

Socio-cultural document of **NARI CATTLE BREEDERS**



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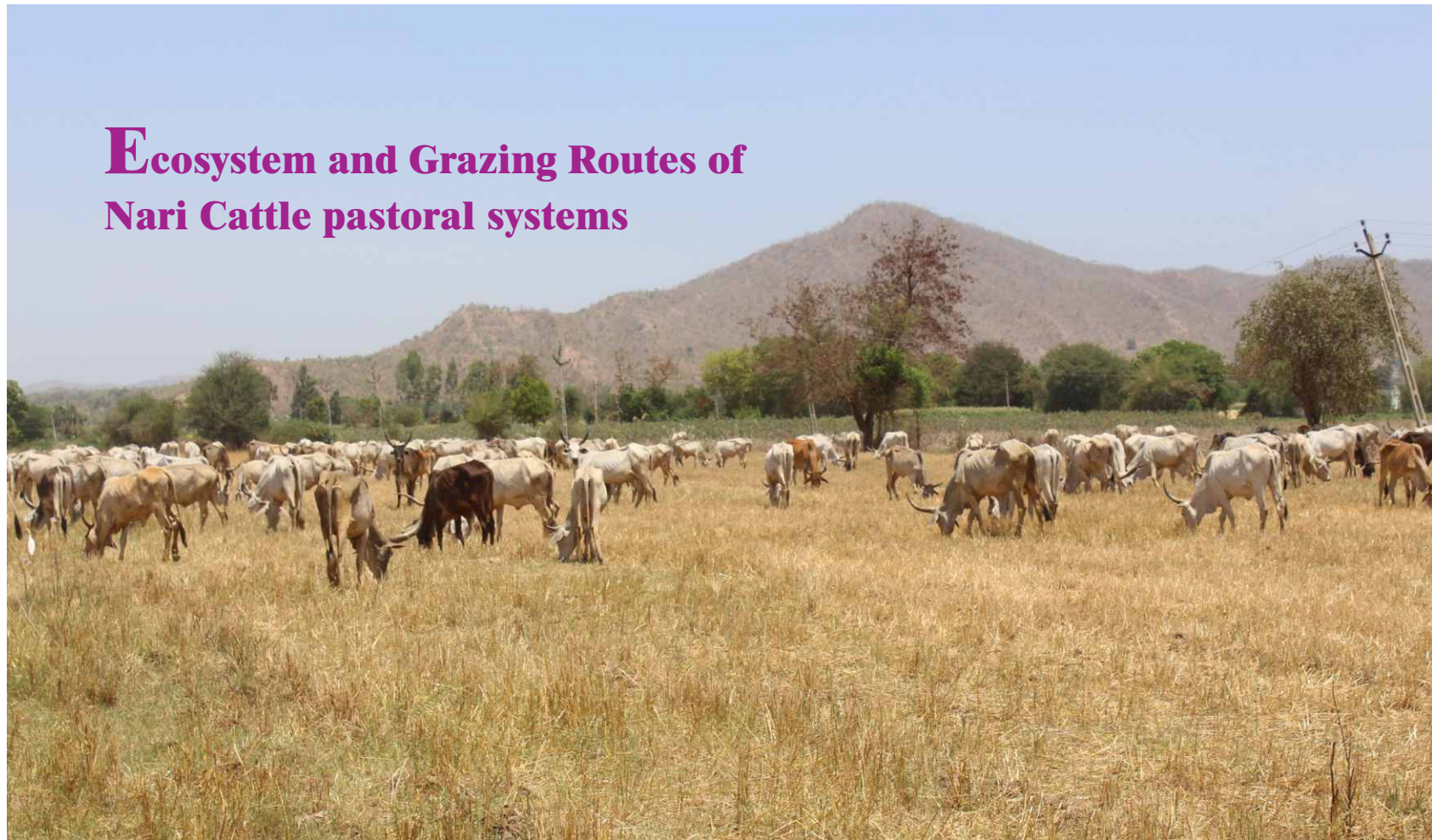
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Ecosystem and Grazing Routes of Nari Cattle pastoral systems



