Loss and Grief at 14000 ft: A Shepherd’s Fight to Save His Dying Flock

A golden sunset turned to night, as Rohit sat on a rock where network was sometimes available, and called everyone he could. “Please help us”, he repeated. By sunrise, twelve animals had succumbed at 14000 ft. We watched in horror as their keepers picked up the lifeless bodies on their backs, and buried them inside piles of rocks.

An intangible phenomenon of pastoral life is the entwinement of a pastoralist’s life force with that of their flock. On 29th June 2023, we witnessed the devastation caused by the PPR virus to a large flock of 1400 sheep and goats at their alpine pastures in Hadsar Dhar. This year, shortly after crossing into Lahaul, they were blindsided by a mysterious illness spreading through the flock. By the time we met Rohit, 200-300 of his animals could not walk, eat or see, and over 50 had died from what later revealed itself as PPR.

As we followed Rohit to the ridge, painful sounds ofretching and incessant groans came from all sides. Under massive pines, there were dozens of mostly adolescent goats with sore, bruised lesions on their moist and thick mucus falling out with each sobs, eyes sealed shut with a yellowing mucus, diarrhoeas, and limited movement. In a desperate effort to access medicines, Rohit made three trips down to Lohani, a 3-hour trek from his pasture, and then to the nearest veterinary centre in Udupai, 22 km away. Each time, he returned with just 2-3 vials of medicines from the clinic, without as much as a diagnosis. He finally requested a friend in Killar (Pan-Gi Valley), close to 50 km away, to send him a box of any medication he could find. Despite Lahaul’s 25 veterinary centres, it was in good-will alone that Rohit managed to get his first set of limited medical supplies from the sequestered Pang Valley.

Over many days, Rohit repeatedly tried reaching out for help – from Chamba’s MLA, to the Lahaul AHD – all to no avail. He was finally able to contact veterinarians Dr Sachin Sood (in Kangra) and Dr Kishor Rana (in Sissu) who were quick in diagnosing PPR and sounded the alarm on the urgent requirement for aid. Once medicines, Rohit responded – “No vaccines come for us. No medicines are given to us.”

By the time Rohit’s herders received aid, about 80 animals had already died. This amounts to a loss of 8-10 lakh INR, which is an under-estimation of actual losses suffered by a herder, since in addition to mortality, PPR is also associated with reproductive failure, reduced milk and wool productivity, inability to sell livestock for meat, and even diminished body weight in surviving animals.

Pastoralists graze their animals in isolated landscapes, often distant from urban centres, and in areas with poor road access. Under such conditions, pastoralists invariably experience difficulties in availing services such as vaccination and other medical care that we take for granted. Losses such as these are extremely difficult to recover from and play a vital role in pastoralists’ decisions to sedentarise. However, such medicines, vaccines, and veterinary care are available, in this case through the simple preventative measure of PPR vaccinations being made available to all pastoralists. Today we have access to products such as milk, meat, and even leather due to pastoralists like Rohit. And, they are the ones most in need of responsive veterinary care to safeguard their livelihoods.

The sheer quantum of migratory sheep and goats reaching the districts of Lahaul-Spiti from Chamba demands an allocation of sufficient vaccinations, medicines and veterinary teams in both districts for the duration of the summer and monsoon seasons. While this encounter provided a picture of what an effective state response can look like, it was also a window into a pastoralist nightmare which could be avoided with better planning. Where pastoralists go, medical care should follow.
**No Better Place to Meet Yourself**

Mounsa Ag Assarid is the eldest of thirteen children in a nomadic Touarg family. Born in northern Mali in 1975, he moved to France in 1999 to study Management at the University of Montpellier. This poem is excerpted from an interview with Victor Amala.

**POETRY**

By Mounsa Ag Assarid

What memories do you have of your childhood in the desert?

J: Camel if you get lost. He will take you where there is water.

Mounsa Ag Assarid (M.A.A): At the age of seven, you can go alone away from the camp, and sit in silence we listen to the sound of the boiling water… We all are into the tents and we boil tea. It's a magical moment… We all get into the tents and we boil tea.

J: Yes, that was it.

M.A.A: Tell me about a moment of deep happiness for you in the desert.

J: How peaceful.

M.A.A: sandstorm is approaching! It scared me, of course.

J: I feel great joy just by touching each other, being together. There, nobody talks.

M.A.A: If you are on your own in that silence you hear your heartbeat.

J: It happens every day, two hours before sunset. The heat decreases, men and animals slowly return to the camp, and there is still no cold air, and men and animals slowly return to the camp, and to be in the camp if you get lost. He will take you where there is water.

