



Ethnographic Account of the Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract: Cultural diversity of nomadic pastoral groups inhabiting the Himalayas has augmented the cultural legacy of the region. Bakarwals, a goat-rearing pastoral group of the Kashmir Himalayas, have a remarkable amalgamation of traditions, beliefs, rituals, and philosophies that have been kept and passed down the generations from time immemorial. Every element of their lives is interconnected with the pastoral yearly cycle and these components of their culture give its tradition, significance and depth. However, with increased interaction, the Bakarwals of the northwestern Himalayas have witnessed several cultural changes; and in this backdrop, this study explores some of the significant ethnographic characteristics of Bakarwal life, as well as the shifting dynamics of their everyday existence.

Keywords: Bakarwal tribe, changing dimensions, economic pursuits, Himalayan pastoralism, transhumance

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Introduction

Long-distance seasonal transhumance is a method through which herders move their flocks twice yearly between summer pastures in the highlands and winter pastures in the lowlands (Chang and Tourtellotte 1993). This method in South Asia has been widely recorded throughout history and continues to this day. There is a continuum of pastoral movement tactics in the greater Himalayan valley of Kashmir, with pastoralist groups engaging in long-distance seasonal transhumance at one end and local shepherds grazing the animals on valley floors at the other (Rao and Casimer 1982). The former migrates between the

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regions of varying heights and locations in the spring and fall of each year and they constitute among other groups, the Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir. This tribe resides in the Pir Panjal range of the inner Himalayas and migrates periodically with their goat and sheep herds from the plains to the high-altitude meadows of Kashmir.

The term *Bakarwal* is composed of two words: *Bakra*, which means goat, and *wal*, which means caretaker. Therefore, the etymological meaning of Bakarwal is one who cares for goats. This moniker is justified by their animal husbandry practices, particularly goat rearing (Casimir, 1991). These tribal groups begin their annual migration to the upland pastures in April, when the temperature rises in the northern plains, and reach their *Dokhs* – the word for high-altitude pastures – in June, after traversing several high-altitude passes with their households and their livestock (Khatana 1992). This cycle is repeated in September and October, when snow begins to fall on the highland pastures, making it difficult for both humans and animals to survive. People's interaction with their environment and livestock has resulted in a survival strategy that has been practised for centuries. It would be prudent to encourage anthropological research on this topic in academic settings, and in this paper, we will provide a summary of the Bakarwal tribe's ethnographic profile based on primary and secondary sources of information.

Environmental Setting

The pastoral activity is widespread across the Kashmir Himalayas, and Bakarwals at one given time inhabited the majority of the Kashmir valley's regions. Although the point of integration moves from the greater Himalayas to valley floors to the lesser Himalayas during the year, in present times, a large number of Bakarwals may be seen working in agricultural fields, mills, or towns due to sedentarisation and the other push and pull forces. However, a chunk of this tribe remains welded to their traditional practice of herding and live in the mountains of the Himalayas. This study was administered among the sentinels of the Himalayas.

The research area includes the vast regions of Jammu and Kashmir, from the Jammu districts of Rajouri and Poonch to the Kashmir valley districts of Baramulla and Bandipora (Figure 1). The region is characterised by the varying topography of the Pir Panjal Mountains to the south and the broader Himalayan ranges to the north. The rich cultural diversity and climatic variance are the outcomes of such colossal geography of the area. The Kashmir valley region, for example, has moderate summers and harsh winters, but the regions lying

