‘Quack-packing’ across Kerala

Paddy Fields are ‘teaming’ with Ducks to support a thriving form of Pastoralism

By Ramya Ravi

By bypassing a herd of sheep while driving, on highways running through rural countryside, will remind a thoughtful observer of the continuing existence of shepherd communities in the modern world. Travelling through Kerala, where the backwaters are equivalent to a road network, one may come across a similar sight. But, instead of sheep, you will see scores of ducks ‘paddling’ their way through these waterways.

The paddy fields, post-harvest, are an ideal grazing ground for these ducks, who wade through the backwaters from one field to another. Duck pastoralism is prevalent in Kerala’s wetlands. The Kuttunadu region – an area encompassing Alleppey, Pathanamthitta, Kottayam and Ernakulam districts – is characterized by many rivers, rivulets and lakes. Also identified as a Ramsar Site (a wetland designated to be of international importance under the Ramsar Convention), Kuttunadu is a low-lying area with rich alluvial soil, ideal for paddy cultivation, and duck pastoralism.

Continued on page 2...
Typically, herders buy one-day old ducklings from the state government farm in Niranom, Tiruvalla, Kerala, where the ducklings cost 21 rupees, as opposed to 24/25 rupees on a private farm. On the first day, the ducklings are fed boiled rice. For the next 10 days, they feed on poultry feed starter and rice. Within a week, the ducklings are ready to go into the water. The ducks are also fed with small shells, small fish and fish waste that is rich in protein. In 25-30 days, ducks can feed on their own in a water body. With enough nutritious feed, they start laying eggs in nearly 5 months’ time.

Above: Ducks are raised in these duck pens, where they are reared for their meat and eggs. Ducks can lay eggs for about 1.5 years producing around 200-230 eggs. Later, the birds are sold for their meat. Each egg costs around 8-9 rupees in Kerala.

Above and right: The herders look on as the ducks do their work in a farm. While there is no specific community (religion or caste based) that is involved exclusively in duck herding, the practice is in general taken up by those in the lower income group with limited land holdings.

DID YOU KNOW?
In the English language, a group of ducks in flight is called as a flock, while they are known as a raft, team or paddling when in water.

Dr. Jayadevan N is a Veterinary Doctor and Surgeon working in Kerala’s Animal Husbandry Department in Kottayam.

Ishaan Raghunandan is an information science engineering graduate turned photographer and naturalist.
The Maverick’ Doctor

An interview with Jayadevan N.

Dr. Jayadevan is a veterinary surgeon in Kerala’s animal husbandry department, who has used his position to help duck pastoralists in the state tackle some of the larger problems that face them. He spoke with him about his interventions in duck pastoralism in Kerala.

In an early study, Dr. Jayadevan was posted to the Veterinary dispensary at Apsourakul Gram Panchayat in Kottayam District. It was a challenging posting for a Veterinarian because there were more ducks than any other animal or poultry than you would normally expect. But it also turned out that duck pastoralists were frustrated because they were not getting the vaccines they needed – and they would vent their frustration by complaining about the veterinarian, using foul language, throwing things... even approaching by complaining about the veterinarian, using foul language, throwing things... even approaching...
The spell-binding Swedish song that calls cows home
For centuries, herdswomen have lured cows with haunting melodies

By Abbey Petracca

"Come, listen and acquire passion," is what they said today. They have learned no other words, all they say is: "Flee from self." Do not make a sound like an instrument; listen and let the duality slip away.

Verse 90, Sur Susa Abiri
Translation in English by Christopher Shackle

A woman who was taught how to read the sacred text by her scholarly father is special. Reading and writing in Sindhi was, and possibly still is, exceptional among the people of Banni. More and more, people like Ferozaben are relics of a past that was fundamentally Sufi - inclusive of both genders, minimal wealth, and maximum tolerance. Sindhi is deeply embedded in Banni’s cultural identity. However, the amalgamation of Banni as a part of Kutch, thereby Gujarat, has now added to their more heterodox cultural identities. This, coupled with rising traditional Islam, makes the present a chalice with a heady mix of old and new. Should they drink from this chalice or not, is only for the people of Banni to decide...

