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Performing a Balancing Act: Coexistence Between Pastoralists and Wildlife in the Himalaya



Photo Credit: Ritayan Mukherjee

AN INTERVIEW WITH YASH VEER BHATNAGAR

The calls of pastoralists echo across the high and dry plateau in Changthang, Ladakh. One eye on the trail and the other on their wandering herds, herders graze their animals through the wild rangelands as cultivation is difficult in these landscapes. But how do they know where to go? In this interview, we hear from a wildlife conservationist about how pastoralism coexists with wildlife in the Himalaya and the challenges of conserving the landscape that they traverse.

Chhani: Can you share a little about the interactions and relationships between wildlife and pastoral communities that you have gathered from your research?

Yash Veer: Over centuries, pastoralism has developed to mimic how wildlife behaves. Wild herbivores track resources - water and forage - and know what areas are best to be in every season. Herders observe and follow a similar rationale at different scales in the Himalaya. Local herders need to move with their livestock year-round, while the transhumants get their stock from the foothills to the Greater and the

Trans-Himalaya. And in the high mountains, transhumants plan their three months carefully, tracking the phenology of forage so their animals can maximise the wealth of forage available in the warmer seasons, the short 3-4 summer months of plant growth.

Most pastoralists in the Himalaya have always held wildlife in high esteem and looked at them with respect, if not reverence. For example, herders in Spiti compare their domesticated goat to their wild cousin - the ibex. While their goats don't stand a chance against the gruelling winters in the wild, the ibex can survive right at the top of the mountain at minus 40 degrees C, digging away the snow and foraging there. Therefore, pastoralists revere the ibex and call them ridaks - monarchs of the mountain.

In a mutual form of acceptance, wild animals in the Tibetan Buddhist areas of the Himalaya also rarely fear the herders. Although wild ibex may scatter in fear if outsiders try to stalk up to them, they are not afraid of the herders who whistle and saunter their way as ibex recognise them through their clothes and smell.

Herds are growing, where will the wildlife go?

Coexistence and sharing of resources between herders and wild ungulates can be sustained as long as the populations of wild ungulates and livestock are balanced. However, the balance is thrown off when one population booms. This is particularly important as domestic livestock, which is fed and cared for by their pastoralists, have a higher chance of surviving the unforgiving winters in the high altitudes than wild ungulates. The large herds brought by the transhumant pastoralists descend to the security of the Himalayan foothills in winter, with relatively easier access to forage. With fluctuating prices for livestock and their meat, herders can increase or decrease their herd sizes as the market demands. With increasing numbers, they dominate grazing grounds during the summer and often leave little for the wild herbivores. So what would the imbalance in populations mean for the wildlife who rely on the same resources for forage? What about the local ecosystem?

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Photo Credit: Ritayan Mukherjee

In Ladakh, the growing intensification of herding combined with hunting in the 60s (by the army that defended these areas) led to several local species becoming nearly extinct. For example, wild species like the Tibetan gazelle (or gowa) that grazed in open rolling areas were most vulnerable, especially before winter.

Due to both hunting and reduced pastures for their forage, the range of the Tibetan Gazelle went from many thousand to a few hundred square kilometres. Another example is a loss of forage in vast meadows across the Rohtang pass and into the upper Chandra (Chenab) Valley. These are beautiful mountains with greenery and flowering (but unpalatable) plants such as primrose (*Primula*), buttercups (*Ranunculus*), gentians and geraniums. However, due to the intensification of livestock grazing and climate change, herders can no longer find food for their livestock saying,

“Ghaas nahi hai yaha, khane ke liye,”

which means there is no palatable forage for our livestock here.

Ladakh in transition

Transitions have marked Ladakh since the 1962 Sino-Indian war. Tibetan refugees arrived in Changthang’s pastures and herded animals to survive, increasing discomfort between them and native Changpa herders for the scarce pastures. India also lost significant grazing grounds to China, yet the number of herders saw an upward climb. It was a complete ‘packing up’ of the pastures. What was once an annual home range of a few thousand square kilometres became a few hundred square kilometres, and with increased herds of pashmina goats. The land use still is pastoralism, but the way it is practised is no longer entirely ‘traditional’. With limited pastures, the native wildlife, the risks, still need to survive the unrelenting winters, and many such as the gazelle and argali are finding it difficult.

That being said, herders and livestock should not be seen as intruders in these landscapes, but rather as stakeholders who play a key role in conserving the ecosystem. As climate change and intensification of herding reduce forage for both livestock and wildlife, we need a community-led approach to conservation. There are examples of how this can work.



Photo Credit: Emmanuel Theophilus

HERDING WITH SNOW LEOPARDS:
IN CONVERSATION WITH SHAFQAT HUSSAIN

Vasant: What is the mainstream conservationist position regarding pastoral communities in the Himalayas? How do they represent agro-pastoralists in the mountains?

Shafqat: The dominant narrative about conservation among the forestry department, government institutions, and international conservation organisations hasn’t changed much in the last 40 years, surprisingly. Especially in the context of the Karakoram and Himalayan ranges, there’s an unchanging narrative that snow leopards are threatened because of pastoralists who encroach on their habitats and degrade their natural prey. There’s another implicit assumption about herders that they should quietly accept these conditions imposed on them and somehow tolerate a certain inner level of predation of their livestock because it’s necessary for conservation. As the larger image of a conservation area is still that of wilderness, herders, especially those who live there year long, are seen as threats.

V: So what’s the problem with that narrative?

