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Trying to make the grade in a Van Gujjar basti

by Varsha Singh

Fatima Bano was reciting a poem: "The fan rotates above, the baby sleeps below," she said in Hindi. "Sleep baby sleep, sleep on the big red cot..." With all eyes on her, the nine-year-old was still trying to somehow not be noticed among the group of kids attending a class one afternoon in a Van Gujjar basti inside the Rajaji Tiger Reserve.

Their 'school' was being held that day in the front yard of Tabassum Biwi's house. A bunch of students, ages ranging from 5 to 13, were sitting on a large durrie, a few clutching notebooks. Tabassum Biwi's two kids, a boy and a girl, were among them; her family, like almost everyone in this basti, rears buffaloes and sells milk for a living. The school has been assembling intermittently in the Kunau Chaud settlement since 2015 – either in the yard or in a large room in the house. Classes are held on and off from

Monday to Friday between 9:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. During one of my visits here in December 2020, when Fatima Bano was reciting the poem, 11 girls and 16 boys were present.

A band of Van Gujjar youth are their teachers. They try to fill in a persistent education gap in Kunau Chaud – a basti of around 200 families in Yamkeshwar block of Uttarakhand's Pauri Garhwal district. The settlements that are in the tiger reserve usually consist of mud and thatch huts. Permanent construction is prohibited by the forest department, there are no toilet facilities, and water is used from forest streams.

Kunau Chaud is located inside the reserve, far from the pucca road – and schooling here remains erratic and uncommon due to several hurdles. The Government Model Primary

School (till Class 5), and the Government Inter-College (till Class 12) are around three kilometres away. Wild animals like leopards, elephants and deer move about here. Reaching the schools requires wading through the shallow waters of the Bean river (a tributary of the Ganga). During the monsoon months of July and August, when the water rises, the kids either stop going to school or their parents shepherd them across this route.

Many are not even enrolled in school – a lack of documents restricts these attempts. Applying for and procuring official papers is a long and hard task for the Gujjar families living in remote forest bastis. Parents in Kunau Chaud say that most of their kids don't possess birth certificates or Aadhaar cards.

In many families, the older children spend a large portion of their days watching over cattle. Among them is Zaitoon Bibi's 10-year-old son Imran Ali, who takes care of the family's six buffaloes. Though he was enrolled in the government primary school and then admitted to Class 6 in August 2021, his education remains a challenge. "I wake up at 6 in the morning to feed the animals and then I milk them. After that I take them to drink water and then give them hay," he says. Imran's father sells milk and his mother looks after household activities, which include taking care

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PC: Sanghamitra Ghosh

Young Van Gujjar women share their stories and aspirations

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of their cattle. Like Imran, many children here are engaged in tasks at home for large parts of the day and this impacts their schooling.

So far, estimates, Mir Hamza, who is the director of the Yuva Sangathan, not even 10 per cent of the children in Kunau Chaud have been able to get a consistent formal education. "Despite laws on the right to education," he says, "various schemes of the government related to education fail to reach this community since our basti is not attached to a gram panchayat [which would make it eligible to receive scheme-related benefits]."

In 2015-16, under provisions of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), Non-Residential Special Training Centres (NRSTCs) were started in some of the bastis, including in Kunau Chaud, to connect Van Gujjar children living in remote areas to formal education. That academic year, 38 kids in Kunau Chaud attended these local classes, says Shailendra Amoli, block education officer, Yamkeshwar. After another approval in 2019, from June that year classes were again conducted with 92 kids on the rolls, until the March 2020 lockdown. For the 2021-22 academic year too NRSTC classes have been approved for Kunau Chaud, for 63 students in the 6 to 12 age group, says Shailendra.

Read the full article here:

<https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/trying-to-make-the-grade-in-a-van-gujjar-basti/>

Varsha Singh is an independent journalist based in Dehradun, Uttarakhand. She covers the Himalayan region's environment, health, gender and people's issues.

on NEWS

Pastoralists hold 'godh bharai' event to save threatened donkey breed

First India Bureau



In Saurashtra, Halari donkey pastoralists organized a Godh Bharai event to raise public awareness regarding the importance of preserving this endangered livestock breed in its native habitat. It was an initiative of the Halari Donkey Conservation Committee – a group of 11 pastoralists from Jamnagar and Dwarka District of Saurashtra along with Sahjeevan, Bhuj. The event commenced in Upleta Taluka, Rajkot the migratory route of these donkeys.

The event was marked with the participation of 35 pregnant Halari Donkeys in their 8th month of gestation along with 150 Halari Donkey Breeders. The women Maldharis who are majorly caretakers of Halari Donkeys commenced the event with traditional Godh Bharai songs and through rituals. Godh Bharai (baby shower) is a traditional Indian ritual to bless the mother and welcome and celebrate the 'to be born'. The event commenced with an idea that the conservation of the Halari Donkey can only begin when each of the donkey breeders welcomes the foal with immense happiness and hope in their families.

Halari donkey is an important livestock in the semi-arid landscape of Saurashtra's Jamnagar and Devbhumii Dwarka districts of Gujarat. They are raised by Bharwad pastoralists who use this donkey as a pack animal to carry luggage during migration with small ruminants. This elegant donkey from the Halar region of Saurashtra is currently in a threatened state and requires immediate steps towards conservation to reverse the declining trend in the population.

Editorial

Breeding bulls for the public good!

By S Rajeshwaran



PC: Ishaan Raghunandan

A bird perched on the back of a Banni buffalo

Breeders of the Indus valley civilization spread across Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat practised meticulous breeding practices. They bred purebred animals over many generations and thus developed many indigenous cow and buffalo breeds. Their wisdom and knowledge have been passed down for centuries, influencing the practices of dairy farmers across India, till about 50 years ago. What made them unique was their strict discipline in choosing and rearing the male breeding bull - all for the public good. This concept of a "Temple bull" as a common property resource is an embodiment of community values, a sentiment of sharing with equal responsibility and accountability brought to life by the rearing of the fertile bull allocated to each village. The power and authority to select and allot the breeding bull was vested with the ruler who, in turn, relied on the experience and wisdom of animal breeders in every village who maintained highly productive and pedigreed stock. The ruler trusted these breeders because of their long-standing experience in breed development and the respect they had earned from people in their respective villages.

