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Drokpa's of Northern Sikkim: Their food and culture as a means of living a traditional way of good life

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Abstract

Drokpas or Dokpas as their name suggests is a Tibetan word meaning 'nomad' or 'high pastoral people'. Drokpa are nomadic mountain people who occupy the higher pasture lands in the valleys of Tibet, Sikkim, Bhutan, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh. Drokpa mainly depends upon herding yaks and sheep in the high-altitude grasslands. Since Drokpa share symbiotic relations with yaks for their sustenance herding remained a part of life for them in the Himalayas of north Sikkim. Thus, Drokpas are known for their unique culture and way of life.

Despite the challenge faced by the Drokpas in extremely rough conditions at altitudes ranging from nearly 15,000ft, their unique dietary practices stand as the central focus of the paper. Drokpa's diet includes not only products made from animals but also locally grown vegetables and crops such as barley and potatoes. Their main food items comprise *tsampa* (roasted barley flour), rice, yak meat, potatoes and other animal-made products. For cooking, Drokpas depend on dung cakes as wood. Since they herd above their treeline. The unique food culture explores the Drokpa's means of living the good life in the extremely harsh weather of north Sikkim.

Today, the sizeable Drokpa populations of north Sikkim who are retaining their traditions are exposed towards the rapid pace of development in the era of modernization. Environmental changes led to a declining yak population. Only a few remaining Drokpas of north Sikkim retain their ancestral traditional knowledge system including food habits which have cultural and ecological value for the future.

Keywords: Drokpas, *Tsampas*, Nomads

Introduction

Sikkim was considered Tibet's vassal state before British intervention in the affairs of the Himalayan kingdom. Before the arrival of the British, Sikkim shared close cultural and historical ties with Tibet. Sikkim shares open border facilities with Tibet. The northern districts of Sikkim that share a border with Tibet were used for grazing facilities by both the border communities of northern Sikkim. The northern communities of Sikkim such as Bhutia's of Lachenpas and Lachungpas and particularly Drokpa's share closer affinity with Tibet since time immemorial. These communities enjoyed open border trade with their Tibetan counterparts. Drokpa enjoyed a nomadic lifestyle and was well adapted to high-altitude regions. Yak is considered the main lifeline for their sustenance. Drokpa's main occupation lies with trade, and animal husbandry including dairy products. However, due to modernity, the occupational pattern of Drokpas of Sikkim has changed.

J Ware Edgar's Report on a visit to Sikkim and the Thibetan frontiers ^[1] notice about Drokpas people who during the month of summer live in the valley of the Mochoo, in Tibet where they cultivate grain, but their main source is derived from their flocks & herds which they graze on the great pastures that lie on both Sikkim and Tibet sides of the chola range. During the winter snowy seasons, Drokpas drive their sheep and cattle to the lower slopes of Sikkim, where they cultivate patches of wheat, barley and buckwheat. Drokpas animals made products such as butter and a kind of cream cheese were supplied from the northern part of Sikkim to the Darjeeling markets and then to Tibet. On account of Drokpas herds of the Phari valley in Tibet, they had to produce butter and cheese as well as beef for the Tibetan authority. Despite J.W Edgar in his report does not mention about particularly Drokpa's people instead use a term such as herdsman? These herdsman are none other than Drokpas themselves. Since Drokpas practiced a trans-pastoral economy they paid revenue to

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both Rajah of Sikkim and the Tibetan government. Revenue was paid in the form of kinds such as butter and cheese to the value of 6 yearly to each government [2]. Besides taxation for herds include services, and sell of cows to both Sikkim Rajah and to the Phari Jungpen.

Concerning the dietary practices of the Drokpa of north Sikkim, not much is known about their food habits. However, based on the assumption one can argue that since their main dietary practices come from animal-made products. Since, they survived in the high alpine region of Sikkim; growing vegetable crops are next to impossible. Therefore, they derived their source of livelihood from grazing animals particularly yak and sheep in the high mountainous region of Sikkim. So, animals made products form an important part of their food habits.

