Living Lightly
Journeys with Pastoralists

Exhibition Report, Ahmedabad
5th-8th October 2017
Curatorial Team

Lead Curator
Sushma Iyengar

Co-curators
Carole Douglas
Kudraj Ji Kalaayi
Craft Narratives
Meera Goradia
Saanjha Bazaar

Curators
Shabnam Virmani & Vipul Rikhi
Rooh Ji Rehaan
Music & Poetry
Sanjay Barnela
Someplace Else

Design Team

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Supported by Vyom Mehta
Exhibit
Design Habit
Film Exhibit
Smriti Chanchani
Film & Graphics

Coordinator
Shouryamoy Das

Curatorial Anchor
Aarati Halbe
यही है मालधारी

सबसे प्यारे हमको बादल हैं और उनकी बूंदों की झड़ी लेकिन यह भी बताता आया जब मालधारी न रखी और लन्दन गीत के साथ चढ़े और साथ तो गाय तब भी हमने बनाए रखी अपने बिल्लों की बिल्ली करते विनाय, गिर दो उठाना फिर चलाना, यही है मालधारी

किसी राजा ने ही भागराज के सिंह, जब तो किसी जुलूसी ने हम अपना मैं देख से भागराज हमने तो हम शव का दिखावा वीर तो हम अति न बुझ से वीराण और जमी के साथ भी हमने तो भागराज हमने सभी हमने दूर, लोक गीत का रंग सुरों में बांसुरी और संग एही वे सदर हो रहे तो हम भी साध करते रहेंगे हम सत्संग करते रहेंगे हम सत्संग।

रखते हैं लोग भरोसा हम पे और हम उन पे क्योंकि हमने किया है तुलना से वापस हमने उस से वापस हमने वीराण यह जन्म देता है अपने जीवन सीधा साधा ज्ञान कविता का जिन्हा है भाई, सुधर जानिए कहलाने हैं,

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During the Living Lightly exhibition in Delhi, in 2016, there was a suggestion that an organization be established with a mandate to undertake focused work on pastoralism and its many associated issues. Sahjeevan, with its extensive experience of working with pastoralist communities in Kutch, Gujarat, offered to host such an organization, and Sahjeevan’s Centre for Pastoralism duly came into being. The Centre may choose to hive off as a separate organization in the months and years to come, but that is in the future.

CIFP sees itself as a facilitator and hopes to collaborate with NGOs, universities, government and the private sector on a range of initiatives to revitalize Pastoralism. While we initiate research aimed at improving our understanding of these systems, we are also identifying approaches that might improve returns from pastoral livelihoods; we also hope to harvest our learning from both research and programmatic interventions to work with policymakers, school and college students and with society at large, towards building an enabling policy environment for research initiatives to revitalize Pastoralism.

During the Living Lightly exhibition in Delhi, in 2016, the exhibition moved to Ahmedabad and found an iconic venue in the Mill Owners Association building. The building, with its strikingly long central ramp, stretched out like a camel’s neck, sprang alive with visitors and pastoralists who thronged the second edition of Living Lightly. Through four very warm days in October, exhibits and stories of pastoralism revealed themselves from the overhanging ledges, shade screens, and grand pillared halls of this modern structure which was designed by the renowned Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier in 1954.

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While retaining most of the exhibits from the first edition, we added a section on grasses to celebrate this life force of Pastoralism - the ‘low-born and ‘low dwelling’ one as Kahlil Gibran’s put it -

"You make such a noise falling! You scatter all my winter dreams."

Said the leaf indignant,

"Low-born and low-dwelling!
Songless, peevish thing!
You live not in the upper air and you cannot tell the sound of singing."

Then the autumn leaf lay down upon the earth and slept.

And when spring came she waked again—and she was a blade of grass -Kahlil Gibran I owe it to Abdullah kaka, an old herder from Banni - Asia’s largest grassland - who inspired this exhibit on grasses. This man, with a face both childlike from years of herding, unravelling for me the large kingdom of biodiversity species of grasses, dicots and legumes, each with a distinct flavour and taste - a sumptuous ‘thali’ for the herding animals! It is believed that grasslands, nourished and fed by the dung droppings of the animals, are the most productive ecosystem on the subcontinent and in fact, the essential foodplate for India’s 35 million herding animals who, in turn, feed us.

In this exhibition, we chose to highlight the wondrous world of our vanishing grasslands.

Through the visualised narratives, visitors perhaps caught a whiff of what life looks like when it is lived in shared spaces - whether it is pastoralists governing their grasslands together or collectively conserving the genetic stock of their breeds. But we also tried to take a peek into the extremely solitary nature of the herding activity, which has led to some of the most extraordinary creative impulses amongst pastoralists. So once again we celebrated the cultural expressions of pastoralists in Kutch - through engaging text, image and film - all of which have been shaped by the pastoralist’s seemingly paradoxical life of shared space and solitude.

