

## The lie of a grassland

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[Adam Halliday](#) : Sun Feb 03 2013, 02:20 hrs

The tall, lean, middle-aged pastoralist adjusts his turban, straightens the shoulder pads of his blazer, lights a bidi and says, "The machines are killing our animals." Ramjan Isha Halepota has seen the change from natural abundance to scarcity—the slow decline of the Banni grassland in the Kutch region of Gujarat, considered Asia's largest and finest. Halepota has seen many years of drought, mass migration, dwindling livestock sales, and now, dependence of the local economy on sparse winter tourism. As president of the Banni Breeders' Association, he has been at the forefront of demanding forest rights for the largely Muslim pastoral community.

The Banni Grassland is a 2,500 sq km protected forest (the entire grasslands, including unprotected areas, is about 1,000 sq km larger) where livestock outnumber the 17,000-odd human population five to one. Since the 1960s, the grassland has been ravaged by an invasive shrub species locally known as gando baval (crazy weed) which has, along with long years of drought, wiped out two-third of 40-odd native grass species that once formed the vast grasslands. "When we visited Banni in the 60s and 70s, there were desi babul trees with trunks about two feet in diameter. In fact, there still stands in Hodko village a pair of 200-year-old mango trees," says 83-year old environmentalist Lavkumar Kachar.

Banni's inhabitants are Sindhi-speaking Muslims who are breeders of cattle, called maldharis. Their buffaloes, sold across Gujarat and beyond, are prized for their health and milk yield and bullocks for their strength. "Before the tractors and machines came, about 12,000 calves were sold to farmers in Saurashtra every year," Halepota recalls. Researchers Charul Bharwada and Vinay Mahajan write how Banni's maldharis used to move out of the grassland each Diwali with herds of buffaloes and bullocks and move from village to village, selling them to farmers in fixed three-year installments.

The pastoralists no longer practise this form of selling, having settled into a more sedentary routine of selling thousands of litres of milk to dairies. At the annual Animal Show in January, this change was apparent—the buffalo that won the milking competition yielded 16.2 litres in two milkings in 12 hours but only six animals were sold in the two-day mela attended by thousands.

This change was furthered by the arrival of gando baval and drought. By the late 80s, drought had made home in the grassland and a large number of Banni's breeders fled with their livestock to other areas.

Severe droughts coupled with the uncertainty of the grassland's status in government records have made Banni's relationship with the state remote. Rita Kothari, a humanities professor at IIT, Gandhinagar, writes in her book *Memories and Movements: Borders and Communities in Banni*, "...the people of Banni express their views on the sirkar with considerable charity. Realising the remoteness of their region, they have expected little from the state. Hence, the building of a road or the availability of electricity make for sufficient optimism for the future. In the process, questions such as why, out of 6,287 families in Banni, 3,492 live below the poverty line, are not asked."

However, it is only recently that their relationship with the state has entered a more concrete phase. The Forest Department introduced a detailed working plan, in 2009, for the regeneration of the grassland by uprooting gando baval and planting native grass species. This process, which will take two decades, will temporarily disallow open grazing in the areas where native species will be planted, throwing them open when healthy populations of grass have grown back. The regeneration will benefit the pastoralists and their livestock.

This plan has become a major point of conflict for the pastoralists, who claim they were not consulted when the plan was being drawn up and who fear, despite repeated assurances to the contrary, that their livestock would be deprived of grazing lands.

"We came to know of the working plan when forest officials came and spoke to us four years ago. We asked NGOs like Sahjeevan to study the working plan. We realised the plan was against us. Grazing cannot be controlled by humans,"

Halepota says.

This rejection of the working plan has been followed by the pastoralists demanding community rights over Banni under the Forest Rights Act, and thousands answered Halepota's call for a rally in Bhuj, the district headquarters, early last year.

Even the annual animal mela was named after what has become their battle cry—Banni me Banni rewa do (let Banni be Banni).

In another act of defiance, the breeders went ahead and formed forest rights committees under the Forest Rights Act on their own, intimating the state in a letter. The government termed the committees null and void since notification for forest rights outside tribal regions had not been issued yet. But the breeders continue to form committees even now. The state government halted work a few months ahead of elections last year, keen to avoid a backlash at polling booths. Work has still not been resumed fully.

Meanwhile, the government has adjusted its stance slightly, assuring that the community would be given forest rights. The Forest Department has also removed the barbed wires that

once circled patches where the regeneration was on and often injured animals, replacing them with trenches to deter animals from grazing on the young grass. The government has, however, refused to revoke the working plan.

Despite the government softening its stand, the conflict continues to rage. "Banni has its natural working plan. It just needs good rainfall," says Halepota.