

Sustainable Commerce and Viksit Bharat: Learnings from Nomadism

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Abstract

The research question the paper addresses is: could a rear view into India's nomadic economy of the past have implications for the articulation and realisation of the vision of India's future, Vision Viksit Bharat (VVB) via sustainable commerce? The research question assumes inevitability as reference to, if not reliance upon, ancient wisdom and traditional knowledge (AWTK) as integral to addressing contemporary issues. In this context, even its flip version, would there be a place for nomadic communities - of pastoralists, hunter-gatherers and peripatetic groups - in Viksit Bharat is an equally pertinent question. The paper delves into the learnings from the nomadic commerce and economics of the past to understand potential connections with our common future. In a broader context, the paper explores the resurgence of interest in the social, environmental, and economic aspects of nomadism, as evident in initiatives such as the World Initiative for Sustainable Pastoralism (WISP). The paper vehemently makes a case for active protection of nomadism wherever it exists and also focuses on discerning and extending the economic and environmental contributions of nomadism of the past for an economy, polity and society of the future. In the process, the paper identifies several linkages and pathways to leveraging nomadic wisdom of the past for India's future as reflected in the Vision Viksit Bharat.

Keywords: *Nomadism, Sustainable Commerce, Sustainable Development, Vision Viksit Bharat*

Introduction

Commerce, in the sense of international and domestic trade as well as services auxiliary thereto provides momentum and scale to an economy. The ratio of trade to the gross domestic product (GDP) provides a measure of its significance. The global trade-to-GDP ratio was nearly 30% in 2013 implying that a third of the world's economy was accounted for by commerce (WTO Secretariat, 2024). It was 45.92 % for India (World Bank, 2025), implying an even more significant role it has in India's economy. Given the significant role it plays in India's domestic economy and that of the world, it is not difficult to envisage that socially and environmentally sustainable commerce can significantly impact sustainable development of the national as well as world economy.

Vision Viksit Bharat (VVB) may be translated in English as the 'Vision of India' as a developed country and is said to be ipso facto a road map for sustainable development in India (Ishwar Dan, 2024). The vision, inter alia, seeks to rely, besides modern approaches to development, on ancient wisdom and traditional knowledge as well. It thus warrants a reflection on the nomadic past, the precolonial medieval and ancient practices of nomadic communities with a view to discerning ways to sustainability.

Objectives of the Study

The purpose of the paper is to reflect upon the relationship between nomadism i.e. communities of herders, hunters, gatherers and sustainable development over time and space. The specific objectives of the paper are enunciated as follows.

- To reminisce one's first academic encounter with the nomadic pastors and to reflect upon the significance of that learning in the wake of the challenges to sustainable development today.
- To examine how the successive institutional changes favouring the sedentarisation of nomadism impacted the nomadic communities and the larger canvas of development. The coping strategies these communities adopted despite severe constraints and pressures of the changing times.
- To discern the pathways to supporting and sustaining nomadism wherever it persists and to transfer knowledge and wisdom with the

nomadic tribes for our collective futures. In particular, to explore and foster supply chain linkages drawing on nomadic capabilities and resources.

Impetus for and Rationale of the Study

The immediate impetus for the study came from the livelihood crisis facing Himachal's Gaddi nomads pursuant to the US's imposition of a tariff of 26 per cent on import of organic wool from India (Mohan, 2025). A paradoxical situation wherein, on the one hand, humanity needs to reclaim an organic, circular, eco-friendly and socially sustainable world, ways of life and our common future and on the other, institutional arrangements seem to defy rather than support such endeavours. A pressing need was felt to reflect upon the temporality and spatiality of the contribution of nomadism to the national world economy and the institutional mechanisms that support and sustain it.