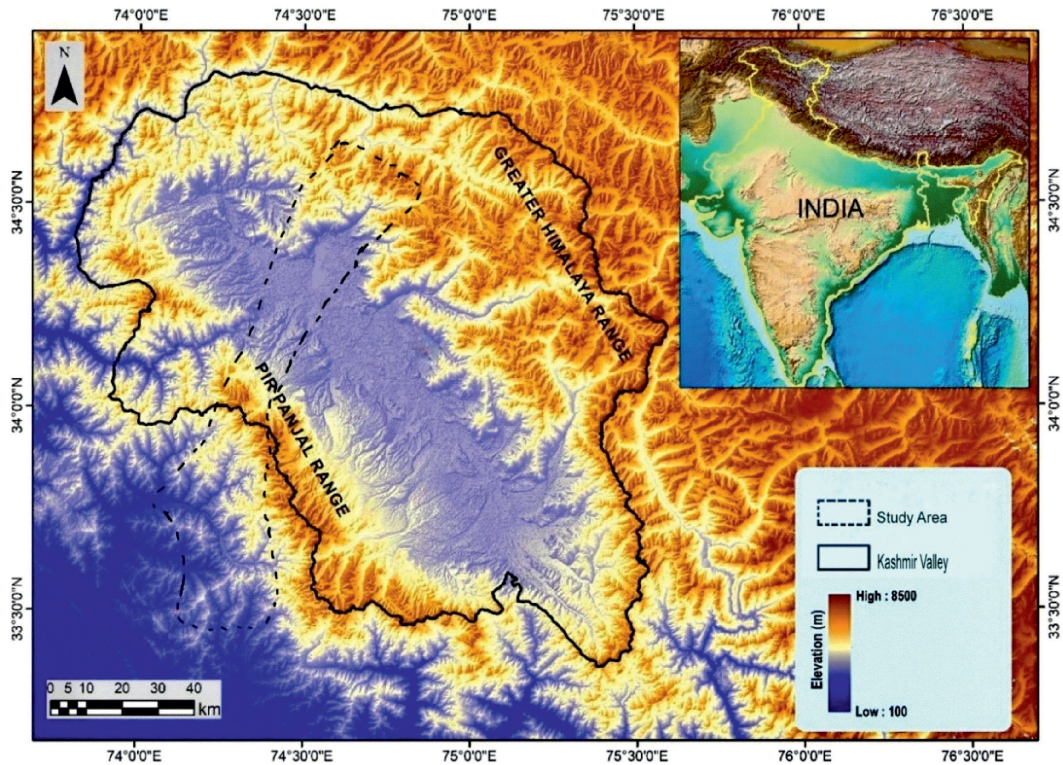


Figure 1: Study Area (Adapted and Modified from Bhat, M.A., Romshoo, S.A. & Beig, G. 2021)

outside the Himalayan belt have severe summers and mild winters, leading to a difference in the population' lifestyles. In consideration of this variable environment, the entire stretch was assigned as the research area, and a *Kafila*¹ which follows the customary path and migrate regularly with their herds was identified as the sample group.

Methodology

This research work is based on the participant observation of around 280 calendar days among the Bakarwal tribe of Jammu and Kashmir. We conducted a number of interviews with pastoralists to acquire anthropological information on contemporary Bakarwal culture for this study. The major goal was to depict an anthropological narrative of the tribe. Following the analysis of secondary materials, substantial time was spent conducting fieldwork in several tribal villages. Based on the existing prior literature, this investigation started in the Poonch area, followed by Rajouri and Gurez. Data collection

was done using the structured schedules followed by FGDs of the tribe members. Additionally, we conducted numerous discussions and mapped their culture using photography throughout the research, which was analysed and presented in this paper.

History of Origin

The origin of the Bakarwals is a contentious issue among scholars till date. The Bakarwals are thought to be a subgroup of the renowned Gujjar tribe of the Himalayas. Cunningham (1871) links their ancestry to the Scythian tribe², which conquered Kabul around 100 B.C., settled in Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Gujarat, and finally founded the Gujjar kingdom. Smith (1904) links their ancestry to the white Huns, who came to India around the year 465 A.D. as wandering hordes. In contrast, Munshi (1944) maintained that they are of Indian origin and not a foreign breed. He asserts that Gujjars formerly ruled an empire that encompassed present day Rajputana, Malwa, and Gujarat (the region was known as *Gurjaradesa*). In the late thirteenth century AD³, the fall of the Chalukya Empire brought an end to their rule (Bamzai 2007).

