

Towards A Pastoral Policy for the Protection of Pastoralists' Rights and for Conservation of Local Animal Breeds

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Abstract

For the last eight years, SEVA has been involved in the conservation of indigenous animal breeds in Tamil Nadu and has promoted herders groups/associations in the following breeding tracts:

- i. Umbalacherry cattle breed in Nagapattinam district*
- ii. Malaimadu cattle breed in Virudhunagar district*
- iii. Katchakatti Karuppu black sheep breed in Madurai district*
- iv. Toda buffalo breed in Nilgiris*
- v. Vembur sheep breed in Thoothukudi district*
- vi. Pulikulam cattle breed in Madurai and Sivagangai districts*

SEVA has initiated development work such as calf rearing programmes, community bull programmes, shed construction for animals, desilting of ponds to provide drinking water facilities for animals, periodical health check-up camps for animals, training programmes for livestock keepers to revitalize indigenous knowledge based health systems for animals (preparation of herbal medicines for animals) and addressing grazing problems.

SEVA is also one of the founder members of the Indian Pastoralists Network and prepared a Policy Note to protect pastoralists' rights, to provide livelihood support for pastoral communities and for in situ conservation of local animal breeds. SEVA has been invited by bodies of the United Nations such as FAO, Rome and the Convention on Biological Diversity to participate in the workshops on animal genetic resources held in Rome, South Africa, Spain and Brazil over the last 5 years.

Role of pastoral communities in India

Pastoralists are people who predominantly depend upon livestock keeping for their livelihood and who graze their animals on common property resources. Pastoralists are often nomadic or transhumant, but they can also be settled, depending on ecological conditions. Pastoralists often believe that they are looking after animals out of a god-given duty (the *Raika* caste is believed to have been created by Lord Shiva to look after camels; the *Yadhavas* and *Gujjars* are regarded as descendants of Lord Krishna and their traditional task is to take care of cattle; the life of the *Toda* tribe would be unimaginable without the daily rituals associated with the buffalo they rear). In pastoralist cultures, animals are regarded as co-creatures and there is a spiritual

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relationship with them that is a far cry from the western concept of regarding animals merely as a means of production.

India's indigenous pastoral communities, such as the *Raika and Gujjar* in Rajasthan, the *Maldhari* in Gujarat, the *Gaddi* in Himachal, the *Van Gujjar* in Uttaranchal and the *Konar* of Tamil Nadu, are guardians of native animal breeds (camels; *Kankrej, Gir, Nari, Malaimadu* and *Pulikkulam* cattle; *Neeli Ravi* and *Toda* buffalo; *Kachakatti black sheep* etc.). Over generations, they have nurtured these breeds that can cope with difficult environmental conditions, are resistant to disease and can retain reproductive vigour – traits that are no longer present in high performance or exotic breeds. These communities use indigenous knowledge for animal breeding and have adopted a seasonal and spatial grazing system that is holistic, complementary to forest ecology and symbiotic with agro-ecosystems. They help farmers by supplying organic manure (through penning) and plough bullocks and by providing local transportation for agricultural produce. Their animals control the excess growth of grasses, which prevents the spread of forest fires. Gradually, evidence is also accumulating that pastoral livestock are linked to the conservation of wild animal species. Often there is a long history of coevolution between wild species and livestock, and the eviction of livestock from wildlife reserves may lead to an exodus of predator species or result in changes to the habitat and make it unattractive for wildlife.

Is domestic biodiversity incompatible with wildlife conservation?

Once again, the breeds stewarded by pastoralists represent biological diversity just as the tiger does. But this domestic biodiversity is seen as an enemy of or antagonistic to wildlife conservation by many environmentalists, although the animals kept by pastoralists retain many of the characteristics of their wild progenitors. Ecological research in the Sahara on the effects of camels feeding on desert vegetation demonstrated that grazing by this species actually stimulates plant growth. In the US, there is recognition that predator species such as the wolf depend on livestock as prey and there is a move to compensate pastoralists for the livestock they lose.

The survival of pastoralism is crucial to sustainable land use. Besides conserving domestic biodiversity, it is a means of producing food in dry lands without depleting ground water resources – which is may be the most important aspect to consider in a state such as Rajasthan. A report by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), a UN agency, entitled “Pastoralism in the new millennium” concludes that the politically popular development of range lands by mining fossil water is not a long-term development strategy and that this land may eventually be reclaimed by pastoralists.

