

## The Socio-Economic Status and Challenges of Nomadic Changpas in Ladakh, India

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**Abstract :** *The Changpa community, residing in the Changthang region of Ladakh, is characterized as both nomadic and semi-nomadic. Nomadic refers to their reliance on animal husbandry for sustenance, necessitating constant movement in search of fresh grazing grounds. The Changpas trace their migration back to Hor in Tibet around 800 A.D. Despite their nomadic lifestyle, they have established village administrations to address local issues independently. This paper aims to explore the social and economic aspects of the Changpa nomadic life, delving into the challenges they encounter, particularly the significant implications of border conflicts with China. The paper also suggests measures to overcome such challenges and difficulties. The research methodology employed in this paper incorporates a combination of primary and secondary sources. It encompasses data from books, journals, website, internet sources and field interviews conducted on the subject. The key outcomes of this research reveal that the socio-economic dynamics of the Changpa community distinguish them from other communities in Ladakh. The challenges they face, particularly exacerbated by occasional Chinese incursions into Indian Territory and the consequent loss of traditional pasture lands, compel them to migrate to urban areas and explore alternative sectors. Addressing these issues is not only for the residents of the nomadic Changpas but imperative for the broader national interest.*

**Keywords:** Changpa, Nomadic, Semi-Nomadic, Changthang, HorTibet, Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, India, China.

## **Introduction:**

The Changpas are a community of nomadic and semi-nomadic people primarily residing in Changthang in Eastern Ladakh. By nomadic we referring to them as people, who rely on the domestication and management of animals for their sustenance, necessitating frequent relocations in search of new grazing grounds. According to Galvin (1996), "Nomadism is a way of life, in which men secure their living by animal husbandry and without a permanent home, constantly wandering through the landscape with their herds, according to the season in search of food and new pastureland". (Rösing and Spurkhapa 2006).

The term 'Changthang' literally means 'Northerners' and denotes a high-altitude plateau located in the northwestern region of Tibet, extending into the southeastern part of Ladakh. This plateau serves as the native land for the Changpa community, who predominantly engage in pastoral activities. The Ladakhi Changpas originated from the northern Tibetan plateau and currently inhabit the southeastern areas of Ladakh referred to as Changthang. (Jina 1995). It extends from Durbuk in the northern region, encompassing Demchok and Koyul in the central area, to Rupsho and Kharnak in the eastern part. (Goldstein and Beall 1990).

The residents of Changpa endure a severe climate and rely entirely on a pastoral economy. The limited precipitation results in minimal plant productivity. (Rawat and Adhikari 2005) It is described as an elevated plateau or expansive open valley, unsuitable for habitation except for pastoral purposes. This area experiences extreme cold temperatures, aridity, high radiation, and intense winds. (Spalzin 2023). Due to the extremely severe climate, most of Changthang remains uninhabited. The Changpa people reside in Changthang at an average altitude ranging from 4500 to 5000 meters above sea level. Approximately 68 percent of the total land, situated above 5000 meters, is essentially inhospitable for vegetation. The region between 4500 and 5000 meters, accounting for around 5 percent of the total area, allows for some pastoral activities, while settled agriculture is limited to areas below 4500 meters above sea level. (Singh, 1995).

During the winter, temperatures plummet to as low as minus 40 degrees Celsius, accompanied by heavy snowfall. In contrast, summer temperatures range from 25 to 30 degrees Celsius. (Rout et al., 2020). The Changpas are believed to have originally migrated from Hor in the Kham Province of Tibet around the year 800 A.D. Historically, the Changpa and other Ladakhi communities did not practice intermarriage. However, the

tradition changed when Ladakh's King Singhe Namgyal married Kalsang Angmo, a daughter of the RupshoGoba family, marking the commencement of intermarriage customs. (Jina, 1999).

