

# Pastoralism

## *The Invisible Power Behind India's Livestock Economy*



## Introduction

Pastoralism is an ancient livestock production system, which is prevalent in almost every continent of the world.

Although often deemed backward, in the recent past, it has been observed that this system is both economically viable and productive, contributing to the economy in several unseen ways. It is also ecologically sustainable, using common pool resources creatively. The system is a dynamic production system using variability, including climatic variability, in a positive way. Socially, pastoralists and pastoralism present vivid and interesting contrasts to existing rural agrarian landscapes and emerging urban ones.

*Characteristics of pastoralist households: Dependence on common pool resources, mobility, primary income from livestock, existence of traditional knowledge systems and often association with specific breeds.*

In India, there are different pastoral communities in almost every state, but they remain invisible and do not figure in livestock policies and development programmes.

## Recommendations

1. Recognize pastoralists and the pastoral production system as a viable, distinct and critically important one.
2. Review and rework existing policies on livestock, forest, agriculture, land and revenue so that they are supportive of the needs of pastoral production systems and enable secure access and rights of common pool resources to pastoralists in flexible and dynamic ways. Provide insurance and risk cover for pastoralists.
3. Recognize services rendered by pastoralists to the ecosystem in terms of maintaining grassland and forest ecosystems and the biodiversity.
4. Institute a Ministry of Pastoralism to take care of the special needs of pastoralists and pastoralism.

## Background

In an attempt to understand questions related to why pastoralism exists and where and if pastoralism has a future at least in the Indian context, several workshops were held in the year 2010 where pastoralists, groups working with pastoralists, researchers, academics, scientists, gender specialists, historians and development workers came together to discuss and deliberate. The workshop held at Yashada in Pune, Maharashtra, brought together groups from southern and western India who represented the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Maharashtra. The next workshop at the IIAS (Indian Institute of Advanced Study) Shimla, brought together pastoralists, researchers, NGOs and academics from the Himalayan states of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttaranchal. The third workshop held at CAZRI (Central Arid Zone Research Institute) in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, saw scientists, pastoralists, NGOs, researchers, and groups from the states of Rajasthan, Haryana, and Gujarat in western India coming together. Following these workshops, members of the Rainfed Livestock Network conducted smaller studies to further understand these production systems. In 2016 members of RLN and other experts in the field of Livestock development met in Kullu, Himachal Pradesh, to come up with a methodology to estimate both the number of pastoralists in India as well as the economic contribution of this production system. Further to this a stakeholder consultation was also held in 2016 in New Delhi project and raise awareness among Indian policy and decision makers about the economic, ecological, and cultural significance of pastoralism in India and about the dominant role of extensive production systems in the country's overall livestock and agricultural economy. It sought to stimulate discussion about the future role of pastoralism in India and globally, giving a special voice to pastoralists themselves.

The workshops, studies and stakeholder consultations concluded that pastoralism is not an ancient dying system but a modern, thriving one, which adapts to changes in positive ways. In fact, it was seen that several communities who were not pastoral in the past have shifted

to this system of production and taken it up successfully. Furthermore, there were several examples of people who had stepped out of pastoralism, pursued other occupations and then moved back.

## Analysis

Pastoralists are the backbone of India’s livestock economy. “Almost all the small ruminant meat consumed in India and a large part of the milk comes from pastoral sources.” Animals in open grazing systems also contribute significant quantities of manure, which in turn enhances agricultural production.

For several decades policy makers have declared India to be deficient in fodder resources. However, our livestock population has increased substantially over these several decades. This paradox can only be explained by the fact that much of our fodder sources are invisible and not recognized by formal science and policy makers as are our pastoralists (Kapur, et al., 2012).

For example our studies show that over 90 per cent of the animals in the country are dependent on open grazing systems (Kullu Call 2016).

We rank amongst the highest producers of milk and meat in the world and most of the milk and meat comes from pastoral production systems

where they feed under extensive and open grazing systems.

There are several perceptions about pastoralism and pastoralists. Since it is largely visible in the drylands it is viewed with the same lens as the drylands are. They are seen as unproductive, backward and unreliable. The drylands themselves are perceived as problem areas by the State – forsaken, resource-poor, non-productive, barren, fragile, overgrazed, backward and conflict ridden. In a similar vein, pastoralists too are considered unproductive, backward and poor.

However, many recent studies have shown pastoral systems to be resilient, sustainable, capable of adapting to difficult situations easily, capable of making sensible and optimal use of resources, are ecologically and animal-welfare friendly, and contribute to the economy directly in several ways.

