PASTORALISM AS AN ISSUE IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Shereen Ratnagar

Formerly a professor of Archaeology at JNU, Dr. Shereen Ratnagar is highly recognised for her impotanant contributions in the understanding of ancient Indian history and prehistoric India. What follows is one of her articles given in parts, from one of her collections of articles The Other Indians: Essays on Pastoralists and Prehistoric Tribal People (published by Three Essays Collective, Gurgaon, 2004).

Pastoral production is a component of the South Asian rural economy that has rarely excited curiosity in historical research. Pastoralists who are mobile and do not live in substantial houses leave such scant remains at their halting places as to be virtually untraceable in the archeological record, whereas the discarded remains of those who have village headquarters during one part of the year may not be particularly different from those of the other villagers who do not move with animals. When pastoralists occupy the interstices of a settled region and are controlled only indirectly by states, they find little mention in royal inscriptions or land grants; and in any case it has always been easier to tax peasants than mobile pastoralists.

In contrast with Central Asia and Africa, we do not have vast stretches of natural grassland in South Asia which would have provided habitats for large and consolidated pastoral groups; here grassland is confined to small stretches, or else is the consequences of forest degradation [W.A.Rodgers, ‘Environmental change and the evolution of pastoralism’, Studies in History, Vol. 7.2,1991,pp.195-204]. Pastoralists in South Asia herd cattle, sheep and goat, buffalo, camel, and yak; the animals vary from region to region, but we do not have relatively self-sufficient horse-mounted multi-animal pastoralists who became a threat to sedentary societies as in Central Asia. People whose sustenance depends on their mobility cannot accumulate sizeable personal possessions; a pastoral life can make do with a simple technology; and it is one which makes high demands on the herdsman’s time and labour. F.Audouze and C.Jarridge [‘Nomadic pastoralists and sedentary agriculturists in the Kachi plain, Pakistan’, Studies in History, Vol. 7.2,1991, pp.231-54] show how makeshift can be herders’ habitations as compared with those of sedentary villagers, and Supriya Varma [Villages abandoned: The case for mobile pastoralism in post-Harappan Gujarat’, Studies in History, Vol. 7.2, 1991, pp. 279-300] records her observations of the meagre possessions which Gujarati herdmen carry around with them. Our pastoral peoples are thus in many ways – or are regarded as – fringe groups, without economic or military might, and in recent times have been scattered amongst farming communities as members of low ranking castes. Perhaps at one time some of the groups lived together as socially distinct tribes, but today none of them command spatially separate territories. Pastoralists have also been marginalized by the institution of market systems. It is significant that Buchanan, when he was travelling in the early nineteenth century through a
part of the Mysore plateau famous for its cattle breeding, says he saw no herds – the herders had fled in fear at new of a stranger in the land [F. Buchanan, A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara, and Malabar, Vol. 1. Madras, 1870, pp. 295-97].

The relative importance of pastoralists must have decreased through time as agriculture was extended, with encouragement from states interested in agricultural revenues. Such expansion could have been at the cost of grazing space, as evidenced by an inscription of about AD 860 from the vicinity of Jodhpur, about a village hitherto ‘infested by Abhiras’ (a pastoral group) being rehabilitated and rebuilt [B.D.Chattopadhyaya, Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in early Medieval India, Calcutta, 1990, pp. 3-4]. Daniel Ballard’s paper ['Nomadism and politics: The case of Afghan nomads in the Indian subcontinent', Studies in History, Vol. 7.2, 1991, pp. 205-230] on the western borderlands of South Asia shows that the frequency of conflict between mobile pastoralists and sedentary villagers is one of the repercussions of agricultural expansion, as also pastoralist impoverishment and ultimate depastoralization.

The Indian Forest Act, imposed by the British in 1878 (as well as the creation of plantations), deprived herdsmen of dry summer grazing areas. Already in 1893, Voelcker had perceived the dangerous implications of this Act [J.A.Voelcker, Report on the Improvement of Indian Agriculture, London, 1893, pp. 139, 169-74]. The advent of motor roads and vehicles and the shrinkage of pasture in the face of expanding cultivation has meant that the camel is no longer prized as a fast pack animal, and special camel breeds are now becoming undistinguishable [Government of India, National Commission on Agriculture1976: Abridged Report, Delhi, 1977, p.357]. Finally, we may recall that it is today the buffalo which is the milch animal, and that development experts focus on raising the productivity of agriculture and the buffalo, on mutton and wool exports, on imports of exotic animal breeds, but not on the traditional forms of cattle and sheep herding. [Thus the report of the Commission on Agriculture, cited above, dismisses traditional livestock raising with the observation that sheep raising is unsatisfactory because shepherds are mobile and economically backward!] Little wonder then, that we have few ethnographies of the various animal-raising groups in the country.