S: This narrative is wrong for several reasons. One is the moral, philosophical argument of who gets to decide who stays where? Another is the ecological perspective; even if you keep people out of snow leopard habitats, can you keep snow leopards out of human societies? It’s not simply about people encroaching on snow leopard habitats, snow leopards also encroach on people’s habitats. When looking at it from the lens of social justice and ecological pragmatism, it just doesn’t make sense to create such strict boundaries and try to enforce them so vehemently.

V: Can you speak about how the problems and discrepancies of the mainstream narrative might be based on data, not just limited to morality and philosophy?

S: There are arguments that snow leopards are keystone species or top predators, yet there are no

studies that prove that. Although snow leopards are considered this elusive, mythical species, the kind of predator that confines itself to places without humans, globally 25% of their diet is livestock. In our areas, we have been monitoring snow leopard diets for 10-15 years and the data shows that 35% of that diet is livestock! There’s just little to no acknowledgement of this data. Again, it’s considered a problem created by the herders themselves. It’s very difficult to maintain that these animals can confine themselves away from society. In reality, these herding communities are unwittingly subsidising snow leopard conservation efforts globally.

V: Can you elaborate on how these local communities subsidise conservation practices? Is it just through these livestock figures or are there other ways?

S: Not only is their livestock a resource contributing to snow leopard conservation, but the labour of these communities is also definitely expected by conservation organisations. They posit that people should be more vigilant, invest in more anti-predatory technologies, and voluntarily change their livestock herding practices and traditions to accommodate wildlife and the goals of conservation institutions. Some costs are difficult to measure objectively. For example, how do you put the cost on the stress these communities have to go through when they must stay up all night after spotting a snow leopard and knowing it might attack their herd? These costs are imposed on herders which then amount to a subsidy that sustains the conservation narrative.

V: You question the other fundamental aspect of this narrative, which is that there is a steady decline of snow leopards. Then there is this attribution of who is at fault, what are your thoughts on that?

S: My data critiques the argument that snow leopards were once abundant and they’ve now declined because of human activity. There’s another that snow leopards prey on livestock because their

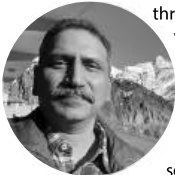
“natural” prey has declined and I question this very notion of natural prey. To snow leopards, goats look and act like natural prey! The argument of scarcity is built on the rare sightings of the animal. Before trail cameras and genetic techniques, you had to go out and see a snow leopard by tracing its tracks. You can read historical accounts where hunters and explorers were getting frustrated because they could see tracks but couldn’t see the “bloody” animal! Fast forward to 2010 and it is the same situation. Plenty of tracks but no animals. They were elusive and hard to sight 100 years and remain so. They were attacking livestock back in the 1850s, and they are still doing so. Do rare sightings mean that there is a decline in numbers?

From 2010 onwards, more people are looking for them. With better technologies, they’re finding that they’re there, and, in my book, I’ve


made the point that they’ve always been there! In 2017, the snow leopards were downlisted from endangered to vulnerable so that made me question, what made that possible? Is it that the subsidies provided by these herding communities are keeping these numbers high? This brings me to my main point: if these snow leopards are somehow considered not endangered and aren’t under threat of going extinct, then it hurts the conservation narrative and the existence of the industry itself which thrives on this crisis narrative. So they have created a counting exercise, conducted every twenty years to know how many snow leopards are left. The exercise serves to perpetuate the idea that the numbers are in continual decline.

V: Himalayan, particularly alpine, ecosystems are undisturbed habitats that are going through a period of transition where fewer pastoralists are moving up into the area. How does this affect the snow leopard population?

S: Another unreflective ‘fact’ thrown out by conservation narratives and institutions is that the habitat for snow leopards is shrinking. Snow leopard habitats are above 12-15 thousand feet and they are completely out of bounds for humans for at least six months. This might be different for lions or tigers in other regions where their habitats can easily be transformed into agricultural fields. The main threat that snow leopards face in terms of loss of habitat and transformation is from global warming. These are not caused by the practices of poor herders, but rather the practices of rich consumers and citizens of first world countries. If you look at villages and valleys along the Karakoram highway you see depopulation of high pastures happening rapidly. Very few families continue to keep animals. I was up in a lovely settlement at 12,500 feet with 60-70 huts, but just one couple was living there. There are many other villages like this. So, does such depopulation lead to reduced prey for the snow leopard? Perhaps. But you are also seeing an increase in wild prey populations in the Karakoram - largely owing to the trophy hunting in the area. I’ve seen ibex herds by the roadside. So yes, I think on the whole one might see a reducing herder presence in the Himalayas, and I’m not sure what the consequences of this might be for the snow leopards. But one does need to accept that this is an argument that is particular to these high alpine landscapes, and one cannot generalise from here to more densely populated areas.



Yash Veer Bhatnagar, PhD, has dedicated three decades to understand and help with the conservation of wildlife of the high mountains of the Himalaya using good science and participation of local communities and other stakeholders. He now works for the Mysore based Nature Conservation Foundation, where he has set up a Himalaya Lab to pursue inclusive, landscape-level conservation in the Himalaya.



Shafqat Hussain is George and Martha Kellner Chair in South Asian Studies and professor of anthropology at Trinity College, US. He is the author of Remoteness and Modernity: Transformation and Continuity in Northern Pakistan (2015) and The Snow Leopard and the Goat: Politics of Conservation in the Western Himalayas (2020). He holds a PhD in Anthropology and Environmental Studies from Yale University.