The ruler usually reserved the yet-to-be-born male calves from the elite female animals owned by such prominent breeders. Once born, such male calves were allotted to another village for use as a breeding bull. The selection of the male calf was based on the mother's productivity and the

physical traits and docility of the male calf. Once the identified male calf was born, it was reared with great care and pride by the owner; so much so that they came to maturity within 18-24 months of age! They were then given to the allotted village for breeding as a temple bull, free of cost. They freely roamed in the village and guided by their keen sense of smell, the bulls identified the females in estrus by the pheromone signals they emitted. Since the bull performed its duty of servicing all females in the village, each household cared for the bull and fed it small amounts of fodder.

The use of temple bulls is still prevalent in Kutch, Gujarat. Here, the breeding bull roams freely with the female buffaloes every day of the year, 24x7! The male pheromone continuously released by the bull has a positive effect on females; such that the age at first calving is less than 24 months and the inter-calving period is around 12 months. This traditional practice has allowed breeders to successfully and quickly develop the next generation of female calves which in turn benefitted all households in a village. Thanks to such time-tested practices, India today holds one of the largest bio-diversified cow and buffalo populations in the world - 50 recognised cow breeds and 17 buffalo breeds. Each breed has been developed over hundreds if not thousands of years, keeping in mind the local context in terms of availability of resources, vegetation, crops

grown, prevalent diseases, as well as the skills and aptitude of the local people.

These breeding practices were also used to develop new breeds that would suit certain environments. The most recent example is the development of the Banni buffalo breed in Kutch, Gujarat. Initially, livestock rearers in this area had successfully developed the Kankrej cow breed and had a good experience with breeding. Unfortunately, the 1816 earthquake changed the topography of Kutch from a fertile river delta to a dry parched sandy land. As a result, the Kankrej cow breed could not be bred in the way that had been done till then. The same animal breeders of Kutch then found that buffaloes were suitable for the dry area that Kutch had turned into. Accordingly, they developed the Banni breed from the Murrah and Mehsani breed of buffaloes brought in from the Punjab area. This is an interesting and unique case of cow breeders turning into buffalo breeders!

While breeders expertly selected and bred cattle and buffalo for thousands of years, the practice of rearing temple bulls and the community values attached to them have all but disappeared. Unfortunately, the ill-thought-out policies of the state government added fuel to this. Government veterinarians were given targets to castrate all indigenous bulls such that they do not service females of the same breed in their villages. Further, this effectively stopped the bulls from producing the male pheromone which was absolutely necessary to bring the female animals into the estrus cycle as early as possible. As a result, their age at first calving and the inter-calving period has increased. And coupled with the introduction of exotic breeds and crossbreeding across the country through artificial insemination, the number of infertility cases has also increased. Consequently, the number of indigenous purebred cows in the country has sharply declined. We must strive to recognise and protect indigenous breeds across the country - lest the efforts of our ancestors in developing such a vast bio-diverse population of cows and buffaloes go in vain.



Prof. S Rajeshwaran is a veterinary doctor with post-graduation in rural management and a doctorate in Public Policy. He has nearly 40 years of work experience across the different verticals of the dairy value chain. He was with NDDB for 25 years working in 8 states in various capacities. He has managed dairy cooperatives as a CEO. He now teaches public policy, livelihood and collectives at the Development Management Institute, Patna.

Pastoralism in ancient Tamil literature

While modern research has largely ignored pastoralism in South India, Tamil Nadu's rich pastoral heritage is well documented in ancient Sangam literature, a corpus of poems written between 300 BC and 300 AD. Unlike their lower status in Tamil society today, seen as practising primitive livelihoods, pastoralists were well-respected and played important roles.

The Sangam poems separate the land into five different terrains called thinais - the Kurinji, mountainous region; Mullai, forests; Marutham, cropland; Neithal, seashore; and Palai, drylands. The poems vividly paint the different landscapes, describing the flora, fauna, and physical features, while distinctively characterising each region's inhabitants and their occupations. The foothill

Mullai grasslands were particularly important for pastoralists, called *aayars*, who bred and raised cattle on these lands. Owning large numbers of cattle signified wealth, so much so that the Tamil word for cattle, *maadu*, meant the word wealth itself.

A clear indication of the cattle's importance during the Sangam period is the numerous stories of cattle raids being used as a tool for gaining wealth and political dominance. Stealing cattle from another's territory often preluded warfare and marked an attack on the enemy's dignity. Such episodes of war and cattle raiding are referred to as *aanirai kavarthal* in Sangam literature while the raid itself is called *vetchi*. As cattle were considered even more valuable than land, villagers would celebrate successful raids with grand festivities involving feasts, dancing, and beating drums.

Cattle also played important roles in different stages of cultivation. In a process called *sedai-vaithal*, the bulls crushed weeds in the fields and mixed them with soil, then levelled the uneven soil by dragging a wooden board across the land. Even after the fields were harvested, the bulls were used to separate the ear of the grains from the stalk by walking them over the stalks. Besides their importance in ploughing fields, their manure served as natural fertilisers for farmers in the surrounding regions. Pastoralists collected dung in cattle sheds called *kottakaram* and sold

the dung to farmers who, in turn, relied on the pastoralists in hope of an abundant harvest. Their contributions to agriculture made them crucial and respected members of society, yet their status has greatly declined in the modern age.

While the practice of using cattle as farm labour has all but disappeared in Tamil Nadu today, there is still a thriving dung economy. Most of the dung is sold to farmers in Kerala, who use it on their plantations. Cattle herd owners around Madurai can make roughly Rs 50,000-60,000 a month from selling dung to customers in Kerala, with each bag weighing about 80 kg and priced at Rs 120.

Thozhuvam

Although pastoralists have managed to sell raw dung to farmers in Kerala, they would receive better prices by turning the dung into value-added products. Recognising this potential, the Madurai-based Thozhuvam Farmer Producer Organization was formed to enhance returns for pastoralists. With cow dung directly sourced from the herders, the organisation manufactures and markets value-added products such as dung firewood, goat dung feed, incense sticks, dung handicrafts, and more. Their main agenda is to safeguard the traditional Pulikulam breed and Theni hill cattle breed that are on the verge of extinction and also fight for the legal grazing rights of pastoralists.

On the verge of extinction

A survey of Halari Donkey and its keepers in 2015 was conducted by a Bhuj-based NGO - Sahjeevan Trust which found that there were 1112 donkeys of the breed left. The population further declined to 662 in 2020. Another survey conducted in 2022 showed that the number dwindled to 439 individuals in its native tract. 154 Halari Donkey breeders from across the Saurashtra region of Gujarat have collaborated and developed a Community Based Organisation to address issues surrounding Halari donkey pastoralism.

