

CAMELS OF RAJASTHAN: AN OVERVIEW ON THEIR HABITS AND HABITAT

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The one-humped camel is a domestic animal that has been developed exclusively by traditional societies and is a product of indigenous knowledge about animal breeding and husbandry. The people of the Raika community are closely associated with the camel in Rajasthan, representing the traditional caretakers of the camel breeding herds (*tolas*) of the Maharajahs. Other communities breeding camels include Rajput, Muslim, Charan, Bishnoi, Gujjar, and Jat. The camel breeding system varies according to agro-ecological zone. In the most western districts (Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Barmer), camels range freely during most of the year and are herded and supervised only during the rainy season. The owners remain settled in the villages. In central Rajasthan, where crop cultivation is practised, camel herds require supervised herding throughout the year and therefore some degree of nomadism by their owners. Some large herds in Pali district are almost continuously on the move. In some pockets of Rajasthan, camels may also be kept in zero-grazing systems, although not usually for breeding.

Villages in the Thar Desert depend on a camel to **lift water** from deep wells. Artisans from lower castes receive income from the **processing of camel products**. Although poorly documented, these secondary industries include leather and bone work. Camel bone has replaced ivory and is used to make jewelry and other elaborately decorated objects popular with tourists.

The young male camels are sold at one of the livestock fairs, which take place in Pushkar, Nagaur, Balotra, and other places. Very young camels that cannot yet be used for work are often purchased by Minas and Bhats who will later sell them to the end users.

- **Shrinking grazing resources** represent the most significant problem. Lack of food undermines the nutritional status of camel herds, making them vulnerable to diseases and negatively affecting reproductive rates.
- While the demand for camels as work animals may have fallen in some areas, the prime causal factor for the population decline is the disappearance of grazing grounds that can support viable camel breeding herds. This is evident in many parts of Rajasthan. For example in Pali district the traditional summer pastures have become part of the Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary, so are closed to grazing. Similarly around the Indira Gandhi Canal that cuts through former prime camel-breeding areas, pasture lands. In many parts of Rajasthan, camel breeders have no access to prophylactic **health care** and medicines.
- There are no organized **markets** for camel milk, wool and leather; camel milk is discriminated against by the dairy cooperatives.
- **Low status** and backward image of camel breeding, lack of respect for the comprehensive traditional knowledge of the Raika community; lack of encouragement and moral support for camel breeders. Due to this intimate association with the camel over the centuries, the Raika also accumulated a large body of indigenous knowledge related to camel management, breeding, disease treatment, and behaviour. For this reason, they were referred to as “native camel doctors” by colonial veterinarians.

A draught animal and means of transportation, while its food potential is largely ignored. In the Thar Desert, camel carts are still popular and remain a frequent means of transportation. They fulfil this function not only in re The camel is used as riding animals mainly in the Jaisalmer area, where it

exerts considerable draw on tourists. Camel wool is utilized by camel breeders for the manufacture of items to be used in their own household such as rugs, blankets, *charpais* and saddle girths. Similarly to camel milk, there were earlier certain cultural restrictions on the sale of wool. Because of low wool yields and short fibre, there appears to be only limited potential for commercial use of camel wool, but the skins of camels are especially useful for manufacturing lampshades, toys, drum covers and certain types of containers. They are also used as material for shoes; according to members of the leather. The present survey focuses on the need to promote camel husbandry and camel carts as a cheap and eco-friendly mode of transportation working community here in Rajasthan.