How Mapping Indigenous Knowledge is Helping Nomadic Communities to Fight Climate Change—and Extinction

By Eva Diallo

When Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim was growing up in the 1980s, along the shores of Lake Chad, she was dazzled by her elder’s knowledge of the land. “Reading the clouds, listening to the wind, they could tell you that in several hours it’s going to rain,” Ibrahim recalls.

Ibrahim is Mbororo, part of a nomadic pastoralist people who have grazed the land around Lake Chad for millennia. “We live in harmony with nature because we depend on it for food, fresh water, materials,” Ibrahim says. An award-winning climate change and indigenous rights advocate, and environmental activist, Ibrahim has spent her career advancing the rights of indigenous communities, particularly those around Lake Chad.

As with indigenous groups in the Arctic and the South Pacifc, the pastoral Mbororo communities around Lake Chad have found themselves on the front lines of climate change. “In Chad, right now, the climate is already changing. I was home in the community during the first days of April, where we faced a heatwave of 130°F (54.4°C),” Ibrahim says. “In the Sahel, the average temperature has increased by more than 1.5°C over the last century, meaning we have already missed the Paris Agreement target. Extreme weather events, with drought, floods, and desertification, are becoming the new reality.”

The shifting climate - drier, hotter, and more extreme - has devastated the livelihoods of the nomadic pastoral communities, and particularly the cattle herds that are the foundation of their existence. “For example, 20 years ago, we used to milk our cattle twice a day, even during the dry season. Today, because of climate change and the lack of water, we can milk them only once every two days. That means that milk production, which is our main economic activity, has been divided by four within a couple of generations,” Ibrahim says.

As the local climate has changed and resources come under strain, the situation has put pressure on local communities - particularly between pastoralists, farmers, and fishermen. In some cases, the pressure has forced people to migrate to urban areas, where they end up living in informal settlements. “That’s why I have decided to fight. Because if we don’t take action against climate change, my people simply face extinction.”

Ibrahim was determined to help. In 2005, Ibrahim founded the Association Des Femmes Peules & Peuples Autochtones du Tchad (The Association for Indigenous Women and Peoples of Chad, or AFPAT), which works with indigenous communities to help advance women’s rights, the rights of indigenous people. In her activism work with local women, she saw resources dwindling and was reminded of her elders and their knowledge of the land. “In Chad, official meteorological forecasts don’t always reach rural areas. So who do the farmers consult about when to plant their crops?”

“Who provides the forecast of whether or not it’s going to rain tomorrow? An indigenous grandmother,” she says. “In my community, a grandmother is far more useful than a smartphone.”

Inspired by this, AFPAT has pioneered the use of what Ibrahim calls “participatory mapping.” “We develop maps with satellite images of...Continued on page 2
Women of Kalama are changing their community one bead at a time

By Peter Murungi

The open plains of Northern Kenya are among the most stunning places in Africa. Scattered acacias just out of the Earth, breaking free of the parched red Earth that has seen little rain for months. Rocky peaks stand out of the expanse, creating the perfect backdrop of vendor, misty slopes. Parables about teachers went to the provinces are usually a two-way street: education and advancement for the students, life lessons for their instructor.

On the other end of the courtyard, Nabiki Lesuper’s shop is constructed out of the tiny beads with a needle, the women of Kalama are transforming their communities through beadwork while earning decent earnings through the local and export market. In the greater region under NRT control, beadwork artisans earned Sh12 million (79 lakhs INR) as labour payment in 2021, a 28% increase compared to Sh8.3 million (61 lakhs INR) they earned in 2020.

Yet, Northern Kenya is full of stories of resilience. A couple of weeks ago, I joined a team of scribes on yet another trip to the North. We pass a group of women driving a herd of donkeys loaded with domestic goods – bracelets, cooking utensils, basins – everything they seem to be on the move to establish a new settlement in another part of the jungle.

