Recognition of Traditional Grazing Rights of Pastoralists in the Indian State of Telangana - Issues and Challenges

Shaik Hussain¹ and Kanna K. Siripurapu²

Conservation of Nature through Rural Awakening (CONARE) and South Asia Consortium for Interdisciplinary Water Resources Studies (SacIWATERS)

Introduction / Background

An estimated 18-21 million pastoralists and their livestock have been traversing across the Indian sub-continent for millennia. Pastoralists in India practice two major forms of seasonal migration – transhumance (in the Himalayan mountainous region), and horizontal seasonal migration in the plains/plateau regions of the country. Despite being one of the oldest livestock production systems, neither pastoralism has a policy nor the traditional rights of pastoralists, for the most part, are secured by any law in India, until 2006.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, (also known as FRA 2006), has been implemented across India since the year 2008 to undo the historical injustice done to the tribes and other traditional forest dwellers of the country. The act recognizes both the individual and community rights (including the grazing rights of pastoralists), of tribes and other forest dependent communities, acknowledging that such rights have always existed. Perhaps the FRA, 2006 is the only act which recognizes pastoralism and grazing rights of the pastoralists in the country.

At the end of December 2020 (latest data), the Indian state of Telangana (also the study area) has received a total of 186,679 claims (183,252 individual claims and 3,427 community claims). As per the data released by the ministry of tribal affairs, however, less than half of the individual land titles 93,639 and only 721 (21%) community claims have been settled in the state. However, there is not even a single record of recognition of the traditional rights of pastoralists in the state under this act. The status of recognition of traditional grazing rights of pastoralists inside the forests and protected areas (PAs) and seasonal migration routes through the same is yet unknown for the most part of the country. For that matter, there is no clear guideline available with the government of India for mapping area and extent of traditional grazing rights of pastoralists in the country.

In this context, a study was conducted to investigate the status of the implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, with reference to recognition of the traditional grazing rights of pastoralists of the Indian state of Telangana and the issues and challenges thereof.

Methods / Approach

The study adopts a case study approach. The Amrabad Tiger Reserve (ATR), spread over an area of 2611.4 sq km is designated as the study area. The ATR is geographically located in the Indian state of Telangana. The study was conducted at 12 villages randomly picked from two districts of Nagarkurnool and Nalgonda of the Indian state of Telangana, adopting a stratified random sampling method. A total 140 respondents from the sample villages, who are actively involved in mobile pastoralism were recruited as resource persons for the purpose of the study. A semi-structured questionnaire with open ended questions was used for data collection. Data was collected through personal interviews and focus group discussions. Data collection also involved visiting the traditional grazing patches located in and around the villages and forest areas in the study area. Data collected was predominantly qualitative in nature. Data collection continued until data saturation was attained.

Results

Over 7.1 million traditional pastoralists (17.7 percent of the total state population) inhabit the Indian state of Telangana. Nationally, Telangana has an estimated 32 million livestock population and ranks 8th in the country in terms of livestock population. Livestock population of the state are predominantly maintained under different extensive pastoral systems.

Commons and village pastures are the mainstay of pastoralism, which are under severe threat from encroachment and agricultural expansion. The state has a total of 12 protected areas (PAs) consisting of 8 Wildlife Sanctuaries and 3 National Parks.

The demarcation of PAs and tiger reserves became the bone of contention between the tribes, the other traditional forest dwellers and the forest department. Traditional grazing practices of pastoralists have been branded as “illegal” and liable for heavy penalties and prosecution under the existing forest and biodiversity conservation laws.

For instance, pastoralists inhabiting the villages in and around the ATR keep sheep, goat, cattle and buffalo. ATR is the main stay of fodder for livestock of the pastoralists. Since the declaration of ATR, tribes, pastoralists, and the other traditional forest dwellers have lost their customary rights almost completely. It was surprising that none of the pastoralists in the study are familiar with FRA 2006, and remains completely ignorant of the act.

Fig #1 Study Area  Fig #2 Cattle crossing a river inside the ATR

Conclusions / Significance

Since, the declaration of PAs the traditional grazing rights inside forests have been annulled, turning pastoralists into illegal entities in forests which were their home since the time immemorial. Non-recognition of the traditional rights of pastoralists may have far reaching consequences not only for the livestock-based livelihoods and economy but also to the 6000 years old pastoral system, which is the cradle of indigenous knowledge, culture and traditions, and most importantly a chance to adopt to the vagaries of climate change. Studies suggest that pastoralism is one of the most resilient systems, which evolved over thousands of years in response to the climate and environmental stressors. The results of the study suggests that there is an imperative need for recognition of the traditional rights of pastoralists to safeguard this age old livestock production system.

References / Links

3. The New India Express, (3, July 2021) - Land dispute: Chenchu tribal woman pours petrol on forest officials during the argument.

Acknowledgements

The study was funded by the Centre for Pastoralism (CIP), New Delhi, India, and coordinated by the Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN), India.