

Understanding the Chepangs and Shifting Cultivation: A Case Study from Rural Village of Central Nepal

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Abstract

This article attempts to seek the understanding and perception of Chepang on the practices of khoriya cultivation. It tries to explain the relationship of Chepang people to their traditional khoriya land by assessing the socio-cultural and economic importance in their life. Chepang's indigenesness is closely connected to khoriya cultivation and the land is their ethnic and indigenous identity. The practices of shifting cultivation have to be understood holistically within the domain of social and cultural analysis. However, their relationship to their khoriya land and the agricultural practice cannot be understood only in measurable indicators and specific manners. For Chepang, shifting cultivation is a good ecological adaptation to their surrounding environmental settings based on indigenous knowledge and skills developed in the particular geographical setting on basis of trial and error. To understand culture, history and everyday life of the Chepang, knowing all about their traditional agricultural practice i.e. shifting cultivation is very significant.

Keywords: Indigenous, shifting cultivation, land, farming & identity

1. Introduction

Anthropologists, very often, relate shifting cultivation to the types or stages of human culture. They point out that most of shifting cultivators use primitive tools that they belong to culture that is otherwise primitive in a number of ways. Some view it more as an

ancient practice rooted in history, then a contemporary means of coping with a need to produce food (Found, 1987:17-18). However, Dhakal (2000) argues that understanding and explanation of shifting cultivation, understood as the primitive, is inadequate. It is needed to study under wider socio-cultural framework which could only reveal all about shifting cultivation (Dhakal, 2000).

It has been widely practiced by hill communities in Asia, Africa and Latin America since the Neolithic period (Teegalapallik et. al, 2009). In the eastern Himalayan region, shifting cultivation is the most prominent farming system providing a way of life for large numbers of ethnic group minorities and other poor marginalized communities (Kerchoff & Sharma, 2008). Conklin (1961) describes about the ecological dimensions of shifting cultivation (Conklin, 1961). The three distinctions of cultural dimensions of shifting cultivation are technological, social, and ethno- ecological. Technological factors refer to the ways in which the environment is artificially modified, including the treatment of soil, pests, and crops. The social factors include property ownership and economic transactions, labor arrangement, local group organization, socio-political organization of the farming population in terms of kin and economic groups. These topics are usually within the domain of anthropological interests. The ethno- ecological factors refer to the ways in which environmental components and interactions are categorized and interpreted locally (cf. Conklin, 1961).

In Nepal very few studies have been carried out in shifting cultivation (Shrestha, 1989; Bajraacharya et. al, 1992; Subedi, 1994 cited in Dhakal, 2000). Economic and ecological aspects of it are dealt in these studies. They hardly look shifting cultivation as an integral part of the people who practice it as the major source of their livelihood. Therefore, it is necessary to bring out and to understand shifting cultivation as a whole system and integral part of social and cultural practices of the people living in the particular environmental setting (cf. Dhakal, 2000). To reveal socio cultural aspects of shifting cultivation, the research works has not carried out adequately. Therefore, the issues of shifting cultivation demand furthermore studies from the perspective of shifting cultivators (Sharma, 2011).

This study primarily applies techniques of qualitative research method such as in-depth and unstructured interview, participant observation, and focus group discussion for the primary data collection. At the same time demographic information, education status, livestock, and holding of *khoriya* land were collected by survey method. Inhabited by Chepang people the study area, Jhamrung village lies in Bhumlichock VDC of Gorkha district of Central Nepal. The village can be reached via a cable bridge (*tuin*) across the Trisuli River which flows along the Prithivi Highway and a steep climb of about one hour. The village has twenty two Chepang households.

2. Approaches to Shifting Cultivation

Shifting cultivation was examined by ecological anthropologists from mid 1950s to the early 1980s and these studies usually characterized low human population densities, poly cultural cultivation, and maintenance of both forest species and fallow periods (Fujisaka, 1991). The ethno-ecological approach is explicated by Conklin (1954), Frake (1962 cited in Conklin, 1961) and Rappaport (1963 cited in Conklin, 1961). "From an anthropological perspective, two general points of views can be made about shifting cultivation. First, the normative views which focuses on the negative aspects of shifting cultivation: low productivity, extensive land requirement, and unwanted environmental effects. And second, the view to shifting cultivation as a rational response to the prevailing ecological and cultural conditions...." (Sandsurkt: n.d. as cited in Dhakal, 2000:97).

