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# Pastoralists in India need better access to land and rights recognition, says UN report

Almost half of the world's rangelands, used for livestock grazing and sustenance of pastoral groups, are degraded, as per a report of the UN Convention on Combating Desertification

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Though their exact numbers in India are not known, the population of pastoralist communities, comprising groups such as Maldharis, Van Gujjars and Rabaris, among others, is estimated to be 20 million or more. Express archive

Millions of pastoralists in India who rear livestock and depend on grasslands, shrubs and plateaus for sustenance need better recognition of their rights and access to markets, a new United Nations report on degradation of rangelands said.

The report by the UN Convention on Combating Desertification (UNCCD) said that almost half of the world's rangelands are degraded due to climate change, population growth, land-use change and growing farmlands.

Rangelands cover 80 million sq km, which is 54 per cent of the earth's land surface. They are characterised by low vegetation and comprise grasslands, shrublands, wetlands, desert, semi-arid land, mountain pastures, plateaus and tundra. These rangelands, the report said, are an important ecosystem to fight against climate change as they act as carbon sinks and prevent soil erosion, land degradation and desertification.

“When we cut down a forest, when we see a 100-year-old tree fall, it rightly evokes an emotional response in many of us. The conversion of ancient rangelands, on the other hand, happens in ‘silence’ and generates little public reaction,” said UNCCD Executive Secretary Ibrahim Thiaw.

Though their exact numbers in India are not known, the population of pastoralist communities, comprising groups such as Maldharis, Van Gujjars and Rabari among others, is estimated to be 20 million or more.

The report highlighted that pastoralists are a marginalised community with little influence on policy decisions, resulting in uncertainty over access to common lands and land rights. "Although grasslands are considered threatened ecosystems in India, they have been virtually overlooked in environmental conservation and ecosystem restoration policies in favour of forestry-based interventions, which includes converting natural grasslands into plantation forests or other uses," the report said.

### Less than 5% protected

"Less than 5 per cent of India's grasslands fall within protected areas, and the total grassland area declined from 18 to 12 million hectares between 2005 and 2015," the report added.

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Pastoralists contribute to the economy through livestock rearing and milk production. The livestock sector of the economy contributes 4 per cent of national gross domestic product and 26 per cent of agricultural gross domestic product. The country also accounts for 20 per cent of the world's livestock population.

Some laws such as the Forest Rights Act 2006, though, have helped pastoralists obtain grazing rights across states in the country, the report said, talking of the gains made by the community. One "success" the report underlined was the Van

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Gujjars winning grazing rights and receiving land titles in the Rajaji National Park, following a high court judgment.

The report noted that there was a gradual shift towards recognition of the socio-ecological role of rangelands and pastoralism in India. It cited the example of welfare schemes and assistance provided to pastoralists under the National Livestock Mission, Animal Husbandry Infrastructure Development Fund and the Rashtriya Gokul Mission on sustainable dairy production.

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