

Customs and beliefs of Raika pastoralists of Rajasthan associated with camel husbandry

Hema Tripathi* & Devi Singh Rajput

Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Indian Veterinary Research Institute,
Izatanagar 243 122, Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh
E-mail: hematripathi1@yahoo.co.in; hematripathi@ivri.up.nic.in

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The paper provides an overview on some customs and beliefs of Raika pastoralists related to camel husbandry. Qualitative information was collected from 60 camel owning Raika families from 4 selected villages of Bikaner district of Rajasthan. Camels play a central and identifying role in various rituals, customs, traditions and ceremonial functions. Camel rearing has influenced the culture life of the Raikas to a great extent. Their knowledge was based on practical experiences and superstitions. Traditionally, Raika neither sell camel milk nor other products like hair and hide. Sacrificing of camel for meat was found totally prohibited among them. Thus, relationship with camel was found to be more cultural rather than purely economic.

Key words: *Raika pastoralists, Rabari* tribe, Camel husbandry, Rajasthan

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The customs, rituals, art, ceremonial functions, folkways, traditions, etc. of any specific culture contributes to the development of particular pattern of life¹. Every society has their own customs and traditional ways of behavior, which they follow in their social system. Camel has been a favorite in the popular folk tradition and literature. There are several goddess depicted as riding on a camel². Camels are lifeline of the dry land ecosystem and considered as fairly constant resource for income generation among rural population of the Rajasthan. Jat, Muslims, Bishnoies, Rajput and Raika community people in Rajasthan mostly rear camels. The Raikas, which is also known as Rabaris, are the largest pastoralists or specialized camel breeding caste exists in western Rajasthan. Raika take pride in fact that for them camel breeding is not just business but their heritage³. Raika believe that God Shiva created their caste in order to take care of dromedary camels⁴. Traditionally, the relationship between the Raika and their camel has been shaped by certain customs and beliefs, which are still followed by them even in fast changing scenario of societies. The study has been taken to document the specific customs and beliefs followed by them.

Methodology

The present study was conducted in state of Rajasthan, which was selected purposively as large number of Raika pastoralists resides here in the state and rank first in terms of camel population. The research was carried out in the Bikaner district, situated in Northwestern part of Rajasthan. It comprises a total of 580 villages spread over 27,244 sq km areas. A village wise comprehensive list of number of Raika families residing in different village was prepared with help of panchayat samiti of district, village patwari and local people. Village Gadwala, Kesardesar Bohran, Bajju Tejpura and Charanwala were selected purposively on the basis of residing maximum number of Raikas in it. A total of 60 camel owning Raika families were identified randomly with probability proportionate to total Raika families in the four selected villages. Qualitative data on customs and beliefs were collected through observation, interaction dialogue, detailed discussion with key informants, aged persons, housewives and migratory Raikas.

Results and discussion

The life of Raika pastoralists was found to be closely linked with the camel, many of them developing close emotional ties. They had distinct

* Corresponding author

customs, traditions, marriage, kinship and property inheritance systems.

Camels are used exclusively by Raika community on the occasion of *Nikasi* (departure of marriage party) and *Toran* (entrance at bride house) during marriage ceremonies. Camel is generally given as dowry by Raikas during marriage of their daughter. Keeping/owning of large camel herd is considered as matter of reputation and high prestige in society⁵⁻⁷. According to Raikas, drinking camel milk has nourishing property and provides strength to body⁸. They believe that the person, who consumes camel milk, can only handle a vicious camel confidently. Parturition of she camel was found to be the matter of high happiness among families. Raika prepare *kheer* (sweet rice boiled with milk) from first milk of camel after parturition. It is firstly offered to their local God *Pabuji* and *Bhomiaji*. After that, *prasad (kheer)* is distributed among family members. Raika believe that *Pabuji* and *Bhomiaji* provide them strength to take care of camel.

Raikas put marks on their camels with hot iron at the age of three years for easy identification, locally termed it *kheng* or *dam*. The markings are done on various body parts of a camel with different shapes or marks as *dodi-liri kheng* (oblique line), *mudra kheng* (like coin), *ankora kheng* (like hook) and *phulari kheng* (like flower). Besides shapes, Raika also put different numbers with hot iron on individual camel for identification⁹.

