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Livestock: The Backbone of the Thar Desert

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Abstract

The Thar Desert, straddling the borders of India and Pakistan, is a region characterized by its arid conditions, extreme temperatures, and scarce vegetation. Despite these harsh environmental challenges, the desert sustains a vibrant community largely due to the critical role of livestock. This paper explores the multifaceted importance of livestock in the Thar Desert, emphasizing its economic, social, cultural, and environmental contributions. Livestock serves as the primary source of livelihood for many, providing income through the sale of animals and animal products, and creating employment opportunities in a region with limited alternatives. Socially and culturally, livestock is deeply integrated into the heritage and daily practices of the local communities, serving as a status symbol and fostering community bonds. Environmentally, livestock plays a crucial role in soil fertilization and land management, essential for maintaining ecological balance in the desert. The paper also addresses the significant challenges faced by the livestock sector, including water scarcity, healthcare and nutrition issues, and the impacts of climate change, proposing sustainable solutions and adaptive strategies. Furthermore, the demographic aspects, such as population dependency and gender roles in livestock rearing, are examined. The study highlights the indispensable role of livestock in the Thar Desert, underscoring the need for innovative management practices to ensure the sector's sustainability. The resilience of the Thar Desert communities, supported by their livestock, illustrates the enduring significance of this vital sector in one of the most challenging environments on Earth.

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Introduction

The Thar Desert, spanning the north-western regions of India and southeaster Pakistan, is renowned for its arid landscape, extreme temperatures, and sparse vegetation. Despite these challenging conditions, the Thar Desert supports a thriving community, largely due to the vital role of livestock. Livestock is the backbone of this desert ecosystem, providing economic sustenance, social stability, and environmental balance. This article explores the multifaceted importance of livestock in the Thar Desert, highlighting its economic, social, cultural, and environmental significance, as well as the challenges faced and potential solutions.

Economic Significance

1. Primary Livelihood

Livestock rearing is the primary source of livelihood for many families in the Thar Desert. In an environment where

agricultural potential is limited due to harsh climatic conditions and water scarcity, livestock provides a stable and reliable income. Animals such as cattle, sheep, goats, and camels are integral to the rural economy, offering a means of survival and prosperity.



Fig 1: Goat feeding with new innovative techniques in rural villages of Thar Desert

The main health benefit of goat milk is that it is closer to human mother's milk than cow's milk is. Because it has a chemical makeup that is much closer to human milk, it is easier to digest and assimilate in the human body. Goat's milk is also extremely nutrient dense. It has almost 35% of your daily needs for calcium in one cup. Extremely high in riboflavin, just one cup of goat's milk offers 20.0% of our daily needs. Add to that high amount of phosphorous, Vitamin B12, protein and potassium. In fact, Ghandi himself rejuvenated his own health after extremely long periods of fasting through drinking raw goat's milk.

Table 1: Nutritional value in milk (gram/liter)

Mineral	Cow	Buffalo	Goat
sodium	56	45	50
copper	0.13	0.21	---
Calcium	123	180	134
Magnesium	12	20	14
Phosphorus	95	95	111
potassium	141	110	204
sulfur	30	28	---
iron	0.45	1.24	0.05
zinc	3	4.6	0.3



2. Income Generation

The sale of livestock and their products-such as milk, wool, meat, and hides-contributes significantly to household incomes. These products are traded locally and beyond, providing essential financial support for families. The income generated from livestock helps meet daily needs, fund education, and improve living standards. Thar region of Rajasthan is the biggest wool-producing area in India. Chokla, Marwari, Jaisalmeri, Magra, Malpuri, Sonadi, Nali and Pungal breeds of sheep are found in the region. Of the total wool production in India, 40-50% comes from Rajasthan. The sheep-wool from Rajasthan is considered best for carpet making industry in the world. The wool of Chokla breed of sheep is considered of superior quality. The breeding centres have been developed for Karakul and Merino sheep at Suratgarh, Jaitsar and Bikaner. Some important mills for making Woolen thread established in desert area are: Jodhpur Woolen Mill, Jodhpur; Rajasthan Woolen Mill, Bikaner and India Woolen Mill, Bikaner. Bikaner is the biggest mandi of wool in Asia.



Fig 2: A larger herds of sheep in Jaisalmer dist. of Thar which is international border of Pakistan

3. Trade and Market

Livestock markets in the Thar Desert are vibrant and dynamic. Regular trading of animals not only serves local demands but also caters to national and international markets. This trade is a critical component of the regional economy, facilitating commerce and financial flow in an otherwise resource-scarce area.

4. Employment Opportunities

The livestock sector generates various employment opportunities, including herding, veterinary services, feed supply, and animal product processing. These jobs are crucial in a region with limited industrial and agricultural employment options.

