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## *Drudgery of Pastoral Women in the Trans- Himalayan Region of Zanskar, Ladakh*

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Historically, highland pastoralism (*Doksa*) has been the predominant means of livelihoods in Zanskar which is primarily based on transhumant practices and entails cyclical migration of cattle from lowlands to highlands for judicious exploitation of seasonal reachable pastures at high altitudes in the Himalayas. This study demonstrates the *Doksa* activities, consequential fatigue and drudgery and gender discriminations of the pastoralist women and strategic interventions to solve the problems. Pastoralist women undoubtedly perform all the *Doksa* activities including milking twice a day, churning yoghurt, making and packing butter, drying *chhurpey*, collecting dung and making dung cakes etc. Due to the lack of modern techniques, the pastoral women are still sticking to their traditional methods for performing the job. The works they accomplish are cumbersome, back-breaking, repetitive, manual, laborious, time-consuming and non-remunerative to efforts made. Introduction of improved cattle production technologies and working methods can minimize their drudgery by saving time and energy. The pastoralist women are worst affected by acute poverty, gender inequality, drudgery and socioeconomic discriminations. The *Doksa* based livelihoods are threatened by increasingly hostile environmental conditions due to heavy pressure over pasture resources, underprivileged socioeconomic empowerment and lack of alternative income-generating activities. Overcoming unfair patriarchal family structures, unfavourable attitudes and related inequality against women remains a challenge. Strengthening women's role in decision-making, supporting women's empowerment in cattle production system and creating

**income-generating activities are the major aspects which needs to be addressed for socioeconomic improvement and livelihood diversification of pastoral women and hence, some policy perspectives needs to be implicated.**

### **HIGHLAND PASTORALISM (DOKSA)**

The *Doksa* system as practiced in Zanskar is different from other livestock farming practices followed elsewhere in Ladakh (Bhasin, 1988). Unlike nomadic pastoralists of Changthang, who keep on moving with their herds from one pasture to another round the year (Namgyal et al., 2007), Zanskaris move with their herds to one of the pastures and remain stationed there for about three-and-a-half months in summer and return to permanent settlements in their villages after the crop harvest (Raj, 2017). Unlike the long distance transhumance practiced in the Mediterranean or nomadism in Changthang, there is vertical movement of stock to pastures in Zanskar. Vertically their movement covers approximately 800 meters, from 3600 m to up to 4400 m above mean sea level. Longest horizontal migration distance is from Hamiling to Panzum *doksa* (35 km). There was not any instance of conflict regarding grazing rights by a particular group of herders to any grazing land or settlement. Traditionally, allocation is decided by first-come-first basis, during which the herders prefer to occupy their last year's locations.



**Figure 1. Women pastoralist at Oma Tangtse doksa**

Once a herder along with her own stock get settled at the *doksa*, other owners bring their cattle and hand them over to one of the herder (mostly an acquaintance) during their stay period at the *doksa*. Behind this system an informal agreement lies wherein the herders at *doksa* had to pay back 3 kg of

butter per animal per month to the animal's owners. Over the years, the contract value is decreasing and the cattle owners are even ready to abolish the contract in lieu of the good quality pasture available to their animals during their stay at the *doksa*. Quality of natural grazing in the high pastures has been estimated as between twice and four times higher than in the lower zones of the arid mountain valleys (Sheikh and Khan, 1982). The herders do not take responsibility if the animals are killed by any wild animals or they go astray.

### **TRADITIONAL SIGNIFICANCE**

The system of *doksa* is an example of how indomitable spirit and human ingenuity has made it possible to sustain livelihood in the harsh environment prevailing in the Zanskar region of the Himalayas (Raj et al., 2020). This strategy primarily evolved to provide them with sustainable livelihood, though commercial angle was attached to it in recent past. The system evolved for centuries in the climatic and socioeconomic setup prevailing in the Zanskar valley.



**Figure 2. Herd at Oma Tangtse doksa**



**Figure 3. Churning milk by women pastoralist**

The strategy involves harnessing the various resources distributed over spatial distance at various altitudes in the region. In addition, this system helps proper field crop management down in the valley during summer, when danger of damage caused to the standing crop by domestic animals always lurks around (Ahmad et al., 2018). The pastoralism system is tightly woven in the socio-economic and religio-cultural fabric of the inhabitants (Shergojry et al., 2017). Butter, the primary tangible product is essential not only for bodily nourishment of the natives, but also for spiritual fulfilments among these Buddhist communities. It is a religious perceptual requirement for them to offer handmade butter (considered more 'pure' than the butter readily available in the market) to monasteries for lamps and offering to the *lamas* as it is emanated from the fact that extreme hard work is involved in producing it. Provision of butter has 'status value' also. Its trade in Leh has other attraction too, like renew acquaintances and visit the capital (Crowden, 1994).



