

Biocultural Diversity and Culture Animals of Mobile Pastoralism - The Biocultural Diversity of Poda Thurpu Cattle Breed of Telangana State, India

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Biocultural Diversity and Culture Animals Biocultural diversity and the concept of culture animals have been around since the time immemorial, however, they made inroads into scientific research and discourse relatively recently. The term biocultural diversity is assuming significance in science, practice and policy. Maffi (2007), defines biocultural diversity as "the diversity of life in all its manifestations: biological, cultural, and linguistic — which are interrelated (and possibly coevolved) within a complex socio-ecological adaptive system." Further, Maffi (2012), elucidates that biocultural diversity can be understood as "The diversity of life is made up not only of the diversity of plants and animal species, habitats and ecosystems found on the planet, but also of the diversity of human cultures and languages."

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With reference to the concept of culture animals, Kohler-Rollefson (2015) defines (animal cultures) as "indigenous livestock breeding communities that have a tradition of livestock breeding and for whom their animals have social and cultural meaning. This is reflected in: An identity based on the community's association with animals. A myth of origin linking community to a particular breed or species. Animals represent social currency (are given as dowry or bride wealth). Animals are shared within the community, while exchange with outsiders is restricted. And Animals have a ritual function."

In above background an attempt was made to refer to the term biocultural diversity, propose and tentatively define the term culture animals, present findings of the study conducted on biocultural diversity of mobile pastoral communities of the Deccan Plateau region of India and discuss Poda Thurpu cattle breed as the culture animal of mobile pastoralist communities of Nagarkurnool district of the Indian state of Telangana, which is also the study area.

METHODOLOGY

(a) About the Study

A study on mobile pastoralism of the Deccan Plateau region was initiated by Sahjeevan-Center for Pastoralism based out of Gujarat, in collaboration with the Watershed Support Services and Activity Network (WASSAN) & Revitalizing Rainfed Agriculture Network (RRAN), during July – December, 2018. The objective of the study was to develop new insights on the biocultural diversity of mobile pastoralism and explore the concept of culture animals with regards to the indigenous Poda Thurpu cattle breed reared by the traditional pastoralist communities of the Indian state of Telangana state of the Deccan Plateau region of India.

(b) About the Study Area

Nagarkurnool district was designated as the study region, it is geographically located at (16.4833° N and 78.3333° E), at an elevation of 576 m, in Telangana state of India (Gov. Telangana, 2020). The Amrabad plateau of Nagarkurnool district was designated as the study area. It is one of the mandals in Nagarkurnool district of the once undivided Mahabubnagar district in the eastern Indian state of Telangana. The topography of the area is highly undulating and hilly, covered in savannah type grasslands with tall grasses. The mandal has an area of 727 sq. miles, comprising 14 villages and a total population of the study area is 45,589 (Census, 2011).

Following the Ethnographic research study approach (Creswell, 2013), the study was conducted at seven villages, of two mandals of Nagarkurnool district of Telangana. The topography of the area is highly undulating and hilly, covered in forests and tall grasses. A total of 50 resource persons have been recruited for collection of data. Resource persons have been selected following the Criterion sampling, a variant of the purposeful sampling technique (Creswell, 2013) and prior oral consent of resource persons had been taken for collection of the data. Primary data, which is predominantly in qualitative in nature was collected through personal interviews and focus group discussions of the indigenous pastoral communities of the study area. Qualitative data was analyzed to arrive at data saturation for 'shared beliefs' (i.e. mentioned by two or more participant / sample village in each category), (Francis et al. 2010). Inductive coding method (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2007) was adopted to initiate the coding process. Codes necessary for breaking the data into chunks have emerged naturally from the data itself (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Fereday, Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

(a) The Mobile Pastoralist Communities of the Study Area

There are three major traditional pastoralist communities found in the study area, the sheep rearing Kuruma community (known also as Dangar in Maharashtra and Kuruba in Karnataka), the cattle rearing Lambadi community (Known also as

Banjara) and the cattle and buffalo rearing Golla community (known also as Yadava), besides few other non-traditional pastoralist communities actively engaged in mobile pastoralism in a very small scale.

The Lambadi community of the study belongs to the sub-sect called Gora/Goramaati Banjara, they are categorized as a nomadic tribal community in the official categorization of tribes and other indigenous communities of India. They are known to have migrated from the North Indian state of Rajasthan to the study area more than four centuries ago.

The Golla (belongs to OBC) are the dominant traditional mobile pastoralist communities of the study region. Both the communities practice mobile pastoralism, and Lambadi communities usually travel further and longer than the Golla communities during their annual seasonal migration. In addition few families of Maala (SC) have been maintaining large herds of this cattle breed for generations (Siripurapu, et al 2020).

