



PASTORAL TIMES

A Centre for Pastoralism Publication

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Mobile Schools for Pastoral Nomads in Jammu and Kashmir

Every year, the nomadic Gujjar and Bakkarwal communities migrate to the upper reaches of the Kashmir valley in summer. Gujjars are buffalo herders and Bakkarwals are keepers of sheep and goats. They rear their animals, between high and low altitudes, in the Western Himalayas. The Bakkarwals saw turbulent times at the beginning of the year when an eight year old girl from their community was brutally raped and murdered in Kathua, Jammu. Though their fight for justice continues, the children of Bakkarwals and Gujjars are now looking towards a brighter future where they won't have to choose between their traditional occupation and education.

Ahead of the annual migration of nomadic Gujjars and Bakkarwal families this year, authorities in Rajouri district of Jammu and Kashmir made arrangements for over two dozen schools to move with them to ensure proper educational facilities for students.

A total of 25 schools having an enrolment of 801 students - 410 boys and 391 girls - moved with the migratory population.

"These schools were provided 45 teachers for ensuring education in higher reaches during the annual migration in Kashmir," an official spokesman said. He said district development commissioner, Rajouri, Shahid Iqbal Choudhary finalized the plan at a meeting of senior officers from various departments and heads of migratory schools along with staff.

The annual migration of nomadic Gujjars and Bakerwal families began end of April this year. Choudhary directed that books and uniform were also provided to students before the migration.

Apart from educational aids, the department also provided sports equipment and first aid kits for each migratory school.

A comprehensive plan for self-defence training was also discussed and finalized. The students have been provided scholarship by the Tribal Affairs Department, the spokesman said.

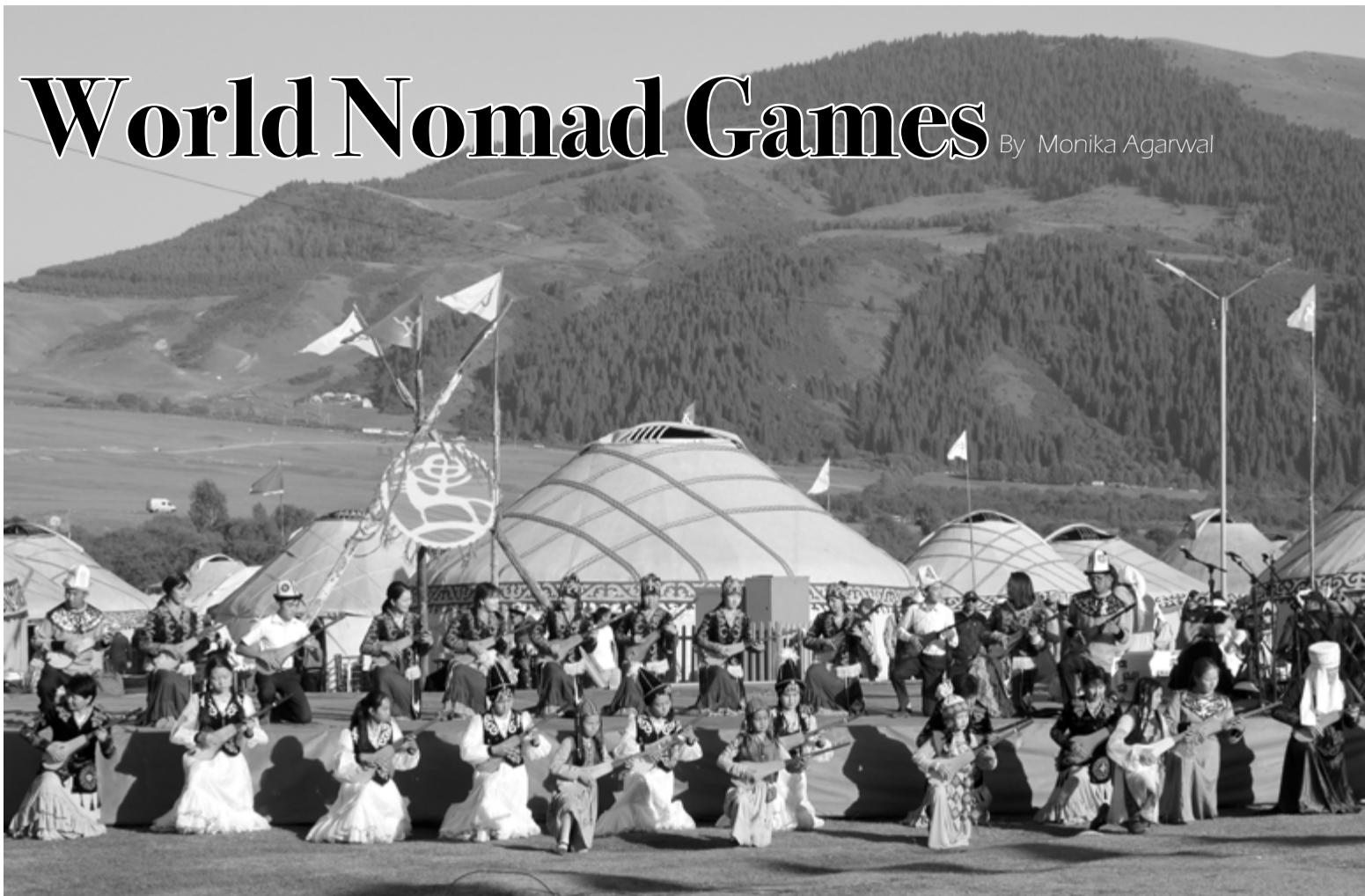
He said the Chief Education Officer was directed to regularly monitor attendance in migratory schools during the period and it was impressed upon the heads of schools to hold

mandatory parent-teacher meetings twice a month during the migration period. 🐾

"Ahead of the annual migration of nomadic Gujjars and Bakerwal families this year, authorities in Rajouri district of Jammu and Kashmir made arrangements for over two dozen schools to move with them to ensure proper educational facilities for students."