Our first stop was Lareaoro village in Kalama Community Conservancy. Like any other Samburu village, Lareaoro consists of a cluster of traditional huts woven around a central courtyard. Few children were loitering here, some herding goats.

As we head to our pit stop in Isiolo later in the afternoon, we could not help but admire how the bead hole. Or her hands are a bit shaky to pass through the thread bead holes. But by singing, she contributes to the task by giving moral support to the rest of the team. It is a battle against poverty. In a battle, those who go to the battlefield and those who watch over the baggage are valued members of the fight.

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Van Gujjars in National Dailies

By Pierre- Alexandre Paquet & Kareri Chealalbury

During the Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, it became difficult to know about communities living in the far peripheries of major towns and cities. For the Van Gujjars of Utratrakhand and Uttar Pradesh, whose livelihoods depend on the sustenance of their cattle, Covid restrictions critically hampered their capacity to thrive. The only way we knew of the Van Gujjars’ struggles during this period was through the media. While it was not possible for us to visit our contacts and friends, this challenging period presented an opportunity to investigate how the newspapers represent the Van Gujjars. What kind of information does the average news reader get about the nomadic Van Gujjars? And, are Van Gujjars voices faithfully related in daily news reports?

To answer these questions, we investigated the publications of four major Indian dailies, two in English (The Times of India and the Hindustan Times) and two in Hindi (Amar Ujala and Dainik Jagaran). Using the Google search engine, we can quickly run a query of alternative spellings (Van Gujjars, Gujar, Gujjar, etc.). For the year 2021, we gathered a total of 45 newspaper articles mentioning the Van Gujjars. Then we turned our attention to how the journalists represented the Van Gujjars.

Purusing the 45 articles, we found that a wide range of events related to the Van Gujjars had gotten some coverage in mainstream media. There were reports of Human-animal conflicts (8 articles), Natural and man-made disasters (4 articles), Interventions by local MLAs and NGOs (12 articles), Civic Rights (2 articles), State denial of pastoralist rights (7 articles), Eviction and rehabilitation (10 articles), Protests (2 articles) and other miscellaneous events (2 articles). However, a key finding remains that although these articles all relate to Van Gujjars’ issues, they rarely relay their point of view.

We also identified when the journalists made mention of (state workers, NGOs, citizens, etc.) and whether these actors were mentioned because they did something (actively) or because something had happened to them (denoting passiveness).

Without a surprise, the Van Gujjars got the most mentions. After all, the community was the focus of our probe. What surprised us more, in the end, was that the Van Gujjars were seen as being ‘active’ only 36.11% of the time. This suggests that the media are more inclined towards reporting on events where the Van Gujjars come across as victims, instead of as actors of change. In comparison, state actors were assumed to be taking matters actively on their ends 70-to-100% of the time. This kind of reporting, we argue, refutes the image of a powerful state and disorganised communities. Years of field studies tell us the opposite is closer to the truth.

This situation is upsetting. In different countries, the news media have adopted ethical guidelines that guarantee fair and equal representation to those whose story is being told. For the Van Gujjars these days, better representation could entail a more systematic inclusion of their voices and a more thoughtful consideration of the trope of victimhood. As expert dairy producers, the Van Gujjars we know are never idle, always active. They are very knowledgeable too, and they could write volumes about the injustices they have faced over time. They never remain passive in the face of adversity. And they should be listened to, more attentively, and receive a less complacent portrayal in the news, lest we tolerate a new injustice.

Pierre-Alexandre Paquet (paquetpierrealexandre@gmail.com) is a PhD student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Kareri Chealalbury is an Environmental research Professional based in Delhi.

Van Gujjars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of actor</th>
<th>Number of times this actor did something or was mentioned</th>
<th>Active / total number of actions</th>
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<tr>
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<td>36.11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forest Department</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>71.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judiciary System</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
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<tr>
<td>Police and emergency response</td>
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<td>70.00%</td>
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</tbody>
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Note: In “Others” are included public servants from all levels of government, politicians, and some citizens (workers and sedentarized villagers who are not Van Gujjars).

