

Learning to Resist(ance) in Gujarat: Pastoral Pedagogy as Active and Positive Grassroots Resistance

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Abstract: The Banni grassland, of Gujarat state of western India, has emerged as a site of multipronged contestations over land and livelihoods. Structural transformations seek to refashion Kachchh's economy, society, and nature along capitalist and neoliberal lines threatening the livelihood of the 25,000 mobile pastoralists inhabiting the grassland. Embedded within this context, the Salim Mama Youth Course, initiated through the a collaboration between local civil society, research and academic organizations, trains youth in the region to recognize connections between pastoralism and their ecosystems. It achieves two main goals: firstly, the course attempts to secure the long-term sustainability of the grassland by developing the technical know-how of the youth as well as generating enthusiasm for pastoralism. Secondly, it contributes to the ongoing resistance against state induced corporate capture both practically, by providing information and tools to sustain contestations, and ideologically by reimagining the role and value of pastoralism in the region. This article unpacks the pedagogical approach of the course as a form of active and positive grassroots resistance against neoliberal environmentalism and commodity frontier expansion.

Amene thayu ke amme Banni na chiye tob amane Banni vishe jaan bovi joie. Amuk amuk chijo tob amane maa-baap thi khabar bati pan ghani chijo amane course द्वारा sikhva madi. Desh-videsh na maldhari vishe shikhva madyu. Amane khabar naboti ke bahar pan maldhari chhe. Amene thayu khali ame chiye. – Paresh Marvada

[We thought that since we are from Banni, we should know about it. There are some things that we learnt from our parents but many others that we learnt through the course. We learnt about pastoralists from across the country and abroad. We did not know that there are pastoralists abroad. We thought it was only us. – Paresh Marvada] Author's translation from Gujarati.

Paresh¹ is a young pastoralist from the Banni grassland region of Kachchh district, Gujarat state, in western India, one of India's largest and last remaining grassland ecosystems. He is talking about his motivation and experience as a student of the Salim Mama Youth Course, referred to as the *Banni course* in this article. The Banni course is organized to help young people in the region understand connections between pastoralism and their ecosystems, and to develop their ability to regenerate their ecologies.

By connecting the youth to their environment and associated cultural values, the course provides a crucial platform to interrogate discourses around land, livelihood, and ecologies. It serves as a tool for building grassroots resistance to counter the abstracting force of state developmentalism expressed through policies to enclose and appropriate the grassland and its surrounding territories.

At 2500 sq.km. the Banni accounts for over 45% of permanent pastures and 10% of grazing grounds in Gujarat (GUIDE, 1998).

¹ All the names in this article have been changed to protect the anonymity of the respondents.



The landscape and pastoralists in the Banni grassland. Photo credit: Nipun Prabhakar for *Living Lightly*.

Once known as Asia's largest grassland, it nurtures a huge diversity of flora and fauna, including various hardy and nutritious grass species that sprout even with limited rains in its shallow saline soils. Banni's community of pastoralists make the most of the spatial and temporal variations in vegetation through shared resource use and mobility. The grassland is sustained, created, and re-created through pastoralists' mobile breeding and grazing practices, which derive from long-held ecological knowledge and a culture of the commons, and provide a range of ecosystem benefits.

Still, statist discourse sees Banni as "unproductive" and "barren" and pastoralism as "wasteful" and "inefficient." Embedded within wider structural transformations that seek to refashion Kachchh's economy, society, and nature along capitalist and neoliberal lines (Mehta and Srivastava, 2019), this discourse pervades policy and action on the ground. Attempts from the state's Forest Department to control and appropriate the grassland through a Working Plan issued in 2009 is a prime example. By proposing to enclose and fragment the grassland, the Working Plan undermines the local open grazing practices and livestock mobility that have sustained the

grassland. It threatens to overturn the lived space that the pastoralists inhabit, experience, and act within and through.

With the slogan "Banni ko Banni rehne do" or "Let it be Banni" (Bharwada and Mahajan, 2012), pastoralists are making claims for the recognition of their community rights to the grassland. But rather than a simple state versus society dichotomy, they are engaged in multilevel and multi-layered negotiations with multiple, plural and heterogenous actors.