Sacrificing camel for meat purpose is completely prohibited among the Raika community. Similarly, camel flesh is a taboo among Syrian and Egyptian pastoralists¹⁰. Contrary to this, some East-African camel pastoralists including the *Rendille*, *Gabra* and *Turkana* have a custom of bleeding live camel usually at the time of year when milk yield become very low. In northwestern part of Kenya, camels are slaughtered during different ceremonies and feasts¹¹. Camel utilization is almost restricted to transportation among Asian pastoralists¹². The Hindu Raika camel breeding caste observes a taboo against the killing and slaughtering of camels^{3,13}. However, the camel meat is especially popular with people of Muslim background¹⁴. The Muslim camel nomads of the Cholistan desert in Pakistan reported a similar attitude. However in some North African countries camel meat has become popular among the urban poor and some pastoralists are specialized in producing camel for market purpose. Sudan annually

exports 60,000 camels to Egypt, 10,000 to Libya and unidentified number to Saudi Arabia¹⁵.

Raikas reported that the dead camels are thrown away in open areas at distance of about 2-3 km away from houses or in jungle. Carcass is neither buried nor sold. Further, it was observed that if a camel die in jungle during grazing, and then the village sweeper skins off carcass. The branded or marked portion is hanged on the tree at the entry of the village so that the camel owner can easily identify it. *Gujjars* of Nainital district also had the practice to throw away their dead buffaloes in the forest¹⁶. Animals died due to contagious diseases were only buried in the forest away from Katha/houses. *Raika* never market camel milk and milk products. The Raika camel breeders of Rajasthan believe that God *Shiva* created their caste in order to take care of camels^{3,12}.

Raika believe that if a *tanti* (cotton thread) is tied around the neck of camel bitten by snake or scorpion, in the name of their God *Nakat Banna*, the life of camel will definitely be saved. The farmers believe that by tying *dora* (magical thread) around the neck, animals can overcome from many diseases¹⁷. *Lodha* tribe of West Bengal believe that tying of *suthlisan* (one kind of jute) round the neck of goat helps recovery from sore and abscess at mouth and *Santal* tribe paint lime on the horn of cattle and tie *kari* (snail) for protection from evil eye¹⁸. *Raika* believe that camels have the ability to forecast the weather condition especially during rains⁹. After seeing the lightening in the sky they move in the direction, where the chances of availability of good pasture will be more.

Raikas perform camel breeding practices at distant places, away from their houses. They believe that if pregnant women see the breeding activity, the chances of abortion for her will be more. Raikas also believe that the sense of evil, in case of camel is very strong. If they foresee any evil event ahead, they erect their ears and do not move forward. Raikas have a strong belief that camel always remembers the path to its owners place. During the night journey, the camels are left on their own to move to the destination while the Raikas take their sleep on the cart. Some of the traditional healers among Raikas do not offer *phitkari* (alum) to breeding camels, as it is believed to dilute the semen. Each camel is supposed to have a different and unique pug mark which help the Raikas to search their camels.

Conclusion

The camel husbandry was a traditional occupation among Raikas pastoralists and camel was found to involve in all wake of their social life. Raikas relationship with camel is more cultural rather than economic. Traditionally, they do not sell camel milk, dung, hair and bone. Some of the Raika families keep camel for symbolic representation of the society without getting any economic benefit from them. Camel pastoralists have developed social structure and cultural mechanism, appropriate for co-existence with camel¹². Many of the customs followed by them represent peculiarity of their society. However, some of the beliefs and customs seemed to act as barrier and hinder the economic growth of society. Camel milk is now being marketed in an industrial manner in Saudi Arabia and on small scale in Mauritania and in Somalia. It has also started to be sold as a health food in Europe. In view of these, there is need to bring changes in livelihood of Raika pastoralists through proper educational programmes, proper extension services, arranging the training camps and participatory interaction with proper justification will certainly benefit them socially, culturally and economically.

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