A morning in the Banni grasslands of Kachchh

By Chhani Bungsut



The sun rises above the deserted Banni grassland

PC: Chhani Bungsut

Clang-dong, clang-dong.

The bells reverberated through the calm dawn as we waited for the buffaloes to come home. Forced awake at 3:30 AM, we groggily sat on plastic chairs near a herder's shed, dozing in and out of conversation. Around 4:30 AM, the bells grew louder and clearer, the animals coming back to their owners, just like the morning before and the day after as well. I had seen Banni buffaloes in daylight before, but they looked even more majestic under the moonlight, harsh shadows replaced with a soft glow ebbing from their smooth skin.

Speaking in clicks and whistles, the Maldharis (pastoralists) who were sitting with us got up with their sticks and guided the buffaloes into the shed where calves impatiently waited for their mother's return. Another bumpy jeep ride away, we watched from afar as women milked their buffaloes into tin cans. They had clearly mastered the art of milking them, leaving just enough for the calves that stood nearby.

"Let's get going, or we'll miss the sunrise" our driver, Rasulbhai, called, and we hurried back

into the jeep. As always, I didn't know where we were headed, but I had learned to simply follow our herd of jeep travellers and our herders - the driver and Imranbhai. No matter where the day took us, I knew I'd return home (the research station) at the end of the day, just like the grazing buffaloes. It had been like this throughout our two-week exposure trip to understand pastoral lives in Kachchh and the Banni region of Gujarat. We drove on the metalled roads for a while, keeping an eye out for the occasional wild animals that crossed our path. Suddenly, Rasulbhai veered onto the desert-like terrain. Up and down, side to side - our bodies bounced against one another and danced to the rhythm of the jeep as we chased the sunrise.

When we finally stopped, it felt like we were nowhere, the dry grassland stretching endlessly on each side. The sunrise was as beautiful as promised, but I was more awestruck by the footprints embedded in the dry soil. "Herders travel through these grasslands all the time," Imranbhai informed us. "But how do they not get lost?" I enquired, feeling silly as soon as I asked the question. They patiently explained how they had walked these paths many times before and were adept at finding their way around. We apparently lacked the same talent, as we spent the next fifteen minutes looking for our way back.

The road finally came to view and I thought, surely it's time to go back and eat! But the jeep pulled up behind a fence of thorns and we made our way to a village seasonally occupied by Maldharis. I don't remember the name of the village but could never forget their hospitality. When we made it through the thorny *gando barwal* (*Prosopis juliflora* - an invasive shrub rampant in the Banni grasslands), a resident Maldhari immediately set up seats for us and ordered his sons to bring us chai. The creamy, sweet chai they served in ceramic plates remains one of my fondest memories of the trip.

After a conversation with the Maldhari and his sons, where they told us of their business making coal out of the *gando barwal*, we finally returned to the RAMBLE station, another cup of chai and breakfast awaiting our arrival. Another packed morning had passed and I knew more awaited during the day, but I needed a nap first. After rinsing my plate and cup, my head hit the pillow before I could even process my walk back to the room. I dreamed of shiny buffaloes, sweet milk, and infinite grasslands.

Talking with sheep

By Ashwini Labde



PC: Ishaan Raghunandan

Along the roads, we often come across Dhangars trying to rescue their sheep from speeding vehicles. We see them dressed in bright red or yellow headdresses, dhoti and white shirts with sticks in their hands, walking along the road while allowing their herds of sheep and goats to graze. Along with their sheep and goats, they also keep several other animals that are just as important. They keep dogs to protect their herds from wild animals and thieves, hens for the eggs and meat they provide, and horses to carry their families/belongings from one location to another. Thus, animals are an integral part of life for Dhangars and they take care of them just like family members.

We sometimes assume that non-human animals lack language, but animals also have their own language that we are simply unable to understand. Communities that live with animals can understand such languages, and communicate with their animals through secret codes and sounds. From subtle differences between the sounds of the animals, they can easily tell if something is wrong with their animals, or if they are hungry, thirsty, or sick. At night, if other wild animals or thieves come close to the herd, dogs bark differently, thereby warning Dhangars of the danger. Even the cries of sheep would be different from the usual, which immediately informs the herdsmen that something is approaching their herds.

On a recent visit to Rashiwade, a village with the largest sheep population in the Kolhapur district of Maharashtra, we met three young boys grazing

their flock of about 250 to 300 sheep in a freshly harvested field. Two of them came to talk to us beneath a tree, and the third boy kept watch over the sheep. There were crops in the adjacent field and one had to watch and ensure that the sheep did not stray in by accident and damage the crops.

While we talked to the two of them about herding, migration, the health of sheep and fodder problems, fifteen minutes had passed and it became increasingly difficult for the single shepherd boy to manage the entire flock. One of the boys who was speaking to us, immediately left us and ran toward the sheep and made a distinct sound. The sheep immediately stopped eating the crops from the adjacent field and stood still in one place. It was amazing, with a single sound, the boy had brought all the sheep back to the previous field in a minute. When asked where he learned to make this sound, he smiled and said, "I have been with animals since childhood. Every shepherd has a specific call for his sheep (animals), animals also have a specific language, not everyone can recognize it." It was a special moment for me as I saw for myself how communities that spend a lifetime with animals can understand them and communicate with them.

Soon the field that we were standing on was grazed and the flock moved to another location. The boy asked us to visit them again. After he bid us goodbye, he again made a sound calling out to his flock. He made a certain sound again and all the sheep started walking behind him without a fuss. Wonderstruck, we silently got into our vehicle and returned home.

Communities that live with animals can understand such languages, and communicate with their animals through secret codes and sounds. From subtle differences between the sounds of the animals, they can easily tell if something is wrong with their animals, or if they are hungry, thirsty, or sick.



Ashwini Labde is a first-generation learner and belongs to the Dhangar community. Ashwini currently works as a research fellow at Anthra, Pune.

on Culture and more..

