

# Commission on Nomadic Peoples

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# Some recent publications on pastoralism in the arid lands of western India (Rajasthan and Gujarat): A review

Michael J. Casimir

The last decades have seen a growing number of publications of academic and applied interest on pastoral societies in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, Europe, and South America. With the exception of a few earlier studies on the Baluch and Brahui and a few more recent ones on the Himalayan Gaddi, the Dhangar of the Deccan Plateau and the Bakkarwal of Kashmir, South Asia has remained a more or less "white spot" on the map of pastoralist studies. Relatively little in-depth information is still available on the contemporary situation of various, large, more or less mobile pastoral populations of and in various regions of this vast subcontinent – about the Changpa, the Lahuli, the agro-pastoral Gujar, Jat, Awan and Sindhi, the Bharvad, the Johya, the Maldhari – just to name a few. Under the pressures of a growing population, extensive deforestation, the "development" of "wastelands", pasture land degradation and rapid infra-structural change in the entire region interest is, however, growing, and scholars have started studying the pastoral niche in various parts of the subcontinent.

In the following I shall briefly discuss a few studies which have appeared in book form in the last decade and deal with the present situation of pastoralists

in the two Indian states of Gujarat and Rajasthan. All of these are mainly development oriented; additionally they also provide an overview of the relevant English language literature published over the last years. Four other recent studies on pastoralists, especially in this region (Frater 1995, Köhler-Rollefson *et al.* 1994, Ratnagar 1991 and Srivastava 1997), will be reviewed in later issues.

In a well written and very readable booklet of the *Drylands Networks Programme* of the IIED Arun Agrawal (1992) sets forth some major features of the economic and social organisation of the Raika of Rajasthan. He focusses on the modalities of migration and briefly describes the destinations, the frequency, the composition of migration units, herd management and interaction with farmers during migration. Agrawal concludes that in spite of the overall "... conditions that are changing adversely for them..." (p. 33), the Raika still have the ability, typical of mobile peoples the world over, to "... innovate and to adapt their lifestyles and production techniques to changing environmental conditions ..." (p. 33). Some very interesting data are presented on decision making in the context of a sheep and goat herding economy – regarding culling of animals, terms of trade, wool shearing, invest-

ments in general, etc. These data support all previous data available on pastoralists elsewhere that nomadic husbanders are neither "... irrational, whimsical, [n]or behave in a random manner" (p. 33).

In an equally well written publication Saurabh Sinha (1992) focusses on the Johya (Joiya) of the Ganganagar area of Rajasthan, "... the chief Muslim pastoral tribe of a group collectively known as Rath ..." (p. 5). These pastoralists bred mainly cows and sheep, cultivated dry crops and migrated traditionally for three to nine months of the year. Till the mid-1950s no recognised individual rights to land (or occupancy rights) existed in the area; unlike water, land – both for agriculture and grazing – was plentiful and had no "perceived value" (p. 6). The Rajasthan Canal Project changed all this: private land ownership expanded, sedentarisation in general increased, so did the population of the area. All this led to a reduction in grazing lands. After a brief but very interesting summary of herd management practices, of the organisation of labour and settlement patterns, the author describes the new strategies developed by the Johya to cope with the changes in their overall environment brought about by the Canal Project. He concludes that in spite of all odds "the pastoral way of life" has survived. To explain this survival he briefly introduces two theoretical perspectives: first, "... the concept of path-dependence to argue that the returns to pastoralism in the region prior to the Rajasthan Canal Project created interest groups with a stake in the existing conditions" (p. 17); second, the economic theory of information, whereby it "... seems probable that the costs of acquiring information relevant to these new activities were high enough to act as a disincentive" (p. 17). Either way, Sinha concludes, following all pastoral risk-

averting logic the Johya have been acting rationally – and not simply resisting change. How long this will last is hard to tell, but the author suggests that "... the Johya are unlikely to survive within a livestock-based economy ..." for much longer (p. 18).

In their slim volume Choksi and Dyer (1996) provide a brief, but well informed, overview of Rabari in the Kutch region of Gujarat. This community consists here of seventeen territorially organised, endogamous sub-groups – the Katchi, Vagad, Dhebaria, Kantha and Gardo. The authors stress the results of historical and contemporary state policies and state interventions in the lives of these pastoralists; policies on agriculture, dairy, forestry and industry are dealt with. Like Agrawal's (1992) volume this study also shows that the changes taking place in the greater ecological and economic framework are for the worse, as far as pastoralists are concerned. Compared to Rajasthan the situation here is more dramatic and it is "increasingly difficult for pastoralists to assure the basic elements of a pastoral existence ... fodder and water ..." (p. 11). Here change has meant altering migration routes (as with the Raikas), much greater commercialisation, greater importance of agriculture and a change in the nature of livestock (with more cows and buffaloes being kept in spite of the arid environment). The study closes with a brief discussion of the perspectives of sedentarisation and the rather bleak future of pastoralism in this area.

