What did the Lockdown look like for Herders and their Animals?

AS WE FACE ANOTHER COVID-19 SURGE, LETS LOOK AT THE IMPACT OF THE 2020 COVID LOCKDOWN AND ITS AFTERMATH ON INDIA’S PASTORAL COMMUNITIES | by Vasant Saberwal

In April of 2020, the Centre for Pastoralism undertook a quick telephonic survey to assess the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on pastoralists across the country. The survey suggested that pastoralists experienced many of the same difficulties that farming communities did. Some impacts, however, were specific to pastoralists, an outcome of their mobility and, in some instances, their identities. This article, based on our survey and on media reports of the time, provides an overview of these results and describes a larger study that is underway, based on this initial work.

Challenges experienced during the lockdown

Restrictions on movement
Pastoralist migrations were halted by state governments either temporarily or for the entire year, on the assumption that all movement held the potential for viral transmissions, and hence threatened communities that pastoralists interacted with. In some instances pastoralists convinced governments to permit them to continue with their migrations. Others, such as the Van Gujjars of Uttarakhand, were banned from moving to their summer pastures for the entire year.

Accessing markets
Pastoralist communities spoke of the difficulties of accessing milk, meat, and feed markets, all closed due to the national lockdown. Some of the surplus milk was being converted into ghee and buttermilk. As the weather warmed, even these products needed to be disposed of to avoid spoilage. The closure of meat markets had implications for immediate cash flows but did not represent the loss of a crop, that may have been experienced by milk-selling pastoralists or by farmers with perishable, fresh produce.

Shortage of Labour
In some instances, herders had returned home in February to attend family functions or to help with cultivation. Post the imposition of restrictions, these herders were unable to rejoin their herds, resulting in significant shortage of labour in managing the herds. Many herders also reported instances of hired labour returning home, owing to the limited information available on the pandemic and the associated desire to be home during this period of uncertainty.

Shearing sheep
Sheep need to be sheared just before the onset of summer. This is generally undertaken by shearers not necessarily part of the herding community. When sheep are not sheared ahead of the summer heat, there are heightened levels of sickness within the herd. Owing to the lockdown, shearers were simply unable to reach the location of the sheep. While the Himachal government ultimately facilitated shearer travel to the herds, in most other States shearing operations were badly impacted. Many herders spoke of the likely impact of the lockdown and its aftermath on the import of wool and on the export of woolen carpets and durries.
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Obtaining ration
Pastoralists on the move normally obtain ration from village kirana stores or from shops in small towns. Pastoralists across the country stated that villagers, normally welcoming, were wary of potential transmission of COVID and were often unwilling to have transient pastoralists enter the village. In instances where the state was providing ration, pastoralists tended to miss out as they were on the outskirts of villages or were grazing their animals at some distance from human habitation.

Social Stigma
Pastoralists from various parts of the country spoke of experiencing some form of social stigma due to their religion or their nomadic lifestyle. Gujjas in Chamba, Himachal Pradesh and from the Rishikesh/Haridwar areas in Uttarakhand faced ostracism as minorities and had difficulty in selling or exchanging学前教育。In both instances, rumours that their milk carried the coronavirus and so must not be bought led to significantly reduced demand for their milk. Pastoralist mobility in itself has been cause for social stigma for many decades and these reports indicated this was accentuated over the course of the lockdown.

Pastoralism, Resilience and COVID-19
A number of pastoralists mentioned that they may have experienced fewer lockdown hardships than many others with rural livelihoods. The adaptability of pastoral communities to climatic, political and other changes may have played a role in mitigating the various issues listed above.

A Follow-Up Survey
These findings were based on a limited set of calls made to pastoralists. In June of last year, CIP staff met with colleagues in academic institutions and various NGOs to explore the interest in undertaking a more in-depth study. It focused on understanding how pastoralists had been affected by the lockdown and its aftermath. This study is ongoing, based on a set of telephonic and in-person interviews, drawing heavily on our findings from the initial survey. We have attempted to speak with approximately 20 individuals from each distinct pastoralist community, resulting in close to 500 interviews. The final report will be produced by the end of April.