Feruzaben and her ilk are living relics

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I hear a rustling outside, halt my casual conversation, and park my thoughts aside. I turn to the door, and this beautiful lady, freshly bathed and dressed in her finest red and green ghaghra - a dress unique to joint women - holding a silver box in her hand, enters the room. With a forceful look in her kajal-smeared eyes, she greets me. She notices the other men in the room, and draws her ghunghat - a long, colorful cloth worn over the head as a sign of respect and dignity - lower. They all respectfully stand up for the ‘scholar’ in the room. Her son, a man in his fifties, tells me that I must not tape her or record her - ‘the Sufi kala will be insulted’. And so, I prepare to tape every second of this incredible meeting mentally. A miss or even a single moment, I step over to sit close by. She grabs her silver box out of the way, and throws me a furtive look. I know I have insulted her in some way, and apologize for my foolishness. She decides to forgive me, and opens the box. In it is a copy of a Risālo that has been changing hands since her grandfather’s time. Hands, that bear the distinct signs of time, open the pages of this dated, well-worn preserved book. She takes a deep breath, and with a quavering but sure voice starts her recitation. We are lost to her reverie, and have begun our own.

Ramya Ravi is a PhD student at Bangalore’s ATREE. She has carried out her fieldwork in Banni region of Kutch.

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Colonising the Wastelands

Neeladri Bhattacharya’s The Great Agrarian Conquest is an important book in understanding how colonialism destroyed Punjab’s pastoralism...

A Review by Vasant Saberwal

Studies of rural Indian history have focused overwhelmingly on cultivated India, premised on the idea that rural India is synonymous with village India. For the most part, this body of work has ignored the communities that lie outside the village, dependent for their livelihoods on forest or grasslands. Neeladri Bhattacharya’s superb account of 100 years of British rule in Punjab argues that such an exclusive focus on village India, to the exclusion of non-village India, has failed to grasp the histories of communities that inhabited such spaces.

As the British empire expanded into Punjab in the mid-19th century, it came across extensive landscapes that were thinly populated, with transient populations, moving seasonally between different parts of the landscape, and transitioning between cultivation, when the rains were good, to some form of agro-pastoralism, to full blown mobile animal husbandry in search of water and forage, at times of extended, multi-year drought. This fluidity was accompanied by an equally fluid property regime, entailing complex, overlapping customary norms as the basis for accessing and either cultivating or grazing the land. Both pastoral mobility and the fluidity of property relations were problems that the British grappled with, as they attempted to tax and govern the vast expanse to the east of the Sutlej river. Even as a seemingly paternalistic state used clearly defined property rights and clearly demarcated village boundaries as foundational bases to “improve” the moral, physical and financial state of the Punjab peasantry, there was continual pushback from the latter, for whom both tenurial ambiguity and freedom of movement were seen as central elements of living with extended periods of drought and scarcity.

In the most arid parts of western Punjab, officials saw this vast open scrubland as the tabula rasa on which they could showcase the benefits of combining tenurial security with systematic planning for large-scale irrigation. The canal colonies were developed in areas populated by mobile pastoralist communities. Cultivators from settled communities to the east were encouraged to settle here, with promises of assured water, large land grants, provision of services and so on. In return, the British hoped for a physical and social transformation: the wild landscape, subject to inefficient use by wandering communities, would yield to carefully tended farmland, peopled by efficient, responsible and morally advanced communities. The bureaucracy saw the pathos of the marginalised pastoralist as an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of such social evolution.

As Bhattacharya points out, however, following an initial bounty in agricultural yields, the colonists report widespread water logging in lands unsuited to irrigated cultivation. This combined with a sharp fall in nitrogen levels, led to dramatically lower agricultural yields. Disease, death and abandonment are recurring themes in the colonial narratives. Bhattacharya highlights the violence and disruption that accompanied the colonial encounter in the Punjab. Ultimately, the bureaucratic desire for effective, responsible and morally advanced communities. The bureaucracy saw the pathos of the marginalised pastoralist as an unfortunate but avoidance of the former pastoralist, a homogenisation of the rural landscapes that were thinly populated, with transient populations, moving seasonally between different parts of the landscape, and transitioning between cultivation, when the rains were good, to some form of agro-pastoralism, to full blown mobile animal husbandry in search of water and forage, at times of extended, multi-year drought. This fluidity was accompanied by an equally fluid property regime, entailing complex, overlapping customary norms as the basis for accessing and either cultivating or grazing the land. Both pastoral mobility and the fluidity of property relations were problems that the British grappled with, as they attempted to tax and govern the vast expanse to the east of the Sutlej river. Even as a seemingly paternalistic state used clearly defined property rights and clearly demarcated village boundaries as foundational bases to “improve” the moral, physical and financial state of the Punjab peasantry, there was continual pushback from the latter, for whom both tenurial ambiguity and freedom of movement were seen as central elements of living with extended periods of drought and scarcity.

