



# How Pastoralists across India are Affected by the COVID-19 Lockdown & Solutions to Sustain Livelihoods

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## Status report

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Centre for  
Pastoralism

### With Inputs from

the Himachal Ghumantu Pashupalak Mahasaba (Himachal Pradesh)  
Van Panchayat Sangharsh Morcha (Uttarakhand), WASSAN (Telangana)  
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URMUL and Lokhit Pashu Palak Sansthan (Rajasthan)  
Sahjeevan (Gujarat) & Indigenous Livestock Society

## **PREFACE**

There are an estimated 30-35 million pastoralists distributed across several states in the country. These communities manage a wide range of livestock, through long-distance migrations that often span multiple states. India's wool, leather, meat and milk economies are directly or indirectly linked to these communities. This report attempts to capture core problems confronting these communities with the COVID lockdown and identifies solutions to help them sustain their livelihood during and post the lockdown in May 2020.

It is based on interactions with pastoralists and members of civil society organisations in Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Telangana, and media reports. Given the difficulties of establishing contact with mobile pastoralist communities, the report does not attempt to be comprehensive. It is a sampling of different communities, located in different parts of the country. The objective is to provide an overview of the kinds of issues pastoralists confront under this unprecedented lockdown. Where possible, we have provided names of communities, their locations and the specific issues they are dealing with. We have highlighted instances where proactive government action has eased conditions for these communities.



## Contents

I. Challenges .....	3
II. Recommended Actions .....	6
III: Map of COVID affected districts with substantial Pastoral population .....	8
IV. Select Media Reports .....	9
V. Civil Society Contacts .....	10

## I. Challenges

### Challenges: An Overview

1. Access to grazing and migration
2. Procurement and marketing of milk
3. Selling animals as meat
4. Shortage of labour
5. Problem of shearing sheep
6. Obtaining adequate ration
7. Social Stigma

#### a) Challenges in access to grazing and migration

There are reports of pastoralists experiencing difficulties in accessing forage on three counts:

First, is access to grazing within Sanctuaries, National Parks and Tiger Reserves. There have been restrictions on access to these protected areas even prior to COVID. Now the recent [advisory](#) issued by the MoEFCC has suggested COVID-related measures that further restrict movement of people and villagers within Protected Areas. This has raised concerns about pastoralist ability to access critical forage.

Second, Various reports highlight the difficulties pastoralists are experiencing as part of their annual migrations. Phase 1 of the lockdown was during the very early parts of the summer. It is growing warmer by the day, and pastoralists that spend the summer grazing meadows in the Himalayan high altitudes, would normally have left on their annual migration. If migrations are not permitted, there will certainly be large scale mortality within herds owing to shortage of both fodder and water.

Third, many pastoralists meet a part of their animals' forage requirements by stall-feeding them with fodder purchased in the open market. Though fodder supply has been opened up under the new [guidelines](#) issued by MHA on April 15 restrictions continue in some 'hotspot' districts. Inability to buy forage, coupled with reducing access to

Protected Areas will undermine productivity, and lead to heightened morbidity and mortality within these animal populations.

On the positive side, the Himachal Pradesh Government has been proactive in facilitating the seasonal migration of pastoralists. In the second week of April the State Government, set up transit camps to facilitate the seasonal migration of pastoralists, and fodder and veterinary care while on migration. An SDM in Solan district passed an order stating that social distancing among shepherds is satisfactory since they are forced to maintain a distance from other herders owing to the forage needs of their animals. Orders have been passed to ensure there are no restrictions on herder movements.

However, even in Himachal Pradesh and despite the foresightedness shown by the authorities, there have been reports of herders being stopped and prevented from continuing with their northerly migrations. The Himachal Ghumantu Pashupalak Mahasabha has been interfacing with buffalo herding Gujjars in Himachal Pradesh who have spoken of continuing difficulties of accessing markets and embarking on their migration. In Uttarakhand, there are reports of Gujjars experiencing difficulties in accessing Corbett National Park and Rajaji Tiger Reserve, in the purchase of fodder, and in embarking on their summer migrations.

b). Challenges of procurement and marketing milk.

