



Problem Faced By The Transhumant Gujjar And Bakarwal Tribes Of Jammu And Kashmir In The Amidst Of Covid-19

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Abstract: The novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic is far more than a health crisis: it is affecting societies and economies at their core. A virus which started from Wuhan, China in the late 2019 and spread globally within a shorter period. The virus is spreading unimaginably, which means that the experience of people, unfortunately, will be extremely different across regions. The spreading of coronavirus effects has been experienced differently from nation to nation. It also differed by gender, age groups, culture, communities, and socio-economic status. There is a danger that the pandemic can reinforce the regional disparities with possibilities of damaging society forever, if not handled in the right manner. The study is mainly based on secondary sources of data and personal observations on the ground at the time of their sessional movement from winter pastureland to summer grazing pasture. The newly formed UT of Jammu and Kashmir has been taken as a study area, and the target of the study is on a specific population 'Gujjar and Bakarwal'. The Gujjars and Bakarwal are one of the largest tribal group in the union territory. The core attribute of the tribe is Transhumance, and they use to migrate from upper reaches of the mountains to foothills or bottom of the valley, in summer and winter, respectively. This paper intends to study the problems faced by the tribal Gujjars and Bakarwal during this pandemic outbreak. The study demonstrates that the problems that have been faced by the coronavirus regionally differed.

Keywords - Seasonal migration, COVID-19, transhumances, tribes, Gujjars & Bakarwal

INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, the novel coronavirus was declared a global pandemic with significant health and economic implications worldwide. At the time of this writing, over 40 million individuals have contracted COVID-19, the disease caused by a coronavirus, and around 1,107,374 have died (World Health Organization, oct. 2020). Beyond the public health crisis, economies have been severely impacted across the world. New fears about the effects of stay-at-home measures and the long-term health implications of the virus emerged among governments and citizens alike. This pandemic has laid bare the inequalities are woven into our social fabric, including our institutions, systems, and policies. From education and employment to housing and health care, various domains of life have been impacted. The economic and health repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic touched communities in different ways, leaving marginalized populations more vulnerable to infections. The novel coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, has changed the world in many ways. Due to the deadly virus and thereby lockdowns significantly impacted the population across the globe. Government and policymakers introduced lockdown to mitigating the spread of the virus and to breakdown the continuous diffusion chain of it. It might have proved helpful to overcome the dissemination of the virus, but it effected whole the population in general and migratory labour a lot, those who were stuck at their workplaces and their family members at their home too. Likewise, these migrators, the tribal Gujjars and Bakarwal paid a lot. COVID-19 have had

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reach in India on January 30, 2020, and since that very time, it has been spreading across the country. Due to its onset, the strict nationwide lockdown has had introduced suddenly on March 24. This abrupt lockdown did make the migratory population unthinkable and miserable and was forced to stay in their host land. Being introduced to such a kind of sudden lockdown, whereas all the temporary mobile population faced severe problems across the country; similarly, the Gujjars and Bakarwal, seasonal migrators also faced the various problem.

Usually, the transhumant used to commence their seasonal migration at the last week of the March or the first week of April. Gradually they must leave their winter home along with their livestock in search of adequate summer grazing pastures. As usual, With the roaring of temperature, transhumant moves towards high altitudes. The COVID-19 and thereby lockdown, the administration did not allow them to move towards their summer destination. Administration compelled them to stay at their winter home, with no assistance, such as there is no availability of fodder and food for their livestock and their livelihood, respectively. There was no way left to support their lives and livestock.

There is new global comity taking shape. Across the world, from the markets of Wuhan to the streets of New York, Rome, Rio, and Delhi, people are sharing the experience of facing the COVID-19 pandemic as health, social, and economic threat. However, there is a darker side to this collective danger—a license to unleash racism against stigmatized groups. We have seen this at national borders, as countries hurry to separate "them" from "us." Nevertheless, we also see this within countries—as the COVID virus compounds the virus of racial hatred via politician, policymakers, journalists, or social media³.