Spiti Donkey is no longer the only indigenous donkey breed of India...5





Musical performance at the games



The Kyrgyz hospitality and generosity was at its best in the hundreds of yurts at the Kyrchyn gorge, offering a range of traditional food and delicacies. There was also a competition for the best decorated Yurt.



Selfie with an eagle was the most done photo op at the games.

Kok Boru
 Kok Boru is undeniably the highlight of the Games, and easily the most dangerous game I have ever seen. Insane actually! It combines elements of polo, football and rugby. Players on horses wrestle and jostle with their opponents to take possession of a headless, 30 kilogram fresh carcass of goat, which they then hold onto as they gallop towards the end of the field, with the hope of throwing it into a round goal the 'taikazan'. It gets rough and ruthless; Kok Boru is definitely not for faint hearted. The winning team gets to eat the goat. It is not uncommon for wolves to attack herds belonging to nomadic shepherds. To protect their livestock, shepherds hunted wolves. It is believed that nomadic shepherds eventually developed Kok Boru (Blue Wolf) to pass the time while returning to camp with the prized dead wolf. Now the wolf is replaced with a headless carcass of a goat. Kok Boru is the cultural symbol of sport in Central Asia, and the national sport of Afghanistan where it is called Buzkashi (literally goat grabbing).



It needs strength to lift the goat off the ground, hold it, and gallop towards the goal. Some of the players could not even pick it off the ground.

The World Nomad Games dubbed as the 'Olympics for Nomads' are the quintessence of nomadic spirit and strength. This year, over 2000 athletes and performers from 82 countries came together to celebrate and champion the global movement of ethno sports and culture.

The biennial games were held in the first week of September for the third time in the town of Cholpon Ata in Eastern Kyrgystan. Cholpon Ata lies on the Northern shore of the second largest saline lake Issyk-kul which means 'warm lake' because it never freezes even though surrounded by snowcapped peaks. This region is historically significant, Issyk-Kul Lake being a stopover on the Silk Road.

Kyrgystan is a mountainous country with little scope for agriculture. It is said that there was a time when all Kyrgyz were nomadic and semi nomadic pastoralists, which changed with the Soviet era. One of the main purposes of the games is for the revival and preservation of the region's nomadic culture.

The entire week was a grand spectacle of heroism, dexterity, and inexhaustible physical and mental agility. Each day was an experience bouncing across multiple venues and discovering the spirit of games. The ethno village set up in the meadows of Kyrchyn gorge (40 kms from Cholpon Ata) evokes special memories of beautiful horses, yaks, camel, eagles and falcons; innumerable theatrical, musical, and dance performances, men and women in colourful costumes randomly dancing and singing, musical instruments I have never seen; art installations of nomad tools and instruments, an ethno-bazaar for buying memories and so much more.



Monika Agarwal is a management graduate who has worked with various national, regional and global alliances on pastoralism.



Ghee: Story of the Superfat we all love

By Aditya Raghavan

The most interesting ghee I have consumed is from Spiti valley, Himachal Pradesh. At 4300 metres altitude, Demul in Spiti is one of the highest villages in the world. In the arid, leeward side of the Himalayas, water is a scarce resource and most of the foliage is shrubs and small trees. People wholly depend on their domesticated animals for basic survival. Dung from churrus – a local cow-yak breed – is painstakingly collected by villagers every summer day, walking up and down the terrace fields, as it is a necessary energy source to keep homes warm in winter. Butter and ghee form the most crucial food source.

Milk is collected everyday and poured into a wooden churning contraption that is quite large, about fifty-litres in capacity. Roughly once in ten days, the continuously fermenting milk is churned into butter. This butter has all sorts of complexity to it: From lactic notes of buttermilk, to slightly piquant cheese-like notes (think of the aroma of Parmigiano Reggiano), and even the elusive taste of 2-Heptanone – a flavour compound produced in blue cheese. The ghee made from this butter has a delicious punch, invigorating my mind and making me ask questions like, “Would this not pair perfectly with a hot mooli paratha?”

I have a dream where, in several kitchens across the country, people have a cabinet dedicated to their coveted collection of ghees. This idea is not revolutionary. Most food lovers today have replaced Dabur honey from their childhood with a cabinet of different, small-batch produced ones from around the country. Sometimes they might reach for that Malabar pepper honey to sweeten their chai, other times a drizzle of a delicate wild forest honey pairs splendidly with their fruit bowl.

Just as bees are attracted to the first blossoms of the season, bovines follow fresh grass. It is simple, really. It takes roughly 30 kg of milk to produce 1 kg of ghee. The flavours of the terroir – the wild shrubs, grasses and flowers – that animals have fertilized and grazed get heightened in this compression. But let us go back to the beginning of the story.

There are two types of traditional Indian ghees. One, as mentioned above, where yogurt is churned to make butter that is subsequently converted to ghee. The more common ghee comes from clotted cream (malai) skimmed off from the top of boiled milk, or sometimes even set dahi, which is churned into butter and then heated into ghee. The latter is a common practice in several Indian households and is certainly how my mother and grandmother would make ghee.

Both these techniques can be traced back to pastoral techniques that are still being practiced today. Pastoralists have had to deal with milk and its by products on a daily basis for centuries. They learned that by churning yogurt in a to-and-fro motion, for a long enough time, and at the right temperature, they could extract butter from it. In households, the warm climate of the tropics necessitated boiling milk to keep it from going bad, and this led to the collection of readily available malai on a daily basis. Malai is different from fresh cream – it cannot be whisked into airy mousses.

Meanwhile in Western Asia and Europe, fresh cream was being separated from raw milk using a crankshaft system that spins milk fast, separating the heavier skimmed milk and allowing the lighter cream to drip down. The development of this mechanical system came from traditions instilled by pastoralists in the cooler climate there. Pastoral herders learned quickly that allowing raw milk to sit overnight in the cold would result in fresh cream rising to the top. This led to a tradition of consuming raw milk and its products – cheeses, cream, crème fraîche and French-style raw milk cultured butter (beurre au lait cru).