It is equally important though, that these aspects are not romanticised or disjointed from the political economy and ecology of pastoralism. For instance, the range of poetic oral expressions, mystic tales and craft skills linked with the shearing of sheep wool across all communities of sheep herders in India, cannot be disassociated from the dismal decline in the procurement, processing and markets for local sheep wool. The range of conversations, held on the sidelines of the exhibition, did precisely this - where pastoralists, government representatives, and sectoral experts came together to negotiate some of the stubborn issues and growing struggles of pastoralists.

Taking advantage of the varied and vibrant student community in Ahmedabad, the exhibition was preceded by university talks and performances on pastoralism as pre-events which reached out to young amavadis. And we were delighted to see the venue fill each day with the chatter, curiosity, candid critiques and comments of students from universities across the city.

It was even more heartening to see pastoralists and herders from the marginals of Ahmedabad come to claim their own space in the exhibition. They came, sat around, checked out the exhibition, conversed with other fellow herders from other States, and left by taking some of the pastoralists to their homes for dinner - heartfelt connections and exchanges that gave this effort its true worth and warmth.
Inaugural Note

By Sandeep Virmani

The Inaugural function began with the Jodla-pava, a double flute, that serenaded guests into the inaugural event. The instrument played by Noor Mohammad, is typical and unique to pastoralists of Kutch and Sindh.

The chief guest Jaya Jaitly, and the Guests of Honour Shri Vasant Gadhvi, Hartingaramji Raika and Jasuben Rabari, inaugurated the exhibition with a unique Khuta ceremony, practiced by pastoralists in many parts of Gujarat. A large Khuta - wooden nail - was hammered into the ground, symbolising the establishment of a temporary herding camp where the herd stops for a night - the nail which holds up a tent, and to which the animals are sometimes tethered in the night.

Sushma Iyengar, the lead curator of the exhibition, welcomed the guests and spoke of the quiet and light world of pastoralists, who create wealth in unison with nature, often showing us ways to live in our stressed times of climate change and globalised wealth. The exhibition, she said, was inspired by the possibilities that pastoralism holds for our future, even as it celebrates one the oldest livelihoods in human history, and seeks to create a better understanding of their contemporary struggles. Jasuben Rabari and Hartingaramji both pastoralists from Kutch and Madhya Pradesh respectively, invited the audience to step into their lives for a short while. They took the visitors on a roller coaster ride through their stories, unfurling first the beauty and richness of their journeys and relationships, and then reminding everyone not to dwell in romantic notions of their lives, but to participate more actively in understanding their mobile lifestyles and livelihood struggles.

During the launch of the exhibition in December 2016 in Delhi, FSSAI gave its clear ace for Camel Milk to be marketed. 10 months later, in this inaugural event of the Ahmedabad exhibition, the Chairperson of Sarhad Dairy (a subsidiary of Amul) Valamji Humble, handed over the first cheque of Rs. 4.6 lakhs to representatives of the Camel Breeders Association, to mark the beginning of camel milk procurement in Kutch. To everyone’s excitement, he announced that Amul would bring Camel Milk Chocolates as a Diwali Gift to the nation. Valamjibhai explained how the dairy has, within seven years, brought livelihoods to more than hundred thousand pastoral households in Kutch. And that this was possible only because of the high quality animals herded and bred by pastoralists of the region.

Jaya Jaitlyji, founder of Dastakari Haat Samiti and a well known craft expert and public persona in her own right, expressed her gratitude to the Chairperson of Sarhad Dairy, the State Information Commissioner and writer, began by acknowledging his community of Gadhvis - pastoral people who conserved, protected and lived off the grasslands, while also being bards and carriers of some of western India’s most lyrical oral folklore traditions in song, poetry and story - the Chhadar, Dohas, and Dayras. Shri Gadhvi commended the spotlight that this exhibition has brought to the life stories of pastoralists. With passion and concern, he spoke about the diminishing access to grasslands and grazing rights, the conflicts and struggle for fodder and water, the slow death of pastoralism and all that it stands for. He expressed hope that the exhibition would sensitise society and policymakers towards nomadic pastoralism as a sustainable life and livelihood.