India is home to roughly 15 per cent of the world’s population, 0.4 per cent of its natural grassland and 5 per cent of its sheep, but about 18 per cent of its cattle population. The importance of cattle lies in their agricultural draught work as well as their milk. In the Rgveda it seems that milk and its products have a ritual and social importance above all other foods; in the Silappadikaram, cowherds by turn carry milk products to the Pandya palace; in the Arthasastra, pastoralists pay tribute to the king in milk products; and in the Mughal period it appears that most of the population, including the poor, ate ghee regularly. We can assume that through history milk was an important source of protein for all the South Asian population, except those eastern and northeastern groups who have a genetic intolerance for lactose. Other factors favouring large cattle populations will be the taboo on beef prevalent after the close of the first millennium BC, the communal grazing of cattle, and the inability of the cow of the Bos indicus species (unlike the Bos taurus of the western Asia and Europe) to
lactate unless the calf is alive and in sight, which discourages culling during infancy. Most important would have been the factors of fertilizer and energy for agricultural production.

Animal manure has through ages been the fertilizer in South Asia, Voelcker noticed its importance during the drought of 1881 when fields lying adjacent to one another were either bare or had a good growth, depending on the application of manure [Voelcker, Report, p. 93]. On irrigated tracts and on some (especially red) soils of the peninsula, manuring has been of critical importance, and we have reports of anything from twelve to twenty cartloads being necessary for each cultivated hectare. For instance, early in this century a village of 105 owner-cultivator households in the Tamil country had a total of 1,722 cattle, sheep, goat, and buffalo, and used 95 per cent of the dung to fertilize its fields [G.Slater (ed.), Some South Indian Villages, London, 1981].

In most part of South Asia there is a sharp contrast in the spacing of rainfall over the twelve months of the year. During the long dry season vegetation growth is severely retarded, so that agricultural activity must be scheduled to take advantage of the nitrogen flush produced by the first rains. Such schedules, as also labour bottlenecks, cannot be maintained without resource to oxen power. Also, the watering of the fields has, over a large area, been dependent on wells, so that cattle may work longer hours at lifting water than at ploughing or threshing.

Thus our purely milch cattle breeds are few, at least today, and are confined to the Ravi basin, the Gir area, western Andhra Pradesh, and Sind. Most breeds are dual purpose, delivering milk as well as draught power. Such is the famous Hissar breed, remarkable for its minimal decline in lactation during the hot dry months. This breed favours a northwest to southeast tract in Haryana stretching between the Saraswati-Ghaggar and the Jumna, in which the calcium content of the soil and vegetation is high [M.S.Kataria, Geography of Indian Livestock and White Revolution, Kurukshtra, 1982]. In the Mughal period the villages of this tract were remarkable for their cattle pens, some villages having even fifty such [I.Habib, ‘Agrarian economy’, in T.Raychaudhuri and I.Habib (eds.), The Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol. I, Delhi, 1982, p.52]; from this tract Hissar provided ghee for the emperor’s kitchen, whereas Sirsa sent ghee to Multan [I.Habib, ‘Non-agricultural production and urban economy’, op. cit., p. 84; I.Habib, Atlas of Mughal India, Delhi, 1982]. This belt does not lie very far northwest of Mathura, the locus of the cowherd Krishna cult elaborated in the Bhagavata Purana and the legendary home of the pastoral Yadava rulers who were later obliged to migrate to Saurashtra. Near Mathura, the plain east of the Jumna has better soils and moisture than on the west; significantly, however, early iron age settlements favoured the west bank. The higher terraces on this bank may have been but one factor in this preference, for Dalal points out that some of these sites are located in niches where the best pastures of the district are to be found [Roshen Dalal, ‘The historical geography of the Mathura region’, in D.Srinivasan, (ed.), Mathura: the Cultural Heritage, Delhi, 1989, pp. 4-5; also R.S.Sharma, ‘Trends in the economic history of Mathura’, op. cit., pp. 31-32].

