

Conference Report

LIVING LIGHTLY: Grasslands Reimagined

11th to 14th March, 2026

An interdisciplinary research conference organised as a part of
the Living Lightly Exhibition, Pune



Centre for
Pastoralism

LIVING LIGHTLY:
JOURNEYS WITH PASTORALISTS



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Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune

Organised by:

Anthra

Centre for Water Research

French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD) - Indian Pastoral Network

Centre for Pastoralism

Living Lightly

Anthra is a non-profit organisation in India, working on livestock development within a broader framework of sustainable natural resource use and rural livelihoods. Its work focuses on supporting marginalised livestock-rearing communities, especially women, pastoralists, and small farmers through research, training, and community-based programmes. Anthra's work is informed by issues in agroecology, gender, pastoralism, and climate change, guiding its work towards building equitable and environmentally resilient livestock systems which in turn build food systems and resilient livelihoods.

Centre for Water Research (CWR) is an interdisciplinary initiative at IISER Pune formed in November 2020. It draws upon expertise from faculty across different departments at the institute. CWR aims to generate interdisciplinary knowledge about water systems, including their history and heritage, resource management and sustainable use, and to train the next generation of scholars to look at water from an integrated/multi-dimensional lens.

French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD) is a French public research organisation focused on advancing knowledge and innovation for sustainable development, particularly in countries of the Global South. The Indian Pastoral Network is an initiative of IRD that brings together researchers, universities, and civil society organisations working on pastoralism in India, to foster collaboration, produce large-scale analyses and datasets, and support training through courses and field-based learning.

Centre for Pastoralism works across India on collaborative programs to enhance pastoralist livelihood security, promote research on pastoral systems, gain mainstream recognition of livestock breeds, improve access to grazing resources, and undertake outreach to educate society on pastoralism and its valuable contributions. In advancing these goals, CfP works in close partnership with civil society, academia, government agencies and the private sector.

Living Lightly ~ Journeys with Pastoralists is a curated exhibition series on pastoralism in India, exploring the land, lives, and livelihoods of pastoral communities. It traces histories of mobility alongside the ecosystems that sustain pastoral life-worlds, while engaging with their culture, knowledge systems, art, politics, spiritual traditions, and the economics and challenges of herding. The Deccan edition was launched in Bangalore in 2025, followed by Pune in 2026. The exhibitions create space for dialogue within and across pastoral communities, between pastoralists and wider public, and through more sustained engagements on the place of pastoralism in contemporary India.

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Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune

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Acknowledgements

This report is based on the presentations and discussions from the Grasslands Reimagined conference, held at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune, on 11th - 14th March, 2026. The event was jointly organised by Anthra, Centre for Water Research, the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD) - Indian Pastoral Network, Centre for Pastoralism and Living Lightly.

We deeply appreciate the efforts of colleagues across all the organisations involved and especially members at IISER Pune, Pune International Centre and Zapurza Museum of Art and Culture. Special thanks to Pushkar Sohoni, Sara Ahmed, Shubham Beldar and Pallavi Kulkarni for their support during the planning phase and throughout the four days. We also extend our gratitude to the logistics teams at IISER Pune and Anthra for efficiently managing accommodation, food, and travel arrangements for the participants.

The conference was made possible with financial support from IISER Pune, IRD and Anthra. We are also grateful to the presenters, panelists, and attendees for their valuable insights and contributions to the discussions.

Background and Introduction

The year 2026 marks the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists, a global recognition of the importance of pastoralist communities and the rangeland ecosystems they inhabit and sustain. In India, grasslands and rangelands extend across diverse landscapes, from the high-altitude plateaus of Ladakh and the alpine pastures of the Himalaya to the semi-arid Deccan and the arid ecosystems of western India. These ecosystems support remarkable biodiversity and sustain millions of livestock and pastoralist livelihoods. Yet, grasslands remain among the most misunderstood and undervalued ecosystems in the country, often mischaracterised as “wastelands” and overlooked in conservation and policy discourse.

Living Lightly ~ *Journeys with Pastoralists* has been a flagship initiative of the Centre for Pastoralism since its inception in 2016, bringing the vibrant world of pastoralism to life through art exhibitions, workshops, talks, and performances across India. Held every two years, this widely recognised event serves as a dynamic space where culture, ecology, and livelihoods intersect, fostering curiosity and dialogue among diverse audiences. It brings together students, artists, academics, and pastoralists to learn, exchange ideas, and celebrate the richness and diversity of pastoral traditions. The sixth edition of this exhibition, with a principal focus on pastoralism in the Deccan, was hosted by the IGNCA in Bangalore, and in 2026 the Deccan exhibition was presented in Pune at the Zapurza Museum of Art and Culture. This edition was co-organised with the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) and Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN), in partnership with Anthra and the Centre for People’s Collective (CPC).

A conference has become an integral part of the Living Lightly exhibitions, and in alignment with the IYRP, this edition focused on grasslands and the pastoralist communities who depend on them. The conference was conceptualized around the recognition that research in this field has long been shaped by disciplinary traditions in anthropology, ethnology, ecology, and sociology, approaches that often frame research problems through their own

assumptions without fully examining the motivations and values underlying research practice. While recent interdisciplinary efforts have moved toward more participatory methods and genuine co-production, opening up new ways of asking questions, developing methods, and interpreting data, important gaps remain.

This conference however is different from previous academic conferences of Living Lightly as it sought to bring together scholars from pastoralist communities in the Deccan to identify and prioritise research concerns related to grasslands, mobility, and water, by centering community-rooted perspectives to reshape how knowledge is produced. It sought to critically examine dominant research frameworks, affirm the value of local knowledge systems, and explore collaborative approaches that ensure community oversight of research processes and outcomes. Emphasising relational ethics, reflexivity, and attention to power and positionality, the consultation aimed to ground research in the historical, ecological, and cultural realities of pastoralist life, fostering more just and contextually relevant knowledge.