Dhakal (2000) illustrates three approaches for studying different topics of shifting cultivation such as ecological/environmental, cultural/historical and economic (Dhakal, 2000). Moreover, Conklin (1961) suggests that "...the study and analysis of the complex relations in shifting cultivation can profit greatly from combined ethnographic and ecological approach" (cf. Conklin, 1961:28). Dhakal (2000) also provides the same view as that of Conklin (1961) making suggestion that it is suitable to deal the topics of shifting cultivation through an ecologically oriented investigation in an ethnographic context.

3. The Chepangs

"The region where the Chepangs traditionally live consists of the southern part of Dhading, the western part of Makawanpur, the northern part of Chitwan and the southern part of Gorkha. They live along the steeper slopes of the Mahabharat range at elevation of 500 to 1200 m" (Bista, 1967:118). They also live in the upper hills of Lamjung and Tanahun districts of the central Nepal. The Mongolian feature of the Chepang indicates their ancestral affinity with Tibetans. They are extremely marginalized ethnic people and have their own ethnic language which belongs to one of the Tibeto-Burman strains. Shifting cultivation is common agricultural practice of the Chepangs of Nepal. They are also characterized by linguistic, cultural, religious, and economic commonalities.

"Chepang toil not, neither do they spin, they pay no taxes, acknowledge no allegiance, but living upon wild fruits and the produce of the chase are won't to say that the Rajah is lord of the cultivated country as they are of the unredeemed waste" (Hodgson, 1848:650). Gurung (1990) states that like many tribal peoples in the world, the Chepang lived a semi-nomadic existence, marked by hunting and gathering, fishing, and slash and burn cultivation (Gurung, 1990). Gaughly et. al (1971:77) argues that Chepangs started agricultural life only ...recently about 120 years ago. They used to live partly in the forest and caves (cited in Gurung, 1990). But Upreti (1967) says that they have been doing terrace cultivation for about 80 years (cited in Gurung, 1990). Furthermore, the present livelihood, economic, and agricultural practices of Chepang also reflect that they had heavily depended on hunting and gathering, slash and burn cultivation in their past.

Levirate, sorrorate, and cross-cousin forms of marriage have been prevailing in Chepang community. In levirate marriage, a widow marries with her husband's brother whereas in sorrorate marriage a widower marries with his wife's sister. Early-age elopement (*bhagi bibaah*) is also highly practiced and arranged marriage (*magi bibaah*) is very rare. In *bhagi bihaah* both girl and boy agree to marry after having several meetings. In this marriage, agreement of their parents is not necessary but the parents of both parties also accept the relationship. However, this marriage relation cannot get

social recognition in the community. For social recognition of this marriage, bride's parents have to call the groom to their house. The invitation time extends up to ten years. The groom side goes to bride's house after getting invitation from latter's parents' side with local liquor, fruits, and breads (*cell roti*) while going to bride's house. The tradition is known as *sagun lagne*. The local liquor is mainly made up of millet grains and maize grown on *khoriya* land. The liquor is considered as very sacred and pure in many ritual activities of Chepang.

4. Village Economy

The village economy is subsistence based. The primary occupation of the Chepang is agriculture. They do both shifting and permanent cultivation. The villagers have very little paddy field on the side of the Trisuli River not enough to support their need of food. A few Chepang households have no irrigated field (*khet*). Therefore, *khoriya* land is their prime means of survival. The Chepangs also do fishing in the Trisuli River and collect edible shoots, roots from *khoriya* and fallow kept field. Chepangs traditionally cultivate maize, banana, millet etc. in their *khoriya*. Millet cultivation on the land is declining and they cultivate *bodi* (bean species) in it as the cash crop in present years. They are also inclined to cash vegetables farming in their terraced land (*baari*). Chepangs cultivate vegetables such as cabbage, tomato, cucumber, etc for market purpose. Fishling and Mugling bazaars on the Prithivi Highway are nearby market centers.

They also use the chemical fertilizer in *bodi* cultivation. Therefore, it is not merely true that nutrition can be obtained only from natural vegetations in shifting cultivation as pointed by C. Geertz (1963). *Sama* (*Echimochla colona*) is a traditional crop which is eaten during the cultural festivals and *Kaguno* is also supposed as sacred food item that only grows on *khoriya*. These are indispensable in the funeral ceremony in the community. But the productions of these crops are considerably reducing at present years.

