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The goat gamble

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It has been a slow and steady shift over decades. Forced by declining returns from farming in ecologically fragile areas, small farmers have been taking to goat rearing. Today, goats ensure income to five million households in India. It is now bonanza time, with demand for goat meat projected to shoot up. India will have to almost double its goat population in 10 years. Government is encouraging goat rearing. But no one considered one question: where will the goats graze? Over the past 50 years land available for grazing has shrunk by half and forests are reportedly overgrazed. If India does not secure its pastures, goats might turn from an asset to a liability, reports **Kumar Sambhav Shrivastava**

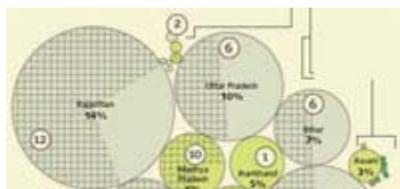


Photos: Kumar Sambhav Shrivastava
Giyasilal Saini is a marginal farmer who has market savvy. It comes from experience. Living in a semi-arid area like Alwar in Rajasthan, he always knew he could not depend on farming alone. So he would keep some goats, like others in village Jaitpura. Then three years ago the pond that irrigated his tiny field dried up. "Rains have not been enough. I spent a fortune on irrigating my field but could not grow enough for my family," said the 36-year-old. He devoted his energy to goat rearing.

Within three years Saini's herd grew from 20 to 80-strong, the largest in his village. "They serve as a 24-hour cash bank," he said, closely inspecting the mouths of goats. He displayed two large teeth in the lower front jaw of one of the goats. "It means the chhendi (goat) is over 12 months old and the thickness of its backbone suggests it has gained 10 kg of weight," said Saini. "I can now sell it for at least Rs 1,500."

Saini sells 35 goats in a year to the Khatiks, a community that trades in goats, for Rs 1,500-1,800 per head. While earlier he could hardly make ends meet, today he has one of the most well maintained houses in the village.

Goat rearing is not capital intensive, hence easy to start. The partially denuded Aravali hills provide free grazing ground; that saves close to 70 per cent of the rearing cost. Being prolific eaters with super efficient digestive system, goats can eat anything anytime.



[1] Like Saini thousands of small and marginal farmers in rainfed Rajasthan have switched to goat rearing. In the process they have earned the state a superlative: host to the largest number of goats in the country. As per the National [Livestock](#) [2] Census 2007,



Rajasthan has 21.5 million goats, which is about 14 per cent of India's total goat population. In the past 10 years, goats in Rajasthan have increased by 27 per cent as against the all-India rate of 15 per cent. But why does a state with least mutton consumption in the country make this choice?

The reason is ecological. With the expansion of desert in Rajasthan, the [population of goats](#) [3] will rise. People shift from agriculture and cattle rearing to goat rearing because goats can survive in harsh environment and still provide good profit. "This is the reason Rajasthan has the highest goat population in the country even though its non-Muslim population is mostly vegetarian," said K A Singh, director of the Indian Grassland and Fodder Research Institute in Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh.

Sixty per cent of the state is arid or semi-arid. It has suffered 40 droughts in the past 50 years. Less than a third of the total 21.6 million hectares (ha) of cropped area has assured irrigation. Land degradation and uncertain monsoon have encouraged farmers in most parts to diversify into goat farming, vouch farmers of Alwar. The more arid a place, the more its dependence on goat rearing. Livestock contributes up to 60 per cent to the household income of marginal farmers in western Rajasthan.

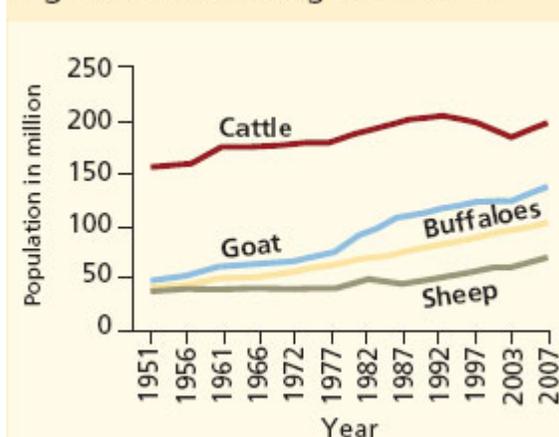
Goat's biology makes the trade competitive compared to one-crop rainfed farming. From the age of one, they are able to conceive and breed twice a year. Most of the time they give birth to twins, sometimes to triplets or qua druplets. "It is like a crop. By the time you sell one bunch, another gets ready," said Saini.

Lucrative crop

[India follows Rajasthan's trajectory in goat rearing](#) [4]. It has the world's largest goat population after China. As per the National Livestock Census the goat population in the country has almost doubled in 30 years: from 76 million in 1977 to 140.5 million in 2007. The rate of increase in goats in the past five decades has been the highest among all ruminants; they beat sheep and cattle (see graph 'Goat numbers grow fastest' on right). This growth rate is in spite of an annual slaughter rate of 38 per cent.

Goat numbers grow fastest

Highest rate among ruminants



Source: Department of Animal Husbandry

Today about five million households in the country rear goats, up from three million in early 1970s. Many households are absolutely surviving on income from goat rearing. Most of them are poor and marginal farmers, like Saini in Alwar. [This reflects in the contribution of livestock to the national GDP](#) [5]. The contribution of the agriculture and allied sector to GDP has declined from 55 per cent in early 1980s to 21 per cent in 2009. But the share of livestock within the agriculture and allied sector has increased from 18 per cent to 23 per cent over the same period.