The conference also attempted to rethink the format of the academic gathering. The four-day event began with screenings of two award-winning films on pastoralism — *Bhed Chaal* by Ankit Pogula and *Desi Oon* by Suresh Eriyat. Days two and three featured presentations, discussions, and a keynote address on critical issues, including community perspectives, traditional folklore and myths, the intersections of ecology and the humanities, and the need for interdisciplinary engagement. These discussions first explored multiple viewpoints on contemporary research questions and then unpacked methodological constraints and possibilities. The final day included an extensive guided tour of the Living Lightly exhibition, concluding with reflections on future methodologies, opportunities for collaboration, and a shared commitment to fostering research that engages diverse disciplinary and researcher backgrounds.

Conference Participants and Attendance

This conference was a small event, intentionally so, primarily to support community based researchers to attend and present their work. As a result, the conference received 17 abstract submissions, of which 11 were accepted for presentations. Over the course of two days, the event saw nearly 25 total attendees, including researchers, and students. The film screening on the first day received close to 80 participants and the keynote address close to 40.

From a disciplinary perspective, the conference brought together biologists, economists, anthropologists, geographers and development professionals, fostering an interdisciplinary dialogue on pastoralism and grassland ecosystems.

Programme of the Conference

Day 1 had an evening programme at the Pune International Centre, beginning with high tea, followed by screenings of *Bhed Chaal* and *Desi Oon*, and concluding with a discussion with the filmmakers.

Day 2 had a full day of sessions starting with registration and welcome remarks, followed by thematic panels on traditional perspectives, colonial interpretations of grasslands, interdisciplinary approaches, and blended methodologies, along with a keynote address by Professor Ajay Dandekar.

Day 3 had sessions focused on emerging research approaches and presentations by early-career scholars, alongside a collective discussion on methodological gaps and challenges, concluding with a closing tea.

Day 4 had a guided tour of the Living Lightly Exhibition at the Zapurza Museum of Art and Culture.



Post-screening discussion led by Aniruddh Sheth with filmmakers Suresh Eriyat and Ankit Pogula

Conference Proceedings

Introduction and Welcome

Dr Nitya Ghotge began with a welcome note and introduction, situating the conference within both a global and local context, outlining its intellectual motivations and collaborative foundations. The session began with participant introductions, reflecting the interdisciplinary and community-oriented nature of the gathering, which brought together scholars, practitioners, and pastoralist representatives from diverse regions and backgrounds.

Ghotge framed the workshop against the backdrop of the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026, emphasizing its emergence from sustained global advocacy by researchers and civil society organizations. She highlighted the formation of an international alliance involving over 100 governments and hundreds of organizations, aimed at repositioning pastoralism as a vital and dynamic system rather than a marginal or declining livelihood. At the same time, she noted the parallel declaration of the International Year of Women Farmers, interpreting this as an opportunity to foreground gender within pastoral systems and address the historical invisibilization of women's roles.

Drawing on her own trajectory as a veterinarian working with displaced pastoralist communities, Ghotge underscored the long-standing engagement of her organization, ANTHRA, with issues of displacement, livelihoods, and ecological change. She emphasized that pastoralism is not a static or "traditional" system, but one that is continually evolving across diverse ecological and socio-political contexts globally.

A central theme of the introduction was the importance of interdisciplinarity. The workshop was designed to bring together perspectives from anthropology, ecology, history, veterinary science, and design, among others, in order to move beyond disciplinary silos. Equally significant was the deliberate inclusion of scholars from pastoralist communities, addressing earlier tendencies for research to be dominated by external perspectives. The introduction concluded by framing the workshop as an interactive and exploratory space aimed at generating new narratives on pastoralism, fostering dialogue across disciplines, and rethinking dominant approaches to ecosystems, livelihoods, and knowledge production.



Dr Nitya Ghotge delivering the welcome address

SESSION 1: Traditional Perspectives

The session deepened the conference's central concern with rethinking grasslands by foregrounding cultural, historical, and literary archives that sit outside conventional ecological data.

The presentation by **Shubham Beldar**, a PhD candidate at IISER Pune, offered a detailed case study of the deity Bhanoba from a semi-arid village landscape near Pune. Beginning with the environmental history of the Deccan marked by low rainfall, shallow soils, and long-standing pastoral subsistence, Beldar traced how pastoral deities such as Khandoba and Bhanoba emerge from these ecological conditions. He focused particularly on cattle-raid hero stones (c. 6th–13th centuries), arguing that they document not large-scale warfare

but localized, routine conflict over livestock and resources. By combining these material traces with oral narratives and contemporary ritual performances such as possession rituals and re-enactments of conflict, he showed how “rural violence” was socially sanctioned and embedded within pastoral life. The Bhanoba story, including motifs of drought, migration in search of pasture, and inter-community tensions, was presented as a narrative archive that helps reconstruct historical pastoral practices and social relations beyond written records.



