

DHAN DIWAS 2074

Paddy at the Highest Altitude
The CHHUM Valley
Once upon a time



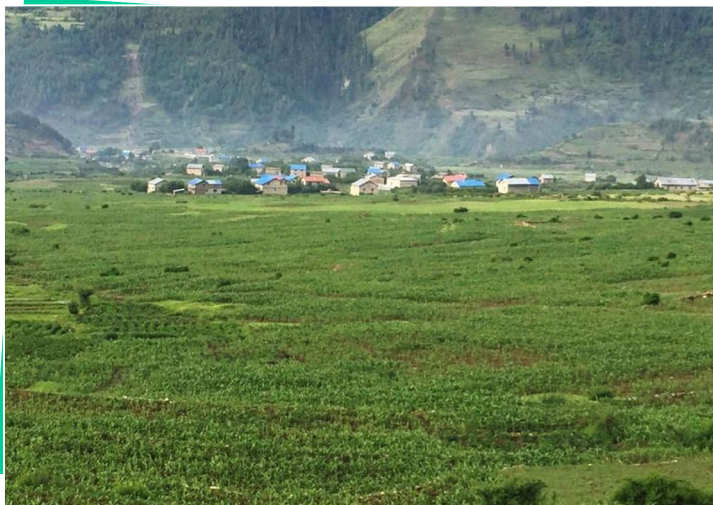
Chhum Valley is a village situated in Patarasi Village Municipality of Jumla District in the Karnali Zone of north-western Nepal. Situated at an altitude between 2800 to 3050 meters from the sea level, it grows paddy at the highest altitude in-situ in the world. However, this charm of Chhum is declining rapidly. This year, merely 1 Ropani of land was used for paddy cultivation, whereas 10 years back the cultivation used to span around an area of more than 500 Ropanis. Now the farmers have shifted their cultivation to maize, millet and beans from the high altitude paddy 'Jumli Marshi'. Why has Chhum valley, despite such historical significance left the cultivation of paddy?

INFLUENTIAL FACTORS: INTERNAL AS WELL AS EXTERNAL

There has been a sharp decline in agricultural performance throughout Nepal, and Chhum valley is not an exception. Farmers don't grow something for a record. Lack of labour force on one hand, and easy access to alternative income generating activities on the other has left the population in the region to lose their interest in agriculture. Farmers are now opting for rather less intensive farming techniques as an alternative and are gradually dragging themselves out of agriculture.

HIGHER INVESTMENT BUT LOW RETURN

The production as well as productivity of Paddy has declined as a result of which the cost of production has exceeded income from the cultivation. This has been the major reason for the farmers of Chhum Chaur to abandon themselves from Paddy and opt for alternative income generating activities. Adding up to the situation is a disease seen in the paddy



known as "Blast". Natural calamities mainly hailstone, in the past has caused severe damage to the paddy fields. "Fellow farmers have been pulling themselves out of cultivating paddy in the village and I have been cultivating Maize instead of Paddy since the last 10 years as others" stated a local farmer.

MISMACHING INTERESTS

Two different types of Marshis are found in Jumla: white and black. The rice obtained from both Marshis is red in color. However, the Jumli Marshi is the only paddy found to be grown in cold and high altitude region. In general, light intensity affects the growth and yield of paddy but it is said that the growth and yield of the Jumli Marshi is not much affected by intensity. Sadly, no interest has been shown to improve Jumli Marshi by the responsible authorities. Instead of promoting this



Removing weeds using wooden plank (*Bigaro*)

type, the National Agriculture Research Council has rather recommended a new variety of paddy called 'Chandannath' for the region. Nevertheless, this new paddy wasn't liked by the farmers." Says Dhana B. Gautam, an activist of Karnali Food and Agriculture Concern Group.

COMPETING CULTIVATION TIME

The time period for cultivation of Paddy as well as collection of Yartsa Gumba (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) appears to be the same. In Chhum valley, collection of Yartsa appears to be in the priority of the people as it yields more money than paddy. Collection of around 200 Yartsa is sufficient to purchase rice for the whole year. They consider paddy cultivation as a difficult work. Paddy cultivation was carried out in the past to address the scarcity in the region. But now due to increase in accessibility, rice is easily available leading to disinterest in paddy cultivation.



WEEDING: THE HARDEST PART OF THE JOB

Weeding of paddy is considered to be a hard job. Nevertheless, it is generally a woman's job. The stereotype in terms of gender exist that men shouldn't weed the paddy while the women think men have no idea as they have never seen the latter doing it. A local man stated that he has been cultivating maize because weeding of paddy is considered to be a woman's job. In the two days journey from Khalanga, to Chhum valley of Jumla, thousands of women were seen weeding the paddy field. Whereas, only one man was seen helping to remove the weeds from the field using a wooden plank called *BIGARO*.

After returning back to Khalanga, we came to know that the senior officials at district headquarter had left for Chhum valley for monitoring on 15th Ashad - the occasion of Paddy day celebration in Nepal. The particular reason behind their visit to the valley however was obscure. It was heartfelt moment to see a place having such historic heritage for paddy cultivation has now merely has any practice. There remains a question in our heads - If Chhum valley was situated in any other part of the world, how well would they have developed it as a place for ecotourism? Despite ample opportunities, the place hardly remains in the notice of policy makers and planners.



Design & Layout: Sanjeeb Bir Bajracharya

Story & Photo | Krishna P. Paudel & Karishma Gurung

Acknowledge:

Thanks to Yuvika Adhikari, Rahul Karki and Teeka Bhattarai for their contribution in translation, feedback and editing.



krishna@forestaction.org



karishma@forestaction.org

Contact:



Bagdol, Lalitpur
Email: fa@forestaction.org
Website: www.forestaction.org