Animal husbandry is also common in the village. The main domestic animals in the village are cow, ox, goat, and buffalo. In addition, few families raise pig. Cows and oxen are raised for

manure and ploughing purpose respectively. Goats and pigs are domesticated for meat. Livestock are with local breed and improved (*bikase*) breeds are not found. Animal husbandry also constitutes vital source of income in their domestic economy. It is very important component of shifting cultivation as *Khoriya* land provides fodders, grasses, and grazing land for animals. Chepangs also domesticate the animals such as buffalo, goat, and cow of neighbors on the basis of '*adhiya*'.

5. Shifting Cultivation

Definition

"Shifting cultivation, in general, is a system of farming in which fields are prepared by cutting down the natural vegetations, letting [them] dry and burning [them] off. Shifting cultivation fields are generally used not more than two years at a time, after which the farmers move to a new area and repeat the same process" (Dhakal, 2000:93). A set of vernacular terms such as *lose*, *bhasme*, *dash* and *khoriya kheti* are also used to denote the shifting cultivation in Nepal. 'Swidden cultivation' and 'slash-and-burn' farming are also referred to denote the shifting cultivation (Geertz, 1963; Gurung, 1999).

It is a form of farming in which indigenous communities clear and cultivate secondary forests, and leave parcels to regenerate naturally via fallows of medium to long duration (Fujisaka et al., 1996). *Khoriya kheti* is locally determined and well defined agricultural pattern. It is a traditional mode of adaptation to the local cultural and environmental situation (Gurung, 1999).

The stages and features of shifting cultivation cycle vary depending upon the local circumstances. However, most practitioners mention that the cultivation phase has six stages: (1) site selection and land clearing, (2) drying of the slash and burning, (3) planting and cultivation, (4) weeding, (5) harvesting, and (6) succession (cf. Fujisaka et al., 1996). After the cropping phase, the land is left fallow for up to twelve years and during the period the forest regenerates. Land clearing is usually done through slashing and burning. "The characteristics of shifting cultivation and permanent cultivation are clear and critical: on one hand a multi

crops, highly diverse regime, a cycling of nutrients between living forms, a closed-cover architecture, and a delicate equilibrium; on other, an open field, mono crops, highly specialized regime, a heavy dependency on water –born minerals for nutrition, a reliance on man-made water works and a stable equilibrium” (Geertz, 1963: 36-37).

Land Tenure and Issue of shifting cultivation

Chepangs were given Kipat tenure over extensive territory by Rana regime in 1854 which was converted into *Raikar* tenure in 1928 (Rai, 1985). In addition to Chepang, other ethnic groups such as Magar, Rai, Limbu, Sherpa and few Hindu caste groups also do shifting cultivation in the country even at present. According to elder members of the community, they used to submit fruits such as banana, chiuri, and other edible items that grew on their *khoriya* to panchayat administrative body before 1990 under the taxation system. Gaurungs and Mukhiyas were responsible for the collection of such items in the panchayat era. This tradition was known as *bali sherma*. Mukhiyas and Gaurungs were in the charge of collection of *bali sherma* of *khoriya* land. The introduction of land reform program had played a significant role in termination of practice of *bali sherma* and falling of the Panchayat political system had totally discontinued this tradition.

Chepangs do not have land ownership certificate of their *khoriya* land. Ownership is based on customary and oral tradition. The *khoriya* land also inherits generation to generation as like irrigated land. They had not registered their *khoriya* land because they thought that the registration of the land was not necessary. They registered only irrigated and non-irrigated land where ploughing is possible together with house land. The land where ploughing is possible, is known as “*jotuwa*” land in the community. If a Chepang family wanted to cultivate the *khoriya* of neighbors then the family had to submit *bali sherma* to the *khoriya* owner. This tradition was common in both intra and inter ethnic communities.

“Presently, 98% of Nepal’s farmland operates under Raikar tenure system. Rights on Raikar land are limited to occupancy rights, vis-a- vis the state; however, these rights can be freely sold or transferred to any person” (CSRC, 2009:15). After nationalization

of forest in 1957, management and protection of the forest was brought under government control. The forest department became increasingly active and local people found themselves excluded from the system; the people who had occupied the land for generations had no documented proof of ownership. Consequently, Chepangs were compelled to lose their right to land that had been tilling under shifting cultivation for generations (Ibid).

