

Role of Cattle Fairs (*Mela*) in Sustaining Animal Husbandry in India : A Case Study of Sonapur *Mela* in Bihar

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ABSTRACT Animals and birds play an important role in national economy. Keeping in view their importance a study was conducted at Sonapur animal fair in November, 1989 where apparently the largest number as well as variety of animals are sold/purchased every year. The purpose of the study was to make inventories of all the animals (including birds), domestic as well as wild, that had arrived in the *mela* together with number, catchment area, and profile of the buyers and sellers. Altogether 12 different animals - elephant, camel, horse, monkey, cow, bull, buffalo, goat, dog, pig, rabbit, guinea-pig and 7 type of birds - lalmunia, parrot, pigeon, desi maina, titil hen, peacock and duck were brought to the *mela*. Animals/birds purchased from this fair are taken to different parts of Bihar State as well as other States of India.

INTRODUCTION

The economy in rural India is primarily dependent on agriculture and animal husbandry. A wide variety of animals, perhaps richest in the world, cattle, buffalo, camel, sheep, goat, yak, donkey, horse, pig, elephant and birds - fowls, ducks and partridges etc. are domesticated in India. There are several pastoral castes and communities who specialize in keeping certain specific animals/birds. A number of these groups are nomadic, semi-nomadic and sedentary. Besides these specialist groups, almost the entire rural population maintains a few animals for a variety of purposes.

In view of the important role played by animals and birds in national economy, it is of considerable interest to understand various aspects associated with domesticated animals, particularly that of the place where people sell and purchase animals.

A majority of animal transactions in India take place in weekly markets (*hats*) and specialized animal fairs (*melas*). In contrast to *hats*, the *melas* are usually associated with some mythological legends and rituals. There

are thousands of such *melas* organized every year in different parts of the country. Some *melas* are, however, more important than the others.

SONEPUR CATTLE FAIR

In this communication I report results of my study conducted at Sonapur *Mela* where largest number as well as variety of animals are sold - purchased every year. The significance of the *mela* consists in the fact that this is the only *mela* where elephants are sold/purchased in large numbers.

Sonapur is situated at 25° 40' N latitude and 85° 12' E longitude on the western bank of the famous river Gandak (opposite Konahara ghat), close to its affluence with the river Ganges in Saran district of Bihar. There are a number of legends associated with Sonapur, which emphasize the religious importance of the place.

The *mela* is held every year for about two weeks, and begins two days before the *Kartik Purnamasi* (the day of full moon, falling during October-November), on which day, thousands of pilgrims bathe in the holy river Ganges and

make obeissance to the Lords *Hari* and *Har* in the famous *Harihar Nath Temple* situated on the right (western) bank of the river Gandak.

The antiquity of the *mela* is obscure. However, it appears that during the reign of Aurangzeb, the *mela* came into prominence. It appears that traders from even middle east and Afghanistan used to come to this *mela*.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of the study was to make inventories of all the animals (including birds), domestic as well as wild, that had arrived in the *mela* together with numbers, catchment area, profile of the buyers and sellers.

The fieldwork at Sonapur was conducted during 11th to 19th November, 1989. The data were collected by interviewing a large number of buyers and sellers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Geographical Area and Pattern of Distribution of Animals and other Mercandise Shops

The *mela* occupies about 10 km² area. Figure 1 shows the locations of various animals, shops and other relevant features. It is noteworthy that the elephants are kept in two zones, adjacent to the bank of the river Gandak so that their movement to and from the river does not disturb other animals and people. The area is full of mango (*Mangifera indica*), pipal (*Ficus religiosa*) and seesham (*Dalbergia sissoo*), all shady trees. It may be noted that elephants prefer both water as well as shade. The horses are kept in another distinct place with shady trees of mango and bamboo groves. The cows and buffaloes are kept mostly in open large fields; however, for the hybrid breeds like Jersey, Frisian etc. tents are provided.