The key difference here is that we have always struggled to separate fat from milk, whether it is by the laborious churning of yogurt or by collecting small portions of malai. This struggle has inadvertently led to a far superior flavour. In both cases, fermentation plays a necessary role in developing and nurturing those flavours of the land and releasing micronutrients that add depth and character to the ghee.

Malai ghee has a gentle fermented dairy flavour on a backbone of notes of toffee that come about by caramelisation of the residual sugars in malai. This nutty, brown-butter flavour is a joy to enjoy in a tadka. With yogurt ghee, the content of sugars is very low in the butter and good yogurt ghee does not have these caramelisation notes. With its more sophisticated flavours, brought about by secondary fermentation, yogurt ghee is a revelation that needs to find a more mainstream spotlight.

Today’s mass-produced store-bought ghee is yet another example of industrialised food. In order to reduce costs and losses, large-scale dairies have

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”

adopted the European separation of fresh cream from milk and make ghee by directly heating this sugar-rich cream. In fact, fresh cream available in stores today is not a traditional Indian product and has entered the Indian food culture as recently as the White Revolution of the 1970s. The fermented dairy flavour is absent but customers still enjoy it as the nutty notes remind them of ghar ka ghee.

Given India’s diverse microclimates and dairy breeds it is anyone’s guess as to how many varieties of ghees we can produce. Would it not be nice to taste the ghee made from just a single cow fed a very specific diet for six months? Or perhaps do a tasting of ghees from various villages of Sikkim, the way one would taste butter all over the French Alps. Will I get to confit mutton in goat ghee some day? 🐏



A cheesemaker who was a physicist in his past life, Aditya Raghavan is motivated by discovery, technique and understanding when it comes to food.



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Maldharin & Unt Gyaani

By Arvind Lodaya & Nishita Chheda



Coping with the real world: Animal Intelligence versus Artificial Intelligence

By Ilse Köhler-Rollefson



to make 'better' decisions than humans with their limited computing abilities.

Indeed, the world has become so complex that probably no human can any longer fully understand the connections between the different components of our multi-layered social and natural environment. Scientists develop computer models to predict the consequences of climate change and the impacts of various degrees of temperature rise. But have they really integrated all eventualities and factors into their models? Almost all scientists are highly specialized, locked into their mental silos and few of them are able to see the forest, rather than only trees, or minute parts of the trees.

Compare that with pastoralists: Day in, day out, they are coping with the REAL world. They know how to read "nature" and how to interpret the signs and signals sent out by the non-human components of our eco-system. They notice changes in the abundance of birds, insects, and plants, in weather patterns, in soil conditions, in the health of their herds, analysing their observations and hypothesizing on cause and effect.

In managing their interaction with the real world, pastoralists often rely on animal intelligence, piggy-backing on the instincts of their herd animals. It tends to be the animals that give the signals for migration to start. The buffaloes of the Van Gujjars become restless when it is time to move up to the alpine pastures from the Himalayan foothills, the sheep of the Rebari in Rajasthan's Godwar area can hardly be stopped

"In pastoralist systems, the animals are respected partners, not just objects."

A large proportion of humanity now spends much of its day in the virtual world, hooked onto computers or smartphones, answering emails, reading news in the internet, watching movies, or playing computer games. We press buttons instead of engaging in physical activity. In a way, our body has already become superfluous. But the next trend is just around the corner, or has already arrived: our brains are to be replaced by artificial intelligence. Robots, programmed by humans, are expected to take over not only many of our daily chores but also to be entrusted with analysing complex situations and huge data-sets

from walking southwards at the time of Diwali when local pastures have dried up. The camels of the Thar Desert follow the clouds – they know where rain has fallen and cannot be prevented from racing off into that direction.

Animals also self-medicate and purposefully seek out and eat specific plants that can remedy their health problems. When they need the help of the herders, these make a diagnosis and provide traditional treatments based on ethno-veterinary knowledge, in the absence of lab tests and computer print-outs of blood values.

Handling the environment is not just a question of animal instinct, but also of their learned behaviour – passed on from one animal generation to the next. Young animals learn from their mothers and older relatives which plants are healthy and which to avoid. Transferring camels from one environment to another – for instance from the arid Thar Desert to the lush Aravalli Hills with their different types of vegetation is fraught with problems because they do not know how to forage in the new place – it takes months for them to learn.

The hill shepherds of Britain make use of "hefting" to keep flocks of sheep on particular stretches of common land without fencing. Lambs learn from their mothers where optimal grazing and shelter can be found throughout the year.

In pastoralist systems, the animals are respected partners, not just objects. The connection between people and their herds or flocks usually goes back many generations. For herd animals, social behaviour is more important than individual performance, and pastoralists select animals for this quality. Contrast this with the scientific approach to animal selection which ignores behaviour and social characteristics, as well as complex aspects like resilience, focusing only on physical characteristics and output. Selection is based on very specific 'genomic' characteristics at the DNA level, rather than at the animal as a whole. Will genomic selection consider all aspects necessary for breeding vigorous animals that can also deal with climate change and less than

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optimal feed resources? So far scientific selection in its focus on a small number of performance characteristics has driven an incremental narrowing of the gene pool, while pastoralists are the ones that have, until now, ensured diversity – of genetic resources, of production systems, of products. And diversity is the foundation of much needed resilience.