The second compelling reason for envisaging this paper came from the growing recognition of the fact that the ancient wisdom of experiential learning, profound insights, and symbiotic relationships with local environments of the indigenous people can play a significant role in the fostering sustainable development (Indigenous Knowledge, n.d.). It has been argued that the tacit intellectual knowledge of indigenous people can be a tremendous source of innovation for sustainable development (Meyer & Naicker, 2023). The author has for quite some time contemplated on the learnings that can be drawn from the lives of the nomadic pastors. Living in Delhi (India) amidst perilous quality of air attributable to the burning of stubbles in the neighbouring states of Haryana and Punjab one is compelled to reflect upon the environmental perils of institutional setbacks to nomadic pastoralism. One may recall that the cattle of the nomadic pastors would feed on stubbles in the field, enrich the soil through biomass and earn in kind and cash for them. The Indian nomadic communities linked well through the trade routes and thus were a source of prosperity for India. The third compelling reason is the need to celebrate the resilience of those nomads who sustained the onslaught of colonialism, capitalism and corporatisation of the economies and societies. It is a serious ethical issue that they were pushed into marginalisation, vulnerability and relegation in history. While, the colonial powers held them as criminals, the present-day sovereign states are no better as they view them as a threat to stability & peace.

Did they lag in our flawed understanding of development? Or are they, as have been, the likely paragons of sustainability? Further, as the growing urbanisation - another flawed indicator of 'development'- continues to encroach upon common and community owned resources it has to be noted that we must rethink, reimagine, restructure and re-engineer and reform the institutions that acknowledge, appreciate and affirm not only their survival but also leverage their knowledge for our future. There definitely is a case for revival of interest in nomadism.

Method

This paper is based on qualitative research and draws on secondary and tertiary data, historical and ethnographic in nature. It comprises both text and visual narratives. These narratives provide insights into the prevalent context of nomadism as well as the institutional changes disrupting the nomadic life.

Academic Encounters on Nomadism

The first encounter on nomadism is referenced in a chapter on nomadic pastors in the NCERT textbook of Class IX History with his daughter (NCERT, 2006). The chapter notes at the outset that the nomads rarely enter the history books used for teaching in schools. Much of the works in history and economics focus on agriculture, industry in human settlements, rather than this wandering community. Nomadic pastors are a large and significant yet neglected minority globally as well as in the national economies despite their economic and environmental importance. Chapter V of the above-mentioned book traverses the Indian nomadic communities of the mountains as well as the plains, plateaus and deserts.

In the mountains, the seasonal cyclical movement of the nomadic tribes of Gujjar Bakkarwals of Jammu & Kashmir and of Gaddis of Himachal Pradesh comprises movement to the foothills during the winters and return to the higher altitudes with the onset of summers. Summer is the shearing time for sheep and reaping the precious organic wool (Figure 1). The annual export of approximately 2.5 lakh kg of raw organic wool to the US provided a decent and dignified livelihood to these nomadic communities. Just a stroke of pen by the current dispensation in the US, escalating the tariffs has led to hardships for these communities (Mohan, 2025).

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In an illustrative account of the nomads from the plateau region of Konkan (Maharashtra & Goa) and Banjaras of the North (Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana), the chapter explains how these communities would alternate from cultivation, crafts, etc. and pastoralism in sync with the cycle of nature. It is significant to note that their cattle earlier fed on the stubble, whose burning lately has increasingly become a major cause of air pollution (Figure-2). Thus, they formed bonds with the settled farmers of their respective regions who paid them in cash and kind (rice and other crops).