Gold Dust

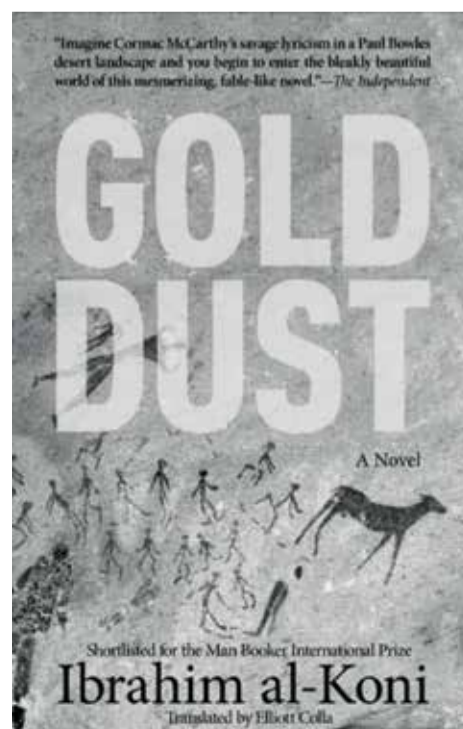
A tale of the deep bonds between man, animal, and nature.

Review by M.A.Orthofer

Gold Dust is the story of Ukhayyad, a Tuareg Saharan nomad whose closest companion remains always the piebald Mahri camel - a noble thoroughbred - that he receives when he reaches manhood and that is his pride and joy. With a will of its own - "Camels do not forget wrongs" - the remarkable beast is also a source of embarrassment and humiliation, but Ukhayyad remains true to the animal, and he to him.

Ukhayyad marries and has a son, and when times grow desperate he succumbs and pawns his camel, thinking he would be able to redeem him soon enough. The two are certainly meant to be together, with the camel repeatedly escaping his new master and returning to Ukhayyad. Eventually, the new owner offers a devil's pact that would allow them to be reunited, and Ukhayyad ultimately gives in, destroying the life he had built for himself and leaving him on the run with his beloved companion.

Al-Koni's story is no romantic man-and-animal tale, but the deep bonds between man, animal, and nature are beautifully presented here. Where



"Without water, miracles cannot take place in the desert. Even when a miracle does occur, the absence of water erases it, transforming it into mere illusion. Without water, the whole world becomes a fantasy. What good is it to have your health back if you lack water? Life draws near, but so does death."

Ukhayyad fails, of course, is in his connections with other people: he proves not to really be a part of his tribe, and even marriage proves only to be a temporarily stabilizing force. He can not fully embrace this sort of life, only finding himself truly happy when he is with his camel, and generally when he is alone with it in the wild desert outdoors. For Ukhayyad, "The prize was in the pure presence of God that can be found only in the quiet emptiness of infinite wilderness."

Saharan life is also very well evoked in Gold Dust - again, less that of community, but of man (and beast) against the elements. So also, especially, its hardships:

Character-development is certainly not al-Koni's strongpoint: even the characters who dominate the narrative remain cyphers, and even such

significant figures as Ukhayyad's father, wife, and son remain almost completely unknown. Overriding passions easily drown out almost everything else, and few exchanges are in any way revealing (indeed, there are few real verbal exchanges and practically nothing that amounts to a conversation); it's not surprising that the closest bond in the book - between camel and Ukhayyad - is one where communication is, of course, not really verbal.

If, in its failure to elaborate on background and character and motivation, Gold Dust does not satisfy some expectations, it is nevertheless a powerful and quite affecting work.

The complete review can be found here: <https://www.complete-review.com/reviews/libya/konii1.htm>

Photo Essay

Camels of Kachchh in custody - ships of the deserted

by Jaideep Hardikar



Maharashtra police detained 58 camels and five traditional herders from Kachchh on January 7 suspecting these semi-nomadic pastoralists were smuggling camels to slaughterhouses in Hyderabad. The herders were horrified at having been arrested for simply herding camels. "We never sell our female camels, and use our male camels for transportation," Mashrubhai Rabari, a veteran community leader who lives in Wardha district, told us. "Camels are our feet."

After being detained for a month, the camels were finally released with conditions for the herders to report their location to the police every Sunday. The following images from Jaideep Hardikar tell us the story of their arrest.

The extended article can be found on PARI - <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/kachchh-camels-custody-ships-of-the-deserted/>



Rabari pastoralists camping in Amravati to help secure the release of the detained camels and their herders



Rabaris from Chhattisgarh and other places camped in an open shed at the gauraksha kendra in Amravati while waiting for the camels to be freed



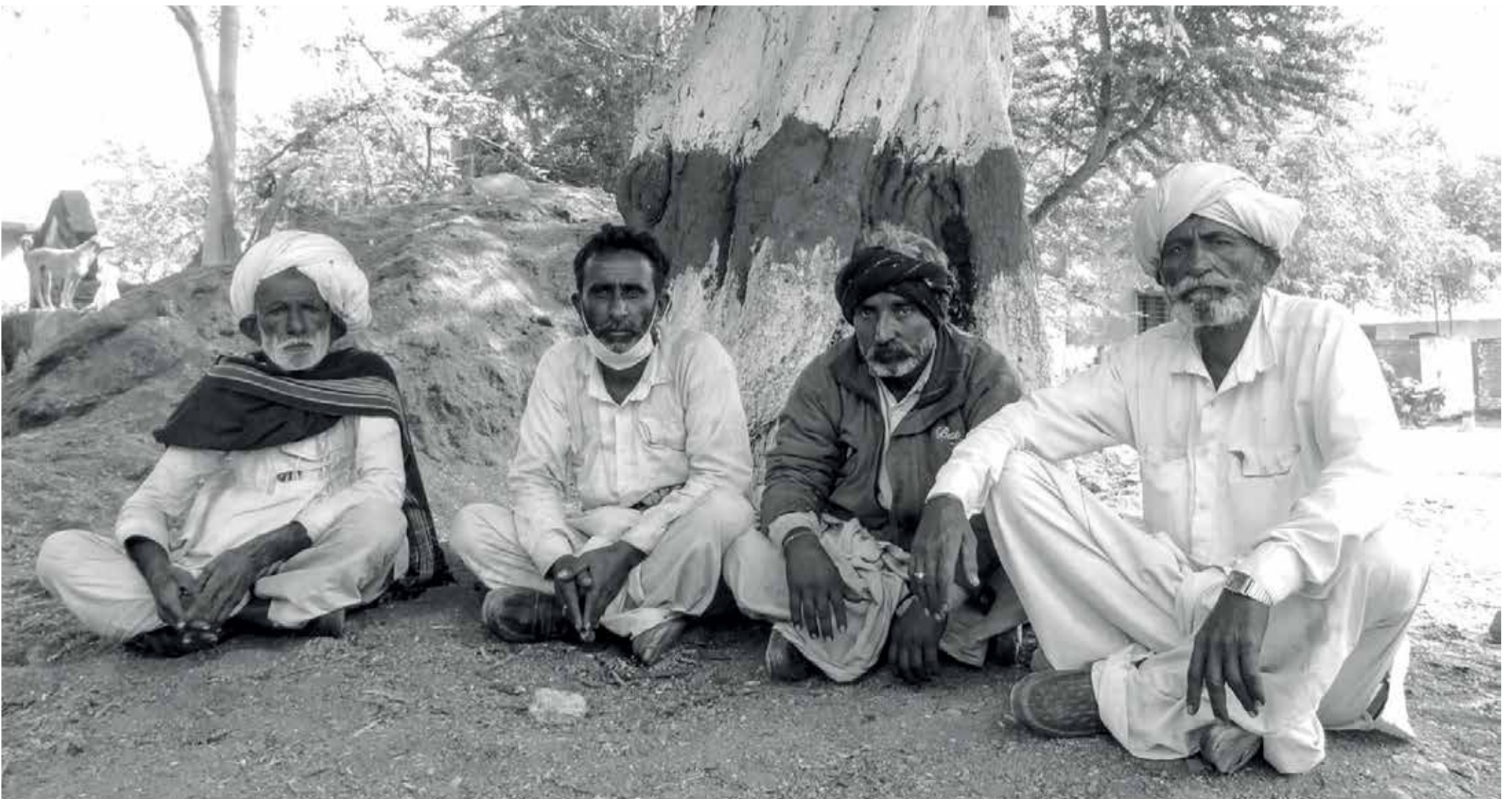
Separated from their herders, the animals languished in the cow shelter, in the custody of people quite clueless when it comes to caring for and feeding them. Eating cattle fodder at the cow shelter.



