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The Importance of Nomadic Pastoralism

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Nomadic pastoralism makes positive contributions to the man-made, natural, human and social capital stocks of the country; pastoralists therefore play an important role in Indian society. There are encouraging signs that thanks to the on-going knowledge revolution they will now receive recognition.

India is a fascinatingly complex society with communities practicing a whole spectrum of modes of resource use, ranging over hunting-gathering, fishing, shifting cultivation, pastoralism, settled agriculture, industrial production and services including sophisticated software development. Though no reliable data is available, the bulk of the rural population, accounting probably for around 60%, are engaged in mixed agriculture and livestock keeping.

Nomadic communities have complex, often mutualistic relationships with cultivators, performing a variety of functions. These include hunting. For instance, the Phasepardhis of Maharashtra help farmers by hunting herbivores damaging their crops, and the Mushahars of the eastern Gangetic plain and the Terai hunt rats. The Bahelias of north India were earlier one such nomadic hunter group. They played an honourable role in the first war of independence of 1857 fighting bravely against the British troops at the battle of Pindra village, Satna. Following this war, the British sought revenge against such communities and beginning in 1871 passed a series of Criminal Tribes Acts. In 1936, Jawaharlal Nehru, denouncing the Act commented, ‘The monstrous provisions of the Criminal Tribes Act constitute a negation of civil liberty. No tribe [can] be classed as criminal as such and the whole principle [is] out of consonance with all civilised principles.’ At the time of Independence in 1947, 1.3 crore people faced search and arrest if any member of the group was found outside a prescribed area. The Act was repealed in August 1949 and the former ‘criminal tribes’ were denotified in 1952. But determined to keep them subjugated, the government promulgated the Habitual Offenders Act 1952. Even today, the legacy of the past continues to haunt a majority of the people belonging to these erstwhile criminal tribes (now officially termed the “Denotified Tribes”), with continued alienation and stereotyping by the police, the media, the Forest Department and urban nature conservationists.

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The most important component of the nomadic population are nomadic pastorals, largely cattle or buffalo keepers or shepherds providing milk, wool, hides, meat and manure for the fields. They may permit taking advantage of land that cannot be cultivated, such as the Himalayan slopes above the tree line, but may seasonally support grazing such as buffalo-keeping Gujars and Bhotia shepherds. Shepherds of semi-arid tracts of Peninsular India are another significant component of Indian society. It rains different amounts at different times in different parts of the peninsula resulting in cultivation of different crops and their harvest at different times. Carefully taking all this into account, the nomadic shepherds spend part of the year camping in one place and move along different routes during the year. Over time they have developed symbiotic relationships with the cultivators and put the natural resources to very efficient use.

Grazing on uncultivated land in the vicinity of the farms has been a mainstay of livestock maintenance by cultivators or landless farm labourers. However, beginning with the British regime people have faced serious difficulties since they are deprived of their rights over uncultivated land. In 1881, Mahatma Jotiba Phule, Maharashtra’s great social reformer, graphically described the straits to which the peasantry had been reduced in a book titled *Shetkaryacha Asud* (Whipcord of the Farmers):

In the olden days small landholders who could not subsist on cultivation alone used to eat wild fruit like figs and jamun and sell the leaves and the flowers of the flame of forest and mahua trees. They could also depend on village grazing ground to maintain one or two cows, or two or four goats, thereby living happily in their own ancestral villages. However, the cunning European employees of our motherly government have used their foreign brains to erect a great superstructure called the forest department. With all the hills and undulating lands as also fallow lands and grazing grounds brought under the control of the forest department, the livestock of the poor farmers does not have place even to breathe anywhere on the surface of the earth.

Phule goes on to declare that “This tyrannical Forest Department should be consigned to flames.”