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Pastoral Jewels of Kachchh

By Aarati Halbe

The Banni grasslands of Kachchh, once visited, are difficult to forget. An hour into the drive from Bhuj towards the Great Rann of Kachchh, the landscape changes abruptly as the road turns north from a village called Lodai. Thorny scrub gives way to a vast expanse of grassland which is, depending upon the season, often bare and occasionally grassy. The land stretches out on either side of a straight road, punctuated by stretches of an invasive thorny tree called Prosopis juliflora, that has taken on a life of its own. Yet, Banni is a name that remains unfamiliar to many, even as increasing numbers of tourists drive though it and indeed, stay in it, when visiting the Rann of Kachchh.

Once the largest sub-tropical grassland in Asia, it has been home to pastoralist communities for over 500 years. Today, over 18 distinct pastoralist communities, collectively called malharis, maintain a livelihood dependent on their buffalo and cow herds. The malharis of Banni are Muslims who migrated into Kachchh many generations ago. They claim their closest cultural ties to Sindh, yet the oral histories trace the path over time to present-day Iran. Multiple conversations with elders of different communities reasonably lead to this conclusion (“We came from Halbh,” or “Sindh is recent history, we all first came from Arabian”, an old name for Iran)

There are visible links also - embroidery styles, clothing and jewelry from Banni bear similarities to those seen in Afghanistan and Iran, reflecting a gradual migration.

Banni’s extraordinary history is evoked in a variety of ways, depending on who is looking. But if one pays attention to the various strands of coverage, what becomes most striking about the representation of the Banni grasslands in the media, or any wider forum, is the simultaneous presence and absence of its women. There is an abundance of photos of Banni women, but they are all dated – taken sometimes upwards of 15 years ago. As Banni opened its doors to the outside world, it also subtly shifted inward. The women can no longer be photographed, nor can their voices be recorded. Their place in everyday life, and their importance to the cycle of work with the animals remains largely invisible. In public space they are primarily represented by their clothing and their embroidery. Their jewelry, while less documented, also tells a story – about tradition, connection and evolving aesthetics.

In Banni, silver predominates - whole gold has smaller representation in daily wear. Wedding jewellery however, is mostly gold, and much that a woman wears to signify that she is married is gold jewellery however, is mostly gold, and much that a woman wears to signify that she is married is gold. Gold is forbidden to be worn by Muslim women, who wear minimal jewellery (1). The jewellery worn by women in Banni is distinctive. Most designs are specific to the community that wears them, and each style of ornament has a different name. In some cases, the name of an ornament is common across multiple communities, yet remains distinct in design and also sometimes in name. In other cases, the same type of ornament goes by multiple names and is roughly the same shape with distinctive markings that distinguish different communities.

The photos that follow show jewellery only – the women that wear it are absent, though they helped with each photograph and carefully explained the name and context of each piece.

The distinct jewellery worn by maldhari women in banni also has stories to tell – of traditions, connections and aesthetics

Different names across different communities:

Occasionally identical pieces of jewellery are referred to by different names. Found instances of this are listed below.

ABOVE AND LEFT: The Raysi and Hingorja communities refer to these heavy open-ended silver bracelets as mongali, the Mutwas as hethariyu, while the Halepotras call them simaari bangdi.

Earrings worn through the tragus of the ear maybe called as nasbi by Mutwas, or kuki by Dhaneto Jats.

LEFT: Varlo, as referred to by the Mutwas, or vallo, as the Hingorja community call them, are silver wire-wrapped heavy choker necklaces made of silver. Halepottas call decorative gold wedding necklace as chirmal, while the same necklace is referred to as jarwar by the Mutwas.

BELOW: These heavy silver anklets are called as kadiyu by the Raysipotras, kadi by the Hingorja community and paaniyu by the Dhaneto Jats.

Same name across different communities:

The same name will often appear in different communities referring to a piece of jewellery, however the jewellery in question may or may not be entirely similar in appearance, or in how and where it is worn.

Bunda / Dur Bunda (ABOVE WITH VARLO): Earrings made of either silver (which is more common) or gold in a range of designs. Bunda and dur bundas are found in almost all communities in Banni.