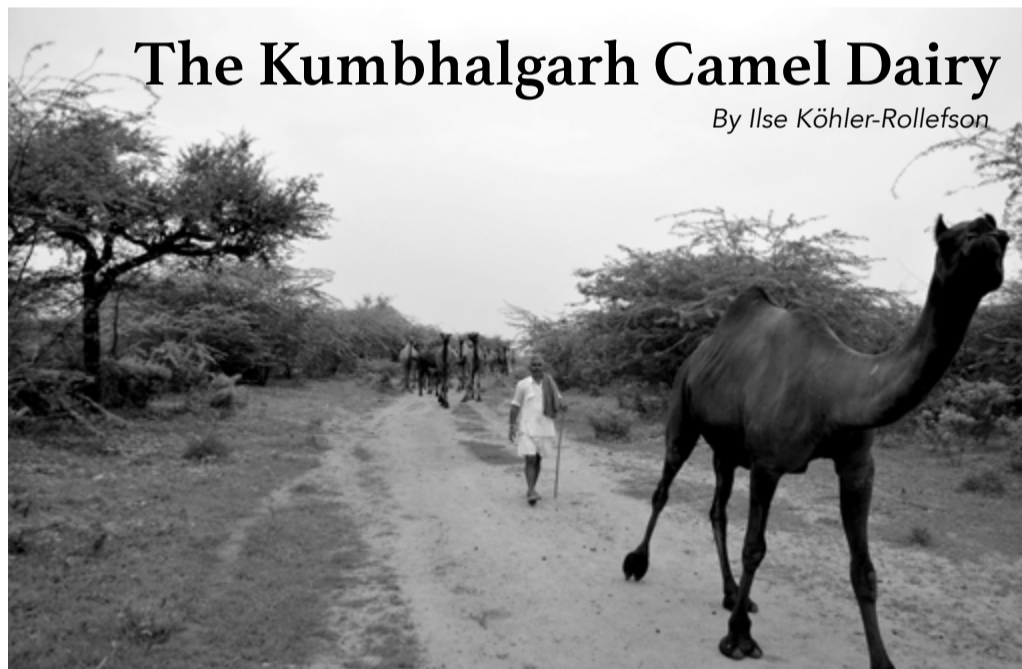
We need pastoralist production systems in which animals are respected and their intelligence is valued much more than industrial precision agriculture in which animals are reduced to mechanical input-output devices. My bet is that the former will outlast the latter! 🐪



Ilse is a native of Germany but has been partly based in Rajasthan (India) since she met the Raika camel pastoralists during a research fellowship on camel socio-economics and management systems in 1990/1991. She has more than 100 scientific publications in journals spanning various disciplines and published a number of monographs.

The Kumbhalgarh Camel Dairy

By Ilse Köhler-Rollefson



India's camel population is plummeting rapidly, down from over one million in the late 1980s to about 200,000 currently. This development is due to loss of its transport function and lack of appreciation for its food potential, among other factors. The endeavour by the Rajasthan government to save it by declaring the camel "state animal" only made the situation worse. Although there have been frequent announcements by government cooperatives about their intentions to support camel dairying, these plans still have to materialize.

Because of the dire situation, the Kumbhalgarh micro-camel dairy was recently set up on the campus of Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan (LPPS) near Sadri in Rajasthan's Pali district. It is operated by the social enterprise Camel Charisma Pvt. Ltd. and has received support from private donors in Germany and Australia to set up a state-of-the-art pasteurization and chilling facility. It ships pasteurized and frozen camel milk in 200 ml bottles, packed in ice, directly to end consumers all over India.

The prime motivation for setting up Camel Charisma and the Kumbhalgarh Camel Dairy was to provide income opportunities for the traditional camel herding communities. The dairy pays better prices for camel milk than anybody else and provides additional benefits such as camel

health care and, through its parent NGO, LPPS, advocacy and legal support for grazing rights.

The camels of the associated Raika pastoralists are sustained exclusively on bio-diverse natural vegetation providing micro-nutrients absent from modern diets. The products are pure and traceable to individual camel herds.

In order to increase transparency and to raise awareness about the situation of the camel, Camel Charisma provides the opportunity to go on "chaifari" and to visit camel herds and drink camel milk and camel milk tea with the Raika camel nomads. 🐪

More information at www.camelcharisma.com



Call for papers

Living Lightly: Pastoralism in a Changing World
Pune, India, February 15th-16th, 2019

The first edition of the Living Lightly: Pastoralism in a Changing World conference took place in New Delhi in late 2016 on the sidelines of the Living Lightly exhibition. The second edition of the conference is scheduled for the 15th-16th February 2019, to be held in Pune, Maharashtra.

While the broad theme of the conference remains the same, we are inviting presentations by young scholars including advanced graduate student research, recent PhDs or fresh work by young faculty. We invite abstracts of papers from anywhere in the world, as long as the research itself has been carried out in India. Partial support for travel within the country can be provided.

The conference is a collaborative effort by Ambedkar University Delhi (<http://www.aud.ac.in/index.html>); Centre for Pastoralism (<http://pastoralism.org.in>); Institut de Recherche pour le développement (<https://en.ird.fr>); and Indian School of Business (<http://www.isb.edu>). Each of these institutions is represented by an individual on the organising committee, as listed below. Please reach out to any of us for clarifications.

Abstracts may be submitted via <https://goo.gl/q5nueV>

Deadline: 10 December 2018.

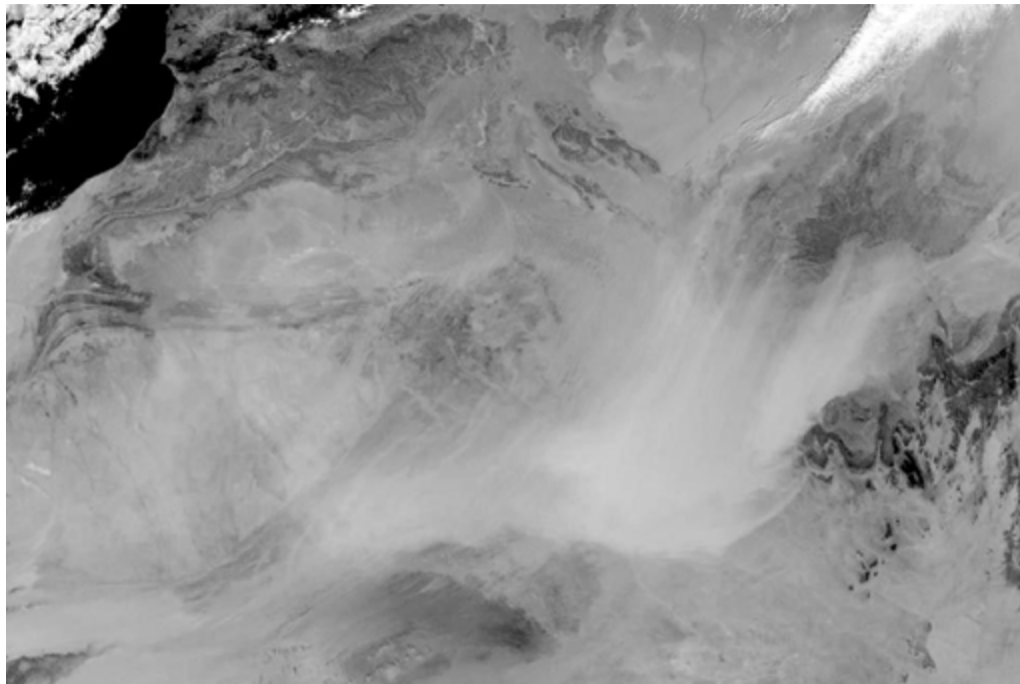
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Pastoralists may have delayed the formation of the Sahara desert by half a millennium

