



Himalayan Pastoralism: A Study On The Livelihood And Mobility Of The Bakarwal Tribe

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to look at the relation of livelihood and mobility, and the health hazards faced by the pastoral Bakarwal tribe based in the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Livelihood pattern of Bakarwals constitutes mostly of herding animals, and seasonal migration plays an all-important role in attaining the same. With the exhaustion of winter pastures in plains, they move to the highland pastures in Greater Himalayas in early spring along with their herds and household items by crossing various passes in the Pir Panjal and Siwalik ranges. Melting snow, gusty winds, dangerous ravines and valleys along with threats of the wild pose high risks to the health and lives of this people and their livestock. Moreover, various factors have led to the loss of this age-old tradition and the Bakarwals are quickly adopting a settled way of life. Data about the study has been collected through various ethnographic techniques among the community in the intervening pastures of the Kashmir valley.

Introduction

South Asia is home to the world's most of the nomadic communities and yet the scholarly interest for nomadism in this region is meagre (Rao, 2003). The boat-shaped valley of Kashmir, that forms the part of Indian administered union territory of Jammu and Kashmir, is encircled by the Pir Panjal ranges and the Himalayan ranges from south and north respectively and is home to a few pastoral communities who traverse the mighty peaks with their herds. The most important of the all pastoral communities is the Bakarwal tribe in Jammu and Kashmir based in the Pir Panjal range in the inner Himalayas and migrates seasonally from the plains to the high altitude meadows of Kashmir valley with their herds of sheep and goat.

The word Bakarwal is the combination of two terms i.e. Bakra meaning sheep or goat, and wal meaning the one who takes care of, that is herdmens. So, etymologically Bakarwal means the one who takes care of sheep or goat. This name is justified by their herding mainly sheep and goats (Casimir, 1991). Each year, in April/May, when the southern plains begin to experience a scorching heat, the Bakarwals along with their herds start their journey towards the greater Himalayan meadows. To reach the summer pastures, they need to traverse around 600 km for two months crossing the Pir Panjal ranges and the valley of Kashmir. Although at the onset of migration the routes are mostly in

the plains, challenges arise when they enter the valley through different high altitude passes on the peaks of Pir Panjal ranges and greater Himalaya. Routes range from 2940 to 4291 meters above mean sea level (mAMSL) and need to be traversed twice a year (Khatana, 1992).

Herding being the primary means of livelihood for the tribe, the seasonal migrations provide other means of sustaining its economy as well. During their movements, the Bakarwals get engaged in active labour for local agriculturists and construction works, among other sources. Moreover, sedentarization of the Bakarwals over the decades has resulted in the loss of this long-held tradition of transhumance among the tribe, but at the same time it paved the way to different forms of earning a livelihood. But those who still practice transhumance and live the traditional way of life face tremendous health hazards during the migrations and in the high altitude meadows in the Himalayas. Crossing snow-laden glaciers, mighty peaks in snow and rains and the wild is not an easy task to embark upon. Health hazards faced by the tribe to retain their tradition and to earn their livelihood are tremendous and life-threatening. The relationship between livelihood, migration and the health hazards involved in sustaining the way of life among the Bakarwals is relatively understudied topic and needs to be discussed upon.

So, this study entails drawing on ethnographic data and archival material to discuss the livelihood and mobility patterns among the Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir and the health hazards faced by the group during its annual migrations.

Methodology

Objectives

The objective of this study is to explore the livelihood and mobility patterns among the Bakarwal tribe of Jammu and Kashmir. Furthermore, the health hazards faced by the tribe under study in forward and reverse migrations to high altitude meadows of the Himalayas would be discussed along with the various reasons for their sedentarization.

Area(s) of Study

Fieldwork for the study was conducted after the onset of migration from the plains to higher meadows and due to this fact; the groups under study were studied in two different areas in the Kashmir valley. One of the locations was Chankah Grassland (34°16'17N, 74°28'11E) in Sopore and lies on the way towards a high altitude meadow of Gurez valley in Bandipora district and the households studied still hold tight to their tradition of transhumance. Another area was at the foothills of famous Karewas at Pattan area (34°10'51N, 74°32'24E) of the Baramulla district, where semi-nomadic Bakarwals had camped in late April and were to stay there only till the onset of autumn i.e. September. So, keeping the notion of topography and climatic conditions into consideration, both types of settlements were chosen for the study.

Data was collected through interviews and schedules for both semi-nomadic and nomadic groups. Purposive sampling was used for the study as access to these groups was much easier than the ones based in other districts/meadows of the valley. A total of 40 households were selected among which 14 were semi-sedentarized and 26 were transhumant.

