

# Exploring Orissa's animal cultures with Dr. Balaram's Pathe Pathshala

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Chariot wheel of the Sun temple in Konark, Orissa

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## The Site of Learning

Orissa, or politically more correct *Odisha*, is a state located in the East of India that has a proud history. Earlier known as Kalinga, it was the site of the conversion of king Ashoka to Buddhism and besides impressive Buddhist sites, it can boast of two of the most important Hindu edifices in India: the Jagannath temple at Puri and the Sun temple at Konark.

Politically, Odisha tends to be associated with poverty and tribal unrest. Indeed, if measured by per capita income, this is one of the country's "poorest" states, and one of the least developed in terms of access to education, health care, and other services. But beneath its soil also lurk invaluable riches: aluminium, iron ore and bauxite highly coveted by multi-national corporates for weapons and steel production. This juxtaposition has caused considerable turmoil: some of the Adivasi tribes are putting up a spirited struggle for their ancestral lands and have aligned themselves with Maoist and Naxalite movements. Visiting the interior, densely forested parts of the state which harbours significant wildlife and amazing biodiversity is considered quite risky.

Landing in the state's capital of Bhubaneswar, one is immediately exposed to these opposing forces. The access road to the airport is lined with huge billboards by Vedanta, one of the mining corporations, trumpeting the efforts and benefits of the company for rural development. The wide avenues of the planned part of the city are bordered by walls embellished with tribal murals.

I came to Orissa at the invitation of Dr. Balaram Sahu, founder of the Pathe Pathshala, to be a visiting professor in his institution. Dr. Balaram Sahu is a veterinarian; he is supervising quality control at the state's vaccine production centre and serves as the Registrar of the Indian Veterinary Council in Orissa. Besides being a poet, writing several books and making a noteworthy film about a local buffalo breed ("The night queen of Chilka Lake"), he volunteers as editor of the Oriya language edition of the Honeybee magazine for which he is scouting innovations throughout the countryside. And he

is also a dedicated member of our LIFE Network which he has represented at meetings of the FAO in Rome as well as in Germany.

*Pathe Pathshala* means “university on the move” or “roadside university” and it is a unique one-man approach to draw people from the margins into the educational process and make them feel valued and appreciated, as well learning from them. How does it work and what is taught in the roadside university? The roadside university has so far focused on the indigenous livestock keepers of Orissa and mainly imparts knowledge about herbal treatments and ways of healing animals with local low-cost resources.

The complete infrastructure of the Pathe Pathshala is contained in one black computer bag and comprises the university banner, a book about herbal animal treatments compiled by Dr. Sahu, a bookstand and an attendance register. The village people provide a big mat or rug to sit on, as well as a round of tea.



Everybody sits on the floor and Dr. Sahu places his book on the folding stand, opens a page and starts a dialogue on matters of interest to the livestock keepers. For instance, he discusses with them about disinfecting and clearing water by adding the seeds of the Drumstick tree (*Moringa oleifera*) and letting it stand overnight, rather than throwing in a chlorine tablet, or how to use *Aloe vera* for treating wounds and joint pain. The villagers listen attentively and then provide their comments or ask questions. Lively interaction follows as arguments go back and forth. The classes are short and last less than an hour, but they kindle the interest of the people in their remedies and result in requests for follow-ups and repeat visits. Dr. Sahu receives phone calls weeks or months later, enquiring about herbal remedies or how to treat a particular disease.

During my visit from 15-19 January, he conducted 7 pathe pathshalas with various communities which included Ghunsur cattle breeders, Ghunsur goat keepers, nomadic pig herders of the Kela community, duck keepers, villagers who had established a museum of implements used in livestock keeping, and finally the people of Bolghar, a hamlet whose claim to fame is that Gandhiji stayed there for a number of days in December 1927.

Because my main interest is in indigenous livestock breeds, the discussion during the Pathe Pathshalas naturally drifted towards the advantages of these animals and experiences, worries and hopes people had about the cross-breeding with exotics as is promoted by the government. Having associated Orissa mostly with Adivasis who hunt, gather and practice shifting cultivation, rather than indulge in livestock breeding, I had not expected much wealth and variety in terms of animal genetic resource. However, I had to thoroughly revise my opinion and have compiled the following breed-wise notes.



## Ghunsur cattle breeders



The Ghunsur cattle breed is a small whitish animal that is bred only by the Gowda community, a caste that claims descent from Lord Krishna. The animals are triple purpose, providing milk, manure and draught. A few quick questions confirmed that this is well-defined breed, even in the absence of a herdbook, as the Gowdas very rarely sell or buy female animals, and if so, then only to other Gowdas. The herds are composed of stable maternal lines that are passed on from generation to generation. These matrilineages are identified by particular names that reflect their special characteristics with respect to colour, temper, behaviour, time of birth, etc. Bulls are obtained in exchange with other herds to prevent inbreeding. A cow gives 7 calves in her lifetime, on average. The milk yields are very low, amounting to only between 4 and 7 liters for the entire herd, and the milk price is also very low. A herd also produces about three truck loads of manure per year which each sell at the rate of 700 Rs – the Gowda explicitly stated that they keep the price low out of solidarity with the farmers for whom they don't want to cause problems.

That was actually the most amazing aspect: the collective spirit that is prevalent among these communities: one of the seven herders that we visited had received a national level award for his efforts in keeping and conserving the Ghunsur cattle breed which came with a Rs. 10,000 cash prize. Everybody was proud that he had received the prize, there was no inkling of jealousy – he had even been jointly nominated for the award as the best breeder.