The workshop held in Anand in 1992 focussed primarily on pastoralists in the Banni Grasslands, an area of about 2500 km<sup>2</sup>, located on the fringe of the Great Rann of Kutch. Here a multitude of pastoral, mainly transhumant, groups are found – the Raika, Ghanchi, Gujar, Sindhi Muslim, Rajput, Jat and Bishnoi. The eleven short articles (cf. Cincotta

and Pangare 1993) published in the proceedings of the workshop cover various aspects of the problems these communities are facing, in the framework of changing ecological and economic circumstances affecting the state. Bharara presents an overview of a variety of socio-economic aspects of Banni pastoralists, and of the various factors leading to change in their perception of the future; the focus is on adaptation and the perception of development needs as expressed by the herders themselves. Suggestions, at the end of the article, for improving livestock migration provide an important basis for further discussions. Whereas eleven of the twelve points listed seem good and important, the first point – "To regulate livestock migration in an organized way ... there should be coordination at the administrative level of different departments that would help ..." – appears highly problematic. Many publications in the recent past have shown that in an hazardous environment with extremely patchy rainfall distribution the quick decisions which mobile groups must take call for highly flexible management patterns; these can be successful only when strategic and *ad hoc* decision making takes place at the local levels. The information flows from the different local communities in rapidly changing, localised environmental contexts to the administrative units are most likely too slow for action to be effective; further, due to the complexity of the situation, the often conflicting interests of the different official departments may not allow viable decisions to be implemented in time. The constant use of the information networks the herders themselves have at their disposal and the communication between them and the different communities, in the various areas they exploit over the annual cycle, can never be substituted by administrators, who must necessarily possess relatively little

information about the specific situation in which hundreds of different, localised groups find themselves in a given period. Normally pastoralists in all parts of the world know their ecological and social environments better than others, and know best what is good for their herds. With a much higher probability than administrators ever can, they can find *their* specific optimal strategy to cope with specific, local, climatic hazards and with regional socio-political constraints. This is also highlighted by H.K. Jain's contribution ("*The Institutional Environment and its Relationship to Sustainable Development*") at the end of the volume. The subsequent short note (pp. 9-11) by S.K. Saxena on the "*Present Status of the Banni grasslands*" seems to indicate that very few "hard" ecological data are available, though they are urgently needed to support the recommendations made by him and all other authors. Some more information, however, is given in E.K. Bharucha's more general paper on "*Conservation of Biodiversity Associated with Indian Grassland Ecosystems*" (pp. 45-50) in which the interdependence between biodiversity, management of grasslands and the demand for sustainable development strategies are dealt with. J.P. Mittal's article (pp. 13-15) describes the environmental stress factors (food, water and specially mineral rich water) in livestock production in pastures in western Rajasthan and their significance as a model for the management of pastoral livestock of western Gujarat. Here it should be mentioned that, in a special monograph published by Ghosh and Abichandani in 1981, a detailed analysis is given of the sheep population of various breeds in Rajasthan, with special reference to the physiological influence of limited water intake that effects feed intake and digestibility of dry matter. In another, short contribution here (pp. 35-36) Mittal rec-

ommends an agro-forestry system to optimise the productivity of animal husbandry. One of the most informative articles (pp. 17-26) in this volume is that by P. Singh, R.K. Tyagi and V. Shankar, who have compiled the quantitative data (and maps) available on climate, soil quality, vegetation and livestock in Kutch and Saurashtra. For the latter region S. Kumar (pp. 37-38) suggests some strategies for improvement on the basis of data collected in, and the formulation of, development plans for rangelands in the Jaisalmer district of Rajasthan. The interesting paper (pp. 27-34) by S. Rangnekar highlights the knowledge of women from pastoralist (Bharvad, Rabari, Banjara) and other "tribal, low and high-caste families" as well as their patterns of work sharing and perceptions of livestock production. This article should be read together with the contribution "*Traditional Livestock Production Systems among Pastoralists: their Traditional Perception of the Production System and Attitude to Change*" (pp. 51-57) by D.V. Rangnekar for a more detailed description of the economic and ecological situation of the different communities. It can only be hoped that these valuable, but brief, studies will be published in a more extended form. R.P. Cincotta's and G. Pangare's paper (pp. 39-43) deals with the transhumant patterns of "sedentary" Bharvad, small stock pastoralists in Saurashtra; they discuss the problems of determining the opportunities of sedentary *vis-à-vis* migratory strategies of this population. The last contribution to this volume (pp. 59-63) tackles the problems of sustainable development and the role institutions can play. After describing the various problems that lie in the way of reaching equilibrium between the various "players", the author stresses the roles local people can play – and this should never be for-

gotten when "outsiders" try to "develop" pastoral communities:

