

Eco-friendly goat husbandry for sustainable livelihood of small farmers

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Goats are increasingly seen as a threat to the ecology as they feed on any type of plant species. But goat keeping continues to be an important livelihood activity for the resource poor people. BAIF has promoted a number of initiatives with twin goals of helping small farmers in rearing goats and also protecting the environment.



Photo: KRAPAVIS

Goat keeping is an important activity for the people in Burdwan and Bankura districts in West Bengal. Most of the goat keepers are landless or own small pieces of land, living in poverty. Some of the villages are surrounded by forests which provide adequate fodder to the livestock. However lack of awareness among goat keepers on aspects like breeding, health, marketing etc., has resulted in high rate of mortality. Goat keepers have been struggling hard to maintain a decent living with goat rearing.

The initiative

BAIF, a development organisation, studied the existing goat rearing practices across the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Karnataka and West Bengal to understand and improve the existing situation. Based on the study, it initiated the sustainable goat rearing programme, focussing on breed improvement, feeding, health care and marketing. Over 135 villages covering 10,000 goat keeping families from Raina II and Kanksha blocks of Burdwan district and Ranibandh and Raipur blocks of Bankura district were covered.

The project was implemented jointly by local voluntary organisations namely the Deepan Yuba Goshti in Burdwan and Socio-Economic Development Programme in Bankura, BAIF and the Animal Resources Development Department (ARD). The ARD provided the technical support for selection of breeding bucks, training of field functionaries to be engaged in the project, critical health care services such as vaccination against important diseases and veterinary services wherever needed. The local NGOs were responsible for implementing the project.

Field Guides, experienced in goat husbandry, were identified to motivate goat keepers to adopt best practices which can enhance the growth and health conditions. Field guides were selected from the same village so that in the long run they could promote various development activities as well. Each Field Guide was responsible for 1-2 villages depending on the number of goat keepers. They were trained on a number of aspects like breeding, feeds, health and marketing. Training of Field Guides every month was a strong aspect of the project.

Organising goat keepers' groups

Goat keepers were organized into groups consisting of 5-7 members. SHG women who had prior experience in goat rearing were selected. Also those living close by were preferred to facilitate regular interaction. Each goat group has a leader known as Mukhia. The members were trained on best goat husbandry practices such as feeding of goats, forage production, feeding of mineral mixtures and concentrates, housing and health care. Each goat keeper is responsible for taking care of her/his herd.

Group meetings are held every month. During these meetings, members discuss on goat maintenance, health care, castrations carried out, causes of mortality, number of goats sold, realisation of price, etc. The members were encouraged to adopt improved rearing practices. They organised micro-credit, input procurement, sharing of technical knowledge and collective marketing to increase their earning.

Demonstrations on feeding and fodder production

Field demonstrations on feeding of concentrates, mineral mixtures and green fodder were organised by providing critical inputs and technical advice to selected goat keepers. Field guides regularly advised them to provide supplementary feeding, using locally available feeds. Goat keepers were encouraged to weigh the goats maintained under these trials to record the benefits of various feeding practices.

Improving breeds

The goat rearers had little knowledge about goat breeds and good practices to improve their productivity. Black Bengal, a breed well known for its superior quality meat and skin, originated in West Bengal is found in Bankura, Murshidabad, Purulia and Burdwan districts. There has been indiscriminate natural breeding owing to prevalence of different strains of Black Bengal breed. Each group was provided elite bucks for providing breeding service to does owned by the members. These bucks have typical Black Bengal breed characters, selected on the basis of their superior genetic characters.

Maintaining health

The goat keepers were not aware of vaccinations and deworming. As a result, many families lost goats and had given up goat rearing. Deworming medicine which cost less than Re. 1 per dose, was procured by the project and supplied to the Field Guides for treating the goats. With the introduction of vaccination and deworming, the mortality rate decreased steeply to below 5%. Village wise camps are regularly organised with the help of the Prani Bandhus as well as the local ARD Department staff.

Goat rallies are organised regularly in lean farming season with the objective of sharing the outstanding goat keepers' experiences and to demonstrate the best animals produced locally by the participants. It also provides a platform to get higher price for

Economics of goat keeping

Average goat keepers have 6-8 herd size with a composition of 3 does, 2 male kids and 2 female kids. With this stock, the goat keeping family will have 9 new born kids per annum. With good health status, there will be 8 surviving which will be available for sale (4 F + 4 M), which fetch about Rs. 6800 - 7000 per year. Male kids of 10-12 months will fetch Rs. 1200 to Rs. 1500 while the females fetch Rs. 1000 to Rs. 1200. Deducting the expenses on service charges, deworming, vaccination and treatment at the rate of Rs 200, the net annual income will be Rs. 7000 to Rs. 8000 per family, giving a boost to the income by over 100%. The factors contributing to increased income are increase in weight of new born kids, number of kids, improved growth rate, reduced mortality and higher price realisation due to better marketing negotiations. The goat keepers in general, do not spend anything on the feed and fodder inputs, mainly due to small herd size and availability of plenty of green fodder on common lands as well as private lands.

superior quality goats. Farmers from non-project villages also attend the goat rallies.

Marketing

Most of the goat keepers sell their goats to local traders or middlemen in their village whenever they are in need of cash. In the absence of weighing practice and awareness about the price for goat meat, the goat keepers are being heavily exploited by the traders.

The goat keepers were exposed to market information on price of live goats and goat meat in local and larger markets in the nearby towns. Further, to enable them to assess the value of their goats, a spring balance was provided at each village for weighing of the goat by the participants. The Field Guides visit each household and weigh the goats periodically and estimate the price.

The sale of goats is usually well planned in advance by the villagers. The bucks are insured against death. During cultivation season whenever there is shortfall of money, castrated goats are sold for purchasing agri-inputs. During festivals, there is a huge demand for the Black Bengal goats. Price varies on the basis of skin texture and colour. The price may go upto 120 - 125 per kg live weight. Breeding buck fetches around Rs. 2000 - 3000 and sometimes, even more.

To prevent distress sale of goats, micro-credit is being arranged through SHGs. Generally, selling of goats either directly to a butcher or in a large urban market will fetch higher price. However, most of the women goat keepers find it difficult to organise such selling directly. They are also often reluctant to entrust this work to their husbands because of fear of not getting the entire sale proceeds. The goat keepers are therefore encouraged to organise collective sale in large markets.

Conclusion

Goat keeping is particularly important for resource poor people to improve their livelihood conditions. Both rural men and women can effectively manage this activity. Their contribution in enriching the grazing lands through manure is grossly neglected. Improved productivity will motivate the goat keepers to reduce their herd size and ease the biotic pressure on the ecosystem, which has direct impact on ecological restoration. Close interaction among SHG members will help them to build their capabilities and initiate other socio-economic development activities.

Goat development should be given priority, primarily to assist the small farmers and poor families who are dependent on goat husbandry for their livelihood. Simultaneously, utmost care should be taken to avoid its ill-effects on the bio-diversity and the environment.

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