Figure 1

Waiting for Shearing to Begin - Gaddis of Himachal Pradesh



Source: NCERT, 2006

Figure 2

Cattles Feeding on the Stubble and Manuring the Fields in Konkan Region

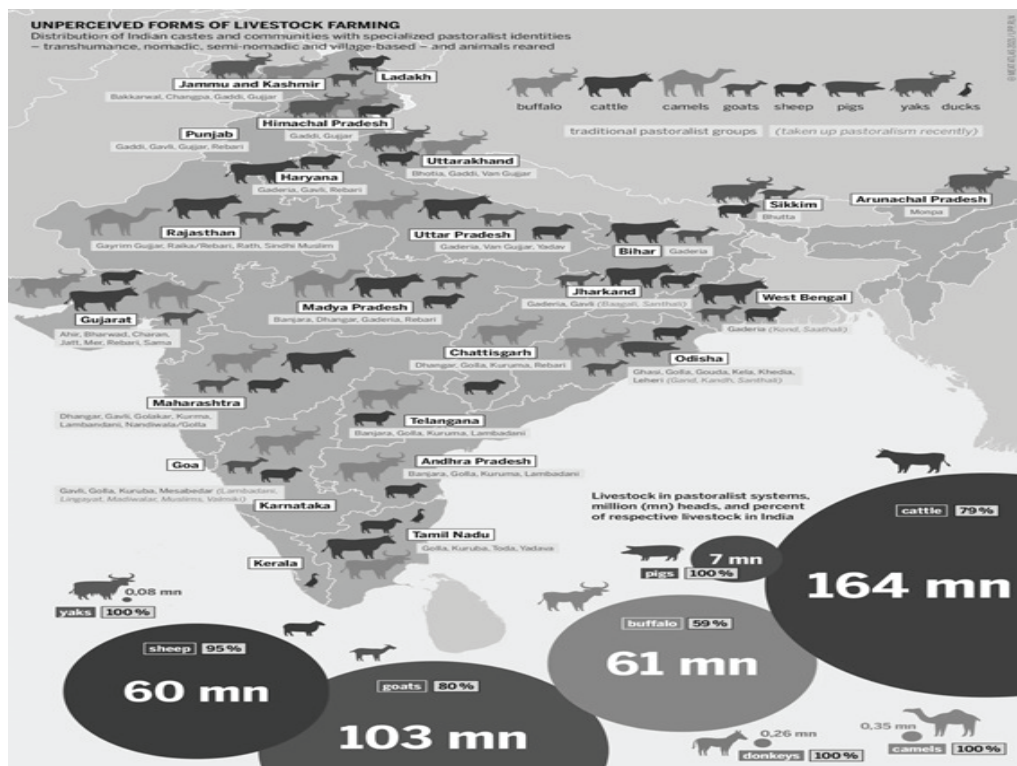


Source: Chakraborty, 2023

The nomadic movement synchronised with the cycles of nature implies a fluid, variable and beautiful temporal rhythm of life at the confluence of environment (Maru, 2024). The pastors made good use of wastelands - referred to as the museums of hardships- as their activity ensured fodder and fuel for their livestock and their own sustenance. Over 70 per cent of India's livestock are kept in an extensive agro-pastoral system and thus account for a significant proportion of red (meat and meat products) and white (Milk and milk products) grocery for domestic and export consumption as can be evinced in Figure 3 given below (Rollefson & Kishore, 2021).

Figure 3

India's Livestock in Pastoralist System



Source: Rollefson & Kishore, 2021

In this paper, the discussion has been limited to the pastoralists of India whereas the nomadic communities here comprise two other equally significant categories viz. hunter-gatherers and peripatetic nomads as well (Berland & Rao, 2004). Even their contribution to the development and glory of India cannot be undermined. For example, the hunter-gatherers played an important role in the evolution of ancient healing practices and Ayurveda (Elendu, 2024) and the thriving economy of the forest produce (Nagraj, 2021). Culturally, it has been argued that nomadic communities of the mountains and forests played an important role in the shaping of Indian culture (Chandrakanth, 2022). Likewise, the Waghris, the peripatetic community of Gujarat continues to play

a critical role in the cloth recycling even till date (Bapat, 2024) and the Gadiya Lohar (nomadic ironsmiths) specialised in metallurgy. See Figures 4a, b & c.

