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Dust of the road

Trips, travel and journeys

Like here, like there

Nomadic lives were destroyed as Sindh and Kachchh are separated by a border

By K P JAYASANKAR & ANJALI MONTEIRO

*Like this, like that
Like here, like there
Friend, enemy
Life, death
All the same
All is he ...*

– Shah Abdul Latif (1689-1752)

For millennia, movement has been central to the existence of human communities around the world. The nomad's logic always defied the logic of the settlers. A *choolah* (hearth) that is grounded, a grinding stone that is fixed, water from a well – all these were taboos for many nomadic communities, in Southasia as elsewhere. The freedom to move is crucial to the survival of communities involved in hunting, food gathering, pastoralism and shifting cultivation. But this freedom has been severely curtailed in recent decades, as settled ways of living have become the norm, national boundaries have hardened and state policies have eroded nomadic ways of living.

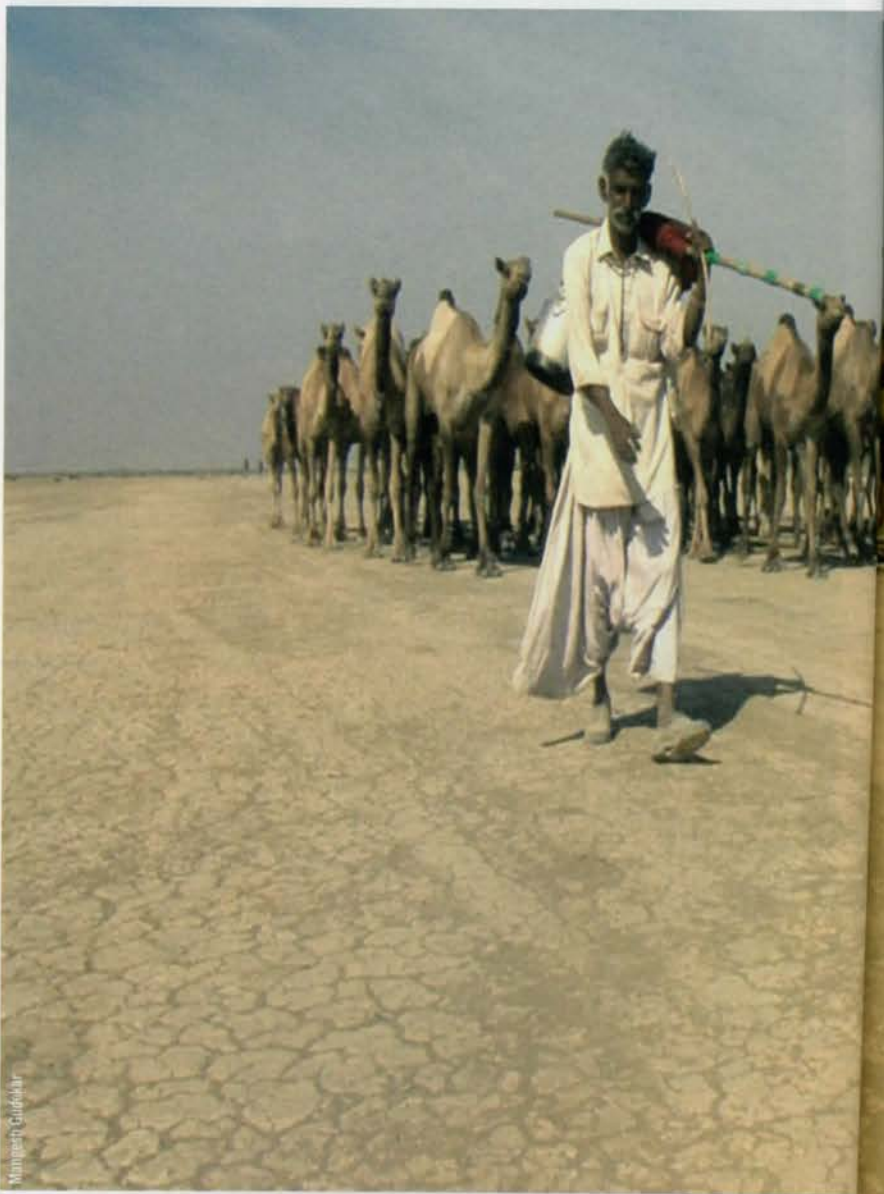
Across the Subcontinent, there are numerous communities that were historically nomadic or semi-nomadic. The mobility of these populations was regarded as a threat by the colonial administration, which tried to discipline them through punitive measures such as the Criminal Tribes Act, land settlement policies, forest laws, excise duties and the like. Post-Independence, the state's approach remains largely unchanged; combined with the triumphant march of capital and liberalisation and globalisation, this has further marginalised these communities.