Photo Credit: Rigzen Dorjay

The Stalker and the Outcast: Sharing the Landscape with Predators in the High Himalaya

By, Saloni Bhatia

One autumn evening in Ladakh, we received news that a snow leopard had killed someone’s pet dog and injured a calf. I had only just landed in Leh and had not fully acclimatized, but we decided to pay a visit to the family the following morning, hoping to catch a glimpse of the carnivore as well.

The village was in a narrow valley surrounded by steep gorges, gushing streams, and a hot spring. It was the smallest one I had ever seen, comprising only two households. We met the family whose calf had been attacked. During our conversation, we gathered that they had been struggling to continue livestock herding owing to frequent attacks by wild predators. In that instance, they had stayed up all night to guard their calf. But, they said, their neighbour Dolma had had it worse. She had lost her pet dog to the snow leopard, her sole companion after her husband passed away. We could not interact with her because she was averse to meeting strangers

but one can well imagine her state of mind. To me, that moment represented something beyond the economics of loss – it was an epitome of pain, vulnerability, loneliness.

Decoding the Mystery

Weeks later, I kept thinking about the families. What had prevented them from retaliating when they could have easily poisoned the carcass in the absence of monitoring? In a place like Ladakh, agriculture and livestock rearing are the main sources of subsistence and are crucial for people’s survival. How did they manage to cope with the losses and the anxiety about predator attacks, night after night?

I repeatedly came across stories about depredation during my travels and questioned: what shaped Ladakhi people’s relationship with wildlife, especially the two carnivores – wolves and snow leopards? I wondered what one could do to reduce



Photo Credit: Saloni Bhatia

the intensity of the negative impacts for people. As the first step, I signed up for a PhD with the Nature Conservation Foundation-Snow Leopard Trust to better understand the problem. As the research progressed, our team gathered insights into the nuances and complexities of living with carnivores. The research helped realise that living with wildlife was a complex matter and had multiple dimensions – be they economic, social, or psychological. Through our conversations, we also came to appreciate the cultural canvas against which we had evaluated these factors. Ladakhis live in relatively close-knit communities and have deep cultural connections; many devoutly follow their religion. We then set out to unpack this canvas.

Impact of Narratives

We learnt that Ladakh had a vibrant oral storytelling ethos. Using a combination of archival searches, visits to monasteries, and interviews with village elders, we were able to document diverse folk stories about the snow leopard and the wolf. From the stories, it was clear that the wolf was largely associated with negative symbolism which, we reasoned, made people dislike them more than the snow leopard. For example, the wolf is often referred to as an outcast or chanzan, meaning a ‘menace-causing predator’. Ladakhis refer to the snow leopard by different names such as jatpo (one who stalks) or salapo (one who eats grass).

Winds of Change

Ladakh is at the cusp of tradition and modernism. The transition has left its youth confused – they are often torn between respecting their roots and adapting to more globalised lifestyles.



The more time that one spends in these landscapes the more one comes to realise that alternatives – practical or intellectual – must enable people to deal with negative wildlife impacts whilst accounting for a diversity of worldviews and perspectives, transitions included. To this day, I remember Dolma and all the families in similar situations who I was fortunate to meet during my time in Ladakh. I remember how kindly they hosted me, how generously they gave

despite having little, and how I hardly understood these paradoxes. More than anything, I remember how they made it a point to remind me, “Animals are like people. They have the same needs and feelings.”

This article was first published on Shepherds of Himalayas and reshared with permission from the author.



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Empathy. Maybe this was the answer that I had been looking for.

“Of Wolves and Shepherds”, Echoes from Portuguese mountains

The lives of shepherds and wolves are interwoven in Portugal. They both used to populate the mountains of the North and symbolised the balanced dispute between men and nature. Where you had wolves, you had shepherds. But shepherds left the hills as they became victims of the authoritarian government ‘modernisation’ policy that grabbed their traditional pasture lands to plant forests instead. One after another, ‘unproductive’, and ‘backward’ common pasturelands were replaced by ‘scientific’, ‘modern’, ‘productive’, and ‘proud’ protected governmental forests. The landscape eventually changed, the climate evolved, and the new government policy transformed once fertile pasturelands into highly flammable grounds. Fires came, wolves departed. No more shepherds, no more wolves either.

The re-democratisation of Portugal in the 1970’s returned the lands to pastoralist communities. Flocks and shepherds re-occupied the hills and, progressively, the wildlife also returned – birds, rabbits, foxes, deer, and wolves. The latter benefited additionally from the active help of engaged environmentalists who proposed a smart and holistic approach: reintroduce both the wolf and indigenous sheepdogs to favour the protection of the flocks. Shepherds were awarded

dogs to limit shepherd-wolf conflicts. The wolf population grew, packs enlarged. Consequently, attacks on flocks became more frequent. Packs of 6-7 wolves tend inevitably to outnumber one or two sheepdogs.

Shepherds do not blame the wolf. Isolated attacks on flocks are the price of nature and wolves also have their rights to existence. Instead, shepherds blame the government and its byzantine system of compensations.

Each attack on flocks has to be duly reported and official investigations are opened to determine whether wolves are the culprits or not. Crime scenes must comprise the animal victim’s carcass and evidence of the wolf attack: footprints, faeces, bite marks, hair, and, why not, a witness. Unsurprisingly, investigations are inconclusive, and shepherds are generally not compensated for their economic losses. Once again, the complicated conservation policy is to the detriment of pastoralist communities.

Shepherds now advocate to be included in the environmental policy. Pastoralism and conservation are not antagonistic in a co-constructed landscape. Shepherds recognise the value of and their dependency on nature. Wildlife, vegetation, flocks, and shepherds all have their roles and functions attributed over millennia. The wolf occupies imaginations, it forces at once fear and respect.