The nomadic Changpa community exclusively resides in the elevated plateaus of Rupshu, Kharnak, and the Korzok region. In Rupshu and Kharnak, the majority of the population follows a nomadic lifestyle, while in Korzok, approximately ninety percent of the population engages in nomadic practices. The second category comprises semi-nomadic Changpa who possess agricultural land and cultivate it during the summer, primarily growing barley. Communities with such semi-nomadic practices can be found in Hanlay, Kuyul, Damchok, Chumoor, Nyoma, Tsaga, Mouth and Nidar, Kargyam, Phobrang, and Chushul, among other areas.

Nyoma and Durbuk constitute two Sub-Divisions within the Leh District. In addition there are five constituencies in the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) Leh. Nyoma Sub-Division includes Korzok, Nyoma and Kungyam Constituency, while Durbuk Sub-Division encompasses Chushul and Durbuk Constituency. Elected councilors from these constituencies serve as representatives for addressing grievances across Changthang, contributing to the formulation of plans in the Hill Development Council Leh. Additionally, local issues are handled by Sarpanches, Panches, and Gobas. (NIC, 2023).

Until the 17th century, the entirety of Changthang was under the governance of a single Goba, widely recognized as RupshoGoba. His authority spanned across Rupshu, Korzok, Hanley, and Nyoma. Following his demise, Changthang underwent a division into numerous village-level administrative units. (Jina, 1995).

**Social Structure:** The majority of nomadic Changpa adhere to the Joint Family System, which proves beneficial in various aspects, including the rotational management of livestock among families. Approximately 40 percent of the community follows a polyandrous system, wherein two brothers marry the same woman. The impact of the polyandry system on population growth appears to be consistent, with a lighter workload distributed among the men. This system is rooted in the collective pursuit of economic gains. (Rösing and Spurkhapa, 2006).

While grazing animals, nomadic Changpa consistently carry three essential items: Mechak, Yugdo, and a dog. Mechak is utilized for igniting firewood or bushes, while Yugdo is employed for throwing stones over long distances to manage the animals. The dog, known as Chang-Khe, plays a crucial role as it accompanies the animals, offering protection against wild threats such as wolves and lions. The grazing territories for each

community are meticulously demarcated and assigned by the Goba. Any person exceeding their designated area is obligated to pay a penalty to the Goba of that particular community. (Mann, 2002).

The Changpas lead a nomadic lifestyle without a permanent dwelling. Their living arrangements are uncomplicated, relying on a specialized tent known as Rebo, crafted from Yak hair. The Changpa community personally engages in spinning and weaving using the portable loom, locally referred to as Thak, which is an integral part of every Rebo. The Rebo serves as a rainproof shelter during the summer rainy season, providing protection from the rain. When they relocate in search of new pasture lands, the Rebo is easily foldable and transportable. The folded Rebo is placed on a yak, which can carry a substantial weight of up to 100 kilograms. (Ibid).

The majority of the Changpa lack agricultural land for cultivating food and vegetables, with only Semi-Nomadic Changpa having ownership of such land. Their diet mainly consists of Tsampa<sup>1</sup> and the meat of goats, sheep, and yaks. Additionally, they produce cheese and curd and frequently consume milk. To acquire tsampa, they often engage in barter, exchanging sheep wool and meat with neighboring villages, as the use of currency is infrequent. A distinctive dish, Thugpa, is prepared using Za-chod, dry cheese, Troma, and Atta. Relying solely on animal products for sustenance poses challenges in achieving a balanced diet and can be unhealthy in the long term. Access to drinking water is limited, and glaciers on the surrounding mountain peaks serve as the primary source. During winter, they collect ice from the peaks, melting it to obtain water from snow and ice. Despite the challenging climatic conditions, women and older individuals remain in tents, keeping themselves occupied with weaving and spinning wool for their families, as they rarely purchase clothing from the market.

Within Changthang, the entire population adheres to Buddhism. It is common for them to carry a large framed photo of H.H. Dalai Lama. Their religious practices are marked by a strong belief in reciting mantras and observing rituals and customs. Despite their deep faith, the people are known for their sincerity and straightforwardness. (Rösing and Spurkhapa, 2006).