By Brooks Hays

Photo: NASA/UPI



According to a new climate model, the Sahara desert should have formed 500 years earlier than it did. The influence of hunter-gatherers and pastoralists may explain the delay in desertification.

The Sahara only became the desert it's known as today some 5,500 years ago. Some 8,000 years ago, the band stretching across North Africa was green, home to diverse vegetation and populations of hunter-gatherers.

Changes in the tilt of Earth's orbital axis cause paths of seasonal monsoons in Africa to shift. These shifts explain why the Sahara alternates between dry and wet across long time-scales.

Scientists have previously argued over-exploitation and degradation by humans accelerated the Sahara's last transition from grassland to desert, but the latest findings -- published this week in the journal *Nature Communications* -- suggest the opposite is true.

"The possibility that humans could have had a stabilizing influence on the environment has significant implications," Chris Brierley, a geographer at the University College London, said in a news release. "We contest the common narrative that past human-environment interactions must always be one of over-exploitation and degradation."

Scientists designed a model to predict when the African Humid Period should have ended. Researchers populated their model with data on vegetation, precipitation and atmospheric CO₂. The simulations showed the "Green Sahara"

should have turned to desert 500 years earlier than it did -- not later.

The discovery suggests human activities could have delayed the region's transition to desert.

"The fact that societies practicing 'pastoralism' persisted in this region for so long and invested both economically and ideologically in the local landscape, does not support the scenario of over-exploitation," Brierley said. "Our study shows that increasing human population and sustainable pastoralism did not accelerate -- and may even have delayed -- the decline of the Green Sahara."

Around 1,000 years before the Sahara turned to desert, the region experienced an increase in the number of pastoralists, nomadic or semi-nomadic cattle-herders.

Research suggests the Sahara's herders were adept at adapting to environmental change and managing scarce natural resources.

"The spread of domestic animals across the Sahara occurred at a time of increasing climatic instability, and yet, these pastoralist populations thrived," King's College London researcher Katie Manning said. "It is likely that strategies used by contemporary traditional herders, such as seasonal movement and selective grazing, were also used by these early pastoralists, helping to maintain an otherwise deteriorating ecosystem."

This story first appeared on UPI. https://www.upi.com/Science_News/2018/10/01/Humans-delayed-the-formation-of-the-Sahara-desert-by-half-a-millennium/1731538409168/

"The fact that societies practicing 'pastoralism' persisted in this region for so long and invested both economically and ideologically in the local landscape, does not support the scenario of over-exploitation."

With field schools in Kenya, FAO teaches techniques to combat drought

To strengthen resilience in the Horn of Africa against natural hazards like drought, which can lead to cattle losses and increased food insecurity, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is supporting pastoralists in northeastern Kenya's Mandera County to grow pasture for livestock.

"Like any other crop, pasture can be grown, nurtured and stored for use in times of need, allowing for a great rate of recovery of degraded land when rested," said Paul Opio, FAO livestock and pastoralism expert.

Composed of arid and semi-arid areas, Mandera County forms part of a cross-border region between Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia where pastoralist communities are highly vulnerable to recurrent droughts that degrade rangelands and reduce access to traditional grazing areas.

In Mandera, hands-on learning methods for producing, managing and utilizing fodder are taught in a 'school without walls,' where groups of 20 to 30 men, women and youth learn through experiential and participatory sessions.

Not initially part of community decision-making, the vice-chair of one group pointed out that breaking traditional barriers have benefited women and youth.

"Women are able to produce, store and sell hay bales and are, therefore, no longer dependent on men for most of their upkeep," explained Shanqaray Hassan Mohamed.

As part of a partnership programme on drought resilience, FAO, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and others have formed a total of ten Agro Pastoral Field Schools (APFS) across five project sites.

At the field schools, participants study each stage of feed production and preservation from preparing the land to planting seeds and whether to water by rain or irrigation -- right up to harvesting, and preserving and storing pasture seeds and hay bales.

The learning cycle takes four months to complete and is offered twice a year. Farmers are also taught the best ways to remove invasive weeds, notably "Prosopis spp," which is accelerating the rate of degradation of rangeland ecosystems.

The field schools use comparative experimentation as a key learning method. For example, participants observe how two similarly planted plots treated in different ways develop over various stages. They also analyze and discuss innovative problem-solving techniques and explore new methods to improve breeding and animal husbandry practices.

"As a result of the APFS, we are seeing improved pasture availability and restoration of degraded lands, while livestock body conditions have improved and mortality has been reduced," Khalif Ibrahim Barrow, focal point for the Mandera County FAO/IGAD Partnership Programme, summed up the schools' benefits.

"For pastoralist families, food security is improved and incomes are higher," he added, concluding: "In short, communities have become a lot more resilient."