I was told a story of a goatherd who found two abandoned wolf cubs in the hills of Alvão. Mother wolf was gone or dead and the goatherd, in secret, cared for her cubs. He fed and looked after them until rumours of this unexpected story reached the forest guards. They coerced the goatherd to deliver the cubs to the care of the environmental authorities. After several intimations, the goatherd had no other choice than to comply with the official demands. The story is one of the multiple illustrations of ties between pastoralists and their environment in the Portuguese mountains.

Shepherds are not enemies of wolves. On the contrary, shepherds hold many conservation

ideas grounded in their pragmatic grassroot ecologies. Once we converse with them, we learn how to conciliate the economy of pastoralism and the conservation imperative for the wolves. The policy needs of the pastoral people may be in the form of lump-sum compensation sums based on a mix of wolf-pastoral interactions and flock size or sanctuaries where wolves are fed with culled livestock. Shepherds make their living from nature; they are the first concerned with its preservation. What is missing is the governmental recognition of their unique environmental agency.

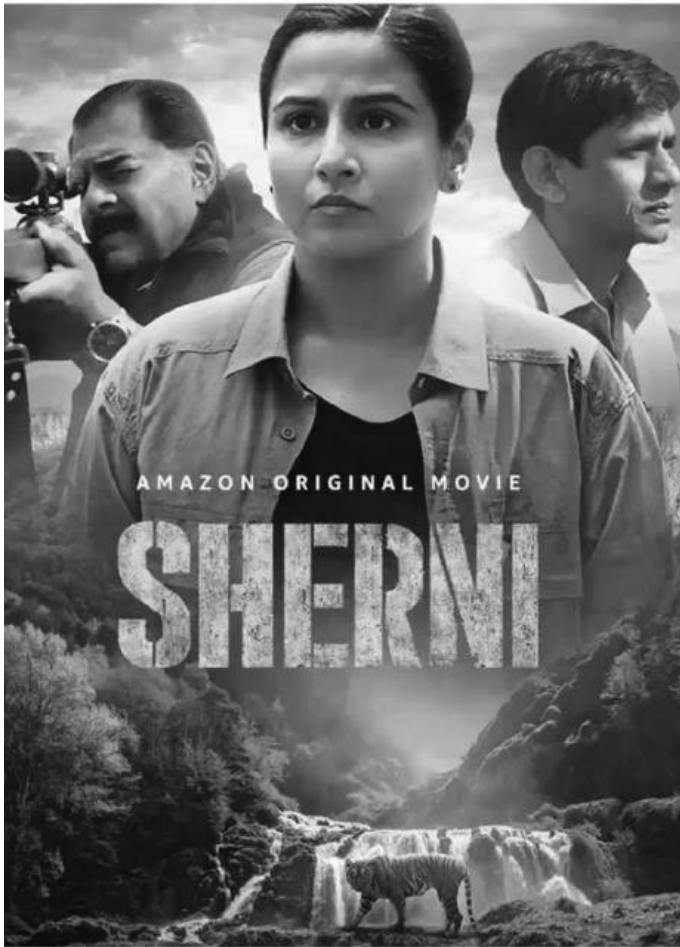
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Julio Sa Rego is an economist and anthropologist born in Paris (France) and raised in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). He lives in Portugal to dive into the world of mountain pastoralists and support their struggles for economic and environmental recognition.

Movie Review

‘Sherni’ Communicates a Story of Fierce Conflict With Genuine Empathy | By Tanul Thakur



Poster Credits: Jsnewstimes

The heart of many conflicts can be distilled into a simple sentence: Who owns the land?

It’s often followed by another question: What should we do with the ‘outsiders’ – or, according to some parochial nativists, ‘encroachers’?

But what if the self-righteous indignation about such questions is murky – and you risk losing your moral compass in the jungle of truths and myths? Amit Masurkar’s *Sherni*, premiering on Amazon Prime Video, tackles familiar and pertinent themes but broadens the conversation by adding an unexpected element: an animal, especially the species living on the margin of margins, the tiger.

This narrative choice makes perfect sense, as dehumanisation – or rendering your adversary ‘animal’-like – is the ultimate weapon of systemic loathing. By making a tiger the film’s centrepiece, Masurkar stretches the gamut of possibilities, as if the literal and the metaphorical are playing a game of musical chairs.

Centred on a divisional forest officer, Vidya Vincent (Vidya Balan), *Sherni* tells a deceptively simple story: prowling tigers, scared villagers, harried administrators. In a Madhya Pradesh village – marked by the dangerous pattern of “farm, jungle, farm, jungle” – a T-12 tigress has begun preying on goats, the community’s prime source of income. Soon, straying villagers become her target – and people start to panic.

The most potent conflict is embedded in the story. Many villagers are worried that, due to T-12’s predations, they’ll soon run out of goats (and the means to earn a living). But the forest department can’t kill the tigress, either – a species already struggling for survival. So, Vidya inaugurates an employment initiative to compensate for the villagers’ wage loss and reduce their dependence on farming. But then comes a crucial twist. A woman says, “Madam, most of us can make beautiful things from bamboo.”

Another says, “We can weave baskets and rice cleaners and even colour them.” As (an offscreen) Vidya encourages them, the camera focuses on a woven basket; a woman picks it up, places it on her head – and drops an infectious smile. That smile, that scene, floored me.

