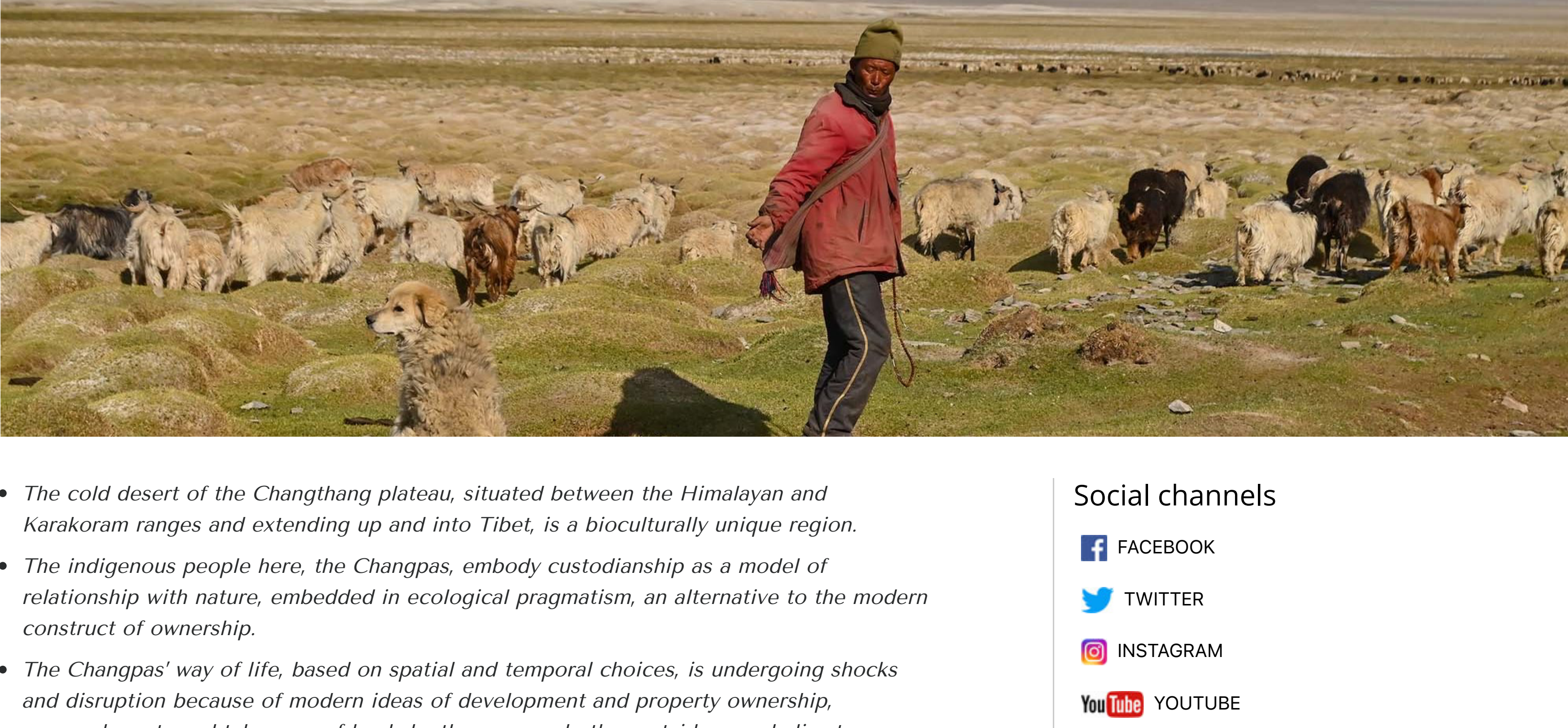


The Changpas’ way of life is undergoing shocks and disruption

by Shrishtee Bajpai and Ashish Kothari on 5 August 2022



- The cold desert of the Changthang plateau, situated between the Himalayan and Karakoram ranges and extending up and into Tibet, is a bioculturally unique region.
- The indigenous people here, the Changpas, embody custodianship as a model of relationship with nature, embedded in ecological pragmatism, an alternative to the modern construct of ownership.
- The Changpas' way of life, based on spatial and temporal choices, is undergoing shocks and disruption because of modern ideas of development and property ownership, encroachments and take-over of lands by the army and other outsiders, and climate change. However, some innovative attempts are being made to deal with the multiple crises that Changthang and the Changpas face.