Drokpas are widely scattered in almost all the Himalayan belt from the western to eastern parts of the Himalayas. From Ladakh to Lahul & Spiti region of Himachal Pradesh and from Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, Drokpas are to be found. Drokpas of Sikkim are not enlisted as per the Schedule Tribe Order of 1978 which included eight other sub-castes within the fold of Bhutia subjects. Drokpas are indigenous people having typical characteristics and are not similar to other ethnic groups living in Sikkim. Drokpas language is slightly different from Bhutia dialects. Their main medium of communication is mainly Tibetans. They were arch-Buddhist followers and

also practiced their local shamanistic rituals during special occasions and festivities.

Today, Drokpas migrated towards the Tso Lhamu region during the limited snow cover in the months of October to November and returned to the Lashar-Giagong region by early May during the summer seasons [3]. Due to the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the subsequent closure of the border, these nomadic Drokpas Tran-Himalayan migratory practices were at a standstill. They were not allowed to carry out their pastoral practices on the Tibet side of the border. Earlier they cross over Tibet via Nyima la or Naku la. This made Drokpas adopt a sustainable resource management to use forage for grazing. Our new generations migrate towards cities for education and employment in a labour shortage. Domestication of yaks and sheep is becoming expensive. Owners started to employ paid herders to graze their yak and sheep. Drokpas had fundamentally changed their traditional way of living and their population growth rate is negative. In other parts of the world indigenous population is growing rapidly. However, the case of the indigenous population from the Himalayan region is completely different. Indigenous people such as Drokpas of Sikkim are declining at a rapid pace. Therefore, the research paper will elaborately explore the traditional food habits of Drokpas people. Since Drokpas food is traditionally healthy and eco-friendly it helps us to maintain a good and healthy life.

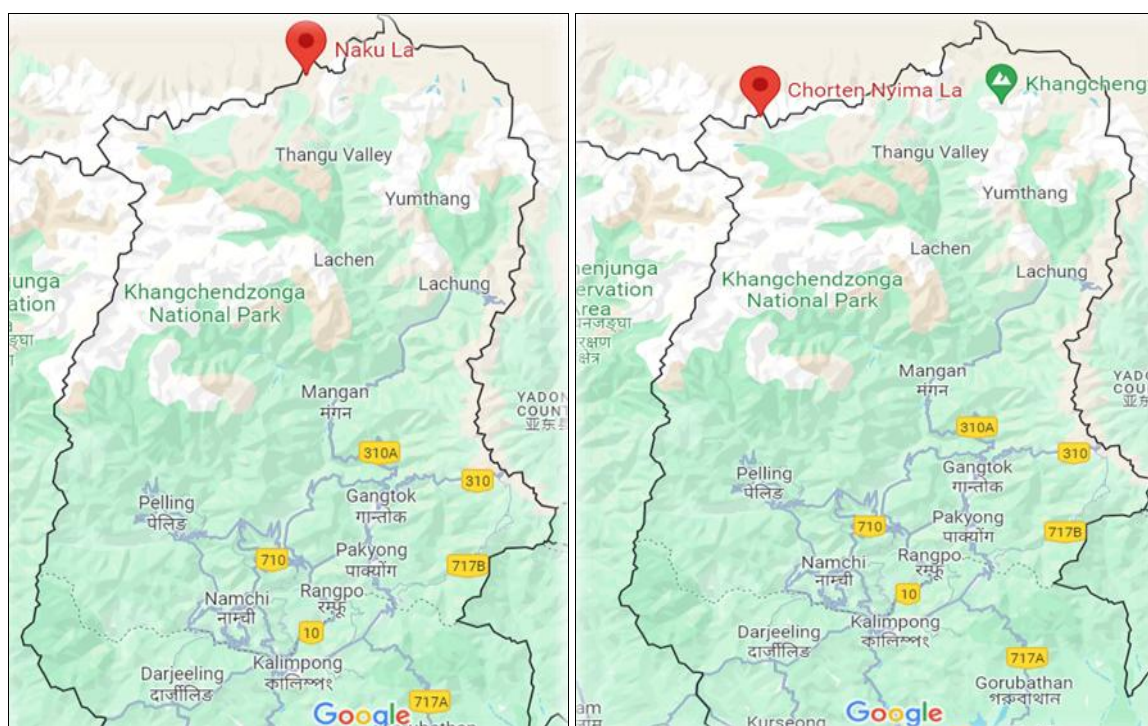


Fig: Map showing ancient pass used for pasturage by Drokpas to enter over Tibetan grasslands