Kachchh, in Gujarat state, has traditionally been home to several pastoral

or *Maldhari* communities that were itinerant, such as the Daneta Jatts, the Hingorjas, the Sumras, the Haleputras, the Bhils, the Rabaris and – two communities with which these writers have worked closely – the Fakirani Jatts and

the Meghwals. The Fakirani Jatts are Muslim pastoralists who are distantly related to the Jatts of Punjab. The Meghwals are a Dalit, mainly pastoral community; they identify themselves as Hindu and are also found in the Tharparkar region of Pakistan.

Kachchh can be divided into distinct areas. In the north and east are the marshy salt flats of the Great Rann and the Little Rann. Moving southwards, one comes across the extensive grasslands of Banni, and other elevated islands of grass in the



Rann; this is followed by the plains and hills of the mainland and, finally, the coastal mangrove stretch. Writing during the 1830s, Marianna Postans, a British traveller, offered an interesting description of the Rann of Kachchh and Banni that still holds true today:

This tract is of large extent, and between the months of May and October is flooded with salt water. During other parts of the year it is passable; but the glare is so great from the incrustation of salt, caused by

the evaporation of water, that it is seldom attempted, unless from the inducements of trade, or the necessities of military duty .. There are several islands on the Rann, and a bright oasis of grassy land, known by the unromantic name of the Bunni. Thither, in patriarchal style, the shepherds take their flocks, and lead a sunny pastoral life, although surrounded by a desert marsh.

The pastoralists are to be found mainly in the Banni area, but also in the other areas to the south of the Rann. These communities traditionally lived in semi-settled *vandhs* or hamlets and moved seasonally with their camels, goats and cattle in search of pastureland and for trade in milk products such as ghee. Some communities, particularly those in the south, would move to Saurashtra (bordering Kachchh) and other parts of Gujarat. Even today, many of the Muslim Maldharis, such as the Daneta and Fakirani Jatts, the Hingorjas, the Sumras and the Haleputras, have strong kinship ties with Hindu farmers in Saurashtra.

In pre-colonial and colonial times, the Maldharis living in the Banni and the other islands in the Rann would go to Sindh in the north, across the salt flats of the Great Rann of Kachchh, for trade and in search of pasture. For drought-prone Kachchh, Sindh, with its greener pastures, was like a safety net. When the grasslands of Banni were parched and dry, many communities would pack up their belongings and make the long trek across the blistering Rann to Sindh. As Padmaben Marwada, a Meghwal woman in her 60s from Dhrobana village on the edge of the Rann, recalled: 'My mother would say that they'd grow some grain in their field, make rotis from the crop. With their food and a pot of water and a bundle of their belongings on their heads, they would leave for Sindh to work hard and earn some money. Some

went to Sindh on donkeys and camels and some went walking.

The movement was in both directions, with Hindu and Muslim pastoral communities in Sindh and the desert district of Tharparkar maintaining relationships based on trade and marriage with their counterparts in Kachchh. In earlier times, these religious identities were not emphasised; many of these groups were Adivasis, with their own beliefs and practices and hence regarded as of 'indeterminate' religion. The identification with one or the other religion came only later, particularly with Partition. Historically, the entire area from Tharparkar and across the Great Rann lay between borders, with contesting claims from Sindh and Kachchh. The conflicts and boundary disputes between the princely states of Kachchh and Sindh did not affect the mobility of the Maldharis, however, and the close ties continued until the time of Partition.

Hard borders

Partition transformed the lives of these communities forever, the new border becoming a faultline for divides that had never existed. The pastoralists and their families now found themselves trapped in recently imagined countries. In the words of Haji Umar, a Fakirani Jatt pastoralist from Abdasa, Kachchh, 'Previously, people would come and go stealthily – brother here, sister there, father there, son here. Children orphaned here, mother stranded there. This is still the case. But how this injustice took place, god alone knows!'

After 1947, the border was somewhat porous until the India-Pakistan conflict of 1965, after which legal contact ceased and the Rann became a militarised zone. After the war of 1971, when Tharparkar was temporarily under Indian control, a number of Meghwal families crossed the border and sought Indian citizenship. Over time, the border controls have become tighter, with severe punitive action



from the army and police in both countries against those who transgress national boundaries. In prisons on both sides of the border languish many pastoralists and fishermen who have strayed across the frontier, either by mistake or by design. In our conversations with both the Meghwals and the Jatts, many of the older generation expressed a longing to meet their relatives in Sindh. A privileged few have been able to make that journey across the border, which is beyond the reach of most due to the costs and the bureaucratic procedures involved.

