

Where blackbuck are dearer than sons

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Farmers take delight in herds of beige-coloured blackbuck eating through their hard work. | Photo Credit: Lingaraj Panda

Residents of 70 villages in this district sustain more than 3,000 of the antelopes

The logic is irrefutable, but no one has tested it. Farmers in southern Odisha say when herbivores crop the tops of their crops, profits increase. The cultivated plants grow in dense tufts that seed, and therefore yields go up. This is one reason why they delight in herds of beige-coloured blackbuck does eating through their hard work.

The Bishnois of Rajasthan and Punjab are celebrated for their protection of antelopes. Across India, other communities too sustain blackbucks at their own cost. Residents of about 70 villages in Ganjam district, southern Odisha, live with more than 3,000 of them.

Blackbucks are not woodland creatures. They thrive in open savannah, and agricultural fields are after all man-made grasslands. At one time, they were prized targets of royal and colonial hunts throughout the Indian subcontinent. The Mughals unleashed tame cheetahs on them, both predator and prey among the fleetest land mammals on the planet.

Hunting depleted blackbuck numbers, and industrialisation and agriculture shrank its pan-Indian range. Today, blackbucks live in small pockets scattered around the country, such as Ranabennur Blackbuck Sanctuary in Karnataka. They enjoy maximum protection by law. But in Ganjam, these animals live in villages instead of well-guarded sanctuaries.

Eats shoots and leaves

In 2010, the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) published a monograph on these blackbucks. About 60% of the landscape is under cultivation, and residents feel the wild animals live on their land year-round.

But the ZSI reports these animals subsist on village pastures called

gowchar

that they share with livestock. In summer, wild grasses shrivel up, and there's nothing else for the wild ungulates to eat. This is the season when herds of does nibble on the new shoots of cereals and pulses, while the bucks descend on the fields in winter.

In such a situation, any farmer would fence his fields to keep the herbivores out. But not these peasants who think their crops belong to the blackbucks too. Lack of irrigation and the added burden of the animals eating their crops, albeit seasonally, was too much for some farmers. Even then, they didn't feel compelled to barricade their fields. Instead, they gave up farming altogether.

For instance, about 25% of the fields in Bhetanai, about 50 kilometres from Berhampur, lie barren. The farmers could afford to because it wasn't their primary source of income or family members working in distant cities sent money home. It's hard to gauge how severe crop damage is. Nearly 90% of the interviewees say they lost crops to blackbucks, but most feel it isn't worth complaining. Many like the animals so much they don't mind the loss. More than 70% say they don't want compensation, but they want the government to build an irrigation project.

The reason for entire communities turning into blackbuck benefactors may have something to do with how the animals arrived here more than a century ago. A herd of these ungulates wandered into Bhetanai during a drought, and rains followed in their steps. Villagers nurtured the animals as good weather mascots at a time when hunting was the norm. In 1918, Madeshi Chandramani Dora, a resident of Bhetanai, placed an ad in a newspaper called Prajyamitra, report Bikash Rath and Y. Giri Rao of Vasundhara, an Odisha NGO. Dora announced that the area was off-limits for hunting as the villagers valued the animals "dearer than sons".

Residents nursed injured ungulates until they recovered completely. Some even collared them with tinkling bells. In return, the blackbucks grew tame and probably knew they could get away with anything.

Symbol of Krishna

Rath and Rao estimate the blackbuck population at that time to be about a hundred. Since then the antelopes have grown 30-fold. Rising numbers pushed them to colonise other villages, where people protected them. Today, they are a common sight along the 20-kilometre stretch between Bhetanai and Buguda, wandering into settlements and chewing their way through farm produce.

Most villagers venerate the antelopes as symbols of the Hindu god Krishna. Others think the animals increase productivity by grazing on their crops. Some think they are beautiful and enjoy watching them. And the majority feel the species needs protection.

For most of the past century, residents didn't organise in any form to care for the antelopes. If they caught a hunter, justice was swift. They either went soft and levied fines or beat them up. In 1997, 20 villages got together and set up the Ganjam District Blackbuck Protection Committee that won the first Biju Patnaik Award for Wildlife Conservation in 2004-05.

The State government could have acted on the long-standing demand for an irrigation project. After all, the people subsidise a species at no cost to the State. Instead, a few years after the government commended the people for their conservation ethic, it grabbed 12 acres of *gowchar* land in Bhetanai to set up a power plant. Amulya Upadhaya, president of the blackbuck committee, says he met the district administration officers in 2015 and made a representation that this would reduce the grazing grounds of blackbucks and livestock. But the State overruled the objections and constructed the power plant.

Upadhaya says if the loss of grazing grounds leads blackbucks to rely on crops more, farmers may not be able to sustain them. And he fears for the future of the animals in these villages.

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