

A Study on tribal Food Habits, Food Culture and Lifestyle of Changthang Region

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Abstract— The district is located at a distance of around 430 km from Srinagar and 235 km from Kargil. The present study was conducted in the Changthang region of Leh District in UT Ladakh. The sample for the study was drawn from the Nyoma block of the Changthang region. The traditional food of Changthang people is based on animals, vegetables, and the cropping system of barley. Animal-based products (meat and dairy) are common. Most people eat dry yak and goat meat, which is sliced thinly and hung to dry after slaughter. By-products of livestock such as milk are used to make paneer, churpey (cottage cheese), butter (khakla maar), and ghee. Pastoral nomads consume only meat and milk from their livestock due to the absence of a cropping system, as they migrate in search of pasture for their livestock. During the winter, Changthang people sell livestock like goats, sheep, and yak in other parts of Leh. They face various challenges in life, especially regarding health and basic necessities, which impacts their social and economic life. Most people consume preserved products like dried meat and churpey. Traditionally, the agricultural system in the Changthang region was primarily for self-consumption. Krishi Vigyan scientists provide training on food preservation and value addition for milk products, vegetables, and barley, focusing on drying vegetables in a hygienic way without losing vitamins and minerals.

Keywords— *Changpa, Changthang, Livestock, Food, Agriculture.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Changthang is a unique part of Ladakh, characterized by harsh climatic conditions with dryness and very low rainfall. The temperature varies from hot to extreme cold. This area is known as a Cold Himalayan Desert and has very low thermal and hydric indexes. July and August are the hottest months, while January is the coldest. In Changthang, average precipitation, mostly in the form of snow, is less than 10 mm, which can be fatal to livestock during the winter. The population predominantly leads a nomadic lifestyle, constantly moving in search of greener pastures for their livestock.



FIGURE 1: Changthang Location

The cropping system is agri-pastoral, with most of the area gross cropped. The average altitude of the region is around 14,600 meters above sea level. Changthang, covering an area of 21,000 square kilometers, occupies a strategic position, sharing borders with both China and Pakistan. It is home to thousands of Changpa nomads (Tashi Dolkar et al., 2017).

In Ladakh, women actively participate in all agricultural activities. In recent years, one of the notable features of the mountainous region of Ladakh has been the shift in the traditional subsistence economy towards livelihood diversification among genders. This diversification has had a direct impact on the dominant economic activities of the region (Tashi Dolkar et al., 2021).

Limited food resources and seasonal accessibility to vegetables and fruits make the population susceptible to nutritional deficiencies. However, like other isolated communities, Ladakhis have developed indigenous practices of food processing. As pastoralists, they incorporate milk and milk products to supplement their staples (Anup Raj et al., 2015).

The traditional food diets of the region are considered highly nutritious and healthy (Kala, Roy et al., 2004).

II. METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted in the Changthang region of Leh District in UT Ladakh. Ladakh is divided into two main districts, Leh and Kargil. Leh District is located approximately 430 km from Srinagar and 235 km from Kargil. The sample for the study was drawn from the Nyoma block of the Changthang region. The information sources for the study were both primary and secondary. Secondary data was obtained from various published sources such as journals, magazines, books, and websites. The secondary data was used only after thorough scrutiny.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The way of life of the Changthang nomads shows their adaptability to the rugged cold desert environment. The nomads rely heavily on meat and dairy products to meet their nutritional needs, consuming very little other food. The traditional food of the Changthang people is based on animals, vegetables, and the cropping system of barley. Most people consume dried yak and goat meat after slicing it thinly and hanging it on threads to dry. By-products of livestock, such as milk, are used to make paneer, churpey (cottage cheese), butter (khakla maar), and ghee. Pastoral nomads consume only meat and milk, as they do not engage in farming due to their migratory lifestyle in search of pastures. Semi-nomads, however, cultivate green vegetables like cabbage, Swiss chard, spinach, potatoes, turnips, coriander, and mint.

Permanent settlers in Changthang villages cultivate a variety of vegetables and have a cropping system. After harvest, they dry dairy products, other food products, and vegetable leaves, storing them for the winter. Permanent settlers also rear cows, yaks, and dzomos. During the harsh winter, Changthang people consume more meat products than vegetables, as it fulfills their nutrient requirements and helps keep them warm. They slaughter yaks and goats before the onset of winter. Most people consume preserved products like dried meat and churpey.

Krishi Vigyan scientists have provided training and vocational courses on preserving and adding value to milk products, vegetables, and barley. They teach how to dry vegetables without losing essential vitamins and minerals in a hygienic way. Dried cottage cheese, or churpey, is a traditional fresh cheese widely consumed in the Ladakh region. Lactic acid bacteria (LAB) produce lactic acid through homolactic fermentation, causing milk to curdle and form churpey cheese.

