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Help us assert grazing rights near LAC, it counts: ex-Ladakh BJP chief

Demchok in south eastern Ladakh, in military parlance an area called sub-sector south, and Chushul, which is closer to Pangong Tso, are the two places where the graziers experience the most pushback by Indian security forces, mainly the ITBP which means the border posts.

A former J&K minister from Ladakh in the PDP-BJP government has said Indian security forces must help the semi-nomadic people of the area assert traditional rights over the land near the Line of Actual Control instead of preventing them from taking their livestock to graze on these pasture lands as they do now.

Chering Dorjay, who was Minister for Co-operatives and Ladakh Affairs until 2018, and until recently president of the BJP in Ladakh, told *The Indian Express* there was concern among the people of that area that if India does not succeed in getting the PLA soldiers to go back to status quo ante positions, “there will be no end” to how much land Ladakhis may lose.

“As far as we are concerned, there has been no question of our people going to the lands on the Chinese side, but our security forces create problems for us even when we take our animals to graze in pasture lands on our side. This has been a problem from the beginning,” said Dorjay.

Demchok in south eastern Ladakh, in military parlance an area called sub-sector south, and Chushul, which is closer to Pangong Tso, are the two places where the graziers experience the most pushback by Indian security forces, mainly the ITBP which means the border posts.

“From the other side we have seen that their army or border police follow a modus operandi by which they push nomads from their side to our side. They send them first to encroach, and come behind them later,” said Dorjay, who has raised this issue many times with the security forces as well as with the administration of J&K (at the time when Ladakh was part of the former state).

Senior security officials acknowledged that there were problems between the local people and the security forces over permission for grazing, and said the ITBP prevents tribesmen from going into certain areas even on the Indian side because it obstructs their patrolling, with animals and people coming in the way.

There is also the “unspoken” suspicion, one official said, that some may be informers for the other side.

However, Dorjay says the main reason that the ITBP stops the graziers is because “they want a peaceful tenure” and fear that permitting people to set up grazing camps may lead to confrontations with the Chinese.

Between December and March, the Changpas, semi-nomadic shepherds of the south eastern Ladakh area, cross over the frozen Indus with their Pashmina goats and yak to a plain called Skakjung, where grazing does not take place in the summer so as to preserve the grass there for the winter. Here, Dorjay said, the Chinese had encroached steadily into traditional Ladakhi pastureland. He recalled an incident from 2008-9, when he was chief executive councillor of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (Leh), to show that being assertive is the only way for India to safeguard its territory.

That winter, the Chinese had uprooted some Changpa reboos (woollen tents) in Skakjung and pushed them back, even burning one tent.

“Some people called me, and said I should go to Skakjung to express solidarity with people, which would help their morale. I took the Nyoma SHO and we went in 10 vehicles to meet the affected people. They told me what had happened, and as the migration season was coming to an end, and the grass on that side was also finished, they were planning to return. But I told them to remain there for the next week or 10 days, otherwise the Chinese would get the impression they had succeeded in their plan. I replaced the burnt tent, sent 10 truckloads of fodder for their livestock, and also installed three handpumps. From that year until now, we have had no problem in that area from the Chinese,” he said.

“Our Army and ITBP never do this, they never go and confront the Chinese like this,” Dorjay said, observing that it was because of “constantly downplaying incidents” that people in the area had lost winter pasture lands on the north bank of Pangong, where dry grass was plentiful on the south facing ridges, and people would take their livestock until some 15 years ago.

Dorjay, who belongs to the Lakruk area of Ladakh, said people living on the south bank of Pangong could see that Chinese soldiers had not fully withdrawn from Finger 4 to Finger 8, and they could also see building activity on the other side.

“Our people can see dozers, road-building activity is going on. Earlier, we never used to see any Chinese, now they are fully visible to people living in the villages on the opposite side,” he said. At night, as the lights come on, their presence becomes particularly visible.

“People have noted this, and they fear the Chinese are not going to go back. They are making permanent structures, they have taken control of that land without firing a shot,” he said.

“If they don’t go back, our people say there will be no end to it. They are very much agitated, they think now they have come 8 km, next time they will come in more, and one day, they will take the whole of Pangong,” he said.

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