Drokpas food and drinks

Food forms an important part of human life. Without food, humans can't survive. Food, shelter and clothing are essential components of human survival. Drokpas who based their economy on semi-pastoral and trade activities mainly depended upon animal products. In temperate cold areas, important animals such as Yak and sheep are their lifeline. Drokpas of northern Sikkim are aware of their traditional food items that pass the knowledge from generation to generation. Drokpas' wealth is measured based

on several cattle such as Yak and sheep. Drokpas had rich traditional knowledge of preserving fermented food and drinks. Animals-made products such as milk, butter, cheese and its fermentation process are highly prepared by the Drokpas. Cheesecake or Chhurpi were in high demand in Sikkim. Drokpas knew about preserving their eatable items over a longer period.

Drokpas are non-vegetarians. Meat is their main staple delicacy. Meat for yak and sheep is available in their locality. Due to highly colder areas, meat is considered an

option for their consumption. Drokpas also eat other non-vegetarian items such as Chicken, fish, beef, mutton etc brought up from nearby areas such as Lachen, Lachung and Chungthang. Vegetables such as potatoes were cultivated during the favourable weather seasons. J.Ware Edgar ^[4] noticed about cultivation of wheat, barley and buckwheat by the Drokpas of northern Sikkim. These cereal crops are of high nutrition that helps to maintain our health a good shape.

Besides meat, Drokpas elderly preferred to eat Tsampa (dry paddy powder) as their main diet. Tsampa is used in both Buddhist rituals for offerings and other purposes. Tibetan herbal teas with rich vitamins were also included in their drinks. Shuja or butter teas are commonly prepared in the Drokpas household. Shuja is required for them to keep their body warm in extreme weather conditions. Drokpas lived in the high-altitude region of Lashar Valley and Tso Lhamu

region which is covered by blankets of snow around the year. Alcohol consumption within Drokpas is common. In earlier days, alcohol from Gangtok, Lachen, Lachung and Chungthang are brought up to Drokpas village for sale. Local alcohols such as Arah and Chang were consumed as drinks for merry-making and to protect their body warm. Alcohol found huge demand within Drokpas society. Sikkim traders from Gangtok sell Murwa of their own grown to the value of about six rupees, which they took to Chumbi for sale. This sum of six rupees which they got from Chumbi for the sale of Murwa would fetch four maunds of salt at Phari, which they could sell in Darjeeling for Rs 32, while the price of Murwa at Gangtok stand at only Rs 4-8 ^[5]. Children were prohibited from consuming alcoholic drinks. In present times, Drokpas derived their alcoholic drinks source such as Whiskey from the Indian army.