Agricultural land in Changthang is primarily used to grow food crops such as grim (naked barley), wheat (in the Rong side of Changthang), peas, etc., which are conducive to the environment's short growing season. Grim, locally known as "ne" or "nes," is one of the most important staple crops of Ladakh.

3.1 Cropping pattern:

The main crops grown in the Changthang region include barley, wheat (only in Liktsey village), mustard, peas, and other grains. Non-food crops mainly consist of fodder crops, especially alfalfa and oats.

3.2 Traditional Foods:

- **Tagi:** A type of bread that can be baked by covering it in ashes (Tagi Thaltak). Lighter versions of this bread are often eaten with tea.
- **Khambir (Skyurchuks):** A sourdough bread made from yogurt and water, typically paired with butter tea.
- **Khura:** Fried biscuits, both salted and sweet, which are specially prepared for the Losar festival.
- **Chhang Kholak:** A fermented local drink made from barley, commonly consumed by travelers for refreshment.
- **Paba:** A pudding made from a mixture of grain and legume flours, widely eaten across Ladakh.
- **Zathuk:** A soup made from the leaves of the stinging nettle plant (*Urtica hyperborea*).
- **Tangthur:** A dish made with green leafy vegetables, served with buttermilk or yogurt.
- **Tsamik:** A sauce made from a blend of coriander, mint, radish, and onions.
- **Skyu:** A soup-based dish that includes vegetables and small dough balls.



FIGURE 2: Tagi Khambir



FIGURE 3: Khura

3.3 Traditional Drinks:

A. Butter Tea:

People of Ladakh drink butter tea throughout the day as it not only provides warmth but also keeps the body hydrated in the cold, high-altitude environment. Known locally as "gur-gur chai," the tea is prepared by boiling tea leaves and then churning them with butter, milk, and salt until thoroughly mixed.

B. Chhang:

Chhang is Ladakh's traditional local beer, commonly served to guests. It is made by fermenting barley and has an alcohol content ranging from 5% to 7%. Chhang is an important part of festivals, weddings, and other major events. In marriage proposals, a pot of chhang is presented to the girl's family; if accepted, it signifies their agreement to the marriage.

3.4 Common Wild Vegetables of Changthang:

TABLE 1
COMMON WILD VEGETABLES OF CHANGTHANG

Common Name	Local Name	Scientific Name	Part Used	Usage in Diet
Stinging nettle	Zatsot	<i>Urtica hyperboria</i>	Leaves	Zathuk is prepared and also mixed with various types of thukpa.
Wild onion	Skoche	<i>Allium przewalskianum</i>	Leaves	Used as an onion substitute for frying in curries; also mixed in thukpa.
Caraway	Ambuk/Konsnyot	<i>Carum carvi</i>	Leaves, Seeds	Mixed in thukpa and curries, also used as a condiment.
Chenopodium	Naval/Sniu	<i>Chenopodium foliosum</i>	Leaves	Mixed with thukpa, also used in preparing tangtur.
Sow thistle	Khala	<i>Sonchus oleraceus</i>	Leaves	Mixed with thukpa, also used in tangtur preparation.
Mallow	Suchili	<i>Malva neglecta</i>	Leaves	Mixed with thukpa.
Buckwheat	Dyat	<i>Fagopyrum tartaricum</i>	Leaves	Curry is prepared using the leaves.
Arnebia	Toma	<i>Arnebia euchroma</i>	Roots	Eaten raw or fried, often mixed with thukpa.
Gege	—	Bulb	Bulb	Eaten raw or fried, also mixed with thukpa.

3.5 Losar Festival:

The Losar festival marks the beginning of the New Year in Ladakh and is regarded as the most significant festival in the region. All respondents from various villages celebrate Losar, along with the birthday of the Dalai Lama. These celebrations include feasts and prayers at gompas (monasteries), and participants enjoy stage performances symbolizing the fight between good and evil. The date and location of the Losar festival change each year [Tashi Dolkar et al.].

3.6 Health Status of Changthang People:

Most Changpa women suffer from anemia, and children are often deficient in vitamins due to the limited vegetative cover and low plant production, especially in remote areas. The diet is deficient in various important nutrients, leading to anemia and other deficiency diseases.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Changpa nomads of the Changthang region exemplify the traditional pastoral practices of the Himalayas. They use natural resources to shape their knowledge of making various foods. However, many women and children suffer from anemia and vitamin deficiencies due to poor vegetation and limited nutritional resources. The agricultural system is witnessing a shift, with an increasing focus on vegetable cultivation and a decline in the production of traditional crops.

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