

Yartsagunbu breeds violence in Dolpo, Nepal

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Dolpo is the biggest administrative region of Nepal but the most scarcely populated due to its rugged geography. It fetches the government large revenues from tourists and a plethora of natural resources from water to medicinal herbs. It houses splendid natural beauty, cultural heritages and endangered wildlife species. Yet, Dolpo is not linked to the rest of the nation by road, or equipped with basic infrastructure such as electricity and hospitals. The people of the lower region primarily depend on agriculture, while the settlements in the upper regions synergize agriculture with animal husbandry for subsistence living. As such, pastures for winter grazing become vital for people to eke out their livestock through the difficult season. With the advent of 'yartsagunbu economy', serious and inevitable consequences are threatening local livelihoods of this remote region.

Dolpo and 'Yartsagunbu'

'Yartsagunbu' (*Cordyceps sinensis*) is a parasitic fungus in which the larvae are mummified and stalk-like reddish-brown fruiting-bodies emerge. Yartsagunbu has been used in both Tibetan medicine and traditional Chinese medicine as a universal cure for all ailments in general, and as a popular aphrodisiac in particular. It is believed to cure ailments ranging from fatigue to cancer. The government of Nepal legalized yartsagunbu harvesting in 2001, and since then, such practices have increased dramatically. Yartsagunbu season begins mid-May, and could last as long as two months. During this time, most villages are deserted. Whole communities are on the move for this seasonal outing to higher altitudes to collect yartsagunbu while homes, schools and offices are padlocked.

Yartsagunbu has swiftly become the biggest contributor to household economy in Dolpo, surpassing even farming, which makes up to 53.3 percent of total household income.¹

The exorbitant price of this fungus attracts thousands of people to move to Dolpo district from more than 28 of the 75 districts of Nepal. According to local sources, in 2013 alone, more than 9,000 people flocked to Dho-Tarap, one of Dolpo's 23 Village Development Committees (VDC), to make a new, profitable living picking yartsagunbu. Dho-Tarap had a meager population of 923 according to the National Census 2011. The onslaught of people and the unexpected consequences has greatly affected and threatened the locals by depleting the limited grasslands and timber. Criminal activities and violence have also dramatically increased.

With little consolation, in 2008 locals in Dho-Tarap started collecting compulsory 'fees', restated as 'donations', from the yartsagunbu pickers. Until 2011, NRs 1000 per head was collected; NRs 1500 in 2012; and NRs 3000 in 2013. The Shey Phoksundo Buffer Zone management committee (SPBZMC), which maintains the area's statistics, has been collecting royalties in Dunai, the headquarters of Dolpo, and in the local VDCs since 2011. Reported royalties until 2013 were NRs 1100 for non-district, NRs 600 for within-district, and NRs 150 for within-buffer zone area residents. Both the government and locals collected together in 2011. In 2012 and 2013 the two agencies collected separately. For 2014, the SPBZMC increased the royalty threefold, or NRs 3000 for nondistrict, NRs 2000 for within-district, and Rs 500 for within-buffer zone area residents, while the locals people from Dho-Tarap reduced the amount to half, or NRs 1500.

Situations turned tense when the SPBZMC wanted to curb the locals from 'illegally' collecting money in the name of donations, while increasing its own royalties threefold. To make matters worse, the SPBZMC wanted to open up all pastures for yartsagunbu harvesting, regardless of the sensitive winter grasslands. The locals however, wanted to block the annual winter grassland, collectively known as 'lang', from

yartsagunbu pickers, while demanding the right to collect donations from other pastures as part of their customary rights, and in addition to the rights granted by the International Labor Organization in ILO convention number 169, to which Nepal is a signatory.² According to the locals, not one rupee of the huge royalties collected by the SPBZMC has benefited them to date. In response, the SPBZMC claims that maintaining law and order is more important than appeasing local demands. In this lose/lose situation, the locals continued to collect donations and declared the 'lang' region as a no-harvest zone. The team of SPBZMC and armed police forces then came in and changed everything.

Dolpo's black days

June 2, 2014: Three field supervisors of the SPBZMC accompanied by thirty-five armed police forces (APFs) arrived in Dho-Tarap, and confiscated a sum of NRs 756,000 which had been collected by the locals. Adding insult to injury, the SPBZMC sent thousands of people to the sensitive 'lang' region.

June 3, 2014: The locals submitted a petition to the SPBZMC asking them to reconsider their actions. The SPBZMC ignored their pleas.

During a peaceful protest on July 4, 2014, the police charged the gathered locals with batons. Some individuals reacted and hurled stones towards the police, who scattered from the scene. In a matter of seconds, the police regrouped and attacked with more force. Live bullets were fired at the unarmed people, who frantically ran for cover.

The unprepared locals were deeply traumatized by this horrific violence. Doors and wooden grain stores were widely vandalized. After the chaos subsided, the police went on a rampage, searching each house along the Y-shaped river valley. Innocent bystanders were indiscriminately beaten. Twelve random people were detained and systematically beaten. The police orchestrated plans to accuse the 12 of crimes they never committed. The victims were also repeatedly assaulted, belittled and made out as refugees in their own nation. Ethnic slurs such as 'bhotias,³ we will kill you all', 'this is Nepal, not your country', were commonly uttered by the police. The violence resulted in the death of two, the detention of 12 and left more than 40 others seriously injured. Authority figures also falsified the report concerning the death of one victim, and failed to send the body for a post-mortem.

Nyima Tsering from Tsarka VDC, 25-years-old, was one of the men dragged out from a grain storehouse, beaten, and then released, only to be rounded up again by another police team as he tried to flee the village. He witnessed a bullet hit his brother's temple. He saw a friend suffer, with burning hot gun pipes shoved into his mouth. He said he didn't feel the pain from his torture in detention as much as the worry about whether his brother had survived. After his torture, he was treated for two broken upper incisors and sent back home. "A cold shiver runs through my veins and my body heats up every time I see a policeman", he told reporters after a press conference on July 29, 2014.