Land Act 1964, Birta Abolition Act 1959, Guthi Act 1976, Tenancy Acquisition Act 1963, Pasture Land Management Act 1973, Land Revenue Act 1977, etc. are the major land related laws but they only dealt with the land used for permanent cultivation. Similarly, Private Forest Nationalization Act 1956, Forest Act 1993, Forest Regulations Act 1996, etc., forest related acts and laws, also do not recognize this agricultural practice. Even after establishment of democracy in the country, land reform commission was also formed and the issue of land ownership has been gaining a highly debatable political issue today but the practice of shifting cultivation has not been recognized in official record yet.

Khoriya Land and Chepang: An Intimate Relationship

“*Khoriyama hamra pita- purkhale bas gareka chhan* means, Chepang’s ancestors and deities reside in and around the *khoriya* land.” “*Chepang jaatiko pahichaan nai khoriya ho* means, cultural identity of Chepang is *khoriya*.” [Field note transcript]

For Chepangs, *khoriya* land has spiritual and religious affiliation. According to them, *khoriya* is the land conserved by their ancestors so that they pay great respect and value to it. They believe that their ancestors and gods reside around it. Therefore, they organize *bhumipooja* (worshiping of land) once a year in order to make their ancestors and gods happy. Chepangs also celebrate a number of ceremonies. The Chepangs of the study area celebrate *kulpuja* (worshiping the ancestors) in December and *baipuja* (worshiping for eternal peace) and *diyali* (usually done after the harvest of paddy, maize). *Bhumipooja* is done once a year.

They pay great respect to nature – forests, rivers and stones- and consider them as the symbol of god and goddess. According to

Chepangs they are worshiper of nature (*prakriti pujak*). A Chepang household must have *khoriya* land. The household that doesn't have *khoriya* is considered as incomplete. In Chepang communities, there is common saying that is 'when we see a Chepang house; there must be *khoriya* land nearby'. It reveals that Chepangs have special relationship to their lands and territories. Gilbert (2006) argues that indigenous people are the people, who used to live, continue to live and wish to perpetuate their specific attachment to a defined territory. The notion of a specific historical attachment to a territory is a defining element of indigeneness (Gilbert, 2006). There was also a tradition that Chepang used to give *Chiuri* (Butter tree) to their daughter as dowry. *Chiuri* is cultivated on *khoriya*. Chepangs love to eat the meat of bats, which, are attracted by *Chiuri* nectar making easier for Chepang to hunt them.

Khoriya Land: Vital Role in Food Security

"*Hami ta Chepang jati gita/ vyakur khanchhau* meaning, we are Chepangs so we eat *gita* and *vyakur*". [Field note transcript]

Khoriya has played great role in food security in the months when Chepangs don't have food to eat. They collect wild foods such as *gita/vayakur (Doiscorea bulbifer)* and other edible plants from fallow kept fields. The wild foods have been an important source of emergency food in the food shortage season. This practice is very crucial in that it provides food during seasonal and emergency food deficit. Most of my respondents said that Chepangs are well known for eating *githa* and *vayakur*. They have special, traditional, and indigenous relationship with these food items. Wild foods including roots crops, herbs and fruits are collected from the Chepang's own land or from nearby jungle. *Githa* bitter in taste has to be boiled in ash once and washed twice to make it edible. *Bharlang* which is poisonous has to be boiled thrice in ash and washed seven times to make it edible. They have developed indigenous knowledge about how to make wild food to make edible. However, their traditional knowledge and skills have not been discussed adequately.

Environmental Concern of Shifting Cultivation

Researchers are of the opinion that agricultural encroachment by shifting cultivators occupies a central position in the debate on tropical deforestation (Dhakal, 2000). Shifting cultivators are often seen as the primary agents of tropical deforestation in developing countries (Myers, 1996 and Angelson, 1994 cited in Dhakal, 2000). "The higher rate of deforestation and degradation in Nepal is attributed to encroachment upon forest for agriculture, settlement, and shifting cultivation. The deterioration of microbiological conditions, surface runoff, ground water runoff and loss of soil fertility are said to be some of the obvious consequences of the slash-and-burn cultivation in Nepalese hills" (Shrestha, 1989: 64 cited in Dhakal, 2000:98-99).

