



NARRATIVE REPORT: BIOCULTURAL FESTIVAL 2026

Gojri Buffalo: A Shared Heritage of the Himalayas; Gujjaran-Go-Kaarj

ABSTRACT

Kalpavriksh, in collaboration with the Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan and partners, organised Gujjaran-Go-Kaarj, a three-day biocultural festival in Rishikesh (February 2026) to celebrate the Gojri Buffalo: A Shared Heritage of the Himalayas. Marking the UN International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists and the International Month of Buffalo, the festival honoured Van Gujjar pastoral traditions and created a platform for dialogue among pastoralists, policymakers, NGOs, and conservationists.

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Attended by the C&L team:
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Introduction

The United Nations has declared 2026 as the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP). Each month carries a theme dedicated to pastoral life; February's theme is *Mobility, Land and Water Security*, which coincides with the International Month of the Buffalo. Against this backdrop, nearly 1,000 participants gathered over three days to celebrate the Biocultural Festival with the Van Gujjar community.

One of the main objectives of the three-day-long festival was to honour the traditions, culture, and the unique relationship between the Van Gujjars, the forest, and the Gojri buffalo. The buffalo, the forest, and the community live in coexistence in a relationship that is ecological, cultural, and deeply interdependent. This narrative of coexistence must be recognised and shared more widely, so that policymakers, researchers, and the public understand and learn from the community's culture. Giving visibility to this way of life is essential for ensuring pastoralists are seen not as marginal, but as central actors in conservation and sustainability.

Day One- 11th February, 2026

The festival opened with warmth and anticipation, drawing around 200 participants from across Uttarakhand and neighbouring regions. Folk singers performed *Bainth*, and stalls displayed pastoral life and buffalo heritage.



1. Women of the Van Gujjar community presenting their SHG initiatives.

The inauguration began with the Chief Guest, Dr Udai Shankar, Director of the Animal Husbandry Department, formally opening the exhibition by untying a coconut rope, as the sound of bainth echoed in the background, a gesture rooted in natural symbolism and

community practice. This was followed by the ceremonial churning of the *maithani*- the traditional butter churner. For the Van Gujjars, this ritual is performed at every auspicious occasion, as buffaloes and their produce are the very foundation of livelihood and life. By joining in the churning, the Chief Guest honoured pastoral heritage and acknowledged that the community's culture and economy are inseparable from the buffalo. Community resolutions were presented to him, affirming Van Gujjar's demands for recognition and support.



2. Dr Udai Shankar inaugurated the exhibition by untying the rope.



3. Chief Guest Dr Udai Shankar churning the mathani before taking his seat on stage.

The Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan team coordinated the festival with dedication, Md. Shamshad and Ameer Hamja anchored and facilitated the sessions.

Speakers shared heartfelt reflections on the community's role in conservation. Sohan ji from the Education Department reminded everyone of the Van Gujjars' unmatched care for forests:

“Paid aur jungle ki jitni chinta Van Gujjars ko hai utni kisi ko nahi... jo prakriti aur mitti ke saath khel kar ke padhte hain, unse behtar koi paryavaran ki raksha nahi kar sakta.”

He also spoke of the injustice of the community not yet being recognised as a Scheduled Tribe in Uttarakhand, calling it a struggle that must continue and must be carried forward with determination.

Neema Pathak Broome from Kalpavriksh spoke about the UN-declared International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP), sharing how pastoralist communities across different countries are organising diverse activities to highlight their traditions and ecological role. She reminded participants that February has been dedicated to the buffalo, and that communities dependent on buffalo are working to give visibility to their culture, livelihoods, and relationship with these animals.



4. Neema Pathak Broome is sharing insights on the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists.

Neema emphasised that this recognition must also translate into policy. She suggested that, through the presence of the Chief Guest, the Director of Animal Husbandry, there is an opportunity to advocate for a state-level pastoral policy in Uttarakhand. Such a policy could address the dangers faced by pastoralists, the challenges of migration with livestock, the lack

of recognition of their rights, and the erosion of their cultural practices. By acknowledging these realities, she argued, the state can safeguard pastoral livelihoods and ensure that their knowledge and traditions continue to thrive.