The Changpa Nomadic people exhibit a high degree of adaptability to the challenging conditions of high altitude and cold weather. They heavily rely on local traditional

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<sup>1</sup> 1. Tsampa is a Himalayan staple foodstuff made of barley flour. 2. Thukpa, a popular Himalayan dish, is a flavorful combination of variety of vegetables and wheat flour. Changpa's frequently enhance Thukpa by adding a mixture of yak and goat meat to the dish. 3. Za-Chod and Troma are locally grown vegetables, usually uses in Thukpa.

practitioners known as Amchi<sup>2</sup> and traditional medicines to address health issues, seldom seeking consultation from modern medical professionals. However, recent surveys indicate a notable prevalence of Hepatitis in Changthang, attributed to the consumption of meat. The hepatitis rate in Changthang stands at a significant 13% within the district. (Norbu, 2019). The education system in the region is notably lacking compared to other parts of Ladakh. Changthang students are required to travel to Leh to pursue higher education, as there is no college for advanced studies within the Changthang region.

**Economic Status:** The Changpa people rear a variety of animals including sheep, goats, yaks, and horses. Challenges arise, especially during the winter season, when the livestock struggles to find adequate food, leading to significant losses. The female yak, known as Dri-Mo, holds considerable value for nomads as it produces milk and butter, which are valuable commodities in the market. Additionally, these animals serve as crucial means of transportation. Typically, one sheep can carry up to 10 kilogram of goods, while a male yak can transport a maximum of 200 kilogram of goods. In the past, yaks, sheep, and horses were the primary modes of transportation, but the contemporary use of vehicles has had adverse effects on the environment. In Changthang, a nomad is considered wealthy if they own 300 sheep and goats, 30-35 yaks, and 4-5 horses. A moderately affluent nomad would possess 100-150 sheep and goats, 10-20 yaks, and one or two horses. Those owning 30-40 sheep and goats, 3-4 yaks, and one horse are regarded as economically less well-off. (Rösing and Spurkhapa, 2006).

The nomads of Changthang are renowned for producing the world's finest Pashmina<sup>3</sup>, derived from a particular breed of goat. Within Changthang, various qualities of Pashmina are available, with the highest quality originating from the regions of Rupsho, Kharnak, and Korzok in eastern Ladakh. This superiority is attributed to the high altitude at which the livestock graze. Pashmina from these areas is considered the finest due to its staple length of 2-3 inches and a diameter of 12-14 microns. In contrast, Pashmina from the rest of Ladakh typically has an average staple length of 1-2 inches and an average fiber diameter of 14-15 microns. (Ahmad, 2004)

Pashmina is recognized as a luxurious fiber, commanding some of the highest prices in the textile world due to its exceptional softness, elegance, and luster. Approximately

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<sup>2</sup>Amchi or Menpais a traditional Tibetan medical practitioner. Nomadic Changpa often believe in amchi treatments and medicines.

<sup>3</sup>The word 'Pashmina' is derived from the Persian word 'Pashm' which means 'wool'. In Ladakhi It is called Lena In the West or Europe it is known as 'Cashmere'.

seventy percent of the total Pashmina production is sold in the Leh market, subsequently making its way to Kashmiri merchants. These merchants transport it to Kashmir, where it undergoes processing into yarn, ultimately resulting in the creation of world-famous shawls. The remaining portion of Pashmina is typically sold to merchants in Himachal Pradesh. Currently, one kilogram of raw Pashmina wool costs between Rs. 4,200 to 4,500, while hand-made Pashmina shawls are priced in the range of Rs. 15,000 to Rs. 30,000. Machine-made Pashmina shawls fall within the range of Rs. 6,000 to Rs. 20,000. In addition to Pashmina, nomads also sell wool sourced from sheep. (Rizvi and Ahmad, 2009). As of today, one Kilogram of wool is priced at Rs. 250. The government of Jammu and Kashmir has set up two Pashmina farms, located in Upshi and KhurilChangthang, with the primary objective of conserving goat breeding and enhancing Pashmina production. Presently, each male goat yields an average of 300-500 grams, while each female goat produces 200-250 grams of Pashmina wool annually. (Ahmad, 2004). Traditionally, Changpa nomads engaged in salt caravans, obtaining self-sufficient salt from the Changthang region, particularly from Tso Kar Lake. However, these salt caravans have entirely vanished from the Central Asian region. (Rösing and Spurkhapa, 2006).