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<thead>
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<th>Percentage of ‘active’ actions on total actions per actor category</th>
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In a first, J&K’s migratory tribals, livestock offered a lift for highland pastures
By Asha Hussein

The lush green pastures and mountains of Kashmir would welcome their annual pastoral friends earlier this year. This was a result of regular movement on foot which would take weeks of marches and halts, the tribal families and their livestock have now been offered a lift. In a first, J&K’s tribal affairs department on Sunday flagged off a fleet of 40 trucks for transportation of livestock and families of the migratory tribal population from various hot Jammu districts to the highland pastures in Kashmir.

“The lieutenant governor is committed to providing transportation support and transit facilities to the migratory tribes in the union territory. Directions were also issued to ensure saturation in transport facilities and cover 100% migratory population on NH and Mughal Road,” said Shahid Iqbal Choudhary, secretary, tribal affairs department. “Funds to the tune of Rs 6.8 crores have been released in favour of J&K Road Transport Corporation for procurement of trucks for the purpose,” he added.

Transhumance, a practice of moving livestock from one grazing ground to another, typically to lowlands in winter and highlands in summer, is a centuries-old practice in J&K.

As per conservative estimates, some six lakh people from tribal communities, including Gujjars and Bakarwals, travel every year with their livestock mostly from Jammu to Kashmir in summer and back in winter. A small population of Gaddi-Sippi travels within the Jammu division. The transport system will reduce the travel time of some of these families from 20-30 days on foot to 1-2 days, while it will also help in smooth management of traffic on the roads.

Dr Jawaid Rahi, author and researcher on tribal issues, said the move was an important step for the recognition and welfare of tribal communities in J&K. “J&K witnesses the country’s biggest movement of pastoral tribal communities every year and never have any government-provided transport for the same,” Rahi, who also belongs to the Gujar community, said.

He said till now, the tribals had to arrange logistics on their own while the government would provide them travel permits and identity cards after the families pay grazing tax. Additionally, government involvement in their travel would make their lives easy as they would otherwise face natural calamities, traffic accidents, and even attacks for vested interests. Their livelihood will also get a boost, he added.

“There was a persistent demand from the migratory tribal community for the provision of some transportation mode,” a government spokesperson said in a statement. Sometimes, due to harsh weather conditions, there was a loss of livestock and other damages, causing a lot of inconvenience to the affected families. The finance department had advised the tribal affairs department to avail the services of JKRTC for the movement till a formal policy is framed in this regard.

Glimpses of Northern India’s Vanishing Pastoralists
By Ronald Patrick

Fitting a small stone into a sling made of yak wool, Tiering Stobdan whipped his wrist and let the object fly, sending it soaring across the arid landscape. This, he told me, was how he protects his flock from predators and convinces straggling goats to return - just one of the countless skills he has learned in the last 60 years that allow him to rear his animals in such an unforgiving landscape.

Meanwhile, some 15,000 feet above sea level, I was simply trying to breathe. Here on the Changthang plateau, in a remote region of the Indian Himalayas, the altitude had left me gasping for air.

Tiering Stobdan is a member of a nomadic community known as the Kharnak, who for centuries have raised yaks, sheep, and goats in the high plains of Ladakh, in northern India, one of the most hauntingly beautiful - if harsh and inhospitable - places on earth.

Once a flourishing tribe, the Kharnak community is now dwindling. Younger generations are being sent to nearby cities, where they can find better health care and educational opportunities. And while pashmina, the lightweight wool shrouded in the bellies of Himalayan mountain goats, is a profitable product, life in the mountains is extraordinarily difficult, especially in the winter. Today, fewer than 20 families are left to care for nearly 7,000 sheep and goats, along with several hundred yaks. And, like Tiering Stobdan, many of those who remain are growing older and are less able to cope with the daily demands of their work.