The clouds were roaring as if a dragon had come to slay everything in its way, while chilly winds gushed through our bodies as if intent on possessing us, leaving a layer of fine dust on our clothes and equipment. One could just stagger in the midst of this wondrous unfolding, as sudden as it was dramatic, the skies having been clear and sunny just minutes before. “It is *de butsig*,” said Karma Sonam, our local host, a naturalist and researcher with the Nature Conservation Foundation. “In Ladakhi, *de butsig* is a demon insect, a name for a big dust storm. A smaller storm is *nyima zara*, ‘lunch for the sun’” Sonam-ley added, as he zipped outside the car to visit a Changpa shepherdess’ tent, which was standing wondrously firm against the raging storm.

We were on the eastern edge of the Changthang plateau in Ladakh, not too far from the Tibet (some call it China) border. The personification of natural occurrences such as storms, part of belief systems that recognise guardians spirits residing in the lands, mountains, springs, animals, and winds, are some of the ways that the Changpa pastoral communities of Changthang plateau make sense of the bitter cold winds, dust storms, freezing temperatures at an altitude ranging from 4500 to 7000 msl. The cold desert of this massive plateau, situated between the Himalayan and Karakoram ranges and extending up and into Tibet, is a bioculturally unique region. It comprises vast grasslands and sand deserts, high altitude lakes such as Tsokar, Tsomoriri, and Pangong, large marshy stretches, and rivers such as Hanle and Indus. The region sustains a unique diversity of animals and plants. It is the only known breeding site in India for black-necked crane and bar-headed goose, and home for snow leopard, Pallas’s cat, Tibetan grey wolf, wild ass (Kiang), Tibetan gazelle, argali, woolly hare, Tibetan lark, among many others.

