



# The growing threat to India's pastoral pashmina producers

Vandana K reports on how the climate crisis is among the key factors affecting goat herders in Ladakh

Chhimet Rinzin in the Karzok Phu pasture, Changthang, Ladakh. Photos by Vandana K

**O**n a Monday afternoon in late August, Chhimet Rinzin squints in the glare of the afternoon sun. He is standing on a tiny mound in a vast pastureland, surrounded by barren, beige-coloured hills. Behind these hills, under the bluest of blue skies, stand snow-capped mountains. A strong, cold wind blows relentlessly.

“Phee-ee, phee-ee,” Rinzin whistles as he watches over his goats and sheep.

It's the first day of the Ladakh Nomadic Festival 2021. The venue is Karzok Phu, a pasture in Changthang, a remote region in Ladakh, India. The government has organised the festival for the last two years to celebrate the Changpa culture.

Rinzin belongs to the Changpa people, an Indigenous nomadic pastoral community known for raising a breed of goat that produces pashmina, considered the world's finest grade of cashmere wool. According to the government's Sheep Husbandry Department in Leh, the capital of Ladakh, there are 3,000 households in Changthang who rear goats for pashmina and there are 200,000 such goats in Leh district.

Rinzin and his family of six spend their summers in Karzok Phu and migrate to another place in the winter. Rinzin lists some of the changes he has seen in his environment over the years: more cars, more smoke, less snow, less water. “If snow is less, the grass will be less. What will we do then? [The goats] won't have anything to eat, they will become weak and die. I have lost many goats because there wasn't enough grass,” he says.

Ladakh, a union territory in India, is a remote high-altitude

region located in the Trans-Himalaya. It is a rain-shadow area, which means it does not experience the monsoon rains. It is a cold desert with sparse vegetation and several glaciers. The climate crisis is melting the glaciers and has changed the snowfall pattern, which in turn impacts the ecosystem. A study published in 2017 by researchers at Heidelberg University showed that the glaciated area of the Lungser range in Changthang saw relative ice cover loss of 17.7% between 1969 and 2014. Ladakh lies on the Tibetan Plateau. This plateau, known as the water tower of Asia, has freshwater resources that sustain 2 billion people. A 2022 study published in the journal *Nature Climate Change* has projected that climate change could lead to a substantial water shortage in the Tibetan plateau by 2050.

## The Indian government sees pashmina as a very high value product and is working on getting a Geographical Indication tag for Ladakhi pashmina

But it's not just climate breakdown that impacts the Changpa. The India–China border standoff has restricted the pastures where the Changpa once grazed their goats.

And Changthang itself lacks basic infrastructure. The road to Karzok is bumpy, there is no piped water supply in homes, and the power goes out at night. There is no hospital, and the entire area has just one school. A majority of the Changpa are also now educated in the formal schooling system. Many have moved away from pastoralism and settled in Choglamsar, near Leh.

Despite these odds, the Indian government has been encouraging pashmina production in Ladakh. India's most vibrant regional fashion movement is also in Ladakh, which has seen the emergence of homegrown labels such as Lena Ladakh and the cooperative Looms of Ladakh. These labels are now working directly with herders, spinners and weavers to produce different kinds of wool for the domestic as well as the global market. Saugat Biswas, the Divisional Commissioner of Ladakh, says that the government sees pashmina as a very high value product and is working on obtaining a Geographical Indication tag for Ladakhi pashmina.

Thinles Chorol is visiting the Nomadic Festival with her family. Huddled in her family's black tent made from yak wool, she is waiting for her group's musical performance. She is a singer, weaver and goatherd. Her family of six has Changra goats, sheep and yak. She takes turns with her neighbour to watch over the animals. “Until I am able to work, I just want to raise my goats and live in my village,” she says.

Chorol sent her three daughters to school in Leh for a better future. Her eldest daughter, Ishey Lhamo, aged 22, who is also a singer, sits beside her mother.

Lhamo has a great attachment to animals. “She cries a lot when an animal dies,” says Chorol. Once Lhamo even pleaded with fellow villagers not to kill a lynx that had been attacking their herds. When she comes home for holidays, she helps her mother with herding. Her grandfather, a nomad and trader, settled in the village of Kargyam.

Lhamo's father, Konchok Phunchok, who had gone to school as a child, used to drive a taxi for tourists. Later he sold the taxi, and now he is chair of the Block Development Council, a job in local governance that pays a meagre income of US\$194 per month. He continues to keep the family's herd, which within just one generation has reduced from 600 to 130 animals.

Lhamo recalls how until his last days her grandfather would send all his grandchildren to watch over the herd in the unbearable Ladakhi winters, when temperatures can reach as low as -27 °C. “I had to go herding in the extreme cold and I would be furious and wonder why my grandpa was so mean. I absolutely disliked him, but he was very good at heart... Now I follow what he taught me. I miss him,” she said.

Chorol doesn't know whether Lhamo will continue her ancestral profession because “she is a girl of today's times.” When I first met Lhamo and asked her whether she wanted to follow in her family's footsteps, she said, “It's an absolute question mark.” At that time she was trying to get into veterinary college so that she could look after her family's herd while caring for other animals. There is no veterinary college in Ladakh. The nearest one is in Jammu & Kashmir.

A Pashmina Wool Development Scheme has now been approved by the Ministry of Textiles with a budget allocation

of over Rs. 290 million (US\$4.5 million) to cover the five-year period between 2021 and 2026. The scheme focuses on breeding, animal feed, shelters, veterinary care, processing and marketing. However, there is no mention of any tangible steps towards biodiversity conservation or climate adaptation measures for the Changpa in Changthang.



Thinles Chorol and Ishey Lhamo

The fact is that there are two distinctly differing views about whether livestock herds are diminishing in size in the region, and seemingly no common ground between such divergent positions.

For example, Tsewang Namgail, director of the Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust, a local nonprofit, says that whilst there is currently no discourse on protection of pastureland, his research has shown an increase in the livestock population. In 2006 and 2007, three different studies co-authored by him revealed that the livestock population of goats and sheep was growing and competing for grass with wild animals such as kiang (wild ass), argali (wild sheep) and gazelle. He also explained that as herd sizes increase, herders also encroach on wetlands, and this can impact migratory birds. But since this research was carried out, there has been no further study conducted on this issue.

Leh's Sheep Husbandry Department claims that there has been a 30% decrease in the population of goats since 2005. “There are more ways available to make a livelihood – many households who used to rear livestock are now working in the tourism sector, road construction or army. This has led to a decline in livestock population,” says Tundup Namgail, district sheep husbandry officer.

When I spoke to Lhamo over the phone in December 2022, she told me that despite two attempts she had not been able to get into veterinary school. Instead she is now studying for a bachelor's degree in science in the nearby city of Jammu, following which she might obtain a year-long veterinary diploma after college. “I still want a chance to work with my family's animals,” she says. **R**

Vandana K is an independent journalist and producer based in Delhi, India. She is on Twitter @vandana\_writes and Instagram @vandana.writes