

# Denmark of Vidarbha

by Ajinkya Shahane

Wardha, a district at the heart of India just next to Nagpur is popular for its Ashrams - established by Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhawe. It is home to large swathes of grasslands and forests. Estimates say the Arvi plains of the region are home to about 400 hectares of grasslands. These grasslands have sheltered several pastoral communities and animals for centuries.

Did you know that the Gazetteer of 1906 declared the Arvi plains of Wardha as "The Denmark of Vidarbha"? The plains supplied milk to the entire district! Who could have inspired such a comparison?! It would have to have been the Nand Gaolis! The Nand Gaoli is a pastoral community of the region, known to be expert rearers of the Gaolao Cow and the Nagpuri Buffalo. The nutritious grasses of these lands have nurtured the animals, kept them healthy, and the milk flowing. It was literally a river that used to flow each day - 2.5 lakh litres of milk to be precise!

The full bodied milk was an excellent source of white butter which used to be exported to far away lands. Manchester in the United Kingdom was also a proud consumer of this butter! The Nand Gaoli herders used to store the butter in large tanks which used to be brimming with liquid butter. The story goes that often a buffalo calf would tumble into these tanks as they jumped around frivolously.

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Times have changed since! The Pimpal Khuta Bazaar, a favourite of the Nand Gaolis started facing competition from the Arvi Loni Bazaar which drew in crowds. The grasslands too were eventually encroached by people with vested interests while the forest department started restricting access to these lands. The farmers too shifted to cultivating cash crops. The crop residue of the cash crops was not good enough to feed the animals in the dry season.

Some of these Nand Gaolis still persevere and continue to conserve the traditional grazing

lands as well as the native breeds. We hope that someday Arvi will once again rise to its billing as the Denmark of Vidarbha!



*After an IT sector stint, Ajinkya has returned to his farming community and works closely with farmers and pastoral communities of Maharashtra - Currently working with CPC (Center for Peoples collective Nagpur) on Pastoralism and Crop Damage by wild herbivores.*