Reduction in population of native animal breeds

According to the FAO, one-third of the world's livestock breeds are endangered. A search is underway for legal frameworks that can create an appropriate context for the sustainable use of animal genetic resources. Livestock breeds are linked to cultural diversity, and there is often a link between ethnic or social groups and specific breeds.

For livestock (unlike plants), only *in situ* conservation (in the original production context) achieves all conservation goals. There is a consensus that *ex situ* conservation should only be used as a back-up.

In India, one of the main reasons for the reduction in animal breeds is because forests are being closed owing to their declaration as wildlife sanctuaries or national parks or owing to the implementation of the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme. Together with the conversion of common property resources for other developmental purposes, this puts pressure on pastoralists and jeopardizes their traditional life style. As pastoralists are unable to sustain their animals without access to common property resources, they are forced to dispose of them in slaughterhouses. Thousands of female camels are sold for slaughter each year, and one of the reasons for this is the grazing problems created after the declaration of Kumbhalgarh Sanctuary in Rajasthan. In Tamil Nadu, *Malaimadu/Pulikkulam* cattle owners are disposing of thousands of cattle every year because of harassment of livestock keepers owing to the implementation of the JFM programme adjoining Srivilliputhur Squirrel Sanctuary. In Virudhunagar district of Tamil Nadu, to sustain his traditional profession, an individual traditional cattle herder has to spend a minimum of Rs.5000 to 10,000 annually on paying penalties, bribes, or for being detained in custody or because of court cases brought against him by the Forest Department. Such harassment discourages herders from their customary life style, and they end up as unskilled labourers or wage earners or migrants in cities.

The following points highlight the alarming scale of reduction of native animal breeds and species:

- The population of *Malaimadu* cattle (undocumented breed) has come down to 55,000 from the original population of 3,00,000 between 1989 and 2004 because of the declaration of Srivilliputhur Squirrel Sanctuary and because of the Tamil Nadu Afforestation Programme (TAP)/JFM.
- The population of camels in Rajasthan reduced by 25% between 1997 and 2003, according to government figures, although a survey conducted by an NGO suggests an even more drastic decline. The declaration of Kumbhalgarh Sanctuary in Rajasthan, which represented a traditional summer grazing ground, is a major causal factor for this decline.
- The population of *Pulikkulam* cattle has diminished to 40,000 because of the declaration of Srivilliputhur Squirrel Sanctuary and because of TAP/JFM.
- The population of *Neeli Ravi* buffalo has drastically diminished to 11,000 because of the forceful evacuation of the *Van Gujjars* (buffalo pastoralists) from the proposed Rajaji National Park in Uttaranchal.
- The population of *Toda* buffalo has declined to 1,500 because of the Mukurti National Park in Ooty and because the Forest Department has encroached on 30,000 ha of the original grazing lands to promote a eucalyptus plantation there.
- The population of *Kachakatti* black sheep has come down from many thousands to 1400. Since 1998, the Forest Department under TAP/JFM has undertaken a tree plantation programme in Vaguthumalai forest in Madurai district. Many herders disposed of their sheep owing to denial of grazing permits in the forest.

- The population of *Umbalachery* cattle has reduced considerably because of encroachment onto revenue grazing land and animal drinking water ponds in coastal wetland tracts in the Nagapattinam and Thanjavur districts of Tamil Nadu.

Problems faced by the pastoral communities

The problems faced by indigenous pastoral communities/herders are summarized below:

- Grazing permits are denied in traditional grazing sites that have been converted into protected areas/wildlife sanctuaries/national parks/JFM programme areas.
- Original pasture lands or stipulated animal drinking water ponds are encroached upon or used for other purposes. Biodiesel (*Jatropha*) planting is being promoted by state agencies without any thought to the consequences. Migration routes of animals are blocked or herd-passing pathways are encroached upon.
- Pastoralists are being excluded from forestry programs such as JFM and Biodiversity Conservation. Long-standing customary rights or *zamindari* given grazing tenures are ignored in the desire to green areas or to introduce wilderness concepts borrowed from the west without taking into consideration India's rich spiritual knowledge and cultural traditions, which encompass all forms of life and accommodate a holistic conservation of biodiversity. Forests are closed completely for tree planting, and rotational grazing systems are not adhered to for providing alternative grazing sites through participatory processes. Once forests are closed for planting, they are not reopened for animal grazing even after the stipulated period of five to seven years has passed.
- Bribery is common at the field level to allow animals to enter protected areas for grazing purposes. Those who do not bribe lower level forest officials are harassed and have penalties imposed upon them: false cases are booked against pastoral communities by implicating them in hunting incidents, in cases of setting fire to the forests and manhandling officials etc. leading to court cases and related agonies.

