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The Future of Camels in India

How to ensure their conservation and well-being

National Seminar

at the India Habitat Centre, New-Delhi

27 February 2025



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Summary

On 27th January 2025, Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan (LPPS) and Bharat Krishak Samaj (BKS) organized a National Seminar on 'The Future of Camels in India: How to ensure their Conservation and Well-Being' at the India Habitat Centre in New-Delhi. The event was attended by more than 50 stakeholders, representing the Governments of India and Rajasthan, FAO, camel herders from four different regions, NGOs, experts in various fields, as well as the animal welfare community. After listening a series of formal presentations, four working groups were formed to discuss the impact of the Rajasthan Law, the importance of Common Property Resources and synergy with the upcoming International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists, how to attract and motivate young herders, and how to go about establishing Rajasthan's camel milk as a cruelty-free' and high value niche product.

The recommendations included:

- 1. Repeal of the *Rajasthan Camel (Prohibition of Slaughter and Regulation of Temporary Migration or Export) Law.***
- 2. Herders must be given respect and dignity, and their young generation requires incentives.**
- 3. Conservation of Common Property Resources (CPR), such as oran, and establishment of a 'Pastoral Cell' within the Rajasthan Government.**
- 4. Positioning camel milk as a superfood and its products as Rajasthan's culinary specialty.**

Proceedings

The event was facilitated by Dr. Nitya Ghotge of ANTHRA who introduced its two organizing partners, The Bharat Krishak Samaj (BKS) and Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan (LPPS).



Inauguration

The seminar was inaugurated by Hanwant Singh Rathore, secretary of LPPS, by honouring the FAO Representative in India, Takahiro Hagiwara, and Ajay Vir Jakhar, the chairman of the Bharat Krishak Samaj with a turban on behalf of the Raika camel herders.



This was followed by the inaugural Speech of the FAO representative, **Takahiro Hagiwara**, who contextualized the event within the International Year of Camelids that has been extended from 2024 until the second half of 2025.



Dr. Pramod Kaushik, Assistant Commissioner of the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying, Ministry of Agriculture, provided details on the programme of the National Livestock Mission that now also includes camels.



Dr. S.C. Bari, Deputy Director, Directorate, Government of Rajasthan, emphasized the state government's dedication to engage in meaningful action to turn the camel situation around.



Dr. Ilse Köhler-Rollefson, League for Pastoral Peoples and co-founder of Camel Charisma, presented a paper entitled 'The Current Status of the Camel in India in a global context' in which she suggested that India's camels could be saved by building on Indian camel culture and developing camel milk into a globally unique, 'cruelty-free' high value product.



A team from Greenhub Bhopal, composed of **Mukesh Mahato** and **Praveen Dewasi** presented a short video which illustrated the way of life of the Raika camel herders.



In the next presentation, **Hanwant Singh Rathore** described in stark terms the impact of the *Rajasthan Camel (Prohibition of Slaughter and Regulation of Temporary Migration or Export) Law* which he said was disastrous.



This was followed by short presentations by camel herders from Godwar, Jaisalmer, Gujarat and Maharashtra about the situation in their respective areas.

Karnaram Raika spoke for the Godwar herders, **Sajjal Kulkarni** for the Maharashtra Rebari, **Bhartiben** for the herders from Kutch and **Sumer Singh** for the camel rearers from Jaisalmer.



Animal welfare organizations, supporting the ban on camel export and against camel breeding, were represented by **Jasraj Jain**, from the Mahaveer Camel Sanctuary in Sirahi.



Dr. Varsha Mehta elaborated on the difficulties of making a living from rearing camels.



Kumud Dadlani, representing the collective Edible Issues, commented on the potential of camel dairy in the culinary arts, explaining that camel milk was not a new trend but rediscovery of a traditional product.



Yogendra Singh Mertiya, representing Fabindia and the Godwar Farmers Collective, elaborated on the potential of the camel for the wellness sector, stating that wellness is not just about physical wellness of humans, but also includes planetary health.