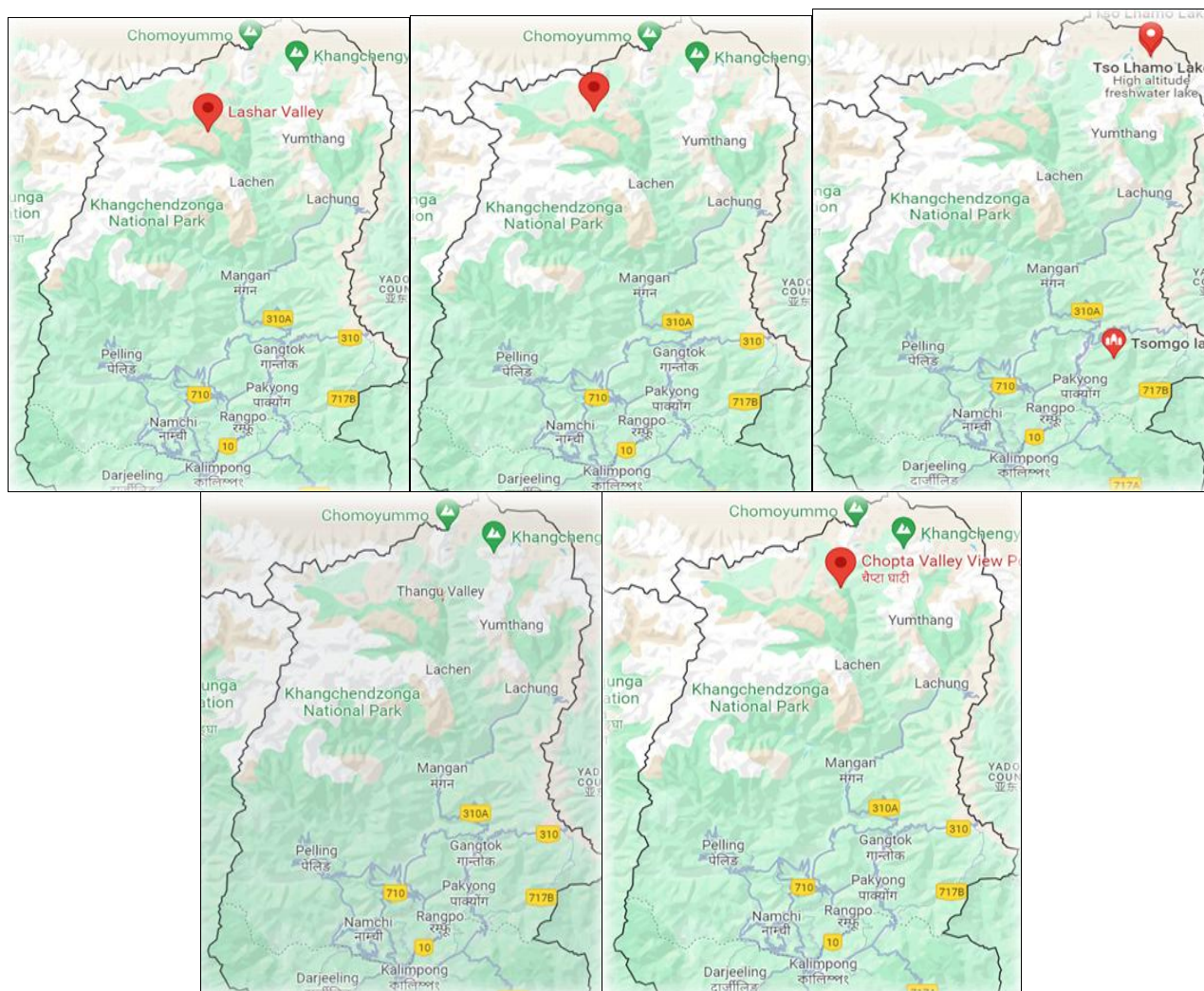


Fig: Above illustration map showing Drokpas settlement area and their grazing land in North Sikkim

The icy cold desert of the Tso Lhamu region makes it difficult for humans to live in their habitat region. Drokpas on the other hand through generations had adopted their natural surrounding environment. They proudly carry forward their traditional occupational practices. Drokpas have practiced agro-pastoralism in areas such as Lhonak Valley, Muguthang, Thangu Tso Lhamu and Lashar Valley above 4000m above sea level for centuries. Drokpas or Tibetan pastoralists herd yaks, *dzos* (cow-yak hybrid), sheep & goats (*pasmine* type). Dzumsa and Drokpas had jointly

regulated and managed the grazing regime of the greater Himalaya, their transition zone. Dzumsa specifies dates for herds to graze their cattle. Dzumsa controls rotational grazing. During the work of Ghanshayam Sharma and Tara Devi Dhakal ^[6], 23 Drokpa families of Tso Lhamu and Muguthang region manage about 90% of the yak population. They mainly depend upon yak, sheep and goat dung for heating and cooking during the winter month. Their main livestock products such as wool, meat, cheese, and fat (*tsilu* of yak and sheep) fetch good income. Pranab

Chanchani, G.S Rawat and S.P Gayal in their work mention that Drokpa's primary source of food is meat. Their livestock serves as their eatables dietary food keeping given the extreme topographical challenge. Meat demands are huge in the region also fulfilling the low-lying Lachen population. Their work found out that dairy was not a prominent industry. However, Drokpas practice the Buddhist faith and the slaughter of their livestock is carried out at the lower belt outside of their inhabited area of the Tso Lhamu region. Tso Lhamu is considered a very sacred place by the Buddhists of Sikkim. Hunting is prohibited within nomadic societies.