Afforestation is making the livelihoods of Gaddi pastoralists in the Himalayas more vulnerable

Worldwide, efforts to curb climate change have led to large-scale afforestation activities. However, a recent survey-based study finds that plantations in the Himalaya state of Himachal Pradesh could be compromising the livelihoods and sustainability of migratory Gaddi pastoralist livelihoods, thus stressing the need for the forest policy to be more inclusive to the needs of local communities (like, Gaddi) to minimise its negative impacts on their livelihood.

For centuries, Gaddi pastoralists have been herding goats and sheep in the Himalayas. The study found that plantations replaced fodder species with non-palatable trees, contributed to the spread of invasive shrubs, disrupted migratory routes, and changed access to pasture lands.

Vijay Ramparsad, lead author of the study and senior fellow at the Dehradun-based non-profit organisation, Centre for Ecology, Development and Research, noted that there was an overall decline in pastoral livelihoods.

Gaddis, like other pastoralists worldwide, were already transitioning to non-pastoralist income sources as a result of existing socio-economic, cultural, and biophysical stresses. Plantations have added to and accelerated the decline in the number of pastoral households and the size of migratory herds. However, many households have successfully diversified their income sources and this ability to adapt distinguishes Gaddi herders who are vulnerable and those who are not, the team observed.

Listed as a scheduled tribe by the Government of India, Gaddis are agro-pastoralists tracing their ancestry to Bhilas in Chambhi district of Himachal Pradesh. An average Gaddi household maintains about 250 goats and sheep and earns between Rs. 2,500 to 3,120 (Rs. 250,000 to 300,000) a year from the sale of the meat and removable parts of their sheep and goats. Using migratory paths, they navigate to low-altitude pastures in the winter to graze their livestock.

Gaddis use forests, high-altitude commons, village commons, and privately-owned lands for their livestock. While forests and high-altitude commons are accessed by permits issued by the forest department, permission to graze on village commons is obtained from local landowners and private lands are accessed by customary relations between Gaddi and individual farmers.

Unpalatable and invasive species
Afforestation policy analysts believe that over the past 40 years, the proportion of palatable trees planted by the forest department declined from 28 percent in the 1990s to 20 percent between 2009 and 2015. One herder noticed that grasses such as garna (Carissa dioides) was a favourite among goats, buckets (Adansonia vacca) and plants such as prepaal (Pica religiosa) are now almost absent from pastures during winter.

Fencing of plantations and land access
Because grazing is a threat to the survivorship of planted tree saplings, plantations were fenced off for the first four to five years restricting access to fodder. Some afforestation practices involve the use of live fences composed of unpalatable species, which can harm livestock. Installation and removal of fences is often unpredictable for Gaddis, and as a result, they face more dependence on private lands and village commons for grazing their livestock, posing other challenges such as competition from local livestock owners and negotiators with panchayats.

Another hurdle faced by Gaddis: increasing urbanisation on their migratory routes, leaving little space for herds. Gaddis were forced to either shorten their migration or shift routes to other areas.


How many Indians are pastoralists? No official data, but report says 13 million
by Ishaan Kukreti

India meets 53 per cent of its milk and 74 per cent of meat requirement from animals reared by pastoralists. While the Union government has no data on the community, a new, global report released in September 30, 2020, report has pegged their number in the country at 13 million — nearly one per cent of the population.

A wide range of pastoralist systems exist in India — from fully mobile to transhumant (seasonal movement of livestock between fixed summer pastures and grazing) and sedentary. Animal systems maintained in mobile systems include camels, cattle, ducks, donkeys, goats, pigs, sheep and yaks.