The North Gujarat Region with the Aravalis Landscape (NGR-AL) is one of the major pastoral regions of the state. Pastoral communities, largely, keep Nari Cattle and graze their livestock in common lands that are the second largest extent of forested area in Gujarat state. This is an important ecosystem from a variety of perspectives: the area includes two protected areas i.e. Jalore Sloth Bear Sanctuary (180.66 sq km) and Balaram – Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary (542.08 sq km) in Banaskantha district. In addition, several reserved forests such as the Taranga and Abakantha Hill forest in Mehsana district and the Vijaynagar, Polo and Shamraji forest landscapes in Sabarkantha district are significant from the perspective of biodiversity conservation. Further, the Aravalis form the catchments for the Banas, Sarasvati and Sambarmati rivers. The Aravali extends eastwards till the River Mahi, and along with the diverse landscapes, forests and the Rann, also form ideal habitats for several forms of wildlife. (Joshua et al., 2007).

Pastoral groups graze this landscape for more than eight months in a year. The livestock grazes on a variety of land systems that includes forest areas, plantations, agriculture, interspersed with human settlements, and include areas with marble and metal stone mines and a number of major and minor water reservoirs. Pastoral communities associated with the rearing of Nari Cattle move to NGR-AL from Rajasthan during the winter, spring and the summer season. During the monsoon, they move towards their permanent settlements in different villages of Rajasthan.

Being a part of the Western Aravalis, dry deciduous and thorn forest are predominant in Sabarkantha and Banaskantha districts which falls under two major sub-groups viz. 5A - Southern Tropical Dry Deciduous Forest and 6B - Northern Tropical Thorn Forest (Champion and Seth, 1968).

Habitat loss and degradation in the form of mining, industrial developments, cutting of fuel wood and small timber, leaf fodder lopping, and encroachment for agriculture exert heavy pressure in the forested areas of the NGR-AL. In addition, two invasive plants i.e. *Prosopis juliflora* and *Lantana camara* have come to encroach on huge swathes of land in this ecosystem.

Pastoral community profile

Nari cattle has traditionally been kept by the Raikas of Rajasthan. Raikas live in different parts of the state including Pali, Sirohi, Jaisalmer, and Jodhpur. Some of the Nari cattle herders are transhumant who spend 2 months in Rajasthan and the rest of the year on the move in Gujarat. More than 300-400 Raika families with between 10000 and 15000 Nari cattle migrate between Rajasthan and Gujarat annually.



However, some Raika families have permanently settled down in the Gujarat Districts of Banakantha and Sabarkantha.

The herders who migrate do so because of insufficient grazing resources in Rajasthan. Nari cattle are expert climbers, but Rajasthan's hills are sometimes too steep even for them. Restrictions imposed by the Forest Department ensure that certain areas are off limits and where herders are allowed to use the forest land for grazing, they pay a grazing tax of INR3 for each animal each month. Herders also speak of the high density of animals in Rajasthan, with the resultant grazing scarcity forcing herders to migrate to Gujarat. , And finally, while there is extensive forest cover, cows often find it hard to reach leaves on the trees.



There are a number of advantages of moving to Gujarat. Herders have generation-old relationships with farmers and villagers in Gujarat and easy availability of crop residue. Gujarat has a far more sophisticated dairy infrastructure than Rajasthan, and this fetches Raika herders good prices for their milk produce. Demand for males from dairies as well as from agricultural

communities is also more prevalent in Gujarat than in Rajasthan.. Panchayats in villages of Gujarat charge a group of herders anything between 20, 000 to 50, 000 rupees for access to crop residue and grazing lands for a period of 8-9 months. Generally, the animals have access to high quality feed when they are amongst these communities. The cows feed on cotton residue in summers and on wheat crop residue in winters.