Climate change has also had a profound effect on the Kharnak’s way of life. The weather has become more difficult to predict, rain patterns in particular. Because of warming temperatures and the overuse of certain pastures, areas once thick with vegetation now lie barren. Small glaciers, which for centuries provided a reliable source of water, are receding. As a result, Kharnak shepherds are forced to shuffle their flocks around more frequently and with less certainty.

Among these nomadic communities, families and animals live in strict interdependency. The milk from the sheep, goats, and yaks - made into cheese, yogurt, and butter - forms the foundation of the dairy-based diet. Life for the Kharnak is difficult year-round. During the longer days of spring and summer, the shepherds milk and shear their animals in the early-morning hours before taking them out to graze, often walking more than 12 miles a day at a trot. Another round of milking and shearing takes place in the evening. But the work doesn’t end there. Food must be cooked, beds must be made, and the family must clean up the encampment before the day’s long trek begins.

The real challenges, though, come in winter, when the temperatures drop to below -30 degrees Fahrenheit. Roads are often blocked, and food becomes scarce. During these long months, from November to April, the livestock are encased in shelters and fed animal feed that’s provided by the government.

During the winter, most of the Kharnak move temporarily to a town called Khambalidong, on the outskirts of Leh, some 90 miles from their highland pastures. While away, they leave their livestock in the hands of a few family members and paid shepherds, who care for the animals during the harsher months of the year. To afford their homes in Khambalidong, many of the nomads had to sell their animals and leave behind their traditional stone houses and tents in the mountains. And with more frequency, members of the community are remaining in Khambalidong year-round, having given up on their old way of life.

At their home in Khambalidong, I talked with a Kharnak elder and one of his grandsons. Dawa Tundup, who was 83 when I met him, had left behind his nomadic life to settle near the city, where he could live more comfortably and with better access to health care. He reminisced about his days in the highlands and dreamed of returning, he said, but acknowledged that life there had become untenable for most young people, given the lack of proper education.

Everything in the city is about money, he lamented, adding that many urban values, centered on consumerism, were very different from the value system taught by his ancestors at home.

Later, while attending a series of traditional festivals held in the mountains, I watched as young men performed ancestral herding skills, including flinging stones on horseback. Here, the interest among younger generations in the culture of their elders was palpable, as most of them had come all the way from the city for this one event. There were no winners or losers during the festivities. Instead, the elders were given a shot of chhang, a local Ladakh beer, and a khata, a traditional Tibetan scarf, every time they list their targets.

It was a heartwarming scene: tribal elders instilling hard-earned wisdom among their enthusiastic descendants. One of the greatest concerns among the Kharnak is that their vast store of nomadic wisdom - the specific types of grass that certain animals need to survive, how meat is dried and preserved, how temporary shelters can be built with meager materials, among thousands of other examples - will be lost in the coming years.

Facing a generational exodus and the threats of a changing climate, their rich culture, amassed over centuries, may vanish in what amounts to the blink of an eye.
From Farms to Fashion: Enhancing and Imparting Sustainable livelihood to Local Women through Avani Initiatives

By Avani Kumaon

Armpit the howling winds, rugged terrains, and inaccessible passes of the Himalayas, lies stories of people, of communities adapting and evolving to the might of nature. People in Uttarakhand living in the higher Himalayan range find ways of coping with the climate, the terrain, the forage, and the accessibility to the plains. All this and more evolved around protecting themselves from the harsh cold leading to the development of various craft cultures. Agriculture was not a viable source of income on the steep slope of the mountains; hence livestock became the mainstay. 