The report, released by non-profit League for Pastoral People and Livestock (LPP), added: “Pastoralism is not an official category in India. No official definition exists. Officials are aware of its existence but do not recognise it as a distinct management system.”

The non-profit arrived at the estimate by analysing data from the National Sample Survey Office reports, individual surveys as well as livestock population numbers.

LPP defines pastoralism as the ‘dependence on common pool resources, mobility, primary income from livestock, existence of traditional knowledge systems and association with specific breeds.”

“Our data shows the importance of pastoralism for the Indian livestock economy. India’s phenomenally productive livestock is sustained majestically on common pool resources, including forests and gochas, which are not wastelands but are treated as such,” said Iloe Köhler-Rollefson, a Rajasthan-based camel expert and co-author of the report’s section on India.

While most pastoralists in India belong to the traditional castes, other groups — the non-traditional pastoralists — have also been taking up mobile herding, the report stated. It added:

“According to the National Sample Survey, only one per cent of the land owned by farmers is used for livestock. This suggests that not only pastoralists, but also common-pool resources (largely large number of farmers who keep crossbred cattle and high-yielding buffaloes also rely on these resources).”

The central and state governments need to acknowledge the significance of pastoralists and extensive livestock keeping for India’s rural economy and gross domestic product, the report said. The livestock sector contributes 4.5 per cent to the GDP, the pastoralist sector amounts to around 3 per cent of the share, according to the report.

“This needs to be reflected in livestock policies sensitive to the specific needs of this way of life, including the SDG assumption that livestock is still ‘f GD,” the report said.

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Wood is a versatile fibre - it sustains against harsh weather, withstands rains, can be carved in many ingenious ways, has great potential use as an architectural material and produces high quality compost when it degrades. Yet it accounts for only 3% of the world's textile market. This is quite a pity considering that production of wool, especially in pastoral systems has one of the lowest footprints of all textiles fibres. Woolens also last long, need few washes and tend to repel all kinds of dirt, making maintenance relatively simple and frugal. Several arguments can be made to consider wool the fibre of the future.

Our country produces more than 40 million kilos of wool and is one of the top producers of wool in the world. While, ideally, we should be developing infrastructure to position ourselves to take advantage of the wonderful fibre that wool is, the shocking truth is that most Indian wool is discarded for the want of a market demand. Where Indian wool is used, it finds two chief uses - as a raw material for traditional woolens produced in a closed-loop local economy, and as a raw material for carpet exporters. Unfortunately, the use of wool in both the economies has been shrinking. Many herding communities, traditionally major users of wool, have started moving towards exclusively ritualistic use of wool while the carpet users of wool, have started moving towards artifical fibres.

While the traditional wool economies have been shrinking with alarming speed in the last two decades, India remains home to one the most vibrant wool crafting cultures in the world. The Himalayan region of India produces the finest wool and still finds a ready market. Some private players have even started procuring wool from herders in bulk and marketing the wool in the west which values this wool because it is organic and non-violent. The herders in the Himalayas two continue to find wool better than any other fibre in the cold and wet monsoons. The arid west of India still has many wool weavers, and Bikaner remains one of the largest wool mandis of the world. Bikaner is also home to around 200 spinning mills which produce yarn for carpet exporters based in Bhadohi, Agra, Panipat, and Jaipur. The Deccan plateau is home to the iconic Gongadi, a textile weavers from Kangra.

There is a general trend of decline in availability of grazing resources in India. We expect that grazing resources will be even more contested in the coming years, a tussle in which pastoralists are often at disadvantage because they are used to grazing on large swathes of marginal lands traditionally part of the commons. Despite these challenges, the number of sheep in India has almost doubled since independence. This indicates that the practice of herding sheep remains a popular and economically profitable profession. The pastoral communities and the practice of pastoralism also allows for mobility - there are many instances of traditional pastoral communities coexisting the trade and newer communities taking their place. As indicated above, wool can find many uses other than use as a raw material for textiles. For example wool could be composted to produce high quality biofertilizer or be used as insulation material in built environments. It is imperative that initiatives look at leveraging all the qualities of wool to create demand for indigenous wool as solely the textile market may not be able to absorb such huge volumes of wool.

