

In the fragile ecological landscape of the high Himalayas in Spiti, local communities have found sustainable ways of encouraging tourism and generating livelihoods that are respectful of the environment and local culture

Text by: Shrishtee Bajpai



As the story goes, about 1,000 years ago, some villages were desperate for water. There was nothing underground and nothing on the surface. A river flowed through their landscape, but it was too far away for a village so high up in the valley. Some elders made a difficult journey to Tibet to check with the lamas what could be done. The lamas spoke of listening and heeding the signs that direct them to sources of water. When a raven sat on a spot not too far from the village for long, the elders reckoned it was the sign. They started digging and kept digging until they discovered water. The spring nurtured them for a few hundred years until recently, when



one of those springs dried up. Phunchok Namgyal, an 83-year-old village elder in Kibber, Spiti, narrated this story to me.

Kibber is an agro-pastoral village, the last one on the traditional trade route between Ladakh and Tibet. It is located at an altitude of 4,270 m above sea level with mostly rocky landscape and steep slopes. This region comes under the Indian Trans-Himalayan landscape of **Spiti Valley**. Spiti means “middle land”, i.e., the land between Tibet and India. The region covers the valleys of the Spiti River and its tributaries, with Pin Valley and the Lingti Valley being the prominent side valleys. Kibber and nearby villages, Langza and Komik, are completely dependent on the snowmelt water from winter precipitation and glaciers. However, snowfall over the last few decades has reportedly reduced significantly.



The Spiti River divides Spiti from Lahaul. Originating in the Kunzum Range, several Himalayan streams nourish this river, and it supports human settlements on its banks. Photo: Dhritiman Mukherjee

Cover photo: Snow leopards are found in the high mountains of South and Central Asia, regions of extreme winters when temperatures can dip to -40 degrees C. At peak winter time, snow leopards follow their prey and descend to lower elevations. Photo: Dhritiman Mukherjee

Since 2018, I have been visiting India’s Trans-Himalayan landscape with colleagues to document the traditional governance systems of communities living in Ladakh and Spiti Valley. During one of those visits, Tanzin Thinley and I headed out to interview Sonam Angdui aka Nono le (descendant of the family that ruled Spiti until 1958) in another village. Thinleyji has worked with the Nature Conservation Foundation, a Bangalore-based conservation group, for over two decades. He is an all-rounder, a guide, mentor, host, cook, naturalist, traditional knowledge-holder, trekker, and mountaineer, with varied talents that only a few possess. In Thinleyji’s red Maruti 800, we took a comfortable ride from Kibber to Rangrik, looking at the granite rocks and the towering fold mountains formed 40–50 million years ago. While absorbed in these otherworldly rocky mountain formations, we saw a herd of 50–60 **ibex** walking in a straight line on a ridge. As we moved further, a small herd of **blue sheep** was comfortably walking on the road.

“Being of a similar landscape ecologically, geographically as well as culturally, Spiti was influenced quite significantly by Ladakh. Kings were either descendants of a native family of Ladakh or chiefs sent to look after the affairs of Spiti by Ladakh’s rulers,” Nono le informed us while we sat at his house overlooking the Spiti River.



(1) Blue sheep or bharal (*Pseudois nayaur*) are magnificent animals adapted to frigid temperatures. They are found in herds on cliffs or gambolling and grazing on mountain slopes. (2) Mountain goats with their awe-inspiring horns cut majestic figures against the snowy landscape. They are incredibly sure-footed animals that navigate steep cliffs and precipices with nonchalant certainty, using the tiniest of crevices and ledges for footholds. Photos: Dhritiman Mukherjee

Our interview with Nono le was interrupted by a phone call Thinleyji received from Langza village about spotting a **snow leopard** with a kill. Nono le looked at my excited anticipation with amusement, “you must go soon,” he added.

We moved very quickly after that. Thinleyji picked up two friends from Kaza town, and we were off to Langza village. “Just another 45 minutes”, Thinleyji said, sensing my restlessness and quickly added, “We will have to treat my friends if we see one”. It was a sunny, clear day, and **lammergeiers** were surveilling treacherous territories. “They are here for a reason,” Thinleyji said matter of factly. Lammergeiers accompanied by **yellow-billed choughs** were swirling in the sky. We were sure there was a kill!

As soon as we got to the spot indicated by his friends, we jumped out of the car while Thinleyji parked. We started climbing downhill in ankle-deep snow, scanning the opposite mountain intently. Sonam, one of Thinleyji’s friends, waved at me to hurry. When I got close to him, I looked through my binoculars to where he seemed to be pointing, but I couldn’t see anything. “Ma’am, you don’t need binocs. Not on the opposite mountain. Just look, it is right here, on that pointed rock.”





