



PASTORALISTS AND THEIR FORGOTTEN ECOSYSTEM

A CONSTRAINTS IDENTIFICATION STUDY OF THE PASTORALISTS AND THEIR FRAGILE ECOSYSTEM IN WESTERN RAJASTHAN



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On behalf of Urmul Trust

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Address to the readers,

“We pastoralists are poor and uneducated people. The society and the government have never cared about us. We have no resources and power. Even, our children are refusing to follow our traditional livelihoods.”- Mularam Meghwal, Rajasar Bhatiyani village, Bikaner District

In the past three months, Urmul has conducted meetings and dialogues with more than a hundred pastoralists across western Rajasthan. The aim was to understand the problems, and opportunities around their livelihoods, social and cultural capital, and access to available infrastructure. Through extensive fieldwork and focused literature review, the team has gained an understanding of the issues that plague pastoralists' ecosystem.

This document is an attempt at voicing their concerns that challenge their ecosystem and their very existence. Through this initial 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 readers.

The team is grateful to the pastoral community in western Rajasthan for sharing their stories, struggles, and love. In addition, the researcher is thankful to the team at Urmul that included Anshul Ojha, Mula Ram, and Rewant Ram for their critical inputs and insights.

Context

Pastoralism is a production system dependent on herding livestock. Historically, this ecosystem has supported a large population (Hatfield and Davies 2006). In India, the pastoralists are believed to form 7% of population, i.e., about 88 million people, inhabiting mainly the arid and semi-arid areas of the country (Nitya and Kishore 2017).

Through centuries, they have adapted to harsh environments and have made dynamic use of resources in their ecosystem. They have been lauded for adopting resilient, sustainable, and creative capabilities to ensure a symbiotic relationship with their environment. These pastoral groups exist across all the states of the country. Their practices, lifestyles, and culture are not homogenous.

In western Rajasthan, the pastoralists chiefly rear sheep and goats. The region is a host to a large population of pastoralists (Koller-Rollefson 1994) and it has witnessed a shift in their ecosystem in the last two decades. Presently, pastoral fragile ecosystem is facing challenges from rapid urbanisation and policies that disregard their needs (Mukherji, et al. 2016). Scarce resources and limited exposure makes it difficult for them to demand accountability from institutions.

“There has to be strong support from government agencies to ramp up the healthcare services. We need to focus on ensuring last mile connectivity of medical services for our animals.”

- Khyali Ram, LSA, Government Veterinary Hospital, Kalu village, Bikaner district

Constraints to the land, living and life of the pastoralists

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

Reduced Common Property Resources

Encroachments and disinterest of locals to maintain common property resources 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. 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 pastoralists 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.

Missing links in the veterinary system along the pastoral routes

Infrequent government health camps, expensive private care, apathetic veterinarians, and scarce health care institutes result in the poor medical care of animals.

A few critical challenges were highlighted by the pastoralists:

- i. There are infrequent health and vaccination camps organized by government agencies. The pastoralists are barely given any prior information resulting in sparse participation by them.
- ii. The private health care services that they opt for are usually very expensive. With limited understanding of modern medicine, they find it difficult to check the credibility of the diagnosis and treatment.
- iii. The veterinarians lack sensitivity to interact with the pastoralists. The pastoralists expressed hesitance to approach and trust their treatments.
- iv. With mounting healthcare expenses, the pastoralists prefer to self-administer injections and medicines. However, the pastoralists have inadequate knowledge about dosage and the technique to administer them resulting in limited benefits for the animals.

The pastoralists do realize that the reliance on traditional medicine is insufficient but the accessibility to modern medicine is scarce, and expensive for them. They plead that there should be reasonably priced medical services available to them.

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

- Kalu Ram Nayi,
Kalu 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 pastoralists complained of an absence of sufficient water resources along the routes. Traditionally, the locals provided the pastoralists and their herds with drinking water. However, currently, while they offer water to the pastoralists, they are reluctant to supply water for their herds. Frequent droughts, and poor rainfall have made the task of providing water for animals more onerous each year and the pastoralists find it difficult to manage. Even if the locals do offer water to the animals, they request the pastoralists to replenish water from a nearby water resources or instead pay some amount to them.

“Things have changed over time. It is getting more difficult to provide the animals with good feed and water along the route. The government should ensure our animals get the services they deserve.”

- Surja Ram,
Kelan village, Bikaner district

The collapse of traditional relations between pastoralists and agriculturalists

Fragmented agricultural lands and growing disinterest in maintaining a symbiotic relationship has deprived these pastoralists of a strong support system.

The agriculturalists have increasingly stopped letting pastoralists feed animals on their fallow lands. Historically, the farmers used to allow pastoralists to graze on their lands after harvest. However, due to increased reliance on fertilizers, farmers ignore this rich source of organic manure. In addition to forage support, the farmers used to let the herds rest in their farms. Presently, due to fear of security and lesser reliance on animal manure for soil fertility, farmers have shown reluctance in hosting these pastoralists. Due to decreased trust and reliance between the two communities, the pastoralists are losing their greatest ally in the ecosystem.

Absence of streamlined value chain

Increased dependence on middle-men for the sale of products.

There is an absence of streamlined sheep and goat derived products value chain. The pastoralists do not have any avenue to sell the products along the routes. They have to rely on exploitative middle-men to sell their wool and other products in the market. Most of these middle-men quote prices that are extremely low and ensure that they maximise their profit margins. There is a strong need to explore alternative markets and provide necessary infrastructure support services to the pastoralists.

Apathetic police machinery

Pastoralists find it difficult to approach the police machinery for recourse.

The pastoralists complained of theft of animals along the routes. They find it difficult to report the theft because of the lack of clarity on police jurisdiction and the follow-up process to their complaints. Further, insensitive policy and legal institutes barely provide any needed support to these pastoralists. Poor levels of awareness of the pastoralists makes it difficult for them to approach the state institutions. also makes seeking help a hassle for them.

“If our herds get stolen along the pastoral routes then we approach the police for help. We have approached the Haryana and Punjab police for help, But, they keep saying that they have conflicting jurisdictions and refuse to help us.”

Lal Khan,
Kelan village, Bikaner district

Disturbed pastoral routes

Ramifications of rapid urbanisation include altered pastoral routes.

In the last two decades, the pastoralists saw an extensive change in their pastoral routes. Increased urbanisation and surge in population has put pressure on existing resources. Further, the encroachment of common property resources, expansion of roads, shortage of common water resources and desertification have resulted in the decline of forage and water resources. Pastoralists are always on the lookout for rich forage sources and pressure on current natural reservoirs has directly impacted the pastoral routes undertaken.

Concluding Remarks

Focused capacity building and infrastructural development measures could save the forgotten community- pastoralists. 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.

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