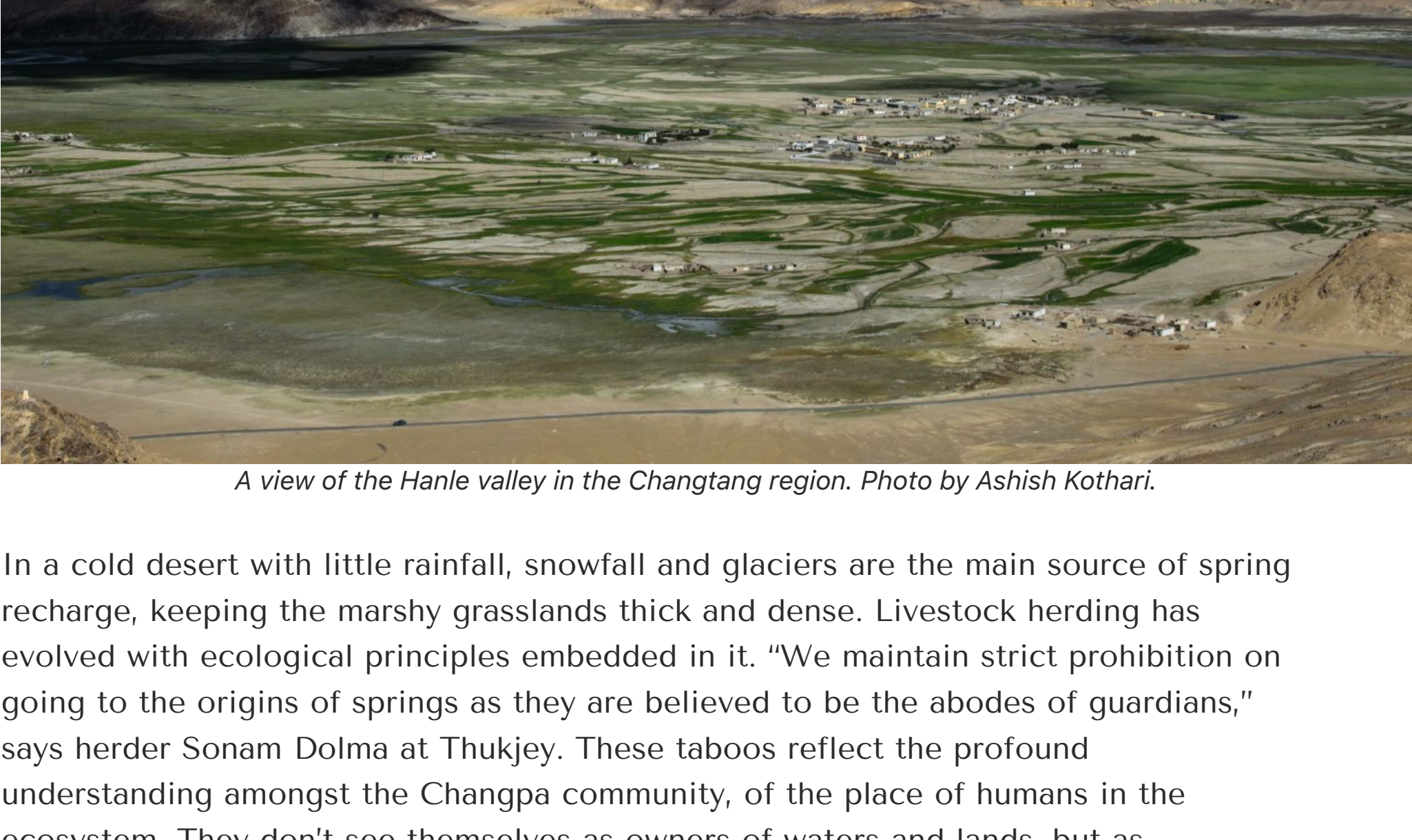


The Changthang region sustains a unique diversity of animals. The Asiatic wild ass (Kiang) is endemic to this region. Photo by Ashish Kothari.

The ecological conditions of the region including arid climate and sparse vegetation, support high-altitude nomadic pastoralism, and are not conducive to cultivation. People do grow basic crops like barley and peas, but primarily for their own and their animals’ consumption and for religious ceremonies. The Changpas, hence, have traditionally been primarily nomadic pastoralists, rearing yak, sheep, goat, horses, for their sustenance and livelihoods, including trade in products like wool.

“We have guardian spirits everywhere. Our pastures, springs, lands, mountains, snow, and animals are all protected by them,” says Nawang Tharchin, an elder and practitioner of Tantric Buddhism, in the semi-nomadic village Thukje on the banks of the brackish Tsokar Lake. “Our animals are very important to us, they help us in communicating with the guardian spirits. If our herd is lost, our communication is lost,” adds Tharchin-ley. The *lhos* and *lhus* (spirits in the village) are a ubiquitous presence, protecting the landscapes and humans living in them. All natural occurrences such as the snowfall in the mountains, and human activities – agriculture, livestock herding, management of pastures, birth and death – are to appease the spirits and seek penance for past actions.