Relation with local communities during stay in Gujarat

The Nari cattle herders have ancestral relationships with farmers in Gujarat. While they do have to pay farmers and the village panchayats levy a tax in exchange for allowing animals to graze village commons, the herders are assured of being welcome. Some herders tell us that their families have been spending 8 months each year with a particular farming family in Gujarat for more than 60-70 years. For the farmers, there is the added benefit of the cattle manure that serves to improve agricultural productivity.

Changes

In the past, two decades ago herders used to keep Nari cattle exclusively, but they have recently started keeping buffalos too. This is because incomes from animal sales have declined and herders have become more dependent on sale of milk. Buffalo milk yields are better and because the fat content in buffalo milk is higher, it also fetches, on average a higher price than cow milk.

Till some decades ago the males of the family used to take over herds from their elders and by default pursue pastoralism. Of late, the younger generation, especially young boys, are getting enrolled in schools in the hope of competing for white collar jobs. Owing to the many difficulties they experience while on the move, including the abuse they face on highways, and in villages, a younger generation is increasingly opting out of herding as a profession.

Animals herded

The herders keep cows, buffalos, and donkeys. Donkeys have replaced camels as animals of burden recently since Donkeys are cheaper to feed and keep. Cows and buffalos are herded together, the young calves are herded in another group and donkeys are herded in yet another group. The herd sizes of the migratory families are larger than those kept by settled herders: migratory families keep about 100 animals, although a single herd can also have up to 400 animals.



Feed

The animals feed on wild grasses village grazing lands and forest lands in Rajasthan. In Gujarat they do not venture into forests since the forest department is very strict. In Gujarat the animals feed on residue of Wheat, Guvar, Maize, millets, and cotton crops. So is the grazing in Gujarat primarily that of crop residues? Are these lands really left fallow for 8-9 months of the year? What has happened with the advent of irrigation? Surely some land is no longer kept fallow for such long periods of time?



Facilities for Water

While in Gujarat herders and animals share village water resources which are made available by the village panchayat. These include awada, simtalav(ponds and lakes on the grazing lands), man-made water tanks, and irrigated farms. From early April, herder start using Dams and canals.