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Grasslands are sumptuous ‘thalis’ for the grazing herds. The famed Banni grasslands of Kutch, for instance, is home to 43 dishes - grasses - on the plate; some for nutrition, some others for ‘masala’, and yet others as dessert! Dhanni, for instance, is the roti, grazed for health and energy; Dhrabad dehydrates the animal, after which they drink a lot of water, like fried chips; Dhaman grows in sweet soil but is bitter like bitter gourd and purifies the blood of the animal. Sawan is sweet like dessert, Oin increases fat in the milk, Chichni improves the texture of the milk; Dhamur is the first grass that grows after rains - on eating it the animals get diarrhoea, cleansing their stomachs and helping them to digest all the other grasses! So, it goes on and on like the veritable Gujarati thali, with a huge and tasty array of foods...
The facilitating maldharis took visitors around the Vathan, explaining virtues of all the grasses through live grass specimens, grown especially for the exhibition. A large oversized installation mimicked a thali displaying grasses with their unique tastes and flavours, giving visitors a unique view of the science of grasslands from the lens of a buffalo and the knowledge of pastoralists.

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The exhibit of cattle shit shocked visitors first, before drawing them into the regenerative orbit of dung. As the Government of Gujarat’s Principle Secretary of Agriculture, Sanjay Prasad, remarked “after the green, white and blue revolutions which extolled the virtues of production from farms, dairy animals and the sea respectively, the brown revolution is around the corner - expressing care for the soil and its health through organic production”. Anecdotes from across the world showed how pastoralists have, in fact, been part of this silent brown revolution for centuries, bringing the fertility and nutrients from the forests to the farms by penning, or having their animals sh(t) on the fallow farms in a mutually beneficial arrangement.

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Students of Riverside School, Ahmedabad in front of the dung exhibit.
Heddan-Hooddan

Here and There

Film Exhibit

Heddan Hooddan na thee, handu veh. Don’t move around here and there, stay at one place. My mother used to say this in Sindhi. Perhaps my being a female and a wandering one made her say that. But States also say that to wandering and meandering tribes, the disciplining voice of a parent and state merge all too often insisting on sedentarization. The exhibits at Heddan Hoddan in Living Lightly foregrounds the ethic of exchanges and human-nonhuman interaction that is an integral part of nomadic pastoralism. The films pointed to the praxis of civic exchanges and the Commons which are emblematic of a sophisticated and modern and non-capitalistic understanding of resources. To my mind, this section provided the deepest understanding of sensitive economics and ecology.

By Rita Kothari
Scholar and translator based in Gujarat

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Played in loops every hour, a series of three short films projected on 180 degree screens enveloped the visitors as they swirled on their seats to follow the buffalo breeders of Banni, dive into the mangrove creeks to meet the swimming ‘Kharai’ camels and their Jat herders or roam through a remote island of east Kutch to meet the Kankrej cow breeders and herders. The 45-minute film experience gave viewers the feel of the land, the breed and the herder even as they discovered a culture of the Commons.

Rumaal Mein Sauda

In a corner of the ‘Vatthaan’, a young pastoralist from Kutch taught visitors the art of striking a financial deal through ‘finger language’ - under a concealing scarf. This is an ancient and continuing tradition of silently negotiating the price of an animal, without speaking.

Illustration by Sushama Durve
There are few places on earth that can compare with the beauty of pastoral lands. Stunning landscapes, robust breeds, and elegant people have moved many photographers, from India and abroad, to wander into the heart of pastoralists. They have made the hard journey and emerged with exceptional photo essays showing the beauty and hardships of the pastoral life. Manzar, the photo exhibition invited Kalyan Varma, Michael Benanav, Monisha Ahmed and Sankar Sridhar to give us a peek into their personal journeys and carry us to into the life and lands of the Dhangars, Van Gujjars, and the Changpas. Manzar also gave an insight into the life of pastoralists from the lenses of the pastoralists themselves. The curatorial team had worked with 20 youth from various pastoral communities, encouraging them to turn the gaze on themselves and embark upon a new journey, camera in hand. Ishaan Raghunandan, a young photographer from Bangalore was invited to spend time with these young boys and girls in their habitats, and teach them photography skills on a point and shoot camera. The outcome of this learning journey - for both Ishaan and the youth - was a collection of more than 2000 photographs of which 200 were curated into a special photo exhibition.
Kudrat Ji Kalaayi

The Hands of Nature

Craft Narratives

Photo by Smriti Chanchani
In ‘Living Lightly – Journeys with Pastoralists’ I was amazed to see a fairly unrecognised world of relationships shared between maldharis and the artisans of Kutch in the section ‘Kudraj ji kalaayi’. Pastoral needs, material and identity that spawned crafts of great utility and beauty. Be it the sheep, goat & camel herding maldharis lending their wool, yarn and motifs to the looms of the weavers, the ajrakh adorning maldharis driving the demand from ajrakh artisans, leather craft artisans blessing the auspicious ceremonies of pastoralists to this day with embroidered hand crafted shoes, or kumbhar potters designing vessels for the maldharis’s milk and its many forms.