When I started work a kilo of honey, ghee, chillies, and desi wool were the same! In the past decades, the price of wool compared to the other three fell. No demand, and suddenly there is a spurt again. I hope our woolen handlooms are liked by you now...this is what we have done for the last 35 years...this is what we know how to do well."

- Mansa Ram, a member of the Gaddi community and one of the many desi wool pastoralist-weavers from Kangra.
There is More to Your Wool than Meets the Eye

by Jen Hoover

In recent years, there is growing interest in knowing where one’s clothing was produced. Following the Slow Food and Locavore movements, which encourage consumers to connect with the farms that grow their food, Slow Fashion includes efforts to identify “fibreshed[s]” or regions where textile materials are grown and processed within a fairly small geographic range. Wool is an especially interesting material for this project, as wool quality is directly affected by the type of environments in which sheep graze. Grains like the nutritional content of local grasses, mineral content of the soil, and amount and quality of water can affect the texture, strength, length, and color of wool.

But wool also complicates ideas of “place” and “local” for the simple reason that sheep move around. The Himachali herders among whom I have conducted research migrate hundreds of kilometers per year, crossing through several distinct climatic zones. The high-altitude pastures of Lahaul contain high-protein grasses and medicinal herbs, keeping the sheep healthy and contributing to good wool growth. The lower altitudes where herds spend the winter are increasingly overrun by burgeoning development in climatic zones. The high-altitude pastures of Lahaul contain high-protein grasses and medicinal herbs, keeping the sheep healthy and contributing to good wool growth. The lower altitudes where herds spend the winter are increasingly overrun by burgeoning development in climatic zones. The high-altitude pastures of Lahaul contain high-protein grasses and medicinal herbs, keeping the sheep healthy and contributing to good wool growth.

As a strand of wool grows outward from the sheep’s skin, it becomes a slowly scrolling record of the sheep’s experiences over a span of months. A strand of wool can be considered a “primitive” trait in sheep, one that is not prized by the global wool industry which relies on uniform material to be processed by machine. It is well suited for hand processing into the blankets and clothing that Himachali herders rely on for survival during their migrations. It is eminently adapted for the unique place in which it is grown and used, and also embodies an approach to living in place and time, with all of its variability, that those of us stuck in the fast lane of urban life would do well to learn from.

Indian indigenous wool was showcased by Living Lightly in an online Desi Oon exhibition on Rangsutra from 10th to 25th Dec ’20 and on Okhai from 20th Jan to 20th Feb ’21.

The online exhibition-sale on ‘Desi oon’ highlighted the central role of wool in pastoral movements, cultures, and economies, and featured different sheep breeds including the black sheep of Deccan, the Patanwadi sheep of Gujarat, and the Harsil sheep of Uttarakhand. The exhibition was accompanied by a film festival on pastoralism.

The exhibition in December 2020 featured the indigenous wool of India, showcasing a fantastic display of products created by the wool artisans, the experiences of the pastoral herders, and perspectives of civil society members.

India boasts a rich diversity of indigenous wool and woolens - a result of the sheep and its wool. As Neetikanth Mama, an octogenarian herder put it “Herding sheep is our dharma, more than a mere occupation. It has been entrusted upon us by the divine.” Artisans too, derive pride and solitude from their practice. Mahadavi Mehta, a spinner from Uttarakhand, says that her main income is not money, but the happiness and peace she finds in spinning.

The Desi Oon story began with the wool fibre and through that traces the movement of the sheep, the uniqueness of each breed, gorgeous diversity of traditional products and the wonderful skill of the wool artisans.