A Rabari climbs a neem tree on the premises to cut its branches for leaves, to feed the captive camels



A narrow chest, single hump, and a long, curved neck, as well as long hairs on the hump, shoulders and throat, are the characteristic features of the Kachchhi breed



“The charge against us is that we treated them cruelly. But there is no greater cruelty than keeping them confined here when they need open grazing.”
- Parbat Rabari, veteran camel keeper from Nagpur

Meet the beauty queens of Al Dhafra

by Kiki Streitberger



The aims of the festival are to celebrate Bedouin culture, generate tourism and preserve the purity of certain camel breeds.



Attendees await the announcement of a winning camel.

PC: Kiki Streitberger

“Camel No. 1! Camel No. 1!”

I had just arrived at the Al Dhafra Festival, and young boys in kanduras, or long tunics, were running toward my car, shouting as they pointed their index fingers in the air. In the distance, two men rode camels, each pulling another of the animals on a leash. One of the camels was draped in a gold-tasseled winner’s blanket. Behind the men, slowly making its way across the sand dunes, was a large convoy of honking pickup trucks. Men and boys stood in the beds of the vehicles and leaned out of all the windows, waving and cheering, many of them filming the scene on their phones. Without a second thought, I left my little rental car behind and jumped on the back of the nearest pickup. I wanted to be part of this impromptu celebration.

The annual Al Dhafra Festival celebrates Bedouin traditions, and takes place at the edge of the Rub al Khali, or the Empty Quarter, considered the largest sand desert in the world, near the Emirati city of Madinat Zayed, a two-hour drive southwest of Abu Dhabi. Highlights of the gathering include Saluki races (the dogs are prized by the Bedouin because of their speed and eyesight), poetry readings and exhibitions on falconry and traditional artisanship. From fresh dates to camel milk, there’s also an array of food and drink.

At the heart of the festival, however, are the camel beauty contests.

During the weeklong event, Al Dhafra is the epicenter of the camel universe. In 2019, the year I attended, more than 24,000 camels from all over the Middle East competed for 60 million Emirati dirham in prize money — the equivalent of more than \$16 million. Vast sums of money also change hands as particularly beautiful camels are sold.

Some participants trace the origins of the beauty contests to a family dispute in 1993, when two camel breeders had to call on some independent judges to determine whose animals were more beautiful. Since then, camel beauty contests have evolved into a multimillion-dollar industry, with state-sponsored heritage festivals held all across the country.

The aims of the Al Dhafra Festival, which was formally initiated by the government in 2008, are to celebrate Bedouin culture, generate tourism and preserve the purity of certain camel breeds. Bedouin society has all but vanished in the last fifty years. Modern borders have stifled nomadic herding patterns, and the encroachment of economic and technological change has upended other traditional cultural practices. For urbanized Bedouins, festivals like Al Dhafra are one of the few ways they can meaningfully sustain their traditions.

Camel beauty competitions are divided into different categories, according to breed, age, sex and whether a camel is owned by a sheikh or a tribesman. The criteria, however, remain the same. The ideal camel has long straight legs, a long neck, a shapely hump (in just the right spot on its lower back), pert ears, expressive eyes framed by upward curled eyelashes, long droopy lips and, of course, a sleek coat and elegant posture.

No supermodel is complete without jewelry, and an entire industry has sprung up around the beauty pageants to provide the appropriate accoutrements. Camel tailors, for example, set up camp at Al Dhafra, where they sell colorful reins, shiny camel blankets laced with tinsel tassels and even glittering necklaces made of plastic beads and strung coins.

Invited to celebrate one of their camels’ wins, I joined the men of the Al Muharrami family into their illuminated tent, following Waheela, a beauty queen. “She has just been crowned the most beautiful young camel in the Middle East,” said Muneef, her 12-year-old owner, beaming with pride. And then the music began, and the men lifted their bamboo canes to perform the yowlah. During the traditional stick dance, men chanted poetry and simulated a battle scene. By the time I left the party, the sky had turned inky black, with the revelry lasting deep into the night.

First published in the New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/29/travel/camel-beauty-pageant.html>

Food

Pastoral Cheesemaking - One of the earliest stories of milk preservation

By Namrata Sundaresan

Cheese and other fermented dairy foods have played a crucial role in the development of civilizations across the Old World. Archaeological evidence suggests that cheese was discovered around 8000 BCE in the Fertile Crescent, the region of Southwest Asia that includes portions of present-day Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, where humans first began domesticating livestock starting with sheep and goats.

So how was the first batch of cheese made and who made it?

Cheese may have been discovered accidentally by the practice of storing milk in containers made from the stomachs of animals. Stories have been told about a shepherd boy who carried milk in a container like this. Grazing his flock of sheep he settled down to drink some milk which had been transformed into a clear liquid with solid floating on top. Rennet, the enzyme used to make cheese, is naturally present in the stomachs of ruminants. The leak-proof stomachs and other bladder-like organs of animals were often put to use to store and transport milk and other liquids. Without refrigeration, warm summer heat in combination with residual rennet in the stomach lining would have naturally curdled the milk to produce the earliest forms of cheese.