Ngaten Choephel, 25 years old, a winter teacher⁴ in the local school, was one of the detainees targeted and tortured for speaking up for his rights. "They let us sit in a sort of Lotus position, and jogged and jumped on our legs, as if we were trampolines. One of them shone the light and kicked me right in the face," he testified in documentary footage.

Among the few who managed to flee quickly across the mountains on that fateful day, and thus escape assault, was 25-year-old Dhargye Lama, a young village Lama (religious guru). "We ran the whole night without flash lights, stopping near rocky caves, and ran again after we suspected we were being pursued. Before we knew it, we had circumambulated the entire Buddha-Rivo pilgrimage," he said.

"They played me like a football, but with martial boots and batons," Pema Tsewang, a 16-year-old student told ABC television reporters at the protest of Bhadrakali on July 4, 2014. He looked little, frail, but determined. He had returned home after being away from his parents for more than five years in Kathmandu, hoping to contribute to his community. "The trauma still haunts me. Nightmares are frequent," Pema admitted.

And so the stories go. Every person from the locality has a story of pain, fear, and suffering, endured on that fateful black day in Dolpo history. There has been considerable media outcry and organized protest since then, which has tragically only fallen on deaf ears. A joint struggle committee was formed by the locals of Dolpo in Kathmandu and numerous press conferences were organized. The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) sent an urgent appeal to the office of the Prime Minister, Home Minister, National Human Rights Commission and the Inspector General of Police on June 12, requesting immediate and effective action. A number of press articles condemned the atrocities, including an editorial in the Kathmandu Post on June 16. The Kantipur media house sent a reporter to the field, and the resultant stories of police brutality were on the front page of the Kantipur daily newspaper on June 22. The joint struggle committee met the Minister of Forest and Soil Conservation on June 25. The home ministry formed a three-member probe panel led by the regional deputy administrator of Surkhet, Mr. Raju Kumar Shrestha, on June 27. The joint struggle committee organized a nine-day sitin protest in Kathmandu from July 1-9 to demand an impartial investigation committee be set up, as well as a candlelight vigil and peace march at Boudhanath on July 22. The probe panel returned on July 15 from Dunai, which is a difficult three days walk from the area of incident. To date, it is yet to produce its controversial report. Worst of all, another round of threat and drama has begun to repeat itself.

The wife of Tsering Phurwa who died after the brutal police crackdown frantically called me up from Dho village at 5:14pm on Saturday, June 11. She was panicking, and sounded confused and lonely. She said the police had summoned her from her camp in the Dho pastures, which is a difficult three day walk away. They pressured her to confess that her husband died by 'falling-off a cliff while collecting timber but not by stick charge. She was told that unless she did this, 'she would not get the one million Nepali rupees compensation promised after the death of her husband on 4 June, and that the 12 ex-detainees would be taken to Dunai for actions accusing them of killing her husband'. She was depressed and left with no hope.

Most villagers have lost hope and/or have been threatened to the point of giving up. There are only a few who are bravely considering the risk of speaking up once again for justice. After a protracted discussion however, the villagers unanimously voted to fight for justice despite the growing hurdles and confusion. They have decided to reject the 'one-sided regional investigation committee' set to fly to Dho village by helicopter when the weather clears, and instead demand a 'high level and inclusive central investigation committee' with mandatory representatives from the victims' side and from human rights groups. In case this does not occur, they have threatened to collect all the citizenship certificates⁵ and dump them in front of the District Administration Office in Dunai, showing the irrelevance of these citizenship certificates that have not safeguarded the rights to security, peaceful livelihood, recognition and justice, which are embodied in the social contract.

Every passing day the pain and fear of my fellow people depresses me more, but there is not much I can do. Our incumbent government is preoccupied with purchasing superluxurious bulletproof German cars to show off at the SAARC summit, designing a fat Constituent Assembly trust, or holding extravagant party conventions full of hatred and lust for power. Justice and compensation appear distant illusions, at least for now. When will Nyima, Pema, Dhargye and Ngaten, along with all the other Dho villagers feel safe again, and relegate the horrendous events of June 3 to the past? When will they get the rights their

citizenship certificates entitle them to? Does the government listen only to violent Nepal Bandhs or chakka jams, or worse, instead of passive resistance, such as sitin protests or hunger strikes?

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1 Shrestha, Uttam Babu and Kamaljit S. Bawa. 2013 Trade, Harvest, and Conservation of Caterpillar Fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*). *Biological Conservation* 159: 514-520.

2 The Legislative Parliament of Nepal has approved the ratification of the Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (No.169) adopted by the ILO in 1989. Convention No. 169 was ratified by the Parliament on the 22nd of August and formally submitted to the ILO on 5th September 2007 by the Minister for Local Development Dev P. Gurung.

3 The Bhotiyas live in much of the northern and eastern regions of Nepal. They are a group of ethnolinguistically Tibetan people living in the trans-Himalayan region that divides India from Tibet, and were originally a hill tribe. Their name, Bhotiya, derives from the word Bod (Bodyul), which is the Classical Tibetan name for Tibet. The ancient language of Bhotiya people is Boti (Bhoti).

4 During the winter season, hundreds of Dolpo people have to leave upper Dolpa and find warmer areas to live. In that time schools also used to close.

5 Generally, Nepalese citizenship is based on the principles of jus-sanguine or bloodline. Generally, a person born of parents who are citizens of Nepal will have a claim to citizenship of Nepal. It is compulsory for people to get benefits from the government. Without citizenship they can't get passports to go to abroad.