

Beyond Livelihood: Childhood and Human–Buffalo Relations among the Van Gujjars of Rajaji National Park

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Abstract: Pastoral communities are often studied primarily in relation to livelihood, migration, livestock and natural-resource use. Such an approach, while important, can overlook the everyday social relationships through which pastoral ways of life are reproduced. This paper examines childhood, transhumance and human–buffalo relationships among Van Gujjar pastoralists associated with the Rajaji National Park landscape in Uttarakhand. The paper is based on qualitative field observations and informal conversations undertaken during a visit to selected Van Gujjar settlements, supported by published literature available up to June 2023.

The field observations indicate that buffaloes occupy a position extending well beyond their economic value. Buffalo milk constitutes an important component of the household economy, with milk being sold in urban areas. At the same time, children spend considerable time feeding, bathing, grooming and playing with buffaloes and calves. Individual buffaloes are given names, and children participate in grooming and styling them. Women make beaded strings for buffaloes and decorate the doors of their dwellings. Children accompany their parents during seasonal movement and expressed a desire to continue the pastoral way of life. Religious instruction is also provided to children by a visiting religious teacher.

The paper argues that pastoralism among the Van Gujjars is not merely an occupation but a lived social system. Children's interaction with buffaloes represents a space where play, care, responsibility, learning and cultural socialisation overlap. The paper proposes the concept of relational pastoral childhood to understand this distinctive form of childhood in which livelihood and leisure are closely intertwined.

Keywords: Van Gujjar, transhumance, pastoralism, childhood, buffaloes, human–animal relations, milk economy, cultural transmission, Rajaji National Park, Uttarakhand