In a true sense, the tacit knowledge which maldharis and craft artisans have shared here hold tremendous insights for a circular economy, for a fearless co-existence with nature & animals, for a garden of mutually dependent communities, and all the embodied values of shared space. We are in times when bottled waters have swept the rivers off our lives, and we make claims to a fourth industrial revolution; a time where we humans have nearly forgotten the natural instinct of communicating - non verbally - with birds, animals and nature’s creatures. This section was a reminder of the spaces we must reclaim, the relationships that we need to nurture within us for crafts to become true expressions of a harmonious coexistence.

By Pradyumna Vyas, Director, NID

“Words aren't enough to describe my experience of this exhibition. The stories, history, culture and crafts of the pastoralists are truly fascinating. I had no idea about the rich heritage that exists around us. Thank you for bringing this exhibition to Ahmedabad.
-Radhika Rani

“The Rabaris, who largely bred the indigenous and wolly sheep breeds called Marwadi and Makdi till recently have had a symbiotic relationship with the weaving community of Vankars in Kutch for many generations. However, the Rabaris find no market today for their indigenous wool even as the market and weavers have switched to imported, low cost, machine-spun wool from the Merino sheep of Australia. Weavers created narrative panels to commemorate their relationship with the herders.
From birth to marriage to death, the ajrakh accompanies Sindhi kutchi maldharis in celebrating all their life cycle events. Maldharis still wear ajrakh today, but the close ties that coloured their lives with the khatri artisans have now shifted. The maldharis still yearn for the pure indigo and red ajrakh dyed in the sweet waters of a flowing river. But that cannot be - much has changed. Water, cloth, the urban Indian who loves ajrakh, and with that, the khatri’s clientele. The traditional hand block printed, natural dyed, double-sided ajrakh is no longer affordable or available to the maldhari today, who buys the cheaper screen printed ajrakh. And the khatri today are quite content innovating for a global market which is less discerning than the maldhari!

Sufiyan Khatri, a young inheritor of this art, which his community of Khatri describe as ‘rang utarma aur rang chadhana’, was inspired to create this ajrakh narrative panel for the exhibition after he and a group of young ajrakh artisans met with an older generation of maldhari over chai. They met, hugged, and argued for hours - who had abandoned whom? The Khatri who went after world markets, or the maldhari who began to wear synthetic ajrakh?

His narrative circles around the two spheres of their universe with the maldharis - then and now. In earlier times, the ajrakh artisan went long distances to deliver the printed ajrakh to their only clients - maldharis living in distant villages. The colours and motifs remained the same for generations but so did their emotional ties with each other - signified by the white border around the circle below. Now, Sufiyan and his friends thrive in an urban market which makes creative demands - new designs, more colours, and finer cloth. Ajrakh has survived well, but their ties with the maldharis are now frayed, as the circle above shows. You get some, you lose some. Life, for us, has revolved around these two circles, says Sufiyan.
Rooh Ji Rehaan
A Gathering of Souls
Music & Poetry

Welcome to this rooh ji rehaan – a gathering of souls - where poems, songs and stories are shared, questions asked, yearnings expressed. Living closely with the elements, as herders do, can bring forth deeper inquiries. Where have we come from? Why are we here? Cast the gaze of a poet around you and every element of the landscape – moon, mountain, camel, cloud, hurricane or river – begins to glow with hidden meanings. You hear many voices here - Sindhi, Kutchi, Gujarati, Hindi - some of the recent poets and some of poets who lived many centuries ago, who stay alive because they are sung, shared and quoted in the day to day lives of the herder communities of Kutch.

With these words, Shabnam Virmani and Vipul Rikhi, curators of ‘Rooh ji Rehaan’ invited visitors into an immersive space where they briefly experienced the psycho- spiritual, philosophic universe of a maldhaari, and how she understands herself and her world.

For the first time in my life of 54 years, I heard the beautiful and soulful melodies of the desert. The simplicity of their music struck me. Thank you for exposing me.
-Ravi John

Rooh Ji Rehaan was a beautiful realisation that we need more poetry in our lives. Thank you!
-Gauri Bharat

Photos by Smriti Chanchani
The art of storytelling is alive still in this media-saturated age. Ankit Chada gave life to “Dastan-e-Khanabadosh” basing himself on a wonderful interpretation of the “Dastangoi” form. Dastangoi is a word of Persian origin, and this form of storytelling has had its own Indian career since the 13th century. The form was revived in 2005. Ankit is a young dastango, or storyteller, and has evolved contemporary stories using the dastangoi style.

The storyteller, dressed in white kurta and churidar, wearing a characteristic embroidered cap, caught our attention straight away! The auditorium was packed, and so many of those whose story he was about to tell – the Kutchi Maldharis – joined him on the stage. So we had story teller and characters of story, all dressed in their impressive finery, in front of us!