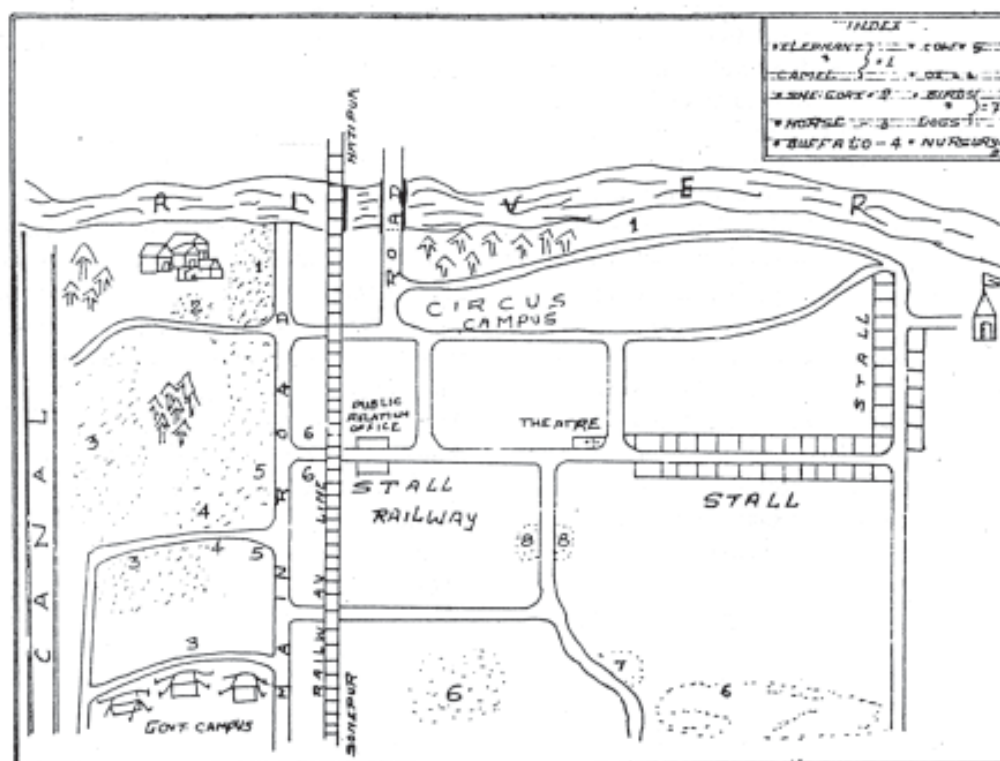


Fig. 1. Internal structure of Sonapur fair (*Mela*)

Diversity of Animals and Birds

Various animals that were brought to the *mela* are: elephant, camel, horse, monkey, cow, bull, buffalo, goat, dog, pig, rabbit, guinea pig, and 7 types of birds - lalmunia or desi munia, parrot (desi, wild or pahari, bajari, hiran), pigeon (gola, girebaj, lakwa), desi maina, tittil hen (or Chinese hen), peacock and duck were brought. However, detailed information could only be obtained for the following animals:

Elephants: 102 elephants came to the *mela*; 55 from 11 districts of Bihar and 47 from 9 districts of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.). It is noteworthy that the bulk came from Siwan district (14) in Bihar and Deoria district (25) in U.P.

In 1988 fair a total of 178 elephants came from various parts of India (106 from Bihar, 66 from U.P., 1 each from Madhya Pradesh and Orissa and 4 from Nepal). There is a marked decline in the number of elephants since 1982 when Kheda operation, i.e., catching of wild elephants were banned under Wild Life Protection Act.

Camels: Only 3 camels arrived, one each from Patna, Siwan and Muzaffarpur districts of Bihar.

Horses: Over 600 horses came from 5 states: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh.

Bulls: Over 20500 bulls primarily from different parts of Bihar came to the *mela*. Three breeds were noted: Haryana (8500), Desi (6000) and Dharpakar (6000).

Cows: Over 3500 cows from Punjab, Haryana, Bihar and U.P. states were brought to the *mela*. There were 5 breeds: Frisian (1200), Haryana (800), Jersey (900), Tela (200) and Desi (400).

Buffaloes: About 3000 buffaloes belonging to the Desi (1900) and Murrah (1100) varieties

primarily from the different districts of Bihar were brought to the *mela*.

Goats: There were 200 goats and, interestingly, all of them came from Rajasthan.

Dogs: Although the number of dogs could not be ascertained, there were 5 different breeds: Lhasa, Pomeranian, Bhutia, Nepali and Alsatian.

Birds: Seven types of birds (domesticated and wild) were brought to the *mela*. Hundreds of birds were sold everyday and a regular supply line, unlike that of other animals, was also maintained.

Thus we see that animals/birds from different parts of the country are brought to the Sonepur *mela* and animals/birds purchased from this *mela* are taken to different states. Although a variety of animals used to be brought in the *mela* for sale, the imposition of Wild Life Act has been instrumental in keeping away many species of wild animals from this fair. The birds found in the hilly terrains of Assam, Nepal and other regions such as Samwa, Tuti, Bhengraj, Nuri, Kakatua, Grey parrot and deers, young elephants which used to be seen at the earlier *melas* are not seen now.

Besides, due to technological advancements in agriculture, the farmers are less dependent on animals in the matter of tilling and other activities related to agriculture. Not surprisingly, the amount of transaction in respect of sale/purchase of animals has gone on declining over the years.

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