

Travel Report Nepal September - October 2019

by Stefanie Christmann

The donkey initiative chair, Stefanie Christmann, was in Nepal in September / October 2019 to visit and review the project in Humla. She has mitigated the climate damage of the flight via a contribution to www.atmosfair.de and donated the travel expenses.

Parekali R. has been a widow for 12 years. At that time her children were two, four and eight years old. She inherited her husband's house and fields, but even with a good harvest, millet, barley, and potatoes only last five months. She has to buy clothes, oil, salt and many other things. In addition, school fees have to be paid in cash, as well as school uniforms, notebooks and pens. For her field work in fields, she is paid in grain, 2 ½ -3 ½ kg per day. This is why, after the death of her husband, the then 28-year-old mother began to trade with stones and wood, although she had to carry both on her back. She sold stones in the village, but to sell wood she had to go as far as Simikot, a 3 ½ hours steep uphill climb from her village - but first she had to go into the forest to find the wood or cut off branches. But she got paid in cash, up to 500 rupees (1 euro = 125 rupees) and that was the deciding factor. Eight years ago, when Sahayog Himalaya Nepal (SHN) asked her whether she wanted a cow, a dzomo (a cross between a nak and a bull that gives a lot of milk) or a donkey, it was clear to Parekali, "I wanted a donkey so I do not have to do the hauling myself". By now, she earns around 22,000 rupees a month transporting and selling goods. In addition, her donkey transports dung, crops and goods, which she has to buy in Simikot, for her family. She also brings the harvest from the field to the homes of people from the village in exchange for help with ploughing and other work. Residents of other villages have to pay 500-600 rupees per day for the transport of their harvest. The donkey that Parekali received has since died, but the male donkey foal was already big enough to take over the job. Parkali wants to save and buy another small female donkey foal. She puts nearly half of her monthly cash income (10,000 rupees) into the education of her three children.

The youngest goes to the 8th grade in the village school, that is not so expensive, but the two older children go to school in Simikot, 10th and 12th grade, which costs money for accommodation and meals; the college (grades 11-12) also charges high school

fees. Parekali is very happy with her choice of animal.

Humla - a very remote project region northwest of Dolpa

Humla is considered one of Nepal's poorhouses. Not one of the mothers had attended school, not even for at least a year. Most spoke no Nepali, but local languages - such as Tibetan in the Limi valley. There is very little infrastructure, the roads to the villages are very steep, narrow and difficult to walk. Hardly any tourists come to Humla, although the landscape and the high biodiversity are impressive. Humla is very green in its lower areas, there is field work (rainfed agriculture on sloping terraces), new houses are being built, in some parts of the forests, very precious medicinal plants can be found, which are massively exploited. This is primarily men's work because you have to live for weeks or months in the forest.

But some single mothers also take on this work, because the daily earnings can be very high if you're lucky and find a good location. Chauki S., for example, stayed in the forest for a month and collected three sacks full of medicinal plants. She was paid 60,000 rupees per bag - but her 13-year-old daughter had to look after herself and her eight-year-old brother for a month, while the mother took a high security risk alone in the forest. Chauki's first female donkey died, but she has three male foals and wants to barter to get a female donkey again.

Gahugora B. also collects medicinal plants once a year and, in this way, the mother of four children enables her eldest son to go to a technical school in Nepalgunj, which costs 55,000 rupees a year. Her 15-year-old daughter Santi looks after the younger siblings and manages the timber sale in Simikot with the donkey until the mother has collected enough plants. Santi herself is in grade 10, she would like to go to college.

The mountains are very steep, especially in southern Humla. Food for the animals and firewood are harvested on dangerous mountain slopes, often people and animals plunge into the depths. For the men, local millet beer may increase the risk even more. In any case, at this medium altitude, the majority of the single mothers are widows. There are also mothers who have been deserted. Some men have died of illness, but many have just disappeared and the mothers do not know whether they left or fell and were carried away by the raging Karnali river or became prey of jackals or snow leopards. Some widows have also lost their husbands in Maoist battles. The widows

often have to borrow 20-30,000 rupees for funeral expenses. They have no opportunity to go to a bank, they are at the mercy of local loan sharks, who often charge 24% or more interest a year. Some mothers need 10-15 years to pay off their debts.

