



Pastoralism in the Northwest Himalayas: A Visual Portrayal

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South Asia is home to most of the world's nomadic groups (Rao 2003), including a tribe that traverses the great western Himalayan ranges, the Bakarwals. This pastoralist group in the Himalayas, are a paradigmatic example of highly mobile sheep and goat rearing nomads. They migrate with their livestock and households from the plains of the lower Himalayas to the high-altitude meadows of the larger Himalayan mountains in search of pasture for their herds on a seasonal basis. Etymologically, Bakarwal means "one who looks after goats or sheep", and this fact is established by the vast flocks of ovicaprids that the Bakarwal follow along with the mountain ranges. Each year in April, as the plains begin to heat up and the pastures become exploited, the Bakarwals pack their households and embark on a long and arduous trek of around 300 kilometers to their customary pastures. This voyage takes around two months, and in June, they establish camps in areas that are inaccessible to most of the local population. After around four months in these locations, they resume their trip back to their winter bases with their herds, a cycle that has continued since time immemorial. With this manner of living, the Bakarwals have developed their cultural system that is opposed to the regional way of life. But this traditional system is on the brink in more ways than one, living under continual strain from climate swings, border difficulties, and societal upheavals.

To capture these facets of their lives, I joined the tribe in 2019 as a participant-observer and have been walking with the groups on a seasonal basis since then. If one thing that alarmed me the most throughout this trip was an elderly Bakarwal stating that *your children would not witness people chasing goats and lambs with their houses packed on a few horses*. While reflecting on this and then relating it to the reality that the majority of the community's young men are either working as migrant laborers in other countries or have abandoned this

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way of life in favor of other subsistence economic systems, I made a point of at least charging my camera batteries along the journey, even if it meant trekking 9 hours a day, to record every aspect of this dwindling culture. Thus, with this in mind, I attempted to acquire as many pictures as possible to virtually preserve the pastoralism of the Kashmir Himalayas as photography is thought to actually supplement the field notes to make it bolster the ethnography (Banks, 2001). In addition to traditional anthropological methodologies such as observations and interviews, the most important aspect of this study was to comprehend the aesthetic experiences of pastoralism in the region through the perspective of “Walking Ethnography” (Valérie & Haydée, 2017). During about 280 calendar days, I walked and lived with the tribe to capture the process of continuity and change. The spatial movement with the tribe first appears to be an exhausting and pointless activity; nevertheless, with time and acceptance, one tends to get involved in the social context, and the sense of belonging assists in giving meanings to acts and emotions. Against this backdrop, this photo essay depicts the day-to-day activities of this pastoral community. A photographic essay is a set or series of photographs that are intended to tell a story or evoke a series of emotions in the viewer (Crowder and Cartwright, 2021). The following pictures were shot primarily in late 2020 and mid-2021, just a few months after the first and second waves of COVID-19.



Figure 1: A Bakarwal nomadic camp in Mathar meadow. They begin their spring migration to their pastures in the larger Himalayan ranges in the months of April and May, leaving for their destination in the mountains behind. The trek takes around two months, during which time they camp in various sites throughout the intervening meadows and Kashmir valley.



Figure 2: In the Himalayas, the pastoralist movement is predicated on the ‘push factor,’ in which one group pushes another forward until everyone reaches their own pastures. Each spring and autumn, whole families and household goods are relocated. Along with the tents and other shelter equipment, horses and mules are utilised to transport household things as well.





Figure 3 and 4: During the migrations, sheep and goat flocks move separately with one member from every household accompanying them and the households along with horses and mules move on the horse route that is longer and safer than the one utilised by herders. Irrespective of the different paths, their route and destination is always same. Herds are managed usually by male members of the community but at times, young females also move along the flock in mountain passes and busy highways. Those who cannot walk over the high-altitude terrain such as elderly people, are either moved on horse backs or they hire taxis to reach the nearest possible location to the pastures.



Figure 5 and 6: Most of the belongings are kept at summer and winter settlements and only the essential items are taken along on the journey which often includes the utensils, blankets, clothes, and food items. All of these household things are transported in specially woven jute bags that are linked in couplets to fit comfortably on the horse's back. Numerous families also have these goat hair bags, which are regarded to be stronger than the jute bags.



Figure 7 (above) and 8 (below): These Himalayan pastoralists either utilise tarpaulin or fabric tents or choose to camp in the open during their migration season. However, in the summer and winter pastures, people construct homes constructed of wood, mud, grass, and (or) stone, which are colloquially referred to as 'Kotha'. From the interior, a Kotha is often separated into two sections: the front half is used for cooking and sleeping, while the back portion is used for storage. Summer pastures (figure 7) have an abundance of wood and a scarcity of stone, in contrast to winter pastures, which have an excess of stone. As a result, we observe that the construction above is primarily constructed of wood and mud, but the Kotha shown in Figure 8 is constructed entirely of stone with wood pillars. As a result, raw material availability has a considerable impact in the geographical diversity of home styles.



