

Preface

In the world map Ladakh occupies a special position with regard to its location, special physiography and environmental conditions. Rich spectrum of biological diversity, historical, socio-cultural and religious heritage has always remained a focal point of attraction in the Ladakh Himalaya for the visitors and the researchers on the subject.

In the recent past decades the rich and varied potentials of the Ladakh Himalaya were severely decimated due to relentless poaching and excessive loss of habitat as a result of various eco-development programme in the entire Ladakh region. So much so that many common animals of Ladakh which were pride of this special Himalayan region have now become rare. These animals of pride are: snow leopard, lynx, ibex, chiru, marcopolo sheep, blue sheep, kiang and wild yak. The loss of these precious elements of wildlife of Ladakh is due to the wanton destruction and vandalism of their habitat and population. Alas they have been dwindled considerably. The materialistic development has indeed taken a heavy toll. It has disrupted the stability of various ecosystems in Ladakh giving no protection to the wonderful and mute denizens of the mountains. The protection to these animals can only be achieved if we make development without any tangible destruction to our ecosystem which provides refuge to wildlife.

The majestic wild animals of Ladakh are of special interest both in term of their ecological specialization and occurrence in the remote habitats of rugged terrain which provide natural protection to them. This special feature of the unique spectrum of wildlife has made them more endemic entities found nowhere else in the world. Due to their ecological adaptation these animals flourished

extremely well at an altitude where man can hardly breathe.

The recent era of eco-development and opening of new communications has resulted in large scale destruction of wild animals and their habitat in the Ladakh Himalaya. Many forms have been pushed to the verge of extinction. Some steps have already been taken at Government level by creating a directorate of Wildlife Protection, setting up of National Parks, etc. But it still requires strict implementation of Wildlife Protection Act in real and practical sense. Again much more important to the implementation of the Act is the co-operation of the people which can go a long way in preserving the vanishing wildlife heritage of the Ladakh Himalaya.

During the course of the completion of my book project 'The High Altitude Wildlife of India' sponsored by the University Grants Commission; I was more fascinated to study the wild animals peculiar to Ladakh Himalaya. No single book was found available regarding scientific data on the systematics, ecology, diagnostic characters, distribution, habits and ecology of the wild animals of Ladakh.

The present book is, therefore, the first seminal scientific contribution on the peculiar wild animals of Ladakh with an appraisal of scientific data on their systematic, distinctive features for field diagnosis, distribution, habits, ecology and conservation in the highly specialized agro-climatic conditions of the Ladakh Himalaya. Several figures (in particular figures 11-12, 15-23 and 25-35, are original and have been drawn by the author.

It is hoped, that this contribution will help not only to the students, teachers but also researchers interested in the High Altitude Wildlife of the Himalayan region in general and the animals in the wilderness of Ladakh in particular.

B.D. Sharma