

Shifting camel cultures

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ONE of India's most fascinating aspects is her wide variety of pastoralist cultures that can be found throughout the entire subcontinent, although they are not always very visible. Many of them offer a humane, ecologically sustainable alternative to the science based animal industries that have taken hold in western countries, and which are often detrimental to animal welfare and to environments.¹

Amongst India's human-livestock-landscape cultures, one of the most intriguing is that of the Raika of Rajasthan and their camels. With a proud heritage as the camel herders of the maharajahs, the Raika maintain large herds of female camels in nomadic systems, grazing them on a mix of forest, commons and harvested fields.

According to their traditional knowledge, camels browse on 36 different species of shrubs, trees and grasses, and many of these have medicinal value.² The Raika observe a number of taboos in their utilization of the camel that are quite puzzling to

a western trained animal scientist: They never slaughter their camels or eat their meat, and they do not sell the milk, the wool, or any female camels. The only 'product' that traditional custom allows them to sell are male camels – which they always sold once a year at the annual livestock fairs at Pushkar, Nagaur and Tilwara, to name just the most famous ones. But over the last couple of decades, the demand for male camels as work animals has almost entirely disappeared, and camel breeding has lost its economic viability, leading to a dramatic drop in the Indian camel population.

In Arab and African camel cultures there is no ban on the use of camels for meat, so where does the Raika attitude towards their camels come from? Is it because the Raika are Hindus, and believe that taking care of camels is a sacred task bestowed upon them by Shiva? However, a quick scan of the several Muslim camel breeding communities in India shows that religion may not be the reason: The Jatts from coastal Gujarat and the Sindhi Muslims from Jaisalmer also refrain from slaughter of camels and consider the idea equally reprehensible. And interestingly, similar sentiments prevail in Iran, as I learnt during a recent visit

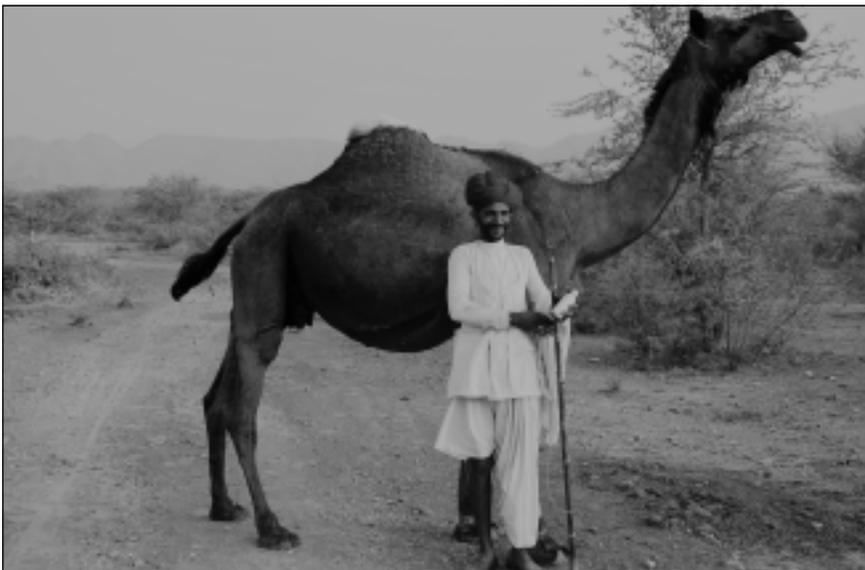
1. I. Köhler-Rollefson, *Camel Karma: Twenty Years Among India's Camel Nomads*. Tranquebar Press, Chennai, 2014.

2. Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan, *The Camels of Kumbhalgarh: A Biodiversity Treasure*. LPPS, Sadri, 2013.

to Semnan province where I met Mr. Rabii from the Torud camel breeding tribe.

We were sitting under the shade of a big tree in Chojaam, a crumbling complex of mud brick buildings in the middle of the stark desert. Chojaam is an abandoned caravan serai from the time when the camel was the only means of transportation, trade and communication; now only a couple of the rooms are used by three camel herders for sleeping and cooking. In front of the buildings is a huge water tank, almost the size of an Olympic swimming pool, filled to the brim with fresh water channelled from a nearby mountain range through *qanats*, Iran's traditional covered irrigation system. The pool is the watering point for about three thousand camels owned by 30 families in Mr. Rabii's clan. The animals roam around the desert feeding on thorny low shrubs and return for drinking at 2-3 day intervals. Most of the people of the Torud tribe live in the town of Torud, about 30 km away, and take turns managing the camels.