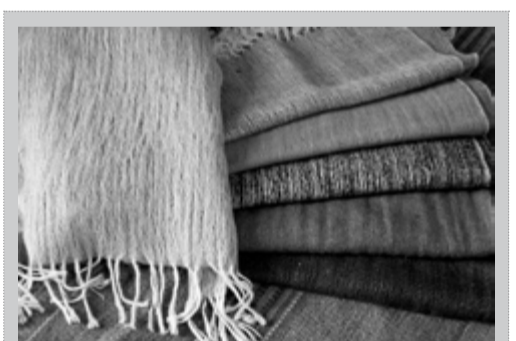
This story has been adapted from the article that appeared in *The European Sting*. <https://europeansting.com/2018/11/23/with-field-schools-in-kenya-un-agriculture-agency-teaches-techniques-to-combat-drought/>

Photo: FAO



Halari Donkey Given Independent Breed Status

The National Bureau of Animal Genetic Resources (NBAGR), the nodal agency of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), for registration of new breeds has given independent breed status to the Halari Donkey, along with the Kahmi goat and the Panchali sheep - the breeds which are mainly found in Saurashtra region of Gujarat. Incidentally, the Halari donkey is the second donkey breed to be recognised in the country after Spiti, the breed which is indigenous to Spiti Valley.



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The Brokpa of West Kameng and Tawang districts in Arunachal Pradesh are a community of reclusive herders of the Monpa tribe. They are nomadic, move around in fixed patterns, and live in the mountains at altitudes ranging from 9,000 to 15,000 feet. They migrate to lower areas during the long winters from October to April, and move to the higher ranges during the summer and rainy seasons, from May to September.

One morning in November 2016, I started on a journey to Thembang village in West Kameng. Thembang is located at an altitude of around 7,500 feet. It is an entirely Monpa village of some 60 occupied houses. The nearest town, Dirang, is 26 kilometres away.

The next day I went to Lagam, a winter settlement of a group of Brokpa. To reach Lagam, located at 8,100 feet, I walked for around 11 kilometres for more than eight hours through dense forest. When I reached at 6 p.m., Pem Tsering, a 27-year-old Brokpa herdsman, welcomed me with a warm smile.

The next day morning, I saw that Lagam is actually a tiny winter-time hamlet of Brokpa pastoralists. It has one small monastery. Around 40-45 people live here in 8 to 10 stone-and-bamboo houses with tin roofs. In November, the hamlet is full as the herders descend to this lower pastureland. From May to September, Lagam stays mostly empty as the young herders move out with their herds of yaks and horses to higher ground, such as Mago village. The elders usually stay back.

Photo Essay

Brokpas of Arunanchal Pradesh

The peek into the lives of the reclusive nomadic pastoralists

By Ritayan Mukherjee



A Brokpa man preparing for migration.

Mago, at 11,800 feet, is located along the disputed McMahon Line which demarcates northeast India and Tibet. To reach Mago in the summers, the Brokpa walk through mountain ranges and passes that are even higher – their route includes Lagam, Thungri, Chang La, Nyang, Potok, Lurthim, and then Mago.

Others can reach the area by road only from Tawang. Indian nationals from outside the region are allowed to stay here for just one night with special permission from the Indian Army. Because of the border dispute, even Brokpa who migrate to Mago have to carry government-issued identity cards.

The daily lives of Brokpa centre around simple rhythms. Their major source of income is yak. They collect its milk for cheese and butter, and sell these items in the local market. A barter system also exists within the community. “They exchange yak and milk products with the people staying in lowland areas, where agriculture is the prime occupation,” says Bapu Pema Wange, a Monpa from Thembang village, and a project officer with WWF-India’s Western Arunachal Landscape Programme. “We (his clan, the Bapu) barter trade with them; we exchange our maize, barley, buckwheat and dry red chilly for their butter, churpi and yak meat. Basically, they depend on us for food and we depend on them for food.”

Later this year, by mid-October, the Brokpa will make the descent from their summer pasture. “We walk through the jungle, find resources for grazing and firewood from the jungle,” Pem says. “This jungle is our mother.”



A fire is always lit in the Brokpa kitchen. It helps them to stay warm during the harsh winters.



Old women generally do not go for grazing. They stay back in their villages. However, if needed they join their families to help them during summer season.



The Brokpa mostly eat rice (bought from markets at lower altitudes) and yak meat. They eat only a few vegetables like potatoes because the land here is not fertile enough to cultivate vegetables.



Ritayan Mukherjee is a Kolkata-based photography enthusiast and a PARI (People’s Archive of Rural India) Fellow.

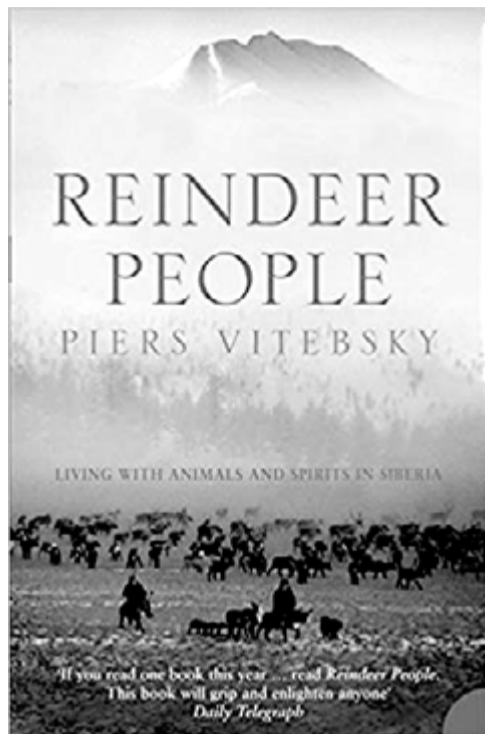
Books

Reindeer People

Living with Animals and Spirits in Siberia

by Piers Vitebsky

A Book Review by Louisa Waugh



Piers Vitebsky is an anthropologist who has spent the past 17 years (on and off) living among the Eveny reindeer herders of north-eastern Siberia. *Reindeer People*, his lengthy account of months at a time herding and migrating alongside the Eveny, is a tapestry of life in the frozen taiga. It is a wondrous, complex story of nomads surviving amid the dictatorships and ruin of the former Soviet Union, and Vitebsky tells it beautifully.