Dr Chandrappa Sobati presenting paper titled “History of Grasslands in Tradition”

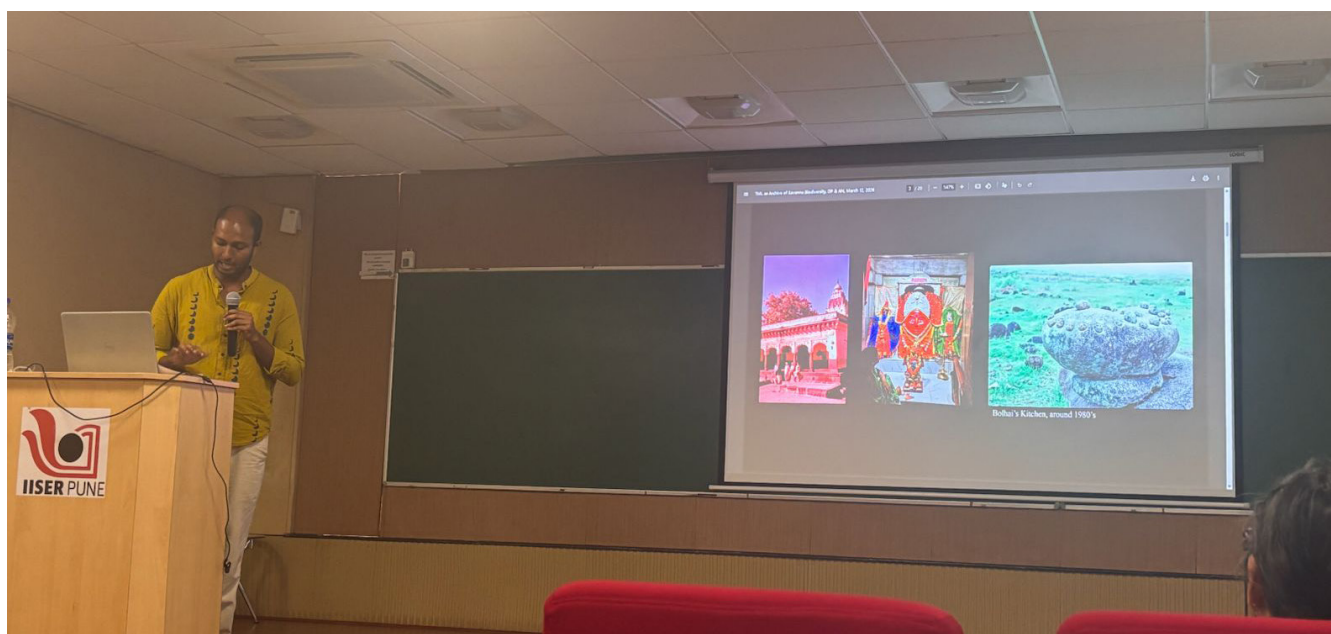
The presentation by **Chandrappa Sobati**, Professor of folklore at the Karnataka Folklore University, expanded the temporal depth of the discussion by situating grasslands within long-standing cultural and cosmological frameworks. He introduced key concepts such as gomala (shared pasture lands) and linked them to broader Dravidian pastoralist traditions. Central to his argument was the Sapta Matrika (seven sister) deities, which he described as foundational to early pastoral cosmologies across Karnataka, Maharashtra, and adjoining regions.

Through linguistic analysis of terms like go (cattle) and mala (landscape), and references to sacred sites, water systems, and ritual practices, Sobati argued that grasslands were historically organised as socio-ecological systems centred on livestock, mobility, and sacred geography. He also pointed to the antiquity of these traditions, drawing on oral epics, deity cults, and megalithic/stone traditions, to suggest that pastoralist cultures predate and underpin later agrarian formations.

The presentation by **Digvijay Patil** shifted the focus to methodological innovations, based on work carried out with Ashish N. Nerlekar, which treated traditional Marathi literature as an ecological archive. Beginning with ethnographic observations, such as the persistence of pastoral deities like Bolai and associated dietary practices were examined as a wide corpus of oral and written texts (13th–20th centuries), including devotional literature and pastoral epics. They extracted geo-referenced descriptions of

vegetation and identified over 60 plant species, the majority of which are characteristic of savanna ecosystems rather than forests. This evidence was triangulated with botanical records, pollen data, and archaeological material to argue that Deccan savannas are ancient, biodiverse landscapes that have been misclassified as degraded forests. The study also highlighted how certain plant species retained sacred status in cultural traditions, reinforcing the link between ecological knowledge and religious practice.

Taken together, the session demonstrated that grasslands can be understood not merely as ecological zones but as historically layered cultural landscapes. By combining oral traditions, ritual practices, linguistic evidence, and literary texts, the presenters collectively argued for a more integrated approach to reconstructing the past—one that recognizes pastoralism as central to both ecological and social histories of the Deccan.



Digvijay Patil presenting co-authored paper with Ashish N. Nerlekar, titled “Traditional Marathi Literature as an Archive of Distinct”

SESSION 2: Grasslands are Wastelands? – Impact of the Colonial Lens

The session examined how historical misinterpretations—particularly the labeling of grasslands as “wastelands”—have shaped contemporary ecological policy and pastoral livelihoods. The session combined ecological evidence with lived experience to demonstrate the material and cultural consequences of this framing.

The presentation by **Ashish N. Nerlekar**, Associate Professor at IISER Pune was closely linked to Digvijay Patil’s presentation, building on evidence from oral literature to argue that old-growth savannahs were the original landscapes of the regions discussed. He then examined how the ecological misclassification of old-growth savannahs as degraded forests has adversely affected the biodiversity of these landscapes. Nerlekar began by clarifying that “grasslands” exist along a continuum of savanna ecosystems, ranging from open, treeless landscapes to regions with substantial tree cover but persistent grassy understories. He argued that this ecological diversity has historically been overlooked, leading to widespread conversion of savannas into tree plantations, agriculture, and fallows, practices driven by the assumption that treeless landscapes are degraded.

Drawing on field research across a rainfall gradient in western Maharashtra (450–2000 mm), he demonstrated that land-use change has far greater impacts on biodiversity than climate variation. Old-growth savannas consistently supported significantly higher native plant diversity compared to plantations, agricultural land, and fallows. The findings indicated that even a single tree plantation could result in the loss of multiple native herbaceous species per square metre, highlighting large-scale biodiversity loss when extrapolated across regions. Importantly, he showed that these ecosystems recover extremely slowly: while degradation can occur rapidly, full ecological recovery may take centuries, if not longer. This challenges the common assumption that grasslands are easily “restorable.” Nerlekar further

emphasized that such transformations not only reduce biodiversity, including many endemic species, but also affect ecosystem functions and livelihoods, particularly those dependent on pastoral systems.