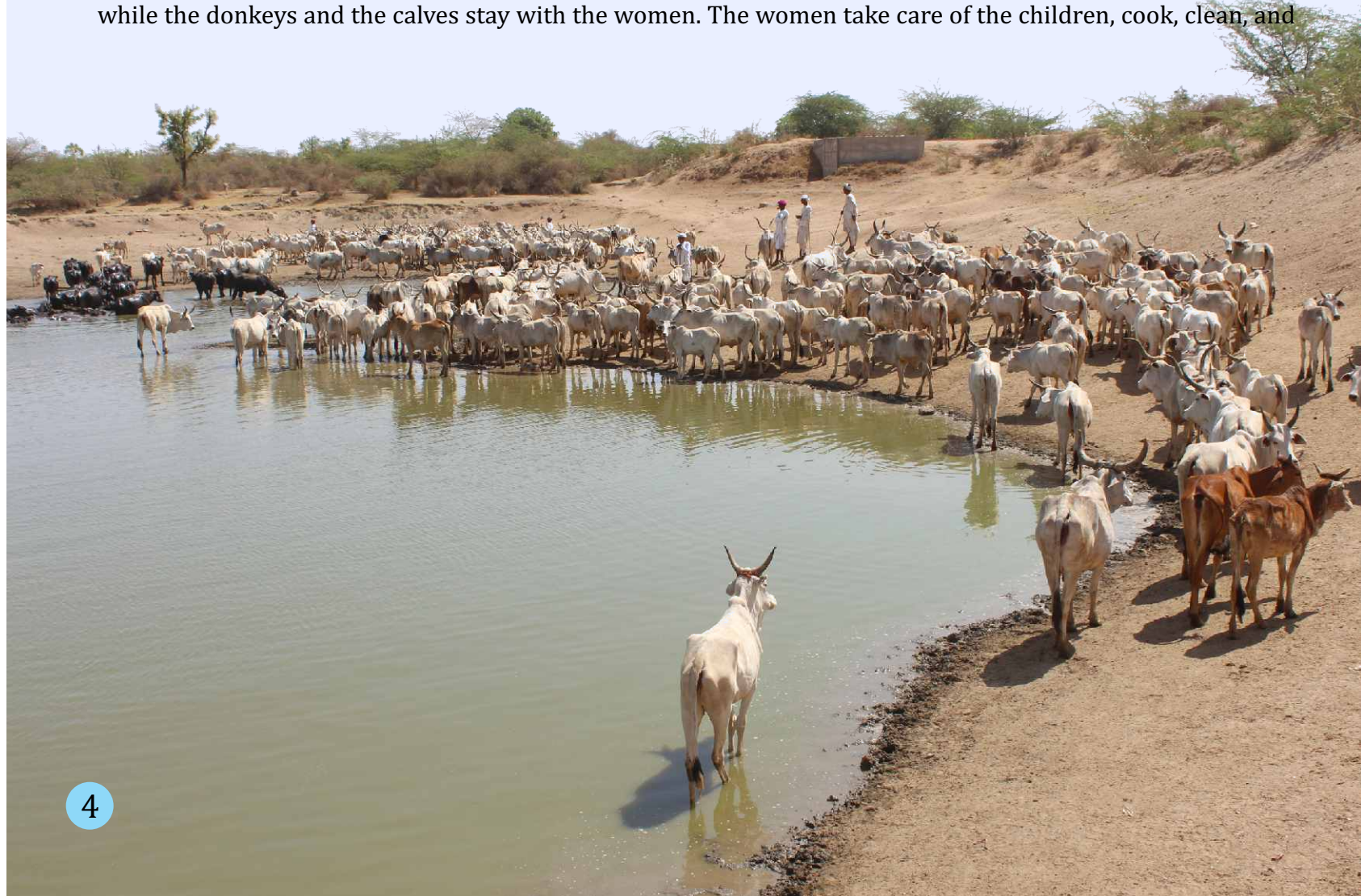
Herders depend almost exclusively on fresh water ponds and lakes during migration. If lucky they sometimes find access to piped water on the way.

Income and institutional support systems

All the herders who move to Gujarat are members of the Sabar dairy. Sabar dairy provides them with animal care support services and charges 100 rupees for every visit by the doctor. Vaccination services are provided free of cost by Sabar dairy. Milk prices are dependent on fat percentages and they earn close to 30-35 rupees for each liter of milk sold.

The herders also earn by selling animals – cows, buffaloes, and donkeys- all of them find a market in Gujarat. Herders start moving towards Rajasthan as the monsoon approaches. And they move back to Gujarat after the monsoon is over. Their incomes plummet when they are on the move because the young ones have to be fed largely on milk.

While on the move, milking is only done in the morning. The cows and buffalos are segregated into groups of adults and young ones after the morning milking. The young men then take the animals to the grazing lands while the donkeys and the calves stay with the women. The women take care of the children, cook, clean, and



pack the makeshift housing structures on the donkeys. Once the belongings are packed the women, children, calves and donkeys move to the next camping spot. Once they reach camp, they unpack the donkeys, collect water, firewood, and erect the tent-like housing structures. The men arrive with the animals soon and the young ones are tied by ropes close to the tents to ensure they do not get lost and are easier to protect against from attacks by wild animals. The adult animals are herded to adjacent/nearby fields, where they spend the night feeding on crop residues. This also ensures that the fields are manured with animal dung. The adult herds are guarded by male herders on rotation. One male from each family is put on duty for 2 hours every night. The animals are milked very early in the morning and the same routine is repeated.