I was also pleased to learn that the Ghunsur cattle keepers have absolutely no problem with forest officials. They come once a year to collect a nominal grazing fee, but do not try to extort any bribes or unreceipted payments. Despite this unrestricted grazing, the forest seemed in pristine condition. Is this because the total number of cattle is small in relationship to the resources? Is it because

people engage in mindful grazing and protect the resources? Is it because the grazing is actually good for the forest? I could not get to the root of the question, but I felt like meeting the District Forest Officer and congratulating him on his enlightened approach which is so totally in contrast to the situation in other parts of India.

Some more interesting things: The cattle graze on the harvested paddy fields for much of the year, except in the rainy season when they shift to the forest. During the night, the animals are tied up in twos on a ring that slides up and down a post, and it is always the same two animals that are tied up together and who have formed close friendships. In the middle of the herd is a small shed in which the calves and some sheep and goats are enclosed during the night to protect them from predators. The herders often sleep on some planks that are put over the enclosure. And I love the huge bamboo hats that the herders typically wear!



Sleeping arrangements on top of the calf enclosure



Herder's hat

During the Pathe Pathshala, we inevitably also discussed cross-breeding. A few animals in the herds were of brownish colour, a relic of earlier attempts of cross-breeding with Jersey which had failed dismally. Nevertheless, there was now interest in cross-breeding with Haryana cattle to raise milk yields. Probably this idea had been put into their heads by the local livestock inspector who was promoting this, saying that the Jersey had been exotic, but that the Haryana was an Indian breed and therefore should work. I was worried about this, since the Haryana cattle is a huge animal which could be expected to lead to birthing problems if crossed with this exceptionally small breed. Besides, it is more adapted to a desert environment. The desire for fresh blood is of course understandable, but I suggested that a breed like the Malaimadu cattle from Tamil Nadu would be more suitable, being also of similar size and adapted to grazing in the forest.

## Ghunsur goat breeders



Ghunsur goats returning from grazing

The Ghunsur goat is not a recognized breed and it is also kept by the Gowda community, but only in six particular villages. We visited village Minagadia in Block Nuagaon, District Nyagarh. This breed is leggy and slender and mostly black with some white and brown markings. It is sustained only on grazing in the forest to which there is unfettered access. In Minagadia there were about 1000 goats of which 500 belonged to Mr. Laxman Bahera who has taken a special interest in goat breeding. Not only has he increased his herd but he has also experimented with various types of housing. For instance replacing the traditional roof made from paddy straw by a corrugated iron one, and by constructing a dipping pan at the entrance to the compound.

Goat keeping is a lucrative business - the meat fetches Rs. 250 per kg or Rs 125 per kg live weight. Animals are sold at varying ages, but mostly at about one year of age when they weigh about 20-25 kg. This is another breed that knows no disease.

Here I learned that the Gowdas never keep chicken and don't eat poultry. While they eat goat meat, they don't slaughter goats.



Mr. Laxman Bahera in his goat compound





Upper storey goat shed – manure accumulates below



One of the two goat herds with wooden bells in his hand

These are some rules written on the wall of the communal building. One of them says to “graze the forest, but don’t destroy it!”

This village which is quite “remote”, i.e. connected only by an untarmaced road, was delightful because of the openness of its people and also the traditional, lovingly decorated building style. Therefore I am including some pictures to bring this across.



## The Kela Swine Herders near Patamundai



Having just listened to a talk about nomadic pig herders in Bangladesh during the meeting of the International Association for the Study of the Commons held at Hyderabad, I was particularly intrigued to learn that similar systems exist in India. Dr. Sahu had also decided that this community would be the appropriate setting for releasing his new book “10 days in a German village”. A friend of his introduced us to the pig keepers which were grazing their animals on the harvested paddy fields near Patamundai. Initially they were quite guarded, although one of youngsters carried around by his mother just could not stop smiling. Once we sat down, the leader of the group impressed us with his pointed and accurate information. His began with the remark that his pigs were entirely healthy and that this had been confirmed by the veterinary department. Apparently he had had some problems during the (human) swine flu outbreak when some people considered the pigs dangerous and



This youngster could not stop smiling!



questioned the need of keeping them. He emphasized that the pigs were eaten by everybody; people will come and buy the pigs and then slaughter them themselves. A pig fetches about 1000-1500 Rs. and each sow has two litters per year, averaging about 10 live offspring annually. The only disease threat is during the rainy season when the piglets sometimes succumb to pneumonia.

The older hogs are castrated to prevent in-breeding and only the really health and strong males are kept for breeding.

One interesting feature I noted were that many of the pigs had wattles which I had thought only occurred in goats. This breed or type of pig is called “gilla”.



The leader of the pig herders



Gilla pig (wattled) 1



Colour variation among these happy pigs



Release of Dr. Balaram's book *Ten days in a German village* among the pig herders

## The Duck Keepers of Bhitarkanika



Our last stop was Bhitarkanika on the coast, site of a National Park and breeding centre for crocodiles and famous for the beach at which thousands of Olive Riddley turtles lay their eggs. The area is dissected by water channels bordered by mangrove forests with boats being the best way of transportation. The rice harvest was going on and we saw people carrying the straw on poles over their shoulders to the roadside from where they were taking it back to the village by cycle rickshaws. Oxen, tied together in threes, were engaged in threshing.

I was enchanted by the settlements because the dwellings were exclusively of the traditional type – with heavy paddy straw roofing, small windows crosses and lovingly embellished outside walls.





There was so much beauty walking around the houses and the ponds behind them, with red flowering water lilies among the duckweed.



The villagers here depend on a mix of farm animals which also include chickens and ducks. The better off households have their private ponds, while the poorer ones depend on the village common pond.

The ducks do not hatch their offspring, for this the people deploy a broody hen. They also showed me some naked head chicks which they had obtained from Bhadrak and they said were coming from China.



After the pathshala session, the women demanded a photo with me.