

Life on an Edge among the Changpas of Changthang, Ladakh

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ABSTRACT The Buddhist Changpas-pastoral nomads of Changthang, Ladakh form an ethnic entity. Like other nomads in the world, the pastoral nomads of Changthang are a minority, suffering problems of under representation, social, economic and geographic marginalisation. The region is extremely poor in conventional energy sources (fossils, fuel and wood) and has almost no industrially exploitable resources. Natural environmental limitations dictate many aspects of traditional life, especially settlement pattern and economic system. Among the Changpas, the pastoral mode of livelihood is an evident attempt to adapt to a natural environment, which provides no plants as food that can support humans and has no potential for growing food crops. Under such conditions, the only solution is to domesticate large herds of various animals, which can feed off the plants and in return, the animals can sustain humans. Since, the ecological conditions of Changthang are not favourable for crop growing, the Changpas raise large herds of sheep and goats as well as transport animals like yaks and horses. These animals provide the Changpas with meat, milk, varieties of wool, which they use themselves and barter for grains and other utilities. This economic interdependence of nomadic pastoral and settled population has been an important characteristic of the society in this area. The Changpas social behaviour is, in part, a response to constraints and opportunities of the natural environment. Both stability and change are outcomes of response to the immediate needs of daily life. The basic form of social organisation in the area was rural, and social relations among the agriculturalists, nomadic and semi-nomadic groups were based on trade and exchange of essential commodities. The Changpas' subsistence level pastoral economy, traditional social and religio-cultural systems are composite part of cold desert's ecological system. Their way of life shows a capacity to adapt themselves to the rugged cold desert environment. The Changpas possess a high degree of specialised knowledge and a flexible social organisation to make viable the mobile mode of production. Despite the ecological constraints, the Changpas were managing their environment for making a living without outside intervention. Their own societal controls like polyandry and cutting of excess animals, helped in turn by their customary rights and equity in resource allocation has helped them. The Changpas are organised using a patrilineal idiom, all members being patrilineal descendants of the founding ancestor. Rangeland, livestock, manpower and the considerable knowledge of the skills necessary to exploit them effectively are the principle economic resources of the Changpas of Changthang. Resource management in a risky environment illustrates the skills of the Changpas for survival. Traditional practices of Changpas, such as the rotation of grazing areas and use of reserve pastures in case of natural calamities help manage the variability of ecosystem and bail out pastures from a state of permanent degradation. Each animal has its own specific characteristics and adaptation to the environment. Rearing together different animals maximised the use of vegetation in the pasture. Different animals graze on different plants. In recent decades, the Changpas of Changthang have been experiencing changes due to external pressures that have altered political, economic and social landscapes. Traditionally, the Changpas were self-sufficient and livestock were providing them with their food and lodging. In recent decades, continuous massive defense investments and improvement in communications; proliferation of government departments; introduction of development plans; provision for basic amenities, alterations in traditional subsistence economy, its commercialisation and extension of know-how through government departments and non-government organisations and tourism has led to a higher motivation among local people for better standards of living. Increasing administrative and market integration and population growth over the years have weakened socio-homeostasis with no functional substitutes for restoring positive social system. For centuries, pastoralists in Changthang have lived in the context of environmental uncertainty and have developed a diverse range of strategies, institutions and network to minimise this unpredictability and risk. Pastoral management strategies, which may have worked previously, may or may not be sufficient now. The three communities of Samad, Korzok and Kharnak responded differently to these changes. Various pressures with an ever-increasing rate of change necessitated the adoption of new strategies for survival.