

Organising around breeds pays dividends:



LIFE-Network India successfully lobbies for policy changes that benefit indigenous livestock and rural livelihoods

Pastoralists were among the losers of post-Independence India: These diverse groups - that include the Raika and Gujjar of Rajasthan, the Maldhari of Gujarat, the Gaddi in Himachal Pradesh, the Bakkarwal in Kashmir, Van Gujjar in Uttaranchal, Changpa in Ladakh, Golla in Orissa, Kuruba in Karnataka, Toda and Konar in Tamil Nadu and many others - became progressively disenfranchised, as irrigation agriculture spread, community pastures were encroached upon, and the Forest Department curbed access to traditional grazing areas. What's more, the hardy, locally adapted breeds that they had developed over centuries and that formed the basis of their livelihoods, were deemed inefficient and poor performers by government animal husbandry agencies that advocated their replacement or cross-breeding with exotic breeds.

When, in the late 1990s, the FAO began ringing alarm bells about the global loss of animal genetic resources, the hazards of this trend for future food security, and the need to conserve local breeds, the tables began to turn, albeit imperceptibly at first. In October 2000, NGOs and pastoralists gathered at a workshop held in Sadri, Rajasthan, to discuss the benefits of local breeds for rural livelihoods and drafted the Sadri-Declaration - a document that emphasizes the significance of livestock keepers – particularly those that depend on access to common property resources – in the sustainable management of animal genetic resources (<http://lifeinitiative.net/index.php/archives/2000/12/02/sadri-declaration/>).

Out of this workshop also grew the LIFE-Network, initially a loosely structured group of NGOs that believed in community-based conservation of animal genetic resources. Acting in a decentralised way, the LIFE-Network emphasized that India's breeds can not be conserved out of their social and ecological contexts and that the best – and maybe only – approach to conserving India's livestock genetic diversity is by providing the people that have essentially stewarded the country's traditional breeds with secure access to grazing grounds. As put by Perumal Vivekanandan of the NGO SEVA in Madurai. "The present situation of humiliation and harassment is forcing many herders to abandon their traditional life style. This is also leading to the disappearance of hardy indigenous livestock breeds, such as camels, *Kankrej* cattle, *Gir* cattle, *Nari* cattle, *Malaimadu* cattle, *Neeli Ravi* buffalo, *Toda* buffalo, *Kachakatti* black sheep, *Pulikkulam* cattle and many others that can cope with difficult environmental

conditions. It means a loss of an important part of India's biodiversity and cultural heritage, as well as an environmentally sustainable way of life".

Besides documenting the indigenous knowledge (IK) which forms the basis of local livestock breeds, the LIFE-Network also supported pastoralists to form breeders' associations. In Tamil Nadu, SEVA organised associations for Umbalacherry Cattle, Toda Buffalo, Kachakatty Sheep, Pullikulam Cattle, Malaimadu Cattle, and Vembur Sheep. In Rajasthan, Lokhit Pashu Palak Sansthan (LPPS) encouraged sheep and camel breeders to get organised and fight for their rights; a state-wide pastoralist development association, the Rajasthan Chervaha Vikas Sanghathan has been formed.

The consistent lobbying by these groups over the last several years is now beginning to bear fruit and is being reflected in positive policy changes. Notably, the scope of the "Recognition of Forest Rights Bill 2005", that originally only gave rights to forest-dwelling tribes, was expanded to include the grazing rights of nomadic and settled pastoralist communities in forests. This legislation was passed by parliament on 7 December, 2006. The National Draft Policy on Farmers that was prepared by a team chaired by Prof. M.S. Swaminathan emphasises the close relationship between livestock keeping, sustainable livelihoods, and access to grazing land. It spells out the need for securing pastoralists' forest grazing rights including in those areas that are declared as being under Joint Forest Management, Wildlife Sanctuaries and National Parks.

An increasing number of government actors are starting to take notice of the role of pastoralists as custodians of livestock breeds and their role on conserving biodiversity. At an international meeting hosted by the LIFE-Network, in February, 2007, the Hon. Chairman of the Commission on Nomadic, Semi-nomadic and Denotified tribes, Sri Balarakrishna Renke, took note of the role of pastoralists as "keepers of genes" and is following up on the issue. At the same occasion, herders handed over a statement to Dr. D. K. Sadana, Director of the National Bureau of Animal Genetic Resources, and which he subsequently shared with other policy makers in various fora.



There is still a long way to go for herding to remain an attractive livelihood option for young people, but now there is more than a ray of hope in the air. Besides favourable policy frameworks, pastoralists will also need capacity-building, training, organisational support, and help with establishing market linkages, and maybe most important, some official

recognition for the valuable services they are providing as stewards of livestock biodiversity humanity at large.

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