Quite different to the green southern and middle parts of Humla is the Limi valley on the Chinese-Tibetan border. It enchants with its untouched nature and its barrenness bears a similarity with the Tibetan plateau. Here, the fields have to be irrigated, they are correspondingly smaller in number and there is hardly any work for single mothers - except in China on construction sites. There, single mothers, who do not have to continuously look after anybody sick at home, haul sand and stones for several months a year. Half of the daily income (2,100 rupees) is spent on accommodation, food and travel, so that the actual income from the hard labour in a foreign country is much lower. You cannot do that until old age, say the mothers.

In the north, in the Limi valley, polyandry has prevailed for a long time (only the eldest son inherits, only he is allowed to marry, his brothers marry his wife as well; this causes a lack of marriageable men and subsequently many unmarried mothers). In Limi, the young unmarried mothers can stay with their parents, at least until their brother inherits. By now, however, real estate division has also been introduced.

In 2011, we assigned the following animals in Humla: 48 donkeys, 187 dzomo, 68 nak, seven cows and in the south, 71 water buffalos. Some of the single mothers had already died, but the children still work with the animals. I was at mid-altitude (about 2,800-3,500 m; donkey, dzomo, cow) and in the high mountains (nak).

Donkeys - the pack animals of the single mothers

Donkeys were very hard to get hold of eight years ago. But in the village of Thehe, they have almost completely eliminated the barren mules and so the place is teeming with donkeys. Most of the offspring come from the animals we provided, but some villagers also brought in donkeys from Tibet 5-6 years after our introduction. In 2011, SHN also brought some male donkeys for insemination to the area around Simikot. The recipients of the male donkeys were drawn by lots. In the beginning, the mothers were able to charge for insemination, but now there are enough donkeys of both sexes.

It was the mothers who had been widowed with several young children for several years and who had been working hard for many years (carrying stone, wood and sand),

who wanted donkeys and not dairy animals. Some mothers were pounding stones to gravel, transported boulders, plowed fields (mainly for lack of draft animals), worked in road construction, collected wood and medicinal plants, carried them on their own backs and sold them - and all that for very little money. Some younger mothers, who had only recently been deserted, specifically wanted donkeys because they knew they could earn a lot of money in transport.

Some mothers have kept all their donkey foals, others sold their male donkeys and only parted with their female donkeys in an emergency. Jhihari B. had to do that. "I had no choice. Everyone in the village knew that. My only child had a bad infection and had to be flown to the hospital quickly. I had to sell the younger of my female donkeys right away. Under normal circumstances, I would have received more than 40,000 rupees, but everyone knew that I would sell at any price to save my son". (S.C.: She should have gotten at least 60,000 rupees, or even more.) Jhihari had been deserted by her husband long before she received her animal. She was able to keep the room and the small field, but the harvest lasted for three months at best. She often sent her child to stay with relatives and spent weeks gathering medicinal plants in the forest. She worked in the fields and was paid in grain, but mostly, she carried stones to construction sites. For one cubic meter of well-cut bricks (18-20 days of work) you get 5,000 rupees. However, it is paid only when sold, not successively on a daily basis. Today she does this work with the donkey, which makes it faster and, above all, much easier. Like the other mothers who transport rocks, she has made leather carrier bags. First, a blanket is placed on the back of the donkey, then a wooden frame on which the leather bags are attached. "After we got the donkey, we finally got out of our rags and it became easier to pay for school". Three years ago, her son fell ill, "I was able to pay for the medicine and the doctor, but six weeks ago, my son swelled up all over, it was clear he had to go to the hospital immediately. He is still there".