Unfortunately, in the past two decades, the procurement of wool has fallen drastically leading to a significant drop in secondary income for the herders. Today most shepherds strew their migratory routes with discarded wool, for want of a market.

The exhibition also connected pastoralists and artisans with some of India’s best craft organizations, all of whom are breathing new life into an entire value chain of indigenous wool across India. Each partnering organization highlighted a particular breed - the Black Deccani sheep was presented by Miton and Earthen Tunes, Harsil sheep by Avani and Pinki, Cholda by Rangsutra, Patanwadi by Khamiis, and the indigenous Gaddi-Merino sheep of Himachal Pradesh by Aana Jana and Kultur Whimsy.

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**Denmark of Vidarbha**

by Ajinkya Shahane

Wartha, a district at the heart of India just next to Nagpur is popular for its Ashrama - established by Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave. It is home to large swathes of grasslands and forests. Estimates say the Arvi plains of the region are home to about 400 hectares of grasslands. These grasslands have sheltered several pastoral communities and animals for centuries.

Did you know that the Gazetteer of 1906 declared the Arvi plains of Wardha as ‘The Denmark of Vidarbha’? The plains supplied milk to the entire district! Who could have inspired such a comparison? It would have to have been the Nand Gaolis! The Nand Gaoli is a pastoral community of the region, known to be expert rearers of the Gaolao Cow and the Nagnaati Buffalo. The nutritious grasses of these lands have nurtured the animals, kept them healthy, and the milk flowing. It was literally a river that used to flow each day - 2.5 lakh litres of milk to be precise!

The full bodied milk was an excellent source of white butter which used to be exported to far away lands. Manchester in the United Kingdom was a proud consumer of this butter!

The story goes that often a buffalo calf would off tanks which used to be brimming with liquid but also a proud consumer of this butter!

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The full bodied milk was an excellent source of white butter which used to be exported to far away lands. Manchester in the United Kingdom was a proud consumer of this butter!

Some of these Nand Gaolis still persevere and continue to conserve the traditional grazing lands as well as the native breeds. We hope that someday Arvi will once again rise to its billing as the Denmark of Vidarbha.

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**Many goats roaming and feeding in the dense grasslands of Saurashtra, produce great volumes of milk. These volumes far outstrip the well-known Gujarati thirst for milky tea!**

From the received positive responses and future demands, Kodhabhai will play a key role in the setting up a Sangathan of herdies to meet the demand from sweet shops, restaurants or caterers.

Being a herder all his life, he is now keen to extend his steps from the world of grasslands to the world of enterprise. He feels they could even make pedhas better than the halwai, provided a market is created. The pedhas could well help them gain increased incomes and a greater share of the dairy economy.

Success will mean inspiration to many other Bharvad families, and to the herdies of the larger world. Perhaps it is time that these primary producers took control of their produce, cutting out the need for large-scale procurement, processing, and promotion - thereby reaching the consumers directly.

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**Tales of Goat Milk Gastronomy**

by Riya Sequeira Shetty

Kodhabhai Badhabhai Bharvad of the Bharvad community in Upleta, Jamnagar, Gujarat owns a herd of 130 Bagri goats. Efforts are underway (by Junagadh University and government agencies) to register this bagri goat breed that is fine ranging and grazes across open areas. 75 of Kodhabhai’s goats are currently milking and since they are milked once in the morning, and once in the evening, Kodhabhai gets 75 - 80 litres each day. Milk from the free ranging Bagri goats is like a polyphony of several notes - astringent, grassy, and earthy flavours combine, a taste perhaps best described as goaty! It has several therapeutic benefits, yet does not have much demand in the market.

Kodhabhai says that the dairies, generally, don’t procure goat milk and if they do, it is for any random amount between 10-15 rupees per litre. This makes the Bharvads wary of dairies. They prefer selling milk to chai shops which pay about 18 rupees for a litre of goat milk. Many goats roaming and feeding in the dense grasslands of Saurashtra, produce great volumes of milk. These volumes far outstrip the well-known Gujarati thirst for milk! Thus, chai shops can procure only a fraction of the total goat milk produced in the region.

