

change

NOTES ON SURVIVAL

THE PUSHKAR camel fair has gained notoriety in recent years as a major centre of camel meat trade. Many female camels sold here end up in meat factories in Uttar Pradesh or are slaughtered in Bengal and even Bangladesh. This is a new development, since traditional camel breeding communities, such as the Raika, have deeply ingrained social inhibitions against the sale of female camels — as ancestral legacy and community capital, these animals are supposed to be passed on from one generation to the next and not leave the community. Non-adherence is punished with social boycott.

But the constriction of grazing areas has nevertheless forced many camel breeders especially from the Mewar area of southern Rajasthan to divest themselves of their herds. It comes as no surprise then that the camel population of Rajasthan declined from 6,68,237 heads in 1997 to 4,98,000 in 2003. This is according to government figures which are not necessarily reliable; other investigations suggest an even more massive decline.

The grazing situation is set to get even worse in light of government plans for bio-diesel cultivation. Some hopes had been pinned on the Forest Rights Bill that also provides for grazing rights of nomadic livestock keepers, but after being approved by Parliament the Bill has been stalled by the Congress president. Unless some solution is found, more camel breeders from southern and central Rajasthan are set to give up herding.

For the camel breeders from Jojawar with whom I have worked for 16 years, this year's trek to Pushkar with their young camels may be their last one. Although they had taken the issue of their customary grazing rights in the Kumbhalgarh Sanctuary up to the Supreme Court, their case was never resolved. In such an uncertain policy environment, no young people can be persuaded to continue camel breeding.



SUDEEP CHAUDHURI

For the camel breeders from Jojawar, this year's trek to the Pushkar fair with their young camels could be their last one. However, there is hope

The LPPS researchers are also impressed by the local camel management system: the herds roam free for several months out of the year, which allows them to exploit a wide variety of highly scattered vegetation. Movements of camels are monitored through tracking of their foot prints and village-specific branding.

In addition, the camels develop attachments to their native villages, and the places where they have given birth.

NOT SHIPSHAPE

ILSE KÖHLER-ROLLEFSON
Animal Conservationist



But according to Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan (LPPS), a Rajasthan-based NGO that first exposed the role of the holy city of Pushkar in the camel meat business, there is now a silver streak on the horizon. Since June 2006, the organisation has been running a project in Jaisalmer that seeks to revive camel husbandry through value-addition to camel products. This is just one of the strategies being pursued. It has conducted a survey of camel herd trends in the district of Jaisalmer and adjoining tehsils. The result: camel numbers in this part of Rajasthan have stabilised over the last ten years. In fact, prices of male camels have risen exponentially. Only a few years ago, an adult animal would fetch around Rs 10,000 — but now this can easily be as high as Rs 30,000.

The hike in fuel prices may have something to do with it. According to French researcher, Christophe Bernard, who has conducted an extensive series of interviews: "Ten years ago people switched to tractors, but now they are more likely to buy a camel for farm work, since they cannot afford the diesel." The same survey also revealed that the camel breeders around Jaisalmer do not normally sell female animals, at least out of the area. While some smaller herders may give up, the animals are picked up by others who seek to expand.

THIS INGENIOUS system is not without its problems. Camels regularly fall victim to traffic accident, they cannot be treated if they become ill, and with the expansion of army activities in the area, the danger of being killed while caught in firing exercises is quite high. Herders also often complain about thefts of camels or their impounding by landowners.

But their strategy of holding on to their ancestral herds may eventually pay rich dividends. The experiments of LPPS with value-addition to camel milk show promising results. Camel milk is a very special substance — containing an insulin like substance that does not break down in the human stomach, it lowers the blood sugar levels of diabetes patients. Hanwant Singh, director of LPPS, notes that till date there are around 32 diabetes patients in Jaisalmer that receive their morning dose of camel milk delivered at their door step. "Our customers appear to have become addicted to the stuff — if they don't receive their delivery on time, they immediately call to complain," he says.

He also notes that while camel milk is difficult to process into curd or cheese, it makes excellent ice cream which is low fat and low in calories. "Camel milk ice cream sold like hot cakes at the Pushkar Fair, proving popular with both Indians and foreign tourists," says Singh.