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SOCIO-ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CAMEL IN RAJASTHAN

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Abstract

The last seven or eight decades have seen several important men-made changes in the ecology and economy of Thar Desert. Primarily induced by the brining of Himalayan river water to the Thar region, first by the Gang Canal in Ganganagar and Hanumangarh districts and latter by Indira Gandhi Canal in the desert districts along the Indo-Pak border. These changes have set up a whole cycle of transforming the landscape as well as socio-economic features in this part of the state. Irrigated agricultural resulted in adoption of modern agricultural practices, including mechanized farming and its associated elements. The modern agricultural practices have increased growth of population and the settlement urbanization and some agro-based industrialization. The stimulus provided by the irrigated agriculture has affected the significant role of camel in agriculture and draught operations. The provision of roads and transportation facilities in the remote villages has also been instrumental in the declining role of camel in the district.

However, there is a dichotomy in the importance of camel rearing within the region. It would seen that camel rearing is more important in non-irrigated areas. The landless and the poor people still resort to keeping camels for agriculture as well as draught operations. While the comparatively resourceful persons in the urban areas use different types of vehicles for their earning through transportation of goats. The poorer among the urbanities still rely for making their living on the camel. These people use camel carts to transport various construction and other goats in the towns and the cities of the Thar Desert.

Socio-economic significance

The camel is often regarded as emblematic of Rajasthan. In Rajasthan folklore, it symbolizes love and ownership of a camel once signaled status and wealth. It was used for warfare by the Maharaja's and played an important role in desert communication, transportation and trade. Historically, camels were thus a valuable commodity used by the ruling classes and by the business community (Srivastava, V K. 1991).

The breeding and supply of the camels required by the elite for battle and commerce was, and is the traditional occupation of a Hindu caste known as Raika. The human camel relationship and camel culture of Rajasthan is unique from a global perspective. Since the Raika are probably the only camel pastoralists in the world who have developed a deeply ingrained prohibition against the use of camels for meat. Earlier, there was also a religious bar against the sale of milk and wool. Raika identity was traditionally based on the belief that they were created by God to take care of the camel. Therefore, they regarded themselves as guardians of the camel in the true sense of the word. Feeling responsible for the well-being of this animal. The community outlaw the sale of females camels. Female camels were part of the dowry and for the marriage ritual the bridegroom had to be seated on a camel. Due to this intimate association with the camel over the centuries, the Raika also accumulated a large body of indigenous knowledge related to camel management, breeding, disease treatment and behaviour. For this reason, they were referred to as 'native camel doctors' by colonial veterinarians (Kohler-Rollefson, 1992).

Economic role of the camel in Rajasthan

Transport

Throughout much of the distribution area, the dromedary camel is an important source of food (Farah and Farah, 2004). But in India, the camel is traditionally regarded as a draught animals and means of transportation, while its food potential is largely ignored in the Thar Desert, camel carts are still popular and remain a frequent means of transportation. They fulfill this function not only in remote rural areas, but also in the major cities. In Bikaner, Jodhpur and Jaipur, camel drawn carts are ubiquitous. They move goods of all kinds especially wood, fodder, gas cylinders, fabrics, bricks etc. The typical two-wheeled carts and a relatively recent invention dating back to the 1950.

Ownership of a camel and a cart is a solid source of income, sufficient to support a family. For this reason, development agencies and regional banks support loans for the purchase of a camel cart. According to studies the National Research Centre on Camel, the average daily income from camel carting was Rs. 300 and Rs. 140 in city and village areas, respectively, versus a daily expenditure of Rs. 40 per camel. The income from camel carting was estimated to be higher in city areas as compared to rural areas because camel keepers in the city area had

more opportunities to transport different agricultural commodities and construction materials than those operating in the rural area.

In the hilly parts of the state (Aravali range and Southern Rajasthan), the camel continues to be used as beast of burden, notably for the transportation of harvested crops, such as chili peppers, chara, etc. It can carry loads weighing 150-300 kg over long distance and 450 kg over short distances. Other chores performed by camels include trashing, lifting of water and powering of oil mills. The camel is used as riding animal mainly in the Jaisalmer area, where it exerts considerable draw on tourists. This is utilized by the Department of Tourism which organizes a camel festival in Bikaner and promotes other camel games, such as racing and polo at various festivals (Gahlot and Chadha, 2000).