My observation shows that shifting farmers do not go to community and national forests for cultivation. They only shift to the lands where they have been doing agricultural activities for generations. Contrarily, the encroachment is made over *khoriya* of the Chepangs in Dhading and Chitwan districts of Central Nepal by community and leasehold forestry programs. Therefore, the Chepangs are facing shortage of land for the cultivation.

The secondary forests help for providing enough biomass to maintain soil fertility. Keeping the fallow cycle is the best ecological concept. During the slashing and burning, large trees are left on the field for both ecological and practical reasons. Practical in a sense that, the large trees are too thick to cut and burn and too heavy to carry off the field. In ecological terms, they serve as mother trees, helping the fallow forests to regenerate faster and with the chance to grow the preferred species only (Aryal & Kerchoff, 2008). They also help to prevent soil erosion and landslides during the cropping phase. *Chiuri* trees are preserved in *khoriya* which helps in the conservation of soil from erosion.

Shifting cultivation may turn maladaptive or means of environmental problems in at least three ways; by increase in population which causes old plots to be re cultivated very soon; by prodigal or inept agricultural practices which sacrifice future prospects to present convenience; and by an extension into an insufficiently humid environment in which more deciduous forests

have a much slower recovery rate and in which clearing fires are likely to burn off accidentally great stands of timber (Conklin, 1959). The practice of shifting cultivation is not only economically sensible but is also ecologically sound. The intercropped fields of swidden cultivation horticulturists are an imitation of the natural ecosystem; generalized and diverse, multistoried, and providing good soil protection (Geertz, 1963).

It is a rational farming system in the context of the constraints and opportunities inherent in remote upland areas and some studies pointed that it has long history as evidence of sustainability. These studies argue that shifting cultivation is a land use practice that reflects (1) indigenous knowledge accumulated through trial and error, (2) an intricate balance between product harvest and ecological residence, and (3) an impressive degree of agro forestry (Cairns & Garrity, 1999).

6. Conclusion

Indigenous people have a special and intimate relationship to the land and their territories. Land is also a source of belief and value system for the people of particular territory where they have been living for generations (Chemjhong, 2009). The wider meaning of the land can be understood under socio-cultural framework. Only after knowing the cultural value and meaning of land (*khoriya*), it would be easier to understand the compatible relationship of indigenous people to their land. In some anthropological writings, shifting cultivation is characterized as one of the primitive and traditional mode of agricultural practices. But this study shows that it is best ecological and cultural adaptation to their natural environment of the Chepang. Chepangs not only harvest grains from their *khoriya* but also pay great cultural and religious respect to it.

Khoriya cultivation is important component of Chepang's everyday life. In broader term, Chepang's value system, ancestral history, and identity are attached to the *khoriya* cultivation. Many of the respondents in the study area said that they cultivate *khoriya* because they are Chepang. It reveals that being Chepang, *khoriya* cultivation is significant for their ethnic identity. Therefore, the

study suggests that Chepang's social, cultural, and economic life can be understood only after knowing *khoriya* cultivation. Wilmson (1989) says that relation of indigenous people to land cannot be understood only in a normative, rule-centered, and functionally specific terms (Wilmson, 1989). Hence, to know all about the Chepangs, knowing their shifting cultivation is very vital.

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Glossary

Adhiya: half share.

Birta: Land arrangement system, under which the land was granted to individuals for supporting livelihood (Regmi, 1978).

Baipuja: Celebration for eternal peace, Chepangs organize it once in a year.

Baithana: Area nearby *khoriya* land where *baipooja* is organized

Bhumipuja: Celebration of cultivated land, Chepangs used to organized *bhumipuja* once in five year. In which they worshiped to owner of land, it was believed that if they organized it their god became happy. They organized it to please their god. Elder chepangs can recall faintly some activities of *bhumipuja*.

Gaurung: Village headman, he was from Chepang caste, worked as assistant of mukhiya/jimmawal.

Guthi: It was land endowment made for religious and charitable purposes (see Regmi, 1978).

Jimmawal An individual responsible for land tax collection at the village level was responsible for autocratic regime before 1951.

Jotuwa: Field where ploughing is possible

Kipat: A system of communal land ownership prevalent among the Limbus and Other Mangolaid communities in the hills regions of Nepal.

Mukhiyas: A village head appointed by the Panchayat government.

Panchayat: One party political system and king used to exercise executive power.

Pita/ Purkha: Ancestor

Raikar: land tenure system in which the state retains the land under its ownership and taxes the private individuals who use it.

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