Rise of Avani

In the year 1996, Avani was set up in a small village – Tripura Devi in the lap of the Himalayas; an initiative of the Social Work and Research Centre, Tilonia, Rajasthan. Owing to the lack of electricity in the region, the main objective of Avani was to generate solar power for the villagers. Efforts were made to use solar panels in the region of Kumaon, but the program was not as successful as anticipated in the beginning as villagers could not afford them. Hence came the initiative of reviving traditional crafts to generate income for the people and provide a means of alternate livelihood.

Today, the organisation’s activities can be divided into two categories, solar power generation and textiles-based livelihood. Capacity building was an essential part of the initiative. Likewise, training programs were conducted to teach people the technique of assembling and repairing solar panels as it was a completely new concept for them. Such workshops are also conducted for the textile department, which include dyeing, sericulture, spinning, and weaving.

Vocal for Local

The Women SHGs are involved in the collection of locally available raw materials such as eupatorium, marigold, walnut shells, tea powder, etc. for the dyeing needs of the centres. Since the need for specialized design inputs was identified, Avani has been constantly working with talented designers to bridge the market gaps and equip the women artisans with the abilities to cope with the demands of the fashion market. In all the field centres of Avani, electricity is generated from solar power. Avani also aims to ensure that they generate the least amount of waste. So, at every stage of the process, the organisation aims to ensure maximum utilisation of minimal resources.

Another core goal is maintaining a circular economy. The local sheep wool used in Avani centres for years, known as Kullu, comes in natural shades of grey, brown, cream, and black. The fleece is thick and warm, perfect for the mountain cold. With the input of designers and the building knowledge of the market, Avani has over the years developed a wide range of products made of local wool. They include handwoven shawls, stoles, handknitted mufflers, sweaters, ready-to-wear garments, and home furnishing items like cushion covers and throws. It also moved into catering to businesses that required our hand-spun yarn, custom woven fabrics, and naturally dyed woolen fabrics. A farm and forest-driven initiative, Avani has strived to create a sustainable way of life for the community and is grateful to be working with such talented artisans both traditional and trained from the Kumaon communities and hopes to leave the world in a better place for coming generations.

A very Gujarati cheeseboard

Two pastoralists from Gujarat collaborate with Chennai’s Kase to make feta, chvre, and pecorino

By Chitradeepa Anantharam

Arpabhai Kalatra, a pastoral Maldhari (herders) from Gujarat’s Rabadi community drinks sheep and goat’s milk every day. “Though Gujarad produces large quantities of this milk, it is less in demand so there is a daily surplus,” he says, adding that the Maldharis consume it in multiple ways to minimise wastage. “We make tea, set curd, and even make khoa.”

Arpabhais and Bhimsibhai Ghungal, who live in Surendranagar, Gujarat, have now found another way to make use of this surplus: artisanal cheese.

Namrata Sundaresan, co-founder of Chennai-based Käse who trained the Maldharis in cheese making last year explains that the feta they make is “terroir-inspired cheese where the flavour is impacted by the livestock and region where milk is procured.”

“We at Käse are constantly on the lookout for ethically-sourced clean milk and this led us to cross paths with the Centre for Pastoralism, India (CIP). Milk is central to the livelihoods of pastoral households in Gujarat. With indigenous milk surpluses, we are presented with a unique opportunity to enhance pastoral livelihoods via artisanal cheese making,” says Namrata, adding that the initiative began as an entrepreneurship training programme for the youth of the pastoral community, and Arpabhais and Bhimsibhai were selected by the Centre for Pastoralism.

The duo now makes 10 types of cheese, including chèvre, feta, barrel aged feta, pecorino fresco, cheddar, and tome. They have set up a processing unit in their village at a cost of 26 lakhs. “All these years so much precious milk was wasted. Now, we have over 100 goats and also buy goat milk from other pastoralists as we need 100 litres to make a kilogram of cheese,” says Bhimsibhai.

At Käse’s recent pastoral tasting event, the cheese was paired with delicious Gujarati snacks and pickles from Parul’s Pickle Magic by Parul Bhath.