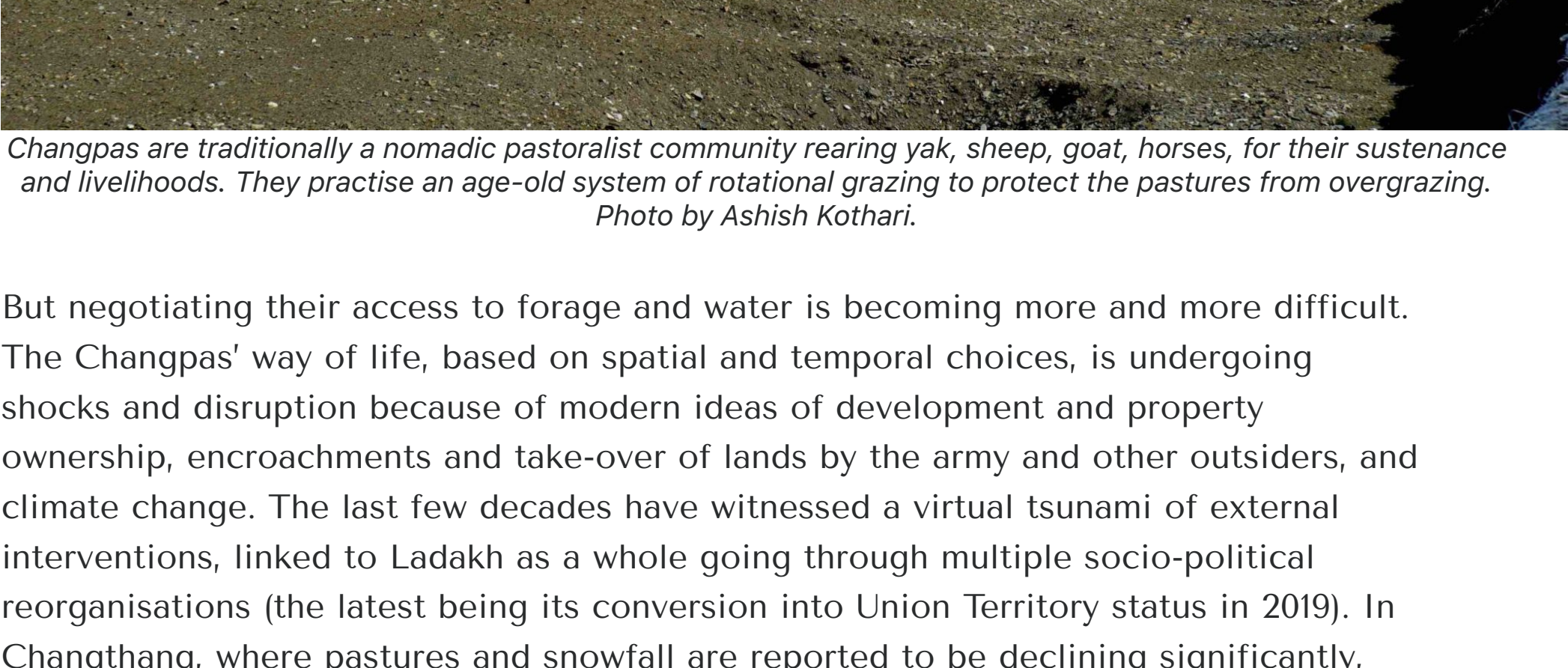
In these landscapes, people’s lives are part of a cosmic order where the ‘unnatural’ separation between humans and nature doesn’t exist. Large swathes of desert and grasslands are not empty lands but rather protected through deities and need to be cared for and tended to, by embedding all human activity within nature.



A view of the Hanle valley in the Changtang region. Photo by Ashish Kothari.

In a cold desert with little rainfall, snowfall and glaciers are the main source of spring recharge, keeping the marshy grasslands thick and dense. Livestock herding has evolved with ecological principles embedded in it. “We maintain strict prohibition on going to the origins of springs as they are believed to be the abodes of guardians,” says herder Sonam Dolma at Thukje. These taboos reflect the profound understanding amongst the Changpa community, of the place of humans in the ecosystem. They don’t see themselves as owners of waters and lands, but as inhabitants with responsibility towards other beings too. Changpas like many other indigenous peoples embody custodianship as a model of relationship with nature, embedded in ecological pragmatism, an alternative to the modern construct of ownership. We belong to nature, not the other way around, they say.

