

Competitive Exams Animal Husbandry Notes: Sheep Rearing

Sheep are an important source of mutton and wool in the country. With about 4 per cent of the world's sheep population India occupies sixth place at global level in respect of sheep number.

The country had 39.05 million sheep in 1951 which increased to 57.49 million in 1997 showing a per-centage increase of 47 during last 46 years. The total production of raw wool in 2001 – 02 was 49.9 thousand tonnes. The average yield of wool per sheep is about 1 kg (cf. 3 – 15 kg in Australia and elsewhere).

In India sheep areas are mainly found in low rainfall zones of the plateaus and hills. Rajasthan accounts for one-fourth of the total sheep population of the country followed by Andhra Pradesh (16.95%), Karnataka (13.92%), Tamil Nadu (9.15%) and Maharashtra (5.86%).

These five states together support 71 per cent of the total sheep of the country. In terms of wool production Rajasthan occupies the foremost place (39.47%), followed by Jammu and Kashmir (13%), Karnataka (11.6%) and Andhra Pradesh (7%). The Indian wool is inferior to Australia and South Africa in quality and is called coarse carpet wool.

It is classified into various groups like Joria, Bikaneri, Harnai, Rajputana, Bibrik Beawar and Mewar. If 2003 – 04 India imported 84.6 thousand tons of raw wool worth of Rs. 871 crores from Australia, New Zealand, Afghanistan, Nepal and central Asian countries (cf. 1, 900 tones worth of Rs. 1 crore in 1960 – 61). Besides, it also exports small quantity of raw wool to the USA and UK

Distribution

In India sheep are mainly raised in dry, hilly and rugged areas not suitable for agricultural purposes. There are three main areas of sheep rearing in the country.

1. **The Arid North-Western Region** This includes Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, western Uttar Pradesh and western Madhya Pradesh. The region has about 33 per cent of the sheep population of the country but contributes over 50 per cent of its total wool production. The sheep are well adapted to the intense heat and cold conditions of the region and subsist on small grasses and roughages. The sheep breeders called Rebaris practise transhumance and move with their flock to the desert areas during the rainy season but return to the harvested field after Diwali. The important sheep breeds include Lohi, Kutchi, Bikaneri, Marwari, Kathiawari, Jaisalmeri, Sonadi, Malpuri, Magra, Shekhawati, Pugal etc. Of these the Lohi and Marwari breeds are famous for blanket wool; the Bikaneri breed for carpet wool; and the Kutchi breed for meat, wool and milk.

2. The Semi-Arid Southern Region This includes drier parts of the Peninsula in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. The region has over 26 million sheep which is about 46 per cent of the total sheep population of the country. The wool from these sheep is very coarse and of poor quality. Here some sheep are exclusively reared for mutton. The total production of wool is about 11, 500 tons annually at average annual yield of 400 – 500 grammes per sheep. The important sheep breeds are the Deccani, Nellore, Mandya, Bellary, Yalag and Bandur. The Deccani breed is good for mutton while the Nellore yields wool.

3. The Temperate Himalayan Region

This region consists of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttaranchal. It has about 5 million sheep (8% of India) producing 8, 500 tons of wool annually (about 1 – 2 kg of wool per sheep per year).

The wool is of superior quality totalized for making shawls, lohis, pashmina, pattus and costly woolen goods. The country's best quality sheep are found in the Kashmir, Kullu, Chamba and Kangra valleys at an altitude of 2, 000 m. Here Gaddis and Gujjars (Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh) and Bhotias move with their flocks of sheep to the pastures on the hill slopes (altitude 3000 – 4000 m) during summer but descend to the sheltered valleys during winter season practicing transhumance.

The Gurej, Kama, Bhakkarwal, Gaddi and Rampur-Bushair are important sheep breeds which produce good quality of wool. In Sikkim and Eastern Himalayas the Sikkim breed is raised for mutton.

Sheep Development Program

Sheep rearing plays an important role in the country's economy providing sustenance to about 5 million households. The Indian sheep provide low yield both in respect of wool and meat. Hence efforts have been made to improve sheep breeds by crossing local breeds with the imported quality breeds like Australian Merino, Russian Merino, Spanish Merino, Rambouillet, Polwarth, Cheviot, Southdown, Leicester and Lincoln.

The Corriedale and Hissardale breeds so developed yield up to 5 kg of wool per year. A Central Sheep Breeding Farm has been established at Hissar which has distributed 949 exotic/cross breed rams, 180 ewes to different states during 1996 – 97.

The Farm also offers training facility to shepherds and officers in modern sheep management. Also there are 90 small sheep breeding farms in different parts of the country besides 7 large farms in Andhra Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.