baireni. They also used to sell their own products and locally produced goods like tobacco, pulse, almond, eggs, chickens, goats, piglets, fish and different kinds of seasonal fruits in those markets. After the construction of the Hile-Leguwa road, they have adopted mobile trading as a new occupation.

Table 7: Adopted strategies under stress

Copingstrategies	% household	
	Majhi	Kumal
Livestock selling	25	39
Wage labour	36	7
Borrowing	12	25
Lending	3	12
Portering	9	4
Mobile trading	15	13
Total	100	100

Source: Field survey, 2008

During the adversity period, Kumales like Majhis used to sell their domestic animals like piglets, pigs, goats, cows, etc. They rarely prefer to work as labour in other farm. They used to borrow money, mobile trading and some of them lending money to others too in such situation.

Summary

There is changing in the livelihood patterns and coping strategies of the marginalized communities like Majhi and Kumal of Kumaltar village in the Arun valley over time. Both communities had adopted initially boating and fishing and clay pot making as their traditional occupations, which later changed to agricultural and livestock farming as major economic activities for their livelihood. As agriculture and livestock became inadequate to support their families throughout the year, due to limited agricultural land, poor quality soil, lack of irrigation, diminishing grazing lands, importing new innovative products replacing their traditional products, etc, working in other parts of country and abroad such as Gulf countries and Malaysia has been a new strategy for the livelihood. The traditional micro enterprising activities such as pig farming, bamboo work, mobile trading etc are also the important cash earning activities of both Majhis and Kumales. Among these, mobile trading in periodic markets has become one of the major means of livelihood after the construction of Hile-Leguwa road. The findings also demonstrate that more sources of income provide more options and alternatives for sustaining livelihood but more irregular sources of income do not play an important role for a secured livelihood.

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