Huthi, a Georgian researcher who travelled to India to study Gujjars in 1967, proposed the Georgian origin idea. After completing research on the Gujjars in northern India, he identified a relationship between the Gujjars and Georgian tribes. He contends that the tribe may have a Central Asian heritage based on various cultural and linguistic commonalities, oral traditions, and archaeological evidence (Sofi 2019). Cunningham asserts that Gujjars descended from the Kushan and Yachi tribes of eastern Tartars; however the majority of experts assert that Gujjars descended from Georgians (Bhardwaj 1999). In addition, the link between the Gujjar and Bakarwal peoples and Central Asia is demonstrated by the fact that the word “Gujjar” was coined in Turkey⁴ and used by Turks of Central Asia in the third millennium BCE (Rahi 2011).

Habitation Area and Population

The Bakarwals are found in most parts of Jammu and Kashmir, particularly in the hilly areas of the region. Their total population in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir (including Ladakh) is 113,198 (Census 2011). Though spread throughout Jammu and Kashmir, their main concentration is in Rajouri, Anantnag, Jammu, Reasi, Poonch and Kathua. The district-wise distribution of the community in Jammu and Kashmir is given in Table 1:

Table 1: Distribution of Bakarwal Population in Jammu and Kashmir

| <i>District</i> | <i>Total Population</i> |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Kupwara | 13 |
| Budgam | 718 |
| Poonch | 5,255 |
| Rajouri | 36,163 |
| Kathua | 7,946 |
| Baramulla | 841 |
| Bandipora | 268 |
| Srinagar | 710 |
| Ganderbal | 4,157 |
| Pulwama | 1,133 |
| Shopian | 167 |
| Anantnag | 14,225 |
| Kulgam | 1,330 |
| Doda | 939 |
| Ramban | 3,779 |
| Kishtwar | 1,482 |
| Udhampur | 6,893 |
| Reasi | 16,393 |
| Jammu | 6,997 |
| Samba | 3,758 |
| Total | 113,167 |

Social Organisation

Based on their origin, the Bakarwal tribe is divided into two distinct sections: the *Kunhari* and the *Illahiwali*. Similar to the Kunhari Bakarwals, who are believed to be from the Kunhar valley in Pakistan, the Illahiwali Bakarwals are affiliated with Pakistan's Illahiwal region (Khatana 1992). Their society is organised into the *gotra/kabila* (clan), the *dada-potre* (lineage), and the *dera* (household): the three major kinship groups. The tribe keeps a track of their numbers and refers to their grazing and *kafila* groups in terms of *deras*. Usually, a *dera* is founded when an individual establishes an independent household, which often occurs after marriage. Consequently, each son constructs his own *dera* upon marriage. Each *dera* has its own hearth and property, which contains a tent for the annual migration as well as sheep, goats, dogs, mules, and horses. Typically, *deras* are governed by a well-defined power structure and division of labour among

its members. Bakarwals follow patriliney where if a *dera* is made up of nuclear families, the husband is always the head. He owns the property and represents it in both its internal and external relationships. In addition the members of a *dera* are assigned jobs based on their gender and age. Women and girls are responsible for home responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, fetching water, caring for children, gathering wood, etc., whereas adult males fix equipment, maintain tents and ropes, and tend to and herd animals. Regarding the *dera's* organisation, its economic role is its primary function. It is the primary unit of consumption and production for a transhumant group dependent on animal husbandry, such as the Bakarwals. This economic activity depends on the availability of grazing pastures in order to be viable. No pastures are allocated to individual families (*deras*) or their leaders in the region. In contrast, they are seen as the property of family groups whose ancestors established control over them and its customary utilisation. These family groups are known as *dada-potre*, and both the community and the forest department and tax authorities have recognised their customary rights to pastures and migratory routes. *Dada-potre* refers to a group of patrilineally related kinsmen who share a common ancestor. Depending on how far pastures and migration routes have been separated, this group's size can range from a few dozen to more than two hundred individuals. In addition, the Bakarwal society is divided into several clans (*Kabila*) however, unlike the *dada-potre* unit, which is based on genuine patrilineal ancestry, the clan is based on the fiction of common descent (Khatana 1984). In addition to the groups discussed above, their transhumant way of life involves the formation of a number of functional groups in order for them to carry out their pastoral responsibilities effectively. The primary functional group of the Bakarwals is the herding unit, a collection of *deras* that collaborate to guarantee appropriate pasture and care for their livestock. The goal of the herding unit is to provide labour for milking and shearing, and the *deras* that make up a herding unit often move together and set up camp in the same spot every year (Dar 2022). The formation of a herding unit is unaffected by kinship ties, and its organisation is frequently determined by economic incentives, which are frequently mixed with feelings of affection. *Kafila* are the second important functional category of the Bakarwals, consisting of a group of migrating families directed for the duration of the yearly migration cycle by a *kafila* leader. Typically, a *kafila* is organised around an older adult with significant knowledge of migration patterns, woods, weather, and animal behaviour (Khatana 1984).