When he first arrived in the Verkhoyansk mountains to research the Eveny, Vitebsky was deliberately confined to the administrative centre of Sebyan village by wily local bureaucrats. But he swiftly negotiated a visit to local herders, and gradually began to spend more and more time out in the taiga in the company of several different families.

Early on in his narrative Vitebsky suggests that it may actually be the reindeer who have domesticated these hunters and transformed them into herders, rather than the other way round. It is a thought-provoking premise about the power that we often assume we wield over our environment. Certainly, the relationship between the Eveny herders and the animals is utterly intertwined, and in many ways interdependent. Each herder has his or her own Kujjai: a reindeer specially consecrated to protect its owner from harm, even if that means dying in place of the herder. During the Siberian winter, which seems to last for at least half the year, Vitebsky wryly comments that "the Eveny looked and smelled like reindeer, with their pungent mittens, hats, boots and massive all-enveloping outer coat. Without this mimicry, they would die within hours."

In chapters with intriguing titles, such as "Kostya's Mushroom Crisis, Camp 10" and

"Landscape with Gulag: Brushed by White Man's Madness", he gradually unravels the life of these people and their relationships with each other, their reindeer and the host of powerful spirits that surround them. He describes how the herders ambush wild reindeer, which still roam across the taiga a million strong: "If two hunters imitate the silhouette of a reindeer, one bending down like a pantomime horse and the other lifting his bow or gun as antlers, it will approach them to investigate..." He goes on to describe the complexities of the Eveny language, which has more than 1,500 words devoted to describing the body parts, diseases, diets and moods of their reindeer. The language itself is "founded on the use of animals as metaphors for relations between humans".

Vitebsky's fascination with his subject and joyful attention to detail are what make this book stand out - this is a man who devotes almost an entire page to hand-drawn diagrams of reindeer ear tags. Many of his conversations are relayed at length, providing as keen a sense of what the Eveny think of their lives and themselves as most of us are ever going to witness. He does not gloss over the ingrained violence, alcoholism and suicide which have plagued the Eveny and other Siberian peoples for generations, especially the young men, but neither does he gloat nor wring his hands piteously over their tragedies. In fact he is discreet almost to the point of detachment about his own emotions, bar the odd comment about missing his family at home in England. Occasionally I longed for him to cut loose just a bit and tell me how he was finding this exhilaratingly harsh experience, but the anthropologist in him wins the day almost every time. The one occasion Vitebsky is challenged by an Eveny friend, who tells him "I

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don't always like the way your people treat each other," he is lost for words.

As well as describing their physical, cultural and spiritual life, Vitebsky also places the Eveny within the historical context of the former Soviet Union, and its disastrous collectivising regime that relegated them to meat producers and almost destroyed their identity. Dissidents en route to gulags in the wastes of Siberia were sometimes forced to work alongside the Eveny, and herders quietly tell Vitebsky of finding skulls along the taiga routes that are still locally known as "Stalin's Trail".

Reindeer People ends on a tentatively hopeful note, with the Eveny "outliving the end of the empire" and the recent establishment of the Association of World Reindeer Herders. Vitebsky concludes his long, rich tale by simply saying "My reward for living with the Eveny has been ... a glimpse into the enduring relationship between a community of humans and a species put on Earth to nourish them with its flesh, insulate them with its fur and exalt them with its soul." 🐾



The Gold-Laden Sheep and the Sacred Mountain

Directed by Ridham Janve

Movie Review

During a routine technical check before the screening of his film, *The Gold-Laden Sheep and the Sacred Mountain*, at the Mumbai Film Festival, director Ridham Janve realised there was something wrong with the projection. The visuals appeared darker than what he had originally created. This was during the third screening of the film at the recently concluded festival.

Janve, a 2011-graduate from the National Institute of Design, who gradually veered towards filmmaking, had only two options: to cancel the screening or go ahead with it as it is. He did not consider the first option at all, neither did he want to go ahead with the second option. Rather, he improvised—he reduced the temperature in the auditorium to an extent where it became slightly chilly to add an effect and elevate experience of the audience as they watched his Gaddi-dialect movie, set in the Chambal and Kangra hills of Himachal Pradesh.

Improvisation has been his mantra even during the making of the movie. Shooting in the hills came with its own challenges. There were some genuine problems, the most prominent being lack of resources like electricity to charge electronic devices. Carrying a generator to the high altitudes did not make sense because it would have come with its own cost and challenges. So, he turned to solar power. And then it rained, and the shoot had to be halted.

At the centre of the film is an elderly shepherd Arjun (Bhedpal Arjun Pant) and his Nepali

assistant (Lokendra Gurung). As much as the film is about the life of these two on the hills, focusing on their daily drill of taking the sheep and goats to graze and their banter, it also captures the folklore of the area. There is a plane crash in the region, followed by speculations of what may have happened to the people and the rumoured gold and silver the plane was loaded with. And then begins Arjun's adventurous journey.

It was important for Janve to cast people from the area to bring out the simplistic elements in the story. While Lokendra, who organises trips in the area, was an easy find, it took him days to find the perfect person to fit the role of the shepherd Arjun. He had met almost every shepherd in the region, but could not find that one person in whom he could see his character. "The pastures where they take the herds to graze is up the hill, it is quite daunting to climb those. Plus, most of these places are a day apart from each other. Every time we decided that we need to go looking for a shepherd, it meant organising an extensive trek. There were times, we returned from half the way to the village," says Janve, who had met almost all the shepherds in the region except one.

Finally, at the 'nag taal', a famous sacred spot atop the mountain, he saw someone standing across the lake. "It was extremely quiet and meditative that day," he recalls. He realised that could be the shepherd he had not met. The man told him, "Whatever you are here for, I am there for you." It was magical, Janve confesses, sitting

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at a café in the western suburbs of Mumbai along with his lead actors as they narrate the story from their point of view.