Pastoralist communities from across states have spoken of the difficulties of selling milk. Goat, camel and buffalo herders normally sell milk either to household customers, to dairies or to road-side tea stalls. Some surplus milk is being converted into ghee and buttermilk, but as the weather heats up, even these products need to be disposed off to avoid spoilage. Given the absence of local transport, the inability to access markets will limit the salability of these products.

On a positive note, Amul has re-started the procurement of camel milk in Kutch. There is also the story of the extraordinary effort and coordination between the administration and the railways, to ensure supply of camel milk from Rajasthan to a customer with an autistic child in Mumbai.

c) Challenges of selling animals as meat:

Shepherds in Maharashtra, Karnataka and elsewhere are finding it difficult to sell their animals, since markets where animals are normally traded are closed. Localized small butcher shops, dhabas and restaurants have shut as well making it even more difficult for shepherds to sell their animals. Since a large part of the income of shepherds comes from the sale of animals, the inability to do so is cause of considerable hardship.

d) Shortage of Labour:

Pastoralists are reporting instances of shortage of labour. In some instances, herders had returned home in February to attend to family functions or to help with cultivation. Post the imposition of restrictions,



these herders are now unable to move to where their herds are, resulting in significant shortage of labour in managing the herds. This will, unfortunately, have consequences with regard to herd management and the ability of herders to keep control over their animals.

e) Problems with shearing sheep:

This is a crucial time in the annual cycle of sheep management. Sheep need to be sheared just before the onset of summer, and this is generally undertaken by shearers who are not part of the herding community. Owing to the lockdown, shearers are simply unable to travel to where the sheep are located. When sheep are not shorn, ahead of the summer heat, there are heightened levels of sickness within the herd. The failure to shear wool on account of the COVID lockdown will almost certainly lead to significantly higher morbidity, and potentially higher mortality.

In Himachal Pradesh, the wool-shearers are appointed by the H. P. State Cooperative Wool Procurement and Marketing Federation Ltd. on a commission basis. While there was an initial problem, normal shearing has resumed in H.P. However, in all other States, shearing operations have been badly impacted with the Bikaner mandi not operational and wool procurement by the Animal Husbandry department not having begun. The import of wool and potential export of woollen carpets and durries will be hugely impacted by the global pandemic and its aftermath.

f) Difficulties of obtaining adequate ration

Obtaining adequate rations is one of the biggest emerging problems for pastoralists. Pastoralists on the move normally obtain ration from village kirana shops or from shops in small towns. Many pastoralists in states across the country have spoken of the fact that villages, normally welcoming, are now wary of potential transmission of COVID and are not allowing mobile pastoralists to enter the village.

In instances where the state is providing ration, pastoralists tend to miss out owing to the fact that they are on the outskirts of villages or are grazing their animals at some distance from human habitation. In any case, they are rarely carrying ration cards, and so have been denied ration even in instances of contacting state distribution agencies.

g) Social Stigma:

Pastoralists from various parts of the country are reporting that they are experiencing a great deal of social stigma on account of their religion or their nomadic lifestyle. Gujjars in Chamba, Himachal Pradesh and from the Rishikesh/Haridwar areas in Uttarakhand have faced ostracism and had difficulty in selling milk. In both instances, there have been rumours to the effect that their milk carries the coronavirus and so customers should not buy their milk.

## II. Recommended Actions

### Key Recommendations

1. Exempt pastoralism from the shutdown
2. Ensure access to grazing and enable migration
3. Ensure continued access to Protected Areas
4. Resolving labour shortages
5. Provide adequate rations
6. Facilitate access to milk and meat markets
7. Facilitate shearing of sheep
8. Issue COVID-free certificates to pastoralists
9. Provide veterinary support while on migration

As pointed out above, a number of proactive actions have been taken by State Governments in support of pastoral communities. Our recommendations draw on some of these or are based on conversations we have had with pastoralists and members of civil society groups. Where needed, CfP and other organizations working with pastoral communities can provide support to government relief measures. Specific recommendations:

