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M. M. Roy

Indian Institution of Sugarcane Research, India

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Livestock grazing in India: policy issues

M. M. Roy*

Indian Institution of Sugarcane Research, Lucknow, India

*Corresponding author e-mail: mmroyster@gmail.com

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Introduction:

The grazing/range lands have been very important in India since ancient times when cattle breeding and milk production was regarded as the second most important profession, next only to agriculture. However, during last five decades increasing domestic animal population has placed enormous grazing pressure on such lands, leading to grassland deterioration and desertification especially in arid and semiarid regions (GOI, 2007; Kala, 2009).

Still, grazing based livestock play an important role in rural economy of the as well over 50 per cent of them depend on grazing (of varying degrees) in forests, community lands and other lands in many parts of the country. In the states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka vast areas are used for grazing. In states like Himachal Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Jammu & Kashmir, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh over 70 per cent of land area is utilized as grazing ground (GOI, 2007).

In this paper the aspects related to livestock grazing in light of policy considerations is reviewed. Few major areas where more thrust is required are also highlighted.

Materials and Methods

The literature and reports on grazing based livestock in India were scanned on pastoral associations, indigenous livestock breeds, trends of change in livestock population, land use changes, use of common property lands/wastelands, forests, wastelands for livestock purposes to analyze the current situation and suggest policy options.

Results and Discussion

Almost 73 per cent of the rural households keep animals of one or the other kind to ensure household security, especially for a small holder. Grazing is the cheapest way of feeding (Jodha, 2008). It saves costs of harvesting pasture/crops; works the soil through livestock's hooves and breaks the top crust of soil, ensuring better percolation (Rangnekar, 2008). However, on account of rising human population such open access grazing areas/grasslands are shrinking. The estimates suggest that these areas will reduce further in coming years (GOI, 2011). In such a scenario, it is very pertinent to evolve a well-defined policy that encourages free range grazing in available areas in a regulatory mode, improve the degraded community land with a shift in focus from extensive to semi-intensive system (Roy, 2009).

Important policy thrusts in Indian situations include a general policy shift from more access restriction to permits based on carrying capacity of the area, including appropriate fodder conservation schemes; a rational and holistic grazing policy that balances livelihood support to disadvantaged communities with vegetation recovery in joint forest management and watershed management schemes, defining usufruct rights for grazers/pastoralists; adequate empowerment of communities for management of common property resources for grazing use on a long term sustainable basis, successful community based examples are replicated in similar areas; promotion of improved pasture species in projects like joint forest management and watershed management; encourage more awareness and capacity building programs in the area of livestock grazing management.

Conclusion

In the present scenario of land and livestock management there is an urgent need to have enabling policies on livestock grazing that are less restrictive, rational and based on scientific principles. It is expected that implementation of such policies through various promotional schemes sponsored by government will lead to greater community involvement in managing grasslands.

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