The second presentation by **Naresh Rathod**, PhD candidate at IIT Hyderabad, provided a grounded account of how these ecological and policy shifts manifest in pastoral communities. Focusing on the migration of herders in Telangana, Rathod traced the transformation of the Lambada community from pastoralists to largely sedentary or wage-labour populations. He highlighted how displacement, urban expansion (including institutional development such as university campuses), and loss of grazing commons have disrupted traditional mobility patterns, which historically involved seasonal migrations spanning hundreds of kilometres.

Rathod’s account emphasized the cascading effects of these changes: reduction in herd sizes, shifts from multi-purpose livestock systems (wool, manure, milk) to meat-oriented economies, and the erosion of associated cultural practices. Rituals tied to livestock, such as worship of pastoral deities represented through stones or specific plants, have declined as communities lose access to animals and grazing lands. He also noted generational shifts, where younger members move into wage labour or low-skilled urban employment, often without significant improvement in livelihood security. The presentation underscored how policy frameworks and development narratives frequently fail to account for cultural loss, even when legal provisions exist to protect it.

Together, the session illustrated that the categorization of grasslands as “wastelands” is not merely semantic but has led to profound ecological degradation and socio-cultural disruption. By juxtaposing ecological data with community experience, the presentations highlighted the need to reframe grasslands as complex socio-ecological systems, central to both biodiversity conservation and pastoral livelihoods.

SESSION 3: The Need for Interdisciplinary Perspectives for Viewing Grasslands

This session brought together ecological and social-scientific approaches to demonstrate that understanding grasslands requires integrating biodiversity science with human perceptions, land-use practices, and policy contexts. Across the three presentations, the session highlighted that no single disciplinary lens is sufficient to capture the complexity of these landscapes.

The presentation by **Prabhav Benara** examined whether alternative land uses can sustain butterfly diversity associated with pastoralist-managed old-growth savannas. Situating his study within the broader problem of savannas being misclassified as anthropogenic or degraded systems, he framed land-use change—such as agriculture, orchards, afforestation, and urban green spaces—as a major threat to biodiversity and livelihoods. Using butterflies as indicator taxa, he designed a large-scale comparative study across a rainfall gradient in Pune district, sampling hundreds of plots to assess species richness, abundance, and composition. His preliminary expectations suggested that high-intensity land uses (e.g., agriculture and urban green spaces) would support fewer species, particularly specialist butterflies adapted to open habitats, while lower-intensity systems like fallows might retain partial diversity. Crucially, he emphasized that even when alternative land uses host comparable numbers of species, they often support entirely different assemblages, underscoring the irreplaceability of old-growth savannas. The study also pointed toward conservation approaches that move beyond strict protection to include community-managed landscapes, recognizing the role of pastoral practices in maintaining ecological processes such as grazing and disturbance.

The presentation by **Yash Gaikwad** investigated the effects of afforestation on bird communities across western Maharashtra. Using a paired-site design comparing old-growth savannas with tree plantations, he analysed species richness, abundance, and habitat specialization across a rainfall gradient. Contrary

to dominant assumptions, overall bird richness and abundance did not differ significantly between savannas and plantations. However, a more nuanced pattern emerged: afforestation consistently reduced savanna specialist species while favouring generalist and woodland species, indicating a shift in community composition rather than simple biodiversity loss. Additionally, the effects varied across ecological contexts, with plantations sometimes supporting higher diversity at rainfall extremes due to structural heterogeneity. The findings highlighted that afforestation produces “winners” and “losers,” and that pastoralist-managed savannas remain critical for conserving specialist species with unique evolutionary histories.

The final presentation by **Siddhi Kulange** introduced a social-scientific dimension by examining how different actors perceive afforestation in pastoral commons. Through interviews across multiple sites, she explored how communities evaluate tree plantations and old-growth savannas in terms of provisioning, cultural, and aesthetic values. Her preliminary findings revealed highly heterogeneous perceptions: while some respondents viewed plantations positively for providing shade or fodder (particularly for goats), others highlighted negative impacts such as reduced grass availability, crop damage from wildlife, and increased human–wildlife conflict. Importantly, perceptions were shaped by levels of dependence on the landscape, with more directly dependent users often expressing more critical views of afforestation. The study underscored that ecological interventions are experienced differently across social groups, and that policy must account for these varied, and sometimes conflicting, valuations.

Together, the session illustrated that the categorization of grasslands as “wastelands” is not merely semantic but has led to profound ecological degradation and socio-cultural disruption. By juxtaposing ecological data with community experience, the presentations highlighted the need to reframe grasslands as complex socio-ecological systems, central to both biodiversity conservation and pastoral livelihoods.

SESSION 4: Blending Methodologies

The session focused on how community knowledge, ecological science, and institutional tools can be combined to produce grounded conservation outcomes. The session moved from lived pastoral practice to collective action and governance, demonstrating how methodological blending operates in practice rather than as an abstract ideal.

The presentation by **Prafulla Kalokar** centred on community-led grassland restoration in Vidarbha, closely tied to the conservation of the indigenous Gaolao cattle breed. Drawing from the experience of the Nandgauli pastoral community, Kalokar emphasized the inseparability of livestock, grasslands, and cultural practices. He described how traditional systems, such as seasonal grazing cycles, festivals like Bhaldeo that regulate fodder use, and community knowledge of diverse grass species, historically sustained both biodiversity and livelihoods. However, he noted a sharp decline in grass diversity (from several dozen species to fewer than ten), alongside pressures from state policies, changing land use, and erosion of customary institutions.

