

"Down to Earth" Editorial

The 'other' food crisis

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There is so much about rural India that escapes notice that one more area of neglect will not break the camel's back. I am talking about the crisis of fodder for livestock. A grim silence surrounds it. 'Grim', because in rural India, domestic animals aren't 'pets' but engines that drive the economy. They provide resilience and wealth — people cope with adverse conditions because of their livestock. But no policy exists on how to feed these 500 million or so animals. Rural India today isn't fodder-secure, and the grim reality is that food security in this country is not possible without fodder security.

Fodder insecurity begins with the question: where are these animals to get their food from? In India, less land has been set aside for domestic livestock than for 'flora and fauna': protected areas such as sanctuaries and national parks sprawl over 15 million hectares (ha), while land classified as 'permanent pastures' cover 11 million ha. Moreover, over the years, these 'permanent pastures' have shrunk or simply degraded.

In addition, there officially exists 13 million ha of land classified as 'culturable wasteland'. Couldn't such land provide fodder? Yes, but not country-wide: only two states, Rajasthan and Gujarat (both livestock-dependent), account for roughly half such land. Also, 'culturable wastelands' are controlled by state revenue departments: usually, the rich are allowed to encroach upon them, or politicians distribute them as 'largesse' under so-called land reform programmes. If these lands, critical for rural life-support, don't get gobbled up, they remain neglected and degraded.

Animals survive by foraging on available land and on agricultural residues. But the productivity of our common lands — forest and revenue land — are pathetic; grass yields on these are mostly illusionary. Sheer grazing pressure ensures animals literally nibble away a pasture's productivity, suppressing regeneration of grasses and tree fodder. Add to these the fact that agricultural production is stagnating, or that farmers are shifting to crops that do not yield fodder. The result? Crisis.

How serious is this crisis? We don't know, empirically. What we know is that unlike most other neglected issues — be it fuelwood to cook food or water to drink or food to avert famine or malnutrition deaths — this is a crisis about many kinds of neglect. First, it concerns the very poor that depend on livestock to survive another

tomorrow. Second, it relates to the country's most neglected lands: common forests. Third, it is about neglected animals.

So it is that I say: we must know now, to find the ways ahead. Trying to put together a fodder-scenario is literally like catching straws in the wind. Every time I travel to villages in dry and drought-prone areas, or forested areas, I enquire about fodder. Poor people, living within what we would believe is a non-cash economy, tell me what they spend on buying fodder. That in the dry months, of peak shortage, they end up spending as much as Rs 6,000 - 7,000 of their household income, buying fodder at Rs 500-800 per tonne.

Ghazala Shahabuddin and her colleagues, studying villages in and around the Sariska Tiger Reserve, find similar trends. They report that even in villages located within forests, pastoral households spend 31 per cent of their household expenditure on buying fodder - commercial and farm fodder. This is the single largest expenditure after food. In times of fodder stress, it costs a livestock owner Rs 600 - 1,000 per month to feed a buffalo. When milk yields improve, and the buffalo owner gets an average daily yield of two litres per buffalo, then selling this milk at Rs 10 per litre provides Rs 3,000 per month. But such yield is seasonal, so this earning is temporary; expenditure on fodder, on the other hand, remains constant year-round.

Couldn't the solution to the above problem be animals with higher milk-yields? The problem is also that animals with higher milk yields — the crossbred cows our planners are fond of — need better quality fodder. These animals do not forage on degraded land; they require stall-feeding. Improving the animal economy, then, demands improving the quality and quantity of fodder available to livestock. But this has simply not been planned for, or done.

The fact is that the fodder crisis is part of the larger land and water crisis of rural India. Better agricultural productivity on private lands is a sure-shot source of additional fodder. But this productivity is limited by the non-availability of water to irrigate crops. Every time I ask people why they persist in taking their animals to graze in forestlands, I am told that part of the problem is there is no water to grow crops, and so, no agricultural residues for animals to eat. Water then becomes the first enabling tool. It is, therefore, imperative that we link fodder security to water security — building water recharge structures for irrigation.

But this is still half the story. The other half relates to the largest grazing lands — the common lands — degraded through sheer pressure. It is understood these lands ought to be regenerated. But what needs to be further understood is that such regeneration is not possible without factoring in the animal economy. Building boundary walls to keep grazing animals out will not succeed; the pressure is too great. Planting non-browsable species will also not work. In the past, this has always led to greater shortage of fodder and, domino-like, to greater pressure on forestlands. It has always led to

an unproductive stalemate between the forester and the grazier. It is, therefore, clear we also need to link fodder security with forest security — replanting and regenerating our vast common lands.

But all this is still not the real story. The real story is that this is an 'other' food crisis, raging through a forgotten animal world.

P.S.

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