

Tasting the (Lost) Ark of Livestock Biodiversity

Why is Jaisalmeri meat famous? Why are village people paying Rs. 500 for a kg of cow ghee from Jaisalmer if it is also available for half that price in the store? In order to answer these questions our team from LPPS¹ not only talked to numerous livestock producers, butchers and village folk in the Thar Desert, but also indulged in numerous meals of mutton and sampled ghee from a variety of locations.

Before we embark on our expedition, we try to grapple with the question on a theoretical level. If a dish – say mutton curry – tastes good, is it because of the breed of goat, i.e. genetic, is it because of what the goat eats, i.e. a question of feeding and the environment, or it is because of the way the meat is cooked? How do we disentangle these factors? And anyway, what is “taste”? Isn’t taste culturally conditioned, i.e. depending on what you ate as a child, or because we associate a certain dish with a particular area to which we are sentimentally attached?

It all seemed pretty complex, but I can confidently state that we are much closer to answering the question after our little expedition into the Thar desert.

Before we embarked on our tour, we fortuitously invited to partake in a goat meal near our headquarter in Sadri (Pali district of Rajasthan). A local Raikanamed Jhalaram had invited us, and this was special because the Raika are basically vegetarian. This community of traditional livestock keepers very rarely eats meat, and if it is done, then only in a religious context, and as a way of worshipping their God. These herders usually devote about lamb or kid per year to God Shiva. This is already done at the time of its birth, and the lamb or kid is given special care and called **jaki**.



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It is slaughtered when one feels the need for some divine support, for instance in the case of sickness or a family problem.



Recipe for Jaki goat

Fry the meat in its own fat and let it sizzle for some time, until the fat has melted.

Add red pepper, turmeric, salt and water and boil (time depending on the age of the animal).

Add finely chopped green coriander

The taste of the meat which was served with *bajri-ki-roti* (flat bread made from finger millet) was excellent. Conservation with our host, some of his brothers, a local Raika leader and a few young men was also interesting and illuminating. Our host had been a sheep breeder and participated in various projects, as well as being involved in the wool trade. But we are very astonished to hear that none of his sons, or nephews, is involved in the herding business. All four of them work in sweet shops in the south. It seems the young Raika have no interest in staying in the business of sheep breeding and have found greener pastures elsewhere. Are we flogging a dead sheep here, trying to identify the hidden values of traditional sheep breeding?

Bhavrani

However, the next morning when we pass through district Jalore on our way to Jaisalmer, our perception changes. Initially, we note that very few animals are to be seen. Large expanses of what earlier must have been grazing areas are now covered with *Prosopis juliflora*, the invasive alien species that is hated by the shepherds because its thorns damage their animals hooves and because it acidifies the soil, so that no grass will grow around it. But then we espy an impressively large flock of sheep spread out over a harvested field and decide to stop and find out more. The sheep do not look like any of the known breeds and when we question the owner, a Raika named Bhavaram, he terms them “*Kheri*” breed, which means cross-bred. Some of the breeds that go into his mixture are *Dumi* and *Sanchori*, maybe also Marwari.

Bhavaram, ably assisted by his young barely teenage daughter, is quite cool and confident. He tells how he has been all over the country – to Ambala and UP – and how his lambs are sold at one month of age for Rs 1700-1800, or sometimes Rs 2700 when two months old.

Daily ten trucks would be coming to try to buy sheep. With his ewes providing three lambs within 15 months, he obviously has an enviable income.



Jaisalmer and Khabha

In Jaisalmer, our staff, Narpat Singh Bhatti, briefs us on what he has already found out about Jaisalmer meat. My anticipation that we could track down this delicacy in one of the many restaurants catering to tourists is dashed. It turns out that these places actually buy their meat by special consignment from Jodhpur, because this is cheaper than purchasing the local meat. It only costs Rs 240 versus Rs. 280 for the local product. Narpat has also researched that there are two butchers in Jaisalmer. One of them slaughters animals for Hindus in *jatka* style, while the other one serves Muslims and kills animals the *halal* way. In order to test the Jaisalmeri goat meat, we have two options. Either buy some meat from the butcher or purchase a whole animal from our livestock keeping contacts in the village and eat it there. We go for the first option and descend onto the butchery of Gajubhai located at the foot of the steep ramparts of the Jaisalmer Fort. His is a small enclosure in which about 10 goats are tied up. Gajubhai willingly explains that he kills about 30-35 goats on weekdays and 40-45 on Sundays. An average goat weighs about 16kg which translates into about 10 kg of meat.



In order to source the goats, he pays 70 Rs commission per head. When we ask him why Jaisalmeri goat has such a good reputation, he looks at us as if we are a bit stupid, and then elaborates as if it is obvious to even the smallest child “Its because they are eating *bordi*, *khejri* and all kinds of other trees – so the meat **has** to be good!”

Indeed, upon closer inspection, the meat is of dark red colour and the fat is yellowish – it is quite different from the meat we are used to in Sadri.



We purchase three kg of the good stuff and then call our friend Chattar Singh from the village of Khabha to find out what other ingredients we need to do it culinary justice. He requests groundnut oil, coriander powder, red pepper, turmeric, garam masala, onions and garlic.