In response, the community initiated a revival strategy that combined local ecological knowledge

with formal institutional mechanisms. This included forming breeder associations to prevent crossbreeding of Gaolao cattle, establishing Biodiversity Management Committees, and collaborating with the Forest Department to restore grasslands. Practical interventions such as controlled grazing, seasonal cutting, seed dispersal through livestock movement, and participatory planning were implemented across multiple villages. Kalokar highlighted that restoration efforts extended to large areas through collective action involving farmers, pastoralists, and state agencies. Importantly, he underscored the need to bridge the gap between academic research and community practice, arguing that conservation knowledge must be co-produced with local communities rather than generated in isolation.



Prafulla Kalokar presenting paper titled "Community Led Grassland Restoration and Gaolao Cattle Conservation"

The presentation by **Pushkaraj Jagtap** illustrated how community mobilization and formal documentation can influence development outcomes. Focusing on the Dhakale–Mudhale grassland in Baramati taluka, Pune district, centred around Ranubai Lake, he described how local residents successfully opposed

a 765 kV high-voltage transmission line through an ecologically sensitive grassland–wetland system. The area supports diverse wildlife, including the Indian Grey Wolf, Chinkara deer, migratory birds, and other Schedule I species, underscoring its ecological significance.

A key methodological tool in this process was the People's Biodiversity Register (PBR), which documented local ecological knowledge and species presence. The community used this evidence to file formal objections and pass collective resolutions,

ultimately leading to a modification of the project footprint and additional mitigation measures, demonstrating how locally generated knowledge can effectively negotiate with large-scale development processes.

Together, the session highlighted that effective grassland conservation requires blending methodologies across domains: integrating pastoral knowledge with ecological science, aligning community institutions with state mechanisms, and combining qualitative documentation with legal and policy tools. Rather than treating knowledge systems as separate, the presentations showed how their convergence can produce tangible ecological and social outcomes.

Concluding session for Day 1

Led by Matthieu Salpeteur, the final session synthesized the day's discussions by situating them within broader theoretical shifts in ecology and social science, particularly in relation to how pastoral systems and grassland ecosystems are understood.

Salpeteur began by emphasizing that the workshop's central task was not only empirical documentation but also engaging with the underlying "narratives" and conceptual frameworks through which pastoralism and ecosystems are interpreted. He introduced historical ecology as a key lens, drawing on work from regions such as the Amazon and West Africa. This approach challenges the long-standing idea of "pristine" or untouched ecosystems by demonstrating that many landscapes often assumed to be natural, are in fact shaped by long-term human activity. Through examples such as anthropogenic soils and managed forests, he argued that ecosystems and human societies co-evolve over time, with humans acting as "ecosystem engineers." This perspective, he suggested, is highly relevant for understanding grasslands in India, where pastoral practices have historically shaped ecological dynamics.

He then discussed the influential critique of dominant environmental narratives, particularly the "degradation" or "deforestation" narrative, exemplified by studies such as *Misreading the African*

Landscape. These works demonstrate how landscapes previously interpreted as degraded forests were, in fact, stable or even expanding systems shaped by human management. Salpeteur highlighted that such narratives have significant policy consequences, often justifying interventions like afforestation, fire suppression, and restrictions on local practices paralleling issues raised throughout the conference in the Indian context.

The second major conceptual framework he introduced was non-equilibrium ecology, which departs from earlier models that assumed ecosystems tend toward a stable "climax" state. Instead, this approach recognizes variability across time and space as an inherent feature of many ecosystems, particularly drylands. Within this framework, pastoral mobility is not a response to disturbance but a rational and adaptive strategy that aligns with ecological variability. Pastoral systems, therefore, can be understood as highly specialized in managing uncertainty, rather than as inefficient or environmentally degrading.

In conclusion, Salpeteur argued for rethinking the relationship between pastoralism and grasslands through these alternative theoretical lenses. By moving beyond static and degradation-focused models, he suggested that pastoral systems could be more accurately understood as dynamic, adaptive, and integral to ecosystem functioning, an insight that resonated with the empirical and methodological discussions presented throughout the day.

Keynote Address

The keynote by Dr Ajay Dandekar examined pastoralism as a central, yet historically neglected, force in shaping the political and ecological history of the Deccan.

The lecture was framed within the context of the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026, highlighting a broader shift toward re-evaluating rangelands and pastoral systems as productive and historically significant rather than marginal or destructive.

Dandekar's core argument challenged the prevailing "sedentary bias" in historiography, which privileges agriculture as the foundation of state formation. He proposed instead that, in the Deccan, pastoralism, particularly cattle-based systems, functioned as a primary driver of polity, economy, and mobility. Drawing on a wide range of evidence, including colonial records, Peshwa administrative documents, and material indicators such as cattle-raid hero stones, he suggested that vast semi-arid landscapes unsuitable for intensive agriculture were nevertheless

highly conducive to pastoral production.

The keynote further situated Deccan pastoralism within a comparative global framework, referencing the Eurasian steppe to demonstrate how pastoral nomadism historically produced powerful political formations. While South Asia did not replicate mounted nomadic empires in the same form, Dandekar argued that pastoral communities played a decisive role in state formation, military organization, and trade networks, particularly through cavalry systems and supply chains.

He also emphasized the cultural and institutional imprint of pastoralism, visible in regional deity traditions, taxation systems on pastoral products, and administrative regulation of grazing. These elements collectively indicated a deeply embedded pastoral economy rather than a peripheral one.

In conclusion, the lecture called for a fundamental rethinking of Deccan historiography, arguing that pastoralism should be repositioned from the margins to the center of analysis, with significant implications for understanding state formation, economic systems, and regional ecology in South Asia.



