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**Theme 3.** Sustainability of grasslands- social and policy issues

**Sub-theme 3.5.** Policy issues related to sustainable grassland production

## **Amritmahal: Need for conserving the living pastoral heritage of Karnataka**

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### **Introduction**

Karnataka is home to the biodiversity-rich Western Ghats with its range of habitats spanning from scrub forest in the lower elevations to the wet evergreen forests in the higher elevations. In stark visual contrast, the Deccan Plateau is blanketed by arid plains dominated by scrub jungles and dry grasslands. These plains are a melting pot of rich biodiversity, culture and associated traditional knowledge. They have also been important centres for breeding livestock and have supported local livelihoods. In spite of this cultural and ecological importance, these arid plains, especially grasslands with sparse woody vegetation, are increasingly being termed as wastelands. The current scenario is much the same in different regions with vast tracts being diverted for industrial use, unscrupulous developmental activity or for afforestation programmes. These short-sighted measures have adverse effects on biodiversity and the livelihoods of people depending on it.

This study looks into the expansive traditional grazing pastures of the *Amritmahal* breed of cattle in Karnataka which are undergoing a spate of similar changes. This draft breed unique to Karnataka was known for its speed, strength, loyalty and ability to withstand droughts. Due to these qualities, it was used not only for agriculture but also in warfare and thus patronised by the royalty. The cattle were raised in exclusive pastures known as *Amritmahal Kaval* in local parlance. The *Kaval* traditionally managed by means of social fencing. Grazing and extraction of resources such as firewood and fodder was regulated (Pai, 2012). These practices seem to have led to conservation of biodiversity as is evident from the fact that these *Kavals* are inhabited by rare and endangered species such as blackbuck, wolves, Indian fox, leopards and several species of rare birds including Indian Courser (Centre for Ecological Sciences, 2011). Recognising the richness of biodiversity, in 2011 the Karnataka State Government declared one of the *Kavals* as a 'conservation reserve' under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. Today, these *Kavals* are spread over an estimated 65,925 acres in 62 villages of six districts - Tumkur, Hassan, Chitradurga, Chikmagalur, Shimoga and Mandya (Ashisar, 2011).

In this paper, we make a case for conserving this unique breed and thus, the grazing pastures they have been traditionally dependent on.

### **Material and Methods**

Every year, the Department of Animal Husbandry auctions the young bulls at two locations – Konehalli and Birur. In 2013, the bidders in both locations were interviewed to understand their socio-economic profile and what the bulls are used for. This study was carried through nine semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion at Konehalli, 29 structured interviews at Birur. Secondary data obtained from government records were also used.

### **Results and Discussion**

Interviews revealed that the bulls are in great demand even today. The bidders were mostly from seven districts – Tumkur, Hassan, Shimoga, Chitradurga, Chikmagalur and Haveri and belonged to at least 15 castes Adikarnataka, Daiva Brahmana, Gowda, Kuruba, ,Kuruba (Halmath), Lingayat, Madivala, Marathi, Nayak (ST), Nayaka, Ubjar, Valmiki, Vokkaliga, Vokkaliga (Gangadikar). Most of them were farmers and owned land ranging from 3 acres to 100 acres. Most of them used the *Amritmahal* breed for tilling, trade and breeding purposes. Most of the bidders from Shimoga District employ the breed in bull races. Known for its fierceness, one of the farmers said he uses the bulls to guard his land. Among those interviewed, 86% felt that the breed should be conserved and many said that the Government should take an active interest in conserving the breed. They were willing to spend an average of Rs.80,227 (Rs 25,000 to 150,000). People preferred this breed for its hardiness, ferocity, strength, extreme loyalty and for being disease-resistant.

The results clearly indicate that there is still a great demand for the *Amritmahal* breed from people belonging to a wide socio-economic background.

## **Conclusion**

Pastoralism is the most reliable and sustainable livelihood option for dryland communities across the world (Davies *et al.*, 2012). People depend on livestock for a wide variety of reasons as shown in this study. With a huge demand for a fine demand such as the Amritmahal, the State needs to invest resources into conserving the breed.

With the vagaries of the changing climate, communities living in dry regions will need to adapt to increasing dry spells. In such a scenario, drought-resistant breeds such as the Amritmahal can insure people from suffering heavy losses. There is an urgent need to partner with the knowledge-holders among local communities in order to preserve this unique system of breeding.

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