**Migration:** The observable trend of Changpa migration towards Leh is prevalent across the Changthang region, with a more pronounced impact in areas like Kharnak, Korzok, and Rupshu, where the primary source of livelihood revolves around livestock. This migration pattern initiated approximately 30 years ago in Kharnak. Among these areas, the highest migration figures are likely from Kharnak, followed by Rupshu and then Korzok. (Goodall, 2004).

The Changpa have migrated from Changthang to Leh and its adjacent areas, with a notable concentration in Kharnagling within Choglamar village. The increasing rate of outmigration and settlement can be attributed to several factors. The combined effects of low precipitation, extreme temperature fluctuations, and poor soil conditions with low nutrients limit the natural vegetation in Rupsho-Kharnak to various grass species and small woody shrubs, making the area unsuitable for agriculture or permanent settlement. Additionally, significant changes have been experienced due to broader economic and political shifts over the past 40 years. Government policies focusing on developmental activities in urban centers have spurred a rapid population shift towards cities in pursuit of better opportunities. (Rizvi, 1996).

The closure of the border with Tibet after the 1962 India-China war and the subsequent loss of crucial pasture land had a significant impact on the livestock of the Changpa community. (Goodall, 2004).



The War of 1962 imposed restrictions on the nomadic Changpas, hindering their ability to travel to Tibet for salt trade and preventing access to winter pasture land in Skakjung. (Ibid).

Apart from facing a reduction in the total grazing area, the Changpa communities have also had to accommodate a significant influx of Tibetan refugees and their herds. (Ahmad, 2004). Consequently, the pasture land became insufficient to sustain the entire livestock.

**Challenges:** Numerous challenges confront the nomadic Changpa way of life, inevitable changes occurring in various aspects due to the age of development and modernization.

The harsh climatic conditions and high altitude above sea level adversely impact the lives of nomadic Changpa. They frequently encounter deficiencies in nutrition and vitamins since their diet heavily relies on livestock. With the reduction in grazing areas, the seasonal migration patterns have had to adapt into shorter movements. Nomads now divide themselves into smaller units, shifting settlements more frequently, a task that proves burdensome and exhausting, particularly for women. They shift grazing areas 8-15 times in a season, depending on environmental conditions. (Chaudhuri 2000).

In Changthang, many nomadic Changpas still opt for home deliveries, resulting in both mothers and children being susceptible to severe infections and facing a very low chance of survival. Nomadic women often experience multiple pregnancies in a short time span, leading to anemia and premature deliveries. Childbirth frequently occurs in unhygienic conditions due to factors such as poor diet, harsh climatic conditions, and a lack of awareness about available facilities. At times, mothers have to give birth in tents (Rebo) in high-altitude terrains during their migratory life, impacting the health of both the mother and child. This scenario can lead to issues such as fever, cold, blood pressure problems, headaches, and anemia. Women in Changthang often suffer from anemia, and children experience deficiencies in vitamins due to the harsh migratory lifestyle, which, coupled with the region's poor vegetative cover and low plant production, results in a diet deficient in various essential nutrients, often leading to anemia and other deficiency diseases. (Azim et.al 2017)

The lack of adequate medical facilities in the remote areas of Changthang poses a significant health concern. Only three Primary Health Centers (PHC) at Nyoma, Tangtse, and Chushul are available, which are challenging to access from Kharnak-Rupsho, Korzok, and other peripheral areas. Illiteracy remains high in Changthang, with the region having the highest illiteracy rate in Leh district. To address this issue, a Nomadic Residential School was established at Puga in 2007. (Bhasin, 2018). The education

curriculum presents a challenge for nomadic children as what they learn in school often differs significantly from their daily practices and nomadic lifestyle. To preserve the nomadic culture, there is a need for the school curriculum to be designed in a way that aligns more closely with their traditional way of life. This would facilitate better integration of education with the nomadic culture and lifestyle.