We don’t see such stories in mainstream Hindi cinema that highlight a marginalised people’s right to self-determination – and does so while talking to them, listening to them, without making a big deal about it. What we typically see instead, in postcolonial Indian cinema, is the unfortunate tendency to talk down to our own people, while claiming to ‘rescue’ and ‘educate’ them. Western colonialism may be dead, but Indian imperialists are thriving.

The film’s empathy is thankfully not limited, even extending to wildlife and nature. But writing about it is one thing, showing it – using a different cinematic arsenal – is something else. We get plenty of forlorn long shots

in the jungle, as if mimicking the tigress’ point of view.

We get an excellent line that shames our own bloodlust: “No animal is a man eater, sir. It’s just hungry.” We get cute-as-cat scenes of a kitten in Vidya’s house and cubs in a jungle. There is a world beyond our own vanities, the film constantly suggests: don’t shame or shun it; understand and accept it.

This is a story of displacement and homelessness, of unfair punishments trying to change fundamental behaviour. It is about environment and identity, stolen lands and manufactured conflicts, callous officials and vulnerable victims. Many characters, including regions and animals, live in no-man’s land. The villagers are torn between the two politicians. The construction of teak plantations for easy profit has deprived the goats, leaving them to choose between starvation and violent death. The officers switch between following their conscience and following orders.

Unlike many films contemplating the relationship between people and wildlife, often set around a forest, *Sherni* doesn’t leap with feral intensity.

It is, in sharp contrast, an understated piece – sometimes a bit too quiet – whose subversions extend to the level of performances. Raaz plays an atypical ‘serious’ role, which has no shades of absurdist humour or whimsical everyman, and he’s earnest enough to make us care for his cause.

Ditto Balan’s Vidya, a controlled minimalist performance that eschews her traditional forte: pleasing tenderness and fierce intensity. Here she seems to be doing so little – there are no grand declarations or gestures. It’s simply one tiring day after the other – a dozen defeats burying a tiny triumph.

It’s also a credible portrayal of gradual disenchantment – from family, higher-ups, institutions – to finally find her niche, whose preservation will (hopefully) not destroy her. Because in man-made jungles, both carnivorous animals and conscientious humans are on the verge of extinction.

This review was first published on The Wire: <https://thewire.in/film/sherni-film-review-vidya-balan-amit-masurkar-amazon-prime-video>

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on NEWS

NGT upholds rights of pastoralists in Banni grasslands, wants encroachments removed

By, Rituja Mitra

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) ordered all encroachments to be removed from Gujarat’s Banni grasslands within six months and directed a joint committee to prepare an action plan in a month. The region’s nomadic pastoralist community, the Maldharis, whose livelihoods are dependent on this protected shrub-savanna, welcomed the move. The community, united under Banni Pashu Uchherak Maldhari Sangthan (BPUMS), had filed a case against the rampant encroachment in the ecologically sensitive grassland in May 2018.

“Banni ko Banni rehne do (Let Banni remain Banni),” echoed pastoralists from the Banni grasslands during the virtual hearing.

The panel comprising the divisional commissioner and the chief conservator of the forest of Kutch will define the extent of the encroachments and an action plan to remove them in the report, the court mandated. The court also said the Maldharis will continue to hold the right to conserve the community forests in the area, granted to them as per the provisions

in Section 3 of Forest Rights Act, 2006. NGT highlighted that the lack of coordination between the forest department and the revenue department led to the problem of encroachment.

“The court has brought relief to our community members,” added Kakan Mutwa, a Maldhari from Abhyanga village, Banni.

Banni grasslands, traditionally, were managed following a system of rotational grazing. On May 11 1955, the court notified that the grassland will be a reserve forest. On July 3, 2019, the tribunal ordered to demarcate the boundaries of the Banni grassland and restricted non-forest activities.

“In 2019 the court had heard us but on the ground, things didn’t change, but this time we would remain positive, if things don’t change, our fight shall continue,” a Nurmada Jat, a Maldhari member pointed out.

This article was first published on Down to Earth and reshared with permission from the author.

Bio: Rituja Mitra has been working as Research Associate with Sahjeevan. Her interest pertains to understanding socio-ecological perspectives in Pastoralism.

In Kashmir, forest rights after a long time

Jehangir Rashid, Srinagar
Published: Sep. 20, 2021

When Articles 370 and 35A were abrogated in 2019, most central laws were implemented in the new Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). However, some were not. Among them was the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

It was finally implemented at the end of 2020, after a struggle that actually began in 2006, when the law was passed by Parliament but could not be introduced in J&K because of the special provisions under which the state was governed. The law gives forest dwellers rights over their homesteads and minor forest produce and recognizes that they have an important role to play in the protection of forests.

The driving force behind the demand to implement the FRA has been Zahid Parwaz Choudhary, president of the J&K Gujjar Bakerwal Youth Welfare Conference (JKGBYWC). “The government of J&K had a very lackadaisical attitude regarding this law. Due to this, we were forced to hit the streets and carry out protests in support of our demands. The eviction of forest dwellers was going on in full swing, especially in Jammu division,” says Choudhary.

Forest dwellers have long demanded that their rights be recognized. They want to play a role in the protection of forests and manage the resources on which their livelihoods depend. He said community members have been raising their demands through different means such as protests, rallies, dharnas and conferences. Hundreds of young people have gotten involved



Photo Credit : Zahid Parwaz Chaudhury

and become robust activists for the cause. When Articles 370 and 35A were abrogated, people assumed all central laws would be implemented. But that was not to be and the FRA was one of the central laws that were not implemented.