The Changpas practise an age-old system of rotational grazing that protects the pastures from being overgrazed, besides helping conserve fodder for lean winter months. A diversity of livestock leaves droppings that add manure to the pastures and sustains a variety of micro-fauna and flora. “Our choice of seasonal pastures is fixed. We move through 5-6 pastures in a year. Periods may differ sometimes based on pasture and water availability but rotation has been fixed since a long time, carried down by generations,” says herder Nawang Dorje of Korkok. There is a deliberative customary process to decide on grazing pastures: “Individual households do not decide pasture movements. It has to be a collective decision. The *goba* (village head) calls the *yulpa* (village assembly) for a collective meeting to reconfirm, or change, the seasonal movement,” says Tsering Dorje, an elder of Tegazong herder community. Along with movement to pastures, the number of livestock and number of families per pasture is also fixed. It is because of this movement, not being stuck to a piece of land, that the Changpas, like many pastoralist communities across the world, are adaptable to climate variability.

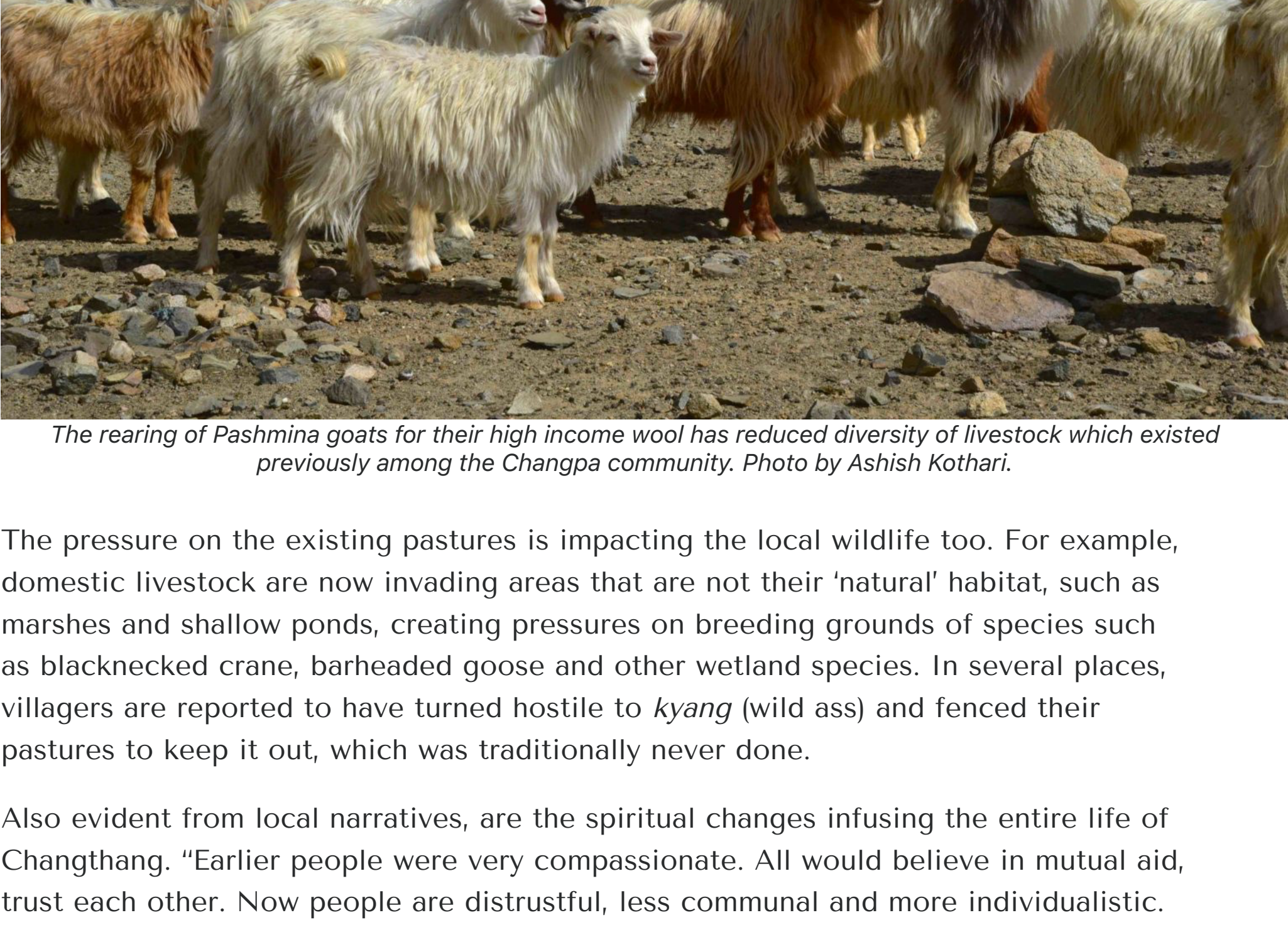


Changpas are traditionally a nomadic pastoralist community rearing yak, sheep, goat, horses, for their sustenance and livelihoods. They practise an age-old system of rotational grazing to protect the pastures from overgrazing. Photo by Ashish Kothari.

But negotiating their access to forage and water is becoming more and more difficult. The Changpas’ way of life, based on spatial and temporal choices, is undergoing shocks and disruption because of modern ideas of development and property ownership, encroachments and take-over of lands by the army and other outsiders, and climate change. The last few decades have witnessed a virtual tsunami of external interventions, linked to Ladakh as a whole going through multiple socio-political reorganisations (the latest being its conversion into Union Territory status in 2019). In Changthang, where pastures and snowfall are reported to be declining significantly, many herders explain it like this: “There is some discussion at the village level regarding drastic weather pattern changes like less snowfall/rains etc. We feel it is because we have disturbed the guardians of the land. We are living in the age of ‘Kaliba-Garpa’, predicted by Guru Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche) as an age that will see some major destruction,” said Jigmet Yangdol, a shepherdess from Thukje village, Tsokar. Climate change induced impacts include receding glaciers, dried up water springs, less dense marshes, and declining quality of pastures.