The influx of tourists during the summer season in Ladakh has an impact on Changthang as it coincides with the germination period of the grasslands. This leads to severe damage to the grazing land in areas such as Korzok, Samad, and Kharnak, which are crucial for the nomadic Changpa communities. The dependence of Changpa on these grazing lands is significantly affected by the consequences of increased tourism.

**Border Conflict:** Traditionally, the nomadic Changpa freely moved with their herds into Tibet and the inner parts of Central Asian countries in search of pasture land. However, after the war in 1962, the winter grazing land known as Skakjung, which was previously accessible and located in Tibet, became inaccessible. This geopolitical shift has had a significant impact on the traditional mobility and grazing patterns of the Changpa community. (Goodle 2004).

However, the nomadic Changpa were prohibited from taking their herds across the border by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). The unresolved border conflict between India and China in Ladakh has serious implications for the overall socio-economic, cultural, and livelihood of the nomadic Changpa. The closure of the ancient trade route to Tibet and Central Asian countries following the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962 has adversely affected the economics of the Changpa. Additionally, the communities of Rupshu-Kharnak have had to accommodate a significant number of Tibetan refugees and their herds in limited pasture land. (Ahmad, 1999).

The Chinese actions have led to the displacement of Ladakhi nomadic Changpa, who were pushed across the disputed border and settled their nomads across the border. As a consequence, the grazing area available to the Ladakhi Changpa has significantly reduced, compelling them to sell their livestock and migrate to cities in search of better opportunities. Ambassador Stobdan has assessed China's intention to extend its influence south of the Indus and potentially cut off Chushul from Durbuk, thereby gaining control over the remaining 50 kilometers of Pangong Lake falling on the Indian side. (Stobdan, 2010). Under such circumstances, the nomadic and semi-nomadic practices of the Changpa community face the risk of disappearing entirely due to the loss of their grazing land. The impact of geopolitical changes and border conflicts has put the traditional way of life and livelihood of the Changpa at significant risk.



The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) consistently threatens the nomadic Changpa to vacate the grazing areas. Local inhabitants in Ladakh residing along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) express their sentiments, highlighting that Chinese intrusions into the LAC are not a recent occurrence. Since the India-China conflict in 1962, there have been numerous incidents of Chinese incursions into Indian territory. The Chinese actions include taking over land, forcing local residents to relocate, and putting their lives at risk. For instance, in July 2012, in the Chumur area of Ladakh, Chinese helicopters destroyed Indian bunkers and tents. Furthermore, in the Demchok area, the Chinese obstructed the construction of a road on the Indian side, which was being built under the MGNREGA scheme. (Angmo, 2013:3).

Residents living along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) have consistently raised complaints that over the years, Chinese incursions have encroached upon their territory, gradually and persistently. However, these transgressions have often been downplayed by the government. The ongoing territorial issues along the border have created concerns among the local population about the incremental loss of land.

According to figures provided by the Indian government, Chinese soldiers on foot crossed the Line of Actual Control (LAC) 663 times in 2019, as perceived by New Delhi. This marked an increase compared to 428 incidents in 2015. Aerial crossings also saw a rise, with 108 incidents in 2019, up from 47 in 2017. (Sushant Singh, 2020). The official explanation for normal incursions at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is around 250-300 annually, with an average of 25 to 30 incursions in a month. (Stobdan, 2010:14).

