

## Bakarwals Of Kashmir: An Observation

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### ABSTRACT

Bakarwal are nomadic tribes found in Baramulla district of Jammu Union Territory between March and October. They are predominantly living and oscillating in the Kandi areas of Kashmir and they are the third largest tribal groups who speak *Bakriwale* dialect in Jammu and Kashmir. The areas where they live and move are mostly mountainous situated in the extreme north-western part of the country. Their food habits and customs depend upon locality. They are not access to formal education and still favour their indigenous medicare system due to their nomadic life. The present paper is an attempt to describe the ethnographic details of Bakarwals in Baramulla district employing interview schedule, participant observation, Focus Group Discussions and interviews with key informants.

**KEYWORDS:** Auspicious, Ceremony, Circumcision, Feast, Indigenous, Priest

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### INTRODUCTION

The Bakarwals are one of the nomadic communities in Jammu and Kashmir mostly identified as goat and sheep herders. The name is derived from the word *bakriwale*, which means goat herders or goat and sheep rearers. Swat region is commonly considered and claimed as the original homeland of the Bakarwals, coming to Kashmir in search of green pastures (Singh, K.S 2003). They were nomadic herdsmen who came from the central and eastern part of Asia. They entered India through Punjab at different time periods and gradually spread over the north-western part of India. This nomadic community of Jammu and Kashmir migrates annually from the hills of Poonch region in Jammu and roam around Pir Panjal region of Kashmir valley and highland pastures of the Greater Himalayas. The total population of Bakarwals is 113198 in Jammu and Kashmir (Census 2011).

#### Objectives

- To observe the socio-economic and cultural background of Bakarwals
- To describe the life cycle ceremonies of Bakarwals

### METHODOLOGY

The present paper is developed on the basis of both primary and secondary source data. The study adopted content analysis approach to interpret the data obtained from the selected resources such as policy records, books and journals; interviews and observation. The data were collected from Bakarwals who arrived from Nari village in Nowshara Tehsil of Rajori district found in Bandibala, Nowgam Kandi, Pachar, Galibal, Kahwar, Farasdub, Varinar Saranz, Nilshar settlements in Baramulla district of Kashmir Union Territory. A semi structured interview schedule, participant observation and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were employed and interviews with key informants such as aged persons, teachers, and religious leaders were conducted to elicit their ethnographic details. The present study has been designed to be purely descriptive and narrative.

#### Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir

The earliest documentary reference to the Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir is from the year 1899. The Bakarwals are not only culturally akin to the Gujar of the greater Punjab, Swat -Kohistan and the Kashmir area but also to Pashtun, Awan and other communities further west and southwest. Their ancestors migrated

some 150 years ago from the valleys of Allahi and Kunhar, now in Pakistan (Casimir, M. J., and Rao, A. 1995). The migration of Bakarwals began around the second century BC. In the late nineteenth century, the community migrated to different parts of Kashmir valley. They are predominantly concentrated in Kashmir valley mainly to the districts of Rajouri, Udhampur, Kathua, Jammu and Doda, though they are spread over almost all the districts of the Kashmir Union Territory. Despite the fact that they have permanent homes, they still move in search of green pastures in order to graze their flock of goats and sheep (Singh, K.S 2003). The areas where they live and move are mostly mountainous situated in the extreme north-western part of the country. The temperature varies from place to place it rises above 30°C in summer and goes much below Sub-Zero temperature in the winter and the rainfall is medium.

### **Socio-economic and cultural background of Bakarwals**

The territory of Bakarwals is surrounded by the Pir Panjal and Himalayan ranges with thick and thin forests. They speak Bakarwali language and use Arabic script, they use other languages like Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi while communicating with others. As stated by Sharma, A., Allana, N. J., and Chaudhuri, D. (2009) the Bakarwals are striking in appearance mostly they are tall, well-built, live long and robust lives with seldom falling ill. The men are tall, muscular and sport beards which they dye with henna when they start to turn grey. Bakarwal women are also tall and strong and have an elegance about them. The women wear muted sober shades of *salwarkameez* combined with colourful stoles and chunky jewellery which is found similar to nomadic communities in Andhra, Karnataka, Rajasthan and Gujarat. The identification mark for a Bakarwal male is *Dastar* (turban) and for a female is *Tupi* (special cap). Mostly the adult male members have long beard. The Bakarwals are non-vegetarians and their staple food consists of maize, rice, wheat and pulses such as *moong* (green gram), black gram, brown gram, Masoor and moth. They consume mutton, egg and chicken on special occasions. Beef is not consumed, being restricted in the union territory similarly pork is also not consumed as it is prohibited religiously. Seasonally available vegetables and fruits are moderately consumed by them. They do not consume any alcoholic drinks. Salted tea is, however, taken several times a day. The consumption of milk and milk products is high consumed among them as they have large number of sheep and goats. They are fond of smoking and almost all men smoke *hooka*, *bidi*

and cigarettes. There is no major social division in the community but a slight differentiation that is based on economic status, educational qualification and the size of sheep flock a person owns (Singh, K.S 2003).