The local pastoralist communities rear a unique indigenous cattle breed called as Poda Thurpu cattle breed (Siripurapu, et al, 2019a). From the oral narratives of the local communities, Poda Thurpu cattle breed is reared by the local communities for over 400 years now. Oral narratives suggest that both the Poda Thurpu cattle breed and the pastoralists have been around this area for over 400 years. And the documental evidence (cattle grazing permits issued by

Nizams and forest department) suggests that cattle breed and the breeders have been here since 1836.

About 101 households have been maintaining large herds (more than 100 cattle heads) and about 30 – 40 households have been maintaining less than 50 cattle heads of this cattle breed in the study area. The Poda Thurpu cattle breeders of the study area formed a group and registered into an association named "Amrabad Poda Lakshmi Govu Sangham" (APLGS) in 2018. There are about 101 members in the APLGS, of the 101 members, the major communities are Lambadi (52%), Golla (23%), Maala (11%) and other communities include Chenchu (2%), Kuruva (4%), Maadiga (2%), Doodekula-Muslim (3%), Vaddera (2%) and Yerra-Golla (1%). The three major communities engaged in rearing of Poda Thurpu cattle breed in Nagarkurnool district are Lambadi/Banjara, Golla and Maala, (Siripurapu, et al 2020).

(b) Biocultural Diversity of Poda Thurpu Cattle Breed

Poda Thurpu is a small-compact sized indigenous cattle breed belonging to the draught power group of cattle breeds. Local communities identify the cattle breed as Poda edlu (locally the term Poda means spotted/ speckles/ blotches), the cattle usually has speckled/blotched coat (brown spots on white coat or white spots on brown). The cattle breed is commonly known as Thurpu edlu in the western parts of Mahbubnagar and Nagarkurnool districts & western parts of Telangana. Farmers who use bullocks of the breed for

draught purposes call them as Thurpu (means East, in local language Telugu), because they are believed to have come from the eastern side of the state. There are an estimated 15076 (approx.) cattle heads of this cattle breed present in the native breeding tract (Siripurapu, et al 2019a).

The indigenous Gora / Goramaati Banjara community (Lambadi) of the study area rears cattle because their spiritual guru, Santh Sevalal Maharaj (believed to be the incarnation of Lord Shiva) was also a cattle herder (Naik, 2009). He took care of his father's 7000 cows and led the life of a cattle herder. Being his disciples, the Goramaati Banjaras also rear cattle and continue his legacy.

taker/protector of cows (Joshua, 2019; Yaadav, 2010). Cattle are extremely important for the community as it is a huge part of their culture and traditions. The animal is a part of every ceremony, ritual and festival of the Golla community.

Every year both the pastoralist communities celebrate their own traditional festivals during Diwali, which are especially observed to celebrate their intimate relationship with their cattle. The element of conservation is deeply embedded within their culture, perhaps, it was a combination of the culture, traditions and economy, in other words biocultural diversity that may have played an important role in the evolution and conservation of the Poda Thurpu cattle breed in the study area.

“Those who serve the cow will attain nirvana and reach the heaven and those who serve the cattle would die a natural and peaceful death.”

**- Malaya Ramavath,
an elderly Goramaati Banjara (Lambadi) pastoralist**

Cattle occupies a very significant place in their traditions, culture and economy (Siripurapu, et al 2020).

Similarly, Golla (also known as Yadava/Yaduvanshi) the other dominant traditional mobile pastoralist community of the study area rears cattle due to the belief that they belong to the same lineage into which Lord Krishna was born. The name Golla, is derived from the Sanskrit word, 'Gopal', which means care-

(c) Traditional Festivals of Lambada community involving Cattle

The two major traditional festivals of Lambadi community are Aavula panduga (cow festival celebrated during Deepawali festival) and Seetala panduga (celebrated during Holi festival). Aavula panduga and Seetala panduga is celebrated during the month of October and March respectively. During Aavula panduga, the entire village congre-

gates at temples of the forest goddesses Mantralamma and Peddamma. Both the forest goddesses are worshipped and traditional rituals are performed to satiate them. The entire community cooks and feasts together at the site. Aavula panduga, involves the procession of cattle of each pastoralist household. Usually, 9 – 16 cows are tied in a sequence to the sacred rope, locally known as Avula tadulu / Damara tadulu, (rope made of neem fiber) and brought to the temple of the goddess Mantralamma. Locals believe that blessings of the goddess will double the number of strings (which means the number of cows will be doubled the next season).