Ankit told the story in fluent Hindustani. Urdu words and couplets with their sonorous brilliance, took us away from the auditorium into the wide open spaces where the nomadic pastoralist maldharis live their lives. The drama of free movement, the spirit of shared destinies, the deep reverence for nature, and the joyful acceptance of all that life gives – these came through as Ankit moved from point to point in his fluent and enjoyable narration.

The story itself cannot be put in other words! The life of the people on-the-move, moving slowly, in no hurry get anywhere, less interested in reaching and more concerned with being – this was contrasted to those who live in one place, constantly striving to reach never-to-be-reached goals. The contrast between these two modes was sharply brought out through the imaginative metaphor of the race between the tortoise and the rabbit!

Ankit laced his tale with a humour that was without a trace of bitterness, and effortlessly threw up the relevance of the story’s moral message to contemporary life. The story-teller’s art lies in making the story become a mirror to the listener, while never preaching or hectoring. And Ankit did this with great charm and captivated everyone’s ears, eyes and hearts.

By Neelkanth Chhaya
Educator & Architect
Rooh Ji Rehaan
A gathering of souls
Music & Poetry

Hosted by the House of MG, in the iconic Agashiye, the Rooh Ji Rehan installation from the exhibition came alive in a live offering by the Wai singers Sumarkhan Jat and Mithakhan Jat, the soulful singing of Mavji Jagaiya, and the raw and pure rendering of Abdul Latif Bhitai by Saidu Ibrahim the herder singer - all from Kutch. Ahmedabad music lovers were all in their seats well in time to receive, not only the songs and music of the pastoralists, but also listen to the curators Shabnam Virmani and Vipul Rikhi speak with passion, lyricism and clarity on the Zahir (the outer and apparent) and Baatin (the inner and the hidden) embedded in the folds of these songs which are sung, heard and quoted by pastoralists across Kutch.

On the evening of October 7th, even as pastoralist musicians from Kutch were enthraling Ahmedabad with the Rooh Ji Rehaan concert at House of MG, Ahmedabad theatre artistes were captivating pastoralists from Saurashtra and Kutch in Tagore Hall where the play ‘Akoopar’ which is based on the the lives of Maldharis living in the Gir Forest, was being specially performed on that day. ‘Akoopar’ written by Dhruv Bhatt and directed by Aditi Desai. Treated as special guests on the front rows of the theatre, the pastoralists were very moved by the sensitive portrayal of their own lives. They were emotional when they left the theatre, saying they had never before had the opportunity to sit back and see their own life come alive on stage. For those who saw the play, this was clearly the highlight of the entire week for them!
Activities
Craft Workshops | Pastoral Cafe & Cheese Workshops |
Sanjha Bazaar | Film Screenings

Photo by Smriti Chanchani
Craft Workshops

Craft workshops were organised by Khamir to enable visitors learn about the materials, techniques, aesthetics, practicalities, and textures of pastoral crafts while, hopefully, changing the way they perceive handcrafted objects. The artisans from different communities of Kutch taught the art of lacquer, wool spinning and embroidery to people who came from both Ahmedabad and outside to specially learn these special pastoral skills. Errol Pires, a noted designer also conducted a workshop on split-ply braiding. Errol Pires is one of the few people who have worked to revive this lost art which was traditionally used by the pastoralists to make a variety of strong, flat ropes. The participants got a chance to not only see the exhibits from the land of maldharis but to also experience a slice of it through these workshops.

Pastoral Food & Cheese Workshops

Ahmedabad - the land of intrepid food and foodies, opened their curious taste buds to the flavours of camel milk. Aditya Raghavan, a physician and cheese maker from Mumbai facilitated a cheese celebration at the exhibition and taught the art of goat feta and camel cheese making to a group of registered and eager participants at the venue, and followed it up with a demonstration for the chefs of Ahmedabad’s famed ‘Agasheye’. Krishni Shroff, expert baker and chief chef of the festival brought her baking and cooking skills to ‘eat lightly’ and savour the tastes and flavours of the camel and goat cheese through a simple assortment of snacks and beverages, all organized by Hema of Zen Cafe. And even as visitors thronged the cafe for repeats of camel milk cream, camel milk latte and camel cheese sandwiches, camel herding pastoralists at the venue gaped at them with glee - this could now mean the beginning of a market for their camel milk!
Sanjha Bazaar