The mothers use their income in a variety of ways and wanted a donkey for different reasons. Baajkala B., a widow with two children, collected stones with her donkey and built two new rooms onto hers, one for each son, so the young families could stay with her. She built a stable for the donkey. Gahugora B. has built herself a toilet with the help of the donkey. Rugu R. brings rice from China with her donkey for herself and to sell (4-day tour). Thuli B. stated, "I wanted a donkey instead of a dairy animal because my eldest is a daughter. I immediately thought a female donkey would later be a

wonderful dowry".



Most mothers earn 15-20,000 rupees a month with the donkey. They could never earn that much doing field work, which usually is paid in grain. If a farmer pays in cash, the maximum is 500 rupees a day. How much money a mother gets for her wood in Simikot varies: "If I'm lucky, and there's no electricity in Simikot right now, I'll get 1,000 rupees for the whole wood load, if I'm unlucky and they have power there it's only 500", explained Bishnu S.

The dzomo

Most dzomo owners are happy with their animals, but some of the dzomos have died without producing any good offspring. The offspring of naks are of higher quality and achieve better prices to buy a mother animal again. Ichin T. wanted a dzomo because her father was very old and in need of help; her brother was too young for it. Ichin herself was in her early twenties when her husband deserted her with two young children. She moved back into her father's house, but the brother is likely to inherit house and fields. She hopes to get a room. Ichin's son is now 18 and is in grade 8, her daughter is 20 and goes to college (grade 12 in Simikot). Ichin is very happy about her dzomo, which has already produced three tolpini (female calves) and one tolpo (male

calf). The tolpo is already used for plowing and carrying of loads. Tolpos are not as strong as yaks, but quite sufficient for the small fields and day routes. Ichin sold one tolpini for 40,000 rupees and kept two, together they produce as much milk as the dzomo. Ichin produces 15 kg of ghee (butter lard) and 15 kg of churpi (hard cheese) a year, half of it is consumed by the family and the other half is sold. She earns 10,000 rupees in cash with ghee and 4,000 rupees with churpi. However, she has to fetch a lot of food for the winter, because dzomos and their offspring have thin fur (like cows) and in winter, cannot graze for food on the high pastures like yaks. One tolpini is currently pregnant again. Tolpini can get calves from bulls and yaks. If she was in need of money, she would sell the tolpo, but keep the tolpini and the dzomo.

Bhagawati S. (mid-altitude) laughingly said, "I would have been overjoyed about any animal that was given to me, but most of all I wanted a dzomo. At that time, I was 35 years old, a widow for two years, my four children wanted to eat, they needed clothes and school. I knew a dzomo would give me so much milk that I could still sell some of it". Like all single mothers, she used to work in the fields, building roads and houses and collecting fodder from the steep slopes for other families. She is a very smart woman and ten years ago, she already used her small fields at mid-altitude more skillfully than the other mothers today. Instead of growing almost exclusively millet species for their own staple food consumption, she sowed cucumbers, green chili and beans on some of the fields in the summer and sold the harvest in Simikot. In this way, she got the cash to pay for the bare necessities for her children. With cucumbers alone, she earned 2,500 rupees a year. She offered a mule owner to feed his animals when he did not need them, and in return was allowed to sell wood in Simikot using the mules without having to pay rent.

Thus, she earns an additional 1,000 rupees 1-2 times a month. She does not have to do the herding duty all by herself in the summer, but a relative, whom she pays in food items, shares butter and shurpi with her. She makes 8 kg ghee a year and sells half of it. Her dzomo gave birth to two tolpo and one tolpini, one tolpo has died. She wants to keep and use the tolpo (4 years) and the tolpini (3 years). "I already have the dung. I bring everything to my fields and I would like to have more". This ingenious mother even built a 4.5 sqm greenhouse with a piece of plastic in which she grows sark (similar to Swiss chard) and white cabbage for her own family during winter.

