

Mongolia: **Water – Precious treasure**

Mongolia is a landlocked country with harsh and dry climate. For this season, water has been cared and respected by Mongolians as precious treasure. This respect reflects many songs and poems such as Mother Ongi river, Mother queen river and Mother ocean etc. However, high mountains with water source and basins including Father Khan khentii and Father Khangai khan are loved and admired like a father.

Due to the lack of rivers, oceans and springs on the surface, Mongolia has low level of evaporation. With this regard, the annual rainfall is very low. Lately, rainless summers and snowless winters are becoming common and this results frequent droughts and dzuds. As for the nomads, their life, food security and livelihood depend on pastoral livestock. Without water, there is no pasture for plants and livestock, and without livestock Mongolians face food shortages. For us, meat is a strategic food because we adapt to live in extreme weather conditions fluctuating between +50 in summer and -50 Celsius degrees in wintertime.

When it is not raining or snowing, Mongolians worship to the mountains which is respected as father and ask for rain or snow. This is the traditional ritual to offer the best food to the nature when the ground is thawed, plants are grown, and baby animals are given birth. In order to entrust our life to the mountain, sometimes we invite monk or make mark on a horse or a sheep as a protected animal which dedicates to the mountain. When the snow or ice is melted and the rivers are flowed, we greet the arrival of the river by kneeling down our knees. This is why Mongolians really respect the water and try to save it.

In Khangai, where water is abundant, Mongolians raise cattle and horses that are drinking less water compared to camels and small cattle. In contrast, camels and small cattle which can be without water for 3 to 4 days have been raised in Gobi steppe region. For example, camels can live up to a week without drinking any water. They drink up to 60 liters of water at a time and can carry up to 500 liters at a time. Thus, camel is a well-adapted animal for the Gobi region where water is scarce. It is common for the herders who live in Gobi region to carry water on camels once every 7 to 10 days from up to 20km distance.

Starting with the development of democracy from 1990s, the Government of Mongolia began to implement the GOLD national program, which opened up the massive numbers of gold mining throughout the whole country. Gold mining uses a large amount of water along with forests and water basin areas. Since then, water usage in the mining sector has increased tenfold and just after 12 years later (by 2010), 30 percentage of Mongolia's rivers have been dried up and become closer to extinct, according to the Environmental report of Mongolia, 2012.

In order to protect rivers and lakes from mining, a large number of people and herders formed movements throughout nationwide, between 2001 to 2013. One of them is the Ongi river movement to protect the Ongi river and Ulaan lake. This movement was covered approximately sixty thousand people from 8 soums of 3 provinces of khangai (high mountain area), steppe and Gobi regions. The movement fought for 16 years and scaled up the movement that took many judicial and non-judicial measures against mining companies. As a result, a total 12 mines at the waterhead of the Ongi river, were closed. Unfortunately, the Government has recently initiated a

project called “Orkhon -Gobi” which will be accompany the Oyu-Tolgoi project. This is threatening to put Orkhon river again at risk.

The shortage of the water is major problem for women. As for the herder women, the income from milk and dairy products – is a main income source to gather everything they need. However, if animals cannot drink water well, they may have less milk or no milk at all. Because of this reason, the herder women cannot make dairy products with milk. This reduces the ability of households to buy other types of food because of food shortage and the inability to sell them on the market. Briefly, there is no source of income for women to manage their life.

In addition, if there is a less water and no grass for animals to eat, herders have to move a lot in search of grass and water. And this makes difficult for women to work hard for long hours. In other words, their normal life changed due to the less time for resting at home, getting enough sleep, sewing, or making dairy products to feed a family, travelling soum or province to get government services. The quality of their life is becoming deteriorate. Therefore, women need to involve more actively to protect water, in particularly the underground water from mining companies. That is why, the majority of environmental protectors and human rights activists are women.

As a result of the many years struggle, in early May 2021, the Government of Mongolia issued an oral decision to ban the use of groundwater in the mining sector from 2030 onwards.

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