Dr Udai Shankar spoke with deep affection about his long association with the Van Gujjar community, recalling memories from more than three decades ago. He described how, soon after completing his medical studies, community youth would visit him at the hospital, accompanied by herds of buffaloes, often camping nearby (*padav lagate the*). They would ask him for Berenil, a veterinary medicine, and he would initially remind them that he was not running a shop but a hospital. Yet when they explained it was for their livestock, he would provide the medicine, charging only a token amount, one rupee for several buffaloes, at a time when the levy was ten paise per animal. He remembered mixing the yellow powder into a solution to prepare doses, and as he recounted this, elders in the audience added that the older form was far more effective than the syrup available today: *“Sir, par jo maza usme tha wo isme nahi hai, jab ek pashu pe wo lag gayi to teen saal tak use lagane ki zarurat nahi padti thi.”*

Reflecting on these memories, Dr Shankar said he felt an emotional bond with the community. He praised their unmatched knowledge of nature:

“Aapse zyada in janwaro ko prakritik roop se palna aur koi nahi janta... aap pahadon ki bhasha ko samajhte hain, prakriti ke saath-saath chalte hain, aur is gyaan ki aap chalti-firti university hain.”

He added that while the world now speaks of sustainable living and organic practices, the Van Gujjars have embodied these principles for generations.

He fondly recalled the generosity of the community, who would gift him butter and buttermilk in such abundance that it lasted his family for six months: *“Kam dena to aapne seekha hi nahi tha, aap log katori mein nahi, bade-bade bartano mein makhan diya karte the.”* Meeting the community again after many years, he said, felt like returning to family.

Dr Shankar expressed admiration for the exhibition, especially the women’s stall, noting that even a goldsmith would be inspired by the intricacy of their jewellery. He congratulated the community on the recognition of the Gojri buffalo as an indigenous breed and assured them of support in increasing its population, highlighting its adaptability and high-quality milk. He referenced Himachal Pradesh’s *PEHEL* program and promised that, following the Biocultural Festival, Uttarakhand would also work to address pastoralist concerns. He was particularly impressed by the inauguration with the coconut rope and requested the VGTYS team to share it with him so he could showcase it elsewhere, urging them, *“Please never modernise it. Many people want to learn from you and understand the way you live.”*



5. Community leaders handing over a demand letter to the Chief Guest, highlighting pastoralist concerns.

After this, there was a soulful *bainth* performance by Md. Rafik, followed by a short act by community children on the importance of education, which drew warm appreciation from the audience.



6. Students from the community school performing a skit highlighting the value of education.

Lunch was served traditionally, with food presented in thalis that carried the flavour of pastoral life, *ghee bhura rice* as a sweet dish, followed by *dal-chawal*. The meal was kept

simple and authentic so that participants could experience the community's traditions firsthand.



7. Lunch is being served traditionally.

In the session on the role of women in forest management and pastoral life, the panel featured Nagma and Misra Bano from the Van Gujjar community, Bhawana from the Maldhari community in Gujarat, and Tanvi Bhati from the Central University of Haryana. Nagma and Misra Bano spoke about initiatives started by community women, including the creation of kitchen gardens after medical reports revealed widespread anaemia among women. They also highlighted how, within a year, the number of women teachers in the community school had increased, strengthening education for girls.



8. Women panellists on pastoralist women's ties to the forest and community.

Bhawana shared the challenges faced by Maldhari women in Gujarat. She explained how earlier women earned directly from selling milk, but after the Amul cooperative introduced bank accounts, the money began to flow through men, shifting decision-making power away from women. She described how this change, combined with cultural practices where men eat first, children second, and women last, has led to malnutrition. She also pointed out that as land and cattle are increasingly sold, women are losing their traditional skills in animal rearing and being pushed into labour work.

Vivekanandan ji from SEVA (Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Voluntary Action) then spoke about the struggles of pastoralists in Tamil Nadu, particularly around grazing rights, and shared how they have developed traditional and herbal recipes for animal care.

Later, in the history panel, Ameer Hamja, Mustafa Chechi, Sushil Bhatti (History Professor), and Nipendra Chaudhary (BJP Adhyaksh) traced Van Gujjar journeys across forests and generations, highlighting resilience, migration, and cultural continuity. The day closed with *bainth* songs, carrying forward the spirit of belonging and pride.



9. Discussion by the panellists on the history of the Van Gujjar community.

Day two- 12th February, 2026

Day two brought together around 350 participants, beginning with joy and rhythm. Vivekanandan ji from SEVA, Tamil Nadu, led an IYRP song and dance, joined by participants.



10. Celebration through dance on the IYRP theme song.

As is customary in Van Gujjar gatherings, *bainth* was performed, followed by a panel discussion on the coexistence of the community and the Gojri buffalo with the forest and wildlife. Panellists included Shadu Shamshad, Afreen, and Ameer Hamja from the community, alongside Ravi Chellam from the Coexistence Consortium.