Additionally, due to multiple influences including those brought in by social media, there is reduced interest amongst the youth in continuing traditional livelihoods, but also a lack of alternative livelihood sources. This, along with absence of good education facilities in villages, force a lot of youth to migrate to Leh or outside Ladakh, resulting in less working hands and nuclearisation or break-up of rural families. Also, the Indian army, providing jobs like road construction (with much better, if short-term, earnings) and also occupying large swathes of pasture lands, is inadvertently displacing herding. Families who simply don’t have enough herders left, are now hiring herders (*rurzee*) from outside and paying salaries of Rs. 25,000 per month, but even then it is difficult to find them because they get good competitive salaries from agencies like the Border Roads Organisation (BRO).

Another factor is the reduced diversity and changing composition of livestock, with an increasing focus on Pashmina goat, whose wool has high market value. “People keep more Pashmina goats because of the income but this has resulted in higher mortality during severe winters. They are not as resilient as sheep and yaks. People don’t keep yaks anymore whose manure is so essential for maintaining the pastures. Diversity in livestock is like a jewel in the herding practice of Changthang, but we have lost the diversity,” says Phunsok Rabgis, a male herder near Hanley. The reduction in pastures is also impacting the agriculture practices; as Sonam Dolma, a shepherdess from Korkok, says: “we don’t really know what to do about the reducing pastures, but I know one thing – if the pastoralism vanishes then so would agriculture because there won’t be enough good manure”. Filmmaker Stanzin Dorjai Gya remarked, as we were observing the annual *bhunglot* procedure of transferring livestock and human manure from pens and dry toilets to the fields using donkeys and horses in the village of Gya (bordering Changthang): “with declining use of livestock, this practice will also die out, then what will happen to our barley fields?”