UAE based entrepreneur **Augusta De Lisi** explained why she sources camel milk powder for her start-up 'Nomadic Nutrition' from Rajasthan instead of locally and expanded on the concept of 'cruelty-free' camel milk.



Finally, **Narayan Singh Chandawat** of the Foundation for Ecological Security added some remarks on the significance of the Commons for the conservation of camels.



After the formal presentations, the participants split up in four working or problem solving group to discuss and address various angles impacting the situation of the camel in India.

1. Working Groups

Group 1. If we want to make India’s camel milk famous and promote the concept of ‘cruelty-free’ milk, what steps should we take?

Facilitator/Rapporteur: Kumud Dadlani, Edible Issues:

Changing the Perception of Camels and Their Milk

The first step is to shift how camels are perceived in India. Unlike cows or buffaloes, camels are not traditionally seen as milk-producing animals, and there is a common misconception that their milk can have an unpleasant taste and smell. Educational initiatives, media representation, and firsthand tasting experiences can help break these biases and introduce camel milk as a viable and nutritious alternative.

1. **Clarifying the Concept of "Cruelty-Free"**

The idea of cruelty-free dairy is not widely understood in India. While cow's milk is deeply entrenched in cultural and religious traditions, automatically associated with purity and health, camel dairy lacks this historical and emotional connection. A targeted effort is needed to explain what "cruelty-free" really means. Focusing on ethical sourcing, humane treatment of animals, and the environmental benefits of camel dairy.

2. **Region-Specific and Community-Centric Campaigns**

India is a diverse country with varying dietary habits, cultural beliefs, and economic conditions. A one-size-fits-all approach won't work. Instead, tailored educational and marketing campaigns should be designed to resonate with different communities and regions. While urban consumers may respond well to health and wellness narratives, rural populations may need a more localized approach, emphasizing camel dairy's historical roots in desert regions.

3. **Positioning Camel Milk as a Superfood**

Branding is crucial. By promoting camel milk as a "**superfood**", it can be positioned as a premium, aspirational product rather than just an alternative to cow's milk. The "**cruelty-free**" label should be emphasized alongside its health benefits, such as being rich in vitamins, low in lactose, and beneficial for immunity. This approach can help build credibility and attract health-conscious consumers, including those in the fitness and wellness space.

4. **Learning from the Vegan Movement in India**

The growing popularity of plant-based diets and alternative dairy products in India offers valuable lessons. Observing the marketing, advocacy, and community-building efforts of the vegan movement can help inform strategies for camel dairy. Collaborating with vegan influencers and wellness advocates can also help promote camel milk as an ethical and sustainable choice.

5. **Tasting Events and Continuous Education Initiatives**

One of the most effective ways to change perceptions is through direct experience. Regular tasting workshops, pop-up events, and culinary collaborations with chefs can introduce camel milk in an appealing way. By emphasizing its taste, versatility, and benefits, these efforts can reinforce its image as a premium, high-quality product.

6. **Educational Campaigns in Schools**

Engaging with young minds ensures a long-term shift in perception. School campaigns can serve as a bottom-up approach, where children learn about the benefits of camel dairy and, in turn, influence their families. Introducing camel milk into school meal programs or organizing interactive sessions can spark curiosity and acceptance from an early age.

7. **Engaging Key Stakeholders for Advocacy**

Credibility is key to public acceptance. Influential figures such as government officials, nutritionists, chefs, and media personalities can play a significant role in spreading awareness. Strategic collaborations with these stakeholders can help validate the concept of cruelty-free camel dairy and position it as a responsible choice.

8. **Highlighting the Climate Justice Angle**

The environmental benefits of camel dairy should not be overlooked. Camels require far less water and land than cows, making their dairy production more sustainable in a

climate-stressed world. Connecting camel dairy to the larger narrative of climate justice and sustainability can resonate with eco-conscious consumers and policymakers alike.

Group 2: Did the Rajasthan Camel (Prohibition of Slaughter and Regulation of Temporary Migration or Export) Act, 2015 do anything for the conservation and well-being of camels? If not, what do we have to do, to achieve this?