11. Traditional *Bainth* songs presented by community singers.

Ravi reminded the audience that tigers have always existed outside reserve forests and urged reframing ecological questions: *“We shouldn’t ask the impact of grazing in grasslands, but rather what is the benefit of grazing. The foundation for all research should be community knowledge systems.”* He cited global studies showing that empowering forest-dwelling communities is the most effective way to conserve biodiversity.

Community voices enriched the discussion. Shadu Shamshad explained:

“Gojri bhains hamesha se first mein rahi hai... jab paani ke liye bhains raste banati hai to wildlife bhi us raaste ko follow karte hain or suta (pond made by the community) se paani peete hain.”

Hamja added that buffaloes, when they walk in the Shivaliks, create pathways for other species. He also shared cultural perspectives: *“Sher Al insaan ki aulaad hai... agar ek saal mein bhains ko sher ne kha diya to wo shubh hai.”*

On climate change, Hamja recalled elders’ observations: ten years ago, after winter migration, Gojri buffaloes ate *Mallotus philippensis* in March, but now they eat it in September. He explained: *“Climate change has impacted everyone, but it has impacted the pastoral community the most, because the Gojri buffalo has changed its food habits.”* He described how breeding patterns have shifted from summer to winter, reducing milk sales and affecting the Van Gujjars’ economy. He added that while the community continues to live in huts of wood and grass, *“it’s the city people who live in concrete houses and use ACs that have induced climate change.”*



12. Panel discussion on co-existence

Shadu Shamsad spoke of migration challenges: earlier, every *padav* (halt) had abundant grass, but now fodder often had to be purchased. Even in alpine areas, heavy rains sometimes prevent grazing, forcing buffaloes down to lower pastures and requiring lopping when grass is scarce.

Hamja reflected on coexistence:

“Jungle ke andar rehne wale logo ko to wildlife apna parivar manta hai.”

He noted that while human-wildlife conflict is rising in Uttarakhand, incidents with pastoralists remain rare, because they live inside the forest. He stressed that policy-makers are not forest dwellers, and without consulting pastoral and forest communities, conservation policies remain incomplete. He recalled asking an elder why their homes had no closed doors or windows, and the elder replied that sunlight enters freely and leopards never enter their *deras*:

“Kisi bhi dere ke andar darwaje nahi hain aur koi bhi khidki band nahi hai, sab open hai, aur ye rishte hain wildlife ke sath.”

Afreen highlighted the need for awareness, noting that many Van Gujjars are unaware of their legal rights and sometimes dismantle their huts when asked by forest officials. She expressed pride in women’s participation at the festival, urging more motivation so women can balance pastoral and public roles. She also noted that buffalo dung itself supports plant growth as a natural fertiliser.

Ravi Chellam challenged the notion of “pristine forests”:

“The moment humans arrived on earth; the pristineness is gone... climate change is operating under every square cm of this earth. The local people are not the cause for climate change; it’s the people living in big cities who point fingers at them.” He asked: “Who came first, protected areas or Van Gujjars? How does a conservationist get the right to say evict the Van Gujjars? What if we go to his home and tell him to leave?”

He emphasised that humans are part of biodiversity, and forest dwellers know how to live lightly with nature, unlike city dwellers with heavy carbon footprints.

After another *bainth* performance, the Chief Guest, Nazish Kaleem, Hon'ble Civil Judge and Secretary of the District Legal Services Authority, Pauri Garhwal, arrived for the panel on the Forest Rights Act (FRA). Panellists included Md. Safi, Md. Shamshad, Md. Rafik from the community, Tarun Joshi (advocate), and Neema Pathak Broome from Kalpavriksh.



13. Nazish Kaleem and panellists discussing the Forest Rights Act (FRA)

Neema highlighted global research showing that while forest-dwelling and pastoralist communities live on 20% of the world's land, these areas hold 80% of global biodiversity. She stressed that this demonstrates the importance of protecting community rights.

Md. Safi recounted the community's struggles against eviction notices, recalling incidents in Kumaon and Ramnagar where deras, handpumps, and fodder godowns were destroyed, and how they fought back through the courts with the help of advocates. He described the 2025 Supreme Court stay protecting Van Gujjar homes and the subsequent double bench order under the FRA allowing them to continue agriculture until claims are processed.