The Bakarwals establish relations with all the Muslim and non-Muslim communities of the region wherever they are in search of pasturage for their flocks of sheep and goats. Traditional intercommunity linkages, to a great extent, are established with the Gujjar community as they believe that they have originated from the same stock and the language is very same with some cultural practices. The Gujjars also maintain economic and cultural relations with the Bakarwals. Business relations are mainly established with the *Ganai* who purchase goats and sheep from the Bakarwal to sell the meat. They take the services of the *Najjar*, *Shaksaz*, *Sangtarash*, etc. and accept *kachcha* (raw) and *pucca* (cooked) food from all the communities of the region except the *watalis*. The similar observation was made among Gujjars by Dilnaz and Durga Rao (2018). Other intercommunity relations are established through interchange of food, sharing of water sources, burial grounds and sacred religious shrines. The landlord-tenant and patron-client relationship is in existence. They still favour their indigenous traditional medicare system because in most of the areas where they camp, the facilities of modern medicare are not available or the facility is not ample. They require more and more hands to assist in the arduous nomadic life. Though the facilities of electricity and drinking water have been provided in their permanent settlements, they usually face the shortage of water supply and irregular supply of water during winter season. Piped water, springs and untreated streams are the sources of drinking water for them. Most of them are self-employed with their age-old occupation of goat and sheep rearing. Radio is the medium of communication for them and source of one way contact with outside world. Firewood, cow-dung cakes and kerosene oil are the main fuel resources for them. Irrigation facilities are not available in their area and they have to depend on rain water for agriculture. They use both organic and chemical fertilizers to get good crop yielding. The facilities of public distribution system through fair price shops are available to them. However, they can avail the facility only for a few months in their original homeland. They are dependent on moneylenders or shopkeepers and have a positive attitude towards saving nowadays.

### **Life Cycle Ceremonies among Bakarwals**

An observation is made on life cycle ceremonies such as birth, marriage and death using ethnographic techniques.

### Birth

The Bakarwals consider the birth of a child as a gift of almighty. The pregnant woman is not allowed to carry heavy loads and do normal work after five months of pregnancy. The delivery takes place in the tents and no special place is arranged for such purpose. An elder, experienced and knowledgeable woman is asked to assist the parturient mother. She may be from the same community or from outside and she is paid for her services in cash and goods. An elder male member of the community recites *Azaan* in the ears of the baby just after birth. Sweets are distributed among relatives and friends to celebrate this happiest occasion. On the third day, the friends and close relatives are invited for a meal as the day is considered auspicious. On the seventh day sunder ritual is performed and the mother is given first bath on this day after delivery. Similar findings made by DurgaRao, P., Babu, M. S., and Rao, V. N. (2006) in their study on Tribes of Andhra Pradesh. The naming ceremony is held on seventh day of delivery and the name of the child is chosen either by the *maulvi* (family priest) or any elder member of the family. Purification and final bath is given to mother on fortieth day and the mother is allowed to do all normal works of daily life. *Zerakasi* (tonsure of head) is observed after the child attains the age of six months. And the head of the male child is shaved by a barber and the barber is offered new clothes and some cash in return on this *Zerakasi* occasion. Sometimes a feast is arranged to mark the occasion. The practice of *Khatnabal* (male circumcision) is done by the family barber when the boy child attains more than two years of age.

### Marriage

The practice of endogamy at the community level is always maintained among Bakarwals. Mostly the preference is given to the cousins, both parallel and cross while selecting the bride. Child marriages were prevalent in the past but recent days they perform their son's marriage between the age of 18 and 25 years and the daughters are married between 16 and 21 years of age. The selection of the spouse is exclusively reserved for the parents or elder of the house and both the boy and the girl do not have liberty in decision making process. Negotiations for marriage are generally initiated by the parents but sometimes the assistance of