The exhibition was accompanied by a pastoral craft market organised by Khamir, allowing buyers to connect with the life style, life world and habitats of pastoralists through their craft products. We celebrated the unique fibres of the camels, sheep and goats, bred and herded by our pastoralists. And connected with the material culture of pastoralists through the craft skills, material and aesthetics that poured into the products on display here. The highlights of the bazaar were desi sheep wool stoles and shawls designed by Shyamji Vankar, Murji Hamir from Kachchh, sheep wool and ajrakh jackets by Archana Shah and natural leather bags and shoes designed by Ranabhai Paba and Jogi Panghaal. Lac turned wood memorabilia from Srishti Verma, and unique apparels by Shabri Wagle designed with a host of Sindhi women artisans. Along with crafts, the commons market also featured a bookshop which attracted the book lovers of Ahmedabad. A host of authors working with pastoralists had lent their books for sale and browsing. Books by Christina Noble, Michael Benanav, Sagari Ramdas and Nitya Ghotge, Ilse Köhler Rollefson, as well as books published for the LL exhibition found many buyers.

Film Screenings

Someplace Else, a film space which featured two films on pastoralists, was curated by Sanjay Barnela, a film maker and educator at Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore.

In their search for pastoral films, Sanjay and his team found films that have dived deep into subtle nuances and drama of pastoralism as a way of living. They also found cinema which explore the stark landscapes of pastoral worlds and some which challenge the way we look at pastoral communities. Many of these films are, however, not readily available on the digital or retail platforms and were therefore selected for screening here.

While the first edition of the exhibition at Delhi had screened four films, the Ahmedabad exhibition could only have two due to constraints of time and space. The curatorial team selected Shepherdess of the Glaciers and Story of the Weeping Camel. Shepherdess of the Glaciers has been directed by Stanzin Dorzai, a film-maker who comes from a pastoral family in Ladakh. This film, shot on the snow clad mountains of the Himalayas traces the life of Stanzin’s elder sister who is a practising shepherdess and herds her animals in solitude, through the hostile weather and harsh terrains.

The second film, Story of the Weeping camel is based in the Gobi Desert of Mongolia and depicts the travails of a pastoral family as they try to save the life of a new-born camel, rejected at birth by its mother.

The audience which included film lovers from local film clubs of Ahmedabad loved the films, and many of them expressed desire to buy copies of the films for personal viewership or to screen the selections at their local meet-ups.
National Workshop on Recognition, Registration and Conservation of Livestock Populations in Pastoral Ecosystem

This workshop was organized with the broad objective of launching a nationwide programme using a commonly accepted methodology for the identification, registration and conservation of indigenous livestock breeds that are developed by pastoralists in different regions and for different purposes. These include cattle breeds, goats and sheep, ponies, donkeys and so forth – livestock upon which the livelihoods of pastoralist communities are founded. The workshop was a collaborative initiative of Government of Gujarat, Centre for Pastoralism (CfP) and the National Bureau of Animal Genetic Resources (NBAGR).

The workshop was inaugurated by Smt Krishna Raj, Honorable Minister of State for Agriculture and Farmer Welfare, Government of India and was attended by senior officials from the Government of Gujarat, the National Bureau of Animal Genetic Resources, and by animal husbandry departments from many states. Large numbers of representatives of pastoralist communities from across the country were present alongside members of civil society organizations and academics.

Following an inaugural session, the 2-day workshop was divided into three technical sessions, on (i) the Importance of indigenous breeds: An Economic and Climate change perspective; (ii) the Registration of Pastoral Breeds: Policies, Participatory Documentation and Registration Process; and (iii) State Experiences: Policies and Program on Identification and importance of Pastoral Livestock Breeds. A concluding section generated a series of recommendations.

The workshop was inaugurated by Smt Krishna Raj, Honorable Minister of State for Agriculture and Farmer Welfare, Government of India and was attended by senior officials from the Government of Gujarat, the National Bureau of Animal Genetic Resources, and by animal husbandry departments from many states.

A number of speakers made reference to the idea that it is insufficient to simply focus on the breeds as part of a registration exercise. Breed recognition needs to take place alongside an understanding of the ecosystem and cultural practices within which such breeding is embedded.

Participants and various sessions highlighted the value of indigenous breeds from a variety of perspectives, including – climate change, value of waste material produced by indigenous breeds, the contribution of pastoral breeding to animal populations maintained by agricultural communities, dairies in various parts of the country and the meat economy.

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The Director of NBAGR shared a comprehensive plan with regard to advancing the workshop’s agenda of recognizing, registering and conserving indigenous breeds. He stressed the importance for communities to take the lead in this process.

NBAGR and CfP expressed interest in establishing an MoU to demarcate the roles and responsibilities each might take on in moving this process forward.

A number of states expressed interest in working with NBAGR and CfP to initiate work on the Recognition, Registration and Conservation of indigenous breeds in each of their states.