Dr Ajay Dandekar delivering the keynote address

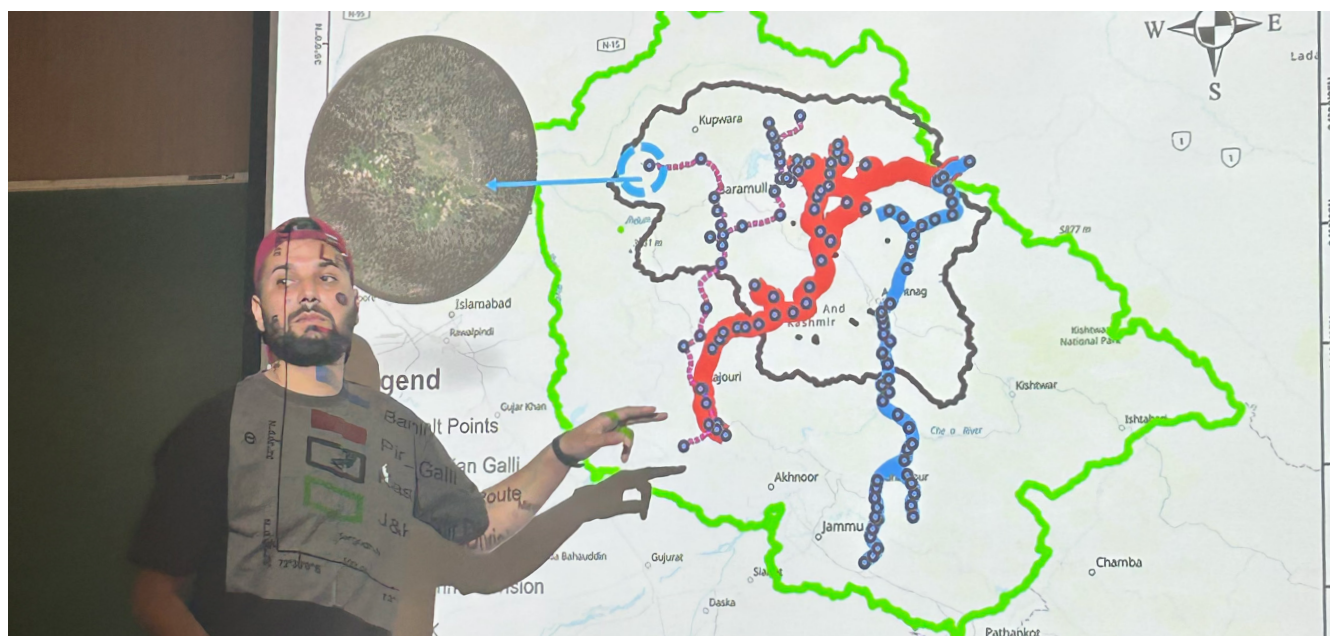
Session 5: Emerging Approaches in Research

The first session of the final day brought forward innovative and interdisciplinary directions in pastoral and grassland studies, combining ecological modelling, climate adaptation, and experimental pedagogies rooted in nomadic knowledge systems.

The presentation by **Shahid Saleem** examined the future of mountain grasslands in the western Himalaya under conditions of climate change. Focusing on transhumant pastoral systems practiced by multiple communities, including Bakarwal, Gujjar, and Chohan groups, he highlighted how seasonal mobility has historically functioned as an adaptive strategy aligned with forage and water availability. Drawing on fieldwork across alpine pastures, he demonstrated significant transformations over the past two decades, including declining herd sizes, reduced dependence on livestock products, and increased reliance on wage labour. These shifts, he argued, signal a weakening of pastoralism's economic viability and social cohesion.

A central concern of the presentation was the impact of climate variability on pastoral mobility. Long-term trends indicated rising temperatures,

declining and erratic precipitation, reduced snowfall, and the drying of critical water sources such as springs. These changes disrupt established migration routes—historically structured around reliable “stopping points” with water and forage—leading to route abandonment, overcrowding in remaining corridors, and heightened inter-community pressures. In response, Saleem outlined a set of adaptive interventions combining ecological data with community participation. These included the use of remote sensing to classify pasture health, estimation of carrying capacity, and the creation of decentralized water sources (e.g., alpine ponds through rainwater harvesting) to redistribute grazing pressure. By integrating scientific tools with local knowledge and youth-led planning, the approach aimed to sustain mobility, stabilize grazing regimes, and enhance resilience to climate-induced disruptions.



Dr Shahid Saleem presenting paper titled “Reimagining Mountain Grasslands in a Warming Himalayan: Ecological Restoration, and Pastoral Adaptation”

The presentation by **Rutvik Dinesh Sankhe** from IIT Mumbai offered a conceptual and methodological departure by proposing a “liberated nomad pedagogy” rooted in the lived practices of nomadic and pastoral communities. Drawing from personal and community histories, he challenged