**Return of Pastoralism:**

Many villagers fought a long battle to return of Pastoralism:

By Bhagirath, Shagun

F our generations, arranging fodder and different grazing crops for their livestock has been a way of life for the residents of semi-arid Boojh village in Rajasthan’s Udaipur district. With population growth and the demand for land, fodder availability gradually reduced, restricting herd sizes.

By 2018, the situation became so dire, recall 30-year-old Rani Bai, that most people had to sell fodder from a previous harvest (pasture season 2017-18). The price of the fodder had doubled, and the quality was poor, according to the herd owners’ will.

In 2019, Boojh residents got in touch with the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES), a non-profit that works with communities across the country on ecological restoration. “FES was very interested in our plight and helped us,” Rani Bai said.

The 30-year-old woman and her husband, Vinod Kumar, who has tended to the village’s livestock and managed the land, organized an impromptu notice to the forest department. Rani Bai said that such notices are termed encroachments in the Lachhiwala range said that the forest department has been taking action ever since 1993. “Our five generations have lived here and labelled every patch in the forest department has repeatedly ruled us in such notice. This land on which we live is a residential settlement land. They say we need to start a movement for the forests, but instead of making arrangements, they serve us notices about encroachment. We would like to accept the eviction notices but there has been enough attempts by the government but as of now, I fail to understand why our entire community in the forest range is being termed encroachers,” she said.

Rajput added that the impromptu notices given to the forest department have collective a fee of Rs 25 each from every household in the village.

Commenting on the marginalized status of the tribal community, Rani Bai added that she would like to demand the allocation of a piece of wasteland and use it for the benefit of the community. “We are experiencing sleepless nights due to the fear of uncertainty,” she concluded.
‘This is living to me’: Three young women swap city life for shepherding in the Pyrenees

By Paroma Basu
Source: The Guardian

Amanda Guzman Mejias briefly worked in marketing in Barcelona before realising she hated office and city life. When she heard about shepherding school, Guzman Mejias immediately applied and has never looked back. ‘It is like I have found my way,’ she says.

Xisqueta sheep grazing at the top of Mount Bonaigua. The Xisqueta are a hardy, rugged breed, native to the Catalan Pyrenees. A few decades ago they were listed as endangered, but in recent years numbers have recovered.

Amanda Guzman Mejias, with the striped umbrella, and Vicky Garcia, look after 400 sheep and goats at high altitudes. Herds are move to cooler, higher pastures during the hot summer months. In early autumn, the animals come back down to the plains.

Esquina's day begins with a four-hour hike through the forests with the goats. Once they are milked, they set off on another four-hour hike, usually returning after dark. ‘This is a way of life and not only a job,’ she says.

Espina Calamayra's day begins with a four-hour hike through the forests with the goats. Once they are milked, they set off on another four-hour hike, usually returning after dark. ‘This is a way of life and not only a job,’ she says.

Gaucha, Lizarza Solana's 18-month-old sheepdog, discovers a newborn lamb that was accidentally left behind when its mother gave birth while grazing in the forest.

Heatwave sparked an unprecedented number of wildfires in Spain last year, aggrieved by rising temperatures from global heating. Sheep and goats have been deployed for centuries to clear the land of excess vegetation, and a growing number of countries are embracing them as an important method of fire prevention.

Every day, Lizarza Solana walks her hungry herd for up to eight hours, as they seek out fresh vegetation to fill their bellies. ‘I am feeling very healthy because I am walking all day,’ she says. ‘I think it’s good for the body and mind to live like this.’

One of the oldest domesticated animals, goats are adventurous eaters with robust stomachs to match. They can navigate terrains inaccessible to other animals and are useful in fire prevention because they clear flammable brush and vegetation.
Aji-lhamu—the nomadic theatre from Monyul, the land of Monpas

Civic Rolls talked with Killeer-Bolfeen about the difference between pastoralism and industrial livestock production, the benefits of the former, and why he believes we can’t all go vegan.

By Kayla Frost

Do Pastoralists Have a Place in the Future of Food?

In your chapter “Feeding the World,” you talk about the need for feeding the world’s growing population. How do you think that feeding the world can be achieved in a sustainable way?

In this chapter, the need for feeding the world’s growing population is discussed. It's important to note that sustainable food production is crucial for the future of our planet.

By Karla Harrell

TEXTILE

Closing Loop: Opening New Ones?

The changing relationships between Kachchhi herders, weavers and artisans

By Dharshana Mudarra

FASHION

Telanganas’ woolen gongadi shawls refashioned into shoes for farmers

By Sorath Maniawati

Source: The Hindu

FOOD

Does Pastoralists Have a Place in the Future of Food?

It's about how we can create sustainable and equitable food systems that benefit all people and the planet.