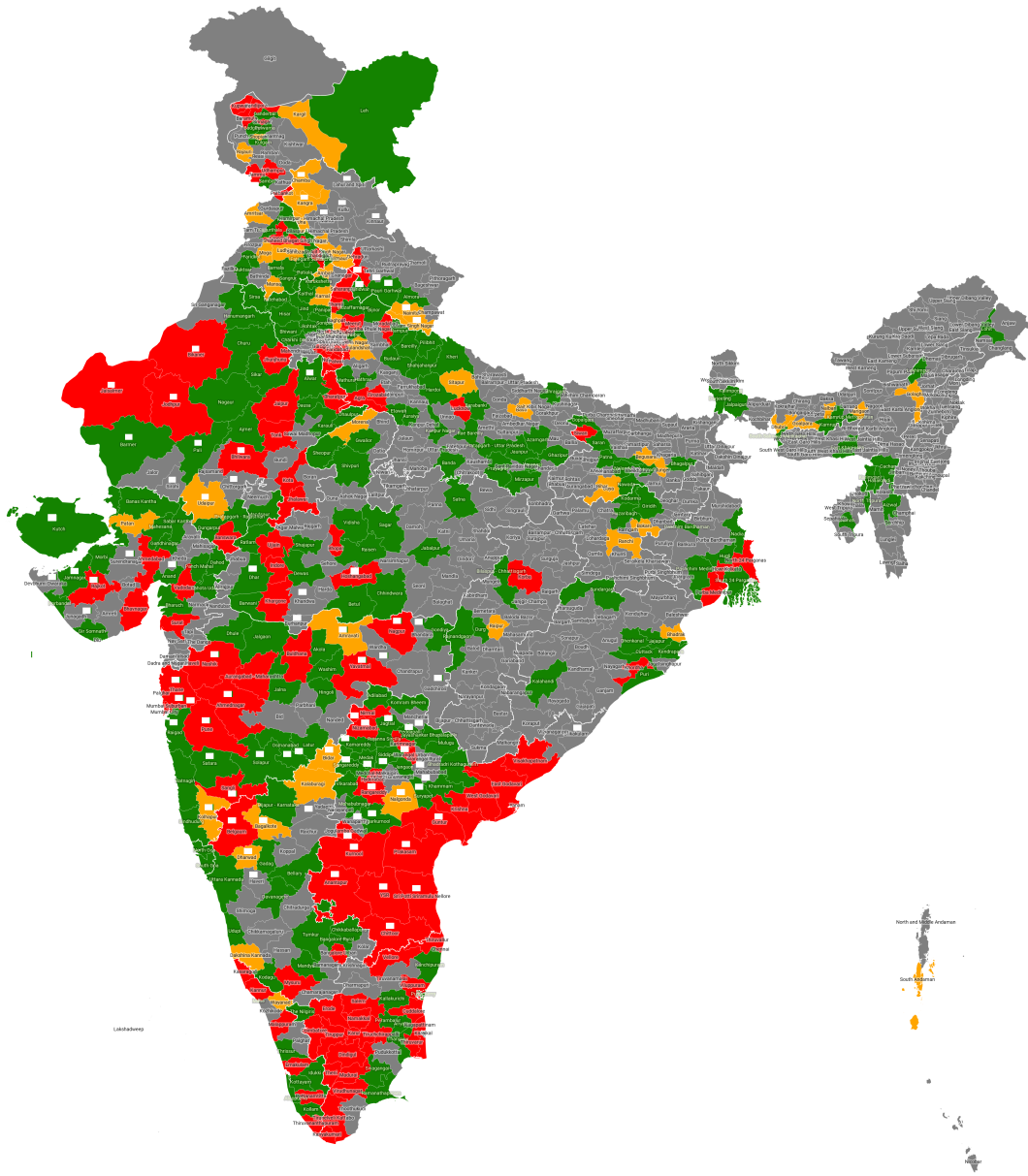
1. Pastoralism as a sector needs to be exempted from the lockdown. This can be in line with the orders passed by MoHA exempting agricultural activities and the collection of minor forest produce from the lockdown. In the main, this means that pastoralist communities be supported to carry out migrations, ensure adequate access to critical grazing resources (which are legal rights recognised under the Forest Rights Act) at this very difficult juncture, and ensure support with regard to marketing of their produce as essential commodities.
2. Ensuring access to grazing: Pastoral communities have legal rights for grazing and seasonal access to resources both for settled and transhumant communities under the Forest Rights Act (Sections 2 (a), 3 (1) (d) and 4 (1)). The Ministry of Tribal Affairs needs to engage with state governments to ensure that these rights are not restricted during or as a result of the lockdown. The ministry can issue an advisory to concerned state governments to take actions to remove restrictions imposed on grazing and access to forests and to extend support to the pastoralists to exercise their rights following the required conditions of social distancing. At the same time state governments should be asked to ensure recognition of rights of pastoral communities as per FRA as tenure security can be effective in strengthening their livelihoods.
3. Access to Protected Areas: Where pastoralists have been living in and using Protected Areas, they must be permitted to continue accessing these areas as their legal rights and access are recognised by FRA.

