

Sahjeevan — The Pastoral Commons That Government Kept Forgetting

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There is a category of land in Gujarat's Banni grasslands that formal development policy has repeatedly failed to see: the commons on which pastoral communities have grazed their cattle for centuries, maintained through customary governance systems that preceded the Indian state by hundreds of years. The British called it wasteland. The forest department called it degraded land. Development agencies called it unproductive.

The Maldhari pastoral communities who live here call it home. They call the Banni — 2,618 square kilometres of seasonally flooded grassland in the Rann of Kutch — one of Asia's largest and most ecologically significant pastoral commons. They call the Kharai camel that swims across the Rann to browse the mangroves a living knowledge system about how an animal co-evolved with an ecosystem over thousands of years.

Sahjeevan — meaning "living together" — was founded in 1999 in Bhuj, Gujarat, to work at the intersection of pastoral community rights, ecological sustainability, and cultural preservation. Their work is among the most specific and least replicated available in Indian civil society: there is no other organisation doing what they do, in the way they do it, for the communities they serve.

Who They Are

Sahjeevan works with pastoral and agropastoral communities in Gujarat — primarily the Maldhari communities of the Banni grassland in Kutch — on community rights over pastoral lands, ecological restoration of degraded commons, documentation and revitalisation of pastoral knowledge systems, and policy advocacy for pastoral rights in national and state governance frameworks.

Their team combines ecologists, social scientists, legal advocates, and community organisers in a genuinely interdisciplinary practice — because the pastoral commons problem cannot be solved by ecology alone, or by rights advocacy alone, or by community mobilisation alone. It requires all three, simultaneously, in a landscape where all three have been systematically dismantled.

The Banni Grassland Restoration

The Banni grassland has experienced significant degradation over the past five decades from the spread of *Prosopis juliflora* — an invasive shrub introduced by the forest department in the 1960s for biomass and fuelwood — that now covers large areas of what was open grassland. *Prosopis juliflora* outcompetes native grasses, reduces fodder availability for pastoralists, and degrades the ecological functions that make Banni a critical waterbird habitat.

Sahjeevan's grassland restoration programme has worked with Maldhari communities to mechanically remove *Prosopis*, restore native grass cover, and develop community management protocols for maintaining restored areas. The work is slow, technically demanding, and critically dependent on community institutions that have the governance capacity to manage commons sustainably. Sahjeevan builds those institutions alongside the ecological restoration — not after it.

The Kharai Camel: A Knowledge System at Risk

The Kharai camel of Kutch is the only camel breed in the world known to swim in the sea — crossing the Rann to browse coastal mangroves and returning to mainland grazing areas. The breed was developed by Maldhari communities over centuries of co-evolution with the specific ecological conditions of the Kutch coast. It requires no artificial feed, thrives in salt-marsh and mangrove environments, and produces milk with documented health benefits.

Sahjeevan has documented the Kharai camel, its herding practices, its ecological role in mangrove maintenance, and the cultural knowledge of the Maldhari families who rear it — creating an evidence base for both the breed's conservation value and the herding community's traditional rights. Their advocacy has contributed to the Kharai camel's recognition in livestock conservation programmes and the nomination of Kharai camel herding for cultural heritage documentation.

The Policy Contribution: Pastoral Land Rights

Sahjeevan's most significant policy work is their advocacy for pastoral land rights in national policy — specifically the recognition of pastoral routes, grazing commons, and seasonal migration corridors as legitimate land uses that require formal legal protection. Their research and advocacy has fed into discussions around PESA implementation for pastoral communities, and their documentation of Banni's customary governance systems has contributed to policy debates about how traditional institutions can be formally recognised without being dismantled.

Why This Matters for Odisha

Odisha's tribal communities face structurally similar challenges to Kutch's pastoral communities: customary governance over commons that formal law has not recognised, ecological knowledge systems embedded in traditional land use that development policy erases, and the intersection of FRA implementation with community management capacity. Sahjeevan's interdisciplinary model — ecology +

rights + community institutions — is directly transferable to Odisha's CFR post-recognition support challenges.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: sahjeevan.org | **Contact:** Bhuj, Kutch, Gujarat

Key evidence:

- Sahjeevan website: sahjeevan.org — Banni restoration, Kharai camel documentation, pastoral rights advocacy
- CSRBox Sahjeevan profile: Banni grassland, Maldhari communities, ecological restoration
- Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies: Sahjeevan grantee — pastoral commons and community rights

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