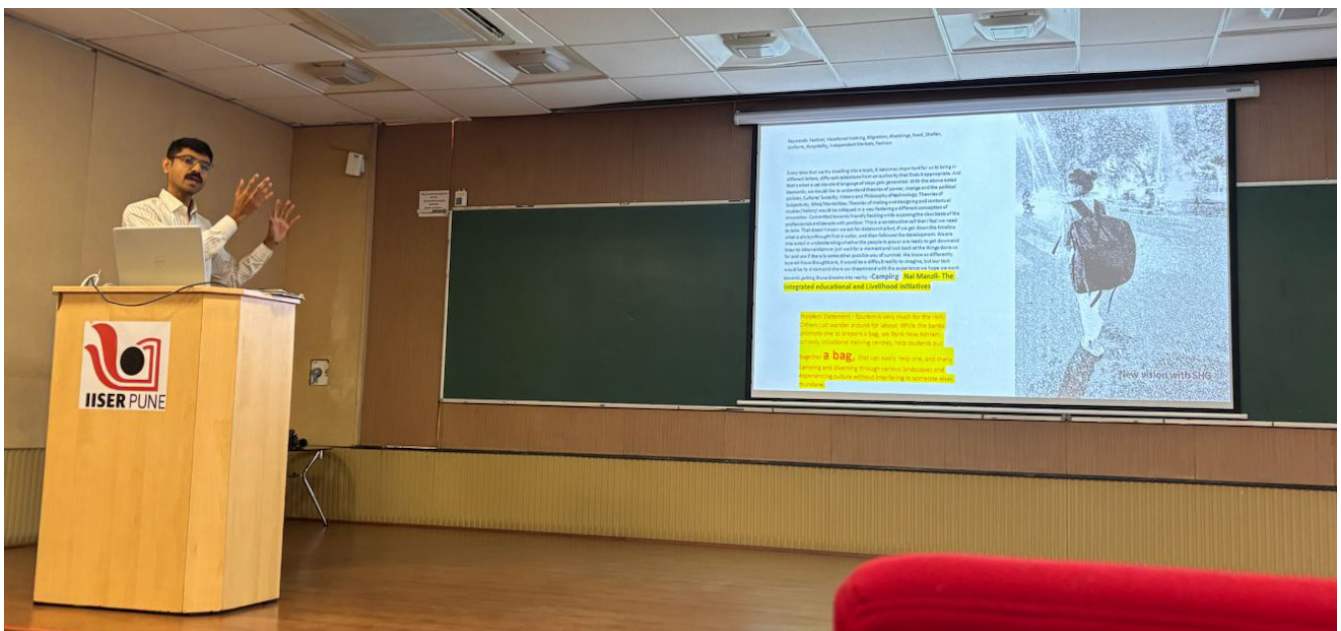
dominant institutional frameworks of knowledge production, particularly formal education systems that marginalize mobile ways of knowing. Using metaphors such as the tanda (nomadic settlement) and mobile cultural forms, he argued that nomadic practices themselves constitute dynamic systems of

knowledge transmission, encompassing ecology, craft, navigation, and social organization.

Sankhe emphasized alternative epistemologies embedded in oral traditions, textiles, movement, and material culture, suggesting that these function as decentralized and embodied forms of “mapping” and documentation. He critiqued the standardization of both education and development— linking it

historically to colonial interventions such as the Criminal Tribes Act— and called for community-led, decentralized “public labs” where knowledge is generated and shared collectively. His work also explored practical design interventions, including mobile toolkits and low-impact tourism models that align with nomadic mobility rather than imposing static infrastructure.

Together, the session highlighted emerging research approaches that move beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries, integrating climate science, spatial analysis, participatory methods, and alternative epistemologies. It underscored the need to not only study pastoral systems but also rethink how knowledge about them is produced, shared, and applied.



Rutvik Dinesh Sankhe presenting paper titled “Tanda- A Liberated Nomad Pedagogy”

Session 6: Sharing of Emerging Research

The session brought together early-stage and exploratory work that highlighted ongoing socio-economic transitions, regional diversity in pastoral systems, and methodological experimentation in studying grasslands and mobility.

The presentation by **Sandhya Karat** examined the socio-economic transformation of the Dhangar community in Canacona, Goa. Based on field surveys across multiple settlements, Karat documented a sharp decline in pastoral livelihoods, with goat and cattle herding reducing to a marginal occupation (approximately 3% of respondents). Historically, the community combined livestock rearing, small-scale agriculture, and forest-based subsistence, but these have largely been replaced by wage labour, private employment, and migration. She identified several drivers behind this transition: loss of grazing land due to infrastructure development and

institutional expansion, restrictions within protected areas, conflicts with neighbouring populations, and changing social aspirations, particularly among younger generations who associate pastoralism with lower status. These shifts have led to broader consequences, including erosion of traditional knowledge, weakening of community identity, and increasing livelihood precarity due to irregular incomes. At the same time, Karat highlighted areas for future research, including linguistic variation, folk traditions, and ritual practices, suggesting that cultural dimensions remain under-documented even as livelihoods transform.



Sandhya Kharat presenting paper titled "Socio-Economic Transformation of Dhangar Community in Canacona"

The presentation by **Afzal Hussain** focused on agro-pastoral systems in Ladakh, particularly within communities practising seasonal transhumance combined with settled agriculture. He emphasized how pastoralism in cold-arid regions is closely integrated with agricultural cycles, including the cultivation of fodder crops such as alfalfa, which are adapted to water-scarce environments. The system operates through a cyclical movement across elevations: winter confinement of livestock, summer grazing in alpine pastures, and seasonal use of agricultural residues. Hussain also highlighted the importance

of community participation in documenting these systems, particularly given the erosion of linguistic and cultural knowledge. His work pointed to the need for participatory research approaches that foreground local practices, especially in regions where pastoralism is embedded within broader agro-ecological systems rather than existing as a distinct livelihood category.

The session concluded with a presentation of **Iravatee Majgaonkar's** PhD work, which engaged directly with questions raised in earlier sessions about narratives and methodologies. Her research, based in

a savanna landscape near Pune, employed GPS-based tracking of herds to quantitatively analyse fine-scale pastoral movement. By documenting daily and seasonal movement patterns across land-use types, she demonstrated that pastoral mobility is shaped not only by ecological factors but also by land tenure and agricultural cycles. A key finding was that pastoralists rely heavily on privately owned, uncultivated agricultural lands and post-harvest fallows, rather

than formally designated commons. This challenges dominant assumptions that pastoralism is primarily supported by common property resources. She also highlighted how such landscapes are often officially classified as “wastelands,” obscuring their ecological and economic significance. Her work thus illustrated how quantitative ecological methods can reveal overlooked dynamics and contribute to reinterpreting pastoral landscapes.

Overall, the session underscored the diversity of emerging research directions, from community-based socio-economic studies to ecological tracking and participatory documentation, while collectively pointing toward the need to rethink assumptions about pastoral systems in contemporary contexts.