It was only at the end of last year that the law got implemented when a drive to evict forest dwellers became an issue before the District Development Council elections. Choudhary explains that the FRA guarantees the protection of forests and empowers village committees to take stern action against people who cause damage to a forest in

any way. He says that village committees have been empowered to such an extent that forest smugglers cannot get away scot-free any longer.

“Under the FRA, tribals can use dried and useless timber for domestic purposes. They are also entitled to pick up dry grass, leaves and medicinal herbs found in abundance in the forests. Community members can also cut branches of trees and this, in turn, will ensure longevity of trees in forests,” says Choudhary.

On September 13, Jammu and Kashmir Lt. Governor Manoj Sinha handed over individual

and community right certificates to the beneficiaries of Gujjar-Bakerwal and Gaddi-Sippi communities at a ceremony for implementation of the ‘Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights Act)’ in J&K.

However, implementation of the law has been poor across India. It remains to be seen whether people get such rights in J&K.

This article was first published on civilsocietyonline.com.

Impact of Covid-19 on Van Gujjars

By Amit Rathi

Van Gujjars, a forest-dwelling semi-nomadic pastoral community, move with their livestock to the higher reaches of the Himalayas during summer and come down to the Shivalik forest in winter. However, this year, their movement has been curtailed by the forest department and are not allowed into their traditional grassland pastures

Van Gujjars who migrate from the Shivalik forests to the Govind Pashu Vihar National Park in Uttarakhand were denied entry by the forest authorities.

Migrating Van Gujjars were forced to live under open skies in tough conditions after they were denied entry to Govind Pashu Vihar National Park despite holding permits. The state government reasoned before the court that letting the pastoralists enter the national park may endanger the wildlife as the coronavirus may spread from humans to animals. Following a hearing based on a public interest litigation (PIL), the Uttarakhand High Court slammed the state government for its “callousness” and also cited that since these Van Gujjar families could not sell milk from their cattle due to the

lockdown, they are forced to survive in conditions “below animal existence”. The court also ordered the government to provide them accommodation, food, water, medicines, and get them tested for Covid-19 before letting them enter the Govind Pashu Vihar National Park.

Van Gujjars and Vaccine Access:

While the Van Gujjars have been less affected by the pandemic, they want to get vaccinated.

However, there are some difficult ground realities that need to be addressed by the government. One such issue is that the Van Gujjars are unable to register online for vaccines as only a few families have smartphones and limited access to the internet in the forests. The vaccine registration process remains a mystery to them. Apart from their desire to get vaccinated, they know little about the process of getting it. The government has made Aadhar cards compulsory and many Van Gujjars do not have one. They are consequently sent back from vaccination centres.

The government has been claiming that they will vaccinate each citizen, but no such steps have been taken so far. The government should come up with special vaccination camps in the high-altitude meadows & foothills to cover their population. This process will require extra effort & the government might have to undertake some special measures to reach them and go into the forests.



Very recently, the government has started organising vaccination camps in the forest or nearby areas for the community - a slow start to a vaccinated future.



Latitude: 30.989663
Longitude: 78.02101
Elevation: 1172.28±30 m
Accuracy: 9.2 m
Time: 05-20-2021 14:44
Note: लुना गढ़

Photo Credit: Meer Hamza



Amit Rathi currently anchors the CFP’s work with the Van Gujjars in Uttarakhand, focused specifically on using the Forest Rights Act towards securing herder rights to summer and winter grazing.

They were running from pillar to post for several days to move the state bureaucracy and met several forest officials who offered no solutions.

Slow Food Heroes: a 4.0 shepherd helps Covid care units

Leonardo is a young Italian farmer who moved from Rome to Abruzzo, the land of his ancestors. He has returned to shepherding and runs a goat farm where he makes excellent artisanal cheeses, all with raw milk and using only traditional methods. During the Covid-19 pandemic, he decided to donate the entire proceeds from his farm's Easter product sale to Covid intensive care units.

I'm 36 years old. After a degree in animal husbandry, I decided to leave Rome and live in my grandparents' land. Looking back at the last 5 years, I studied, delved into the techniques of milk processing, met the local goat herders, listened to their stories, regrouped all these pieces and made my decision.

When I arrived here, I knew I wanted to raise goats, but not which goats. Coming from study and work experiences focused on breeding in northern Italy, I was almost convinced that I wanted to introduce purebred goats, with those beautiful udders that promise the cheesemaker liters and liters of milk: a dream for those who, like me, could not wait to start their own laboratory and begin to put into practice their studies and experiences accumulated in the dairies of other companies.



Photo Credit: Tommaso d'Errico

So, I began to roam the pastures surrounding the Casetta, in search of answers. I got to know the plants, the trees and the woods, but most of all I got to know the local shepherds; shepherds who are the sons of shepherds. I got to know their flocks, I saw them grazing on these mountains and made up my mind: breaking the link with the territory by introducing goats from other places would have been a resounding loss, with serious short and long-term consequences both for the herd itself and for the mountain that hosts it.

Today, I have my herd of 140 goats, the pastures, the cheese farm where I process only the milk of my goats, strictly raw, without adding adjuvants or enzymes. Goats are not purebred; they come from the flocks of the oldest shepherds who have been living in these pastures for centuries and who have established a complex biological relationship with the territory in which they live, one that has been

perfected over time and is indispensable for the preservation of the ecosystem.

I process all the milk produced on the farm, making a wide variety of cheeses, mainly lactic coagulation cheeses, strictly made with raw milk, of medium maturity, seasoned or refined with herbs and wild fruits that the pastureland of the goats offers us (bear garlic, juniper, hazelnut, etc.). In the dairy, I process exclusively the milk of my goats, from which I obtain the grafts and of which I try to exalt the different nuances deriving from the seasonality of the pasture.