"Indigenous or local knowledge ... concerns local resources, regimes, rules and practices. Local users of natural resources are often more competent and knowledgeable as resource managers than are highly trained technicians from elsewhere. Local people know the exact local environmental conditions, local history of natural resources and behavioral patterns better than others. They generally have the capability of forecasting trends in the production of natural resources on the basis of climatic and biological indicators." (p. 63).

In the context of "sustainable development", "local knowledge" and biodiversity, Gupta, Patel and Patel's (1992) working paper, presented at the IIMA, is of special importance. It provides a list of several hundred plants which have been used for veterinary medicine or plant protection purposes by local populations. The authors state that this is only a beginning, but it shows the potentials and importance of a systematic cataloging of useful plants which may help in reducing the hazardous impact of chemical pesticides. Here again, the stress is on the interface between protecting biodiversity and collecting local information. As the authors point out in their abstract: "A strong case is made for redefining the framework for conservation of biodiversity so that stakes and insights of local people become the basic building blocks of future development strategies and interventions."

Whereas all the studies reviewed above are fairly brief, those by Kavoori (1996), Prasad (1994) and Rathore (1993) consist of more lengthy analyses relating to animal husbandry in western India.



Expanding on an earlier study (Kavoori n.d.) submitted to the *Norwegian Agency for Development* in New Delhi, the present study by this author is his doctoral thesis presented to the Institute of Social Studies at the Hague. The book is divided into 7 chapters: *Introduction – Pastoralists and a Changing World; The Making of a 'New' Niche: The Ecological Basis of Transhumance; Trends and Transformations: Population Dynamics and a Changing Social Basis; From Subsistence to Exchange: The Commoditization of Pastoral Production; Conflict and Negotiation: Pastoralists, Cultivators, Forests and the State; Intervention: Structural Constraints and Sustainability; Conclusion: Pastoralists and the 'North'*. The author sets out to consider both a phenomenon – pastoralism – and a specific group of people – transhuming sheep herders of western Rajasthan. After very briefly reviewing four “theoretical and practical considerations” in the realm of pastoral development – namely, “political economy”, “ecology”, “rationality” and “intervention” – Kavoori sets out to pursue his primary goal of locating “the practice of pastoralism in its particular contemporary political economy” (p. 7). Incidentally, the discussion of the “essentially conservative” “political underpinnings of ecological theorizing” (p. 16) does seem like flogging a dead horse. Over the past decade, at least, studies using concepts of symbiosis do not take as their “premise a state of homeostasis” (p. 16); ecological systems can only approach homeostasis, which can never be a state of permanence (e.g. Foin and Davis 1987). As far as pastoralism being considered harmful by ecologists (p. 43ff.) it is indeed surprising that Kavoori did not consult more mainstream publications (e.g. Coughenour *et al.* 1985); had he done so he would have not wasted his time discussing a long-outdated controversy. To understand the political

economy of pastoralism Kavoori uses “... the essential arguments of the debates on the development of underdevelopment in the peripheral regions of the world capitalist economy. The arguments ... specifically take shape through the formulation of a notion of *incorporation*, as an analytical framework for interpreting the complexity of the pastoral present” (p. 10).