The traditional homestead products such as blankets, rugs and carpets made from wool from high altitude and sheep are rare and marketable. Animal products such as skin, meat, cheese, butter etc and *Yarsa Guemboon* (*Cordyceps Sinensis*) potentially provide high-value market options. Fruits and crops such as barley, and wheat in low-lying regions, potatoes, apples, peas, and beans were also grown in the area.

However, in the case of man-wildlife conflicts, Drokpas may resort to retaliatory actions to prevent their livestock from existing prey. Drokpas, respect the wild species that exist between their environments.

Other than Drokpas the inhabited area of Tso Lhamu plateau is also dominated by Indian security forces. The region is highly sensitive in terms of national security concerns. The local populace was prohibited from entering the region or needing special security clearance to enter the zone. This area is closer proximate to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of Tibet. Indian army collaborates with native Drokpas who have vast knowledge of the local geomorphology and assist the local security agency in monitoring the international border. The army presence in the area led to several developmental initiatives that included road construction, building new houses etc. Gradually, the region rich in biodiversity hotspots is slowly degrading its natural prestige due to human greed for developmental goals. This new road was being built across the wildlife zone. Development and pollution have hampered the local vegetation and valuable topsoil. Ever competition to match the Chinese infrastructure development also severely hampered the natural habitats ecosystem. Therefore, along with the development goals the local agency should take important initiative to safeguard the pristine natural environment.

Drokpa's Religion

The early history of Buddhism in Sikkim can be dated back to the 8th century AD. Buddhism came from Sikkim via Tibet. Before the spread of Buddhism in Sikkim the native religious practices were Bon or natural worshippers. Guru Padmasambhava entrusted the task of transforming native natural religious practices into Buddhism. The two main religious sects i.e., Red Hat and Yellow Hat sects played prominent roles in the spread of Buddhism in Sikkim. Their difference over belief system in Tibet ultimately Red Hat sect's followers crossed over Tibet and established the Buddhist monarchy in Sikkim [7].

Every year nomadic Drokpa community of north Sikkim celebrates the Drukpa Tsheche festival with great fanfare and festivity in the Muguthang Valley of north Sikkim. The festival is supported by Lachen *Dzumsa* with the offering of prayer flags and holy rituals to the local deity. Traditional

sports activities such as yak race, archery, dance and food fests were on display. The main purpose of the celebration of the festivals is to preserve their traditional culture alive.

Health benefits of drokpa food

Drokpa found mainly in the high Himalayan region of Asia are unique in terms of the ancient primitive lifestyle. Traditionally they lived beyond the reach of the government. They continue to exercise their ancient Tran-Himalayan pastoral practices. However, after the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959, Chinese authorities imposed sanctions restricting nomadic lifestyles and curtailing their free movement. Since Drokpas are nomadic pastoralists their diet is comprised mainly of dairy products from Yak and sheep. The earliest evidence of dairying was first reported in northwestern Anatolia in the seventh millennium BC. However, the region where the first milking was practiced remains still unknown. In the sixth millennium BC in Eastern Europe and the fourth millennium BC in Britain, the archaeological pottery found suggests the presence of organic residue preserved that contributes to the evidence of the use of processed milk [8]. Drokpas had vast traditional knowledge of the natural fermentation of dairy-made products derived from Yaks. The word 'fermentation' is derived from the Latin word 'fervere' meaning 'to boil'. Elie Metchnikoff was the first to recognize the benefits of fermented food consumption [9]. Thus, fermentation is one of the oldest techniques of food preservation.

The Drokpa people of the high Himalayan region confidently and proudly practice Tran-Himalayan pastoralism while consuming dairy products from Yaks and sheep. They expertly transform these into special fermented foods, such as cheese *churpi*, which have been scientifically proven to possess probiotic properties that provide numerous therapeutic health benefits. Yak milk and cheese *churpi* are rich in essential nutrients such as calcium, phosphorus, vitamins, and lactoferrin, which are critical for optimal health. They prepared special fermented *Chu*, *Shyow*, *maa*, *Churkham*, cheese (*churpi*) etc. Himalayan fermented yak milk has probiotic properties. The term probiotic means microorganisms being present alive when conferring a health benefit will add to the host. The probiotic food contains lactobacilli which is present in fermented milk will provide therapeutic health benefits. The benefits of probiotic food on human health and its nutritional values are internationally recognized by health professionals. This Himalayan fermented milk stimulates the immune system and cures stomach-related disease [10].