Market demands

What is also pushing goat numbers is the rising demand for goat meat in India, both for domestic

Meat demand to skyrocket

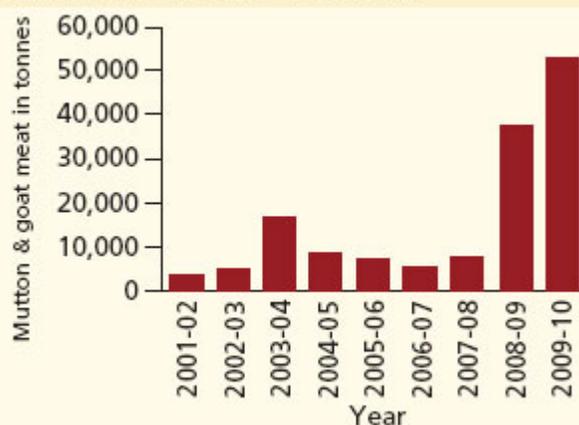
Thanks to urbanisation and export



Sources: NABARD, National Centre for Agricultural Economics and Policy Research

Meat export jumps

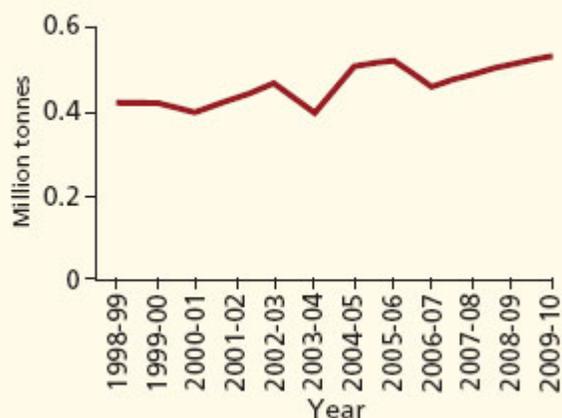
Middle East drives demand



Sources: Department of Animal Husbandry, Agriculture and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority

Goat meat production

It is yet to pick up pace



Source: Department of Animal Husbandry

and international market. Consumption demand is more pronounced in urban areas that are growing at the rate of 2.5 per cent per year. While rural population has grown at 1.7 per cent a year between 1981 and 2001, urban population has grown at 3 per cent.

India is the largest goat meat producer after China. The rate of goat meat production (18.6 per cent) in 1997-2007 was double the production rate (9.3 per cent) in the previous decade. Despite a steady increase in supply, goat meat prices are continuously rising. The Wholesale Price Index shows the prices of mutton and goat meat have increased by 75 per cent in the past five years. This is the highest among all the primary food items except pulses and potato. In Delhi, goat meat prices increased from Rs 170 per kg to Rs 260 per kg in the past one year.

“The main reason for the price increase is the rising export of goat meat to West Asia,” said Mohammad Aqil Qureshi, former president of the New Delhi Meat Traders Association. Sixty countries import goat meat from India. Big importers are Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Angola and Egypt. Nearly 80 per cent of the goat meat and mutton export is to West Asia. Although India’s current export of goat and sheep meat is 6.4 per cent of the production, export is where demand is set to explode. Export of goat and sheep meat has, in fact, increased more than eight times in the past two years, while production has increased marginally (see graphs). “People in West Asia are shifting from Australian sheep to Indian goats because the meat of our goats is tastier and low on fat,” said Qureshi.

This has turned goat into a much sought after economic instrument. “Both exporters and local traders buy from the same market. Since exporters have a better purchasing power they have captured 60 per cent of the goat market in Delhi,” said Qureshi. Exporters are buying goats at an even higher price going up to Rs 300 a kg, said Billal Qureshi who owns a meat shop in Delhi. The average sale age of goats is coming down. “We realised demand for the tender meat is rising,” said Rahul Chaturvedi of the Foundation for Ecological Security, an NGO studying the goat market chain in

Rajasthan and Karnataka.



Farmer-turned-goat rearer Giyasilal Saini The [goat meat market](#) ^[6] is set to rise as the middle class is expanding and meat consumption is increasing. Demand for goat meat and mutton will rise to 12.72 million tonnes in 2020 against 3.8 million tonnes this year (see graph 'Meat demand to skyrocket'), according to the National Centre for Agricultural Economics and Policy Research, Delhi. India will need 248 million goats to meet this demand, which is almost double the number of goats in 2007.

Insurance for the poor

Goat rearing was never so lucrative. Since goats were domesticated 10,000 years ago, they have been poor people's most reliable livelihood insurance. The National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad, studied the economics of one buffalo v five goats in Rajasthan in 1999. It showed yearly profit from the goats was higher than from a buffalo.

This explains goats' geographical and class biases. They are found more in ecologically fragile arid and semi-arid areas and goat rearers are mostly the poorest. It is not known whether goats were domesticated for riding out tough life in such areas or goats were responsible for ecological damage. But what is known is that in India goats are the most reliable source of earning a living in ecologically degraded areas. Of the 100 districts with high goat population in India, 24 are agriculturally distressed, 42 are chronically drought-prone and 21 show deforestation in 2007 as compared to 2005. Goat population is also high in disaster-prone areas, like parts of Bihar frequently ravaged by floods. In many ways, goat has everything a poor or a person in emergency needs: low investment, high and consistent returns and near liquid monetary status.

Add to this the spurt in demand for [goat meat](#) ^[7], and it is nothing short of an economic bonanza for India's poorest. But the goat's geographical bias also dictates its growth limit. The biggest incentive for goat rearing—free grazing— may not be there as the number increases. Saini of Alwar grazes his goats on a hill in Sariska National Park. Goats of 40 other villages graze on it. Once the hill is stripped of its vegetation, Saini will have to think of some other ways of providing for his family.



On a good day trade at Baladi goat market near Alwar in Rajasthan could go up to Rs 1.5 crore

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