When the Sheep Come for Penning - The Economy of Traditional Sheep Penning Practice of the Deccan Plateau Region of India

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Introduction / Background
Penning of livestock especially in the Southern Indian Peninsula can be traced back to the Southern Indian Neolithic age. The presence of ‘Ashmounds’ across most parts of the southern peninsula indicates flourishing of a complex agro-pastoral economy during the Southern Indian Neolithic era.

Sheep rearing till today had been nomadic in nature and traditionally, sheep rearing had been the primary occupation of a few specific pastoralist communities of India. The Dhangars of Maharashtra, Kuruma of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Kuruba of Karnataka (of the Deccan Plateau region), the Konar of Tamil Nadu, the Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir, the Gaddis, Kanets, Kaulis and Kinnuars of Himachal Pradesh, the Bhotias of Uttar Pradesh, the Raikas of Gujarat and Rajasthan, of India are particularly associated with sheep and goat rearing and are known for sharing an intricate socio-cultural, religious, spiritual, and economic relationship with them.

Contemporary studies on sheep penning in India however remain mainly focused on its contribution to soil fertility and organic farming and economics but the other aspects of social, cultural, ecological, environmental, and Geo-ethno-archeological, aspects remain almost untouched. In this background, a study was conducted to investigate the socio-cultural dimensions and economies of the sheep penning tradition in the Deccan plateau region of the Indian subcontinent. The study examines how the sheep penning tradition and economy has changed over time in the study area.

Methods / Approach
The study adopts a mini-ethnographic case study design. The study area is located in the Indian state of Telangana is situated on the Deccan plateau, and geographically located in the semi-arid region. It experiences a tropical climate which is predominantly hot and dry. Based on the weather and climatology and soils, the state is broadly divided into three major agro-climatic zones. Two districts – Kamareddy and Vikarabad were chosen randomly to represent the Northern zone and Southern Zone respectively.

Telangana state has an estimated total sheep population of 17.4 million. There are about 0.57 and 0.23 million sheep in Kamareddy and Vikarabad districts respectively. Sheep are exclusively maintained under mobile pastoralism in the study area.

Criterion sampling, a variant of the purposeful sampling technique, was adopted for selection of sources of evidence. 14 mobile sheep pastoralists and 10 farmers practicing penning were selected as resource persons for the study. Data for the purpose of the present study was gathered by conducting personal interviews and focus group discussions. Inductive coding method was adopted to initiate the coding process. The present study adopted the analytic generalization for data analysis and interpretation.

Results
Sheep penning season in the study area usually commences during the month of December – January and concludes during the month of April – June. The average duration of penning season during the year 2020 was 106.8 days (3.5 months) and the average number of days spent penning at each farm was 5.2 days. Farmers of the study area pay both in cash and kind (food grains) to pastoralists in return for penning at their farms. The average penning fee per night collected from farmers is INR 985.7 for an average flock size of 600-800 sheep. On an average pastoralists of the study area charge INR 1.5 – 2 /per sheep for penning per night. It was observed that penning accounts to be the second major source of the pastoralist HH income in the study area.

It was found that on an average farmers and pastoralists are acquainted with each other for over 20 years in the study. Traditionally, pastoralists and farmers of the study share a special social-cultural and economic relationship. Although there is not much of a change in their relationship, however, a few changes with regards to inter-personal relationships and economic transactions have been reported in the study. For instance, monetary transaction was not a part of traditional practice earlier and pastoralists spent longer durations at each farm. Now payment in return for penning is primary and pastoralists spend shorter (5-7 days), penning at each farm.

Conclusions / Significance
Sheep penning alone generates an estimated revenue of INR 26 million per day in the state. The estimated revenue generated from sheep penning alone could be approximately INR 2.7 billion within a span of 3.5 months (107 days). If the revenue generated from the sale of dung of sheep, goat, cattle and buffalo and penning of cattle is calculated then the figure would be even higher. It is seldom considered as a livelihood and income generation activity, therefore remains grossly neglected by the state missionary. Perhaps, the promotion of penning and dung sale should be institutionalized as “manure economy” and included as a mandate of both the state agriculture and animal husbandry departments.

References / Links

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