We primarily worked with the *Khatana*, *Dedad*, and *Thikariya* clans of the Illahiwal Bakarwals and the *Khari* clan of the Kunhari Bakarwals for this

research. Consequently, our evaluation of the characteristics that identify “Bakarwal” culture as a whole may be slightly biased.

Immediate Community or Total Community

Srivastava (2020) defines the immediate community as the one in which an individual expresses himself/herself concretely, while the total community is considered the summation of these immediate communities. Bakarwals spend most of the year in mountain pastures and preserve a physical and social remoteness from the mainstream. Thus, they have evolved a sense of belongingness to these pastures and are dispersed over the Himalayan Mountain ranges. This sense of belonging to both their profession and their community makes the Bakarwal society a “total community.” In addition, their attempts to unite against marginalisation and exploitation contribute to this element. This is also true concerning cultural practises, particularly linguistic differences, as the sense of ‘immediate community’ is depicted at the sub-regional level, with the Bakarwals of Kashmir having different characteristics than the Bakarwals of the Jammu division, but sharing similarities in dress, eating habits, marriage customs, etc. Consequently, we may conclude that the Bakarwals are both an “Immediate Community” and a “Total Community” at the regional level.

Belief Systems

It is evident from both field-based and literary studies that the Bakarwal society is patriarchal and ruled by senior male members. They are the adherents of the Islamic faith and follow the *Sunni*⁵ school of thought. However, the entire system of beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies must be understood through the lens of their pastoral way of life (Dar 2022). According to Khatana (1992), these social systems may be categorised into three groups: annual and life cycles, as well as specific rituals and avoidances.

The Bakarwals observe festivals religiously on an annual basis, with *Eid*, *Nawroz*, and *Baisakhi* being the most prominent. During their annual migrations, they also visit various holy men’s or *pirs*’ shrines for blessings and prayers. They offer offerings of animals, money, and fabric to these shrines in exchange for supernatural protection for their family and herds. Likewise, life cycle rituals contain ceremonies associated with birth, marriage, and death. The *Khutna* (circumcision), which represents a boy’s entry into the group, is one of the key life stages that children born into the tribe must experience. Bakarwals marry and are considered adults at around 25 years of age. In the past, they married

their kids at a much younger age, but as a result of the impact of the lowland population and constant interaction with them, the age threshold for marriage has increased, along with the spread of other new components. Bakarwal marriages are endogamous and patrilocal, with Bakarwal women relocating to their husband's family after marriage. Several cases of polygamy were also observed over the course of this research. When it comes to death, Bakarwals adhere to Islamic burial practises, and if the death occurs during migration, the departed are buried along the migration path and marked with a pile of stones. On the anniversary of the deceased's death, they practise *Fatiha Khwani*, in which a *Molvi*⁶ is summoned to recite Quranic verses for the deceased's better afterlife. The migratory routes include some significant mountain passes such as *Ratan Pir Shah*, *Pir ki Gali*, *Dholwali*, etc., which are named after the revered *Pirs*⁷ of Bakarwals. They regard *Pirs* as the intermediaries who stand between them and God and help them to please the Almighty. In addition to this, it was observed during the research that a shrine was constructed entirely of stone arranged in a circular pattern and supported by tree branches, where woollen thread was tied on the structure for the wellbeing of both humans and animals. These structures were usually situated on the high altitude passes and were believed to be utilised by their *Pir* as a resting area in ancient times. Thus, the ceremonies and beliefs of the Bakarwals are strongly impacted by ecological elements and well-suited to their migratory cycle (Dar 2022)

