



Harmony in Flux: Exploring Ecology, Livelihood Transitions and Social Ties in Limi Valley, Nepal

Soumya Mohapatra¹ and Ishwari Bhattarai²

¹ Assistant Professor, School of Law, KIIT Deemed to be University, Bhubaneswar, India

² Senior Researcher, Democracy Resource Center Nepal (DRCN), Kathmandu, Nepal
ishwari.bhattarai@gmail.com

Abstract. The Limi Valley with almost 1000 indigenous people living in an area of 1200 square kilometres, nestled in the remote mountainous region offers a unique and captivating glimpse into the interplay between environment, livelihood and traditional social ties. It is an ecologically sensitive area in the Humla district of the Karnali province in Nepal. For many centuries of its history, livelihood strategies as well as cultural and religious practices of the people of Limi Valley have been directly intertwined with the local ecology. As there is a lack of sufficiency from farming, the people of Limi have to rely on innovative means of subsistence to non-farm and off-farm activities such as handicrafts, entrepreneurship, and trading across Tibet and other neighbouring regions of Humla and Nepal. This paper explores how the livelihood strategies and the economic exchange relations are interconnected with the ecosystem of the place, the connection between the physical environment and the human groups inhabiting the area and the changing nature of this relationship in recent decades. Through the use of qualitative data from the field consisting of in-depth interviews and group discussions, this paper also delves into the transformations taking place in the Limi Valley as a result of development, policy interventions, the process of globalization, the challenges that are being faced by the community and its impact on the social relations among people.

Keywords: Limi Valley, Ecology, Livelihood, Social Relations, Tradition and Modernity

1 Introduction

The environmental conditions are largely shaped by close interactions between human populations and their immediate physical surroundings (Tenberg et al., 2012). The natural and cultural environments are closely intertwined, emphasizing the importance of considering the ecological and cultural contexts of people residing within and interacting with the ecosystem (Anacio, 2017). Viewing the environment through a holistic perspective reveals the dynamic relationship between human interactions with ecology and cultural context. This interconnectedness highlights the inseparable link between humans and nature. Geography therefore has an indelible mark on the culture, social relations and livelihood strategies of that area. This is

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more true of a traditional society where technology has not made inroads yet and people's everyday lives are interconnected with the ecosystem. People's daily lives are synchronized with the ecology in such a manner that they do not see a difference between nature and culture (Negi 2020).

Limi Valley is situated in the scenic snow-capped Himalayas and is home to about a thousand people who are indigenous to that area. The relationship between the ecosystem and the socio-economic dimension can be very clearly observed in this place. An administrative unit of the Humla district, Limi Valley is an environmentally fragile area, located in the northernmost corner of Western Nepal, sharing its border with the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR).

Traditionally the interaction of the people living in the Limi Valley with other parts of Nepal was minimal because of its remote location. For many centuries of its history, livelihood strategies as well as cultural and religious practices of the people of Limi have been directly intertwined with the physical environment. Because of the chilling climate, food production is also limited in the area, as crops can be harvested only once a year, and its population has to depend on other sources for income and sustenance. Thus, the people of Limi have usually relied on plural economic activities such as handicrafts, entrepreneurship, and trading across the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of China and neighbouring regions of Humla and across Nepal (Saxer 2013).

In recent years, the increasing social mobility due to globalization, and physical infrastructure development in the areas adjacent to Limi Valley, has significantly altered the social structure, and the Limi area is also experiencing changes in the socio-ecological environment (Goldstein 1981, Hovden 2021). This indicates that the cultural and ecological landscape is likely to experience irreversible changes soon.