The Banni course is a unique intervention situated within this universe of claims making. It was developed by Sahjeevan, a local NGO; Research and Monitoring in the Banni Landscape (RAMBLE), an open research platform dedicated to the grassland; and the Banni Breeder's association, in conjunction with the Earth Science Department of the Kachchh University. Launched in 2020, the course facilitates a nuanced scientific understanding of the landscape and pastoralism.

At a practical level, the Banni course provides youth with skills and tools needed to navigate rapid shifts and exposes them to pastoral systems across India and abroad. It builds the capacity of youth to contribute to their



Office of the Banni Breeders' Association where the course takes place. Photo credit: Nipun Prabhakar, personal collection.

community by participating in and leading projects, such as community-based grassland restoration. At a more affective level, the course seeks to renew a sense of wonder, appreciation, and pride in their ecosystem and the cultural norms that preserve it among the pastoral youth. It facilitates collective reflection and vision building in times of change and uncertainty.

In this article, I unpack both the practical and affective dimensions of the Banni course. The insights derive from sporadic field work in the Banni region starting 2015, involvement with discussions related to the course as faculty, and my own experience of interacting with the students.

The Banni Course

T *Ame Kalo Dungar gaya bata. Tyaan ame joyu ke Banni ni maati kem bane chhe, ane paani kyathi aave chhe* [We went to Kalo Dungar. There we saw how Banni's soil is made and where water comes from], Paresh continues as he speaks about his favourite class of the Banni course – the one on soils. Close to the Banni region, Kalo Dungar [Black Hill],

Kachchh's highest peak, is not just a good vantage point to observe the fascinating landscape of the region, but also to facilitate a locally embedded understanding of geological features like soil. Through an interactive session, the youth experientially learnt about the topography, soil, and water features of Banni.

Designed as a 300-hour certificate course, the curriculum of the Banni course is divided into several 2-day workshops on technical topics such as soil/geology, animal breeds, vegetation, faunal species, toxicology, animal health, and climate change, as well as more social science based examinations of topics such as pastoral communities, culture, economy, and laws. The tie-up with the Kachchh University came about through conversations with professors that are known within the civil society network. The idea was to provide legitimacy to the culturally bound and practice-oriented knowledge of the pastoralists that are not only left out of, but often clash with, formal curricula. This served as an incentive for prospective students and funders, and for the University to accredit more practical and situated knowledges.

Workshops are taught by subject-area experts that include academics, development practitioners, and policy consultants. Each workshop is led by someone based locally in Kachchh but they may invite experts from elsewhere to conduct parts of the session. For instance, the session on soils that Paresh is speaking about above was given by Sailesh Vyas, secretary and trustee of Satvik, an NGO promoting organic farming in Kachchh. Although the course is designed to follow a progression, the sequence of sessions is made flexible to accommodate the schedules of the faculty as well as the interests of the students.

Well aware of faculty positionality, the course relies on the wisdom of community elders, local animal experts, and insights from students themselves, amassed through their lived experiences within pastoral communities and grassland landscapes. Intergenerational transfer of knowledge is fostered through activities where students are actively encouraged to speak with their elders. In one exercise, students were sent to different villages to speak to skilled pastoralists from previous generations to learn the history of the region. In another exercise, students were asked to bring old objects from their homes

and describe what they were used for. One student, Altaf, brought and described an old utensil used in his great grandmother's time. He spoke about the material it was made of, the food that was cooked in it, and what place it held within the local economy and culture. He connected practices in his family to the shared culture of the pastoralist community, as well as the abundance of the grassland that formed a part of pastoral diets, and as deriving from the weather, soil, and geological formations.

This simple classroom activity yielded a rich description of the object, one that was threaded through a narration of the social, political, and ecological history and change in the region. It alluded to the experiential knowledge of the pastoralists, developed through close interaction with their environment, and passed down as instinct to the next generation. Speaking to their elders, observing their own environment, drawing connections between their practices, and learning about their own communal history were all part of this exercise. Role play, field visits, audio-visual material, and interactive icebreakers were used to make the sessions interactive and fun, and to keep the youth engaged.



Pastoral youth attending the Salim Mama Youth Course. Photo credit: Nipun Prabhakar, personal collection.

