



## Saving the Camel and Supporting Rural Livelihoods

### Conserving animal biodiversity and creating rural employment can go hand in hand – an Indian NGO is showing the way

“Although the camel is part of Rajasthan’s history and identity, in this day and age it has lost its utility.” This would have been a fair description of the general sentiments of policy makers in Rajasthan towards the animal that is emblematic for their desert state. Well, until a few months ago. Only a short time into a project by the NGO Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan (LPPS) that is aimed at adding value to camel products, perceptions have already changed, significantly.

#### Unique camel culture

The camel once was the signature animal of Rajasthan and regarded an indispensable vanguard against the frequent droughts and devastating famines that regularly afflict its Thar Desert. Partly because of Hindu beliefs, a very special camel culture had developed in this far Western part of India: Camels were regarded as household members – they were never eaten, and even their milk was rarely drunk, except by the camel breeders themselves. Instead, they were used almost exclusively for transportation, such as for hauling carts. But by the end of the 1990s, because of slackening demand for camels as draft animals and lack of grazing lands for breeding herds, the age-old and deeply ingrained taboos against using camels for meat had crumbled, and hundreds – even thousands – of female camels were sent to the meat markets. LPPS had been providing camel breeders with camel health care since the early 1990s, and had appealed numerous times to the government for intervention. But all these pleas on behalf of the camel breeders fell on deaf ears. But when a survey by LPPS revealed that camel herds in its project area had dwindled by about 50% between 1994 and 2003, the need for some drastic action had come.



#### Camel Yatra

In the time-honoured tradition of Indian social activists, LPPS embarked on a camel “yatra”, literally a pilgrimage, in order to further explore and draw attention to the issue. In early 2005, on camel-back and accompanied by Raika camel breeders, an LPPS team crossed Rajasthan from south to north, covering 800 km in 28 days. On the way, they engaged with village people, distributed many thousands of flyers and pamphlets, collected public comments in a big diary, gave countless interviews to newspaper and TV, and organised large rallies in Jaisalmer and Bikaner. At the end of the exercise, the media had hooked onto the issue. What’s more, a donor came forward to support a two-year project for restoring the camel as a means of livelihood and sustainable land-use, with value-addition to camel-products as a key-strategy.



### **Camel Milk: The White Gold of the Desert**

Camels provide a multitude of products, but the project zeroed in on camel milk. Since there is no cultural tradition of drinking camel milk in India, except among the camel breeders, this approach may have seemed surprising. But camel milk has not only nutritional value; it also resembles a wonder drug: containing enzymes with anti-bacterial and anti-viral properties, it helps to fight diseases of all kinds. This is why it has not only been used traditionally to treat tuberculosis and typhoid, but according to scientists, may also have a positive effect on patients with HIV/AIDS, cancer and Alzheimer's disease. Furthermore, no allergies against camel milk are known and even lactose-intolerant people can drink it. Maybe most significantly, camel milk contains insulin and has been shown to reduce blood sugar levels in diabetes patients – which is very pertinent, considering that India faces a diabetes crisis as people eat more sugar-rich food and drinks. Camel milk is already marketed as a health food and beauty product in the Gulf and several African countries and the global market potential for camel milk could be billions of dollars, according to estimates by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations.

### **Camel milk ice cream**

In the kick-off workshop to the project, LPPS organised a camel milk ice cream tasting. The ice-cream is actually what is known as “kulfi” in India – it is made without adding cream and by condensing milk that is then flavoured and frozen. This “low-calorie” treat immediately captured the imagination of national and international media and the local tourist business, and is now marketed by LPPS at local fairs and to restaurant owners. The publicity surrounding the product has already changed the government attitude towards camels, and the project has received expressions of interest from government and private stakeholders, such as the Bureau of Investment Promotion and rural livelihood support programmes. Local ice cream makers are also getting into the fray, and some business people are exploring their involvement.



### **Training, Technical Support, and Supportive Policy Environment essential**

All these developments are promising, but should not gloss over the fact that there are still enormous logistical and technical problems to sort out before camel milk can form the basis of profitable businesses: Hurdles include the traditional free-ranging management system for camels, the huge distances that need to be covered to collect the milk and the problems of setting up a cool-chain, in light of the power shortages in Rajasthan. The camel-breeders need training in hygienic milk collection and organisational support to remain in control of the production process, technical support will be needed to improve product quality, and the government will have to ensure that land use plans leave space for camel herds. However, all out of sudden, camels are no longer an anachronism, but have turned into a hot item and media darling. If local entrepreneurship, some technological inputs, and a benign policy framework come together, there is no doubt that camels become an economic asset with almost unlimited economic potential and restored to their former status, albeit in the re-incarnation of a milk rather than a draft animal.

### **Endogenous rather than exotic!**

In the larger context of saving domestic animal diversity, the experiences from Rajasthan suggest that a promising way of conserving animal genetic resources is by mobilizing their keepers and assisting them with training, organisational support, and technical back-stopping to access and develop niche-markets. This approach can achieve the dual purpose of conserving diversity with creating rural employment and contributing to poverty alleviation. After many decades in which livestock development was practically synonymous with the replacement or cross-breeding of local animals with exotic breeds, now the time for “endogenous livestock development” by cashing in on local animal resources and knowledge seems to have come!

For further information, please contact:

Hanwant Singh Rathore, Director, LPPS, [camelherds@yahoo.co.in](mailto:camelherds@yahoo.co.in), Tel. 0091-9414818564.

Ilse Köhler-Rollefson, League for Pastoral Peoples and Endogenous Livestock Development, [ilse@pastoralpeoples.org](mailto:ilse@pastoralpeoples.org)