Gujarat has become the native breeding tract favored by Nari cattle. This is because the animals mate in the months of December and January, and calving occurs in the months of October/November, at which time the animals return to Gujarat. This works well for the herders from a livelihood perspective – the herders (Raikas) sell the female calves to local farmers (Patels, Rabari, Tribals, Chaudhrys etc.) who pay well since the animals are used for dairy purposes. Male calves are sold off to be used as draft animals on the farms. Most of Raika herding families have bank accounts in Gujarat and when they sell milk to collectives, the money gets transferred directly to their accounts.





Material Culture

The herders are masters at minimalism, a detailed but not exhaustive list of items carried by them is noted below:

- Iron stove
- Firewood
- Tawdi- a pan to bake bread
- Kadhai – a vessel to cook in
- Tub to wash clothes and utensils in
- Flex sheets which are used to form a tent
- Ghudiya – a small swinging bed for infants
- Blankets
- Rain coats and Ponchos
- Torches
- Mobile phones
- Foldable beds
- Small cots
- Poly bags
- Rope
- Axe and spade
- Vessels to carry water
- Clothes
- Phone and torch chargers
- Steel hooks which are pounded into the ground and tied to a rope to which the young ones are tied in the evening.



Physical characteristics of Nari cattle and breeding practices

The pure-bred nari cows are known for their white colour, pointed horns and nimble feet. The milk yield is relatively good, and cows produce 12-14 liters of milk each day. The breeders look for symmetric features, spotless white colour, and thick & shapely horns for male selection. The ancestry is also of importance for selection of breeding male.

Cuisine and food culture

The herders eat a diet rich in millet and dairy. Typical breakfast is rotla, a bread made of millet along with either milk or vegetables or jiggery & ghee (clarified butter). Lunch meals are packed in a piece of cloth, and include millet breads with milk, yogurt, buttermilk, or ghee. For dinner they generally cook millet breads and vegetables.

The animals are milked only in the morning while on the move, but twice a day when not on the move. Milking is done by both men and women.

Houses and shelters

During their stay in villages of Gujarat from November to June/July, and when they are relatively settled, the Raikastay in Bhungasmade of wood, mud, and grass. When they are on the move, such as while migrating between Rajasthan and Gujarat, these herders stay in makeshift structures made of wood and flex.

These families have permanent housing back in Rajasthan- while architecturally the houses look the same some of the houses have concrete walls instead of the more traditional mud walls. The roofing of these houses are tiled with a typical semi-cylindrical shape, which is locally known as Naliya tiles.



Settled herders

As mentioned above, some of the herders are settled in Rajasthan. These herders live in a house with a wada (extensive enclosed space) next to their houses. The wada is used to keep animals. Their residences are within forested lands and some of them have farming land too on which they grow millets and pulses. The children of the settled herding families are regulars at school. These families keep about 50-60 bovine animals each. There are no dairies close to their settlements and milk is sold to private vendors at 30-35 rupees a liter.

Ethno-culture

The men and the women wear distinctive clothing. The men dress in white dhoti, undershirt, and a kediya (jacket) and tie a pagdi (headgear), generally red in color. The women wear a skirt, a blouse, and a dupatta (veil) over their heads. The women wear a lot of jewelry and this custom is tied to their lifestyle – since the herders have been on the move, they did not have access to banking services or an ability to invest in physical assets. The easiest way to carry the assets for the herders was (and still is) to buy silver or gold jewelry and wear them on their bodies.

The herding families do not marry their children within the same community only. Interestingly, the groom used to ride a camel to the marriage in the old days. Since the herders have practically stopped keeping camels, this practice is not popular anymore.

Issues

Herding does not pay much and the herders are looked down upon in the society. Herders also face a lot of abuse on highways since the animals hold up traffic and at times stray into agricultural fields. Access to grazing lands is also becoming difficult each day. Herders also say that those who have jobs in their communities find it easier to find brides. This is because herding is considered a hard life and young girls do not want to shoulder so many tasks and responsibilities.







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