Facilitator/Rapporteur: Varsha Mehta

The "Rajasthan Camel (Prohibition of Slaughter and Regulation of Temporary Migration or Export) Act, 2015" caused untold damage to the livelihoods of camel herders and has been a major contributor to the decline in the population of camels in Rajasthan and other states.

- Herders reported that their herd size had declined by more than 50% since the imposition of the ban on export of camels. Their incomes had also accordingly decreased.
- The male/female ratio of herds had changed as a result of the law, and herders had to invest more in management of herds as male camels were difficult to manage. There were reports of female camels dying because of the aggressive behaviour of male calves (e.g., sitting on the neck)
- It was proposed that the law, brought in with the intent of conservation of camels, should be amended to allow sale and export of male camels. Otherwise, the law was proving to be counter-productive.
- Along with the amendment proposed above, it was important to simplify the procedure of obtaining permission for temporary migration: (i) the veracity of sale and purchase intent should be established/validated by the local Gram Panchayat; (ii) the authority to grant permission should be devolved to the SDM or other competent authority in the department of animal husbandry. This was in light of the background information shared by LPPS that not a single permit had been issued since passage of the law. The primary reason for it was believed to be the inability of camel herders to access the competent authority under the law (i.e., the district collector)
- In addition to the above, it was felt that the utility value of male camels could be enhanced, for example through their use in patrolling the borders by the Border Security Forces (BSF)

Group 3: The perspective of camel herders: what must happen for the next generation to continue caring for camels?

Facilitator/Rapporteur: Sajal Kulkarni

1. Camel rearers, especially young people, should be treated with respect and dignity.
2. Milk and draught power are major sources of livelihoods from camels, but there is no investment in supporting these. Federations of youths should get incubation support.
3. Cultural activities such as camel racing and festivals should be supported.
4. Pastoral youths should be invited/ appointed as experts to train camels in military and border forces.
5. There should be tie ups with big investors for camel products and youth capacity building for the same.
6. Camel draught power should be investigated by means of All India coordinate research projects.
7. Process of application for National Livestock Mission should be user friendly, the minimum number as well as banking process should be easy.
8. Grazing and migration should be made easier.

2. The conservation of camels and the Commons is interlinked. How can these efforts support each other – keeping in mind the upcoming International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists?

Facilitator: FAO – Dr. Hasib

1. Existing CRPs and Rangelands should be mapped both digitally (GPRS) and through revenue department and should be identified. Under this the Charagaah, Oran and forest area should be taken up for actual status in the state of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Chhattisgarh. For the same, the Diversity Register available with Forest Department should also be reviewed.
2. There is a need to understand and propagate the concept of camel grazing among various stakeholders especially the forest department. Camels graze on large rangelands on various species of plants and grass. Unlike cattle, camels spread over large area while grazing. This feeding practice of the camels do not degrade the vegetation cover. Also, camels grazing in rangelands help in dispersing various seeds they feed on and help in sustaining the genetic biodiversity of flora in these landscapes. Hence, Camel grazing is not detrimental

to forest areas and does not contribute to overgrazing which is the concern of forest department.