On a rocky ledge not far from the road, we saw a snow leopard protecting its half-eaten donkey kill. Photo: Shrishtee Bajpai

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I removed my binocs. Yes, there it was, sitting 30–40 metres away from us on a rock jutting out of the very slope we were standing on. It looked at us curiously, perhaps a bit satiated after the heavy meal of the baby donkey it had killed. I had seen snow leopards before, but never ever so close. Just being able to exchange a glance with such a magnificent species left me stunned. Thinleyji murmured, “You can see this animal many times and each time you are enchanted”. While the four of us sat there for three hours watching the **snow leopard’s** every move, an older gentleman from the village brought us hot tea and biscuits. We were awe-struck by the cat’s large, furry paws, its yawns as it surveyed the valley, the way it gently moved its long furry tail closer to its body.

Later, as we climbed back towards where our car was, I looked back at the donkey’s tattered carcass and wondered how life, joy, violence, and redemption could all exist in one moment. “It was a pregnant donkey, and the snow leopard pulled the baby out,” added the elder from Langza village. Locals feel sad and agitated when the **snow leopards** take their livestock, but conservation efforts in the region have helped bridge the gap between loss of livelihoods and wildlife protection and changed the community’s perspective on this.





In the freezing winters, the bathrooms are frozen in places like Kibber (at 14,000 feet/4,270 m), and the villagers use traditional dry toilets. For water, they have to rely on a single village tubewell for this scarce commodity. Donkeys carry the water from the tubewell to people's homes. Photo: Dhritiman Mukherjee

“Earlier, people would look at snow leopards as the killer of their livestock, but now they know their importance in the food chain and in their livelihoods. Now we honour the snow leopard,” said Thinleyji. With the help of NCF, Kibber village has been working towards conserving the landscape, protecting species and their habitats, and generating localised livelihoods that are respectful of ecology and local culture. In times of unpredictable and low snowfall, springs dry up, glaciers recede, and habitats change. Since 1998, based on a comprehensive understanding of ecology and society, the community and NCF started a community-based conservation programme after signing a joint agreement. The village assigned an area of 500 hectares (6 per cent of their regularly used grazing land) that would remain free of livestock grazing and human use for five years. It appointed a village committee of 10 villagers to oversee the affairs. The community ensured that herded livestock were not taken to the free-grazing, community-conserved land. This resulted in an abundance of bharal, the most common wild herbivore and essential prey of the snow leopard. It has also resulted in frequent and closer sightings of snow leopards in Kibber and the surrounding villages since 2014.

Around the same time in 2014, Kibber initiated homestays intending to combine nature and cultural experiences for tourists. People interested in wildlife, especially those who want to spot **snow leopards** up close, often visit Kibber. Besides snow leopards, tourists travel here to see the beautiful landscapes, birds, Spitian culture and festivals, and to experience local food and their way of living. There are 46 homestays among 80 households in Kibber, which has provided good revenue and alternative incomes, especially for young people. Over the last few years, the community has also been working towards reviving their traditional crafts. They started a

conservation-friendly enterprise called SHEN in 2013 that produces and sells handmade products to offset losses caused by wildlife.



(1) Summer is the main tourist season in Spiti, but with an increased interest in snow leopard-related tourism in the winter, some homestays in the upper reaches of Spiti stay open through the year. Communities of women knit and sell woollen wear, like caps and socks, to winter visitors. This allows the women to have some income during the winter, too. (2) A group of people on the top right cliff, spotting snow leopards on the opposite cliff. Photos: Dhritiman Mukherjee

However, despite the huge potential for income generation, Kibber residents are aware and cautious of the possibility of tourism going beyond the region's carrying capacity, and they reject large-scale or unbridled tourism. In 2024, the community was in the process of making rules to ensure sustainable tourism. "Money is not everything. If our biodiversity is destroyed or the environment is polluted by excessive tourism, then it serves no purpose," said Thinleyji as we sat in his homestay, disconnected from the rest of the world after heavy snow. "In Ki monastery, we discuss **climate change**. They say that slowly, even for drinking water, we will have to go to the river. So, all we can do is to be good humans and not be greedy. Not chase development at all costs," says Phunchok Namgyal, an elder whose words eloquently point to the impacts of **climate change** and what we need to rewire in us to rekindle our relationship with nature.

## About the contributors

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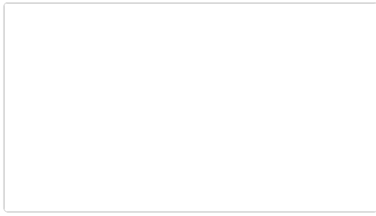
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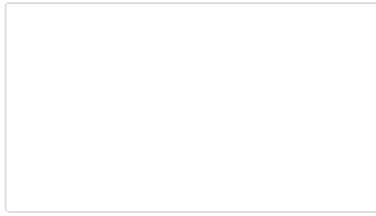
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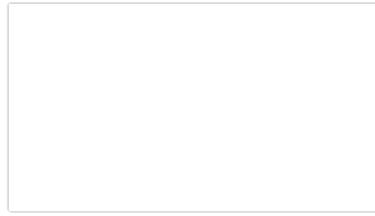
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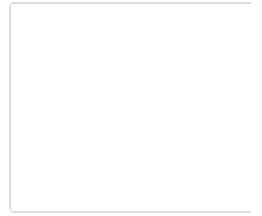
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