Through activities such as these, the course creates the space for an exploration of the values intrinsic to pastoralism as a cultural practice. For example, the pastoralists use the grassland resources in common; they believe that nature is god's gift and must be shared and preserved for future generations. Therefore, the livestock are allowed to graze openly across the region, and animals from drier areas have the right to graze in wetter areas. Discussions of the values that make open grazing possible were explored. The students examined extant practices where finders of a lost animal do not see themselves as its keeper but rather as a trustee of the animal and its income for the owner. Or of how it becomes incumbent on the village to help restore a herd of a colleague who has lost his herd to disease, accident, etc.

These values are connected to the social topics covered through the workshop, such as economic risk management through moral economy, or demands for community forest rights that draw from the ethic of shared resource use and its custodianship. Emerging opportunities in pastoralism, such as dairy processing, for example, are discussed

through peer-to-peer engagements with pastoralists from other parts of the country and abroad. Both the content and the form of this pedagogic intervention are designed to reinvigorate pastoralism among the youth who have been leaving for jobs in tourism and industry.

The course also provides practical training for pastoralists on using Microsoft office, managing projects, conducting resource mapping, and building their photography skills. These modules were taught bearing in mind workplace requirements, as well as the expanding capacity needs within initiatives undertaken by Sahjeevan and the Banni Breeders' Association, such as community-based grassland restoration initiatives or organizing "forest management committees" as part of their rights-based claim making. From the perspective of the NGO, receiving rights to resources is only a means to an end; the goal is not just to prevent implementation of the 2009 Work Plan and receive rights, but to ensure the long-term sustainability of the grassland and to safeguard the livelihoods practiced therein by protecting human-environment relationships.



Natasha Maru teaching during a session of the Salim Mama Youth Course. Photo credit: Nipun Prabhakar, personal collection.



Tourists at the Greater Rann of Kachchh at the edge of the Banni grassland. Photo credit: Nipun Prabhakar, personal collection.

The students enjoyed the course. While many of them had had formal schooling, it followed de-localized state-based curriculum taught by teachers that had never been to the region before. At home, too, learning was by doing, by perceiving, rather than through any ‘taught’ channels. Hence, for many students, coming to the course was a way of re-discovering themselves and their homeland as well as learning. Some students have been able to incorporate ideas from the course into their daily and professional lives. Paresh, for example, wants to more carefully monitor the quantities of water and feed he gives to his herd after learning about animal health and nutrition and the economy of animal husbandry. For another student, Mir, the course helped him prepare him for the interview and job where he now works with another NGO in the region.

The Banni Course as Resistance

Following colonial policies, the government of newly independent India nationalized all land not assessed for revenue, taking over all non-agricultural land devoid of private ownership (Corbridge and Kumar, 2002). Banni was thus declared a Protected Forest in 1955, but, its “survey and settlement” pending, it remained stuck in an administrative logjam for decades. This meant

that, depending on the situation, the State selectively owned or disowned matters related to Banni, pushing the region and its people to the margins of the state’s imagination (Bharwada and Mahajan, 2012).

This changed following a new impetus to survey public lands following a devastating earthquake in Kachchh in 2001. Long ignored on the “economic map” of Gujarat (Tambis-Lyche and Sud, 2016), the “remote,” “marginal” border district of Kachchh was re-positioned as India’s premiere investment destination. It was “deliberately turned into a corporate business opportunity” (Menon et al, 2014) leveraging on its vast stretches of sparsely populated semi-arid lands. Operating on a narrow state-business alliance as opposed to a free play of markets (Sud, 2014), the development in Kachchh is an apt example, and, indeed, the laboratory for the now popular ‘Gujarat model,’ that is being promoted across the country since Modi’s promotion from Chief Minister of Gujarat to national office.

The development of tourism, industry and commercialization of the grassland, along the lines of state developmentalism have served to “commoditize” the grassland, transforming the relationship between pastoralists and the grassland from that of reciprocity to that of exchange. With these developments, the

Banni is a layered commodity frontier in the making.