3. The team expressed their deep concern on decrease of tens of thousands of acres of land in Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Barmer districts of Rajasthan which has been done without consultation of local livestock keepers and has directly impacted the small livestock keepers including camel herders. The government have started notifying areas in Kutch as protected areas and stopped the camel herders from entering these places. Similar situation has been witnessed Kumbhalgarh Forest Areas where the Government has planned to conserve the ungulates and supposedly introduce tiger
4. It was suggested that government should not take unilateral decisions in notifying an area as protected without having consultation with local inhabitants particularly with livestock keepers whose livelihood is dependent on the landscape.
5. It was noted that though Pastureland Development Committee has been in place, there existed a dearth of knowledge on its functioning. Hence, the committee's role should be revisited and strengthened. Besides extensive campaign is required increase the awareness among the pastoralist community and local livestock keepers to understand their rights and means of livelihood.
6. One of the major migration routes of camel is the from Marwar to Malwa vis Mewar which transcends state boundaries. The migration route is now threatened due to increases urbanization and unplanned restriction of movement of camel herders by notifying some areas as protected area along the route. This has made is difficult for the camel herders to reach their destination and time besides compromising on the pastureland that was once available for their animals bust has now been impacted.
7. There is need to have revive the route and have an interstate committee to conserve the route and make it exclusively available for the pastoral community whose livelihood had been dependent on the vegetation and easy movement along the route.
8. It was recommended that the Pastureland Policy developed by The Indian Grassland and Fodder Research Institute (IGFRI), Jhansi, which is in draft stage and available for providing feedback, should be reviewed and analysed for issues related to incorporation of rangeland conservation for camel and other livestock.
9. It was informed that the Supreme Court has directed the Rajasthan government to grant legal protection to sacred groves or Orans in Rajasthan as "forests" and carry out a district-wise mapping of such lands not based on their size but on their ecological and cultural significance. As per the judgement the state of Rajasthan alone, has about 25,000 Oran spread across an area of about 600,000 hectares. About 1,100 major Oran are in an area of more than 100,000 hectares in the state which provide livelihood to the rural population. Further, the

classification of forest should not depend on the size or extent of the groves but instead, focus solely on their purpose and their cultural and ecological significance to the local community.

10. The group suggested that Degrai Oran, Jaisalmer can be termed as a role model for conserving the rights of the pastureland. Further, camel milk value chain can be developed in the area if a sustainable market can be ensured.
11. It was recommended that effort should be made to get unutilized revenue land/fallow land designated as pastureland with subsequent of pasture before it is taken for other urbanization activity jeopardizing the livelihood of local and pastoral community.
12. The group recommended the formation of a Pastoral Cell within the Animal Husbandry Department, Govt. of Rajasthan and Govt. of Gujarat with provision of regular exchange of information and interstate coordination for preservation of rangeland and safeguarding the rights of pastoral community. This would pave an important milestone for pastoral community particularly when there is so much focus on raising awareness of the importance of healthy rangelands and sustainable pastoralism. The United Nation's General Assembly has already declared 2026 as the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP). Hence the time is befitting to advocate for more investment in the pastoral livestock sector, promote sustainable land management practices and improve and restore ecosystems.

Appendix 1: Agenda

National Seminar

The Future of Camels in India

How to ensure their conservation and well-being

Thursday, 27th February 2025 at the India Habitat Centre, New-Delhi

08:30-09:15	Breakfast & Registration
09:15-09:25	Inauguration and Welcome by Lokhit Pashu Palak Sansthan (LPPS) and camel breeders
09:25-09:30	Short speech by FAO Representative- Takayuki Hagiwara
09:30-09:40	Short remarks: Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying of GoI and Rajasthan
09:40-10:00	The Current Status of the Camel in India in a global context by Dr. Ilse Köhler-Rollefson and Q&A



Session I: The Status Quo

10:00-10:10	The Impact of the Rajasthan Camel (Prohibition of Slaughter and Regulation of Temporary Migration or Export) Law – Hanwant Singh Rathore
10:10-10:50	The Perspective of Camel Herders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bhanwarlal Raika, Godwar Camel Milk Producers • Sumer Singh, Jaisalmer • Sajal Kulkarni, The situation of camel herders in Maharashtra • Sahjeevan - The situation of camel herders in Kutch
10:50-11:15	Q&A
11:15-11:45	Tea Break

Session II: The Vision for the Future

11:45-11:55	Making a living from camels - Varsha Mehta
11:55-12:05	The culinary potential of camels – Kumud Dadlani, Edible Issues
12:05-12:15	Perspective on Camels from the Wellness Sector Yogendra Mertiya, Godwar, Farmers Collective and Fabindia
12:15-12:25	Why I want camel milk from Rajasthan as ingredient – Augusta de Lisi, Nomadic Nutrition
12:25-12:40	Q&A

Session III: The Vision for the Future

12:40-01:40	Working Groups
01:40-01:55	Presentation of Working Groups
02:25-02:30	Concluding Remarks & Vote of Thanks by Ajay Vir Jakhar
2:30	Lunch

Appendix 2: Background Note

Background Note

India's camel situation is dire. It is the only major country in the world where population numbers are rapidly shrinking, from over one million head 50 years ago to an estimated 200,000 or less currently. During the same period, the global camel population more than tripled.

