

Pastoralists of Himalayas

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ABSTRACT Pastoral societies have revived strong and renewed interest among the anthropologist. Pastoralism is a subsistence pattern in which people make their living by domesticating large herds of animals. The pastoral subsistence economy provides an adaptation to such conditions since it promotes the conversion of the low quality plant resources into portable, high quality animal foods. However, the overall low level of energy availability necessitates low population density and high mobility among pastoral population. Within a pastoral society the ecosystem diversity does not only means the variety of ecological zones or habitats, but, it encompasses cultural diversity and ecological processes related to different pastoral production systems as well. Therefore, biodiversity provides a fundamental base to pastoralism and to the overall economic systems. Sheep and goat pastoralism is a constant feature of traditional mountain societies. It is rare that any pastoral group lives exclusively with the products of their herds. All pastoralists have to look for supplementary forms of economic activity. The pastoral communities of Himalayas make use of resources like high mountain pastures by three different ways by characteristic mobility patterns, socio-economic organisation and property rights. The study deals with three pastoral groups of Himalayas who inhabit Ladakh, Sikkim and Himachal Pradesh. Changpas nomads of Changthang raise herds of sheep and pashmina goats, yaks and horses. Gaddis of Bharmour are agro-pastoralists and raise large flocks of sheep and goats. Bhutias of North Sikkim are agro-pastoralists and raise local cows and ox, yaks, sheep, goats and ponies. These societies use animals as providers of food, fuel, fiber, draught power and transportation. However, nomadic, semi-nomadic and transhumant pastoralist societies have lifestyles that revolve mainly around their livestock. The transhumant pastoral societies inhabiting the high Himalayan areas exploit the seasonal abundance of grazing areas. As social and ecological conditions change, pastoralists adjust accordingly. Pastoralists play an important role in the ecology of India. Their production of organic manure contributes to the maintenance of soil fertility. Their grazing controls invasive exotic species. Contrary to their reputation, pastoralists have traditional practices for conserving vegetation by rotational grazing. Pastoralists make a significant contribution to India's economy in terms of food security (milk), provision of draft animal power, as well as foreign exchange earnings (meat, fibre e.g. pashmina wool). Since pastoralists do not own land, their produce is generated by dependence on communally and state-owned grazing land. Currently, the trend towards globalization of the market, with pastoral lands increasingly being commercialised and/or turned in to national parks has created problems for the pastoralists. Due to neglect by officials and policy makers, pastoralists face deprivation from their traditional and customary rights to these grazing areas. The political marginalisation of pastoral communities paved the way for forcible eviction from their land and/or restriction of their movements. In Ladakh, protection of wildlife has proceeded at the expense of the availability of grass biomass for the herds of the pastoralists. Since Independence of India, the pastoralists of Himalayas have faced a series of significant changes from external political and economic changes. These structural alterations have brought adjustments in many aspects of the traditional pastoral system, including migratory cycle, local economy and social organisation. Many of them left their traditional transhumant way of life and settled along valleys. Some have settled in urban areas others stick to the pastoral activities by changing the composition of livestock by increasing number of goats and decreasing number of yaks. State policies regarding forests, agriculture, irrigation, fodder, famine, pastoral rights and migration are some of the mechanisms that contribute to the alteration of pastoral life-style. Development of animal husbandry is a major government goal. All pastoral groups in Himalaya face the similar constraints and stimuli. Natural exigencies- extreme weather conditions, drought, epidemics and predators result in reduction of animals. Likewise, social crisis, such as phases in domestic developmental cycle and work force shortage in herding groups cause concern in the community