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There was broad-based agreement on the dramatically superior adaptation of indigenous breeds to local extremes of climate, topography and vegetation. Sophisticated genetic analysis supporting this notion was shared in the meeting, representing a significant advance in our understanding of the mechanisms by which such adaptive capacities have developed.

A comprehensive listing of indigenous populations across the country took place, in the expectation that these need to be studied and documented to understand whether these are unique populations.
Goat Cheese, Anyone? Livelihoods Consultation

As part of CIP’s interest in exploring ways to raise herder revenues, a half-day consultation was organized to explore the potential for and challenges that might accompany a pilot aimed at the production of goat cheese. This objective followed from the hypotheses that (i) there is growing urban demand for goat cheese; (ii) the bulk of goat cheese consumed in India appears to be imported; and (iii) goat concentrations in India, necessary to enable adequate procurement of goat milk, are almost entirely linked to pastoralist herds. These themes found broad resonance during our deliberations, attended by cheese-making entrepreneurs, members of civil society organizations working with pastoralist communities, and pastoralists themselves. Our discussions revolved primarily around experiences shared by Chris Zandee, of Himalayan Cheese; Apoorva Oza, of AKRSP and Aditya Raghovan, cheese-making consultant and artisanal cheese enthusiast.

A number of likely logistical challenges associated with the production of goat cheese were highlighted, including the key question of hygiene, the criticality of maintaining optimal temperatures during both production and curing of goat cheese, its relatively short shelf-life, the problem of procuring undiluted goat milk, and the capacity to handle large variations in capital flows. But there was also a sense that this was a good time to embark on a pilot, given rising urban demand and India’s almost complete dependence on imported goat cheese.

Access Livelihoods Consultation, based out of Hyderabad, expressed interest in embarking on a goat cheese-making pilot. This would require the commissioning of a feasibility study to identify potential locations, partners, costs and potential financing. While ALC has no direct experience in cheese-making, it does have extensive experience in the dairy sector. An industrialist in Surendranagar, formerly associated with AKRSP’s lapsed experiment in goat cheese production, has also expressed interest. He would likely have the infrastructure, but would need assistance in organizing pastoralists for the supply of milk.

At the end of the day, any such effort would make sense from a livelihoods perspective only if there is the potential for significant gains to herder revenues. As one of the participants put it “The issue is not about making cheese – it is about enhancing revenues for the farmer.” Converting goat milk to cheese could be an exciting option, but it will need to be undertaken by an entrepreneur with the desire and capacity to stay invested over the long haul.

Consultation on Forest Rights Act and Rights of Pastoralists

The implementation of the FRA has thus far focused primarily on Individual Forest Rights, and has tended to ignore the empowering provisions of community forest resource rights (CFRs). No more than 3% of the estimated potential for CFR recognition has taken place under the FRA. Accordingly, the provisions for rights of vulnerable communities such as pastoralists and particularly vulnerable tribal groups have not been implemented across the states. Non-recognition of rights of pastoral communities has resulted in continued restrictions on traditional access to forest areas for grazing and other resource use. There are also cases of violation of their rights in protected areas (wildlife sanctuaries, national parks and tiger reserves), in areas proposed for forest diversion for various projects, and in areas where plantations have been set up under CAMPA and other forestry programs.

This consultation was organized to discuss the status of access rights of pastoral communities and how these may related to the FRA. Key initiatives already undertaken by pastoral communities with regard to filing CFR claims, and the nature of the state’s response to these initiatives. The consultation was attended by members from civil society organizations working with pastoral communities, representatives of pastoral communities from different states, researchers, activists and students.

Plans and key strategies put forward by the group:

Awareness on the provisions of the FRA needs to be increased amongst pastoral communities. NGOs and research institutes can be identified to undertake more systematic work on the FRA-pastoral community interface. A template based on the experiences of Maldhari pastoralists of the Banini grasslands in Kutch, and the Gaddi herdsmen of Kanga District in Himachal Pradesh can be prepared and shared with other communities and actors from civil society.

Devising action plans to increase the numbers of CFR claims forwarded by pastoral communities. Training and capacity building of community leaders and facilitators will be needed to enable an increase in such claim-filing.

The constitution of a working group to anchor CFR claim-making and to devise ways of dealing with legal problems arising from pastoralist eviction from Protected Areas as well as where cases have been filed against pastoralists.

Document the experiential knowledge of pastoralists to develop the argument that traditional forest management practices by pastoral communities are not necessarily detrimental to forests, grasslands and other forms of natural resources.

Sensitize the Animal Husbandry Departments on the FRA and claims of pastoral communities to ensure the Department’s involvement and support.