It would appear that our nation state has two consorts: tyrannical autocracy, which is a legacy of the British regime, and democracy, which we embraced on Independence. Our forward march has been a tug of war between these two. As Phule had remarked, the Forest Department is the principal weapon of the tyrannical autocracy. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi the Congress party had promised that on achieving Independence the village communities will be freed of the tyrannical grip of the Forest Department and be conferred authority to manage natural resources in their vicinity. Turning back on this assurance, the government instead strengthened the hands of the Forest Department after Independence. But even then, the hold of the Department was restricted to 23% of the land under their control. The Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 has gone further and brought the entire country under the grip of the Forest Department. This has rendered the life of nomadic pastorals even more difficult.

As democracy has taken roots in the country, there has been increasing awareness that these historical injustices should be done away with. The result has been the Forest Rights Act of 2006. The act incorporates important provisions relating to nomadic pastorals which have been largely ignored. Workers of the NGOs who could explain these provisions to the people in simple language are not motivated to do so since they will then lose their hold over the people. One such NGO arranged for me to spend two days with a group of nomadic shepherds, but despite my repeated requests did not agree to explain the legal provisions of the Forest Rights Act to them. I am therefore mentioning below the relevant provisions:

The Scheduled Tribes and Other traditional forest dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006

Definitions

(a) community forest resource means customary forest land within the customary or traditional boundaries of the village or seasonal use of the landscape in the case of pastoral communities including reserve forests, protected forests and protected areas such as sanctuaries and national parks to which the community had traditional access.

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(o) “other traditional forest dweller” means any member or community who has for at least three generations prior to 13 December 2005 (25 years per generation) primarily resided in and who depend on forest or forest lands for bonafide livelihood needs.

Chapter 2 Forest Rights

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(d) other community rights of uses or entitlements such as fish and other products of water bodies, grazing, both settled and transhumant and traditional resource access of nomadic or pastoralist communities

...

Chapter 6 Miscellaneous

(13) Save as otherwise provided in this Act and the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (40 of 1996), the provisions of this Act shall be in addition to and not in derogation of the provisions of any other law for the time being in force

The Government of India is conducting a Livestock Census for the 21st time this year. The Livestock Census has been conducted in India every five years since 1919. For the first time, the 2024 Livestock Census will include pastoralist nomads, seasonal mountain dwellers and pastoralists. This is an event of historical importance.

It is appropriate to assess the merit of the practices of nomadic pastorals in the context of the four capital stocks of the country. Development should lead to enhancement of the totality of the four capital stocks of the country, namely, man-made capital (e.g. steel and automobiles, electricity, roads and water supply, as also cultivated plants and domesticated animals modified by man), natural capital (e.g. water, vegetation, fish) , human capital (e.g. knowledge, science, health, satisfactory employment) and social capital (mutual trust, cooperation among different components of the society). It is obviously undesirable to be merely transferring resources from one compartment to the other and wasting a great deal in the process. Regretfully this is what is going on today through looting of natural resources to augment man-made capital, which is controlled by a small number of money-bags leading to dissonance and conflict

among different components of society.

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Let us examine nomadic pastoralism in this framework:

(a) Man-made capital: Nomadic pastoralism is a fantastic business model. Very low cost and high return. The communities have been early adopters and innovators of technology to manage risk and increase profits. P R Sheshagiri Rao, who studied nomadic sheep-keeping as a part of his doctoral research at the Indian Institute of Science, estimates that in semi-arid regions it contributes to around 60% of income at the regional level.