Rice porridge cooked in cows' milk and curd are offered to satiate the goddess Mantralamma. The goddess is said to have born out of cows' milk and curd and the symbol of bounty of milk and curd, therefore, cow milk and curd is very sacred for the Lambadis'. Lambadis' of the study area abstain from eating non-vegetarian foods along with milk and curd because of the belief that the goddess Mantralamma lives in them.

The most powerful goddess of the Lambadi community of the study area is Peddamma (symbolically represented as the Tiger). She is offered lambs and chicken to protect the cattle herders as well as the cattle herders from predators and other wildlife during their stay inside the forest. Although Lambadis' of the study area seldom milch cattle, however, cows with only female calves are mulched during Deepawali festival, and the milk is

used for cooking rice porridge and make curd. Perhaps this is the only festival of Lambadi's where rice porridge is cooked in cow's milk and consumed along with non-vegetarian dishes.

Another major traditional festival of the Lambadis' is *Seetala panduga*, which is celebrated during *Holi* festival. Like any other traditional festival, it also involves sacrifice of lambs and chicken and offering of rice porridge cooked of cow milk to goddesses. During the festival Jaju (red colour) is applied to horns of the cattle and the owner of the cattle herd brings seven bones, known as Kamani and women of his family bring punnets/pots of *Molakalu* (nine day old wheat seedlings) to the ritual site. Kamani ritual is performed by men (considered masculine) and *Molakalu* ritual is performed by women (considered feminine). A large pit is dug in the ground (at least ten feet away from the goddess) and filled with cooked Bobbarlu (horse gram), beans, feathers and innards of the chicken and lambs sacrificed during the festival. After filling the pit, cattle herds are made to pass by the pit. Either one or two people toss the rice porridge at the passing shepherds, which the shepherds catch and eat as they move on. Cooked *Bobbarlu* (horse gram), feathers and innards of chicken are scooped from the pit and toss at the passing by cattle herd, it is believed to protect the cattle from wild animals during their stay inside the forest. Cattle herds are often taken to the village in a procession during the festival. Local communities consider cattle entering into the

village as a good omen and believes that they bring wealth and good fortune to the village.

(d) Traditional Festivals of Golla community involving Cattle

One of the major traditional festivals of Golla's in the study area is *Ligamayya jatara* which is celebrated during Dasehra, a major Hindu festival celebrated in the month of October. The festival is observed in the honour of the forest god Lingamayya (believed to be the incarnation of Lord Shiva) and his five sisters *Pedamma, Elamma, Mahishamma, Pochamma, and Mantralamma*. The temple of *Lingamayya* is usually located at a sacred spot inside in the forest and the entire family of the cattle herders visit the temple and offers lambs or chicken to satiate *Lingamayya*.

The festival includes also a ritual called "*poli challadam*", which involves tossing hot porridge cooked in milk is at shepherds and herds taking procession by the sacred place. The shepherds catch the porridge thrown at them and move ahead eating it. It was believed that it brings good luck and protects the shepherds and the herd from dangers (bad spirits, predators, wildlife, etc.) lurking inside the forest. The ritual is observed once in every 3 – 5 years.

(e) Cattle in the Wedding of the Lambadi Community

Traditionally, parents of the Lambadi and Golla communities give cattle as wedding gifts to their daughters at her wedding. Usually, pedigree of the cattle is also drawn

from such traditional transferences and exchanges. The Lambadi community even performs a ritual involving cattle (especially bull) during weddings. The new bride is made to sit on the bull and she sings to the bull, reminding him how she took care of him and requests the bull to move to her in-laws house along with her as her parents and siblings may not join her. The bull and few cattle accompany the new bride to her in-laws place.

(f) Traditional Pastoralist Communities and their Relationship with Wildlife:

The traditional pastoralist communities of the sub-continent shares a unique relationship with wildlife. As mentioned earlier, the Lambadi community of the study region revere and worship the Tiger. It is considered as the manifestation of "*Peddamma*" the most powerful goddess and believed to be the creator of the universe. Similarly, the sheep rearing, *Kuruma/Kuruba/Dangar*, pastoralist communities of the Deccan plateau region of India, are known for their mythological and cultural connection with wolves. They revere wolves and refer to them as their maternal uncle/aunt, and do not resort to killing them in case of wolves lifting their livestock (Vishwanadha, 2017; Bhardwaj, 2020; Kohler-Rollefson, 2015; Ghote and Ramdas, 2010). According to them meat of the sheep is tastier when wolves are around, due to adrenaline rush, therefore, the presence of wolves is tolerated. Surprisingly, they often support conservation and protection of wolves in the Deccan plateau region (Bhardwaj, 2020). Similarly,

the Changpa herders of Ladakh of the Himalayan region also shares a special mythical and cultural relationship wolves and often tolerate their presence (Bijoor, 2020). One of the most fascinating is the relationship shared by the indigenous Bishnoi community of the Indian state of Rajasthan with the wildlife. The Bishnois are known for their dedication to protect Blackbucks and the environment. Bishnoi women take wildlife conservation altogether to a different level, they are known to breastfeed the young and orphaned Blackbuck fawns along with their own babies (Humairah, 2017; Menon, 2012).