Introducing Handcrafted Pastoral Cheeses from Cheese on the Move! Cheese on the Move is an initiative from the Centre for Pastoralism that collaborates with artisanal cheese makers to connect with sheep, goat, and camel pastoralists. It facilitates the making and marketing of a range of pastoral cheeses, made with milk sourced directly from pastoralists in Gujarat. We currently support Panchal Dairy – run by two young pastoralists and based in Sayla, Gujarat – to procure milk from goat and sheep pastoralists in the region.

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<tbody>
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To place orders: Email: panchalgoatmilk@gmail.com Or Call/Whatsapp: 7507648888

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<td>Haloussir</td>
<td>Lactose Cheese</td>
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All rates in Rupees for 150 gms - Minimum order of 450 gms (Shipping charges extra)
Gujjaran go Kaarj: A Living Lightly Exhibition and Utsav

Photos by Shivam Rastogi

From 24th to 26th March, the Centre for Pastoralism and the Van Gujjar Tribal Yura Sangathan hosted ‘Gujjaran Go Kaarj: A Living Lightly Utsav & Exhibition’. The exhibition aimed to shed light on the lives of Uttarakhand’s Van Gujjar pastoralists and was followed by a pashu mela, or animal fair, on March 27th.

The three-day event was brought to life with Bains performance, Gojri stories, multi-media installations, and film screenings that brought forth pastoral cultures. The Utsav was not only a celebration of the Van Gujjars but also an opportunity to start a much-needed dialogue on a variety of issues pertaining to their lives through workshops and consultations. Under the blue skies at Jeevan Utsav Resort, Rishikesh, the event became an open space for Van Gujjar pastoralists and other participants to engage in conversations, listen to experiences of other pastoral communities, and for outsiders to learn more about Uttarakhand’s pastoralists.
The Van Gujjars use horses during migration. Pictured here is a work-in-progress installation of a horse with its trappings during migration.

A Gojri Buffalo being milked early in the morning for a milking competition.

Art exhibits based on the genesis stories of the pastoral communities of Kachchh.

Pastoral musicians from Kachchh regaling the audience on a breezy evening.

Every day of the Utsav saw lively games at the end of each session, including this display of their physical strength.

Members of the Van Gujjar community decide to form a Van Gujjar Gojri Breeders Association.
Van Gujjars – 
A community stuck between a rock and a hard place

By Radhika Chatterjee

Van Gujjars are a traditional pastoral community spread across the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand. They also happen to be a forest-dwelling community. In fact, they are well known for having an intricate relationship based on coexistence with forests and wild animals. Today, however, these very forests have become a reason why the younger generation of the community finds itself stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Descendants of Gujjars of Jamnui and Kashmir, Van Gujjars began living in parts of Uttar Pradesh (which is now a part of Uttarakhand) a couple of hundred years ago. According to the community's oral history, they were sent to Himachal Prades by the King of Jamnui and Kashmir as part of a dowry. Gradually, the community expanded and spread over the nearby alpine pastures, and winters in lower altitudes of cities, would they be able to adjust to the altered lifestyle?

in 1990s. This too occurred by the active role played by Shri Arvind Khushial, the founder of RLEK.

Nonetheless, their relationship of coexistence with the forest continues to remain unacknowledged, especially by state officials who are responsible for ‘protecting’ forests. For more than two decades now, the community has faced increasing problems in accessing their forests. For instance, speaking at an informal discussion, a young Van Gujjar woman described her relationship with forests as that of a ‘bebasi kyara’ or love born out of helplessness. Elaborating further she said, had she found a chance for attaining better education, she too could have found employment in cities. She was staying in the forests only because she did not have the option to do otherwise. This feeling however is not shared by all young individuals in the community. Several of them are also engaged in activism for claiming their rights to the forests under the Scheduled Tribes And Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition Of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.