Political Organisation and Social Control

Traditionally, the political organisation of the Bakarwal tribe comprises the established system of *Jirga*, an ancient social institution. These *Jirgas* do not exist at the general level, rather each *kafila* or group has its own *Jirga* that solves the disputes inside the community. It is led by the elder member of the group and his power is regarded as absolute. There may be some advisers or members in the *Jirga* council as well. The political power ranges from *kafila* to households whereby a tribe is ruled by the *Jirga* council, a *kafila* is governed by a *Kafila Muqdam*, who is the head of the *kafila* and is usually a person who is eldest in the group.

With the increasing infringement of mainstream politics, be it for regulation of policies related to land rights, healthcare, mobile schools etc., or for remote support and confidence of the community, the influence of centre and state can now be felt among them too. With this, the importance of *Jirga* has become less prominent, but it is still prevalent in solving small disputes among the tribe members. In the lack of a traditional political structure, the current system of

government is based on official Panchayats, which are often led by Sarpanchs from other groups. Therefore, the community's elders are responsible for resolving internal problems, and in the most egregious situations, the local government is engaged for aid. However, at the household level, the head of the family has complete power and control over all aspects of everyday life including dispute resolution.

Economic Pursuits

The primary source of income for the Bakarwal tribe is their goats and sheep. To maintain their way of life, they manage their flocks by relocating them to summer pastures of greater Himalayas in Kashmir valley for six months from March to August, and back to winter pastures of lesser or outer Himalayas in Jammu region for the remaining six months from September to February (Figure 2). However, they also engage in daily work, agriculture, and non-agricultural jobs in addition to shepherding, which is their major and traditional source of income. Concerning shepherding, they rear animals throughout the year in order to sell a few in times of need. Depending on their size and quality, the costs for animals can range from ten to twenty-five thousand rupees. In addition to the value of the live animal, they also sustain themselves on the products that are obtained from their herds. In the past, there was a lucrative market for animal goods such as wool, but due to the influx of synthetic wool in the valley, the price of sheep wool has decreased from 100 INR per kilogramme to 10 INR per kilogramme in recent years. This has led to a serious economic crisis in the tribe and increased estrangement from traditional occupations. On a leasing basis, Bakarwals also handle the livestock of local farmers, charging around 400 INR per sheep every season. Nevertheless, it aids in the sustenance for at least six months of the year.

The tribe's principal source of income, pastoralism, is dependent on the geographical oscillation between lowlands and highlands and back again. The annual cycle begins in April with the beginning of the spring migration from their winter grazing areas in the outer Himalayas. The migratory season comprises of the months of April and May, and they typically arrive at their summer camps in June. The Bakarwals then engage in various economic tasks in the highland pastures, such as shepherding, gathering, and wool shearing, etc., until September, when they begin their trip to the winter pastures and arrive in November. In addition to daily shepherding in the adjacent pastures of the outer Himalayas, their method of subsistence throughout the winter months, beginning in November, consists of small-scale agricultural operations. They cultivate crops such as corn, wheat, etc.

Due to heavy snowfall in the winter pastures and rising temperatures in the plains during the summers, it is typically impractical for shepherds in the Himalayas to build permanent bases at a single place. Therefore, with this background, they oscillate between the two ecological zones to sustain their livelihoods. Additionally, the forest department imposes limits by fencing off the majority of pastures in the guise of social forestry. The route to highland pastures is extremely tough to traverse, resulting in the recurrent animal loss. With other tribes acquiring an economic advantage, the entire ecosystem is driving the Himalayan shepherding industry to extinction. All of the elements are therefore operating as restricting forces that increase the population's geographical and occupational mobility.