(g) The terms Cultural Animals, Animal Cultures and Culture Animals

The notion of human beings as the cultural animals, refers to the idea that human beings differ from other animals in the extent to which they create, sustain, and participate in culture (Aronson, 2004; Baumeister, 2005; IResearch.net, 2020). And borrowing also the term animal cultures from Kohler-Rollefson (2015), I prefer to use the term “*culture animals*” over “*cultural animals*” and “*animal culture*”, as the former has a different definition and the later has a different connotation (Ramsey, 2017). Animal culture as defined by Beckoff (2019), “*animal culture as information or behaviours shared within a community, which is acquired from conspecifics through some form of social learning.*” And suggests that understanding the rich social lives and preserving animal cultures is quintessential for biodiversity conservation (Whitehead, 2010; Balter, 2013;

Whitehead, and Rendell, 2015; Beckoff, 2019). Also see animal traditions (Avital and Jablonka, 2001; Bennett, 2010).

In the context of pastoralism, the term “*culture animal*” refers to the livestock species which prefers to live in groups, tolerates and prefers human companionship. They are organized and maintained not by an individual human being but by a community, where the knowledge and information pertaining to the breed, breeding, management and animal husbandry is usually generated, accumulated and shared not only among a particular community but also passed down to the next generation through traditions, customs, beliefs, rituals, songs, myths, stories, folktales, crafts, and other folklores by placing the animal at the centre of such their culture and traditions (Tripathi and Rajput, 2006; Kohler-Rollefson, 2015). Further, such animals/livestock usually relies on the community to get what they need to survive and procreate in return for products and services derived from them by their human counterparts.

There are however, many other wild fauna revered and considered sacred among different cultures of the human society. And many wild fauna are a part of traditions, customs, beliefs, rituals, songs, myths, stories, folktales, crafts, and other folklores of human societies around the world. That leads to the question whether such wild fauna should be considered also as culture animals? Perhaps the answer is no, because, such fauna may not live in groups, may not tolerate and prefer human companionship. They are

not organized and maintained by an individual human being or a community. And the knowledge and information pertaining to the breed, breeding, management and animal husbandry is usually neither generated nor shared among a particular community or passed down to the next generation. Most importantly, such fauna do not rely on humans for their survival and procreation in return for providing goods and services.

(h) The Concept of Culture Animals in Mobile Pastoralism in India

Pastoralist communities are often closely associated with a particular livestock breed/species by the myth of origin, drawing their decency to an ancestor who was created by God to take care of these animals (Kohler-Rollefson, 2015; Sharma, et al., 2003). Indigenous livestock breeds such as the Poda Thurpu cattle represent the collective heritage of communities they are associated with, and cannot be conserved separately. Such breeds will survive only when the indigenous knowledge & production systems which they are a part of would also survive (Marsoner, et al, 2018; LPPS and Köhler-Rollefson, 2005).

The indigenous cow-herding, semi-nomadic, Nanda Gawli pastoralist community is a sub-group of the Gawli community which is predominantly found in the Indian state of Maharashtra. The other three sub-groups of the Gawli community, the Yadav Gawli, Ahir Gawli, and Ligayat Gawli, are divided on the basis of the territory which they inhabit (Singh, et al, 2004). Perhaps the

name '*Nanda*' was derived from Lord Krishna, the Hindu God, who was raised by a cow-herding family. The Nanda-Gawlis believe that they are the descendants of Lord Krishna (Siripurapu, et al 2019b; Kalokar and Siripurapu, 2020).

Nanda-Gawli community rears a unique indigenous cattle breed called as Gaolao cattle breed. Legend has it that Nanda-Gawli ancestors brought the Gaolao cattle along with them when they arrived here from the ancient mythical city of Mathura. Since then, Nanda-Gawlis' continue to nurture and conserve the Gaolao cattle breed. Perhaps, the name Gaolao may have been given after the Gawli community, which rears it. There is a traditional practice among the Nanda-Gawli community, locally known as 'Jani' (translates as origin/life). Jani as a practice is to maintain few selected animals as sacred (elite) animals and they are revered. Animal products and calves produced by 'Jani' are considered holy and sacred (Siripurapu, et al 2019b).