Apart from using milk at home domestically, the Bharvad women make mawa, for three generations now. They are able to get 1 kg of mawa from 7 litres of milk. From Kodhabhai’s goats, around 8 kgs of mawa is made per day. Every 2-3 days the mawa sells for 200-220 per kilo in these towns.

Kodhabhai and his fellow Bharwads feel it is inadequate compensation for a food that is so good and now dreams of goat milk pedhas! He has been selling mawa to local halwais (sweet makers) who have started making small batches of pedhas to test waters. Some sweetness of sugar, dried fruits and spices are perfect companions to Goat milk mawa. Sweet makers are experimenting with it for the moment, distributing it for testing and selling it in temples and in small markets.

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Our camel milk soaps are handmade from pure camel milk, coconut oil and a splash of various scents. The milk is sourced from Raika camel herdies who graze their herds on the bio-diverse trees and shrubs of the Aravalli Hills near Ranakpur. They make a wonderful lather and are good for your skin too, as camel milk contains valuable Alpha-Hydroxy acids which plump the skin and smooth fine lines. It has a very high content of Vitamin C (6 times higher than cow’s milk), as well as Vitamin A, B2, and D! For your skin too, as camel milk contains valuable Alpha-Hydroxy acids which plump the skin and smooth fine lines. It has a very high content of Vitamin C (6 times higher than cow’s milk), as well as Vitamin A, B2, and D! To know more and shop log onto www.camelcharisma.com

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Seven thousand rupees for a litre of donkey’s milk? For a litre of anything? Sounds insane, but that’s what the newspaper headlines said in September 2020 about the milk of Halari donkeys in Saurashtra, Gujarat. It even turned out to be true — if only in a single verifiable instance. And the Halari-rearing communities of Gujarat would laugh you out of sight if you dared suggest that they were routinely finding such rates.

The price for this variety of milk, said to have rare medicinal qualities, seems to have touched a maximum level of Rs. 125 a litre in Gujarat. And even that came from an organisation buying limited quantities of it for research.

And so here I was in Saurashtra, following up on the newspaper headlines. In the barren cotton fields of Rajkot district I met Kholabhai Jujubhai Bharwad, a pastoralist in his 60s, from Jampar village. Bharwad was tending a herd of goats and sheep, and five Halari donkeys.

“Only Rabari and Bharwad communities keep Halari donkeys,” said Kholabhai. And among them, very few families are “keeping the tradition alive. These animals are beautiful but not sustainable for our livelihoods. They generate zero income.” Kholabhai and his five brothers together own 45 donkeys.

Halari donkeys are an indigenous breed of Saurashtra, deriving their name from Halar, a historical region of western India corresponding to the present districts of Jamnagar, Devbhumi Dwarka, and Rajkot. These strong and well-built donkeys, white in colour, can walk up to 30-40 kilometres in a day. They are used as pack animals during pastoralist migrations and also to pull carts. The Halari was the first from Gujarat to be registered and recognised as an indigenous donkey breed by the National Bureau of Animal Genetic Resources. Nationally, it was the second after the Spiti donkey from Himachal Pradesh. The 20th Livestock Census 2019 records an alarming decline in the donkey population across India — with their numbers falling from 310,000 in 2012 to 120,000 in 2019 — a decline of around 62 per cent. In Gujarait, this drop is visible in the numbers of Halari donkeys as well as the breeders. The reasons for the decline? “Where is the land for donkey grazing?” asks a frustrated Mangabhai Jadhabhai Bhardwad, a pastoralist of Jamnagar district, who is in his late 50s. “Most grazing lands are now under cultivation. So much of farming everywhere. Nor can we graze in forest land. That’s forbidden by law.”