The production is limited, due to the genetic type of goats bred and their diet, which consists only of mountain pasture plus a minimal integration of raw materials (corn and beans). Many visitors come to our company store, especially on weekends, to buy products or just to meet the goats! We also

collaborate with some selected restaurants in the area. I stepped up during the most dramatic moment of the Coronavirus emergency, with the intent to add a new link to the solidarity chain that was supporting the Italian public health system during those difficult days.

On March 23, 2020, I wrote on social media to share my concern for the situation and I followed with apprehension the news that travelled up here, in the mountains, in the pastures that welcomed me. So, I asked myself: how can I do my part to help the community face this terrible moment? I, who as a herdsman, have had the enormous privilege of being able to continue working.

So, I decided to donate the entire proceeds from the Easter farm product sale to the intensive care units of the ASL Lanciano Vasto Chieti, to support the intensive assistance that the sick desperately needed.

The initiative has been joined by individuals, local authorities and institutions, buying traditional Easter products, with the awareness of contributing, with their purchase, to the donation.

On Easter 2020, I closed the Easter sales and donated the sum of €4,300, to the account dedicated to the Covid-19 Emergency of the ASL Lanciano Vasto Chieti.

My support aimed to evoke a distant yet present feeling of a 4.0 shepherd, who has combined his studies, modern technology and the precious know-how passed on by the elders of the trade in order to create "Casetta Bianca", a small company born out of an abandoned stable.

First published on Slow Food:
<https://www.slowfood.com/slow-food-heroes-a-4-0-shepherd-helps-covid-care-units/>



Photo Credit: Nipun Prabhakar

The revival of a historic journey across Spain

By Kira Walker on BBC, 24th September 2021

A resurgence in pastoralism, one of the world's more sustainable food systems, could help Spain adapt to climate change and revitalise depopulated rural areas.

As late May approached, the animals were growing restless. In little more than a day, the heat from the southerly desert winds had turned the grass dry, leaving Jesús Garzón's herd of 1,100 sheep and goats little to eat. Garzón knew – and the animals, nervous and bleating, knew as well – it was time to head north, where cool weather and fresh pastures awaited them.

Every spring and autumn, Garzón and his herd make this seasonal migration, called transhumance – from the Latin trans for “across” and humus for “earth” – a form of pastoralism where animals

typically move to and from summer highlands and winter lowlands to take advantage of seasonal peaks in pastures and avoid extreme temperatures. After being abandoned for half a century, the recovery of transhumance in Spain demonstrates how pastoralism, a livelihood suited to coping with uncertainty and sustainable food systems, can help preserve biodiversity, while breathing life into depopulated rural areas.

Practiced by 200 to 500 million people across the world's rangelands – grasslands, savannahs, mountain pastures, tundra and steppe covering half the earth's land surface – pastoralism is significant socially, environmentally and economically. Yet misconceptions and an underappreciation of its benefits means it has been largely overlooked in international sustainability discussions and

agendas. As a herder who has also been at the forefront of efforts to revive this ancient practice and raise awareness of its importance, Garzón understands its potential, and its challenges, well.

Ecological Benefits of Pastoralism

Through grazing, pastoralism provides further benefits to the ecosystem. So long as a threshold of overgrazing is not crossed – which seasonal migration helps avoid – grazing stimulates plant growth, increases productivity, reduces soil erosion and facilitates water retention.

More recently, grazing is being touted as a solution to climate change. However, the extent to which grazing contributes to climate mitigation is the subject of much debate. Some researchers argue grazing has significant potential to increase long-term carbon storage.

Unlike industrial farming, which relies on fossil fuels, chemical inputs and fodder, pastoralism only relies on seasonally available pastures. “Grazing animals make use of the resources that are not good for cropping and for agriculture, and turn them into food we as humans can digest and can eat,” says Oteros-Rozas.

Pasture-fed animal products have better nutritional profiles, too. Feeding on natural biodiverse pastures produces meat, milk and cheeses that contain more nutrients and healthy fats. The combination of minimal external inputs and high-quality food make pastoralism one of the most sustainable food production systems.

Reviving Pastoralism in Spain

For Garzón, transhumance is undoubtedly gaining momentum as climate change creates more challenging conditions – droughts, rising fodder prices – for sedentary livestock in southern Spain. Research suggests a revival has occurred in some corners of Spain. In the Aragonese Pyrenees, for example, Fernandez-Gimenez found several

families have resumed transhumance over the past decade after abandoning it due to difficult living and working conditions. For herders, the increased availability of low-cost winter grazing lands made transhumance more profitable than sedentary livestock, but access to inexpensive, high-quality summer pastures, as well as technology, which helps families cope with time apart, were crucial, too. “There are many ecological, animal health and lifestyle benefits to being a transhumant. But bottom line, it's more profitable and that's why people are going back,” says Fernandez-Gimenez.

Advocates of pastoralism are hopeful it will continue carving out a place for itself in a world that has changed profoundly since the first transhumant herders began their journey.

“Pastoralism is this way of life attuned to making efficient use of the available resources and adapting to what's there in a way that doesn't harm the system and often enhances it,” says Fernandez-Gimenez.

“Rather than trying to get rid of it, we need to learn from it, because those lessons are going to be ever more important under a changing climate and changing environment.”

In the mountain pastures of the Picos de Europa, Garzón and the herd pass the summer in ease, waking to crisp mornings and occasional showers while the rest of the country swelters through record-breaking heat. There they will remain until the first snowfall, signalling the time to retrace their steps south has arrived.