Figure 1. Camel population trends globally (left) and in India (right), based on official FAO data (source: <https://livestockdata.org/resources/livestock-population-trends>)



This trend continues despite the camel being declared the state animal of Rajasthan and protected by The *Rajasthan Camel* (Prohibition of Slaughter and Regulation of Temporary Migration or Export). Act, since 2015.

But we should not despair. Other countries too, such as the United Arab Emirates and China, have faced the threat of losing their camels and managed to turn the situations around. No doubt, India also has the capacity to achieve this by taking the right measures. These would entail taking its globally unique camel culture and heritage as a starting point and building on its strength. In addition, it should promote the milk produced by its ancestral camel herders as the best in the world – the champagne of camel milks – and, after defining what this means, as ‘cruelty-free’.

The Raika, India's most prominent camel breeding community, have a spiritual connection with their camels, believing they were created by God Shiva to take care of camels and ensure their well-being. They treat them as co-creatures and family members and have accumulated an

enormous body of ethnoveterinary knowledge to keep their animals healthy, including such sophisticated techniques as indigenous vaccination. They managed their camels on the commons in herding or free-ranging systems, allowing them to choose their own menus of trees, shrubs and grasses. Notably, they never separated mothers from their calves, as is commonly done in other dairy systems. They kept detailed mental records of the ancestry of their herds for up to seven generations and created several distinct breeds.

These ancestral management systems reflect a compassionate relationship with animals, that provides an antithesis to the industrial model of animal production that has been propagated around the world, with terrible consequences for animal welfare, the environment, biodiversity, while acting as a breeding ground for diseases.

By contrast India's ancient herding systems, of which the Raika camel keepers represent just one, are characterized by a close human-animal relationship, provide crucial organic manure, use practically no fossil fuels, nurture biodiversity, and deliver healthy products. They have long been castigated by scientists trained in the western model, as backward and unproductive, but are in fact the opposite. They embody a treasure of traditional wisdom in producing food within planetary boundaries, food that is rich in phytochemicals essential for human health and missing in modern diets.

According to this traditional knowledge, camels forage on 36 different plants – all of them used in ayurvedic medicine. This may part of the reason why their milk is proving its value as a health tonic and an auxiliary in the treatment of serious diseases. There are many case studies of camel milk having an almost miraculous effect, although controlled studies are lacking.

Saving India's camels requires going beyond rescuing individual animals, as welfare organizations tend to do. Instead we need to take a holistic approach and create a supportive and nurturing eco-system for camels and their guardians with backward linkages to biodiversity rich grazing areas and forward linkages to markets for high value products.

Some of the measures that should be taken include:

- Earmarking and protecting camel grazing areas
- Building up a decentralized milk collection system and pay a decent price to camel herders that allows them a dignified livelihood.
- Encouraging and rewarding young people who want to take up the demanding task of camel herding
- Kicking off a marketing and PR campaign that highlights India's camel culture and the benefits of camel milk
- Improving provision of camel health services
- Supporting medical research to monitor impact of camel milk consumption on patients with specific health problems
- Incentivizing the use and development of products from camel wool and dung.

From this list it is clear that camel conservation cannot be tackled by the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying alone, but requires collaboration between the various government

ministries and departments, as well as the support of philanthropists and the private sector. It must be guided by the knowledge and needs of the camel herding communities. In order to bring these different stakeholders together before the official end of the International Year of Camelids and mapping out a plan for the future that lets India's camel heritage shine, LPPS and Bharat Krishak Samaj are organizing a National level Seminar at the India Habitat Centre on 27th February 2025.

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