

The Future of Camels in India:

How to ensure their conservation and well-being

National Seminar at the India Habitat Centre, New-Delhi

27th February, 2025

Background Note

India's camel situation is dire. It is the only major country in the world where population numbers are rapidly shrinking, from over one million head 50 years ago to an estimated 200,000 or less currently. During the same period, the global camel population more than tripled.

Figure 1. Camel population trends globally (left) and in India (right), based on official FAO data (source: <https://livestockdata.org/resources/livestock-population-trends>)



This trend continues despite the camel being declared the state animal of Rajasthan and protected by The *Rajasthan Camel* (Prohibition of Slaughter and Regulation of Temporary Migration or Export). Act, since 2015.

But we should not despair. Other countries too, such as the United Arab Emirates and China, have faced the threat of losing their camels and managed to turn the situations around. No doubt, India also has the capacity to achieve this by taking the right measures. These would entail taking its globally unique camel culture and heritage as a starting point and building on its strength. In addition, it should promote the milk produced by its ancestral camel herders as the best in the world – the champagne of camel milks – and, after defining what this means, as ‘cruelty-free’.

The Raika, India’s most prominent camel breeding community, have a spiritual connection with their camels, believing they were created by God Shiva to take care of camels and ensure their well-being. They treat them as co-creatures and family members and have accumulated an enormous body of ethnoveterinary knowledge to keep their animals healthy, including such sophisticated techniques as indigenous vaccination. They managed their camels on the commons in herding or free-ranging systems, allowing them to choose their own menus of trees, shrubs and grasses. Notably, they never separated mothers from their calves, as is commonly done in other dairy systems. They kept detailed mental records of the ancestry of their herds for up to seven generations and created several distinct breeds.

These ancestral management systems reflect a compassionate relationship with animals, that provides an antithesis to the industrial model of animal production that has been propagated around the world, with terrible consequences for animal welfare, the environment, biodiversity, while acting as a breeding ground for diseases.

By contrast India’s ancient herding systems, of which the Raika camel keepers represent just one, are characterized by a close human-animal relationship, provide crucial organic manure, use practically no fossil fuels, nurture biodiversity, and deliver healthy products. They have long been castigated by scientists trained in the western model, as backward and unproductive, but are in fact the opposite. They embody a treasure of traditional wisdom in producing food within planetary boundaries, food that is rich in phytochemicals essential for human health and missing in modern diets.

According to this traditional knowledge, camels forage on 36 different plants – all of them used in ayurvedic medicine. This may part of the reason why their milk is proving its value as a health

tonic and an auxiliary in the treatment of serious diseases. There are many case studies of camel milk having an almost miraculous effect, although controlled studies are lacking.

Saving India's camels requires going beyond rescuing individual animals, as welfare organizations tend to do. Instead we need to take a holistic approach and create a supportive and nurturing eco-system for camels and their guardians with backward linkages to biodiversity rich grazing areas and forward linkages to markets for high value products.

Some of the measures that should be taken include:

- Earmarking and protecting camel grazing areas
- Building up a decentralized milk collection system and pay a decent price to camel herders that allows them a dignified livelihood.
- Encouraging and rewarding young people who want to take up the demanding task of camel herding
- Kicking off a marketing and PR campaign that highlights India's camel culture and the benefits of camel milk
- Improving provision of camel health services
- Supporting medical research to monitor impact of camel milk consumption on patients with specific health problems
- Incentivizing the use and development of products from camel wool and dung.

From this list it is clear that camel conservation cannot be tackled by the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying alone, but requires collaboration between the various government ministries and departments, as well as the support of philanthropists and the private sector. It must be guided by the knowledge and needs of the camel herding communities. In order to bring these different stakeholders together before the official end of the International Year of Camelids and mapping out a plan for the future that lets India's camel heritage shine, LPPS and Bharat Krishak Samaj are organizing a National level Seminar at the India Habitat Centre on 27th February 2025.

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