Cheesemaking thus became the form of milk preservation, nutrient-dense food that could last months and carried as groups of settlements migrated. People from the earliest cheesemaking cultures migrated through the Balkans and the southern Mediterranean and on into Northern Europe and went west into Egypt and later from North Africa to France’s Loire Valley.

These nomadic cheesemaking traditions also went east into India. The Vedas include references to making acid-coagulated cheeses as well as using plants to help coagulate milk into cheese—some of the earliest uses of plant rennet we have on record. While acid coagulated yoghurt and fresh cheeses like paneer flourished in India, the maturation of cheese as hard cheese never gained popularity probably due to the emphasis on food purity in the Vedas that may have prevented the use of rennet, sourced from animals.

A study published in 2020 presents what could be the earliest evidence of cheese-making in South Asia. The study, led by Kalyan Sekhar Chakraborty, a researcher at the University of Toronto Mississauga, is based on archaeological finds from the Kotada Bhadli settlement, located in modern day-Gujarat’s Kutch district, which was an agro-pastoral settlement in the Indus



Van Gujjars making Kalari cheese from fresh buffalo milk

PC: Chhani Bungsut

Small batch producers across the country are now vying for shelf space with processed and imported cheese with their locally made and handcrafted cheeses. Modern urban cheesemakers though have their own challenge in their quest for a clean source of milk. Pastoral communities on the other hand have a challenge of bountiful supply and no tangible form of milk preservation or value-added products.

The solution and the bridge between the two perhaps are in Pastoral Cheesemaking, a traditional form of preservation, value-added product in the modern context for the urban consumer.

Valley civilisation, occupied between 2300 and 1950 BCE.

Over the years, especially in India, cheese is synonymous with processed cubes, slices made on an industrial scale. The last decade has seen a wave of handmade artisan food products gaining much-needed visibility. Cheese has been one of them.



Namrata Sundaresan, Cofounder at Käse Cheese. Namrata has a background in business consulting, specializing in international trade & investment. She travels to learn various traditional forms of cheesemaking and comes back to her Cheese studio to adapt it to local resources. Käse works with a variety of locally sourced ethical milk around the country and makes over 30 kinds of cheese

The world's oldest pants stitched together cultures from across Asia

Move over, Versace. These 3,000-year-old pants were stylish, functional and multicultural

by Bruce Bower

What little rain that falls on a gravelly desert located in western China's Tarim Basin evaporates as it hits the blistering turf. Here, in this parched wasteland, lie the ancient remains of people who made one of the biggest fashion splashes of all time.

Herders and horse riders who buried their dead in the Tarim Basin's Yanghai graveyard pioneered pants making between roughly 3,200 and 3,000 years ago. Their deft combination of weaving techniques and decorative patterns — displaying influences from societies across Eurasia — yielded a pair of stylish yet durable trousers now recognized as the oldest such garment known in the world.

Now, an international team of archaeologists, fashion designers, geoscientists, chemists and conservators has untangled how those trousers were made and painstakingly created a modern replica. The vintage slacks weave a tale not only of textile innovation but also of how cultural practices

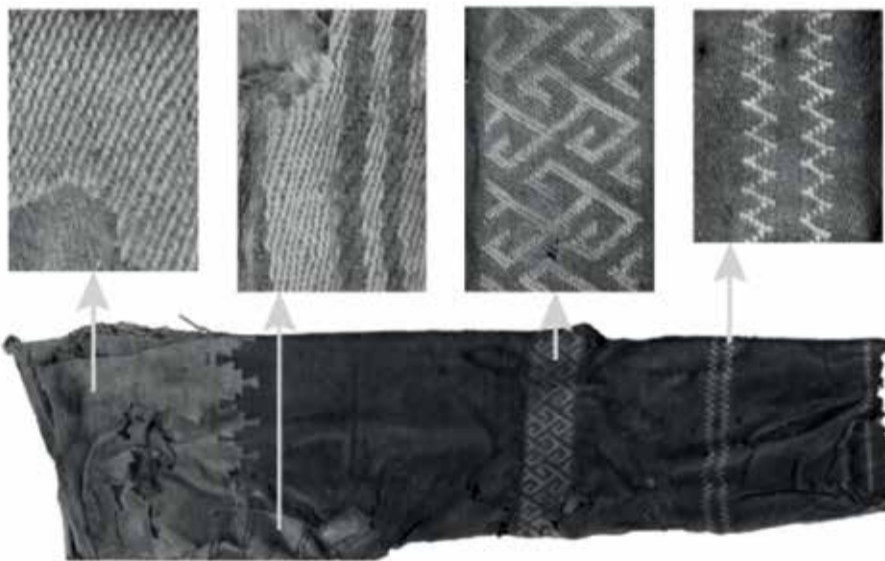


This pair of approximately 3,000-year-old pants, the oldest ever found, displays weaving techniques and decorative patterns that were influenced by cultures across Asia, researchers say.

fanned out across Asia, the researchers report in the March Archaeological Research in Asia.

Fashion icon

One man brought the pants to scientists' attention without uttering a word. His naturally mummified body, as well as the preserved bodies of more than 500 others, was uncovered during excavations conducted by Chinese archaeologists since the early 1970s at the Yanghai cemetery.



Ancient trousers (partly shown at bottom) from China's Tarim Basin display twill weaving that was used to produce alternating brown and off-white diagonal lines at the tops of the legs (far left) and dark brown stripes on the crotch piece (second from left). Another technique for manipulating threads enabled artisans to create a geometric pattern at the knees (second from right) and zigzag stripes at the ankles (far right).

PC: M. Wagner et al/Archaeological Research in Asia 2022

Researchers now call him Turfan Man because the Yanghai site lies about 43 kilometers southeast of the Chinese city of Turfan.

Of all of Turfan Man's garments, his trousers stood out as truly special. Not only were they older by at least several centuries than any other examples of such gear, but the Yanghai pants also boasted a sophisticated, modern look. The pants feature two leg pieces that gradually widen at the top, connected by a crotch piece that widens and bunches in the middle to increase leg mobility.

Within a few hundred years, mobile groups across Eurasia began wearing pants like those at Yanghai, other archaeological finds have shown. Woven leg covers connected by a flexible crotch piece eased the strain of riding horses bareback over long distances. Not surprisingly, mounted armies debuted around that time.