He also recited shayari on struggle and resilience:

“Apni baat tum kisi ke samne jataya na karo, apni dil ki baat tum kisi ko bataya na karo, ye duniya wale mutthi me namak leke ghumte hain, Md. Safi apne jakham tum kisi ko dikhaya na karo.”

*“Hamesha sangharsh karna padega, apne adhikaro ke liye hamein
aajeevan ladna padega, dil dulke hamara idhar ya udhar, apne dil ko
pinjade me jakdna padega”*

*“Sangharsh karna, sankat ka jeevan bitana padta hai, laga kar kaanto ka
Takiya fir sar ko uspe tikana padta hai, har ang chahiye hamein lohe ka aur
dil ko patthar banana padta hai.”*

Nazish Kaleem assured the community of support, noting that para-legal volunteers from within the Van Gujjars, Aftab and Md. Shamshad is working to raise issues with departments and spread awareness about government schemes. She encouraged the community to share their problems with these volunteers so they can mediate solutions.

After a traditional lunch, community members performed an act on folklore, traditional knowledge, and governance systems, closing the day with cultural pride.



14. Community members performing folklore on governance and way of life.

Day 3- Pashu Mela: Celebrating Gojri Heritage

The final day of the festival unfolded at Meena Bazaar, Kunau Chaur, Gohri Range, Pauri Garhwal, where the much-awaited Pashu Mela brought together 9-10 herds of Gojri buffalo, nearly 450-500 animals in total. The atmosphere was vibrant, filled with the sounds of pastoral life.



15. Herd of Gojri buffalo at the Pashu Mela

The mela was attended by Hon'ble State Minister for Animal Welfare, Surender Singh Moga, whose presence signalled recognition of the Van Gujjars' contribution to Uttarakhand's pastoral economy. Pastoral representatives had travelled from Jammu & Kashmir, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Himachal Pradesh, joining Van Gujjar elders and national conservation leaders in a collective celebration of heritage.

Competitions showcased the strength, health, and milk-yielding capacity of the Gojri buffalo, with winners emerging from the Gohri Range of Pauri Garhwal. The Minister praised the Van Gujjars for their role in sustaining the state's milk economy and announced the official registration of the Gojri buffalo as an indigenous breed. He also highlighted supportive schemes, including the Kisan Credit Card for livestock keepers.

Community leaders Mohammad Rafik and Ameer Hamja expressed gratitude while voicing key demands: insurance schemes for migratory buffalo keepers, facilitation of Kisan Credit Cards for Van Gujjars, recognition of ethno-veterinary knowledge, and the formulation of an Uttarakhand State Pastoral Policy, modelled on initiatives such as Himachal Pradesh's PEHEL project and Karnataka's shepherd law.



16. State Minister of Animal Welfare with community members at the mela

Adding to the spirit of support, Chaman Lal University assured that if a Van Gujjar woman wished to pursue a BA degree, the university would provide funding.

The mela closed with collective affirmations of pastoral resilience, echoing calls for policy support to secure grazing rights, social security, and the pastoral milk economy. It was not just an animal fair, but a powerful reminder that the Gojri buffalo and the Van Gujjar way of life remain central to the ecological and cultural fabric of Uttarakhand.

Reflections: Outcomes of the Festival

The Biocultural Festival became a platform for dialogue between pastoralists, policymakers, academics, and conservationists:

- Van Gujjar women emerged as leaders, not only through their Self-Help Group stalls of honey, ghee, and handicrafts, but also as panellists in key sessions. For some, it was their very first time speaking publicly; nerves were visible at the start, but confidence grew as discussions unfolded. One young woman, radiant after her session, came up smiling and asked softly, “Was I good?” -a live example of how the festival nurtured courage and voice.
- The presence of senior officials and ministers opened space for pastoral policy advocacy. Commitments were made to explore a state-level pastoral policy in Uttarakhand, expand livestock credit schemes, and support buffalo population growth.

- Panels on the Forest Rights Act reinforced community struggles against eviction and highlighted recent legal victories. Para-legal volunteers from within the community were recognised as crucial bridges for awareness and advocacy.
- Pastoral representatives from across India shared experiences, from Maldhari women in Gujarat to Tamil Nadu's SEVA, creating solidarity across regions and strengthening collective demands for grazing rights and recognition.
- Bainth performances, folklore enactments, and the Pashu Mela reaffirmed pastoral identity and pride. These cultural expressions reminded participants that pastoral traditions are not relics but living practices central to sustainability.
- The festival closed with clear community demands: insurance schemes for migratory buffalo keepers, facilitation of Kisan Credit Cards, recognition of ethno-veterinary knowledge, and secure grazing rights.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan and the community members, whose active participation and efforts shaped the festival and its dialogues. Our sincere thanks to ANTRA and other partner organisations for their support. We also extend appreciation to the volunteers and facilitators whose dedication ensured the smooth coordination of sessions, performances, and documentation.