some middleman is taken. Monogamy is the general practice though polygyny is also permissible in the community. There is no specific symbol of marriage. Bride-price and dowry are not prevalent among Bakarwals. A big feast is arranged on the occasion of marriage and ceremonies start with the ritual of *Gandum* (engagement). The bridegroom first visits the bride's place and offers money to the bride and her father. In return, the bride's father presents an earthen pot full of dry fruits and cash to him. This is called *Doon-leij*. After the engagement, marriage invitations are sent to the relatives and friends. As the date of marriage draws nearer, several rituals are performed in succession. In *Malasbehoun* the bride is restricted from taking bath and doing household jobs for at least three days before marriage day. This is followed by *Massmechravoun* or loosening of hair plaits of the bride. This is done by the female relatives of bride. The first day of marriage is known as *Menziraat* when the hands and feet of the bride are dyed with *mehndi* (myrtle-paste) by relatives at night. *Yenevoul* is the second day of marriage and on this occasion the father of the bridegroom sends some sweets, dry fruits, clothes and ornaments to the bride's home. The *Barat* procession is followed by elder women singing in *chorus*. Marriage ceremony is performed during the day time. The groom is received at the bride's house by the elder female member and others are also welcomed. Tea and snacks are offered to the party. The *Nikah* is presided over by the *maulvi* (priest) and the *mahr* money is also fixed at the same time. The bride and bridegroom both give their consent for the marriage and a contract is written in the presence of witnesses. The amount of *mahr* fixed varies from Rs. 9,000 to 21,000, promised for payment in future. It is generally demanded by the bride at the time of divorce. A big feast is arranged just after the *Nikah*. The bride goes to live with her husband and in-laws and her female relatives follow her for some distance, while singing in chorus. The bride stays with her husband for ten days. On the fourth day, feast is hosted where most of the relatives and neighbours participate and give presents to the newlywed couple. This is known as *wathal*. The rules regarding residence are patrilocal. The bride lives with her husband and in-laws after marriage. Divorce is permissible but practice is rare and most of the time avoided. A man enjoys more rights and privileges than the woman in the matter of divorce. A husband can divorce his wife on different grounds of barrenness, adultery, maladjustment, insanity, etc. The wife can also ask for separation if the husband is absconding, or does not bear the expenses of the wife and children or abstains from any sexual

contact for more than three years. Divorce may be given either orally or by *talaq-nama* (written document). After divorce the woman is prohibited from remarrying for a specified time called *Iddat*. If consummation of the marriage had taken place, the *Iddat* is for three months and ten days and is enforced till delivery if the woman is pregnant at the time of divorce. The duty of the father is to maintain the minor children after divorce. Widow, widower and divorcee remarriages are permissible but a widow and a divorced woman are allowed to remarry after the completion of the period of *Iddat*. Nuclear and vertically extended family types are very common in the Bakarwal community. In most cases the newly married couples establish a new household after marriage. Interpersonal relationship is amicably established among the family members and due love and respect is paid to the youngsters and elders alike. The eldest member of the family is considered as the head and takes the responsibility to control and overview activities of the family. Avoidance is maintained between relations like daughter-in-law and father-in-law; and between the younger brother's wife and husband's elder brother (*jeth*). Both of them are not allowed to touch each other and even talk directly. Talking is permitted between sister's husband and wife's brothers or sisters. After the father's death, the property is divided among the sons, daughters and widows but the daughters get a lesser share than sons. The succession pattern is followed in the male line, from the father to the eldest son in the large families. The breaking up of the joint family system and turning into the nuclear families are the only change noticed in recent years (Singh, K.S 2003).

### Death

The Bakarwals bury their dead members. The deceased's family inform all the neighbours, relatives and friends about the death. When they assemble, a bath is given to the dead by the *snangor* (a professional man), and the body is placed in a *taboot* (coffin) while body is wrapped in a *kafan* (shroud). The body is laid on the ground facing west and the priest recites a prayer. Thereafter the *taboot* is carried to the graveyard where a *lahad* (grave) is dug by the *malkhos* (sexton) or *gorkun* and he is paid money and served tea with bread. The dead body is then buried in the *lahad*. The Koran is recited on the fourth day for peacefulness of departed soul. The ceremony is also repeated on the fortieth day. These rituals are called *chaharum* and *chhallum*. Mourning is observed for forty days, after that the members start doing normal works (Singh, K.S 2003).

### Education

Some of Bakarwal community now with better education opportunities and hold different government and private jobs. They mix with the communities of different states and regions. Only a few boys have studied up to the primary level. The girls do not go to schools due to lack of awareness and social difficulties. The children of Bakarwals are not able to attain the school education though a few mobile primary schools have been introduced by the government due to lack of adequate motivation, incentives and their continuous movements in the hills and other difficult areas.

### CONCLUSION

It is observed that Bakarwals have friendly relations with their neighbouring tribal and non-tribal communities since they roam around in search of green pastures. The main subsistence economy of Bakarwals is rearing of sheep and goats. They are not access to formal education and modern health care facilities since they rely on nomadic life. The government is striving to implement different programs like Mobile Schools and Mobile Health Clinics etc. for the upliftment of nomadic communities but this community is not able to make use of these facilities due to their lack of awareness and their geographical conditions except a few individuals. Mostly they rely on money lenders, other tribal groups and non-tribal groups to meet their needs.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The government should implement the area specific programs to uplift these nomadic groups. And there is a need for further studies to know the changing patterns of culture among Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir. However, the concerned Research and Training Organizations and academic institutes should record and document the ethnographic details of Bakarwals to make available for future generation since the native culture of Bakarwals is endangered due to their interaction with different tribal and non-tribal groups.

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