Concluding Session: An Open Discussion

The final session brought together reflections from across the conference, foregrounding both conceptual debates and practical challenges in researching pastoralism and grasslands. The discussion functioned as a collective synthesis, but also as a critical interrogation of research practices, methodologies, and institutional structures.

A central theme was the **question of knowledge and archives**. Participants repeatedly emphasized that dominant histories remain shaped by sedentary and state-centric perspectives, relying on written records, inscriptions, and elite documentation. In contrast, pastoral histories are embedded in oral traditions, songs, rituals, and everyday practices, which are harder to formalize but essential for reconstructing social and ecological pasts. This raised methodological challenges, particularly around

issues of dating, validation, and integration with conventional historical evidence.

The discussion also highlighted **persistent gaps in data and methodology**, especially the absence or fragmentation of baseline data on pastoral systems. While some participants noted that large datasets do exist (for instance in agriculture or climate records), the challenge lies in extracting and interpreting pastoral dynamics from them. Others pointed to



Discussion on research methodologies in the concluding session

the limitations of conventional “scientific” methods, arguing for greater recognition of embodied and experiential knowledge such as local techniques for assessing soil or vegetation, which remain undervalued within formal research frameworks.

A second major theme concerned the **relationship between research and application**. Participants debated whether research must necessarily demonstrate direct, measurable impact particularly in contexts shaped by funding expectations and policy relevance. This led to a broader reflection on the purpose of research itself: whether it should prioritize immediate outcomes or contribute to longer-term knowledge-building. Several interventions suggested that involving community members as researchers, rather than subjects, offers one way to bridge this divide by embedding impact within the research process itself.

Questions of **positionality and ethics** also emerged strongly. Participants reflected on the role of the researcher especially those working outside their own social or cultural contexts and the risks of extractive knowledge production. Concerns were raised about whether research findings meaningfully return to

communities, and how language barriers, identity politics, and local conflicts can shape fieldwork access and data quality.

The discussion further underscored the **institutional constraints on interdisciplinarity**, including rigid academic structures, limited guidance, and challenges in integrating methods across disciplines. At the same time, participants pointed to emerging possibilities such as shared data platforms, collaborative “commons” approaches, and alternative forms of dissemination (including exhibitions and community archives) as ways to overcome fragmentation in research.

Finally, the session emphasized the need for **collective and long-term approaches**: building shared repositories of knowledge, fostering collaboration across researchers and communities, and rethinking research as an ongoing relational process rather than a bounded project. In doing so, it reiterated a core insight of the conference that pastoralism and grasslands cannot be understood through isolated disciplinary or methodological lenses, but require sustained, collaborative, and reflexive engagement.

Appendices

A. Programme Schedule

Day 1: March 11, 2026

- 17:00** High Tea at Pune International Centre
18:30 Film Screening - Bhed Chaal and Desi Oon
20:00 Discussion with the directors

Day 2: March 12, 2026

- 09:30 - 10:00** Registration
10:00 - 10:15 Introduction and Welcome - Nitya Ghotge
10:15 - 11:45 **Session 1: Traditional Perspectives**
1. Shubham Beldar - *Violence at Grasslands: Discussing the Cowherd Deity Bhanoba through Oral Narratives and Ritual Performances.*
2. Dr Chandrappa Sobati - *History of Grasslands in Tradition*
3. Digvijay Patil and Ashish N Nerlekar - *Traditional Marathi Literature as an Archive of Distinct Savanna Biodiversity*
11:45 - 12:00 Tea/Coffee Break
12:00 - 13:30 **Session 2: Grasslands are Wastelands? - Impact of the Colonial Lens**
1. Ashish N Nerlekar - *Misinterpreting Old-growth Savannas as Wastelands has Biodiversity Consequences*
2. Naresh Rathod - *A Case Study of Migration of Nagarkurnool Headers from Extreme Southern Telangana to Northern Telangana.*
13:30 - 14:30 Lunch
14:30 - 16:00 **Session 3: The Need for Interdisciplinary Perspectives for viewing Grasslands**
1. Prabhav Benara - *Can Alternative Land Uses Sustain Butterfly Communities of Pastoralist-managed Old-growth Savannas?*
2. Yash Gaikwad - *Effects of Afforestation on Grassland Bird Communities*
3. Siddhi Kulange - *Diverse Perceptions of an Exotic Tree on Pastoral Commons*
16:00 - 16:15 Tea/ Coffee Break
16:15 - 17:00 **Session 4: Blending Methodologies**
1. Prafulla Kalokar - *Community Led Grassland Restoration and Gaolao Cattle Conservation*
2. Pushkaraj Jagtap

Day 3: March 13, 2026

- 09:45 - 10:45** **Session 5: Emerging Approaches in Research**
1. Shahid Saleem - *Reimagining Mountain Grasslands in a Warming Himalayan: Ecological Restoration, and Pastoral Adaptation*
2. Rutvik Dinesh Sankhe - *Tanda- A Liberated Nomad Pedagogy*
10:45 - 11:45 **Session 6: Sharing of emerging research**
1. Sandhya Karat - *Socio-Economic Transformation of Dhangar Community in Canacona*
2. Afzal Hussain on pastoralism in Kargil, Ladakh
3. Iravatee Majgaonkar's PhD research in Maharashtra
11:45 - 12:00 Tea/ Coffee Break
12:00 - 13:30 **Discussion Part 1: Gaps in Research Methods and the challenges faced by young researchers**
13:30 - 14:30 Lunch
14:30 - 15:30 **Discussion Part 2: Gaps in Research Methods and the challenges faced by young researchers**
15:30 Tea/Coffee and Closing

Day 4: March 14, 2026

- 11:00 onwards** Guided tour of the Living Lightly Exhibition at Zapurza Museum of Art and Culture

B. Biographies of Organisers and Presenters

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