Tourists are invited to the annual Rannotsav, or Desert Festival, at the crown of Banni with the invocation, “Kachchh nahin dekha toh kuch nahin dekha” [You’ve seen nothing until you’ve seen Kachchh] (Gujarat Tourism, 2016). The Vibrant Gujarat business summit takes place alongside this festival bringing in high industrial investment to Kachchh and the region. Huge export oriented marine chemicals industries have now established themselves in the region surrounding Banni, such as Agrocel Industries Private Limited (28000 acres), Solaris Chemtech Industries Limited (subsidiary of Agrocel) (67000 acres), Archean Chemical Industries Private Limited (100,000 acres), and Satyesh Brinechem Private Limited (111,200 acres)².

The 2009 Forest Department Working Plan (WP) proposes the commercialisation of the Banni grasslands. Constructing the problems of the grasslands as mismanagement by local people, the Plan proposes to enclose the region, all the while aiming for its corporate control. Issued 54 years after Banni first received forest status, the WP enlists several schemes for the “rejuvenation” and the “scientific management” of the “highly degraded” grassland that is claimed to have been “heavily damaged” by the “open and uncontrolled grazing” followed by the pastoralists (Meena and Srivastav, 2009). Reeking of the widely contested “tragedy of the commons” treatise (Hardin, 1968), the WP recommended enclosing the grassland into plots that are “fenced through **double fencings** [original emphasis] with barbed and trenched [sic],” (Meena and Srivastav, 2009) and capitalizing the space for biofuel production by a multinational company.

These developments are all emblematic of the capitalist expansion, social change, and ecological transformation of the region. They have “encapsulated” a pastoral way of life by undermining their production relations, customary shared resource use, mobility, and traditional knowledges (Kavoori, 1999). They have abstracted the space of the grassland from the lived realities and daily practices of

the pastoralists and eroded the tacit knowledge that comes from engaging with the resource over time, including the skills, routes and landmarks learnt through traversing the land. The Banni course seeks to counter the “cognitive enclosure” (Habeck, 2013) that accompanies such appropriation by renewing the relationship between the pastoral youth and their ecology. In this context where pastoralism is being squeezed out, the Banni course serves as a space and practice of resistance where alternative imaginaries can be built. The course’s focus on the socio-ecological connections and communal values that pastoralists derive from their lives and livelihoods counters the state’s negative perception and discourse. It confronts the conflict between two contrasting philosophies: the market and capital on the one hand, and the culture of commons on the other. It builds on indigenous ethics and understandings and connects them to contemporary western science as a basis through which the pastoral youth can develop a counter discourse that views pastoralism more positively. Importantly, the course offers a tool for resistance that is based not on opposition, not a sentiment of “no”, but rather a sentiment of “yes” or agreement - yes to the commons, yes to understanding the environment, yes to sustainable pastoralism.

Conclusion

Embedded within the rapidly shifting context of Kachchh, the Banni course is a unique intervention to counter the appropriation of pastoral territory and ways of being. It serves as a tool for raising awareness, building a shared consciousness, and as an organic form of grassroots resistance. Mobile pastoralism has long been viewed as “outdated, irrational, stagnant, unproductive and ecologically damaging” (Butt 2016: 463) within popular imagination. Broad processes of economic, social, political changes post the 2001 earthquake operationalise this view into policy and programmes, public perception, and the pastoralists’ own understanding of self. The Banni course challenges these negative

² Data found from company websites and popular news articles.



Pastoralism in the Banni grassland. Photo credit: Nipun Prabhakar, personal collection.

perceptions, privileging the intuitive and collective wisdom of pastoralists over the technocratic solutions proposed by the state through its various sessions and discussions.

The course achieves two objectives as shown in section 2 and 3 respectively: firstly, the course attempts to secure the long-term sustainability of the grassland by developing the technical know-how of youth as well as generating enthusiasm for pastoralism. Secondly, it contributes to the ongoing resistance against state induced corporate capture of the grassland both practically and ideologically – practically, by providing information and tools through which to sustain the contestation, such as an understanding of the Forest Rights Act, 2006³ and claim-making within it, and ideologically by reimagining the role and value of pastoralism in the region.

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Photos provided by Nipun Prabhakar, an independent photographer and architect working at the intersection of built environments and people, artifacts, and folklore. Since 2016 he has been working on documenting the nomadic pastoralist communities in India. nipun.spab@gmail.com.

³ The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.

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