Harvesting the Himalayan Gold in a time of crisis: Comparison of three countries

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Presentation outline

Introduction
Methodology
Results and discussion
Conclusion
Yartsa gunbu – Himalayan Gold

- Caterpillar infected by fungus
- Habitat: 3500-5200m

- Length: 4.3 to 11.3 cm
Socio-economic Importance

Large influx of collectors to high altitudes at the harvest sites during May to June annually

Worth more than its weight in gold

Contributes <60% of total cash income of rural households (Shrestha et al. 2013; Negi et al. 2017; Laha et al., 2018)
Objectives

Examining knowledge, attitude, and perceptions of COVID-19 among rural mountainous communities

Assess the impacts of COVID-19 on livelihoods of caterpillar fungus collectors
Study sites

**Bhutan**
- Tsento, Paro
  - 27° 26’ N, 89° 25’ E
  - Access only to individuals from the local administrative unit - dzongkhag

**India**
- Chiple-Kedar valley, Pithoragarh
  - 30° 00’ N, 80° 20’ E
  - Access only to individuals from the local administrative unit - Van Panchayat

**Nepal**
- Marma Darchula
  - 29° 50’ N, 80° 31’ E
  - Access only to individuals from the local administrative unit - Van Panchayat
- Saipal, Bajhang
  - 29° 32’ N, 81° 11’ E
  - Access to any Nepali citizen upon the payment of a collection fee charged by the local government
State of COVID-19

Pithoragarh district, Uttarakhand, India

Bhutan

Sudurpaschim Province, Nepal
Study sites

**Bhutan**
- Allowed
  - Tsento, Paro
  - 27° 26’ N, 89° 25’ E
  - Access only to individuals from the local administrative unit- dzongkhag

**India**
- Ban
  - Chiple-Kedar valley, Pithoragarh
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Methods of data collection

Questionnaire Survey
• Paro (Bhutan): 55 respondents
• Pithoragarh (India): 40 respondents
• Darchula (Nepal): 50 respondents
• Bajhang (Nepal): 45 respondents

Semi-structured in-depth interviews (telephonic)
• Darchula (Nepal): 3 respondents
• Bajhang (Nepal): 4 respondents
Findings
Awareness about COVID-19

- All the respondents were aware about the pandemic as well as the precaution measures
- Wearing masks was the most reported precaution measure
- Radio and mobile caller tunes were major sources of information
- Local mobilities were not affected by the lock-down

“No lockdown in our village. Will the government compensate me, if I do not go to field for cropping fearing virus and lockdown?” - 39 years old woman, Darchula
“Our deity resides in the kharka, our deity will protect us against all evils, so we need not worry about virus”- 46 years old man, Darchula

“Those coming from plains and unfaithful to their spouse are bringing the virus in the village”- 52 years old woman, Bajhang

“I felt feverish and had body pain but did not get tested. If I test positive, I will be socially ostracized and they will keep me in isolation, then who will look after my animals”- 28 years old man, Bajhang
Impact on collectors

- Fewer family members at collection site
Impact on collection days and harvest

Decline in number of yartsa collection days

- Increase in average number of yartsa harvested day$^{-1}$ person$^{-1}$
- Decrease in total number of harvest person$^{-1}$
Impact on trading

- Fewer traders
- Decline in price of *yartsa gunbu*
Coping strategy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping strategy</th>
<th>India</th>
<th>Nepal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use savings</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other income sources</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-migrate for labour work</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>61.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sell livestock</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borrow money from relatives/local lenders</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce expenses</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“My family does not have much option. My son will return to Delhi, once they open the border. Meanwhile, I will borrow from local lenders. This is how my family has survived so far.” - 48 years old man, Bajhang
Conclusions

• Social and religious stigma persisted about the virus

• COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected livelihoods of yartsa gunbu collectors in all three countries, particularly Nepal

• Diversified strategies to uplift the socio-economic conditions of poor mountain communities
Let’s protect the pulse.

Thank you