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Short Communication

ANIMALS FROM INDIA IN THE CARIBBEAN

No substantial research has been done on the animals and birds that came from India to the West Indies/Caribbean. Historians have instead chosen to focus their studies on Indians (West Indians) in relation to religion, caste, leadership, law and land. Animals were brought on the same ship with labourers who were imported to work on the sugar cane plantations after the abolition of slavery. Large lop-eared goats, for instance, were the survivors of the ship *Lapwing* which was wrecked near Barbados on its way to Guyana (cited in Shannon 1945). As agricultural workers during Indentureship (1838–1917), Indians worked alongside cattle in the fields, and they also kept private animals as property and pets. Indians have an ancient tradition of animal husbandry which continued in the West Indies. Indeed, it must be remembered that the cow (cattle) has always been sacred to Hindus who form a major ethnic group in Trinidad and Guyana. *Until the 1950s every Indian family raised cows to produce dung, milk and manure for subsistence and sale.* The animals were raised on common holdings and fed crop residues, wild grass and cane tops. They, therefore, did not compete with their owners for food and space.

This neglect in research is unfortunate. Researchers Julie Cole, Will Faust and Matt Fleming claim in their work on “The Evolution of Wild Cattle” (1991) that the first known bovid (family of cattle, sheep and goats) in the world was the Aurochs, which is of Indian origin. The breed first evolved in Asia, and then in Europe and Africa at approximately the same time during the Pleistocene Period (1.8 million to 11,000 years ago). The closest resemblance of the Aurochs today can be found in the wild Zebu cattle of India, and the Sanga cattle from Africa. Archaeological findings and genetic evidence have proven that farmers in India were the first to capture and tame the humped Zebu cattle which is native to that country (Bradley 2003).

Though domesticated cattle was first brought to the Americas by Columbus on his second voyage, the Zebu cattle (*Bos indicus*) was brought to the West Indies by the British in the 1860's.¹

¹ *Bos indicus* is thought to have originated in India more than 4,000 years ago (RRAT 2002).

Over 30 breeds (including a miniature) came and were named after their province of origin such as the Nellore, Hissar, Mysore and the Gujarat. These have huge curved horns, a massive hump just behind the neck, and thrive in hot humid conditions. Zebus have built-in protection against biting insects in the form of muscles that allow better twitching of the skin. They do not eat when water is unavailable and live off of the fat in their hump. These were later crossed with other breeds in Jamaica and Martinique Chantal *et al.* (1998) in the 1950's to produce more beef (Hoyt 2003; JAS 1961). Several *B. indica* breeds have been developed into the Brahman breed² in the United States, where it was first imported 1849.³

In 1905 and 1908 during indentureship, 30 Jafarabadi Indian water Buffaloes ("bhaisa") were brought to Trinidad in the Tacarigua sugar estate to replace the cattle herds (Zebu and Brahman breeds) which were infected with tuberculosis (L. Rastogi *et al.* 1993; Lidga 1996). Several importations of other breeds like the Murrah, Surti, Nili and Bhadawari, on the advice of Dr. L. Shannon, occurred until 1949.⁴ Crossbreeding by Steve Bennett in the 1960s has produced a Trinidadian type ("Buffalypso") that has been shipped to 19 different countries around the world, especially to Central and South America, Cuba and Barbados. Since 1974, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has signposted buffalo (*Bubalus carabanesis* and *Bubalus bubalis*) as the most neglected animal for production of milk,⁵ meat (Indian Diary 2002), Cheese, leather (Bennett 2003), and one may add draft power. Buffaloes in Trinidad have been found to be relatively free from cattle diseases and insects, and almost twice as efficient as cows in producing milk. Researcher Leela Restogi and others (1993) argue that their meat is also reported to be superior in quality to beef, and buffaloes have the unique quality to convert poor quality rations into remarkable muscle growth. In 1978, there were 6,000 buffaloes in Trinidad living in environments hostile to other animals (R. Rastogi *et al.* 1978). With the increasing use of tractor power and the imminent death of the sugar cane industry (Caroni 1975 Ltd.), these animals are destined to disappear as drought animals.

The small mongoose was imported from India (sometimes through London) to Jamaica and Trinidad around 1872. It (*Herpestes auropunctatus*) was brought to control rats that infested the sugar cane plantations which caused tremendous losses in revenue (Hinton and Dunn 1967; NHSJ 1949). From these islands they were sent to Cuba, Puerto Rico, Grenada and Barbados. They also kill snakes by inducing them to strike, stepping aside quickly, and then pouncing on their head

² **Brahman cattle** is thought to have originated in India more than 4,000 years ago (RRAT 2002).

³ Henry Koontz was the great grandson of Captain John N. Keeran, who with his friend A. H. "Shanghai" Pierce, imported some of the **first Zebu cattle** to Texas and the **United States** in 1878 (Liar's Lake 1999).

⁴ India has the highest **buffalo population in the world** (IVA 2003).

⁵ India has emerged as the **largest milk producer in the world today** (IVA 2003). About 20 years ago, nearly 60% of milk production came from buffaloes (R. Rastogi *et al.* 1978).

above with a bite that cracks their skull. They are extremely intelligent animals and reliable pets (Sanderson 1953).

Goats are probably the oldest ruminant animal (next to dogs) to be domesticated 8000 years ago. Domestication occurred along the rivers of the ancient civilizations of Nile (Africa), Tigris and Euphrates (Asia), and Indus (India). In 1872, Indian goats were bought from vessels in England, and about the same time they were brought to the West Indies to be milked for the children of immigrant labourers on the ships (Shannon 1945). The original goats imported from Africa, Arabia and India were long-legged and hardy, and were crossed by British breeders.⁶ Goats adapt easily to mountainous and semi-arid environments, and are used for meat, milk and hide production. Goat milk is valued for people suffering with ulcers and matasmus.

Rhesus monkeys (*Macaca mulatta*) were released in islands near Puerto Rico in the 1960s (SZGD 2000, ZOO 2002), and later in Florida (BBC 2003). They have a squat thickset built and are highly intelligent. In India, they are considered sacred and are left unmolested.

Very few birds from India were brought to the Caribbean, and none could have flown over the vast oceans. The most widely distributed is the Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*). The Peacock is identified by its magnificent huge tail that can be raised into a broad fan. Both male and female emit a loud scream. They are raised as garden and farmyard ornamental birds (Höner 2003; Raffaele *et al.* 1998). Their feathers play an important part in Hindu iconography.

Another bird that is native to India and found in the Caribbean is the Hill Myna (*Gracula religiosa*). It is also called "The Talking Myna" because it has the surprising ability to mimic human speech, bird calls, and other sounds. There are other birds like the Red Avadavat (*Amandava amandava*) ("Strawberry Finch"), Warbling Silverbill (*Lonchura malabarica*) ("Indian Silverbill"), Nutmeg Mannikin (*Lonchura punctulata*) ("Spice Finch"), and the Chestnut Mannikin (*Lonchura malacca*) ("Black-headed Nun"). These birds were introduced to Puerto Rico (in the 1960s) Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, Martinique and Guadeloupe (NFSS 1999; Faffaele *et al.* 1998; Sims 2002). It is likely that they escaped or were released from cages.

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⁶ Shannon (1945) argues that the term **Anglo-Nubian** is a misnomer; Anglo-Indian is a more appropriate and accurate designation.

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