There is also, says Ranabhai, a social stigma attached with rearing donkeys. “Who wants to hear — ‘dekhol gaddhiya ja raha hai’ [‘look, donkeys are going by’] — that’s not something anyone deserves to hear from others.” Ranabhai’s own herd has fallen from 28 to 5 over the past two years. He sold many Halaris because he was unable to maintain them and needed to raise cash. A Halari can fetch Rs. 15,000-20,000 at the fair which is held at Vautha in Dholka taluka of Ahmedabad district. The buyers are from within the state or from other states — from other nomadic communities, or some looking for sturdy pack animals — for use, for example, in mining areas — or for pulling carts.

So what was that sensation over Rs. 7,000 for a litre of donkey’s milk about? It began with local newspapers reporting the sale of a single litre — just the one — for Rs. 7,000 in Mota Garediya village of Jamnagar’s Dharoi block. The lucky recipient of that prize was the herder Vashrambhai Tedhabhai. He told reporters he had never himself heard of anyone getting such a price, ever.

“People were finding such rates. Nor can we graze in forest land. That’s forbidden by law.” And, he adds, “Maintaining the Halari mare is a tough job. They have a bad temperament. Their numbers do not grow fast.”

There were many other reasons for the decline. “We are unable to maintain them and needed cash,” says the 62-year-old Halari rearing community, running a school in Jamnagar district, on an annual migration route with his donkeys. And so here I was in Saurashtra, following up on the newspaper headlines. In the barren cotton fields of Rajkot district I met Kholabhai Jujubhai Bharwad, a pastoralist in his 60s, from Jampar village.

Ritayan Mukherjee is a Kolkata-based photography enthusiast and a PARI (People’s Archive of Rural India) Fellow.
Simply Style or Simply Living?

by Shabri Wable

Pastoralism has always charmed the city bred, at least the more romantic urban folks. We admire their ruggedness, their simplicity and ingenuity yet try to adopt their way of dress, and look avant-garde at best. Surely the secret runs deeper than the fabric and the cut of the garment. Confidence and comfort makes for effortless style and pastoralism seem to be that, and also a picture of swag. While the denizens of the cities hope to assert individuality by way of their clothing, entire communities of pastoralists wear almost identical clothes, often in the same colour. How do they feel comfortable in the coarsest woods, extreme volumes, drawstrings, heavy embroidery and the chunkiest jewellery?

Perhaps the confidence comes from conforming, and belonging to a community. The wool is from the flock of a person’s sheep, hand spun by a loved one and then dyed, felted, knitted, or sewn in the village by someone they grew up with. However coarse the wool is, if hand knitted by the wife, or hand spun by the father, how could it not be comforting and wholesome? Perhaps just like home food. The roomy clothes are comfortable for sure, but also keep themselves perfectly to quilts in their afterlife. The cut is simple geometry – the quadrilateral of a fabric is cut into most rudimentary shapes that can be easily turned back into a rectangle of a quilt to give it a new life. Strings and drawstrings are often used to allow for pregnant mares, mood swings of the body and probably allow for sharing of clothes. Embellishment in the form of embroidery is a tradition, a form of expression, an outlet, and also a showcase of skill. There is a lot going on, in the circle of similarly dressed pastoralists. Not easy to detect, when seen closely the individual in the conformist emerges. A well-worn ring that has taken the contours of the fingers, a bidic and a bunch of keys tied to the jacket string, a hidden pocket or a flash of beadwork on the drawstring all worn with easy nonchalance.

The dressing and adorning goes far beyond the human family – their wider family of camels, horses, ponies, cattle, sheep and goat are also lovingly dressed. Children build special friendships with young lambs and goat kids. They turn friends, and the animal friends are decked up with fabric scraps and trinkets, a display of the creativity and resourcefulness of its human mate. It is not unusual to find a pony saddled with a wool felt made from the fleece of sheep herded by his master, or to find new born lambs snuggled in the Chola, woolen coat, of a Gaddi – the wool from the herd holding man and lamb together in a warm hug. The same Chola also carries the Gaddi’s food and belongings, and the dura – a woolen felt holding the vast coat together, is useful in pulling out fallen sheep during the day, becoming a pillow at night. Pastoralist clothes then are not just covering the but are living and evolving just as the wearer inside them.