Gaolao cattle is extremely important for the Nanda-Gawli community and it is a huge part of their culture, traditions, identity and economy. It is an integral part of every traditional ceremony, ritual and festival of the Gawli community. It is gifted as a wedding gift to the new bride by her parents at the wedding and pedigree of the cattle is traced accordingly. Both men and women of the community shares the responsibility of taking care of the cattle and women usually keeps a record of the pedigree of the cattle.

Likewise, both sheep and wool are intricately woven into customs, traditions, culture and social fabric of the indigenous Dangar/Kuruma/Kuruba pastoralist communities of the Deccan plateau region (Patil, 2009). The Dangar/Kuruma/Kuruba pastoralist communities share a special bond especially with the Deccani sheep breed, found in the Deccan Plateau region of India. There are many myths and stories celebrating the relationship between the Deccani sheep breed and the Dangar/Kuruma/Kuruba pastoralist communities. The Dangar pastoralist communities revere Sri. Santh Balumama, their spiritual guru, a shepherd himself, has handed over his Deccani sheep flock to the Admapur Panchayat at the time of his "jeevasamadhi" (soulful meditation). Therefore, the progeny of his flock is considered sacred and taken care of by the Balumama Trust of Admapur, Maharashtra, (Shri Balumama Trust, 2019). Similarly, the Kuruma community of Telangana keep idols of both sheep and dog at shrines of their deity Beerappa (believed to be the incarnation of Lord Shiva), (Patil, 2009).

Similarly, Camels have an important place in the traditions, culture, identity and economy of the Rabari community of Gujarat and the Raika community of Rajasthan states of India. Camels are not only central to their culture, rituals, customs, traditions and ceremonies but also influence their lifestyle to a large extent. The relationship of these communities with camels is believed to be more spiritual than economics (Tripathi and Rajput, 2006; The

Raika Samaj Panchayat, 2009; Patel, 2018).

Cattle, especially the indigenous Burugur cattle breed is an important part of the life, culture and traditions of the indigenous Lingayat community of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. They consider themselves as the proud custodians of the indigenous Burugur cattle and Malai Erumai buffalo (hill buffalo) breeds. Both the breeds are said to have co-evolved with the Barugur forest ecosystem. One can notice a picture of the Burugur cattle on the roof of every Lingayat temple in the state (Swamigal, 2009).

Van Gujjars of Himachal and Uttarakhand, is a Muslim, vegetarian and nomadic pastoralist community which shares a unique bond with their buffalos (Benanav, 2015; Gooch, 2004). Equally, the indigenous Toda communities, the oldest inhabitants of the upper Nilgiri Plateau of Tamil Nadu state rears buffaloes and they are an integral part of their life, traditions, culture and economy. Traditionally, Toda's divides their buffalo herds into six hierarchical grades and maintains special dairy temples for each grade (Chhabra, 2018). Similarly, Nagpur buffalo breed occupies a very special place in the life, culture and economy of the Nanda-Gawli community, a semi-nomadic pastoralist community of Maharashtra. Curd prepared from Chilika buffalos' milk is offered to Lord Jagannath of Puri, Odisha. As per the mythology, Manika, a milkmaid offered some curd to Lord Jagannath and his elder brother Lord Balabhadra at the village named Dahikhia, and both the brothers

relished the curd. As a tradition, offering of curd made of Chilika buffalo milk continues to this day at the famous Puri shrine (Mishra, 2021; Nanda, et al., 2013).

CONCLUSION

The traditional pastoralist communities of the study area has a rich and vibrant biocultural diversity, which they share with their livestock, the Poda Thurpu cattle breed in case of the present study. Poda Thurpu cattle, as the culture animal is central for the biocultural diversity of the Lambadi and Golla communities. Cattle is the genesis of folklore and folksongs of the traditional pastoralist communities of the study area. It is evident that indigenous livestock is crucial for keeping the socio-cultural fabric of the traditional pastoralist societies intact, sustain their livelihoods, traditions, culture, art and crafts, folklore, music, ecology and economies, *vis-à-vis* the biocultural diversity and socio-cultural fabric of the traditional pastoralist communities is crucial for the survival of indigenous livestock populations. There are endless such examples of biocultural diversity depicting the intimate and intricate relationship between the livestock and the indigenous traditional pastoralist communities of India and around the world, which needs further exploration.

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