It was challenging to work with non-actors. But he could not imagine these characters being played by actors from elsewhere. "We wanted to retain the sense of the mountain and its people who are completely devoted to the mountains," he says. Since these non-actors were completely unaware of how a camera works, there would be times during the shoot that the actors started talking to each other, giving them instructions. "The spontaneity of the actors, at times, worked in the film's advantage," says Janve.

The director did not know the Gaddi dialect either. It was only because of familiarity to the area because he had done many treks earlier that he understood the language pretty well. "The genesis of the film happened long back when my friend, Akshay (also the writer of the film) and I were writing something totally different and looking for cheap places to stay. That is when we started going to the Gaddi villages, not ever thinking about making a film or about the people there. But we indulged in their stories and anecdotal information about their culture," Janve recalled in the question-answer session with the audience after the screening.

During one of these treks, the two friends thought that a film could be made on the life of the Gaddis. They took two days to write a layout for the film. It was not a script, he says. But a treatment note of sorts. "We kept the script open because we wanted to be open as we shot the film."

The first cut of the film was finished in 2016, after which it became a part of the NFDC's Work In Progress Lab. "The film was seen by some very prominent people there. They shared their experiences and suggestions with us, some of which we incorporated in the film. It was very beneficial because we got noticed. Prior to that, we had no idea who is going to watch the film. We just wanted to be free while making it with no pressure of a narrative or pace, or having to make it interesting. We didn't want to make any gimmicks in the film, we just wanted to stay true to what mountains are," he says.

He then quotes Werner Herzog, "Walk on foot, learn languages and a craft or trade that has nothing to do with cinema. Filmmaking — like great literature — must have experience of life

at its foundation." The films of Werner Herzog, he says, have had a great influence on him as far as filmmaking style is concerned. "And while we were attempting to make the film, his words were resonating," says Janve who is originally from Rajasthan and now lives in Goa.

Janve, as he takes *The Gold-Laden Sheep* and *The Sacred Mountain* to film festivals, is still discovering his language of filmmaking by venturing into new genres and forms. One of his next projects would be set in his home state, Rajasthan, close to Udaipur. "It is a psychological thriller, again with a lot of local people acting in it. But along with a few trained actors, too, this time," he says. 🐾

The article first appeared in *The Week* on the following link: <https://www.theweek.in/leisure/society/2018/11/03/presenting-the-men-of-the-mountains.html>

Did you know?

Nanda Gaoli is a pastoral community that keeps the Gaoli cattle and the Nagpuri buffalo. They herd their cattle in deep forests of Wardha district in the state of Maharashtra, India.

Herding in the forests comes with many challenges and threats faced by the community and their animals. Tiger attacks are especially common in the region. However, tiger attacks are not a new phenomenon but is just an occupational hazard for which, the Nanda Gaolis have depended on



a centuries old tradition. They burn beehives of wild honey bees and feed the ashes, mixed with the fodder to their animals. The community believes that by doing so, whenever a tiger or any other wild animal attacks, the animals unite

themselves to form a protective shield around the herder.

The bee hives are burnt just before the monsoons, so that the honey bees rebuild their hives in time to benefit from the monsoonal flower bloom.

Story by Sajal Kulkarni
Illustration by Tapas Upadhyay

Find them out!

How much do you know about breeds of domestic animals in India?

C	S	P	S	A	B	U	R	U	K	M	V	M	N	S	W	J	W	N	I
I	T	I	P	S	K	M	I	H	J	E	R	S	E	Y	D	Y	B	D	F
A	H	I	R	J	H	Y	T	O	P	Q	A	X	F	C	M	N	J	Z	F
W	R	A	G	N	A	H	D	B	A	R	P	K	Y	O	O	O	O	O	Q
R	Z	M	E	R	R	I	N	O	A	P	R	L	O	D	C	J	L	M	Z
A	L	L	A	W	A	T	L	L	P	E	E	I	D	C	C	C	U	O	A
K	M	B	E	C	I	C	X	I	K	J	H	W	B	O	U	C	J	I	D
A	U	P	A	K	D	F	R	P	O	K	S	F	M	I	M	I	A	B	G
B	C	O	P	L	M	I	K	K	R	C	H	A	N	J	F	B	M	H	D
A	F	P	B	S	A	R	W	A	D	H	C	B	Y	V	M	H	J	U	S
N	N	T	L	N	C	H	A	N	G	T	H	A	N	G	I	O	T	T	S
N	P	N	O	M	P	I	H	E	H	L	I	O	C	U	B	P	X	T	T
I	K	H	B	K	L	O	T	T	Z	I	L	T	S	U	H	A	J	I	A
U	M	R	A	J	J	U	G	I	Y	K	I	I	L	F	Q	Q	L	A	H
A	C	F	W	Q	A	B	A	R	I	A	K	A	W	D	O	X	R	D	B
T	R	G	T	K	K	R	N	V	J	R	A	N	I	L	U	A	K	S	I
O	E	T	L	N	I	O	Q	B	O	D	E	C	C	A	N	I	S	V	D
D	M	C	A	G	A	B	I	O	Y	B	D	N	G	V	O	D	Y	I	D
A	L	I	Y	S	R	R	I	E	V	U	A	D	T	N	E	O	W	H	A
I	U	G	P	W	N	I	C	O	B	A	R	I	O	P	K	T	O	Y	G

Clues!

1. Buffalo breed named after the grassland in Kutch.
2. Named after a famous lake in Orissa. Milk from the buffalo can last upto 3 days without refrigeration.
3. This breed of sheep came from Spain and is known to give the finest wool.
4. Imported cow breed known for giving upto 22 litres of milk in a day.
5. The exquisite pashmina shawls come from this goat.
6. Hybrid of a yak and domestic cattle, this breed is used in the regions of Spiti and Ladakh.
7. The only breed of black sheep found in India and is used for weaving Gongadi.
8. The breed of pig named after an island in the Indian Ocean.
9. This breed of buffalo is named after its herding tribe that resides in the Nilgiri mountains of Tamil Nadu.
10. First recognized indian breed of donkey named after a district in Himachal Pradesh.
11. The only breed of camel that swims.