2 Research Methods and Sources of Data

This research paper mainly draws information regarding the ecology of Limi Valley and its impact on livelihood strategies, religion, socio-cultural relationships, etc. from existing sources like books, research articles and policy documents. It has also examined laws and policies made at different levels of governance. Fieldwork was carried out for a week in the Limi Valley in September in the year 2021. Methods of observation and structured interviews with people of the Limi Valley have been used for insights such as understanding the history and local population of the place. The informants included local, provincial, and federal representatives, officials from Namkha Rural Municipality, Limi Valley residents, and some youths from Limi Valley currently residing in Kathmandu. Interviews have also been conducted with officials from Karnali Province, experts and researchers in resource management and conservation. The interviews with the aforementioned informants were done online or by phone. They shared information about the history and changes in Limi Valley, the environment, traditional ways of livelihood and managing resources, and recent legal issues.

3 Geography and the Socio-cultural History of the Limi Valley

Limi Valley is a high-altitude area in the northern part of Humla district, Karnali Province. In the past, it used to be a separate governing unit known as the Limi Village Development Committee (VDC). Now, it's part of Namkha Rural Municipality (RM) along with three other VDCs. Namkha RM is the biggest local unit in Nepal in terms of land area, and Limi Valley makes up almost half of it, covering approximately 1200 square kilometres.



Zhang Settlement of Limi

Limi Valley is situated at a height ranging from 3000 to 6000 meters above sea level. It has three main settlements: Halji, Zhang, and Til, with Halji being the largest. The thinly populated valley of around a thousand people consists of roughly 150 households, with a little over 90 in Halji, around 30 in Zhang, and 25 in Til. The ward office in Halji manages administrative matters in Limi Valley. Since it is in a transboundary area, residents have to cross Nyalu Lagna Pass, positioned at 4995 meters above sea level, to get to Yalbang or Simikot to access government facilities and services. Each year, heavy snowfall from November to April cuts off the valley for six months, making it challenging for residents to access services and stay connected with the rest of Nepal. On the north side, Limi Valley shares a border with Purang County in Tibet, China, which remains accessible throughout the year (Goldstein 1974, 1975).

The Limi Valley is like an extension of the western Tibetan plateau, even though it is in Nepal. It has places sacred to Hindus and Buddhists. Mount Kailash and

Mansarovar Lake, important to these religions, are close to Limi Valley. One can see both of these from Lapcha Pass, which is a border point in Nepal. The valley has old monasteries which were established in the 11th century, and two others are located in Zhang and Til settlements (Hovden 2013, 2016).

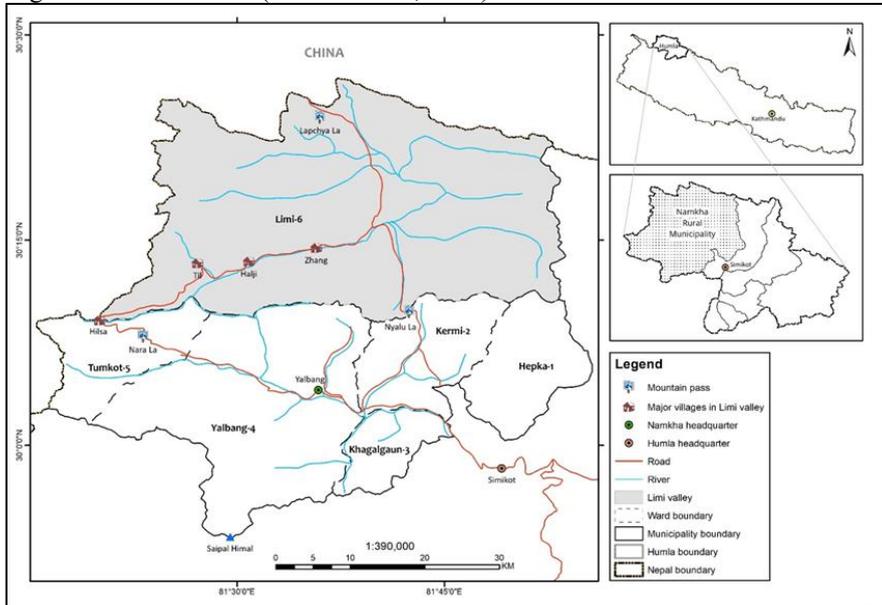


Figure 1: Map of Limi Valley and Namkha Rural Municipality, Humla

As the area is a Buddhist-majority region, the monasteries of the valley play a vital role for the community, which is also discussed briefly in this article. The monks of the monastery depend on villagers for economic and cultural support. In return, they also have important roles in the local life of the village, organizing events, and providing protection from natural disasters (Hovden 2013).