Results and Discussion

Transhumance is an adaptation to marginal and spatially variant environments where a group seasonally oscillates with their herds of cattle and/or sheep etc (Khatana, 1982). The Bakarwals earn their livelihood from the herds of sheep and goats besides doing agricultural activities and labour for the local population. Depending on the time and space, different sources of livelihood are identified. In the winter pastures where they spend around six months, from October to March every year, agricultural activities surpass herding unlike in the summer pastures where the group is mainly dependant on herding their livestock with minimal or no agricultural activities. So basically the type of livelihood depends on the time of year and the space where a particular convoy (kafila) of the Bakarwals is found.

By the end of April each year, winter grazing pastures in the Rajouri, Poonch and Kathua regions get exhausted, which forces the tribe to move towards high altitude meadows (margs) in the northern direction. This migration means traversing the mighty Himalayan ranges like Siwalik, Pir Panjal and the valleys in between. The altitude of the ranges can vary between 610 meters to 4570 meters above mean sea level (Khatana, 1982) from south to north direction. The Bakarwals move from their winter pastures with their herds and goods in convoys owned by the same clan (gotra) and halt at pre-determined locations for a considerable time. During their movements from plains to higher pastures, they utilize middle mountains as pasture lands which are at an average altitude of 2440 mAMS L during forward and reverse migrations in the spring and autumn of each year. By the end of June, groups reach their specific margs or pasture lands on the Greater Himalayan ranges which are at an average height of 4570 meters AMS L. They call these meadows dokhs in their local language (Bakarwali).

The economy of a pastoral group depends mostly on these pasture lands and for fulfilling the needs of their herds and earning their livelihood, Bakarwals move seasonally along traditionally set routes. There are different channels or passes which are utilized by the groups to enter and exit the valley of Kashmir during spring and autumn. Major passes along the way with altitudes are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Some important mountain passes walked by the Bakarwals in spring and autumn migrations

S.No.	Mountain Pass	Altitude in AMS L
1	Banihal Pass	3189 meters
2	Darhal Pass	3983 meters
3	Jammiyan Wali Gali	4086 meters
4	Kausarnag pass	3962 meters
5	Nurpur Pass	4093 meters
6	Pir Panjal Pass	3491 meters
7	Rupari Pass	4099 meters
8	Sarthal Pass	2133 meters
9	Tosamaidan Pass	4091 meters
10	Zeji marg Pass	4036 meters

These passes are mostly snow-laden and are very harsh to cross. Frequency of snowstorms, torrential rains and hailstorms is very high along with the harshness of wind and cold. There are frequent deaths of both men and livestock reported along these harsh passes. The situation worsens when kids, women and elderly are along. The most important passes which are used by the majority of the

Bakarwals for movement are the Pir Panjal Pass and Banihal Passes. Here, as well as the other passes, there is no vegetation because of the huge blankets of snow that cover the mountains. Moreover, the frequent melting of snow in April-May makes it difficult to cross the ranges as the routes become slippery and result in the loss of lives. Deep ravines, gushing streams, and vertical cliffs welcome the groups at the end of the passes that add to all the misery people have gone through. Moving further south, they reach the lush green pastures of the southern parts of the Kashmir valley and from there the kafilas break up into small groups and move to different directions depending on the location of their dokhs. As the groups proceed northward, they cross more passes and move towards their margs. By the time they enter the summer pasture lands, the temperature in the valley of Kashmir is enough to melt the snow in Greater Himalayan ranges and thus making it very difficult for the groups to reach their destinations. Some of the major pasture lands where Bakarwals lead their livestock include Pahalgam, Gulmarg, Sonamarg (see Figure 1), Gurez valley, Machil, Matayan, Bangus valley, Dodpathri, Tosamaidan etc and the groups stay on these meadows till September each year. And by the end of autumn, he herders start their journey back to the winter pastures through the same routes and the cycle continues each year.

Since the last decades, the Bakarwals have been leaving this centuries-old tradition of nomadism and are moving towards a settled life. Major factors responsible for the sedentarization include pasture scarcity, armed conflict, availability of modern education and health care services (Sofi, 2013). Health care services play an important role in the sedentarization of the Bakarwals as the health hazards faced during the migrations through snow-laden mountain ranges, blizzards, strong winds and many more dangers pose a major threat to the lives of Bakarwals as well as their livestock. Even if the ranges are crossed successfully, basic healthcare system is non-functional and unavailable at the higher altitudes where they spend about four months every year.

One of the kafilas under study had given up their tradition two decades ago. They live a life of semi-nomadism wherein each year in April they migrate from the areas of Rajouri and Poonch only to pitch their tents in local orchards, around karewas (lacustrine deposits) or on roadsides (see Figure 2). They do not rear goat or sheep and do labour activities like paddy harvesting for the local people for 400-500 INR per day. So their main source of earning livelihood is labour and through jobs by educating their newer generations. Among the 14 households who are in the process of sedentarization, 35 per cent cited the reason of armed conflict, wherein they were constantly harassed by security forces as well as militant groups. Health was the second major reason cited as the health hazards faced by the groups were not being looked upon with modern healthcare facilities and members belonging to the community had died due to this reason. Furthermore, pregnancy and menstruation-related complications have resulted in many deaths during the migrations. Lack of basic education only adds to the misery as 21 per cent of the respondents prefer education over tradition (See Figure 3). Their kids are going to local schools in Jammu as well as Kashmir valley and are getting good jobs to earn bread and butter for the families.