This complexity was investigated, both through participant observation over 1986-1987 and through other survey methods. The net result is a description of migration patterns, flock size fluctuations and partially also market conditions at a regional, macro-level. A number of maps and numerous Tables add to the clarity of the text. An interesting observation made is that, contrary to what one may suppose, “the rise of an irrigation-based agriculture in Haryana ...” (p. 83) has led to pastoralists from Rajasthan taking their flocks there to graze on the stubble. It is, however, debatable whether several decades ago, long “prior to the advent of irrigation” a similar pattern did not exist there. There is enough historical evidence (which Kavoori, as a historian must be familiar with) not referred to here of large tracts of Haryana bordering on Rajasthan having been used by mobile pastoralists even into the early years of colonial rule; indeed this entire tract was largely used for grazing before settled agriculture came in (e.g. Bhattacharya 1995, Chakravarty-Kaul 1996). While the reader is afforded an overall view of the phenomenon of pastoralism in Rajasthan in the period of study, it may have been more interesting had the author concentrated more on any one aspect – say on herd growth, shifts in migration patterns, the status of grazing lands and common property resources; or the various aspects of the increasing

commoditisation of pastoral production and the relations with the 'North'. What the anthropologist also misses are the people, the herders – their points of view, their problems with increasing commoditisation, their ideas about pastoralism and pastoral well-being, their notions of *incorporation* and ways of dealing with it. For example, when the author – very plausibly – comments, "in the instance of pastoralism, the advantages of far-flung kinship ties are self-evident, the obvious example being that of access to new resources, especially grazing" (p. 129), it is pertinent to ask whether while arranging such ties, these families explicitly consider these potential economic advantages. Since no information is supplied about the circumstances under which participant observation took place it is also hard for the reader to evaluate some of the data; for example, it is not mentioned how time-spans and ages (p. 83) – a standard problem for anthropologists – were reckoned, how herd-growth rates were calculated, etc.

R.R. Prasad's (1994) study deals with "various pastoral nomadic communities of Rajasthan and Gujarat" (p. 8) and sets itself five extremely ambitious and wide-ranging objectives (p. 7): to examine "the various aspects of the ecological and economic adaptation of pastoral nomads; to "discover the fundamental process whereby the pastoral nomads' forms of organization are evolved and maintained"; to "understand whether the stability of the pastoral nomads is being threatened due to disturbances in the balance between pastures, animal population, and human population"; to "assess whether there is a trend pointing [towards] ... sedentarisation and the gradual giving up of nomadic life ... on account of ... a phase of severe involution reflected in declining resources and productivity"; and finally to "study the

stimulus provided by the pastoral crisis for innovation and development of new institutions keeping in view the needs and aspirations of the pastoral groups, their skills, customary modes of action and the social framework within which they function". While Prasad mentions (p. 8) that this study presents both secondary and primary data and that the latter were collected through "interviews, participant and non-participant observation", the period of data collection is not given. The author rightly uses the term nomadism to include all degrees of mobility, but his sweeping statement (p. 6) "Various groups like Raikas, Jats, Seervi, Bishnoi, Rajputs, Gujjars and Sindhi Muslim are the most predominant pastoral nomads of the area" is simply incorrect. While these communities – as indeed all communities of the region – keep livestock, the Jat, Seervi and Bishnoi also constitute the major local peasant communities. The book is divided into 7 chapters, each of which contains some new unpublished information, but is primarily a compilation of published (mainly Government) data. On the whole, this study provides useful background information, but, not surprisingly, does not fulfill the range of objectives set out by the author.

In his much less ambitious and more concrete and concise study M.S. Rathore (1993) discusses the economic situation of ruminant breeders and the market situation in Rajasthan. The book consists of six chapters, with a short introduction and some notes on the objectives of the study and the methodology used. The first chapter deals with livestock population dynamics between 1951 and 1988 and the climate of the region, where the intensity of droughts can be seen as the factor influencing the differential growth rates of the various species of ruminants. The next chapter analyses the "marketable surplus and export of small rumi-

nants", and relates these to the "market structure", which is described in detail in the chapters that follow. In these chapters detailed descriptions are given of the *bakra mandis*, local trading centres, where goats and sheep are assembled in large numbers to be sold on a private treaty basis. These centres possess facilities for receiving, caring, handling, and selling animals (p. 28). The descriptions of the organisation of these *mandis* are of interest not only for those who are concerned with the economy and development of the meat market in Rajasthan, but also for the anthropologist who is interested in traditional market structures. The special analysis of two of these *bakra mandis* (in Jaipur and Ajmer) with detailed data on the monthly turn-overs of the various ruminants is a valuable source for all those interested in the economy and development of this sector. Here, not only are data on buying and selling of animals made available, but also detailed figures on secondary products (skin, blood, intestines, etc.) are given. Chapter six deals with "markets outside Rajasthan" and mainly describes the situation at the Bombay *bakra mandi* and its catchment area as well as those of Delhi, Ahmedabad and other North Indian cities. Here again, detailed figures are provided. Chapter seven (pp. 67-74) sums up the various findings and draws conclusions from the results presented in the previous chapters. All in all, this is a detailed and excellent study.

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