Figure 4a`

Hunter-gatherer Tribal Women of Chhattisgarh Sorting the Forest Produce



Source: Nagraj, 2021

Figure 4b

A Woman of the Waghri Community of Gujarat Exchanging Clothes



Source: NDTV, 2023

Figure 4c

Rajasthan's Gadiya Lohar (Nomadic Ironsmiths)



Source: ETV, 2022

It would be fair to interpretively extrapolate that in their movements, nomads picked up the crafts, crops and cultural artefacts for direct trading not only through the nooks and corners of the country but also building contacts with the merchants for overseas trade. While it would be a cliché to say that before humans settled, they were all nomads, yet several Indian business communities of the date have a nomadic lineage. Despite their significant contributions in the past and linkages with the present, all the nomadic communities are discriminated against, looked at with suspicion by the sedentary population and have thus been substantively marginalised (Pant, 2004). It would be pertinent here to examine the institutional changes impinging upon the fate and the future of nomadism in India.

Institutional Change and Nomadism

Modernity, with its attendant capitalism, colonialism and corporatisation, can be said to be the major institutional change that impacted nomadism nearly everywhere. The advent of sedentarism as the mainstay of urbanisation,

civilisation and economic development created prejudice against nomadism. Institutional theory provides a robust framework for understanding the relegation and pathways to the revival of nomadism. Institutions are embedded in both formal and informal aspects of governance. Institutions are formal and informal rules of the game (North, 1990). The formal rules are inherent in laws and regulations; the informal rules vest in societal norms and beliefs, customs and traditions. These aspects and discontinuities and structural breaks therein significantly provide a constellation of circumstances that can impact the fortunes of the individuals and the collectives. In this section, an instance or two from each of the two types of institutional change impacting nomadism are highlighted below.

Formal Institutions: Colonialism

Colonialism was perhaps the most disruptive phase in the lives of indigenous people anywhere. In India, the colonial role drastically impacted the lives of pastoralists. Grazing lands had to give in to commercial agriculture and forest areas were declared as “reserved” resources. Their movements were suspected by the rulers and, the revenue (grazing tax) they had to pay to the rulers were increased (NCERT, 2006). Their dignity was ruthlessly compromised with the enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) in 1871, notifying nearly 200 nomadic communities as criminals. Colonialism, thus, meant persecution, disenfranchisement and sustained marginalisation of the nomadic communities of India.

Following Independence in 1947 and adoption of the constitution in 1950, some nomadic and de-notified communities were included in the constitutional categories of disadvantaged people of India (Rahul, 2023), viz. Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Castes (OBCs). Whether these measures have been able to bring about the mainstreaming, inclusion and economic emancipation of the nomadic people of India is a subject that is beyond the scope of this paper.

International Institutional Context

Nomadism has attracted the attention of international institutions too. For example, International Union for Environment Conservation (IUCN) studied the total economic value attributable to nomadic pastoralism as comprising not

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only direct benefits such as milk, meat, wool, hides & skins but also deeper indirect benefits, such as environmental services that help conserve species and contribute to tourism (Helen, 2008). As an international research and advocacy organisation the IUCN has undertaken several initiatives in support of nomadism such as the World Initiative for Sustainable Pastoralism (WISP). United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of the Indigenous People (UN, 2007) bestows upon the nomadic communities a host of rights including the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture [Article 8.1], right not to be evicted from their lands [Article 10] and the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons [Article 13].

Informal Institutions: Social Norms and Beliefs

Social norms and beliefs associated with nomadism have also undergone a kind of metamorphosis. For example, a society that was once welcoming of peripatetic nomadic communities of street performers or majma artists has now become a gated community where there is no place for the nomads in the practice of a living culture (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Informal Institutions and the Endangering of Peripatetic Nomadic communities of Street performer