Till the 1980s, people in the Limi Valley had to deal with various difficulties as there was almost no access to modern medical care and facilities (Goldstein 1974). Compared to that time, the situation has improved but people still have to deal with challenges such as poor roads, poor telephone network, and limited healthcare facilities. Even now, getting modern healthcare is tough due to inadequate infrastructure. As a result of which people rely heavily on traditional Tibetan treatments and medications. Local health services face issues like being understaffed and lacking important equipment and medicines. The area has also been categorized as 'highly food insecure' (Saxer 2013:427).

In the present time, the concept of 'development' is ubiquitous in the country's landscape. Monetary aid from other countries and initiatives of development exert a lot of influence. Even the Village Development Committee (VDC), which is the smallest executive unit places 'development' at the core of its agenda. Nepal boasts over five thousand active non-governmental organisations (NGOs). According to Saxer (2013), these NGOs primarily work on enhancing community health, education,

or rural incomes which are the core development areas; or addressing issues of children living in poverty, migrant labourers, or trafficking victims thus addressing the adverse effects of 'modernity', these organizations articulate their goals using the language of 'development'. But, development, is not a value-neutral term, and has to be analysed in terms of how it impacts different sections of the society, including those who have been at the receiving end of this 'developmental agenda'.

4 Ecology and Livelihood Strategies

In recent years, in the dominant discourse, Humla region in general and Limi Valley in particular is portrayed as an 'isolated' region, 'remote' and left in the margins. This was not the case in the past. Some Limi residents still believe that it was one of the centres of economic activities, especially the caravan trade. In addition to subsistence farming, Limi communities for centuries were quite mobile engaging in socio-economic exchange across India, Nepal and China. The yak, sheep and horse caravans served as the lifeline of the Valley, facilitating the exchange of goods, including salt, wool, grains and other essentials, between the Limi Valley and the outside world. These caravans traversed across the treacherous mountain terrains to the north and plains in the south forging vital connections between Nepal, India and China (Bauer 2004, Bishop 1990, Furer-Haimendorf 1975). It is also a historical trade route to the Mansarovar region and Tibet (Yeh 2019, Saxer 2013). Interestingly, Limi's case of relative isolation and remoteness is attributed to modern 'economic development' that shifted the 'centre' of economic activities in recent decades. Limi Valley carries a rich history and community heritage of almost one millennium, which witnessed the expansion of Buddhist monastic tradition and social life, its relations with neighbouring regions and frontiers. Like in other rural villages in Nepal, there is an increasing out-migration among the youth for education and business purposes. There is an increase in the seasonal migration for manual labour in Purang County of China. In this sense, the upper-Humla region including the Limi Valley is experiencing a significant change due to the government-led development activities. Because of globalization and new constructions near Limi Valley, people are moving around more. This has led to a change in how things work in the community.

Farming in Limi Valley is mainly for basic needs, and it happens only once a year because of the extremely cold weather. Since farming alone doesn't provide enough food all year round, people in Limi do various jobs and often switch from one to another. This is a common situation in other high mountain areas in Nepal as well. In the 1970s, Goldstein found that the combined output from farming and herding wasn't enough for 57% of the population for the whole year. According to a report from the World Food Programme in 2010, three-quarters of the population (75%) in Humla was reported to be highly food insecure (Saxer 2013).

