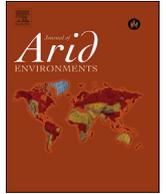


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Purdah, purse and patriarchy: The position of women in the Raika shepherd community in Rajasthan (India)

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ABSTRACT

Pastoralist women are perceived as doubly disadvantaged, due to gender inequality and their low status as pastoralists. Thus, development organizations are adopting gender-specific approaches to improve the specific position of female pastoralists. This paper examines this issue with respect to the Raika (Rabari), the largest nomadic pastoral community of Western India, using an ecofeminist theoretical framework.

Because Raika women observe purdah, there is an outward impression that men play the dominant role in sheep production, but in reality nomadic shepherding is a family operation and dependent in equal parts on the contribution of women and men. A series of interviews and group discussions revealed that women often prefer being on migration to staying in the villages because of lower workloads, nevertheless, they are concerned about security issues and the dangers of nomadism.

Raika women increasingly express their resistance to traditional customs by refusing to consummate marriages with husbands to whom they have been betrothed in childhood. Very often the reason for the refusal is that they do not want a husband following the traditional pastoralist livelihood, preferring an urban way of life. The gradual decline of Rajasthan's sheep population over the last fifteen years may be due in part to women's refusal to engage in shepherding. It is suggested that this issue needs to be addressed by instating pro-pastoralist policies that benefit pastoralist families at large rather than gender-specific measures.

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1. Introduction

Pastoralist women are often described as being “doubly marginalized” or in a “double bind”, due to gender inequality and because they are pastoralists (e.g. [Eneyew and Mengistu, 2013](#); [Kipuri and Ridgewell, 2008](#)). They are frequently depicted as especially vulnerable and as victims of male decisions. In addition, current climate change has imposed additional burdens upon them, forcing them to walk longer distances to obtain water and to spend more hours collecting firewood ([Mushi, 2013](#); [UNCCD, 2007](#)). In order to address these issues, development interventions in the livestock sector often seek to adopt an explicit gender focus and promote approaches such as, “securing women's access to livestock assets”, “increasing access to livestock technologies and services”, “integrating gender and poverty indicators in monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment” (e.g. [Gurung, 2010](#); [ILRI n.d.](#); [Rota and Sperandini, 2010a,b](#); [Rota et al., 2010](#)). However, are these approaches really what pastoralist women want and need? Will they

be able to improve and make a difference to the economic lot and social status of pastoralist women?

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the assumptions that underlie project interventions of the major development organizations by looking at a particular pastoralist community in India, the Raika (also known as Rebari) shepherds of Rajasthan. It examines gender relations in the community, describes the gender allocation of tasks in both sedentary and nomadic sheep production, looks into the attitude of women towards continuing a pastoralist way of life, and finally analyzes the results from an ecofeminist perspective.

2. Ecofeminism as a theoretical framework

The term “ecofeminism” was first used by Francoise D'Eaubonne in 1974 and grew out of the environmental movement in the 1970s in which women played an important role. Ecofeminism posits a connection between patriarchy, science and the subjugation of nature and women. The concept was elaborated by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva in their classic, recently republished work “Ecofeminism” ([Mies and Shiva, 2014](#)). Their key postulate is that

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the liberation of women and the preservation of life on the planet cannot be separated nor achieved independently. Ecofeminism sees the global development paradigm as destroying diversity, both cultural and biological, and women as the main victims of this process by severing their bond with the land and destroying their subsistence economy. They are especially critical of conventional male research which they describe as reductionist, leading to the commodification of seeds, land and water and the dominance of corporates over people. One of the examples for reductionist science is the agricultural research that led to the Green Revolution resulting in high yields of grain, at the expense of erosion, water depletion, and poisoning of the soil. Instead the ecofeminists advocate a subsistence perspective which is based on the necessities of life, and seek to situate production and consumption within the context of regeneration. They promote rebuilding ecological cycles instead of applying technological fixes and believe that women are the ones that can, and should, nurture the planet back to health.

Mies and Shiva (2014) reject the cultural relativism of post-modernism as it implies that violence and patriarchal institutions, such as the dowry and the caste system, are acceptable because they are cultural expressions. Mies (1983) is a strong proponent of a feminist research paradigm, rejecting the concept of value free research and replacing it with “conscious partiality” which is achieved through partial identification with the research objects. She also calls for replacing ‘the view from above’ with ‘a view from below’ and to replace ‘spectator knowledge’ with active participation in actions, movements and struggles.