Source: As mentioned

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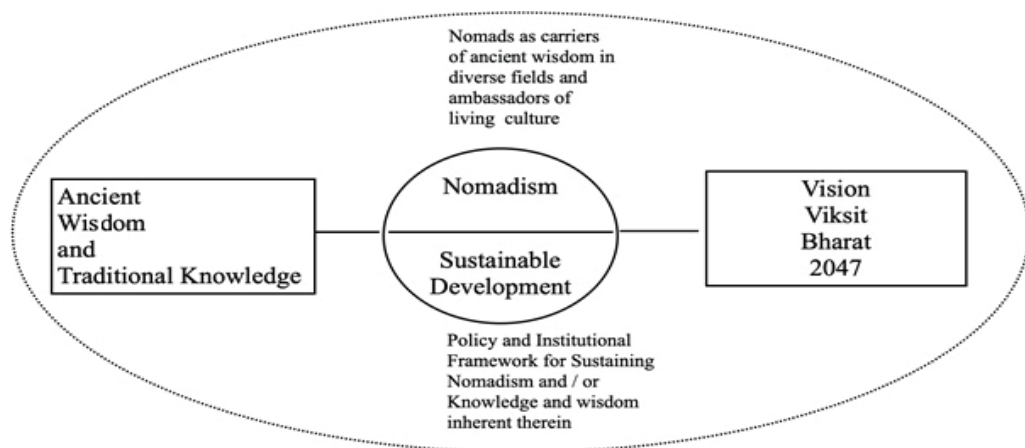
The Vision Viksit Bharat (VVB @ 2047) seeks to accord simultaneous importance to the idea of *virasat* & *vikas*, implying a symbiotic relationship between the need to preserve and learn from the heritage as well as to adopt a progressive and outlook toward the future. While the vision does not make this emphasis explicit, an emphasis on poverty reduction as a pillar of the VVB @2047 and emphasis on the ideas such as *virasat aiwam vikas* (heritage & development), *sabka saath sabka vikas* (participative governance for social inclusion) suggests that the welfare of nomadic pastors, forest dwellers and peripatetic nomads has not got omitted from state prioritisation for the realisation of the VVB@2047. Announcement of the welfare schemes such as the ‘Mechanism for Marketing of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) through Minimum Support Price (MSP) and Development of Value Chain of MFP’ augur well for the hunter-gatherer communities of India (TRIFED, 2020).

Integrative Framework

Any search for a solution to the problems of sustainability- be it poverty & inequality, conflict & peace or be it climate change can immensely benefit from non-dualistic and mutually reinforcing insights from ancient wisdom as well as modern knowledge systems. Nomads have the performance and potential to provide a seamless continuity of the past-the present- and the future (Figure 6).

Figure 6

An Integrative Framework for Sustainable Commerce for Viksit Bharat



Conclusion and Policy Implications

In this paper an attempt was made to reminisce one's academic encounters with nomadism and time regress the institutional changes impinging upon it. It was noted that the role of nomadic communities in India's development in the past has been significant and their sedentarisation by the colonial rulers posed an existential crisis for them. The compulsion of sustainable development has renewed interest in their indigenous ingenuity and a lifestyle in sync with the rhythm of nature. The paper has highlighted the role of formal and informal institutions in sustaining nomadism. It is encouraging to note that the VVB@2047 is not oblivious of this imperative, albeit even if not explicitly stated. The paper recommends that support to the nomadism be a matter of rights to these communities and enjoin upon the governments a directive principle of state policy to this effect. Some of the recommendations in this regard could be as follows.

- Enunciation and Designation of Nomadic Communities as the Ambassadors of Living Culture of India. Issue of Special Identity Cards with India as their residential address. This should facilitate their unrestricted movement, entry and stay throughout the country. This identity card should be valid for all 'Know Your Customer - KYC' verifications and for availing of state subsidies, medical facilities and other welfare schemes.
- An institutional mechanism for researching, documenting and preserving the tacit knowledge of these communities and the means for harnessing it for the resolution of the problems of modernity.
- Extension of policy support, including minimum support price to all the forest produce gathered by these communities.
- Inclusion of support to the nomadic communities in Schedule VII of the Indian Companies Act, 2013 for facilitating flow of corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds for furthering their interests.
- An institutional mechanism for upskilling of the nomadic tribe craft artists and introduction of tribal and nomadic art forms in the art and design schools of India.

- Free access to all the performance areas and venues, theatres etc. for street artists, puppeteers etc. Institutional mechanism for their ticketed performances.
- Recourse to sedentarism must be a matter of choice for them rather than imposed compulsion.

A concerted action of the state, market and society may result in the emancipation of nomadism and the very idea of sustainable development.

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