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Winter mornings can be bitterly cold in the eastern Himalayas, plunging to -15°C .



Thankfully, it is summer now, and Passang, a 14-year-old Dokpa* pastoralist-in-training, has work to do.

*A pastoralist community in the Himalayas

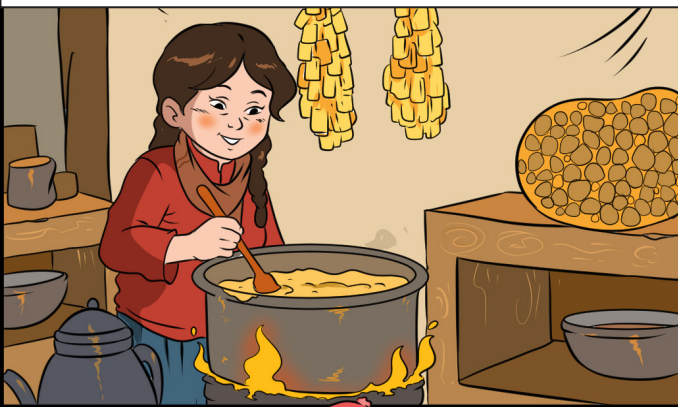
But first, breakfast! He has a warm cup of buttered yak tea and a bowl of tsampa*.



Yak milk is used a few months after the calf is born. Newborn calf milk is dense and cannot be digested by humans.

*Powdered wheat or barley mixed with yak milk

Passang's mother uses dried yak dung as fuel. She makes hard and soft cheese from yak milk that she hangs around the house. Yak fat is also used for cooking.



The Dokpas put down yaks for meat only in the month of August. The local panchayat (dzumsa) decides how many yaks are needed for meat.



The meat is dried and then cooked when needed.

Breakfast done, Passang heads out with his father for a hard day in the mountains.



Bye, Am*!



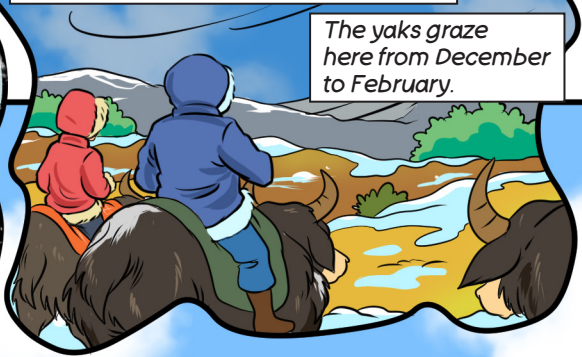
*Mother in Sikkimese Bhutia, the language of the Dokpas

The Dokpas have an interesting migration pattern. Unlike other Himalayan pastoralists, they go higher up the mountain in winter.



But it is not without reason.

You see, the wind is strong high up there. It blows the snow down, leaving the ground snow-free to graze on.



The yaks graze here from December to February.

But now it's summer and ooh, looks like Passang has spotted something!



Ah! Medicinal herbs!



Huh?



Aha! Snack time!

Passang!



It's Rokpu-ma. I just got the news that a snow leopard might have gotten to her. Hurry!

Oh no, Apo*! Rokpu-ma is my favourite little calf.

Passang is about to enjoy a slug! These slugs will improve his immune system.

*Father in Sikkimese Bhutia

It is a time of sorrow. Rokpu-ma is gone.



Passang will now have a funeral for her. It is a sacred ritual.

See the tail Passang is carrying with him? The pastoralists keep the tails of their beloved yaks who've passed as mementos.



He will always remember Rokpu-ma.

That's the third yak we've lost this month. We don't even get enough money from the government to compensate for our loss.

I don't like snow leopards! I don't know why people tell us to protect them!



I understand. But nature has its rules. Snow leopards usually hunt yaks only in the winter when food is scarce. Feral dogs are our biggest threat.



Feral dog population has gone up in recent years due to increased military presence in the border areas.

Unfortunately, this means that packs of dogs attack yaks all through the year.



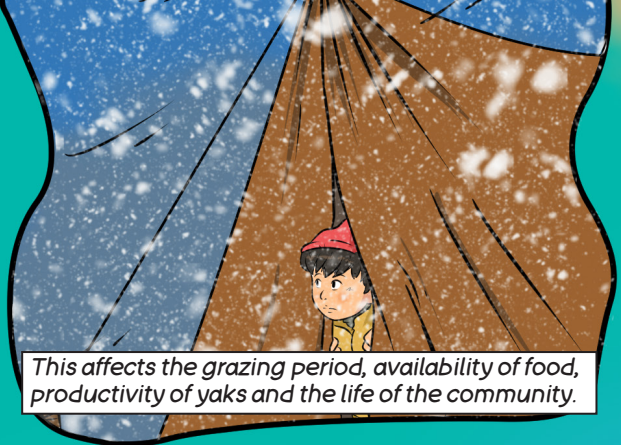
The dogs feed on the military personnel's leftover food.



They must be careful. There're hardly any veterinary facilities and Passang's family simply cannot afford injured yaks.



The problems are mounting for the Dokpas. Global warming means the snowfall is unpredictable and water sources such as glaciers are drying up.



Apo, two more of my friends have given up pastoralism and have left for jobs in the cities.

Can't blame them, Passang. Cities are tempting as they have more opportunities.

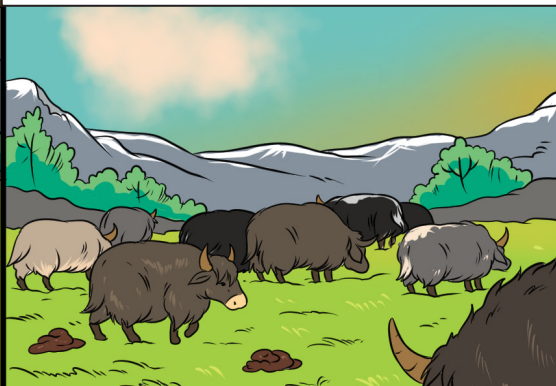


There were 90 herders when I was your age. Now only 17 remain here.

But then what will happen to our community? To our yaks? They are already endangered!



For the Dokpas, their yaks are family and a source of livelihood. Their loss brings great sorrow.



Pastoralists provide free range milk and meat. Theirs is an environmentally friendly and sustainable way of life as they keep moving and the yaks nourish the soil with their dung.



It is important to raise awareness about their way of life and provide a platform for pastoralist voices to be heard.