

Urgent Need to Support Goba System of Ladakh

Kalpavriksh, Snow Leopard Conservancy – India Trust (SLC-IT), Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF), Ladakh Media and Arts Organisation (LAMO), and Local Futures

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Five civil society organisations are encouraging the UT Administration and the Hill Council, along with Ladakhi society, to recognise and strengthen the goba (or nambardar) system.

In a detailed study led by Kalpavriksh (a Pune-based organisation active in Ladakh), in coordination with Ladakhi organisations Snow Leopard Conservancy – India Trust (SLC-IT), Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF), Ladakh Media and Arts Organisation (LAMO), and Local Futures, it was found that the goba system is still highly relevant for Ladakhi society. Across the Leh district, people continue to have faith in this system, and insist that it should continue along with the Panchayat system.

The study was conducted in the Sham valley, the Gya-Rumtse region, Changthang, and Leh town and surrounds. It found that:

- The goba **performs many important functions for the community**, including land and water management, resolution of disputes, organising of religious and cultural functions, announcing sowing and harvesting time or migration time for livestock herders, providing character certificates, representing the village to the government, keeping population and livestock figures, ensuring compliance with customary rules (*thims*), and others. Many of these are beyond what is listed in the J&K Lambardar Act, under which gobas are recognised and registered.
- Even though the Panchayat has replaced some of the goba's functions, **people retain more faith in the goba system** because it is much older, has emerged from the people themselves, and is not affiliated to any political party.
- The goba is also often the **main interface functionary between the government and communities**, and the person government agencies depend on to effectively get their messages across to villagers.
- Despite this, there is **no clear mandate for the panchayats, Councillors, or UT Administration to consult with or involve the goba** in crucial decisions. This causes confusion on the ground, and less enthusiasm amongst gobas for their work.
- The **goba system has weakened** also because of reduction in traditional livelihoods and community functioning (especially in/around Leh town), replacement of some functions by the panchayat, and difficulty for people to do both their own occupation and perform the goba's role.
- There are **traditional inequalities** in the goba system, for instance very rare cases of women or young people or 'lower castes' being gobas.

- While traditionally this was a much-sought after position, today it has become a **burden to be a goba**, as they have to do their own livelihood activities alongside performing the goba's responsibilities, and there are very few incentives.

Based on these findings, the study has recommended that:

- The government and Ladakh society should provide greater social recognition, financial incentives, and opportunities for gobas to build their capacities. From a current honorarium of Rs. 1500/month that the government provides, it should be enhanced so that at least all relevant expenses of the goba for official work get covered. Well-performing gobas should be given social recognition and awards.
- Rules and guidelines should be issued under all relevant laws (Nambardari Act, Hill Council Act, Panchayat Act, etc) to clearly lay out the functions of the goba in relation to the Panchayat, Hill Council, and UT Administration; and to mandate that these institutions consult with and involve the goba in all relevant matters.
- Gobas should consider forming a Leh district or Ladakh level association, for better mutual learning, and a stronger collective voice.
- Ladakh needs to be urgently granted 6th Schedule status to enable the goba system to be given strong formal recognition (such as what is given to the Dzumsa system in Sikkim). If possible the 5th Schedule could also be applied, to strengthen the powers and role of the *yulpa* (village assembly).
- Discussions should happen in all villages to frame new *thims* (rules) for recent issues like solid waste, climate change, development projects, etc.
- More incentives and encouragement are needed for women, young people, and 'lower castes' to become gobas.
- The age limit of 60 recently imposed by the government, should be withdrawn, as often the people with the most relevant experience to be a goba are above that age.

The study findings have been presented to the Principal Secretary and will be presented also to the Chief Executive Councillor, the Lt. Governor, and other relevant government officials. It has also been discussed with the head of the Ladakh Buddhist Association, and presented to a range of civil society organisations, and groups of gobas.

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