

Difficult times for livestock farmers

For a nation that claims to practice Ahimsa our country has scored a very low count in the past few months. For a country that claims to loves its animals especially cows we have fared very poorly too.

India prided itself on being an agricultural country and several politicians used the phrase as an opening line to their speeches but the recent obsession with steel, chrome, bullet trains and high technology has bought the country to its knees when several other crises envelop us in a dark heavy cloud.

The livestock sector suffered the last year. Climate change which brought a prolonged monsoon not only raised the price of onions to the sky it also brought with it other problems. In Maharashtra, floods affected several dairy farms and animals in the highest milk producing districts of the state. Several hundred animals could not be rescued. In several other states migratory shepherds lost their livestock to a disease called Blue tongue. This was not well reported as reporting this disease would ruin the image of the government and its inadequate veterinary service. Shepherds are still waiting for support and compensation despite having approached the government to record their loss. However, as most shepherds are not literate and migrate out of their home villages in search of fodder it is unlikely they will be able to get any compensation in the near future especially as other larger problems emerge.

In January this year the organised poultry industry began reporting decrease in sales and enormous losses amounting to several hundred crores. This sector is large and organized and could come up with their case which caught the attention of the media. The losses were attributed to an alarming decrease in the consumption of chicken. Across the country sales of chicken dipped as messages on social media applications like whatsapp and tiktok spread the message that industrially produced chicken spread disease especially the new COVID 19. The fear of consuming industrial chicken is not unfounded. The earlier Avian Influenza epidemic began in industrial poultry farms in South East Asia. However, the present COVID pandemic is not linked to consuming industrial chicken produced in India. I am no fan of industrially produced chicken but placing the blame on the wrong source can be socially and economically destructive.

The blame game is not a new one. In research conducted by our organisation in 2016 we found that small pig farmers across the country from Goa to Meghalaya had stopped raising pigs in their back yard because backyard pig rearing was considered unhygienic and the cause of disease. Gradually in our country pig farming has shifted to organised piggeries. Pig meat was earlier eaten by the poorest communities . Today the meat from organised pig farms is eaten by a wealthy few. Like wise in the earlier Bird flu epidemic which took place in 2005 back yard poultry was considered unsanitary and some countries like Indonesia even banned it.

Today the tables have turned in India, local breeds , local produce , local systems have become the mantra . From cow urine parties to banish the COVID virus to A2 milk ghee we are all about protecting the indigenous cow .

However, stories from the field tell us that we are not doing enough. Pastoral communities raising cattle in Vidarbha are being denied access into villages to sell their milk or buy cattle feed to support their animals in these difficult times. Local production houses such as Haldirams and Dinshaws are shut and are not buying their milk anymore . Local dhabas and eating houses are also shut . Even NDDB has reduced its procurement and pastoral cattle farmers are unable to sell their milk anywhere. Soon they will have no option but to dump their milk. With no money coming in they will be unable to procure cattle feed. The transport lock down has meant they cannot sell their milk in other more distant markets or purchase cattle feed . At a time when there are thousands of people without employment and hungry, it is a shame that milk producers have to dump milk . Pastoralists have said that while the lock down may be for a month for the nation, their losses will be felt for over a year .

Livestock markets across the country are closed. This is where most livestock producers sell and buy their produce and their animals. Shepherds cannot sell their animals as transport chains, butcher shops , eating houses serving meat are all shut. Without being able to sell their animals , how do they get incomes to feed their families . Most pastoral communities especially nomadic shepherds are unaccounted for in the census, they do not have bank accounts into which transfers of funds can be made by the government . Not only have we forgotten our sheep, we have also conveniently forgotten shepherds who raise them.

The COVID epidemic creates further divides. Clean versus unclean , sanitary versus unsanitary , polluted versus unpolluted , vegetarian versus nonvegetarian raising again the dangerous and ugly head of caste and class distinctions in our already deeply divided society. While the rich store and hoard packaged and processed food and practice social distancing , the poor , the unorganized are left to fend for themselves facing huge deprivations .No job , no money , no food , no transport , no soap , no water , no health facility , no bank accounts .How does the falling stock market make the slightest difference to their already perilous lives. In the rural areas ,while rich farmers and industrial farming houses demand and shout for compensation the poor farmer will be silently snuffed away waiting for produce to be picked up from their farms and fields.

There were far more critical things we should have been paying attention to these last months. Our agriculture and livestock systems and our health and education systems instead of temples, mosques, bullet trains and the banging of pots and pans at the appointed hour.

Dr. Nitya Sambamurti Ghotge

Veterinarian , researcher and Director of Anthra an organisation working with pastoral and small livestock rearing communities.