Finally, the camel also maintains some military significance, being used to patrol the desert border. The border security force keeps 7750 camels for this purpose in Rajasthan and Gujarat.

Camel milk

Camel milk is a by-product of camel breeding which is consumed primarily by herdsmen especially on migration and by their families. In Rajasthan, there are traditional cultural restrictions on the sale and processing of camel milk and it is not marketed in the core camel breeding areas, such as Bikaner, Jodhpur and Jaisalmer. But in the late 1960s, there was a large 'grey' camel market in the northern tip of Madhya Pradesh and in parts of southern Rajasthan which proceeded at tea-stalls to private households or under the guise of cow/buffalo milk to dairies. The average daily yield of a lactating camel is around 2 kg. Although, some owners assert that individual yields can be as high as 6 kg or more.

Camel wool

Camel wool is utilized by camel breeders for the manufacturing lampshades, toys, drum covers and certain types of containers. They are also used as material for shoes; according to members of the leather. Working community, there is no tanning facility in Rajasthan and skins have to be transported to South India for this purpose.

A regional specially used to be the Kuppa or Kuppi painted vessels for oil, ghee and perform painted in an intricate pattern. Because of lack of demand this artisan industry has now stopped.

Why camels are needed

Drought resilience

Rajasthan is a drought prone area. Average annual rainfall amounts fluctuate widely between year and in most years. But the policy makers seem to have forgotten this and have supported and subsidized irrigation agriculture in a big way. Already this has led to a depletion of ground water. Supplies in many parts of the stat, including the immediate area around us. Over the last 20 years or so the number of bore wells multiplied exponentially and the traditional one-crop rain fed agriculture was replaced with an irrigated two or even three crop cycle. But since last 7 years the majority of fields has rain fallow and so once again can be put to productive use only by means of livestock. The riots surrounding waster distribution in Hanumangarh are another indication that water will become increasingly scarce rather than more abundant in the coming years. An animal which can thrive on local vegetation that grows without irrigation is an inestimable asset in such a scenario. It is in the interest of drought proofing Rajasthan that the camel should have a larger rather than a smaller share of the economy.

Livelihoods for poor people

In earlier times, camel ownership was a prerogative of the rich and powerful and camel ownership, symbolized wealth as well as a military power. But currently, it is the poor and the voiceless who own camels and for whom they form the basis of their livelihoods. Among camel owners, we can distinguish two broad categories; camel breeders who keep herds of female camels and camel users who own one or two male camels for work. We can estimate that there are about 6000 – 10000 camel breeding families and up to 200000 families for whom working camels are an important element of their livelihood.

Environmental protection

As a means of transporting, goods even in cities, camel carts have much to recommend them being silent, independent of fossil energy and non-polluting. Instead of being perceived as antiquated camel carts should be regarded as trademark of Rajasthan and a progressive because eco-friendly, source of energy, lifting water is another activity that can easily be performed by camels.

Identity

Eighty percent of India's camel population is at home in Rajasthan, and the camel is practically symbolic of this state. The word Rajasthan

particularly conjures up images of camels in most people's mind and everybody knows that camels can be found only in Rajasthan. The camel means deserts, sunset, turbaned and most achieved men even have and advertising agencies capitalize on this from mobile phone companies to the Department of Tourism, many business, exploit the romantic vibration emanating from the image of a camel and use it in their advertising campaigns.

Tourism

Undoubtedly, it is possibility of undertaking a camel safari that lures a large proportion of especially young tourists to Jaisalmer and to Rajasthan as a whole. The significance of the camel for Rajasthan's attractiveness as a tourist destination cannot be overstated. Some tourism entrepreneurs are already expressing anxiety about the shortage of camel.

Recommendations

- Identify emerging market opportunities for camel products (such as milk and meat) and support changes in the farming system to take advantages of these.
- Promote the value addition and marketing of camel products (milk, wool, leather, dung).
- Promote and subsidize the use of camel carts as an eco-friendly source of transport.
- Develop an effect comprehensive camel policy, aimed at the long term conservation of the camel as part of Rajasthan's biodiversity. This should be developed in extensive consultation with the various stakeholders, especially camel-breeding communities.

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