A tall and gaunt man in his fifties, with a gentle but somewhat resigned



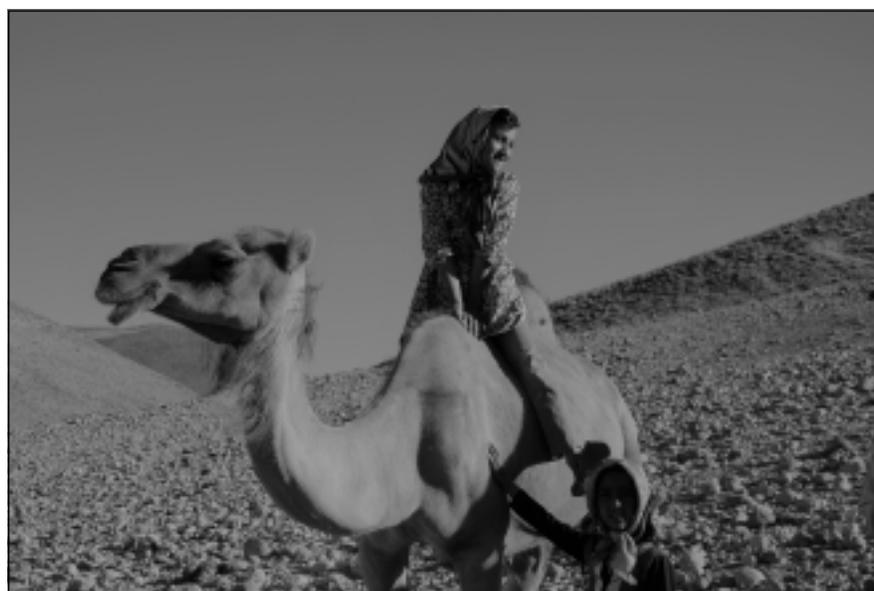
Bhanwarlal Raika with milk bottle.

demeanour, Muhammed Rabii lamented that Iranian camel culture had totally changed since his childhood. 'We never ate camel meat earlier and my father refused to take it until the end of his days. We believed that killing a camel would make a person cruel. And we never used camel wool to weave rugs, only garments, because we thought it disrespectful to the camel to step on its hair with our feet. But now camel breeding is all about meat production.' 'All Torud people are camel breeders,' Hassan Ameri, one

of the three herders currently on rotational duty, chipped in: 'Our families used to have more than 7000 camels. The numbers have decreased, but they still provide us with our basic livelihood—enough to live on, although not enough for any extras or luxuries.' Then he added, 'Soon I will sell ten camels to pay for my son's wedding.'

When asked how the importance of the camel has changed, Mr. Rabii broke into a philosophic homily: 'Before, the camel was everywhere and essential in all aspects of life. We needed it for the transportation of goods, for bringing the bride, and as an ambulance. It was involved in every celebration. When a caravan started, the camels were decorated elaborately and it was a time of excitement and happiness. The wool of the camel was used to make the *aba* (cloak) of the clergy. In the Koran, the camel is the only animal that is put on the same level with humans. But since the car came, all this changed.'

The current camel breeding system is one of minimum input. The camels feed themselves, cursorily supervised by a young man on a motorbike who tries to prevent them



Nomad girls in Iran.

from harm on the highway to Torud, or from being attacked by cheetahs and wolves, but often with limited success. The losses due to accidents and predation are significant, but apart from these dangers it is an ideal area for camels that thrive in the hot and dry climate. Once a year the young male camels are caught and sold to the meat markets in Teheran, Semnan and elsewhere.

In Iran there is big of demand for camel meat, which sells at the same price or higher than lamb, i.e. for 10,000 toman (about 3 USD) per kg live weight. The camel breeders proudly pointed out that they did not fatten their camels with processed chicken manure as has become a widespread practice in Iran. Mr. Rabii strongly disapproved of such methods, emphasizing that camels need to roam around freely and are an essential part of the desert ecosystem. Sitting down next to a prickly camel thorn, he explained how the camels are pruning the dried parts of the plant and thereby stimulating it to branch out. He also pointed at places where camels had urinated, saying that this was where new shrubs

would germinate as soon as a few drops of rain fell.

The traditional knowledge of Mr. Rabii and his camel breeding colleagues – the result of astute observations on the relationship between camels and plants over generations – is supported by *bona fide* scientific research. Already in the 1960s, zoologist Hilde Gauthier Pilters studied the ecology of camels in the Sahara and, in a book published by the University of Chicago Press, came to the conclusion that their grazing behaviour does not cause damage to desert vegetation, but instead nurtures the growth of its plants.³ This knowledge does not seem to have filtered through to bureaucrats and officials sitting in government offices and deciding over rangeland policies.