**Figure 4. Butter extraction from churned curd**

### DRUDGERY OF PASTORAL WOMEN

These herders were generally veteran women (Figure 1) who are expert in every aspect of dairying like milking, milk processing, packaging of butter etc. The herders lead hard lives and perform gruelling works in dairying activities (Figure 2). The day starts for them early in the morning before day-break, around 3.00 a.m. until dawn, around 7 p.m. in the evening. Their daily activities involve primarily milking twice a day, churning yoghurt (Figure 3), making and packing butter (Figure 4), drying *chhurpey*, collecting dung and making dung cakes. The most difficult task, as apparent to them, was milking manually 20-35 animals twice a daily. The problem was further aggravated because of smaller tits of *zhomo* that were

difficult to hold properly while milking. This resulted in blisters in upper portion of their palm and fingers (Figure 5). Current dairying practices are so cumbersome and exhausting that the herders hardly have time and energy to take care of them. The food habit of the herders is very poor as they took only one proper diet in whole day. The inability to feed adequate food in quantity and quality has resulted into undernourishment, malnutrition and ill-health. They reported a number of diseases like backache, sore throat, joint pains, gastric problems, eye sore etc. Occasional rains and associated snowfall on adjoining higher ridges compounded their problems. Strong cold wind caused death of almost 2-3 calves at each settlement surveyed (Figure 6). There was also problem of animals going astray. One of the herders at OT, Yangdol Dolkar reported that out of 29 *zhomos* she started the season with, 20 drove away in August leaving her with only 9 milking animals owned by her for rest of the season. Besides these difficulties, the herders had to face threat of wild animals too as brown bears are frequent visitors to the *doksas*.



**Figure 5. Blisters on hands due to heavy workload**



**Figure 6. Calf mortality due to excessive cold at Oma Tangtse doksa**

They target mainly the store room where provisions and finished milk products are kept. The area is habitat of many wild animals like Himalayan marmots, fox, wolf, wild dog, snow leopard and Himalayan brown bear. Their raids gave the herders sleepless nights many a times because they also attacked their animals. Provision of watchdog for advance warning and protection were also not feasible because the dogs escape away for fear of wild animals whenever they were kept at the *doksa*. The women herders were fully satisfied of their status in the family. They justify non-involvement of male counterparts- fathers and brothers- in this system as they migrate to other places (cities) for better economic opportunities. When the herders return back to their homes down in the valley they were not given any special status and they had to perform all their duties of homemaking as done by the other women in their homes or villages (Figure 7). Instead, young girls were provided with one new set of dress brought from Leh when their father/ brother go to sell butter/ *chhurpey*. The elder women offer pilgrimage which materializes only occasionally. Most of them had never travelled outside the Zanskar valley. They do not get any monetary reward in any case. The women folk who are the real custodian of this tradition have to bear the brunt of this system. However, harsh climate, threat of wild animals, excessive workload and very pathetic living conditions are some of the distressing problems facing these women. These dispelling factors combined with pulling pressures arising out of modern education and associated employment opportunities for aspiring young girls are driving them out of this system. There are many examples of abundant *doksas* in central and lower Zanskar. Unless this issue is addressed adequately and promptly by all stakeholders- farmers, religious communities, scientists and policy makers, we are going to witness more of these *doksas* being abandoned, as was observed at Panzum, Drangdrung, Balti *pulu* and Dabongsa during this study. The pastoral women are major care-takers of their families and undoubtedly play a predominant role in the socio-economic set up of the household economy. However, instead of giving credit, rewards and recognition, they are generally ignored and their male counterparts dominate the limelight (Borah, 2019).

### CONCLUSION

The study concluded that the pastoralist activities attended by the women herders of Zanskar were

drudgery prone due to acute poverty, constrained livelihood and traditional lifestyle. Introduction of modern technologies and improvised work system can reduce their drudgery by saving time and energy in their commonplace activities. Interventions that attempt to support gender equity and pastoral women's empowerment need to be implemented. Organization of capacity building and extension training programmes on production of alternative animal feed from local resources and improvement in the livestock production is imperative for poor pastoralist women to improve their livelihoods and economic well-being. Hence, policy implications are needed towards minimizing their drudgery by intervening science and technologies in their lifestyle.

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