Today, people everywhere don denim jeans and dress slacks that incorporate the design and production principles of the ancient Yanghai trousers.

In short, Turfan Man was the ultimate trendsetter.

Clothes connections

Perhaps most striking, Turfan Man's trousers tell a story of how ancient herding groups carried their cultural practices and knowledge across Asia, spreading seeds of innovation.

For instance, the interlocking T pattern decorating the ancient horseman's pants at the knees appears on bronze vessels found in what's now China from around the same time, roughly 3,300 years ago, Wagner's team says. The nearly simultaneous adoption of this geometric form in Central and East Asia coincides with the arrival in those regions of herders from West Eurasian grasslands riding horses that they domesticated 4,200 years ago or more.

Pottery found at those horse riders' home sites in western Siberia and Kazakhstan displays interlocking T's as well. Any deeper meaning this pattern held aside from its artistic appeal remains unknown. But West Eurasian horse breeders probably spread the interlocking T design across much of ancient Asia, Wagner and her colleagues suspect.

Similarly, a stepped pyramid pattern woven into the Yanghai pants appears on pottery from Central Asia's Petrovka culture, which dates to between around 3,900 and 3,750 years ago. The same pattern resembles architectural designs that are more than 4,000 years old from western and southwestern Asian and Middle Eastern societies, including Mesopotamian stepped pyramids, the researchers say. Tapestry weaving such as that observed on Turfan Man's trousers also originated in those societies.

It's no surprise that cultural influences from throughout Asia affected ancient people in the Tarim Basin, says anthropologist Michael Frachetti of Washington University in St. Louis. Yanghai people inhabited a region at a crossroads of seasonal migration routes followed by herding groups starting more than 4,000 years ago. Those routes ran from the Altai Mountains in Central and East Asia to Southwest Asia where Iran is located today. Excavations at sites along those routes indicate that herders spread crops across much of Asia too.

Cultural transitions in the Tarim Basin may have started even earlier. Ancient DNA suggests that western Asian herders in oxen-pulled wagons moved through much of Europe and Asia around 5,000 years ago.

By around 2,000 years ago, herders' migration paths formed part of a trade and travel network running from China to Europe that became known as the Silk Road. Cultural mixing and mingling intensified as thousands of local routes throughout Eurasia formed a massive network.

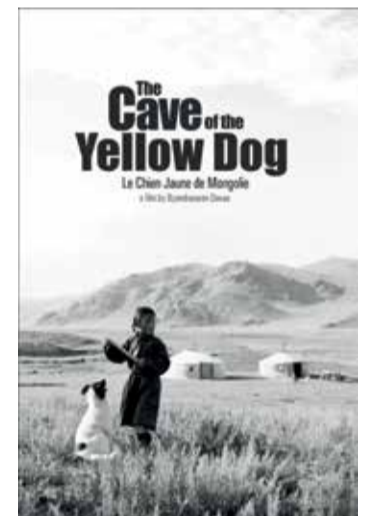
Turfan Man's multicultural riding pants show that even in the Silk Road's early stages, migrating herders carried new ideas and practices to distant communities. "The Yanghai pants are an entry point for examining how the Silk Road transformed the world," Frachetti says.

The full version can be found on Science News: <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/pants-oldest-ancient-horseman-asia-culture-origin>

Film Review

A peek into the pasture: A film review of The Cave of the Yellow Dog

By Prajakta Kulkarni



The Cave of the Yellow Dog opens up a window into the lives of a pastoral family living in the Mongolian meadows. Astute framing of shots and simple camera movements offer us a candid glimpse into the lives and surroundings of the Batchuluun family.

The film threads the beauty of their simple life and their hardships together, portraying the Batchuluun family with authenticity and nuance. Most of the film is from young Nansal's perspective, which is full of innocent curiosity. She walks with sure steps, reaches out to what catches her eyes and if she stumbles, she gets back up again. Her naivete leaves little room for pretences. When she returns from her city boarding school, Nansal quickly adjusts to life on the meadows. She is adept at navigating the landscape, often venturing out on her own to collect dung or take her family's herd out to graze. She forms deep connections with the animals around her, particularly with an abandoned dog she finds in a cave. As she wanders with the animals, sometimes getting lost without much of a worry, Nansal seems content. The viewer also finds peace in the slow pacing of the film and the charming shots of the family's natural surroundings. On the other hand, the difficulties that Nansal's family faces are not ignored either. Prowling wolves takes two of the family's sheep and conversations reveal that people are selling their herds to move to the city.

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Always trust the mother

Story told by Nadaga Bomma, a Lingayat elder from Bargur Hills, Tamil Nadu



Bargur cattle with their herders

PC: Shouryamoy Das

"Go to the earth and serve the humans," the goddess Parvathi told the cow. But there was no one to take care of the angry cow on earth, and she roamed alone for ages. One day, on a day that seemed like any other, she met a human, one that promised to care for her and adorn her with accessories. So the story went- the Gollas tamed the cow and became the first herders in the world. Staying true to their promise, they decorated the cow's horns, put a ring through her nose and tied bells around her neck, showering her with praises of her beauty.

One cow became several hundred, and the Gollas travelled across seven hills to graze the cows. On one occasion, the last cow that was grazing had a calf waiting for her in the pen. As she started her journey back home, a tiger caught hold of her and tried to eat her. Before the tiger could manage a bite, she calmly told him, "Eat me tomorrow, I'll give milk to my calf and return at daybreak." The tiger asked, "How can I trust you?" The cow swore on the skies, water and land that she would return and the tiger let her go.

The cow came back to the pen, gave milk to the calf and told it to follow the aunts and sisters and remain cautious. She told the other cows to not kick her calf from the back, not send it out alone and take care of it as if the calf were their own. The next morning, the cow bathed herself so that she was clean for the tiger. She then set off to find him.

Upon seeing that the cow had returned, the tiger was shocked. "How can I eat a cow with so much Bhakti, so much devotion?" he asked himself. He let her return home. When she returned to her pen, the calf refused to drink her milk. The calf thought that she had lied and did not go to the tiger, suspecting that she did not keep her word. Insulted by the calf's lack of trust, the cow cursed all calves that they should be separated from their mothers after birth. To this day, this is why calves are sold off at such a young age.

About the Bargur Lingayats

The Bargur Lingayats are a Kannada speaking community that live in the Bargur hills of Tamil Nadu and herd Bargur buffalo and Bargur cows, both registered breeds. Spread out across 33 hamlets in the hills, the Lingayat community practice a transhumant form of pastoralism. Herders spend eight months in the lower elevation Nal Road region which lies at the foothills at 300m above sea level, and return to their homes in the Bargur hills for the summer months. This story is a part of their folklore and expresses their traditional ties with the cattle they keep.