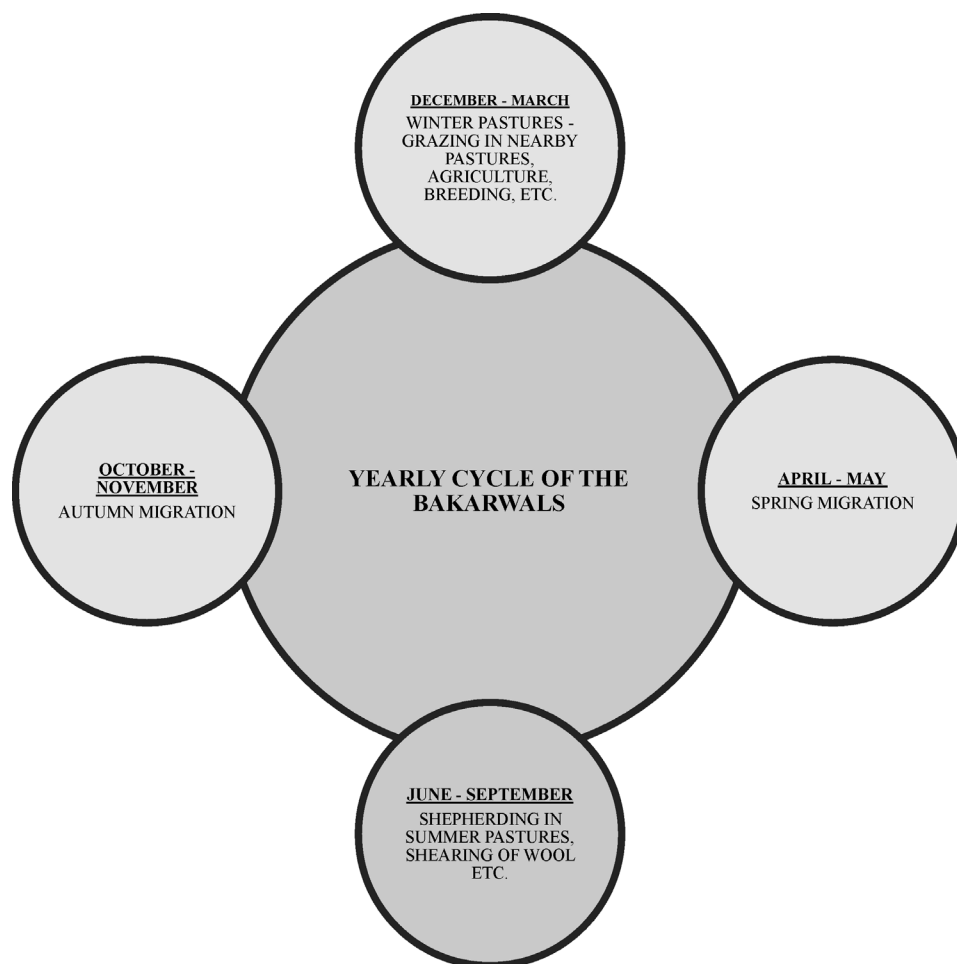


Figure 2: Yearly cycle of the Bakarwals

Dress and Ornament

Bakarwal males prefer to wear shalwar kameez, *vaskat* (waist coat), and *Pagheri* (headgear). Trousers and shirts are also common nowadays, particularly among the youngsters. The Bakarwal women normally wear long gowns called *Jubo*, Shawl, Cap and Jotti, Jora. Women also wear an embroidered cap which is locally referred to as *Lachka*.

Among the Bakarwals, ornaments are culturally significant and function as identifiers. These are artefacts that are spontaneously passed down over generations and frequently have an extensive lineage of inheritance. The silver jewellery worn by women among the Bakarwals is the most ornate antique. They accessorise with massive silver chains known as *gani* and *haseeri*. Also featured are a variety of necklaces that are passed down through generations and follow a lengthy line of inheritance. *Dodmala*, *Hamel*, *Jomala*, and *Hansli* are only few of them. Without the long, round, drooping earring known as *bali*, which is treasured by the Bakarwal women, jewellery is incomplete. In addition, young girls wear necklaces composed of carnelian beads linked together. Along with jewellery, things like as horse saddles, shepherding sticks, and coins have aesthetic value and are passed down through generations as movable property.

