COVID-19: Lockdown and the Impact on Camels and Their Herders

Vikramjit Singh¹*, Poonam Choudhary², Arun Kumar Jhirwal¹

¹Department of Livestock Production and Management, College of Veterinary and Animal Science, University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Bikaner-334001, Rajasthan, India.
²Department of Veterinary Parasitology, College of Veterinary and Animal Science, Rajasthan University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Bikaner-334001, Rajasthan, India.

Abstract

In these difficult times, Camels and their herders in the state are finding it difficult to survive during lockdown without any source of income. Only prompt action can ensure the concerns of the ‘ship of the desert’ are addressed. This pandemic has forced many of them to free their camels to fend for themselves as they cannot afford to care for them. They are not being allowed to graze them and not able to offer proper feed as the income sources are chocked. Due to a lack of transportation facilities, camel milk was not sold out. According to the livestock census report 2019, the camel population in the state has reached its lowest point in seven decades. As the economic viability of the camel has decreased, their numbers have gone down. Lockdown has severely affected the livelihood of herders. For the last sixth month’s camel died due to skin diseases; during the lockdown, vaccination put on hold. Camel herders face several problems due to the nationwide lockdown to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19): They are unable to get proper veterinary care, medication, forage, and water for their animals.

Key words: COVID-19, Pandemic, Camel, Coronavirus, Livestock Census.

Introduction

Mankind is facing an unrivalled pandemic of the Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). In the 21st century alone, the corona virus outbreak has emerged thrice - as COVID-19, MERS, SARS-CoV - from animal reservoirs to cause global concerns. Coronavirus chiefly circulates among animals primarily pigs, camels, bats, and cats. (Garg 2020).

The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) has maintained that though the novel coronavirus emerged from an animal source the predominant route of transmission of COVID-19 is from human to
human. It held that now that the coronavirus infections are widely distributed in the human population there is a possibility for some animals to become infected through close contact with infected humans. The camel is Rajasthan’s state animal and was once an integral part of the state economy. It is also reared in Gujarat, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. However, Rajasthan has the highest population of camels – 2.13 lakh in 2019, followed by Gujarat at 28,000 and Haryana at 5,000. Of the total camel population, 1.7 lakh are females while 80,000 are males, as per the 2019 Livestock Census (Table 1 & Fig. 1).

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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>-35.25</td>
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Table.1. Camel Population in 2012 & 2019 of major States

Poor last-mile care connectivity threatens their well-being as well. The population level of the desert animal witnessed a sharp decline of 37.1 percent, compared to the previous census in 2012, according to the 20th Livestock Census in 2019.
The desert state is home to 213,000 camels or, 86 percent of the countrywide camel population. Their population is concentrated primarily in Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Jodhpur districts (https://www.downtoearth.org, 67762). Efforts to address declining numbers by the state government remain inconsistent as well, despite the camel being declared the official state animal in 2014 (https://www.downtoearth.org.in 67648).

How can affect the pastoralist community
The pastoralist community has been forced to suspend travel till the lockdown is phased out, causing an extreme fodder crisis in several villages. Those who had to begin to migrate to other states with their herds are now stuck and exposed to a precarious environment where food and water are scarce. Thousands of pastoralist families from western Rajasthan, who begin their journey to Haryana and Punjab during the summer, were severely impacted by the nationwide lockdown, put in place to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Pastoralists belong to some of the most marginalised communities, with several families lacking the finances to purchase fodder from open markets. As the summer peaks, the lockdown will result in pastoralists missing opportunities to use green grass as fodder, before the kharif season, on their pastoral routes.

Milk producers, especially pastoralists, have been facing difficulties because of transport restrictions during the Covid-19 lockdown in selling milk to dairies, other bulk buyers, and to individual consumers. This is because there can be problems in preserving products made from unsold milk. Amul has been procuring not only cow but also camel milk from pastoral communities in Gujarat. Incidentally, since many of these pastoral communities belong to a particular faith, they have been facing social stigma and are not able to sell milk in local markets. These communities are also finding it difficult to dispose of their cattle and other animals as the markets for these animals are closed. All this has affected their earnings in a big way. The market access for their products needs to be urgently facilitated so that they continue to earn some income to carry on with their daily lives during the lockdown (Singh 2020).

In lock-down, milk sales have stopped and these families lack the cash to buy essential items for survival. With the help of KUUMS, Sahjeevan managed to trace all the families and provided a kit with month-long supplies with supplies of food, spices and other supplies. Since pastoralists are always on the move and may not have a ration card, they do not get any relief from the government (https://steps-centre.org/).

