



Perceptions of zoonotic and animal diseases in the Van Gujjar community of North India



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ABSTRACT

Humans living in and around forest areas are at increased risk of zoonotic disease transmission. The transhumant Van Gujjars of North India are one such population, but there is an absence of health data, including evidence of zoonotic diseases, in this community. Pastoral communities can have a wide breadth of knowledge of livestock diseases, but not necessarily of human diseases. This study investigated the perceptions that the Van Gujjars have specifically of zoonotic diseases, using participatory epidemiological methods, including semi-structured interviews, ranking, proportional piling, transect walks and direct observation, triangulated by informal interviews with local veterinarians. The community did not have a wide appreciation of zoonotic diseases, apart from rabies and potentially zoonotic skin diseases. In contrast, animal diseases were of much greater concern to the community; the locally-named *surra* (trypanosomiasis), *ajar*, *khuriya* (foot-and-mouth disease), *dakhutra*, *gheru*, *taku*, and 'blood in urine' (possibly babesiosis), being of most concern. A participatory epidemiological approach was found to be an effective method of data collection and analysis; and the findings suggest that access to health services, particularly veterinary health services, should be improved for Van Gujjars.

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1. Introduction

The Van Gujjars of North India are a transhumant, vegetarian, pastoral people whose culture and livelihood is intrinsically linked to their herds of buffalo (Gooch, 2004). During the winter months the Van Gujjars reside in the forests of the Shivalik foothills of Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh; when the summer months begin, the people and their animals migrate north to graze their buffalo in areas of the lower Himalayan range in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh States (Fig. 1). The Van Gujjars source food for themselves and for their animals from the surrounding forest, and buffalo milk production is the main source of income for the community (Sharma et al., 2012). Therefore, it is necessary that the impact of animal diseases is reduced where possible.

Zoonotic diseases pose a significant burden worldwide, and the human-domestic-animal-wildlife interface is very important in the transmission of such infections. Eighty-two percent of important

zoonoses have wildlife reservoirs, 74% have a domestic animal reservoir, and 60% have both wildlife and domestic animal reservoirs (ILRI and IRVC, 2011). Individuals and communities, such as the Van Gujjars, who live and work in close association with domestic animals or wildlife thus are at increased risk of infection with zoonotic agents.

The Van Gujjar summer and winter camps overlap with protected forest areas (Fig. 1), but there is a perception from some agencies that they damage forests, mainly through grazing and tree lopping (Joshi, 2012), and that their practices may present a disease risk to wildlife species. In contrast, other reports detail the knowledge that the community possesses about forest management and suggest that Van Gujjar practices are necessary to maintain ecosystem health (Jain and Seshia, 2005).

In terms of zoonoses, this community is of interest for three main reasons. First, the Van Gujjar, as a pastoral community who are dependent upon buffalo milk production, live and work in close association with their livestock throughout the year. Secondly, interactions occur with other human and buffalo populations through trade in milk products. Thirdly, the Van Gujjars and their livestock interact with their forest environment. They therefore

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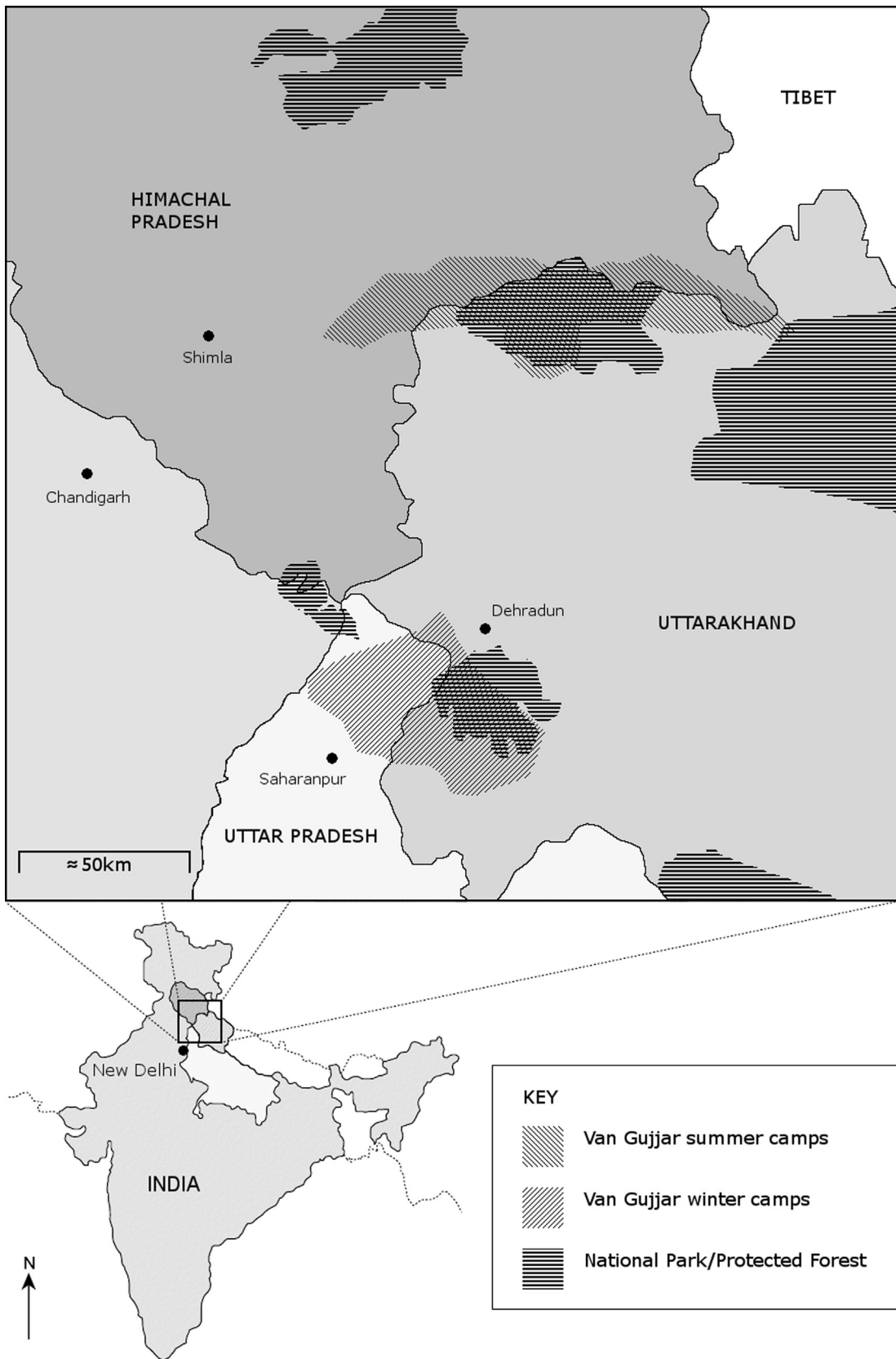


Fig. 1. Map demonstrating approximate geographical distribution of Van Gujjar winter and summer camps.

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