Because of these factors, pastoral communities are unable to continue their life style, leading to a reduction in domestic animal breeds and the loss of the indigenous knowledge that sustained them. Under such circumstances, pastoralists are forced to sell cattle and camels to slaughterhouses. This matter has been brought to the notice of the government at state and central levels, but there has been no genuine enquiry on this issue.

Legal frameworks for pastoral rights

Pastoralists are conservers of domestic animal biodiversity, and their way of life contributes to the ecology and economy of the nation. There is a strong need to recognize their role in conservation. Instead of marginalizing pastoralists and stigmatizing them as destroyers of forests, they should be integrated into forest management programmes in a holistic manner and their knowledge in natural resource management should be made use of. India is obliged to do this in the context of both national legislation as well as the international agreements that it has signed.

The **Biological Diversity Act, 2002** stipulates that conservation, sustainable use of biological diversity including *in situ conservation* of breeds of domestic animals under their surrounding natural habitat (Section 36 & 41) where the breed has been evolved or maintained by communities. This calls for recognizing the role of pastoralists or indigenous livestock keeping communities who conserve native breeds by using indigenous knowledge in livestock breeding.

As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, India has committed itself *to respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.*

India also recognizes the Right To Food in the context of national food security and therefore should adhere to the voluntary guideline 8d: Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture that stipulates that, “States, taking into account the importance of biodiversity and consistent with their obligations under relevant international agreements should consider specific national policies, legal instruments and supporting mechanisms to prevent the erosion of and ensure the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources for food and agriculture including, as appropriate, for the protection of relevant traditional knowledge and equitable participation in sharing benefits arising from the use of these resources, and by encouraging, as appropriate the participation of local and indigenous communities and farmers in making national decisions on matters related to the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources for food and agriculture.”

As a member of The Durban Action Plan (2004), which was the outcome of the Vth IUCN World Parks Congress (September 2003), India has the mandate of *securing the rights of indigenous peoples, including mobile indigenous peoples, and local communities in relation to natural resources and biodiversity conservation.*

The Draft Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill, 2005 (still awaiting approval of Parliament) envisages rights of uses or entitlements such as grazing in forests and traditional seasonal resource access of nomadic or pastoralist communities (both settled and transhumant).

Therefore, the Government of India is obliged to seriously consider recognizing and protecting the role of pastoralists/herders and for conferring the following rights that will support both livelihoods and community conservation of domestic animal biodiversity:

1. To restore traditional grazing rights and camping rights in forest areas including wildlife sanctuaries and national parks and also in those areas earmarked for grazing purposes in village common lands.
2. Formalizing entitlements (including issue of permanent grazing cards) for the traditional pastoralists/herders who maintain native animal breeds and who depend upon them for their livelihood to allow them free access to notified or demarcated grazing sites and migration routes.
3. Whenever a tree planting programme is to be implemented, alternative grazing lands and drinking water resources for animals should be allotted by the concerned authorities. It should be made mandatory for the implementing agency before initiating afforestation programmes to seek prior consent from forest dependant communities including pastoralists. A rotational system of grazing should be encouraged instead of completely closing the forest zone for tree

plantation purposes, and the process should be facilitated by participatory discussion with livestock keeping communities.

4. In-depth documentation, characterization of indigenous livestock breeds should be carried out to recognize and protect the intellectual property rights of the local communities/individuals conserving these local livestock breeds.
5. Pastoralists should be involved in all local natural resource management programmes including village forest committees and community conservation approaches to address the fodder and drinking water requirements of their livestock.
6. Encroached land or unutilized common lands assigned to forest departments should be retrieved and brought under the control of village level committees to allow grassroots institutions to develop pasture land.

Reference source

Publications and Survey Reports with SEVA.