By Karla Harrell

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Supporting resilience, for its sake and ours

As the drought crisis gets worse in northern Kenya, women in the East African country initiate projects like reforestation and conservation of watersheds.

By Huaxia
Source: Xinhua

"It is us girls who are dropping out of school or trekking many kilometres in search of water and have therefore resolved to be champions of a climate-resilient future" said Rehema, a 19-year-old gender rights advocate from Kenya's coastal county of Kwale, said that young girls in her backyard have taken up the search for climate justice, having borne the brunt of food insecurity and water scarcity that has worsened in the current drought season.

"It is us girls who are dropping out of school or trekking many kilometres in search of water and have therefore resolved to be champions of a climate-resilient future," said Rehema.

A dry river bed serves as a waterpoint for both humans and livestock. PC: Kenneth Ochieng

A woman and several children are seen in a drought-affected village in the town of Laisamis, Marsabit County, Kenya. PC: Dong Jiihui

Pastoral communities are resilient in the face of adversity and their adaptive capacity contributes to their valued livestock management. "The breeds that pastoralists have created over centuries are one of our best, most important assets to adapt to climate change," says Ilse Köhler-Rollefson in the interview with Civil Eats on page 6. But increasingly, pastoralists are relocated from forests, and their access to resources is curbed. On page 5, the article by NewsClick addresses the Van Gujjar's collective state of anxiety over being termed as "encroachers" in light of their relocation from the forests. Reshma, a Van Gujjar woman whose family has lived in the region for five generations, says, "They say we need to resettle from the forests, but instead of making arrangements, they serve us such notices about encroachment."

In contrast, there is evidence that pro-pastoralist policies ensure that pastoralists are equipped to continue responding to adverse conditions, allowing them to continue to equip us in turn with their produce and services. In 2022, the Kashmir government provided trucks to transport Gujjar and Bakarwal animals during their annual migration. The HP government's responsiveness to the growing incidence of theft experienced by pastoralists and Amul's decision to install bulk chillers to buy milk from pastoralists in the Banni grasslands of Gujarat illustrate the same thing. Undoubtedly, pastoralists are experts in managing livestock in adversity; but we owe it to them to do our part in sustaining the productive adaptation that is pastoralism through timely assistance in the face of new challenges. We owe it to our milk, wool, leather, meat and dung economies as well.

A workshop titled Gender and Livestock: Evolving Research Strategies was jointly held by Anthra, Indian Commoner, and the Indian Pastoral Network from March 6th to 8th in Pune. The workshop brought together 42 participants from diverse disciplines: researchers, NGO representatives, and practitioners from the fields of gender and livestock-rearing communities with a focus on pastoralist communities in contemporary India.

The conference began with sessions summarising the current understanding of gender relations in livestock-rearing communities followed by a discussion on why narratives often tend to miss women. The absence of a regional word to describe gender was discussed in relation to the narrowness of disciplines that shape the questions we ask and the outputs we create.

Some of the main reasons for the invisibilisation of women were identified as - women's lack of ownership of livestock; their association with small livestock and poultry which leaves them out from surveys that focus on large livestock, and biases in large-scale quantitative data.

There were focused discussions on alternative research methodologies in the field of rearing livestock and research methods to study gender which led to raising pertinent questions about the challenges of ethics, collaboration, and co-production with the communities and the limitations of methodology and outcomes. Visibility, by who and for what, during and after research, was identified as a challenge that all the panelists grappled with in their own work. Along with larger structural solutions, the panel also concluded that it is crucial for individual researchers to have the training and skills to practise empathy, ethics, and reflexivity.

The most apparent understanding that the workshop generated was that it is challenging to work on gender, and especially to work with women, because of limitations of traditional “textbook” methods such as FGDs, cultural norms, the immense role played by the subjectivity of the researcher, and lack of existing good quality data on gender relations in pastoralism and livestock-rearing. Getting women together in one place, especially where migration is involved, gets difficult. It is very difficult to get safe spaces for women where they can speak freely. However, even after finding a space where they are comfortable to meet them, women find it difficult to open up about their lives. Many participants found kitchens to be spaces where interactions with women flowed smoothly; one of the participants named this the “kitchen method.”

Quantitative methods fall short due to issues and biases present during data collection. Methods such as time surveys result in inaccurate data with underestimation of women’s work. It was also discussed that the existing frameworks of qualitative methods are oriented toward Adivasi communities, which might not be applicable to many of the pastoralist livestock-rearing communities.

Participants of the workshop agreed that many such discussions are required to touch upon relevant topics such as patriarchy in pastoralist households, child marriage, dowry and bride price, child labour, the role of men, feminisation of pastoralism, gender fluidity, class, caste, and touchability.