Even if rams can carry small loads, sheep are not working animals. They mature earlier and reproduce faster than cattle, and require less concentrated and succulent grazing, doing well
on field stubble and weeds. Thus except in very humid zones such as the mountainous northeast or the crest of the Western Ghats, sheep can adapt to most South Asian regions [G.C. Taneja, *Sheep Husbandry in India*, Delhi, 1978, pp. 1-3]. (In the fourteenth century Marco Polo claimed that the sheep of the Andhra kingdom were the largest in the world.) Sheep can combine with cattle in a flock, eating the shorter shoots and leaving the taller growth for cattle [Meanwhile a few goats will give milk closest in constitution to human milk, and will keep a sheep flock on the right track. Goats can live on drier vegetation, and do not interfere with cattle. In a broad sense a diversified herd is a herd more secure against drought and disease and its milk output less subject to seasonal fluctuation: goats do not breed with the same marked seasonality as do sheep and cattle.] Sheep droppings constitute valuable manure: two hundred years ago it was observed in the south that fields could be productive for about six years if a thousand sheep per hectare were penned in them for about a week. It is likely that through the centuries sheep have been replacing cattle in number; Dandekar, for example, surmises that in the past the Deccan pastoralists kept mixed herds and not just small stock as today [Ajay Dandekar, ‘Landscapes in conflict: Flocks, hero-stones and cult in early medieval Maharashtra’, *Studies in History*, Vol. 7.2, 1991]. Reasons for changes in herd composition could have been denudation of the vegetation cover, or a rising demand for wool, or expanding markets for meat. But no one has investigated the when and where of such change. Were the Mughal cities, for instance, important mutton markets?

Other than meat and ghee, important pastoral products are leather and wool. It would be useful to explore when and where these were produced on a substantial scale, and how such crafts linked up with pastoralist economies. In the later nineteenth century India was a world producer of hides and skins; in the Mughal period leather production is attested in Sind; in fact, production on a substantial scale may be of fair antiquity: when calcium carbonate encrustation was observed on certain large pots from Arikamedu, it was inferred that these were used not for dyeing but for curing animal skins; and large heaps of shell found at Vasavasamudram may also testify to this industry in the late first millennium BC [R. Nagaswamy and A.A. Majeed, *Vasavasamudram*, Madras, 1978, pp. 24-27]. Incidental references in early Buddhist texts mention the use of woolen shawls and rugs, but also indicate that sheep’s wool was especially dear in the Gangetic region, and that fine wool was imported [G. Lad, ‘Textiles in the Vinaya Pitaka’, *BDCPRI*, Vol. 49, 1990, pp. 227-35]. But the *Arthasastra* (11:29,46) refers to the collection of wool from sheep and goats every six months, and to white and red woolen cloth for blankets, covers, animal coverings, armour, and so on [R. P. Kangle, *The Kautiliya Arthasastra*, Bombay, 1963, pp. 118-19, 194]; in the medieval period an embassy to China carried, inter alia, five hundred pieces of fine woolen material; and wool production is attested for several parts of the Mughal empire.

Kavoori describes how the extension of agriculture in Rajasthan has ‘eaten into’ common pasture and induced great outmigration of herdsmen, while at the same time the introduction of irrigation in Haryana has provided a new tract for the grazing of flocks from Rajasthan [P.S. Kavoori, ‘Transhumance in western Rajasthan: Trends and transformations’, *Studies in History*, Vol. 7.2, 1991]. Agriculture and animal herding in our part of the world are complementary and interdigitating, rather than spatially separate, forms of land use. When
grain is scarce in a region, the greater is the importance of livestock (and probably also the ability of herdsmen to move requisite distances with the animals). Jowar, ragi, and the fast growing bajra, the main crops of the dry zones, each have their relevance for pastoralists. The tall jowar plant is not strictly an annual, because if moisture remains in the soil it can continue to tiller after it has been cut. Thus jowar stubble has a special importance for cattle, but not so much the dry stalks of harvested bajra. Ragi is a shorter plant and its fields require regular weeding and thinning out, so that occasionally animals are allowed to eat the tops of an overluxuriant early growth; but animals may not graze freely about the village after the ragi harvest, because this grain must dry in stacks in sun for several weeks before it is ready for threshing. Sugarcane, which was grown in so many regions in the past, affords yet another kind of complementarity. The crop requires large manure inputs, and large animals to drive the cane mills, and a harvested field will yield great quantities of leaves and green tops, valuable animal feed.