LEFT: Nasbis are earrings ranging from large and chunky to small and quite delicate. This name can apply to an earring worn either in the main lower ear piercing, by Mutwas, or earrings worn in the tragus of the ear by Raysi and Hingorja communities.

Reference: 1) Information provided by Jumabhai Raysipotra. Collected and documented by Aarati and Sonal. Location: Ghadiado, Banni, 20/12/2013
How Dinka Got the Cow?

By Jakob Jiel Akol

Dinka herdsmen of South Sudan have a unique ritual before their bedtime stories. Just before the first story begins, someone shouts out “Our old home!” and in response, the sleeping mates will reply with “All of us! Our old home! All of us!” This, according to them, serves two purposes: to prevent nightmares about the stories to be told; two, to warn everyone that whoever interrupts the story risks having nightmares. The story then begins with “This is an ancient story” and proceeds to announce the title of their story.

So let’s begin. “Our old home!”. Please say “All of us!” and read on.

This is an ancient story.

How Dinka got the Cow?

A long time ago, the Cow and the Buffalo lived in the forest with their mother. One day, their mother was killed by humans in a hunt.

“We must revenge our mother,” said the Cow. “Yes,” said the Buffalo, “we must revenge our mother! I am going to kill any human I see in the forest! They will dread my fury!”

“Today we know which of the two has killed more people than the other. It is the Cow! Brother kills brother for the Cow. Clans will feud over the Cow. Nations will go to war over the Cow. And a man without cows cannot marry a decent woman. The Cow has more than revenged her mother.”

PUZZLE: HIDDEN CRAFT!

How much do you know about these craft items that are associated with different pastoral communities?

Clues!

1. A traditional woolen blanket woven around the body of the animal to prevent nightmares about the stories to be told; two, to warn everyone that whoever interrupts the story risks having nightmares. The story then begins with “This is an ancient story” and proceeds to announce the title of their story.

2. A sheep-wool waist band typically associated with different pastoral communities.

3. It is a unique carpet weaving technique done by only two families in Kutch. Geometric patterns on these carpets give them their distinct look. Goat and camel wool for this purpose is supplied by nomadic herders.

4. Male pastoralists of Banni wear this piece of cloth with floral patterns on their shoulder.

5. This craft of block printing is still associated with different pastoral communities.

6. Brokpas, the pastoralists of Arunachal Pradesh, store Yak cheese in this handmade wooden box.

7. A sheep-wool waist band typically associated with different pastoral communities.

8. This colorful embroidered hat is worn by Kashmiri’s Bakarwal and Gujjar women.


10. Deccan’s Dhanger community weaves these hand-made baskets.

Answers on page 8
World Week in Brief

**Would we all be happier living as nomads?**

By Chris Moss

Nomadism was Bruce Chatwin's enduring obsession. In 1965, while working for Scott's, he rented a camel trek and, according to his biographer, Nicholas Shakespeare, "experienced his first taste of it all over again..."

Later that year, during a visit to the Hermitage in Leningrad (St Petersburg), he gasped in wonder at the mounted heads of camel herders that had been deep-frozen in the Mongolian Altai and preserved in pristine condition. He decided to give up auctioneering and become an archaeologist.

University work was dry and stuffy – and static – so he gorged on that to up. Turning to his real talent, writing, he became obsessed with a project, The Nomadic Alternative, which he would later describe as "a wildly ambitious and intolerant work, a kind of Anatomy of Restlessness" that would enlarge on Pascal's dictum about the man sitting quietly in a room.

"The argument, roughly, was as follows: that in becoming human, man had acquired, together with his straight legs and striding walk, a migratory 'drive' or instinct to walk long distances; that this drive was inseparable from his central nervous system; and, that, when warped in conditions of settlement, it found outlets in violence, greed, status-seeking or a mania for the new."

"It's the same as disentangling the way we live from our being settled. From around 10,000BC humans began to live, ploough and sow grains at fixed locations, constructing seasonal and, later, permanent dwellings. The payoff or, was that women, freed from gathering wild wheat, were accompanied by livestock, and having children every year, which led to a population boom. "But the extra mouths quickly wiped out the food surpluses, so even more fields had to be planted." Hawai'i calls the early agricultural revolution "history's biggest fraud". It fed more mouths, but an elite was created and the newly established lower classes were made to work ever harder for scant rewards."

Many of the darkest chapters of human history – slavery, wars, plagues, deforestation, wildlife depletion, chauvinism – can be traced back to the collective drive to settle and multiply.