Because farming isn't sufficient, people in Limi have to find alternatives to make a living, like making handicrafts, starting businesses, and trading with Tibet and other nearby places. The economic relationship of Limi Valley with adjoining areas has a long history. Different ecological zones are used to exchange surplus food for natural

salt from the dry Tibetan Plateau. People in Limi also commonly raise animals like cattle, sheep, horses, and yaks, and they engage in trading and craftsmanship. As Saxer puts it, 'Upper Humla, like many other communities near the Tibetan border, is a society of craftspeople, entrepreneurs, and traders, just as much as it is a society of farmers and herders.' (Saxer 2013:429).



Farmland of Halji Settlement of Limi and Limi River in the Middle

One of their most important jobs is trading. In the past, they used to exchange salt for grains in Tibet and lower regions. However, the introduction of iodized salt especially from India has reduced this exchange. Now, people in Limi are getting involved in financially rewarding activities like working in construction across the Tibetan border in Purang, China, and engaging in labour, trade, and religious pilgrimages in other places.

In Limi, besides farming, another important way of living is transhumance or pastoral nomadism which is the seasonal movement of cultivators, and herders in fixed habitations and the moving of these flocks according to seasonal variations in pastures. The size of the herds of sheep and yak is influenced by the physical environment, the availability of pasture land, and human resources. Limi residents used to move sizable herds to Tibet in winter and back to Limi in summer. However, this changed when China took control of Tibet in the late 1950s. The traditional access to Tibetan pastures for people in Nepal was no longer unrestricted.

This shift had a big impact on the herds and their size. Access to Tibetan pastures, which are considered high quality for grazing animals, completely stopped after the 1990s. Additionally, the Nepal government's subsidized distribution of iodized salt in

the region disrupted the traditional salt-grain exchange with Tibet. As a result, the economic benefit of keeping large herds significantly declined for these agro-pastoralists in Limi.

In recent years, there has been a significant push to build modern structures and roads. However, this focus on physical infrastructure has changed the traditional way of life in Limi Valley. Livestock numbers have reduced, and access to pastureland in the Tibetan plateau is restricted. In the past, people walking with caravans of livestock was a common sight to the north and south of Limi Valley, but now, one can see occasional jeeps and tractors in places like Hilsa, Yari, Tumkot, and Yalbang, which didn't exist a few decades ago.

5 The Monastery: Maintaining the relationship between ecology, people and livelihood

The monastery, including monks and its recruitment system, plays a crucial role in organizing socio-religious activities and in managing natural resources in Limi Valley. Monasteries are involved in resolving local conflicts and maintaining social order. When village assemblies can't solve problems or conflicts, people turn to monasteries and religious leaders for help. According to Hovden and Havnevik (2021), a group of religious leaders known locally as 'the Fifteen' (bCo Inga), made up of five monks and ten commoners, was formed to establish rules for managing natural resources in the area.

A unique aspect of these religious institutions is their connection of various deities and spirits with the physical environment, including water, trees, forests, and medicinal plants. Strict rules are in place to avoid disturbing these deities through the overexploitation of resources. Certain locations considered sacred have strict prohibitions against disturbance and resource exploitation. Disrupting these sacred sites is viewed as upsetting territorial deities, a form of pollution that could bring various troubles and natural calamities. These 'forests of gods' and territorial spirits are believed to contribute to the health and well-being of the community, leading to the prohibition of extractive activities like digging, woodcutting, herb collection, and animal killing to prevent harm to the deities (Hovden and Havnevik 2021).



Rinchenling Monastery (11th Century) in Halji Settlement

In a similar vein, the use of natural resources for local consumption is also regulated by rules set by the community. The community has framed a set of rules and all the families of the valley have to adhere to it. There are particular timings for grazing livestock, on a rotational basis and in specific sections of a pastureland. This ensures that overexploitation of pastures is avoided. Access to the forest areas to collect forest-based products such as fodder, firewood, dry leaves and grass is also decided by the village assembly, which gives specific dates for such collection. Villagers have access to their community pastures as well as shared grasslands. Again the access to which is determined by the village assemblies. Thus, every family participates in the decision-making process and guidelines are framed through participatory resolutions. The nature of penalties differs according to the rule violation. Offences like cutting trees, not following the time for grazing animals, and animal trespassing lead to fines either in cash or grains. Offences such as killing wildlife carry a higher cash penalty (Basnet and Chaudhary 2017).