(b) Natural capital: In a world getting hotter and hotter all the time, enhancing carbon sequestration and keeping emission of greenhouse gases like methane under check are important priorities. Nomadic pastoralism shows a smaller carbon footprint and lower levels of methane production in the lifecycle analysis, in comparison to other methods of livestock keeping. This reflects the fact that the local breeds, reciprocal dependencies between farmers and nomadic grazers, and the cultural practices of communities have evolved over centuries to develop the current system. Nomadic grazing also provides valuable ecoservices: the luxurious herb / weed growth in farms and pasture lands are converted to valuable nutrients in a matter of 12 hours. Two districts of Karnataka, Bellary and Tumkur, have around 13 million sheep each, about 80% of them nomadic. At about 0.3 litres of urine and 1.5 kg of dung per day per sheep they contribute to 17 million tonnes of manure/year. At an N:P:K content of 8.8:1.6:5, the nutrients' market value equivalent is Rs. 720 million a year This is just the benefit of NPK, Nomadic sheep keeping also provides services that have never been studied: ecoservices like valuable microorganisms, enzymes, and destruction / germination of herb seeds from the digestive tract.

(c) Human capital: Migration produces lean meat as the sheep walk about 25 km/day that is healthier than the high fat meat of stall-fed sheep.

(d) Social capital: Social capital entails trust, and cooperation among different sections of a society. Farmers value the droppings of sheep as a highly desirable natural fertilizer, and therefore invite shepherds to pen their sheep for the night in their farms after the crop has been harvested, paying them in grains or cash. This has over generations established a relationship of trust and cooperation among farmers and shepherds.

Clearly, nomadic pastoralism is a highly desirable occupation from the perspective of Indian society and ought to be encouraged. Regretfully our better-off urban classes consider it to be an undesirable occupation that destroys natural resources. This highly influential class, constituting at best only about 15% of the country's population, is completely alienated from the common people of the country and believes that it is only the Forest Department that will protect nature. The department in its turn goes on harassing these people and extorting bribes from them and painting them as an undesirable element of society. The NGOs also do not support them as they should. The politicians among the shepherds focus on asking for reservation and dividing society. The Government of Maharashtra engages in pointless exercises such as changing the name of Ahmednagar district to Ahilya Nagar district in honour of a highly respected leader of the shepherd community, Ahilya Devi Holkar.

Official records have thus far deliberately failed to mention nomadic pastorals like shepherds. However, there are good signs like the 2024 Livestock Census that they may now be given justice. While after 77 years of Independence, good education has hardly reached the common people of India, educated leadership is beginning to emerge amongst the nomadic pastorals. The group of shepherds that camps for the monsoon months at Khamgaon village in Buldhana district of Maharashtra decided to educate one of their boys, Saurabh Hatkar, in Chandrapur, where he obtained a bachelor's degree in computer science. He then obtained a master's at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai, and is now a PhD student in Development Studies at Edinburgh University. Saurabh studied the relevant provisions in the Forest Rights Act and communicated these to other members of his group.

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With smartphones becoming readily available at affordable prices after 2015, they have now reached most people in rural areas. To further their own commercial interest, companies like Samsung have made available facilities of using all major Indian languages on the phones, with the result that 80% of the traffic on smartphones in India now employs local languages. The facilities of translation from

English or other languages to Indian languages are also rapidly improving. Furthermore, various apps on Google permit access to the vast store of knowledge on the internet. Additionally, forums like WhatsApp groups or Zoom conferences permit vast number of people to get in touch with each other. Thus, while the gap in wealth is continually widening, that in information and knowledge is rapidly narrowing.

Taking advantage of this knowledge revolution, Sourabh Hatkar initiated a number of activities in 2022. Beginning with Gandhi Jayanti in that year, shepherds sent over 10,000 postcards to the Chief Minister of Maharashtra with an appeal to bring the tyranny of the Forest Department to a halt. In the same year 5,000 shepherds marched to Nagpur during the winter assembly session to press for a similar demand. The decision to include nomadic pastorals in this year's livestock census might be the result of such initiatives. I have every hope that using a whole range of modern communication tools, nomadic pastorals and other similarly disadvantaged groups spread over many different localities will begin to share information and ideas and get organised. This would strengthen people's movements and thereby render our democracy truly meaningful.

Madhav Gadgil is an ecologist, nature lover, and a staunch believer in the good sense of people and in democratic decentralization.