## Conclusion

The perceptions about pastoralism are changing, albeit slowly. The emerging new world of free markets while depressing wool prices has created new opportunities for mutton especially free-range mutton. The organic wave has increased the demand for manure and dung from livestock. Pastoralism and livestock breeds reared by pastoralists have proven to be resilient, flexible, disease-resistant, drought-tolerant and their genetic material is sought by scientists

| Distribution of Livestock with regards to their Dependence on Commons* |                                  |   |                                      |
|--|----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| Category   | Total Livestock Population (No.) | Assumption for Proportion of Total under Extensive Feeding System (%) | Final Extensive Feeding System (No.) |
| Indigenous Cattle Male (only others)                                   | 17,84,114                        | 100   | 17,84,114                            |
| Indigenous Cattle ( less than 2 years + breeding + draught )           | 590,97,703                       | 50  | 295,48,852                           |
| Indigenous Cattle Female   | 1468,99,534                      | 90  | 1322,09,581                          |
| Buffalo Male (only others)   | 3,56,647                         | 100   | 3,56,647                             |
| Buffalo Male (non-others)  | 151,57,223                       | 50  | 75,78,612                            |
| Buffalo Female total   | 885,81,515                       | 60  | 531,48,909                           |
| Yak  | 76,237                           | 100   | 76,237                               |
| Sheep (indigenous) Total   | 601,45,718                       | 95  | 571,38,432                           |
| Crossbred sheep (Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir)                 | 25,31,749                        | 100   | 25,31,749                            |
| Goat   | 1290,80,808                      | 80  | 1032,64,646                          |
| Pig Indigenous   | 70,99,587                        | 100   | 70,99,587                            |
| Mule and Donkey (total)  | 2,67,498                         | 100   | 2,67,498                             |
| Camel (Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh)                             | 3,50,000                         | 100   | 3,50,000                             |
| Total  | 5114,28,333                      | 77  | 3953,54,863                          |

\* The above data has been taken from Livestock Census 2012.

and researchers. The indigenous knowledge of pastoralists has found acceptance and value although to a limited scale. Even the skeptical wildlife conservation lobby has slowly begun to value the grazing services provided by migrating herds. So it appears that pastoralism has a future despite the larger stranglehold of state and international policies and politics. Pastoralists themselves have mixed opinions of the future. While on one hand they admit that their lifestyle is fraught with hardships, risks and uncertainty, they feel that it is a profession, which has a future as there continues to be a huge demand for goods produced by pastoralists – milk, meat, dung, wool and more.

## Way Forward

- Census data on nomadic livestock rearing communities, the animals they rear, and the breeds they maintain needs to be collected and included in the National Census Records.
- Policies and programmes related to livestock should include pastoralism, pastoralists and animals kept under pastoral systems. These include policies and programmes related to health, insurance, other inputs as well as marketing of products produced by pastoralists.
- Grazing policies in different states need to be reviewed and revised to address the needs of migratory pastoral communities.
- Services provided by pastoralists such as biodiversity conservation, maintaining soil health and fertility have to be enumerated, duly acknowledged and accounted for.
- Pastoralists and nomadic communities in different states are categorized under

different categories: OBC (*Rebari* and *Raika* in Gujarat and Rajasthan), ST (*Gujjars* and *Bakarwals* in Kashmir), BC (*Kurumas* in Andhra Pradesh), etc. The same communities in two different states may be categorized differently, for example, *Kurumas* in Maharashtra are NT (nomadic tribes) and in Andhra Pradesh they are BC (backward castes). All these categories need to be reviewed and revised. This could be facilitated through a Department or Ministry of Pastoralism, which is created and dedicated to deal with issues of migratory livestock rearing communities.

## References

Depinder Kapur, Divya Ravindranath, Kamal Kishore, K Sandeep, Pratiti Priyadarshini, Purnendu S Kavoori, Rahul Chaturvedi, Shreya Sinha and partner organisations, Revised Report, 2012: A COMMONS STORY, In the Rain Shadow of Green Revolution. Published by Foundation for Ecological Security. <http://fes.org.in/studies/commons-story.pdf>

Kullu Call, 2016 - For the Recognition of the Importance of Common Pool Resources (CPRs) and Pastoralism for India's Livestock Sector". Published by Rainfed Livestock Network anchored by Foundation for Ecological Security.

## Credits

Nitya S Ghotge: Anthra, Pune, Ilse Köhler Rollefson: LPPS, Rajasthan & Kamal Kishore: Coordinator – Rainfed Livestock Network



“The Rainfed Livestock Network is a consortium of organisations anchored by the Foundation for Ecological Security. The Network's objective is to strengthen the knowledge, information and analytical base on livestock rearing, with specific reference to arid and semi-arid regions, required to encourage and support favourable policies, planning and increase public investment for livestock development in these regions.

For more information, contact us at [rln@fes.org.in](mailto:rln@fes.org.in) or write to :

**Kamal Kishore**

Coordinator, Rain-fed Livestock Network, Foundation for Ecological Security, PB No 29,  
At: Jehangirpura, PO Gopalpura, Vadod 388370, District Anand, Gujarat  
[www.rln.org.in](http://www.rln.org.in)