4. Ensuring annual migrations: As has been done by Himachal Pradesh, pastoralist communities need to be authorized to undertake their annual migrations. This is particularly true for communities that spend the summer at high altitude, since they have exhausted their forage in the winter grazing grounds and their animals are unable to tolerate the heat of the plains.
5. Resolving labour shortages: The return of pastoralists to their migratory sites needs to be facilitated.
6. Ensuring availability of fodder: Settled pastoral communities are in need of fodder. In the same way that the state is making food available to citizens, it needs to ensure that adequate supplies of fodder are available to pastoralists should there be an expressed need for the same.
7. Obtaining adequate ration: For the most part, pastoralists are at some distance from human habitation and so do not represent a transmission threat of any kind. They are, however, dependent on local communities or government for their ration. Dedicated sets of teams need to identify the locations of pastoralists while on migration, and to supply them with the provisions they need.
8. Ensuring appropriate access to markets: Governments are treating farm produce as essential services and are accordingly making arrangements to ensure that farmers are able to get their produce to the market. Milk and meat produced by pastoralists needs similar categorization as an essential service, and efforts must be made to ensure pastoralists are able to access mainstream markets to sell their milk and meat. District administrations need to ensure that local misgivings regarding milk and meat as a carrier of Coronavirus are alleviated.
9. Shearing of Sheep and Procurement of Wool: Departments of Animal Husbandry of the State Governments need to provide shearing services and undertake wool procurement and storage on a large scale. This is both to compensate for the potential drop in wool imports and provide relief revenue to pastoralists who have seen a drop in revenues from sale of milk and meat. Over the next 6-8 months, state governments may need to invest in wool procurement.
10. Health check ups: Testing for the Coronavirus needs to be undertaken for all pastoralists, particularly those who are on migration. If found to be clear, they need to be provided medical certification to that effect. They will then be able to show these at check- points as well as in villages along their migratory routes. This should go a long way towards minimizing the social stigma that pastoralists are currently experiencing.
11. Veterinary care needs to be made available to pastoralists while on migration.
12. Health messages: Advisories to pastoralists and migratory communities need to take into account their context and availability of water. Frequent washing may be impossible for them, but sanitizers should be made available to them.

**Civil society would be willing to partner with government in any of these efforts.**



### III: Map of COVID affected districts with substantial Pastoral population



## IV. Select Media Reports

1. <https://epaper.hindustantimes.com/Home/ShareArticle?a=6aa1f26b&imageview=0>
2. <https://youtu.be/0SvOUgbCLHw>
3. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/dehradun/nomadic-van-gujjar-tribe-caught-in-lockdown-with-nowhere-to-go/articleshow/74956429.cms>
4. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/dehradun/in-haridwars-sealed-village-thousands-of-litres-of-milk-being-dumped-in-drains-every-day/articleshow/75072991.cms>
5. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/wildlife-biodiversity/covid-19-himachal-s-pastoral-community-in-the-shadow-of-lockdown-70359>
6. <https://epaper.hindustantimes.com/Home/ShareArticle?OrgId=6aa1f26b&imageview=0>
7. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/economy/covid-19-300-400-maldhari-families-from-gujarat-stranded-in-chhattisgarh-70468>
8. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/himachal-pradesh-govt-facilitates-seasonal-migration-of-gaddi-community/story-RJP3M2K7USut4P2Z7ZEvzN.html>

## **V. Civil Society Contacts**

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