The single mothers in the Limi valley

The Limi valley is separated from the mid-altitude villages by the Nyalu Pass (5,141 m), some other passes and a relatively long unpopulated stretch of road. In the valley, there are several villages at an altitude of between 3,577 and 4,152 m. Due to polyandry in this region, we have almost exclusively assigned animals to unmarried mothers. Except for one mother, who wanted a dzomo, all others opted for a nak. During my visit, many mothers worked in Taklakot (China), so sometimes, we talked with their daughters, mothers, sisters and sometimes their sons.

The mothers from the villages of Halji and Dzang herd their naks together. Three years ago, avalanches killed most of the naks we gave to this herd. Luckily, at the time, the calves and young animals were still kept in their pen (to protect them from nightly attacks by snow leopards), which was at a distance from the avalanche, and survived. Today, the herd has recovered, as the naks in the Limi valley have an encouraging number of foals.



For example, Yang L., mother of a 9-year-old daughter (in 2nd grade), lost her nak, but the nak had previously born one dzomo, three yaks, and one nak, which in turn gave birth to one yak. Yang sold two of the yaks for 65,000 rupees each and kept the other animals. Yang and her daughter live with her mother, who needs to be cared for, so Yang cannot work in Taklakot like most single mothers and male school leavers.

The three women live on the offspring of the naks. The six summer months are the high season for milk production, in winter, there is only enough for their own consumption. But during the summer months, Yang's animals produce 16-17 kg ghee per month as well as churpi. Over the year, despite the large self-consumption - dairy products are the main suppliers of fat (heat) and protein at this altitude – over the year, on average she earns 8,000 rupees per month in cash from dairy products. Not a lavish life, but enough to not have to work in China.

Kundul L.'s mother is also a nursing case. But her mother owns fields with enough harvest for at least six months. In addition, Kundul works in the fields of other owners, but she cannot leave her mother and two little sons alone to work in Taklakot. She also lost her original nak in the avalanche, but from this nak had three yaks and two naks. One of the naks gave birth to a nak that recently produced another nak calf. Kundul has kept all these animals, she uses all of the dung itself or exchanges it for rice.

Buti T., now aged 33, came to the Limi valley all the way from herding duty on the high pastures and talked about the hard work in Taklakot. She leaves the children, eight and four years old, with her mother and goes to China for 2-6 months. The women first have to walk for days and then pay for a jeep, they have to bring bedding and stay in dormitories. They work for eight hours every day digging up soil, carrying rocks, sand and wet concrete. It is very hard work, even for young, strong women. Her older sister, Yangdzin T., also a single mother, works also during the winter in Taklakot, where she clears the roofs free of snow and weaves. But for one blanket you have to weave nonstop for ten days - and then get 16,000 rupees, of which food and overnight accommodation for the ten days are, of course, deducted. "My sister is now 42. She's getting sick more often. She cannot work in China for much longer. Then, there is only fieldwork and gathering dung here in the valley, but you cannot live on that".

In the Limi valley, the naks and their offspring often help single mothers and their children to survive at the most basic level, once the mother can no longer work. Many mothers now have serious knee problems. In this close proximity to the Chinese border, naks are also slaughtered. When Buti's original nak became old, she sold it for 57,000 rupees, while it was meaty and fat, and bought a young nak from the money.

She still has the offspring from her first nak. Buti worries about her sister. "Her children are older than mine, but Yangdzin's youngest is only in third grade". Yangdzin's nak

was not killed by the avalanche and is alive, as are its three offspring (two yaks, one nak). The sisters are in the same herding community.

We also assigned naks in many other places outside the Limi valley, where the villages are at a lower altitude (about 3,000 m), but there are enough high pastures.

Our involvement in Humla

Because of the large number of new single mothers, we want to systematically collect data on who has become a new single mother in the northern part of Humla since 2011 and give these mothers naks or greenhouses. As in Upper Dolpa, sark is grown during the summer months, but for the most time during the year there are no vegetables.