

CAMELS: THE FORGOTTEN SHIP OF THE DESERT

A constraints identification study of the camel herders and their fragile ecosystem in western Rajasthan



Period of Study: November 2019 – January 2020

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On behalf of Urmul Trust

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About this document

“We camel herders are poor and uneducated people. We have no resources to save our animals. Even, our children are refusing to follow our traditional livelihoods.”- Genaram Raika, Grandhi village, Bikaner District

In the past one year, Urmul has conducted meetings and dialogues with more than a hundred camel herders across western Rajasthan. The aim was to understand the problems, and opportunities around their livelihoods and access to available infrastructure. Through extensive fieldwork and focused literature review, the team has gained an understanding of the issues that plague camel herders' ecosystem. This document is an attempt at voicing their concerns that challenge their ecosystem and their very existence in the Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Jodhpur districts of western Rajasthan. Through this draft, Urmul has attempted to document the woes of people whose existence largely remain undocumented. Urmul believes in the principles of information commons and thus there would be an absence of any paywall restricting the content for our readers. The aim is to reach out and sensitize researchers, policymakers, desert enthusiasts, media persons, and other interested readers. The team is grateful to the camel herding community in western Rajasthan for sharing their stories, struggles, and love.

About Urmul

The Urmul team sensed a dire need to address the concerns of camel herders. Urmul started collaborating with stakeholders across the board. In the last six months, Urmul has designed a comprehensive policy advocacy program focusing on garnering the necessary support services to revive traditional camel based livelihoods in districts of Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Jodhpur in western Rajasthan.

About Desert Resource Centre

Desert Resource Centre is a participatory initiative currently working in the cold and hot deserts of India on multiple land, life and living issues. Our work ranges from promoting sustainable enterprises to knowledge platforms, and collaborating with desert grassroot organizations towards forward looking impact solutions and services - common goals. This document has been compiled by the Desert Resource Centre.

Context

In the last quarter of this century, the Indian Thar has witnessed one of the fastest demographic growth in the country. According to the latest census, the decennial growth rate in the rural areas in the six desert districts of the Thar has been 32.5%, which is much higher than the state average of 25.46% and 20.01% for the entire country. This unusually high growth rate poses a threat to the fragile ecosystem of the desert, already constrained by lack of arable land, paucity of surface and ground water resources, meagre forests, vegetative cover and diminishing grasslands.

Animal husbandry is a traditional occupation and the backbone of the communities in ruralscape. In the Thar desert it's more pertinent as a scope and means of livelihoods, given the high variability and unpredictability of rains. Cow, goat, camels, and sheep are reared in abundance and provide for milk and wool.

Camel is a unique feature of the Thar desert. Its interdependence with community and living has meant a special care and utility for the animal. Camel has enjoyed a high popularity and demand amongst the herding communities of Rajasthan for its resilience to the climate of the region and the functions it has played (Sansathan 2004). Over the years, however, there has been a significant decline in the population of this animal – a crucial component of desert living and the overall ecology of the region. All the applications of camels have faded away in the recent years. There is a great survival challenge, the camel is facing in the absence of alternative functions that a camel could play in the living of the desert.

The relationship of this animal has changed from coexistence to liability amongst herding community. Today, a household cannot survive and sustain itself only by rearing camels. Traditional camel products like camel milk, camel leather and products made out of camel hair no longer have a local market or demand in the community thanks to globalization thence availability of cheaper alternatives, fast fashion and no lack of value chains. Consequently, the findings from the 20th Livestock census in 2017 revealed that compared with the last census of 2012, the total camel population in the country has dropped down by 37.1% and their population hovers around a mere 2.5 lakhs (Department of Animal Husbandry and Diaring 2019). If concerted efforts are not applied to save the animal then the ship of the desert would be a forgotten member of the Thar.

Needs Assessment Study

A needs assessment study was undertaken in from June 2019 till March 2020 understand the ecosystem of the camel herders and the issues that threaten their livelihoods. The sample size comprised of 1011 camel herders from 96 villages in Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Jodhpur districts. A survey tool was developed that captured details of the following key themes,

- Assessing the health status of the camels
- Current management of CPRs and feed availability
- Medical insurance coverage of the animal
- Access to government services and support
- Areas where urgent support could be provided
- Status of existing livelihoods around camel based products

The findings were further validated through focused group discussions. A similar survey tool was used to understand the systemic problems in Pokaran camel milk cluster, Jaisalmer district and in Chimana camel milk cluster, Jodhpur district. The key findings are represented in the annexure.

Constraints to the land, living and life of the camel herders

With their entire livelihood and ecological ecosystem under threat for survival, it becomes imperative to voice the problems that mar the existence of camel herders today. The section below outlines the challenges faced by them.