6 Ecology and Economic Activities: A Case Study

The unique relationship between ecology and economic activities can be seen through the traditional salt trade between the northern areas of Tibet and the southern regions of Nepal. The trans-Himalayan trade, a traditional engagement for the people of upper Humla, exemplifies an exchange system between two ecological zones.

While the middle and lower regions of Nepal generate a grain surplus, they lack salt. Conversely, the arid Tibetan Plateau abounds in natural salt lakes, and the pastoralists there require grain. The perpetual demand for grain on one side of the Himalayas and salt on the other laid the foundation for a relatively stable exchange system. This system carved out a niche for those specializing in trade, transportation, storage, and distribution, enabling settlement in places that would otherwise have been nearly uninhabitable.

The salt-grain trade in Humla was intricately linked with pastoral transhumance. The seasonal migrations of extensive flocks of sheep and goats served as the means to traverse the challenging Himalayan terrain. Each animal carried 10 to 20 pounds of salt or grain in a dual-pouched bag fastened to its back (Saxer 2013). The conventional caravan system not only delivered essential provisions to the food-scarce higher valleys but also presented numerous business opportunities beyond salt and grain. The trade encompassed various items such as wool, pashmina, Tibetan antelope pelts, animal hides, medicinal herbs, musk, timber, dyes, spices, and a wide array of manufactured goods, all exchanged across the Himalayas. This trading system underwent a comprehensive transformation during Tibet's integration into the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the 1950s.

In the early 1960s, the Government of Nepal recognized the pervasive issue of iodine deficiency, which was causing elevated levels of goitre and cretinism across the country (Siva 2010). To address this problem, the Nepal Salt Trading Corporation was established in 1963, explicitly aiming to provide iodized salt to all citizens of Nepal. As Tibetan salt lacked iodine fortification, India stood as the sole source of industrially processed, iodized salt. In 1973, the Government of India extended assistance on a larger scale. Saxer (2013) notes that a formal agreement was reached, with India committing to support Nepal in combating goitre. The Government of India not only agreed to cover the cost of 100,000 tons of Indian salt annually, meeting Nepal's entire yearly demand but also pledged to establish storehouses for storage and fund transportation to twenty remote and inaccessible districts in Nepal.

India's well-intentioned neighbourly gesture had a direct impact on the profitability of the trans-Himalayan salt-grain trade. Ethnologist Hanna Rauber (1980; 1981) illustrates the consequences of Indian salt for a community of nomadic salt traders in Humla. Faced with this shift, some salt traders abandoned their trade, redirecting their efforts toward agriculture or other pursuits. Alternatively, some offered their services as contractors for the transportation of Indian salt into the hills. While the goitre control program undeniably contributed to improved health for many, with iodine deficiency nearly eradicated by the end of the 1990s, the salt subsidies unquestionably struck at the heart of the trading system upon which local livelihoods were built.

7 Continuities and Changes in Livelihood in the Limi Valley

In recent times, the number of livestock in Limi Valley has significantly decreased for various reasons. While yaks remain in good numbers, there has been a notable decline in the population of sheep and goats. This reduction has somewhat eased the

pressure on pastureland, as more individuals and families have shifted to seasonal labour activities in Purang. However, conflicts arise as neighbouring villages often access the pastureland traditionally used by the Limi community. The Chairperson and Vice Chairperson of Namkha Rural Municipality reported increasing disputes between the Limi community and neighbouring wards. To resolve these conflicts, the Namkha Rural Municipality Executive decided to officially recognize and prioritize the Limi community's access to resources. They also decided to restrict entry from outsiders in neighbouring areas.

