

Uttarakhand's First Pashu Mela
By Sanghamitra Ghosh

The Van Gujjars are a nomadic community of buffalo herders settled in Rajaji National Park, Uttarakhand. The Van Gujjars of Uttarakhand are expert breeders of the Gojri Buffalo.. The community migrates to the Trans Himalayas in the summers, to graze their buffaloes, and travels back to the lower Shivalik forests of Uttarakhand when the temperatures drop.

The Van Gujjars

The Van Gujjars have been fighting a political struggle with the government in Uttarakhand with respect to their migratory routes and forest dwelling. The livelihood of the Van Gujjars depends entirely on their herd of Gojri buffaloes. Van Gujjars never kill their older buffaloes, and often take them on their migratory journey as the older buffaloes often lead the herd. The Van Gujjar economy depends primarily on the milk their buffaloes produce, and the byproducts of it. Without the need for certification, the milk of these buffaloes is recognized to be organic as the grazing of the animal happens in the forest with only natural fodder. Buffalo manure is sold to the farmers around the area, and the sale of the buffalo itself brings in large sums of money to the Van Gujjars. As an emergency fund, the Van Gujjars also have goats, cows and horses as part of their herd. They believe in living lightly and carry only their essentials when they migrate. The non-essential belongings, with faith, are left behind at their deras or with their family that will remain stationary while they migrate.



The Gojri Buffalo

Gojri buffaloes are docile and prefer being in groups. They rarely venture alone and are very responsive to their *maee*. They say that a Gojri buffalo can hear the sound of its *maee* calling, even five kilometres away, and will hastily find its way back to the rest of the herd on being called. Gojri buffaloes are known to produce good quality milk, and legend has it that the buttermilk, ghee, paneer, traditional kalhari, and lassi made from this milk is a higher quantity and quality as compared to the milk from the other breeds of buffaloes. Unique characteristics of the Gojri buffaloes include their ability to climb steep inclines quickly, and travel long distances at a stretch. They can survive on low quality grass and are not subject to frequent illnesses. They like being around water and spending a lot of their time in the river during the summer.



The Pashu Mela

On March 27, the Van Gujjar community hosted and attended its first *Pashu Mela* or Animal Fair with the help of members of the Maldhari pastoral community and Centre for Pastoralism. Held at the Meena Bazaar Dera, the Pashu Mela saw participation from the Van Gujjars of the nearby *deras* as well. Three categories were created for the competing buffalos; the first judgement was based on the quantity of milk the buffaloes produced. The second category was Healthiest Buffalo – Female, and the third category was for Healthiest Buffalo - Male. On the morning of the day prior to the Pashu Mela,

the milk was emptied from the buffaloes that were competing in the milk category. The same evening, the first milking was done and weighed. The second milking was done on the morning of March 27 and the quantity was tallied from both the milking sessions to assess the winners. The buffalo that came first produced 15.7 litres of milk. The second competition was Healthiest Buffalo - Female. Researchers Dr. Sardana and Dr. Sabyasachi Das and Van Gujjars Amaanat Shari, Irshad and Gulam Nabi judged the competition.



They first eliminated the buffaloes that were not the original Gojri breed and cross-bred buffaloes, then selected the best based on how healthy the buffaloes looked. Though normally docile, male buffaloes can get temperamental if left together. After the assessment of the buffaloes, two young male buffaloes were untied and made to stand face to face. This resulted in a fight between the two, which quickly became the highlight of the day. There was havoc when the buffaloes moved too close to the spectators, and everyone had to disperse quickly.



The competition was followed by a session on the different breeds of buffaloes. This session had the attention of all the Van Gujjar men as they learned about the difference between the Jafrabadi, Banni and Nagpuri Buffaloes and the Gir Gai. The session also had a little presentation on the Gojri Buffaloes and why they are special. The Breeders Association of Uttarakhand was formed and its members were announced. This saw a positive response from the Van Gujjars who raised their hands in agreement that the

association is necessary for the advancement of their breed of buffaloes. The association was formed with the hope of getting the Gojri Buffalo breed recognized and registered in Uttarakhand. The association also aims to help the Van Gujjars fight for their rights, preserve, and protect their tradition. The Pashu Mela ended in high spirits with a prize distribution for the winners. The prizes which consisted of a milk pail, a traditional Maldhari buffalo neck accessory, cash and a certificate, were handed out by the judges to the winners of each category. Certificates were also handed out to certain members of the Van Gujjar community who contributed to making the Pashu Mela a massive success.





Other Pashu Melas

Some other well-known Pashu Melas that happen around the country are the Pushkar Mela which takes place in Rajasthan every year. This animal fair has been recognized as a major tourist event attracting people from across the world to see the camel. Unfortunately, the Pushkar Mela has become more of a tourist attraction than an event that will benefit the camel owners, and in the last five years, the fair has seen a 75% decline in the population of camels attending the fair. Another Pashu Mela that is one of the biggest in Asia is the Sonapur Cattle Fair that happens in Bihar. It goes on for 15-30 days and attracts traders from different parts of Asia. The animals that take part in this pashu mela range from donkeys to goats to rabbits to buffaloes. Even elephants are

brought to this mela. Pashu Melas have been a long standing tradition in India and are held to benefit the animals and their herders. Lately, there have been some contradictions regarding the significance of Pashu Melas. People feel like Pashu Melas are losing their original charm, trading of animals is not happening the way it was intended to and the event has become less authentic. Several herders no longer participate in Pashu Melas in several parts of India.

My Experience

Having had a lack of exposure to the life of pastoralists and the Gojri buffaloes, I learned a lot while documenting this event. Listening to the accounts of the buffalo herders as they talked about the problems they faced during Covid, the encounters their buffaloes have had with wild animals, ancestral traditions that they continue to follow, and the new ways that they are adapting to current situations and scenarios, were all very interesting. I also realised that even though I have crossed the deras of the Van Gujjars several times, I have not had access to information about the people settled in these deras and what their lives entailed. Through the presentation on the Breeds of India, I also got to learn about other breeds of buffaloes, some of which I have seen. Overall, this has been a great learning experience for me and it has piqued my interest to know more about different animals and their communities as well.