

Photo Essay

# Meet the Pugees: Pastoral Detectives of India

By Nipun Prabhakar

Amongst the *maldharis* of Kutch and Rajasthan you will find some unique men - the Pugees. Believe it or not, a Pugee can catch your crime by the tell-tale foot prints you leave behind at the place of crime! Respected, feared and with many enemies, the Pugees, or foot trackers of Rajasthan-Kutch ensure the safety of *maldhari*'s animals in the vast arid landscapes they traverse. Just the presence of a Pugee acts as a deterrence for potential thieves. Many many stories of Pugees and their exploits travel from generation to generation!

A footprint tells many stories; the weight, gait, disposition, even family inherited features, all of these get transferred onto the footprints you leave behind! This unique art and science of the *maldhari* Pugees is used on the borders of India and Pakistan even today - with border security agencies of both countries inviting Pugees to trace the footsteps of infiltrators across the desert!

Here, you see the veteran Pugees from village Jura in Kutch.

*This photo-essay was done for Living Lightly, a curated exhibition on the lands, lives and livelihoods of Indian pastoralists.*

LEFT: Netaji Sodha is tying his turban before going out for work. He says that impressions can reveal a lot about people; how they walked, their gender, their weight and even the time of the day they were walking.



The young boy is being trained in the art of identifying footprints by his grandfather.



Netaji Sodha, one of most celebrated and accomplished Pugees.

It takes less than a minute for a Pugee, to identify footprints different animals and humans.

Netaji Sodha pointing to the imprint of a snake. He recognised the species of the snake from its imprint.



The Pugees are no longer able to pass their skills to the next generation, mostly because of the lack of work. However, a few young children are showing interest in this art.



Nipun prabhakar is a photographer and a practicing architect. He has done several photo-essays on communities, landscapes and architecture. When not with his camera, he loves to sketch cityscapes.