Many of us who are a part of urban society are driven by change and perhaps make everyday improvements in our lives. This constant drive often gives way to a sense of displacement and perhaps even a constant search for a pastoralist, always on the move and often setting up camps, clothing is the much needed constant, a companion crafted by the caring hand. While we, surrounded by creatures to act for you?

A few years ago, a Rabari embroidery artisan opened my eyes to the core of style. Kuerben, my colleague on a project, is an expert embroider with a great sense of composition and an instinct to know what works. While selecting embroidery threads I noticed that she would always pick deep shades of green, blue, red and purple regardless of the fabric we were working on. Joked, I asked her if she even looked at the fabrics before selecting the embroidery threads and put came her reply, “But these are Rabari colours!” I can see it now, being stylish is being comfortable in your own skin. Do we recognize ourselves in what we wear?

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“The day we spent walking with the Rabaris was really hard. Our physical limits were truly tested.”

In conversation with Filmmaker Ashwin Gokhale

“Rabari: The People of the Leopard” is a visual delight in every way. The film tells the story of a Rabari family living in Jawai-Bera region of Rajasthan. Shabri is the eldest daughter of the Rambans for many generations. As the title suggests, the viewer starts watching the film with the anticipation of getting to know the relationship between the Rabaris and the leopards, and the conflicts of this co-existence. However, Gokhale, an expert cinematographer and Ashwin, a keen-eyed cinematographer and director, is an expert cinematographer and director, explains with a lot of pride. However, when the film starts, we hear a Rabari man explaining to the viewer with a lot of questions in the mind. Still, the cinematography leaves the viewer spellbound till the very last frame.

Rabari: The People of the Leopard was made by Ashwin Gokhale for his Master’s thesis and was screened as part of the Living Lightly Film Festival. Here is an excerpt from a conversation between Gokhale and Bhavna Jainini.

BJ: Why and how did you choose to make Rabari: The People of Leopard?

AG: I had a chance to visit Jawai-Bera while during college and I found it to be one of the most exciting places on this planet. There are these 70 odd leopards living on the hills surrounded by villages, where the Rabaris live with their animals.

BJ: The film has some truly stunning shots of the leopards. Aren’t leopards shy and not very easy to spot? How easy or difficult was it for you to get these shy creatures to act for you?

AG: We shot in Jawai-Bera region (2020) and because it was winter, the leopards were often out, basking. I was also told by the people of Jawai-Bera, that, because leopards usually reside in caves on the hills, they find the altitude comforting and are confident to come out easily.

BJ: When the film starts, we hear a Rabari man talking about his life as a pastoralist which he explains with a lot of pride. However, when the film ends, we hear the same man designating his life as he compares himself to animals. This felt odd to me as I didn’t want to leave the film with a story.

AG: I agree with your observation and I too felt that contrast and conflict during my conversations with the Rabaris. Somewhere the challenges faced by the community did not come out that well to help the viewer make that connection between the pride they feel and the issues they face for their survival. There is severe mismanagement from the government which doesn’t pay severences to the Rabaris when the leopards takes their animals away. A lot of resorts are being set up which are employing people from the outside, instead of giving employment to the Rabaris. I think he compares his fate to that of animals to make it easy for us city folks to understand their reality.

“Simply Style or Simply Living?” by Shabri Wable

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When one has become part of the scenery, become insignificant, what allure will the man-made have if it is not deeply personal?

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Ashwin Gokhale is a keen-eyed cinematographer and documentary practitioner, whose work spans five continents.