Chatwin claimed that "as a general rule of biology, migratory species are less 'aggressive' than sedentary ones." Although sharks are pretty damn aggressive, and Genghis Khan was not one to chillax while watching his goats.

Bruce Chatwin thought the world would be a better place if we all did a lot more roaming. Chris Moss wonders what we’ve lost by abandoning our nomadic roots...

But it is fair to say that nomads have to live in harmony with the seasons and nature. They move only to where they can gather food or feed their herds.

Dr Stephanie Bunn, an anthropologist at the University of St Andrews, in her work alongside Kyrgyz herders, found their attitude to the environment enlightening, "...which accepted that the land was for all its inhabitants, and that humans were custodians of the land and all its inhabitants. People could take what they need, but not take more, or that would create an imbalance which could negatively rebound and affect humans."

Other scholars write that nomads maintain very strong family bonds and have profound respect for elders. Chatwin's work is littered with such positives. Gypsies, he wrote, "were egalitarian, things-free and resistant to change". Chatwin never finished his masterwork on nomads. Instead, he left us In Patagonia and The Songlines – both books finding their key inspiration in nomads, the extinct Patagonians of South America and the living cultures of Aboriginal Australians.

In settling we have lost insatiable, even spiritual, values. Nomads live in the present, while farmers spend all their time worrying over the future. Nomads explore, and expand, their immediate world; modern travellers take holidays in places usually divorced from their homeland. Nomads move at walking pace; travellers are often hurrying. Nomads carry what they can, homeowners rent storage units.

"We're most likely, these days, to hear the word "nomad" in relation to digital nomads. I can't help thinking Chatwin would have found them to be self-deceived. An essence of nomadism is to live naturally, to watch the landscape and the sky changing, to keep your head raised for coming storms and prowling wolves. Being hunched over a screen, virtually zipping from web browser to social media site to email box is, surely, closer in spirit to staying put than it is to being free, drifting hither and thither, ever searching."

Is Transhumance an intangible cultural heritage?

Spain, Italy, Austria and Greece think so...

According to a statement released by Euromontana, a European association of mountain areas, Italy, Austria and Greece proposed Transhumance as a candidate for the UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. The wide range of practices, know-hows, skills, ethnographic, literary and historical aspects that are passed on from generation to generation and that are inseparable from the people who practice them include the seasonal migration of people and their livestock. This form of migration varies from community to community. They herd their animals to the best pastur lands all year round. Since these herders constantly migrate, it also ensures overexploiting area's resources.

One of the reasons that compelled these countries to formally nominate transhumance for this year’s UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list is the knowledge systems of these communities which are derived from a deep understanding of nature and its conservation. “Such migratory movements require transhumant herders to have a broad and profound knowledge on, for instance: their animal’s needs and how to protect them; the characteristics of the different habitats and climate; and sustainable management of the land and its natural resources”, Euromontana statement emphasized. “A special bond with their animals is a must, as the herders do not only travel accompanied by livestock, but also by dogs, for protection, and pack animals”.

Beyond the knowledge of nature, the communities also have a rich oral traditions and expressions such as stories, myths and legends as well as music traditions that are used to pass on knowledge from generations to generations. Altogether, transhumance is more sustainable than other intensive livestock farming, providing both important ecosystem services and increasing human well-being in many ways. It is not just cultural heritage, but a way of living through a sustainable relationship between humankind and nature.

In November 2019, the governing Commission of UNESCO will make public their final decision on the nomination.

California Fires: Goats help save Ronald Reagan Presidential Library

California: In May, the Ronald Reagan Presidential library hired a herd of goats to clear flammable scrub surrounding the complex as a preventative measure. The goats ate the brush, creating a fire break that slowed the flames and gave firefighters extra time to react. The library near Los Angeles was threatened by the Easy Fire, the latest in a spate of fires causing evacuations and power cuts across the state.

The caprine contractors included Vincent van Goat, Selena Goatmez and Goatzart. They helped save exhibits including an Air Force One jet and a piece of the Berlin Wall. “We were told by one of the firefighters that they believe that fire break made their job easier,” Melissa Gilley, a library spokesperson, told Reuters.

The goats were hired from a local company to help clear 20-30 acres of land. Scott Morris started the company last November and charges around $1,000 (£771) per acre of land. As California continues to face more wildfires, Mr Morris says he will need to double his herd to meet the demand.

This article was first published in an extended form on https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/comment/would-we-all-be-happier-living-as-nomads/