Twenty-six households selected for the study who still practice pastoralism were studied during their spring migration which continues from April to June every year. The kafilas under study were heading towards their dokhs in the high altitude valley of Gurez in the Bandipora district. Their livelihood depends hugely on the herds of sheep and goats. Trade of animals is a common practice among the tribe during the migrations. Among the respondents taken for the study, each household has their livestock as the main source of income. Dairy products like milk, cheese, ghee, etc are stored and sold in markets during reverse migrations and the fur of goats and sheep whence sheared makes them a good profit selling to the textile industries. Other sources of livelihood include labour

work, selling herbal medicines which they get from the margs, taking the sheep of local shepherds for grazing for months together at 400-500 INR per sheep etc. As far as the education and other factors are concerned these groups are not much affected by them. Governments have provided them with mobile schools and healthcare centres which unfortunately are not effective till date. The mortality rate among the group is high because of the hazards faced along the high altitude zones. But to sustain their livelihood, the Bakarwals need to migrate every year from the plains to the great Himalayan ranges with their health and education at stake.

Conclusion

Following their centuries-old tradition, the Bakarwal tribe traverses the mighty ranges in Kashmir Himalaya to earn their livelihood. They walk for more than two months to reach their destinations facing many difficulties along the way. Strong winds, melting ice, ravines, cliffs and deadly valleys pose difficulties which can result in on spot death of humans as well as their livestock. Lack of education, healthcare system, and the conflicting situation in the valley has resulted in the decline of the traditional pastoralism with many Bakarwals being settled now in different areas of the union territory. Some groups are semi-sedentarized and are in the process of settling down completely. Change in livelihood and mobility patterns have brought both positive as well as negative aspects with it. Facilities like modern education and healthcare facilities have improved the life of the Bakarwals but at the same time resulted in the decline of this tradition. With the change in their livelihood patterns, groups are moving towards a social change which is directly or indirectly resulting in the change in their identities.

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Images



Figure 1: Bakarwal tents in Sonamarg at an altitude of 3528 meters AMSL (Photo: Dar Ubaid A



Figure 2: Semi-Sedentarized Bakarwals living alongside the Karewa in Pattan. (Photo: Dar Ubaid)

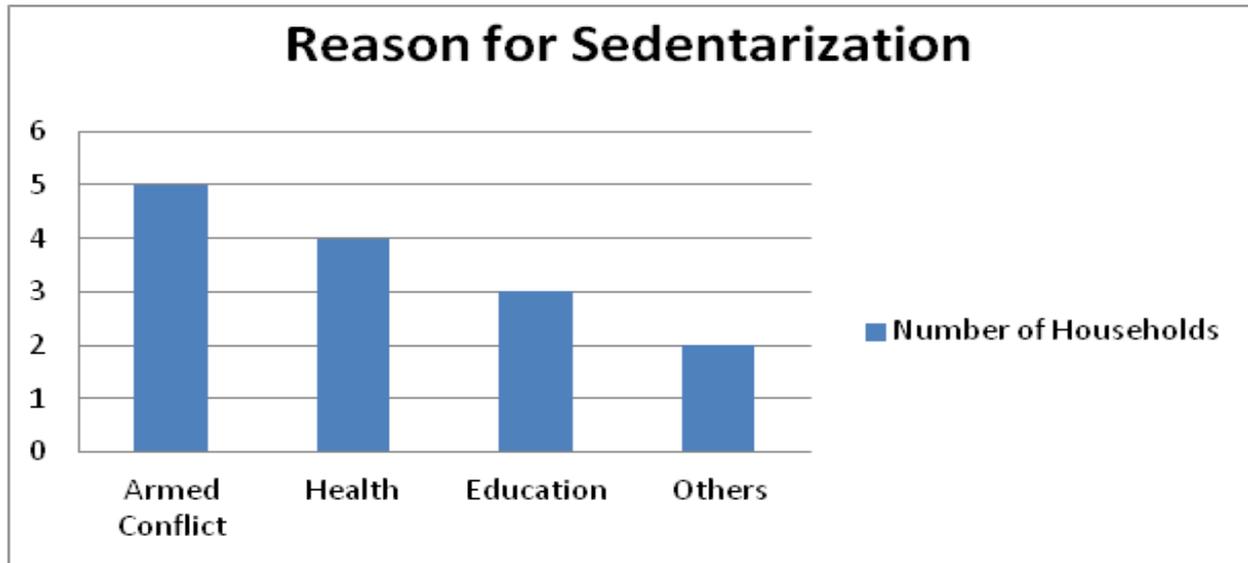


Figure 3: Graph showing the reasons cited by the group for sedentarization.