“The planet is facing a situation of real social and economic catastrophe,” says Garzón. “But pastoralism is going to survive.”

First published on BBC Future Planet. Find it here:
<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20210923-the-revival-of-spains-epic-pastoral-migration>

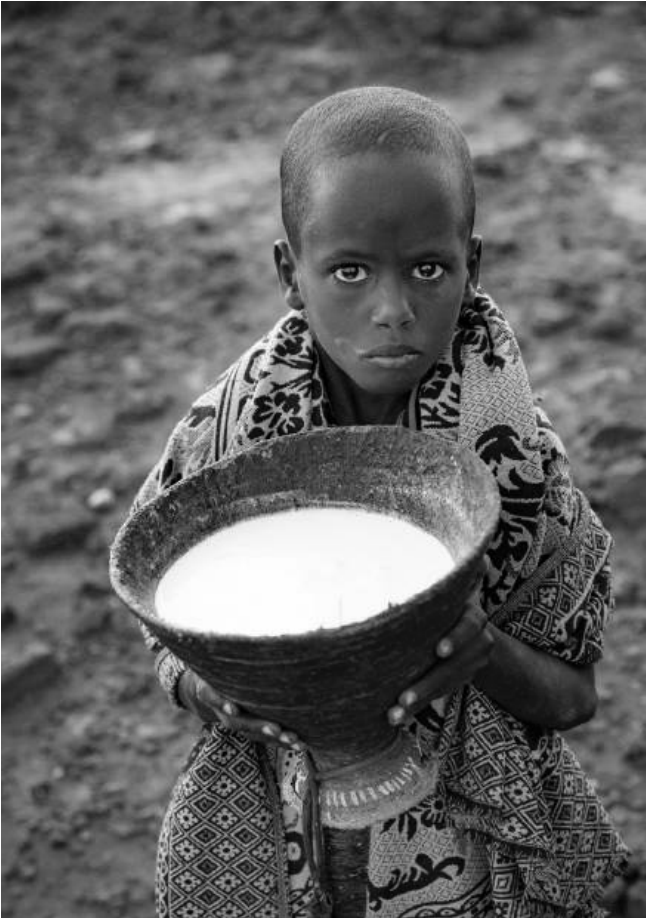
A photo essay by Michael Benanav

A glimpse of The Afar of Ethiopia -



Milk is the foundation of the Afar diet and, while cows and goats are important sources of it, camel milk is considered to be the healthiest and heartiest of all. In fact, it is high in Vitamin C, iron, niacin, important amino acids, and proteins that can boost the immune system.

A girl herds goats and sheep across lava fields in the Danakil Desert. Most families keep more goats than sheep, because they eat a wider variety of vegetation, hence are easier to keep alive in this harsh environment.



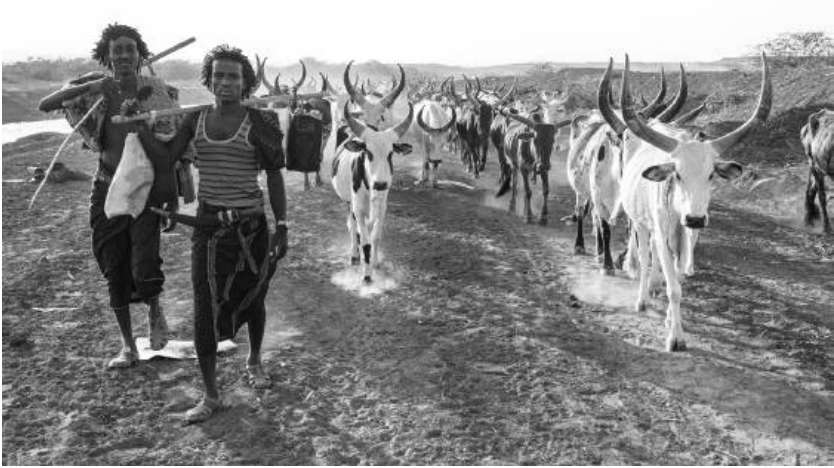
A boy carries fresh camel milk in a tightly-woven basket called an amour. The inside is smoked over a fire, creating a surface that is milk-tight.



Many families also keep donkeys as beasts of burden. Though neither as strong nor as desert-proof as camels, they are just the right size for many jobs, and are quite hardy in their own right. They are neither eaten nor milked by the Afar.



Erecting a hut — called an “arri” — on the lava fields at Saha. Thin branches are bent and lashed together, then covered with reed mats.



Ibrahim Mohammed and Mohammed Ali trekking across the desert with cattle from Gega, in search of grass. Aside from the inherent hardships of life on the move, more movement increases livestock exposure to disease, and malnutrition makes them more vulnerable to falling seriously ill.



Top: Many Afar believe that the drought and the locusts are “from Allah.” They pray for rain on occasion, “when the moon is red or black...when the moon is dead.” Here, a group of men pray at night.



Left: Returning to a temporary camp for the evening on a road surrounded by wayani (a nickname for an invasive, drought-resistant shrub introduced by the Ethiopian government in the 1980s), in an area that used to be prime pasturelands.



Top: The village of Shekti Golu.

Left: “We’ve walked for four days with no rest. A couple of our cows collapsed along the way...The locusts have made this year especially hard,” Ibrahim said.



Michael Benanav is an author and freelance photographer known for immersing in foreign cultures and bringing compelling stories and images back from distant places. When not in some remote nook of the planet, Michael can often be found hiking in the hills behind his home in northern New Mexico.