Ecofeminism has been much criticized for being ahistorical, ignoring hierarchies among women and for seeing the end of patriarchy and of ecological destruction as inseparable. Nevertheless, “ecofeminism” has been chosen as a theoretical framework for analyzing the situation of Raika women shepherds because the theoretical concepts were shaped to a significant extent by the peoples' movements in India and though often applied to the Green Revolution have never been applied to its equivalent in the livestock sector, the “Livestock Revolution”. In Asia, the latter model promotes high yielding breeds requiring equally high inputs in terms of concentrated feed, controlled environments and veterinary care with the goal of producing affordable animal protein for the rapidly increasing demand by the growing middle class in Asia. This is the paradigm that both central and state governments have adopted and the economic and political context in which Raika women are operating.

3. Existing literature on the role of women in animal husbandry

In pastoralist societies, livestock production has traditionally been a family operation, with labour allocated according to gender (Flintan, 2008; Horowitz et al., 1992; Joekes and Pointing, 1991; Jowkar et al., 1991). Women's control and ownership of livestock and their products vary between and within regions. In many societies, women are responsible for small stock such as goats, sheep and poultry, as well as for young and sick animals kept at the homestead. They are rarely in charge of managing large stock, although there are exceptions; for instance in transhumant systems in the Andes of Latin America women take care of camelids. Women are frequently involved in milk production, although not all women control the sale of milk and its products (Bravo-Baumann, 2000).

Many observations indicate that abandonment of the nomadic way of life and sedentarization impact women negatively due to loss of livestock or increased control of men over products such as milk and the income generated. Women then may have a reduced

workload but lose influence and control over family resources. For instance, among the Maasai in Tanzania, the commercialization of livestock production and extension activities involved only men, leading to new power constellations that increased male control over livestock and contributed to the subordination of women (Hodgson, 1999). Among the Galole Orma in Kenya, the transition from a subsistence dairy economy to an emphasis on commercial beef production also undermined the economic position of women (Ensminger, 1984). In other cases, when men leave the pastoral way of life to seek employment in the cities, women continue to herd livestock taking care of all the chores themselves (Azhar-Hewitt, 1999). This trend is referred to as “feminization of agriculture” (FAO, 2012), implying bigger workloads for women.

Specifically, with respect to India, various studies about the role of smallholder and tribal women in livestock production conclude that women are in charge of taking care of young and newborn animals and mainly handle the feeding of animals while chores such as watering, milking and treating sick animals are taken care of by women and men on an equal basis (Chotge and Ramdas, 2002; Rangnekar, 1994, 1998). For India's pastoralist societies no such studies are available, with the exception of some very general observations of pastoral communities in Northern Gujarat. In these cases, livestock management is shared more evenly between men and women than among adivasi (members of the aboriginal tribal peoples) and farming communities (Rangnekar, 1994). Neither are there any specific studies of gender relations among the various pastoralist groups in India. We know that in some communities, such as the Gaddi sheep nomads of Himachal Pradesh (Wagner, 2013) and the Rajput shepherds of Rajasthan, women do not participate in migration but stay behind in the villages (Kavoori, 1999). In contrast, among the Van Gujjar buffalo nomads of Uttanchal, the entire family joins in the seasonal migration to the alpine pastures (Benanav, 2015). The same applies to the pig nomads of Odisha (Sahu, 2012).

This study aims at enhancing our understanding of the specific role of women in a major nomadic shepherding group, by providing details about their workloads, attitudes and significance in upholding this economically important livestock production system.

4. Context

4.1. Geographical

Rajasthan, situated in the west of the country, is India's second largest state, extending over 342,000 square kilometers. The state is divided into three distinct geographical zones. In the west is the Thar Desert that extends along the border with Pakistan, in the east there is a more humid plain that merges with the Deccan Plateau. These two discrete regions are separated by the Aravalli hill range that dissects the state from northeast to southwest. Average annual rainfall in the Thar Desert ranges from 100 mm in the far west to 450 mm at the edge of the Aravallis. Due to this low rainfall and the frequent occurrence of droughts, livestock keeping has always been the backbone of the rural economy. More than 80% of Rajasthan's rural families keep livestock in their households. The contribution of the animal husbandry sector to the GDP of the State has been estimated to be around 9.16%. Rajasthan is India's state with the largest output of livestock and livestock products, producing 10% of the milk, 35% of the wool and 10% of the meat in the country. Nationwide, it ranks first in wool production, first in sale of live meat animals (an estimated 40,000 goat, sheep & buffalo are sold each day), first in producing approximately 12% of its milk from goats and ranks second in per capita availability of milk as well as in milk production (Government of Rajasthan, n.d.). About 35% of the income of small and marginal farmers comes from dairy and animal

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