The Transhumance delayed their seasonal migration and faced problem followed the COVID-19 but being a minority in general and humble tribal group in specific, they might pay a lot in return. Same as the Asian American, especially Chinese American in the United States, Dalits, Muslims and other minorities with low caste suffered the most across the Indian nation. *Nehginpao Kipgen*, in his study, stated that several instances of racial attacks on the people, even in the largest democracies—United States and India. Leader and the general public who stigmatize people of a certain race should realize that viruses such as COVID-19 do not have race, religion, nationality or boundary⁴.

With the increasing in coronavirus cases in the US, racism against the people of Chinese-descent and other Asians had also increased. The use of the term "Chinese virus" by Trump in the US and similarly, the term used "Corona Jihad" in India by Indian media and some politicians, contributed to racial attacks against the Asian Americans in America and the Muslims in India, respectively. Even being the head of the largest democratic country, Instead of trying to stop racial discrimination against the Chinese and other Asian Americans, Trump defended the use of the term "Chinese virus" during his White House press briefing on March 18.

Objective of the study

1. To study the impact of COVID-19 on the seasonal migration of Gujjars and Bakarwals.
2. Throw some light on the COVID-19 and discrimination.

Research Methodology

The analysis and arguments of this study are primarily based on the data available from news outlets, media reports, commentaries, statements from government officials, reports, research articles, and also from various NGOs as well as the authors own observation as the author himself hails from the same tribe. The study emphasis on the impact of COVID-19 on the seasonal migration of Transhumance and demonstrates the virus and thereby discrimination on various bases.

Result and Discussion

The general profile of the Transhumance:

India is a multi-lingual and multi-cultural nation with a rich diversity in its multitude of cultures, racial stock, languages and religions, and it called as the land of diversities. Almost all the religions of the world have been found here in this very nation, and apart from this, it's also blessed with climatic and geographical diversities. At one end we have Siachin where the temperature dips to minus 55, and on the other hand, we have Pokhran where temperature can

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7348427/>

⁴ <http://www.rightsrisks.org/in-media/covid-19-pandemic-and-racism-in-the-united-states-and-india-economic-political-weekly/>

go up to 55 degrees Celsius. All these things clubbed together brings in the diversity in the lifestyles of people which include dresses, food habits, festivals etc. and make our country stand out among all other nations and enrich and beautify our culture and reinforce cohesive coexistence.

As far as, the tribal Gujjars and Bakarwals are concerned, they are pastoral transhumant and possessing a unique ethnicity. The community in our country addressed with different nomenclature in another state. They play a significant role in the economy but at a micro-level. They cannot follow the static lifestyle & need to move from one place to another because of the nature of their occupation. They are called the Kachchi Rabaris in Gujarat, Yadavas in UP and Bihar, Rathod in Maharashtra, Banjaras in Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana, they are called Gujjars in Jammu and Kashmir union territory. This name is so familiar that automatically the picture of herds of cattle sheep and goat followed by some herdsmen come in the site. As they are the owners of the large flocks of sheep and goat and a large herd of cattle, they are also called 'Maldars' in Gujarat. They are the leading suppliers of milk and other dairy products in the entire region.

Even still now, the wind of modernity is not yet prevailing in the community of transhumance Gujjars and Bakarwals. They used to live a life of wandering around the places in search of fresh and adequate grazing grounds for their livestock. Busy in their world of rearing of cattle Sheep & Goats, they have been able to create a niche of their own in the ever-boiling state of J&K. They do not even like eating rice or nonveg like Kashmiri's but prefer eating the vegetarian food with Roti of Maize or Bajra along with Ghee or Buttermilk.