About 200 km north of Torud, close to Firuzkot, we visited the summer camp of three nomadic families from the Elikai tribe. They were primarily shepherds but also kept a herd of about 40 camels – in excellent fettle, with bulky humps and no trace of mange (the parasitic skin disease that is the scourge of more humid

camel breeding areas). Most of them were only half tamed, but one of them behaved more like a favourite pet than a farm animal, placidly allowing everybody to sit and pose on it. The family seated us in their tattered army type tent which was surprisingly comfortable inside – the floor covered with rugs and big cushions to lean on – then plied us with glasses of tea served on a silver tablet and freshly baked flat bread still warm from the stove.

Nobody is more hospitable than nomads living in isolated areas. Two of the men, with sparkling eyes in their weather beaten faces, talked expansively about their camels and their affection for them. ‘We have seen others who have sold their camels, but they are not any happier than we are – on the contrary,’ they said. ‘But the Ministry of Forest, Rangelands and Watershed is telling us to stop keeping them. The officials say that camels are destructive to the rangeland vegetation.’

‘Camels are very clever animals and *they* are the owners of the range. So as long as they are able to move around, they never destroy anything. They take only one or two bites from a plant, and then move on. In fact, now that there are fewer camels, the balance of the rangelands is being destroyed. The camel thorn has grown so high that the sheep can no longer eat it. And tamarisks die if they are not browsed upon. The government people even tell us that we should sell our camels and that they will bring in new camels from Australia. But what good will that do? Already large numbers of camels are smuggled into the country for slaughter from India and Pakistan. This is dangerous as they pass through our territories and bring in diseases.’



Raika herders in Sirohi district, Rajasthan.

3. H. Gauthier-Pilters and A.I. Dagg, *The Camel: Its Evolution, Ecology, Behavior, and Relationship to Man*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981.

At a meeting of UNICAMEL, an association of camel herders from all over Iran that was held in the Azerbaijan region in the far northwest of Iran, I gained more insight into the minds of the bureaucrats that decide on rangeland policies. The meeting was hosted by the Shahsevan tribal confederacy: Turkish speaking nomads who herd sheep and traditionally used two-humped Bactrian camels to transport their belongings on the migration between summering and wintering grounds. It was organized with the help of CENESTA, an Iranian NGO that has a long history of supporting Iran's 600 nomadic tribes – organized in 100 tribal confederacies – in various ways. The get together took place in an encampment, an *oba*, perched on a slope with a magnificent view of the snow covered volcanic Mount Savelan.

Members of UNICAMEL from all four corners of Iran held forth about their woes, and officials from various government departments gave speeches, often with vastly divergent views. I learned that most of Iran is covered by deserts and steppes in which crops cannot be grown, and therefore nomadism has always been an important, even predominant, way of life. Besides being providers of meat and dairy products, they made major contributions to its arts and crafts, notably its rug and carpet making traditions. Unfortunately, under the Pahlevis, the dynasty that took over Iran at the beginning of the 20th century, the nomads were considered a threat. In the 1960s, the Shah declared the rangelands to be property of the state and the nomads were forcefully settled. While almost all other policies were changed after the Iranian Revolution in 1978, the rangeland policy remained the same, and until today bureaucrats decide about the dates on



Camel milk is naturally foamy.

which nomads can move between their summer and winter pastures.

Iranian officials may want to keep camels off the range but, at the same time, they are eager to increase camel meat supply. Three years ago the government imported ten Bactrian male camels from China to cross them with the local one-humped camels because the hybrids reach significantly higher body size. Now they are planning to bring in 300 more in a swap for oil. (Due to the embargo on Iran, the Chinese had not been able to pay for the oil they obtained from Iran and instead sent compensation in kind, including camels).

The nomads also reported that large numbers of camels were being brought into the country from India – and that huge herds passed through their territories *en route* to slaughterhouses in Teheran. While Iranian officials did not confirm this, the nomads emphasized that such things could not happen without government connivance. Reliable sources in Pakistan and India also confirmed that large numbers of camels cross the Indo-Pakistan border in Kutch in Gujarat to reach their final destination in slaugh-

terhouses in Iran. This happens even though this part of the Indo-Pakistan border is supposed to be sealed by a strong fence, and the camel was recently declared a 'state animal' with its export and slaughter banned in the Indian state of Rajasthan.