Social and Cultural Significance

- Cultural Practices:** Livestock is deeply intertwined with the cultural heritage of the Thar Desert communities. Animals feature prominently in festivals, rituals, and traditional practices, reflecting their importance in social life. For instance, camel fairs and cattle festivals are major cultural events that attract visitors and reinforce community bonds. The importance of animal husbandry can be understood from the organization of large number of cattle fairs in the region. Cattle fairs are normally named after the folk-deities. Some of major cattle fairs held are Ramdevji cattle fair at Manasar in Nagaur district, Tejaji cattle fair at Parbatsar in Nagaur district, Baldeo cattle fair at Merta city in Nagaur district, Mallinath cattle fair at Tilwara in Barmer district. Livestock is very important to the Thar Desert people
- Status Symbol:** Owning a significant number of livestock is considered a status symbol in many Thar Desert communities. It signifies wealth and social standing, with larger herds often equating to higher prestige and influence within the community.
- Community Bonding:** Livestock rearing fosters community bonding as families collaborate during grazing, watering, and market activities. These cooperative efforts strengthen social ties and promote mutual support among community members.

Environmental and Ecological Importance

- Adaptation to Harsh Conditions:** Livestock in the Thar Desert is specially adapted to survive in extreme climatic conditions, thriving on sparse vegetation and limited water resources. Their resilience makes them invaluable to the local ecosystem, ensuring sustainability in a challenging environment.
- Manure for Fertilization:** Livestock manure is a critical resource for fertilizing the soil, enhancing its fertility, and supporting the growth of crops in small agricultural plots. This practice is essential for sustainable farming and food production in the desert region.
- Grazing and Land Management:** Properly managed grazing helps maintain ecological balance by controlling the growth of certain plant species and preventing desertification. Livestock play a vital role in land management, contributing to the health and stability of the ecosystem.

Challenges and Solutions

- Water Scarcity:** One of the main challenges in the Thar Desert is water scarcity, affecting both livestock and their owners. Solutions to this issue include:
 - Rainwater Harvesting:** Collecting and storing rainwater for livestock use.
 - Construction of Ponds and Tanks:** Building water storage facilities to ensure a steady water supply.
 - Sustainable Water Management:** Implementing practices to efficiently use available water resources.



Fig 3: Community ponds (Naadi) is the lifeline of the livestock's in Thar



Fig 5: A view of degraded common grazing land for livestock in Thar due to heavy pressure of overgrazing and lack of maintenances

2. Healthcare and Nutrition Providing adequate healthcare and nutrition to livestock is challenging due to the remote location and limited resources. Measures to address this include:

- **Mobile Veterinary Clinics:** Offering veterinary services in remote areas.
- **Government Initiatives:** Programs aimed at improving livestock health and nutrition.
- **Community Training:** Educating livestock owners on best practices for animal care.
- **Climate Change:** Climate change poses a significant threat to the Thar Desert's ecosystem, affecting the availability of fodder and water. Livestock is not affected much by climate changes or global warming and the sector has grown to become 25 per cent of agriculture GDP and 5 per cent of the country's GDP. It generated output worth Rs 3405 billion while value of food grains was lower at Rs 3156 billion and that of fruits and vegetables at Rs 2088 billion. In 2009-10, livestock output was 2.5 times the value of paddy and more than three times the value of wheat. For smallholder farmers, this has been a boon; 65 per cent smallholder farmers report income from livestock and percentage share of livestock in total income is around 15.5 per cent.

Adaptive Strategies Being Explored Include

- **Breeding Resilient Livestock Species:** Developing breeds that are more tolerant to harsh conditions.
- **Sustainable Grazing Practices:** Implementing rotational grazing to prevent overgrazing and land degradation.
- **Fodder Development Programs:** Promoting the cultivation of drought-resistant fodder crops.



Fig 4: A model developed by GRAVIS for Sustainable fodder security through silvi pasture development with sevan(L.S.) and dhamaan (C.C) for live stocks in thar desert

Population and Demographic Considerations

1. **Population Dependency:** The population of the Thar Desert is highly dependent on livestock for their daily sustenance. According to a study by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), approximately 70% of the households in the Thar Desert rely on livestock as their primary source of income.
2. **Demographic Shifts:** Changes in population demographics, such as youth migration to urban areas for better opportunities, affect livestock management. Elderly and women often take on more responsibility for livestock, necessitating targeted support and training.
3. **Gender Roles:** Women play a crucial role in livestock rearing in the Thar Desert. They are often responsible for milking, feeding, and caring for animals. Empowering women through education and resources can significantly enhance livestock productivity and household welfare.



Fig 6: Rural women take care of milch animals at their family and feed accordingly

Additional Points

1. **Biodiversity Conservation:** Native livestock breeds contribute to biodiversity conservation, maintaining genetic diversity and resilience in the ecosystem. Preserving these breeds is crucial for ecological stability.
2. **Tourism:** The unique livestock practices and traditional ways of life in the Thar Desert attract tourists, contributing to the local economy. Events like camel fairs draw visitors, providing additional income sources for communities.
3. **Education and Skill Development:** Livestock rearing involves the transfer of traditional knowledge and skills from one generation to the next, preserving cultural heritage and promoting education. Programs that support skill development in animal husbandry enhance the capacity of livestock owners.

Conclusion

Livestock is undeniably the backbone of the Thar Desert, underpinning its economy, cultural practices, and environmental sustainability. The symbiotic relationship between the people and their animals is a testament to human ingenuity and adaptability in one of the most challenging environments on the planet. Addressing the challenges faced by the livestock sector through sustainable management and innovative solutions is crucial for ensuring the region's continued reliance on livestock. The resilience of the Thar Desert's communities, supported by their livestock, highlights the enduring importance of this vital sector.

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