News Gallery



वन गुर्जरों के बच्चों की ओर से बनाए गए मिट्टी के खिलौने। संवाद

ऋषिकेश। गंगा भोगपुर तल्ला स्थित एक रिजॉर्ट में वन गुर्जर ट्राइबल युवा संगठन की ओर से अंतरराष्ट्रीय भैंस दिवस के अवसर पर गोजरी भैंस, हिमालय की साड़ी विरासत थीम पर तीन दिवसीय कार्यक्रम का आयोजन किया गया। कई राज्यों से आए गुर्जर समुदाय के प्रतिनिधियों ने सहभागिता की। पशुपालक निदेशक उदय शंकर ने कहा कि यह उत्सव हिमालयी क्षेत्र की एकमात्र प्रवासी भैंस गोजरी भैंस और वन गुर्जर समुदाय की सांस्कृतिक एवं पारंपरिक विरासत को प्रदर्शित करेगा। महिलाओं की ओर से स्टॉल लगाकर हस्तकला उत्पादों और स्वरोजगार से जुड़ी गतिविधियों को प्रदर्शित किया गया। वहीं बच्चों की ओर से खिलौनों के स्टॉल लगाए गए। संवाद

सरावतीकरण

संगठन से जुड़ी महिलाएं हस्तकला उत्पाद कर रहीं तैयार

आत्मनिर्भर बन रहीं वन गुर्जर महिलाएं

संवाद न्यूज एजेंसी

ऋषिकेश। गंगा भोगपुर तल्ला क्षेत्र में वन गुर्जर ट्राइबल युवा संगठन से जुड़ी महिलाएं स्वरोजगार के माध्यम से आत्मनिर्भर बनने की दिशा में भजबूत कदम बढ़ा रही हैं।

संगठन से जुड़ी लगभग 30 महिलाएं अपनी आजीविका के लिए हस्तकला उत्पाद तैयार कर रही हैं। इनमें मोतियों से बने कान के बुंदे, गले के हार, बाजुबंद, ऊन से बनी टोपियां एवं गर्मी-सर्दी में उपयोग होने वाली दरियां शामिल हैं।

इसके साथ ही गुर्जर बस्ती में पाली जा रही भैंसों के दूध से मट्ठा और शुद्ध देशी घी तैयार कर स्थानीय बाजारों तक पहुंचाया जा रहा है। महिलाएं शहद जैसे उत्पादों की बिक्री भी कर रही हैं। महिलाओं का कहना

है कि वे लंबे समय से जंगलों में रहकर जीवन यापन करती आ रही हैं और अब सरकार की ओर से महिलाओं के लिए चलाई जा रही योजनाओं ने उन्हें नई उम्मीद मिली है। वे चाहती हैं कि गुर्जर महिलाओं को भी सरकारी स्वरोजगार योजनाओं से जोड़ा जाए, ताकि वे अपने परिवार की आजीविका बेहतर ढंग से चला सकें।

संगठन की महिलाएं मिलकर घरों में पाली गई भैंसों से शुद्ध देशी घी तैयार कर बाजारों तक पहुंचा रही हैं। शहद जैसे उत्पादों की बिक्री भी हो रही है।

-आफरीन

महिलाएं जंगलों में रहकर छोटे स्तर पर स्वरोजगार कर रही हैं और घरेलू कामकाज के साथ उन की टोपी, दरियां और हाथ के पखे बनकर बाजारों में भेज रही हैं।

-सलमा खातून

तैयार सामान को बाजार में बेचने के लिए उचित प्लेटफॉर्म की कमी है, जिससे काफी परेशानी होती है। सहायता और स्थायी बाजार उपलब्ध कराने की उम्मीद है।

-जुलेखा

एमओयू पर हस्ताक्षर किए। एसआरएचयू ऑफ मैनेजमेंट स्टडीज के विद्यार्थियों के गातम, डा. ब्राह्मचक्र दुब, डा. रजनाश बस्तर, डा. अपूर्व त्रिवेदी आदि उपस्थित रहे।