Camel herders facing problems
Camel herders face problems in getting care for their animals because of the nationwide lockdown to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Camel Mange/ Sarcoptic mange, an extremely contagious skin disease in camels, has rapidly spread across many districts in Rajasthan. Many camels have succumbed to the disease. Owing to the nationwide lockdown, treatment could not be provided to these camels suffering from the infection. (Divendra Singh, 2020). Due to the restricted movement of locals and veterinary department officials, it has become difficult to procure vaccinations and tend to the diseased animals.

The severity and number of mange cases decrease during the summer. With the current lockdown, however, the timely procurement of vaccinations and treatment remains a significant challenge to
counter this disease. Camel herders across the district have complained about the poor availability of vaccinations in the market and the inability of the government to provide them.

This year, since herders could not move across districts, they suffered a loss of income in these trying times. The situation is not much different in the western provinces of Gujarat and Rajasthan, where pastoral communities maintain large herds of camels and sheep. We are unable to freely move with our herds for grazing since villagers are afraid that we are carriers of coronavirus, said Sumer Singh Bhati, who owns about 200 camels that feed in dry and desert areas of Rajasthan. We were sometimes even prevented from going to the village shops to buy food rations. This coronavirus scare has broken the back of camel herders. (https://www.kcet.org/coronavirus-worldwide/pandemic-lockdown-lands-new-blow-on-indias-struggling-pastoralists)

Soon after the lockdown announcement on March 24, most activities came to a standstill in Kachchh. Camel herders have since faced particularly tough challenges because they live and graze their animals in places quite far away from their homes. Also, the areas they live in are very close to, or on, the border – and therefore marked as highly sensitive zones, governed by ultra-strict security protocols. The sudden lockdown did not give many of the maldharis much time to either return to their villages or arrange sufficient food supplies for their families residing there. (https://ruralindiaonline.org/articles/kachchh-camel-herders-lockdown-last-straw/)

The first case of Covid-19 in Kutch was recorded in Lakhpat taluka, not far from where we are planning our research. Around 30 families with about 500 Kharai camels use the tropical thorn forests and mangroves in these areas to graze their animals. After the lockdown, these families have been struggling to graze their camels. Since the lockdown was declared so quickly, many were unable to return to their villages, or arrange sufficient food supplies for their families who live there.

The Raika of Rajasthan, traditional camel herders, also shares a unique bond with their animals – the camel that is milked is also allowed to feed her calf. The Raika share a close, familial bond with their animals. Milking a camel could be a risky affair; to the Raika, however, the camels offer their milk without protest. (https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/health/the-unique-composition-of-camel-milk-a-food-with-medicinal-properties)

Semi-nomadic groups of the northern plains who tend to move into the hills or cooler areas on the onset of summer months, as well as camel and goat-herders of Kutch and Marwar region have similarly been stranded as their movement has been restricted. Many such nomads were already en-route to various destinations when the lock-down was enforced in the wee hours of 25 March. The complete lock-down has meant that many such semi-nomadic cattle herders are being robbed of their subsistence as the denial of access to grazing as well substitute fodder shall take a huge toll on their cattle (Kabir 2020).

**Actions must be Implemented during this Censorious Period of COVID-19**

This is in addition to all misinformation regarding COVID-19 and its spread in animals. In such a scenario, veterinary preparedness assumes huge importance. Despite veterinary services being included in the list of essential services, such facilities were shut in several areas during the initial period of the lockdown. The worst thing is that there are no safety gears for veterinarians dealing with localized zoonotic epidemics. The response of the state governments has been sluggish in giving care. Officials
were ordered not to conduct animal health camps in the state, according to a circular released by the state government’s animal husbandry department. The government needs to consider alternate measures, including organising mobile veterinary camps to urgently treat diseased camels. This will ensure the safety of state officials and locals is not compromised, while camels receive treatment.

Therefore it is needful to take immediate effective action to enforce this problem and made available required veterinary care and extra alternatives to improve the status of camels and their herders, so that plays a key role to maintain and increase this species.

**Conclusion**

It is of utmost need to take urgent steps or several control measures by the governing bodies to cover all the hurdles that happen during and after lockdown with the camels and their herders and many pastoralists communities that facing severe difficulties due to this emergency period. In addition to these, some advanced action must be needed to take to improve the present condition of camels by encouraging the herders and made available more opportunities to camel owners for selling camel by-products. In addition to this, there are required more veterinary care and attention against this threaten spp.

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