The relevance of agriculture and pastoralism to each other can be perceived at the local level when we study the location of a site like Hastinapur. This ancient settlement stood on the edge of the high bangar terrace on the right bank of the Ganga, where long years of intensive cultivation have been known. But about 30 m below lies the wide khadar trough of the river, prone to heavy monsoonal flooding, and till recently the habitat of nutritious tall grasses and jungle, of tiger and elephant. This trough has for centuries been a valuable cold season grazing area for the cattle of villages on the terrace. Yet when the economic potential for cultural development in the iron age in the Gangetic valley is discussed, historians tend to focus exclusively on agricultural productivity and the role of iron tools in forest clearance, as if forests were a hindrance to rural prosperity.

Interdigitation and complementarity, however, do not mean that only mixed farming prevailed. We have to consider pastoral nomadism, as well as ‘agropastoralism’. (There is of course no hard and fast classification.) Agropastoralism can prevail in zones which cannot support successful agriculture or pastoralism exclusively, those who depend more on herds for their livelihood spend less time and labour on fields, and vice versa [One of the best works I have read on agropastoralism is G.Massey, Subsistence and Change: Lessons of Agropastoralism in Somalia, Boulder, 1987]. (In mixed farming, wealth means increments in both.) Families may find their fortunes more closely tied with cattle and may move with them, but after some years the balance may shift to an emphasis on cultivation. True ‘specialization’, in contrast, applies to nomadic pastoralists who own flocks larger than necessary for their immediate needs, and whose prosperity is critically dependent on their routes, range, and schedules of movement. This strategy ensures the maximum utilization of scattered grazing in the face of variations in resource availability, spatial and temporal. Perhaps in the past there were several groups of specialized pastoralists. The Arthasastra (II.46) refers to state herds of a hundred cattle, each entrusted to a single herdsman, who could only have been an expert; it also appears to distinguish the subsistence herd (46.4) from the fallow herd (46.6), perhaps revealing the specialists’ strategy of reserving the best grazing for the productive animals...

We also know of the pastoral Abhiras. They first appear in the epics and Puranas in the Indus and Saraswati plains and adjoining Rajasthan, but in later centuries are found in several other regions [B. Suryavanshi, *The Abhiras: Their History and Culture*, Baroda,1962]. We are reminded of the fact that pastoralism as a form of land use contrasts with agriculture in that it makes no ‘capital investment’ on land; grazing terrains as the papers of Balland and Kavoori show, are always prone to shift, for a number of reasons, so that ultimately new ‘territories’ are carved out [D. Balland, ‘Nomadism and politics: The case of Afghan nomads in the Indian subcontinent’, *Studies in History*, Vol. 7.2, 1991, pp. 205-230; P.S.Kavoori, cit. above, pp. 255-78. Also D.J.Stenning, ‘Transhumance, migratory drift, migration: Patterns of pastoral Fulani migration’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol.87, 1957, pp. 57-73].

A region of mixed farming witnessing a steady population increase and the extension of agriculture could begin to experience shortage of grazing, so that some people were forced into long-range mobility and thus specialization in herding. (Agricultural intensification, on the other hand, would require higher manure inputs.) Yet we also know that many pastoralists are now grouped as castes dispersed amongst farming populations. They may have a village base and move seasonally with their herds; like nomads they may exhibit some cultural distinctness; but unlike the latter they lack group rights over specific grazing zones, and without group coherence they lack the ability to be politically autonomous. When we learn that the Abhiras in the second century became militarily conspicuous, serving the Kshatrapa rulers as *senapatis*, or that some Abhiras became politically dominant in the Deccan after the fall of the Satevahana kingdom, the question arises whether the group was still engaged in herding, or whether ‘Abhira’ was now only an ethnic label. For we know that when pastoralists enter regional politics, albeit initially only as raiders or mercenaries, their pastoral life becomes less exclusive and less satisfactory to them. Their access to weaponry or loot creates new needs for luxuries, so that they become increasingly parasitic [The most dramatic of such changes is described by E.A.Thompson, *A History of Attila and the Huns*, Oxford, 1948. Hun society, increasingly dependent on Roman weaponry, gold plates, and Indian pepper, disintegrated in less than a century.] Thus it is significant that if the Abhiras were originally a distinct *mlecha* tribe, and in the sixteenth century receive dismissive reference by Krishnadeva Raya of Vijaynagar as forest dwellers, albeit a group ‘able to enforce their orders’,[ T.V.Mahalingam, *Administration and Social Life under Vijaynagar*, Madras, 1969, p.110] today they are a caste dispersed over central India and the Deccan.

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