Disregard for nomads and their way of raising livestock is not limited to Iran: similar thinking prevails in many countries. In China, Tibetan nomads are forcefully settled in order to protect the rangelands, leading to their economic destitution and dependence on handouts from the government. It is difficult to understand what is behind the contradictory policies of Asian countries versus the camels, and nomads in general. Why would Iran bring in camels from Australia instead of supporting its own camel breeders? Why does China sedentarize Tibetan nomads for 'environmental protection' when nomadism is recognized as a means of conserving nature elsewhere? In India, camel nomads are systematically excluded from their summer grazing grounds in forests, while at the same time not being allowed to either sell their milk⁴ or dispose off their camels for meat. How can Rajasthan

expect to save the camel when its products cannot be sold and it does not ensure places for camels to graze?

The Indian camel population has been in dramatic decline over the last few decades, reducing from more than a million to a couple of hundred thousand, according to the last livestock census in 2012. When this situation registered with the Government of Rajasthan, the camel was declared a 'state animal' on 30 June 2014. Subsequently, the Rajasthan Camel (Prohibition of Slaughter and Regulation of Temporary Migration or Export) Bill, 2015 was passed on 30 March 2015. Furthermore, on 2 October 2016, the Rajasthan government initiated a subsidy scheme, the Ushtra Vikas Yojana, for all new camel calves being born. But none of these well intended interventions have had an impact so far, and have in fact made the situation worse for the camel breeders.

Unable to generate any income from their herds, Indian camel owners are desperate to dispose of them, despite this going against deeply ingrained beliefs. Sometimes they neglect them, leading to diseases and the gradual dying off of the herd. Or they take the drastic step of selling their entire herd to a trader, mentally blocking out any ideas of what may be its final fate. But trucks transporting camels are now routinely stopped by the police and the animals are 'rescued' by animal welfare organizations, which are then in a quandary about what to do with the confiscated camels. They usually raise funds to bring them back to Rajasthan, their 'original habitat'. But who takes care of them there? If the animals are healthy there may be a willing taker, but if they are old and sick, as is often

4. This situation has changed since December 2016 when camel milk was officially approved by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India.

the case, then their plight remains the same. They may once again be picked up by a trader and face another ordeal in a truck. What to do with old and ailing camels, and with excess male camels, is a huge issue to which there are no easy answers.

NGOs have argued that the only way of saving Rajasthan's camels, beyond an existence in zoos and as the occasional safari animal, is to develop a market for camel milk and other camel products. Camel milk is frequently described as the world's next super food, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has opined that the global market for camel milk may grow to \$10 billion annually. The camel dairy sector is the fastest growing dairy sector in the world, according to some sources. Large-scale dairy farms are operating in several Arab countries, including Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia. Smaller dairy farms are currently being set up in the USA, Europe, and Australia to cater for the demand from health conscious consumers. In Kenya, and other countries in the Horn of Africa, women are often the ones who trade camel milk, obtaining a good income from this occupation.

The reason for the growing popularity of camel milk lies in its therapeutic qualities. Containing ingredients that act as immune system booster, it has traditionally been used in the treatment of tuberculosis in India and Central Asian countries. It also contains an insulin-like substance that is not broken down in the stomach and immediately lowers the blood sugar level; therefore doctors often recommend it for the treatment of diabetes. But the greatest demand for camel milk comes from parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Many autistic children respond well to camel milk, establishing eye contact and sleeping better

after only a small dose.⁵ Camel milk can be consumed by lactose intolerant people and has a positive effect on allergies, autism and, according to some sources, even cancer.

In India there is certainly a market for camel milk and a couple of Raika families are already benefitting from it and making a decent income. They immediately invest their profits into the purchase of more female camels. Camels have once again become an asset for them, showing that this is how camel conservation can work. If the health food market grows further, the challenge will be to avoid the notion of stall-feeding camels and instead maintain the herds in their customary nomadic grazing systems, enabling camels to harvest biodiverse wild vegetation—which may ultimately be the reason why camel milk is so healthy, due to the medicinal properties of their forage plants.

If this transition takes place, the survival of the camel in Rajasthan will be ensured, but we will still need to find meaningful tasks for the male camels if we want to avoid their slaughter. How about reviving camel racing, promoting camel cart tours (actually a very comfortable and relaxing mode of travel), declaring some of the congested areas in Jaipur, Jodhpur and Udaipur as motorized traffic free zones and only allowing camel carts to ply? It may sound unrealistic, but it would purify the air and create silence! Almost all shopping areas in Europe's inner cities are now pedestrian zones and horse drawn carriages are available in major tourist spots. Could Rajasthan not go 'camelestrian' in honour of its state animal?

5. Christina M. Adams, 'Patient Report: Autism Spectrum Disorder Treated with Camel Milk', *Global Advances in Health and Medicine* 2(6), 2013, pp. 78-80. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3865381/>