The emergence of hard borders, that are fenced and fortified, is not the only threat to the semi-nomadic pastoralism of the Maldharis. To a great extent, the state has been responsible for the destruction of these ways of life, through environmental policies, the promotion of industrialisation and the officialdom's continued deep-seated suspicion and contempt of these communities.

As long ago as 1877, the British introduced *Prosopis juliflora*, an exotic acacia species, to India. During the late 1950s and 1960s, this tree was enthusiastically propagated by the Gujarat Forest Department in Kachchh as part of its anti-desertification programme. This invited ecological disaster. Locally known as *gando bawal*, the mad tree, it has literally taken over the Banni grasslands, affecting the growth of grass required for the livestock and depleting the water table in the area. Because it cannot be used as fodder due to its toxicity, the population of sheep, goats and cows have been replaced by hardier buffaloes. According to Indian Remote Sensing satellite data, the grasslands are depleting at the rate of approximately over 2000 hectares per year.

Further, the Banni grasslands were traditionally a common property resource, accessed by all pastoral communities with no individual ownership rights. Today they are classified as 'reserved forest' Cultural anthropologist Farhana Ibrahim notes that, in so doing,

'the state espouses a certain vision of conservation and afforestation that is totally disconnected from those who live within that ecosystem.' Today, the Jatts and other Maldharis in the Banni and other parts of Kachchh are caught between the myopic policies of the Forest Department and rapid industrialisation, with no rights to the land they have used for millennia. The relatively low density of population in Kachchh makes it a prime location for special economic zones and large-scale, potentially polluting industries such as cement and chemicals. The Jatts and other communities bear the double burden of being pastoralist and Muslim. Living close to the border in a state ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), their citizenship rights are rendered somewhat tenuous and their allegiance to the nation-state suspect.

Amidst these multiple threats to their survival, the Maldhari communities in the Banni have formed the Banni Pashu Ucherak Maldhari Sanghatan (Banni Breeders Association), and have recently come up with a detailed plan for the regeneration of their grasslands. This calls for state recognition of these communities' customary rights to use and conserve the grasslands, and for the protection of their ecologically sustainable traditional ways of living. It also calls for a process of consultation before any decision is taken to grant private landholdings, fence the Banni, allot land to industries, or undertake conservation initiatives.

Just souls

Sindh and Kachchh share common cultural traditions, drawing on Sufism and other syncretic traditions, as well as the same repertoire of poetry, folklore, embroidery, architectural practices and visual culture. Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, a medieval Sufi poet, is an iconic figure in the cultural history of Sindh, whose *Shah ji risalo* is a remarkable collection of poems that continue to be sung by communities throughout Kachchh and Sindh. Many of these poems draw on the legendary love stories of Umar-

Marui and Sasui-Punhu, among others, which speak of the pain of parting, of the inevitability of loss and of deep grief that takes one to unknown places. According to Hakeem Rahman, a Fakirani Jatt pastoralist now in his 80s: 'We are shepherds, we re-live our lives, our joys and sorrows in the stories of Bhitai. The same camels, the same mountains, the same heat, the same hardships – our experiences are reflected in the melodies of Shah Bhitai. Each melody has its own characteristic that reflects our life.'

Bhitai's poems have a deep resonance with the fragile worlds of the Maldharis, a space of transience, flux, finitude and a respect for the other. This philosophical sub-text is eloquently articulated by Haji Umar, a pastoralist and self-taught Sufi scholar: 'When souls were created, they were just souls. Not Hindus or Muslims or Christians or Sikhs. Just souls. That's from where Bhitai starts his journey. Today, the world has forgotten Bhitai's "Like here, like there", which points to the universality of human existence. If we understand the true meaning of his verses, we will realise that whether we are Americans or Japanese or Indians or Pakistanis, we are all children of Adam. And I am not as good as the other. The other is better than me.'

This is a profound insight into the worldview of many Maldhari communities, who recognise difference and yet do not perceive it as threatening. Today, this ability to live with difference and uncertainty is beginning to change. Yet more than ever before, this marginalised wisdom needs to be affirmed in a world that promotes tourism and transnational capital but seeks to discipline and control transhumance; a world that privileges borders and fixed identities; that markets diversity while normalising the ethnocide of nomadic cultures and ways of living. △

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