In all three settlements within the valley, villagers have controlled access to collect grass and firewood from their respective village forests. The village assembly is responsible for deciding when to collect firewood and other forest products, strictly prohibiting the cutting of green trees and saplings. Violators of this rule face penalties in the form of cash or grains. The strong presence of religious institutions acts as a deterrent against killing animals and damaging plants and trees. The most severe penalty, up to NRS 50,000 in cash, is imposed for the illegal hunting of wild animals and the use of guns. According to the ward chairperson, when asked about rule violations, he said no one had been found cutting trees or disregarding the prescribed date for grazing cattle. Other economic activities like farming, irrigation, and their maintenance are deeply intertwined with cultural practices and the natural cycle.

In 1957, the Government of Nepal enacted the nationalization of all private forests, citing escalating forest degradation in across Nepal. Regardless of the underlying motives, this decree sparked resentment and controversy not only among the formerly privileged class but also among the entire rural population, whose customary use rights were restricted. Some argue that nationalization effectively dismantled indigenous forest management systems (Saxer 2013). With the state lacking the capacity to replace these systems, the forest essentially turned into an open-access resource. Consequently, this situation led to a 'tragedy of the commons' (Hardin 1968) manifested in widespread deforestation.

Throughout history Limi community has been highly mobile across the national and international borders which continues even at present. Financially lucrative economic activities, particularly manual labour (in construction activities) across the Tibetan border in Purang, in TAR of China, labour, trading activities, religious pilgrimage etc. elsewhere is increasing (Hovden 2016, Yeh 2019). The dependency on the Chinese side of the border seems to be increasing in recent years with the greater flow of consumer goods, food supply and employment. Limi residents have been completely impacted for more than a year since the beginning of 2020, as Nepali and Chinese authorities have imposed border restrictions due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ward chairperson, a resident of Limi says "Farming is limited, animal husbandry is gradually declining, our dependence on livelihood and economic activities across the border in Tibet had significantly increased in the past few years, we are now severely affected by border restrictions imposed since more than one year due to the spread of COVID-19 pandemic." This indicates an economic shift, with increased dependence across the border in Tibet as the traditional livelihoods like farming and animal husbandry are becoming less viable leading

residents to seek alternatives. The community's reliance on cross-border economic activities makes them vulnerable to external shocks and border restrictions.

8 Conclusion

Today, the Limi Valley grappling with a myriad of challenges in its ecology and cultural environment and is trying to preserve its traditional way of life and manage the natural environment. The Valley's landscape is witnessing a rapid transformation in economic activities, with increasing reliance on opportunities across the border. More and more people are depending on economic opportunities across the border. 'Over-dependence' on labour across the border has had positive as well as negative aspects. While it has increased the family/household income leading to relative prosperity for some, any disturbance in the border is likely to have an impact on the lives of the people of the Valley. They seem to be more vulnerable than ever before.

The Limi community is also experiencing broader social and cultural challenges due to the shift from the traditional livelihood impacting social structures, cultural practices, and community identity. More recently it is witnessing inter-generational differences especially in holding traditional social norms intact and adapting to new changes. More and more young adults are migrating out of the valley for studying and employment opportunities in India and Kathmandu. In the past, Limi Valley discouraged outmigration by imposing negative sanctions on those individuals and families. Those who do not follow their traditional rules are barred from participating in village functions, selection of authorities, or performing religious worship in the monastery. Despite these sanctions, outmigration is accelerating at a speedy rate. These changes have implications for its tradition, culture, social relations, and traditional natural resource management practices.

Addressing these emerging challenges requires the promotion and recognition of locally led, ecologically sensitive governance approaches. A holistic and community-centric approach is necessary to tackle growing environmental challenges effectively. Various studies point to the resilience of the local community in adapting to environmental shifts while navigating the delicate balance between tradition and modernity. The livelihood strategies adopted by the people of Limi Valley reflect their adaptive capacity and resilience. Therefore, sustainable development in the Limi Valley necessitates an integrated approach that acknowledges the interconnectedness of ecological, economic, and social-cultural dimensions, ensuring the preservation of its unique centuries-old heritage and the well-being of its inhabitants.

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