Yak milk is a rich source of calcium, phosphorous, vitamins, lactoferrin and so on. Calcium and phosphorus are beneficial for bone health and heart health. Vitamins mainly include A, B; and D helps in metabolism body growth, bone health, vision and reduced risk of colon cancer. Some of the proteins especially lactoferrin enhance the immune system, weight measurement, antimicrobial substance and binding toxic substances [11]. On the other hand, yak meat contains high protein which is vital for the human body. Yak milk has high iron vital for preventing anemia. It also contains omega-3 fatty acids important for heart-health properties [12]. So, it is very rare to find out that Drokpas suffered from heart disease. Yak meat they consume has high nutritional value which prevents them from any cardiovascular risk disease [13]. The Drokpa staple food, *Tsampa*, is roasted barley flour that is rich in fiber, minerals, and probiotics that

promote the growth of healthy gut-bacteria. In addition to animal husbandry, the Drokpa also engage in intensive potato farming for additional income. The Drokpa people of the high Himalayan region have an ancient and unique lifestyle that involves Tran-Himalayan pastoral practices. Their diet mainly consists of dairy products from Yaks and sheep, which they use to make special fermented foods such as cheese *churpi*. These foods have been found to have probiotic properties that provide numerous therapeutic health benefits. Yak milk and cheese *churpi* are rich in essential nutrients such as calcium, phosphorus, vitamins, lactoferrin, and other nutrients that are vital for good health. *Tsampa* contain unsaturated fatty acids that add essential fats beneficial for heart health. *Tsampa* is rich in fibre, minerals and its probiotic that helps to promote the growth of healthy gut bacteria. The *Tsampa* also contain a low glycemic index that keeps human blood sugar from spiking ^[14].

Dokpa in the lower area of Lashar Valley in north Sikkim cultivates intensive potato farming. Potato farming contributes enormous income to the Drokpa household. Besides dairy made products agriculture contributes a small portion of their source of income. Drokpa is mainly engaged in animal husbandry as a source of their livelihood. Since animals provide fuel and manure help in growing vegetables in their local garden. Potato is also one of the staple foods of the Drokpa tribe. Potato is rich in carbohydrates, protein, minerals, vitamins and other useful phytochemicals. Antioxidants contained in potatoes help to prevent inflammation control from cardiovascular risk and heart disease. Potatoes that contain caffeic and chlorogenic acids help in the prevention of type-2 diabetes and still studies are going on ^[15].

Impact of climate changes

Climate change is one of the serious problems affecting the lifestyle of the Drokpa community. Today climate changes have disrupted the seasonal pastoral movements to graze their livestock in the high-altitude region of north Sikkim. The traditional occupation based upon trading and nomadic pastoralism between the Sikkim and Tibet border was stopped after the 1962 war with China. Thereafter, the deployment of troops along the frontiers was increased. Though the pastoral movement was restricted after 1959, the actual cross-border movement was completely stopped after the 1962 Sino-Indo War ^[16]. Climate variability, social marginalization of the herders, and topographical challenges were seen as the root cause of their declining nomad population in Sikkim. The increase in summer temperature, low snowfall, landslides, avalanches and reduction in pasture covers in the alpine region affect the nomadic community for survival. The threat posed by free-ranging dogs and wild carnivores disrupted the grazing activities of the Drokpas. The irregular weather phenomenon severely affected the nomad's settlements. Their local vegetation suited for pasturage was negatively grown. Extreme irregular winter snowfall and short spells of heavy rainfall during summer affected the local vegetation of the region. Insufficient forage availability increased the risk of Yak strength for survival.