In this context, there are two difficult questions that the younger generation of Van Gujjars has to reckon with. First, even if they are granted rights to the forests, will they be able to live inside the forests? Second, if they are rehabilitated in cities, would they be able to adjust to the altered lifestyle?

Whatever their answer may be, one thing that we can all be sure of is that the dilemmas of Van Gujjars will affect everyone. Their aspirations for a modern lifestyle will lead to a loss of their traditional knowledge of forest use. This in turn will be a huge loss for environmental conservation and will leave no one unscathed, including the blissfully ignorant city-dweller who remains unaware of the Van Gujjars’ dilemmas.

I met Anjum Nisha, Kulsum, Muskaan, and Aamna Khatoon at the recently held Van Gujjar Utsav at the Rajji National Park in Uttarakhand. With Shilpi Iyengar who suggested we do a small interview together. Chhani and I found an empty room at the venue where all of us headed in and sat on the carpet in a circle for a chat. This was too brief a meeting to make any generalizations about ‘Van Gujjar women’, or even attempt to put them together as an analytical unit (which is not an unproblematic homogenization in itself) yet, with this caveat in place, I would like to attempt to draw out a few themes based on this conversation that might be worth a thought for the reader.

The interview with Anjum Nisha, Kulsum, Muskaan, and Aamna Khatoon was a breeze. The conversation had a natural flow and their body language communicated as much as their words. They looked at each other with an intuitive rapport and never spoke over each other. They talked with candour about how their condition as Van Gujjar women has remained somewhat unchanged from the time of their mothers, who, just like them, were seldom allowed a voice in any decision-making body of the community. Just like their mothers they too have to look at the faces of the men in their families for permission to speak… It is the same even now they say… Yet they add that some small changes have started creeping into their otherwise patriarchal societal norms because of their newly acquired educational status. This is the first generation of educated Van Gujjar women whose voices have not been drowned out by the empowering potential of education, they say.”We have studied a little bit. This has informed us about our rights. Now we can talk to our family members and tell them what we want to do…” Aamna noted. The transformative capacity of education is deeply felt too, and they have struggled to educate themselves in spite of daunting odds. Anjum, who is in the final year of her master’s degree, has funded her education through money earned from stitching and tuition, Aamna has worked to pay for her education as well. Meanwhile, even too have changed a bit, they suggest, and it has become somewhat easier to communicate their need for some autonomy at least to one’s immediate family members. As one spoke, the others listened. They encouraged and approved with smiles and familiar tactile gestures. The individual voices of Anjum, Kulsum, Muskaan, and Aamna came through even in this rather brief encounter, as did their corval communication spirit. They declare themselves as proud Van Gujjar women, as sisters and friends, speaking for each other while allowing each other no room to be. Their perspicacity seemed premised on a close communitarian coexistence, and their solidarity as women was palpable and infectious. Most of all, their trust and admiration for each other was clear and seemed forged on the firm foundation of familiar struggles.

In one respect, however, Anjum Nisha, Kulsum, Muskaan, and Aamna seemed very different from what in the mind’s eye is a picture of their mother’s generation of women — and this is in their relationship to ‘the wild’. Could the familiarity with wilderness their mothers lived with and espoused be a thing of the past? Curiously, Aamna felt she found the stories of older Van Gujjar women living in the forest to be ‘ajeeb’ or strange, or out of the ordinary. Why so when Aamna’s own father was tragically killed by an elephant in a forest some years ago — and this is sadly not an uncommon encounter for Van Gujjars. So why should such encounters with ‘the wild’ be strange for those who live in and around forests? Anjum also drew a clear distinction between ‘prakriti’, ‘nature’, and ‘culture’ perhaps deserves some thought.

When Chhani’s phone died after some 15 minutes into the interview so we finished a little abruptly, but we went on to chat and exchange phone numbers. Anjum Nisha, Kulsum, Muskaan, and Aamna left a few minutes later as they were running late for a meeting. Now we occasionally say hi on WhatsApp.

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