- **Fading applications**

Over the years, there has been a significant decline in the population of this animal – a crucial component of desert living and the overall ecology of the region. Historically, camels were used for transportation and heavy work – water lifting from well, seed sowing, mill grinding, etc. The camels have failed to compete with machines such as tractors, etc. which have made inroads in the desert farming system. Motorcycles, cars, etc. have replaced the role of the ship of the desert for transportation. With all these applications fading away and in the absence of alternative functions that it could play in the living of the desert, the camel is facing a great survival challenge.

“The common property resources are all dried up. The plantation is scanty. Our animals barely get anything to eat.”

- *Bachchan Raika, Beethnok village, Bikaner district*

- **Reduced Common Property Resources**

Encroachments and disinterest of locals to maintain common property resources (CPRs) have deprived the animals of these rich sources of forage. The health of animals is widely affected due to shrunken common property resources. For centuries, these lands had served as a nutritious and replenishable source of forage for the animals (Jodha 1990). These lands were maintained by the local institutions. In the last few decades, the encroachment of these lands by locals has resulted in the collapse of these rain-fed biodiverse sources of forage. The herders in the region have not been able to muster the resources and the resolve to challenge these brazen encroachments resulting in deprivation of a wonderful source of pasturage.

“Our animals do not get access to any healthcare services. They get sick and die. It is unfortunate that we cannot provide them with timely care.”

- *Ishwar Ram, Kolasar West village, Bikaner district*

- **Missing links in the veterinary system**

Infrequent government health camps, expensive private care, and scarce health care institutes result in the poor medical care of animals. A few critical challenges were highlighted by the herders:

- i. The frequency of health camps organized by government agencies is not adequate to tend to the diseased animals.
- ii. The private health care services that they opt for are usually very expensive. With limited understanding of modern medicine, they even find it difficult to check the credibility of the diagnosis and treatment.
- iii. In addition, owing to mounting healthcare expenses, the herders prefer to self-administer injections and medicines. However, the herders have inadequate knowledge about dosage and the technique to administer them resulting in limited benefits for the animals.

The current generation of camel herders is not well-apprieved with the ethno-veterinary practices. They have increasingly come to rely on modern medicine. However, the accessibility to modern medicine is scarce, and expensive. The herders plead that there should be reasonably priced medical services available to them.

“Our families used to serve the royal family. We had a herd of 200 camels. These days we are not able to earn any income from the animal. Our herd size has reduced to 20 camels.”

- *Doongar Ram Raika, Charanwala village, Bikaner district*

- **Shortage of community water resources**

Deficit in rainfall and the callous use of water resources have resulted in a shortage of water resources for the animals. The herders complained of an absence of sufficient public water resources along the routes. These resources are rain-fed. Currently, there are no concrete efforts being made to ensure that

the practice of rainwater harvesting is adopted. It gets difficult for the herders to arrange water for their animals. They are forced to migrate and traverse long distances.



(above) A CPR with sparse plantation, Kolasar West village, Bikaner district

■ 2014 Rajasthan state legislation depriving herders of camel-based livelihood avenues Under the 2014 State law the camel has been declared as the state animal and its slaughter, trade and transportation outside the state has been banned. The declaration of camel as the state animal in 2014 has banned slaughter, trade and transportation of the animal outside the state. It has culled all the existing livelihood opportunities around the animal. There are growing expenses associated with the animal. The herders expressed their inability to take care of the animal. They shared that how with the absence of any income from the animal there has been a growing disinterest among the younger generation to rear camels and they prefer opting for alternate livelihood avenues.



(above) A camel infected with Mange, Paithro ki dhani, Bikaner District

A. Concluding Remarks

Neglect by the community, government institutions and civil society is slowly resulting in collapse of the ecosystem of the camel herders. Focused capacity building and infrastructural development measures could save the forgotten community- camel herders. Through the course of the next one year, Urmul, with

the aid of stakeholders, plans to strengthen the ecosystem by equipping the community with the necessary knowledge, resources, and infrastructure.

Voices of the Community



(above) Mahadan Raika and his son vaccinating their camel in Charanwala village, Bikaner district

Mahadan Raika of Charanwala village had one of the largest camel herd in the Bajju cluster. He had around 75 camels in his herd. He told us that there was absence of any medical services in the region. A high proportion of his herd was diseased. The health camps were organised in distant locations and it used to get challenging for him to travel there. He used to inject the vaccinations to his camels on his own. He emphasised that it is important to provide good and affordable medical services to the camels otherwise the survival challenge would continue.



Pabu Ram Raika is a camel herder from Tanwarwala village. He has a huge camel herd. Unfortunately, most of his animals were diseased. They were infected with Mange and Trypanosomiasis. He believes that greater medical attention and adequate feed nutrition can save the lives of these animals. He also highlighted that animals are left in the open and their well-being is ignored by the community. He believes that the younger generation has lost interest in camel rearing. The older generation is taking care of the animal out of love and respect for their cultural heritage and tradition.

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