The rearing of Pashmina goats for their high income wool has reduced diversity of livestock which existed previously among the Changpa community. Photo by Ashish Kothari.

The pressure on the existing pastures is impacting the local wildlife too. For example, domestic livestock are now invading areas that are not their ‘natural’ habitat, such as marshes and shallow ponds, creating pressures on breeding grounds of species such as blacknecked crane, barheaded goose and other wetland species. In several places, villages are reported to have turned hostile to *kyang* (wild ass) and fenced their pastures to keep it out, which was traditionally never done.

Also evident from local narratives, are the spiritual changes infusing the entire life of Changthang. “Earlier people were very superstitious. All would believe in mutual aid, trust each other. Now people are distrustful, less communal and more individualistic. Buddhism and its principles have just become a ritual, a shallow identity that is not embodied in every-day practice,” said Tharchin-ley, the Thukje village elder. The entire order of convivial living among the Changpas and the rest of nature is now disturbed, according to him.

Outside Changthang too, the problems are deepening. The problem with mainstream development is given a cosmological explanation by Smanla Tundup, ex-goba of Saspotse village: “the temperatures are rising, snowfall is much less and all you can see are JCBs digging up the earth everywhere. We have disturbed the spirits of the land, of mountains, of snow. If the spirits of nature are not happy, how can we humans be?” These words eloquently point to the impact of climate change and the perils of top-down, human-centred decision-making.

Some innovative attempts are being made to deal with the multiple crises that Changthang and the Changpas face. Enhanced earnings from their livestock is one, though the predominant focus on Pashmina wool has distorted the herd composition and made pastoralism more vulnerable in some ways. Some groups are now assessing the potential of sheep wool also becoming more remunerative, to redress the balance. Homestays for visitors who can experience the Changthang ways of life, are a hybrid of traditional and modern livelihoods, and may incentivise youth to stay back. Pastoralism festivals to celebrate local culture, economy, and knowledge are also being organised, with help from the government. Increased documentation of the intricacies and beauty of Changthang’s people, wildlife and landscapes, such as the *Shepherdess of the Glaciers* film by Ladakh filmmaker Stanzin Dorjai Gya, could bring appropriate attention to what is threatened. But much more is needed, with Changpas and other peoples of Changthang and the rest of Ladakh at the centre of decision-making.

Read more: [Conservation lessons from Changpa herders of Ladakh](#)

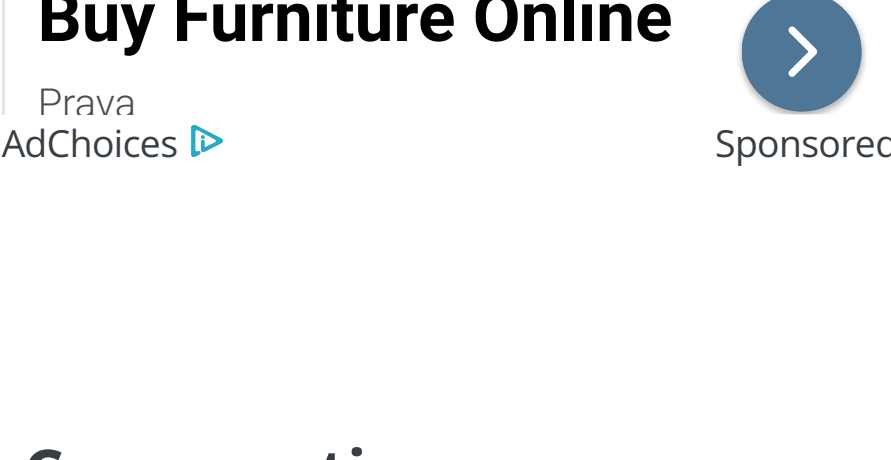
Banner image: A pastoralist from the Changpa community grazing his cattle. Photo by Ashish Kothari.

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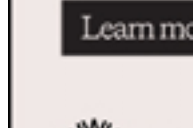


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