Out of six districts of Sikkim, the North district forms the largest district in Sikkim. The total area covered in north Sikkim is 4226 sq. km ^[17]. The northern ridges of the districts are inhabited by the Drokpas of Sikkim who

practice trans-nomadic pastoralism. The geographical position of the area inhabited by Drokpas provides ample reasons for rearing grazing ground. Their range of the Tibetan plateau in the north and the Bay of Bengal in the south make climate varies from tropical moist forests to the icy cold deserts in the north. Heavy precipitations in the seasons provide lush green vegetation suitable for grazing. Cold deserts situated around the Sikkim plateau are popularly known as Tso Lhamu, one of the major epicenters of Drokpas cattle grazing ground. Tso Lhamu area covers about 400 sq km and lies in the trans-Himalayan region. This plateau is mainly used by Drokpas herders to graze their livestock in the region ^[18].

The area inhabited by Drokpas is listed as 'endangered' (schedule 1) in the Indian Wildlife Protection Act ^[19]. (IWPA). Tso Lhamu plateau is used as a winter grazing camp by the Drokpas. The plateau is also home to numerous 'endangered' wild animals. Prominent among them are snow leopards, Tibetan wolves, Tibetan sand foxes, Tibetan argali, Tibetan gazelle kiang blue sheep etc. Drokpas continued to practice their traditional grazing of cattle such as habour yaks, sheep and goats alongside wild animals found around the habitat region. Drokpas' major concern was the threat posed by predators of Tibetan foxes while grazing the cattle in the region. The wild animals and domestic ungulates severely affected the traditional pastoral practices of the native Drokpas. Frequent attacks of wolves and feral dogs disrupted the age-old pastoral practices of the Drokpas. Today, Drokpas migrated towards the Tso Lhamu region during the limited snow cover in the months of October to November and returned to the Lashar-Giagong region by early May during the summer seasons ^[20]. Due to the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the subsequent closure of the border, these nomadic Drokpas Tran-Himalayan migratory practices were at a standstill. They were not allowed to carry out their pastoral practices on the Tibet side of the border. Earlier they cross over Tibet via Nyima la or Naku la. This made Drokpas adopt a sustainable resource management to use forage for grazing. Our new generations migrate towards cities for education and employment in a labour shortage. Domestication of yaks and sheep is becoming expensive. Owners started to employ paid herders to graze their yak and sheep.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Drokpa of northern Sikkim are a few remaining ancient nomadic pastoralist groups found in Tibet, Sikkim, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh that continue to exercise their traditional pastoral practices. Their major source of income comes from rearing animal husbandry. Drokpas of Sikkim are mainly scattered in areas such as Lashar Valley, Thangu, and Muguthang which are beyond the reach of the government. The local traditional institutions such as the Dzumsa system regulate the migratory practices of herders during peak grassland seasons. The food and culture of Drokpas also revolve around animal-made products. Fermented yak and sheep milk have high medicinal values that benefit Drokpas to survive in harsh weather. They had vast traditional knowledge about food from animal-made products.

Despite the continuity in traditional pastoral practices, today the numbers of Nomads families are declining. The impact of modernity can be felt by the younger generations as they are not willing to carry forward their traditional occupation.

The younger generation preferred the modern education system over the primitive lifestyle. Today, nomadic Drokpas families are engaged in the hotel business in some of the major towns of Mangan, Chungthang and Gangtok. On the other hand, the impact of climate change greatly affected the nomadic way of life. The erratic weather phenomena make it difficult for herders to graze their cattle at higher elevations. Cloud bursts during monsoon seasons cause havoc due to landslides, and floods cause nuisance for the herder community. Shortage of grassland is seen as another reason for declining pastoral practices. Recently, hundreds of yak died due to the spread of plaque. Thereafter, herders were completely demoralized and shattered by the incident. Today, yak populations in Sikkim are declining rapidly. Hardly, few families carry forward their traditional nomadic pastoralism in the event of a globalized world.

Drokpas food and drinks

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from Chumbi for the sale of Murwa would fetch four maunds of salt at Phari, which they could sell in Darjeeling for Rs 32, while the price of Murwa at Gangtok stand at only Rs 4-8^[10]. Children were prohibited from consuming alcoholic drinks. In present times, Drokpas derived their alcoholic drinks source such as Whiskey from the Indian army.

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