Plan to irrigate pastures generates hopes for Changpas

By Tashi Morup

LEH, Mar 22: Since the 1962 war between India and China, the movement of the traditionally nomadic Ladakhi Changpas across the Changthang (the Tibetan Plateau that extends from Tibet to eastern Ladakh) has been restricted to the poorer grazing grounds for their flocks of sheep and goats on the Indian side of the Himalayas.

Now, a decision made by LAHDC to divert several free-flowing streams and tributaries of the River Indus to three areas of sparse vegetation into lush pastures has given the impoverished Changpas something to hope for. Irrigating this "cold desert" will only mean greatly improved grazing for their animals, it also means that the better quality wool that will result will find better prices in the market place.

The traditional pastures have considerably shrunk after China captured some important winter pasture reserves such as Skagzhung in Kuyal border area or movements on those pastures were restricted in view of the deployment of army posts. The post—Chinese occupation of Tibet and 1962 Indo-Chinese episode also saw large number of Tibetan refugee nomads settling in eastern Ladakh sharing the reduced pasture with the locals.

The resulting conflicts over sharing the pasture were somehow resolved but there is no idea about the destruction caused by the 40-years of overgrazing in Changthang range. Today, mere sheep and goat population figure is 2,95,000 including Tibetan—owned some 60,000 livestock concentrated in some important pasture areas. But the actual figure could be much more, according to official sources. Then evry Rebo (nomad household) owns a large number of yaks and horses.

Moreover, pastures reserved for winter pasture for seven months. "While as there is no dearth of summer pastures, the winter pastures are causes of concern for the breeders as they have to go for high stocking rates on limited pasture areas leading to extensive damage and denudation of the winter reserve pastures. This was stated in a project report on Development of Pashmina submitted to Central Wool Development Board Jodhpur, Rajasthan by District Sheep Husbandry Department, Leh.

Winter pastures undergo further exploitation at the hands of undesirable nomads, touristic groups with pack animals and car rally teams and other drivers racing through the pastures especially during summer. The pastures surrounding Tso—kar lakes in Samdol area and Ldak in Kharak are stark examples. But it is a bit different problem at Skagzhung winter pasture at Kuyal bordering China.

Padma Tashi, a resident of Kuyal said, in summer Tibetan nomads living in Chinese border area graze their livestock at Skagzhung, which the Kuyal and other local nomadic communities including Tibetans Refugees use in around December. The vast and relatively warm Skagzhung pasture was once the common water reserve pasture for almost whole of Changthang nomads.

Chintem Nurboo, a resident of Kharak said, leaving behind men including monks and 40 livestock all young and old members of a community would move towards their winter pasture Skagzhung. This is rendezvous for nomadic communities from all parts ceased to be so with China capturing a major portion of it. Setting up of army posts on both sides in this sensitive border area has further restricted the movement of livestock.

Though the Changthang is spread over an area of approximately 22000 square kilometers, woke up again to discover the overflowing natural waterways gurgling past the Changthang wilderness. Even as the administration have as many as seven major irrigation projects in hands to get on with, there are abandoned carcasses of earlier attempts to build canals that only reminds of the ugly phase of corruption prevalent at that time. Over 20-year-old Durugh canal worth over a crore rupees and Zara canal in Kharak has not yet produced a shrub.

Though this time Ladakhi Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) is directing the project implementation. And

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