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Visitors

Have we not been told, so many times by those wiser than us or by our classical books which we have read and reread, that we should live lightly - without any expectations, worldly pressures and material pleasures? Well, all those pearls of wisdom came alive when I had the good fortune to visit, and spend some time at the exhibition ‘Living Lightly’ which brought out the science, logic, art and philosophy of pastoral communities and was an attempt to present the Maldhari’s way of life. Apart from the fact that the exhibition was a learning experience, it touched me in many ways. It was aesthetically appealing, emotionally engaging and spiritually elevating.

Most exhibitions are for promotion of some thing or self. What made this exhibition unique for me, was that it was not an exhibition to promote any thing, but to present a way of life. I was drawn into an eco system which links so many lives together! While teaching a course in a local Law College on the subject ‘external aids for interpretation of Statutes’, I always refer to a case decided by Supreme Court using a website for interpreting a provision of Food Adulteration Rules for treating camel milk as covered by the said rules. I never knew or thought, that one day, I would be able to eat or drink something made from camel milk, or appreciate its merits, which I did here!

I was indeed overstruck to see the way pastoralists move and herd and was humbled to learn how lightly they do indeed live! Being from the world of music, I loved the selection of music and poetry. Rooh-ji-rehan brought to me the poetry of a poet saint from Sindh and his Surs, each so heart warming. Pt. Omkarnath Thakur candidly admits that our classical music has its roots in folk music. And so many folk tunes are used even in our classical ragas!

By Amar Bhatt
Advocate & Singer

The "Living Lightly – Journeys with Pastoralists" exhibition was an extraordinarily complete experience for the visitors - going beyond being a mere beautiful, informative or anthropological exposition of pastoral lives.

Our travel and work in Uttarakhand has made us quite familiar to the lives of the Van-Gujjars, their annual migration and plight for grazing lands; but learning about the unbelievably long annual migratory route of the pastoralists from Kutch for instance, who traverse so many States with proficiency in several languages, was a revelation for the visitors. And the film about a lone shepherdess from Ladakh carried us to yet another, completely different dimension of pastoralists’ herding lives at high latitudes in snow clad areas.

The all encompassing twirl of the pastoralist’s herding stick, it’s symbolic presence in their lives, the language of the stick so to speak, and the nuanced communication between the herder and the animals unlocked a whole new world for us. As did the craft of the animal bells, which bound the luhar crafts person (the bell maker), the maldhari herder, and the animals into a fascinating story of identity and sound ...that pastoralists identify their own animals from a large herd of seemingly alike animals through the varied sounds of bells gave us a fulfilling glimpse into their intimate relationship with animals.

Photographs taken by young pastoralists themselves were able to capture stories and spaces that other photographers would find very difficult to enter. And the story telling performance - ‘dastangoi’ - invited us to enter and behold the clash between the unhurried and transient lives of nomadic pastoralists and our own sedentary and rushed lives! Lastly, the evening of music and poetry with the pastoralists of Kutch took us from fascination and learning to a state of divine ecstasy.

By Rajendra & Rupal Desai
Architects
Media

Malharis and experts from Centre for Pastoralism in a conversation with journalist at the press meet organised by World Around You (WAY) and Kinesis on 5th October ’18, before the official launch of the exhibition. WAY also worked on the promotional strategy for the exhibition.
In Gratitude

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Photo by Nipun Prabhakar
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... And Many Others from the Camel Breeder’s Association and Banni Breeders Association

Centre for Pastoralism

Close to 35 million pastoralists graze India’s forests, grasslands and farm fallows, and are a familiar sight by the roadside, as they migrate between summer and winter grazing grounds, often over hundreds of kilometres. Their many contributions have rarely received the recognition they have deserved, as mainstream society has tended to see them as relics of an outdated way of life. They are “keepers of genes”, custodians of India’s remarkable animal diversity; they are significant contributors to our dairy and meat industries; and their music and crafts find resonance and expression in much of what we see as mainstream culture.

Perhaps most critically, pastoralist mobility, as an adaptive response to the climatic extremes they experience, marks them out as communities particularly well adapted to a changing climate regime. The Centre for Pastoralism, a Sahjeevan initiative, hopes to undertake research aimed at enhancing our understanding of pastoralist ecosystems, collaborative programs aimed at enhancing livelihood security, and outreach activities to educate the wider society about their contribution to the mainstream.

Photo by Nipun Prabhakar
Said a blade of grass to an autumn leaf, *
You make such a noise falling!
You scatter all my winter dreams."

Said the leaf indignant, *
“Low-born and low-dwelling! Songless, peevish thing!
You live not in the upper air and you cannot tell the sound of singing.”

Then the autumn leaf lay down upon the earth and slept.

And when spring came she waked again—and she was a blade of grass

-Kahlil Gibran

*Photo by Nipun Prabhakar*