...Continued from page 7

In one scene, Nansal stacks dried dung to recreate her memory of city buildings and proclaims, “ I will live on the top floor of this stack one day!”

Towards the end of the film, we see the Batchuluun family packing up their lives on wooden carts. As they prepare to leave, Nansal’s parents discuss leaving her at a relative’s house so she can continue her education. It is a poignant glimpse into the lives of pastoral communities today, who wish to find a balance between upholding their culture and keeping up with the ever-changing society. Layer by layer they peel their yurt, a round tent that serves as a temporary house, down to its bones. Before we know it, the picture of their quaint home that we’d grown used to seeing is gone and all that is left is a patch of bare land. Now that we see their house folded and packed on carts, we see that they leave almost nothing behind. A nod to the simple and sustainable life that they live, bereft of excessive consumption.

In a short span of time, the Cave of the Yellow Dog opens up a world of possibilities for the viewer - a world where stagnancy doesn’t exist and hope is always around the corner. In times of fast cars and faster lives perhaps we need to slow down and take a look at our surroundings to find our own silver linings.



Prajakta Kulkarni is a Communication Designer with a penchant for writing. She spends her free time indulging in a plethora of movies, series and K-dramas.

Farmer shoes from desi oon

by Snigdha Ahuja

“What was supposed to be a beautiful story of the pastoral community making blankets and selling them for income has reached a stage where they don’t even care to shear their sheep because the cost is much more than the value they get for the product,” says Santosh Kocherlakota. He is the Hyderabad-based co-founder of footwear label Earthen Tunes who participated in an online exhibition in February to sell indigenous wool products as part of the Desi Oon Hub.

Earthen Tunes, which was founded in 2019 and is being incubated by the Rural Technology and Business Incubator at IIT-Madras, has design innovation at the centre of its product. The brand is focused on creating functional footwear for farmers that they can wear while at work. Crafted from Deccani Gongadi blankets, these shoes are thermoregulated, water-resistant and lab-tested for durability and fit. The blankets are made of Deccani wool sourced dominantly from the Kuruba, Kuruma and Dhangar tribes of the region.

Pastoral communities have been weaving wool into blankets for a long time. These blankets are woven on the earliest forms of pit loom, making this craft one of the oldest crafts of our soil. “Local wool has already been stereotyped as coarse wool which is carpet grade. But those who have used traditional Gongadi or Kambali blankets would be aware that they can typically last for up to 20

years and that the natural fibres become softer as you keep using them,” explains Kocherlakota, who is a graduate of the National Institute of Design. These blankets are an integral part of the shepherd’s attire and protect from the harsh weather conditions throughout the year. These properties make desi wool an ideal material for use in making footwear for Indian conditions, particularly for farmers who deal with varying climates and soil conditions. After carrying out extensive field research, prototyping and testing, Santosh’s team was able to design and manufacture a shoe made from locally sourced desi wool.

Despite the useful properties of desi wool blankets, the craft of making them is on the verge of extinction. The decrease in demand for wool blankets and the rearing of meat-based breeds over wool-based breeds has led to a sharp decline in the number of weavers involved in this craft. “We believe our shoes could be a way to revive the demand for this wool and help resurrect the desi wool economy again.”

Excerpts from:

<https://thevoiceoffashion.com/fabric-of-india/features/warming-up-to-indigenous-wool--4841>

<https://socialdesignlibrary.in/earthen-tunes/>



PC: Earthen Tunes

“I used [the shoes] for a few months in 2019 on my sugarcane and pomegranate farm. I wore it in all conditions — when my land was dry, as well as after irrigation when the soil was muddy and wet. Usually, shoes will sink in this kind of mud, and slip out while trying to release the feet. But, these shoes provided a good grip because of the lace. Moreover, they look trendy and can be worn casually for a short trip to the market too.” - Swapnil Mhetre, a 29-year-old farmer from Baramati, Maharashtra.

Via thebetterindia.com

Breeds Word Hunt

Pastoral Breeds of India

Ever wondered how many breeds in India are raised in pastoral systems? Even if you didn’t, we’re here to tell you. Research conducted by the Centre for Pastoralism found that 73 of the 197 breeds in the country are managed by pastoralists, including cattle, camel, donkey, horse, and yak breeds! How many of these indigenous Indian breeds can you find in the word puzzle below?

E	A	I	A	M	E	N	H	I	I	A	L	R	C
I	R	J	A	L	O	R	I	R	H	L	L	T	A
M	R	P	L	I	A	T	A	A	O	A	G	C	A
H	I	I	H	L	I	W	K	U	R	H	I	H	N
R	I	W	N	P	R	R	A	H	I	L	I	A	L
R	I	A	S	A	A	O	L	H	R	H	I	N	O
K	C	R	M	N	N	A	M	I	A	N	T	G	K
N	T	I	A	N	A	A	R	R	L	I	R	T	K
E	E	R	J	W	A	R	I	C	A	O	A	H	A
I	A	R	A	H	K	A	I	M	H	R	K	A	H
R	C	M	A	U	T	M	I	L	U	I	T	N	M
I	H	A	R	I	H	E	A	H	I	A	A	G	I
A	A	M	A	U	I	R	I	R	H	I	H	I	A
A	I	I	S	R	I	E	R	O	L	L	E	N	K

CLUES:

1. Cattle with widespread horns, kept by the Raika/Rabari of Sirohi and Pali districts of Rajasthan
2. Sheep and goat breed, native to the Leh district of Ladakh
3. Swimming camel breed native to Kutch, Gujarat
4. Reddish brown and black goat breed reared by Bharwad and Rabari communities
5. Sheep breed reared solely for meat, found in Andhra Pradesh
6. Name for sheep, goat, and camel breeds reared in the districts that once constituted the Marwar kingdom
7. Swamp buffaloes raised in Assam
8. A multipurpose camel breed used for milk production, tourism, riding and safaris in Rajasthan, it does not have the ‘jhepra’ - a common feature of desert camels
9. White in colour, this donkey is large and strongly built, bred in Gujarat
10. A breed of horses native to Kinnaur and the Lahaul-Spiti regions of Himachal Pradesh

ANSWER KEY:

1. Nari
2. Changthangi
3. Khari
4. Khami
5. Nellore
6. Marwari
7. Luit
8. Jalori
9. Halari
10. Spiti