In the evening we watch in his house how Jaisalmeri goat is prepared:



Jaisalmeri goat – village style

- Fry the onions with garam masala until brown
- Add coriander, turmeric and red pepper
- Add meat and fry for a few minutes
- Add water and boil
- Add the crushed garlic later

While the stew is brewing, we have another chance to enquire into the special nature of the Jaisalmeri meat. Over some locally distilled daru (liqueur), our informants come out with the following statement:

- Goats and camels eat 36 species

- Sheep eat about 3-5 species
- Cow eats only grass.

For them it is quite self-evident that what the animal eats determines the quality of the product. And over a few more glasses of deshi daru, we manage to extract at least a tentative list of the famous 36 species. Here it is

1. Rohida
2. Khejri
3. Bhui (only goat)
4. Kher
5. Jhal
6. Bordi
7. Bavlia
8. Kumat
9. Murali
10. Guglan
11. Kheep
12. Aak (only bakri)
13. Tumba/tussan
14. Thor
15. Ringni
16. Damaso
17. Sayan
18. Sen
19. Lathiyo
20. Ekad
21. Dammar
22. Loh
23. Phog
24. Lana
25. Oin
26. Kan
27. Kanti
28. Hato
29. Sevan
30. Bhagto
31. Sone makai
32. Bekar
33. Bekriya
34. Dhaman
35. Gangani
36. Neem

Chetangar

Today we want to focus some more on the ghee and visit two villages that are quite isolated, about 60 km from Jaisalmer. On the road to Chetangar, we meet milk producer Ummed Singh who manages about 100 cows of mixed breed, including a few Holstein-Friesian crosses. He is selling the milk to the government dairy in Jaisalmer and receives about 16 Rs per kilogram. The cows go grazing during the day and come back in the evening. In order to augment their milk yields, he feeds them a concentrate composed of *mung*, *bajri*, *guar*. We try to find out more about the grasses that the cows eat, and he names them as *Lomp*, *Beker*, *Mroot*, *Sevan*, *Baroot*, *Dhaman* and *Murat ganthio*.



He also recounts the local belief

“Animals will die within 6 months, if fed with Khejri cut from tree.”

With this warning in our ear, we continue to Chetangar village, a settlement of Bhatti and Sodha Rajputs who are originally from the village of Ramdev in Pakistan. Besides camels, they keep a large number of cattle, although they report that the market for bullocks is down. However, they have just begun selling milk to a “Baba” from Sanchoe. This Baba accepts only milk from indigenous (deshi) cows and processes the milk into ghee, for religious purposes, i.e. use in temples.



We also enquire about the breeding practices and institutions. The villagers explain that they used to have just one common bull for the whole village, but that now there are three. They recently invested Rs. 29,000 into purchasing a pedigree Tharparkar bull from the government farm in Chandan. It seems as if the advent of a market for dairy products from indigenous cows has given the cattle economy a new impetus.

Kharia Village

From Chetangar we continue on a dirt track to the village of Kharia. It consists of about 70-75 houses belonging to Sodha Rajputs married to women from the Rathore Rajputs. Kharia is only five generations old – it was founded by just one family that came from Khuri.

They have also availed themselves of the opportunity for marketing the milk of their cows and are already selling about 400 kg of milk per day at a rate of 22.5 Rs to the private dairy in Sanchore.

Sanawra

Our final village in this trip is Sanawra, about 40 km from Pokaran, home to Bhom Singh, the president of the Jaisalmer Camel Breeders Association, who has invited us for a meal of goat meat and to stay overnight in his house. Bhom Singh is an amazing source of information and the whole evening he regales us with titillating stories about life in the “olden days” – which actually were not that long ago. The changes that he has seen in his lifetime (57 years)

are amazing.

Basically, his family earlier made a living from stealing camels in Sindh and selling them in the Pokaran area. When he was a child, the local diet consisted almost exclusively of livestock products: ghee, milk and chach (buttermilk). These products were available in plenty much of the time (except during the frequent droughts), and were much easier to come by than water. Roti made from bajra (pearl millet) was eaten only once a day, together with “cuddy” (made from chach). Koka, the dried pods of the khejri tree and pilu, the fruit of the Jhal tree were used as vegetables. Other dietary essentials were oil (made from sesame seeds), red pepper, sugar, salt and matches. They obtained these goods through barter with ghee and wool.

While opium use has a very long history, two other “intoxicants” were introduced just very recently.

Tea only became common in the 1950s, and Bhom Singh remembers how his mother was unfamiliar with the idea and used the longish tea leaves to make a vegetable preparation with turmeric and red pepper. Liqueur drinking used to be a privilege restricted to the big land owners only.

However, droughts and famines were very common and in those years, the whole village migrated to Sindh and worked there for food. Only one man was left behind in the village. There were certain hunger foods that people ate during a famine: lana, bark of khejri tree and the kher tree.

Certain communities who had many camels never cooked, subsisting entirely of the milk, and his family cultivated bajra for the first time in 1974. One bori of bajra lasted a whole 12 months for the entire family!