

Yak migration and its associated challenges: an experience from Haa.

Haa *Dzongkhag* is located on the western border of the country sharing boundary with the Chinese Autonomous region of Tibet to the northwest, Samtse *Dzongkhag* in the southwest, Chukha *Dzongkhag* to the southeast and Paro *Dzongkhag* to the northeast. The yak (*Bos grunniens*) is the flagship species of livestock for the 10 northern dzongkhags of Bhutan, predominantly covered with alpine meadows and located at an altitude ranging from 2800 to 5000 masl. Of the six *geogs* with more than 500 households only 57 households from three *geogs* rear yaks. In total there are 4,915 yaks on an average in the area. The *Brokpas* (yak herders) graze their yaks from Nubtshonapata to China border during summer and in winter they would move to Wangdi Nya & Chelela Paro to the west of Doklam plateau. It is believed that *Brokpas* are custodian of northern borders of Bhutan.

Yak rearing system

Yak rearing in these 10 *Dzongkhags* are an age-old tradition that has survived centuries and it is deeply integrated into their social life. Yak farming system is not sedentary farming as the system primarily depends on grazing in the open pastures for their feed. Therefore, the animals have to migrate from lowlands to the highlands during summer season and vice versa during winter in search of green pastures. This system of rearing is called pastoralism or transhumance husbandry system. In Bhutan, transhumance migration of yaks follow both latitudinal and altitudinal migratory routes depending on the climatic conditions and travel long distances covering wide range of altitudinal variance (Letro, 2015). The Haa *Brokpas* migrate their herds at the end of 3rd month to

beginning of the 4th month of the Lunar calendar to their summer grazing areas in the summer. It takes around 4 to 6 days to reach their summer grazing ground. During winter, some herders start to move down at the end of the 8th month and others at the beginning of the 9th month of the lunar calendar to the lower foothills when the climate is extremely cold in the alpine grazing areas. Therefore, the herds remain approximately six months each in their summer or winter grazing camps.



Migration of Yak to their summer grazing grounds

Migratory routes as practiced by yak herders of Haa.

There are four primary migratory routes that the herders migrate their yaks;

1. In summer,

1. one group of herders migrate towards Layna, Nubri Paro Dzongkhag (4500 masl) passing thorough Gapla, Gonglayla, Fanla, and Togola passes. another group migrate towards Shaktoe and Shakmey near China border crossing Gongzala and Yaklayla passes (4500-5000 masl) the third group migrate towards Nubtshonapata (4000 masl)

2. In winter,

1. One group of herders migrate towards Doklam plateau (2700-4000 masl)
2. and rest migrate to Haa valley and some to Paro Dzongkhag side (2800-4000 masl).



Herders having their farewell feast before commencing migration

Decline in the yak rearing practices in recent times

Jou Rinzey, a 73 year old yak herder started herding yaks at the age of 13, way back in 1960s along with his late father. His attachment towards rangeland and yak herding has been his lifelong passion. Despite his unfavorable age he has been persuading his wife and children that he wanted to accompany his yaks this year (2020) to its summer migration camp for one last time. This is a typical example and it has been the trend prevailing in yak herders of the Haa that the enthusiasm of the older generations are donot exist anymore with the younger generation.

Jou Lhab Tsheri from Dumchu village under Uesu geog recalls his bygone days with yak herding and singing 'Yak Labey Lhadha Gow' at the top of his voice while herding yaks, cherished as his best memories. Those days the wealth of a household was measured by the number of yaks one owned and recalls that he was among elite herders. From more than 20 in his community

then now are left with only four herders.

Similar stories are shared by Aum Chimi from Ingo under Kartshog geog and Hatey under Bji geog. Two decades ago, there were more than 20 herders in her community but now left with only two herders. She is struggling to maintain the age-old tradition that are passed on her by her parents due to labour shortage. At Hatey they are now left with only seven households from the 30 households. According to livestock statistics 2013 there are 99 herders now left with 57 (2020) this is the trend prevailing at Haa.

The trend of yak herding and migratory practices are declining although it is a traditional practice that has been the main source of income for centuries for the highlanders. This poses enormous threat to yak rearing as farming system in the country if appropriate measures are not taken to encourage sustaining of the practice. The main reasons behind people leaving yak farming are due to i) modern education whereby, children choose paid jobs over yak farming leading to labour shortage, ii) emergence of predation by wild animals including feral dogs leading to loss of yaks, iii) mortality due to diseases such as Gid disease. iv) change of Tsamdro rights. Such a trend makes herders like Jou Lhab Tsheri worried that the age-old tradition will slowly disappear as their children will not come back to the mountains again to take over the practices.

What interventions are being instituted by the Government to encourage the yak rearing practices?

The record at the Department of Livestock maintained since 1987 states that the population of yak in the country remained consistent, which is about 42,000. The following are some of the key measures being taken;

1. Formation of yak federation in the country to preserve, promote and protect yaks in the highlands.

2. Intervention on yak products diversification to make yak farming business more attractive amongst the youth.
3. Initiated gid disease surveillance and elimination program
4. Established yak nucleus breeding farm at Chonaphu, Haa with an mandate to coordinated and promote yak development in the country through innovation, technology popularization (for instance Artificial insemination (AI) to address in-breeding issue) and provision of extension and technical services through the support of BTFEC (Bhutan Trust Fund and Environmental Conservation).
5. Initiated value chain and livelihood improvement of herders and capacity building through The Kanchenjunga Landscape (KL) and Resilient Mountain Solutions (RMS) through the support of ICIMOD (International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development)
6. Established Regional Cooperation for sharing knowledge, technology and germplasm exchange among the mountain people through the initiative of ICIMOD (International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development)

National Integrated Yak Breeding Centre

Haa