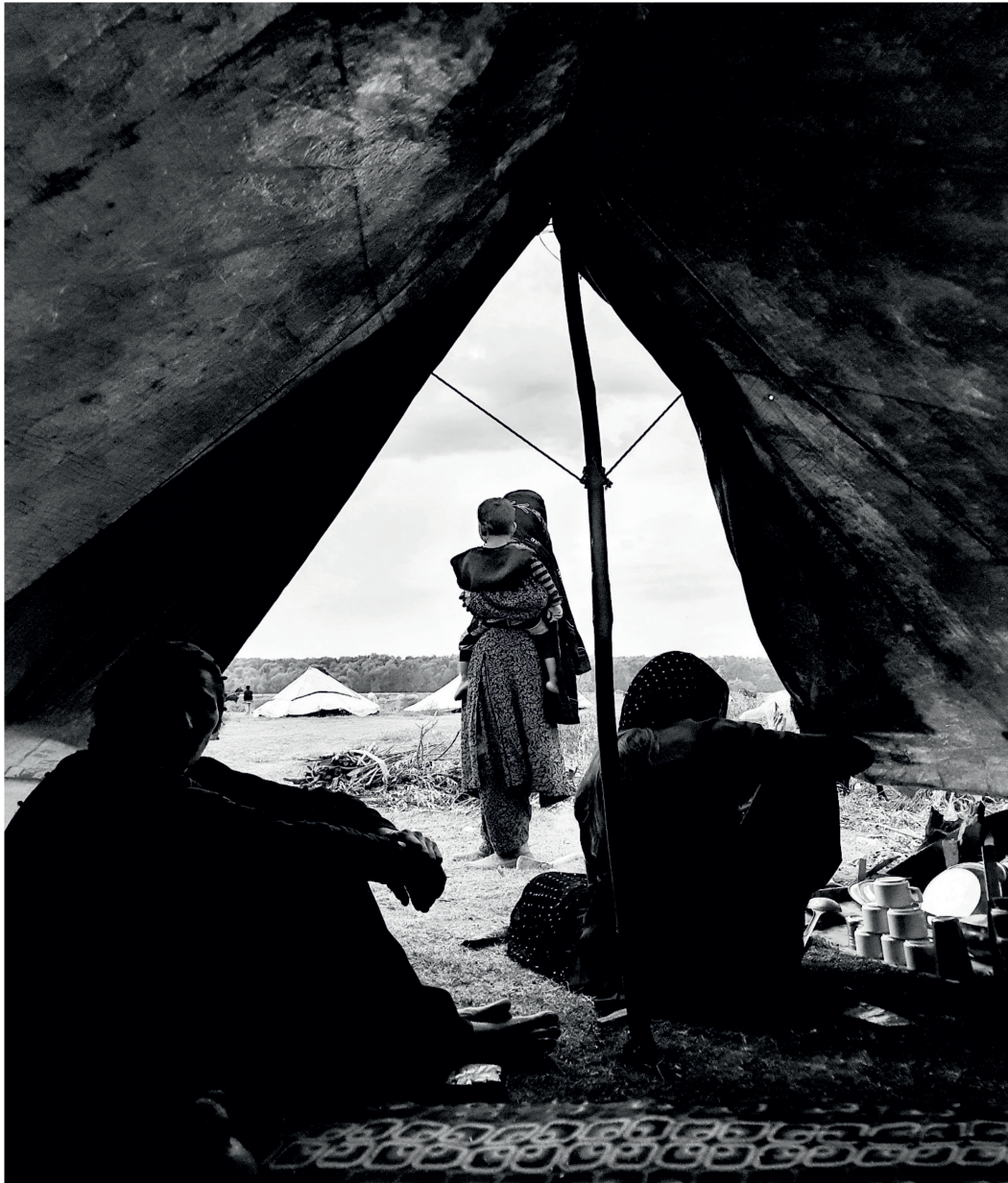


Figure 9: Women play an important role in the Bakarwal society. They take part in chores like making and unmaking of tents during the journey, repair of the kothas, cooking, firewood collection, agriculture, gathering of herbs, upbringing of children, and they at times look after the herds as well. Moreover, the Bakarwal children usually spend their day playing and helping their parents in daily household chores. Children are often given the responsibility of looking after horses and collection of the firewood.



Figure 10: It is hard for the Bakarwals to care after their flocks alone in the huge Himalayas, which is why they bred their unique species of herd dogs known as Bakarwali Dogs. It is a prized property, and during my fieldwork, I never saw or heard of a Bakarwal selling their dogs. These dogs are invaluable on the voyage, ensuring that no animal is left behind or taken in the deep jungle. They protect the flock from wild creatures such as bears and tigers in the upper reaches. Furthermore, due to the lack of food in the meadows, they are given goat milk and can survive months only on the milk. Once a Bakarwal stated that there is no pastoralism in the Himalayas without a dog with the flock



Figure 11 and 12: With shifting geopolitics and the climate change, there has been immense problems faced by the people who are dependent on the movement of livestock across the northwest Himalayan zone. Climate change, in particular, has resulted in dramatic changes in pastoralism around the world, and Bakarwals have been similarly impacted. Figure 11 illustrates a Bakarwal tent that has been ripped apart by the valley's unpredictable strong winds. These and several other causes have resulted in the sedentarization of the Bakarwals, who have abandoned their age-old custom. Due to the sluggish pace of sedentarization, it will take time and effort for the Bakarwals to adjust to this way of life. Figure 12 depicts the established Bakarwal hamlet, which has been occupied for around 10-15 years. These semi-sedentary and permanently inhabited villages are now scattered throughout Jammu and Kashmir, signalling the end of a century-old practise.



Acknowledgment

My thanks and appreciation goes to the Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir for trusting me with their photographs. Furthermore, I am grateful to Dr Mitoo Das for her supervision and Dr Rukshana Zaman for the valuable reviews.

Consent

Proper consent has been taken from all the persons depicted in the above photographs.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

U A, Dar. (2022). "Pastoralism in the Northwest Himalayas: A Visual Portrayal" in *Indian Journal of Anthropological Research*. Special Edition on Visual Anthropology. Guest Editor: Alison Kahn 1(2), pp. 9-17, ISSN : 2583-2417.