Health and Hygiene

Due to their geographical mobility, nomad populations are susceptible to inequalities in healthcare access, especially in rugged geographical terrains (Verma, Gandhi & Dash 2019). Although the National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes supports the development of programmes for the advancement of such groups, major impediments to healthcare systems have been identified among the Bakarwals. Due to their seasonal isolation from the mainland, their access to contemporary healthcare facilities becomes infrequent for them. The situation worsens in the summer months when the nearest medical facilities are not less than a day's trek far. In this context, the Bakarwals have relied heavily on traditional plants to treat illness. They have been dealing with the difficulties of availability, cost, and access to the contemporary healthcare system using their traditional ethnomedical expertise.

Even though ethnomedicines have proved better alternatives, the inaccessibility disproportionately impacts children and women during crucial moments, such as when newborn infants and pregnant women require medical care. Typically, babies do not receive necessary vaccines in the summer months,

and pregnant mothers miss routine prenatal examinations, hence raising the risk of miscarriage and even death. Similarly, menstruating girls in these distant areas suffer from a scarcity of necessary supplies such as sanitary pads. So, there ought to be specialised healthcare initiatives to tackle such situations.

Push and Pull Factors

Push and pull factors act at three levels among the pastoralist's populations of Kashmir Himalayas viz. economic, physical, and social. With the prospect of a better life outside their traditional occupation, younger generations are opting for other economic pursuits over traditional shepherding activities, demonstrating a high degree of occupational and geographic mobility; however, rising competition and economic exploitation push the Bakarwals towards the pursuit of a living in highland pastures. Similarly, from the perspective of the physical environment, migration to higher elevations, on the one hand, provides year-round sustenance to the tribe, but at the same time, the changing climate at the global level, which in turn leads to natural disasters, forest fencing by authorities, and thus shrinking flock sizes, causes this pattern to decline. Even when physical and economic indicators exhibit favourable trends, stigmatisation and marginalisation of the community continue to be the outcome of societal forces. Nonetheless, the Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir have been striving to improve their social standing, and with the formation of the Tribal Research Institute in Jammu and Kashmir, policymakers are making additional efforts to ensure the continuation of this age-old custom.

Conclusion

This study aimed to describe the anthropological characteristics of pastoralism in the northwest Himalayas. Focusing on the enduring cultural aspects of the Bakarwal people, it can be demonstrated that a distinct identity has flourished alongside the dominant cultures in the Jammu and Kashmir areas. Nonetheless, this pastoral culture has matured into a strong feeling of identity and belongingness among its members. We have observed that their culture is notably unique from that of surrounding groups. Since the past two decades, however, there has been an influx and outflow of significant cultural components in the tribal population, resulting in social, political, and cultural changes in the community.

Acknowledgements

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Competing Interest

The authors declare that we do not have any competing interests.

Notes

1. a group consisting of multiple Bakarwal households that move together.
2. Scythians were an ancient group of nomadic warrior tribes who originated in modern-day Siberia.
3. Between the sixth and eighth century A.D., the Deccan was under the authority of the Chalukyas. Then, in the tenth century A.D., they restored their control and dominated until the end of the twelfth century. The legendary history of the Chalukyas puts doubt on their origins. However, subsequent Chalukya monarchs' use of the titles Gurjar Nath and Gurjeshwar made it very clear that they sprung from the Gurjar people. Former feudatories of the Maitrik Gurjars, they later declared their independence.
4. The term "Gujjar" is thought to have originated from the Turkish word "Göçer," which refers to seasonal pastoralist nomadic settlements.
5. According to Britannica, *Sunni* is one of the two sects of Islam, comprising the majority of the religion's adherents. In contrast to the Shia minority, Sunni Muslims considers their sect to be the dominant and historic sect of Islam.
6. *Molvi* is a religious specialist among Muslims, who is a highly qualified Islamic scholar and has completed full studies in a Madrasa (Islamic School) or Darul Uloom (Islamic Seminary).
7. *Pir* is a sufi spiritual guide in Islam.

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