Major recent incursions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh include events in 2009 at Chumur and Demchok in the Nyoma Sub-division, the Depsang incursion in 2013, and the Galwan Valley incursion in 2020. In 2009, the Deputy Commissioner of Leh reported that the Chinese army had warned shepherds on the Indian side of the border in Changthang to vacate the area or face consequences. (Correspondent Hindustan Times, 2009). This incident illustrates the challenges faced by the nomadic Changpa in their daily lives.

After the disengagement at Galwan River Valley to defuse the conflict, both the Indian and Chinese troops withdrew 2 to 10 kilometers at different points from the Line of Actual Control (LAC). This withdrawal left a significant portion of land as a no man's land, including the traditional pasture lands of Phobrang, Chushul, Mann, Merak, and Lukung.

Kochok Stanzin<sup>4</sup> mentioned that these areas have become a 'Buffer Zone,' leading to a reduction in their traditional pasture lands, impacting the 90% of nomadic people who depend on their herds and livestock. The traditional winter pasture areas of Chushul, including Phurtsog Karpo, PhurtsogNakpo, Helmet Top, Bomp Top, Gurung Hill, Magar Hill, Rezag La, Rinchen La, and Mukpa Re, are now restricted for the local nomads. (Stanzin 2023). The 'Finger Belt,' locally known as Nag Lungpa and Kar Lungpa, which serves as the grazing area for the nomads of Mann Pangong, has become disputed and designated as a 'No Patrol Zone' following the disengagement. Stanzin further added, "that we have almost lost Ane La, where they had a permanent post in 1959, and Tharsang La and Kui-La have now become Buffer Zones".(Ibid).

KonchokStobgais, the traditional head of the village or Goba<sup>5</sup> of Phobrang village, located 60 kilometers from Patrolling Point 17, mentioned in an interview that over the past two years, the army had restricted grazers from accessing land at Ani La, Thadang Valley, and Nag-Lungpa. With each disengagement process, the army has further ceded space to China, creating new 'Buffer Zones.' Stobgais added that in the last year alone, at least three large grazing areas near the village have been turned into 'No Man's Land' or 'Buffer Zones' after Indian troops pulled back from Patrolling Points in the Kugrang Valley, including PP-15, PP-16, and PP-17.(Singh 2022)

### **Conclusion:**

After conducting fieldwork in Changthang in November 2023, it was observed that the Changpa community leads a challenging life under constant surveillance from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). Many of their traditional grazing lands have become disputed, restricting access to their herds. Consequently, the renowned Pashmina production, considered the finest in the Himalayan region, has significantly declined. This transformation has prompted the nomadic Changpa to shift away from traditional livestock cultivation, engaging in alternative sectors such as tourism and small entrepreneurship. The changing dynamics have also led to increased outmigration to cities, where individuals seek better opportunities and alternative sources of income. The traditional way of life is undergoing rapid transformation in response to the challenges posed by geopolitical factors and economic shifts.

Government initiatives like the Vibrant Village Programme (VVP) in border villages are crucial for the well-being of the people in the area. The program focuses on the

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<sup>4</sup>Konchok Stanzin is an Independent Councillor from Chushul Constituency in Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) Leh

<sup>5</sup>Goba is Ladakhi name 'Head Man' or 'Village Head Man'. It is a traditional system of village representative who handle the village problems.

development of border villages, encompassing various aspects such as Livelihood Generation, Skill Development, Housing, Village Infrastructure, Road Connectivity, Community Infrastructure, Tourism, Off-Grid Electricity, Eco-System Regeneration, Telecom & Internet Connectivity, Television Connectivity, IT-based Common Services Centres, Financial Inclusion, and Cooperatives.

In addition to such initiatives, the government needs to engage and build confidence with residents during border meetings between Indian and Chinese officials in Ladakh to ease conflicts. The resident nomadic Changpas possess valuable knowledge about the territorial limits of their grazing lands, the nature of the terrain, and customary landmarks of the border. Involving them in discussions can contribute to a more informed and collaborative resolution of border-related issues. A cordial and civil-military relationship is needed to build trust and confidence in each other.

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