According to the 2011 Census, Gujjars and Bakarwals constitute 11.9% of the total population of Jammu and Kashmir as a state of j&k, of these mostly residing in Pir-Panjal areas of the UT. Together, they form the third largest ethnic group in the UT. As far as the social reconstruction of this community is concerned here in J&K, it is broadly divided into two groups Gujjars & Bakarwals. Gujjars which form a sizeable population are mainly stationed at one place and have forged into professions as Govt jobs, dairy farming, woodcutters, labours, some of them also rear donkeys, horses & mules & supply them in hilly areas for various purposes. The Bakarwals, on the other hand, have the real transhuman character, purely engaged in rearing & caring of goats. They form a sizeable population of approx. Six lakhs, this nomadic community, needs to move from one place to another. As by the last week of March or the first week of April, the winter pastures are almost exhausted, and this is the time when they start moving towards higher altitudes. They move in Kafilas (a group of interrelated families). These Kafilas follow either the Pir-Panjal route or the Banihal Pass route. The Pirpanjal route has all grazing fields en route, right from Akhnoor, Jammu to extreme north Kashmir (Naranag) the summer base pasture.

Problems faced by the Gujjar and Bakarwals during COVID 19:

India introduced a national lockdown on March 24 hoping to curb the spread of coronavirus pandemic. At the initial phase of deadly pandemic coronavirus, when the world was under the threat of it and had been trying to tackle it, with providing various assistances to their respective population. But these assistances were limited up to some extent, to a specific community, somewhat confined to the urban population. Due to COVID-19, the population has been affected differently in terms of their age groups, immunity, availability of health facilities, even on the basics of their socio-economic status, etc. Thereby nature of this terminal virus, it has been affecting the peoples across the world, irrespective of their cultures, caste, colour, creed, religion, race and their social status. Nevertheless, it is the humankind of the 21st century that made the virus do affect the people based on their castes, creed, cultures, colours, and even based on religious and socio-economic status. Such as in India, politicians and so-called media's anchors do make the virus as Hindu and Muslims, as well as, in U. S. they painted it with the colours of racism. So, in the amidst of covid-19, Muslims faced the problems a lot in **India** and **Asian American in the US**. This is the one dimension of discrimination in the amidst of covid-19 by politically, socially and religiously.

The transhumance of Pir-Panjal range of the Jammu and Kashmir Union Territory were also travelling in the same boat of discrimination and many different spheres of problems, during covid-19. The annual journey is the mainstay of Bakarwal and Gujjar tribes. They faced the problems; seasonal migrations delayed, after delaying they must face many problems during their journey, from the valley bottom, low hill (winter staying areas) to the upper reaches of Himalayas (summer grazing pastures).

Challenges faced by the Transhumance at their winter hometown:

Ideally, they must commence their seasonal movement in the last week of March or the first week of April. Nevertheless, this year, due to covid-19 and thereby lockdown, they did not do made their movement at the time. They passed around six months of cold winter in the lower valleys and foothills areas. After that, they do not possess forage for their livestock and must move. In the years, there is a compulsion for them to stay at their winter hometown,

without the availability of fodder for their livestock. They faced many problems; shortage of fodder, scarcity of water and even not allowing them to access the local forest areas on the one hand, and on the other hand; they were unable to sell their dairy products in the market, discriminated by the general public, by calling them as "virus spreader" and refused to buy their product, like milk, fresh mutter, Ghee etc. As usual, they sustain themselves on commodities – meat, eggs, milk, fresh butter, milk etc. – produced by their livestock. Javid Rahi, an expert on the nomadic pastoral tribes and a member of the community himself (Scroll.in news outlet by Fidous Hussan) stated that the adverse impact of delaying of the Transhumance is the reduced of food availability for the animals. Almost half of them are only starting now, nearly a month late, after the government gave full permission on April 23, for the pastoralists to use vehicles to transport their families and animals. A member of the community said that they are facing the problems of selling their products and buying the fodder for their livestock. Locals said that shopkeepers are taking advantage of the crisis by buying milk at about half the price. **Rafi**, a member of the community from Kathua, said that they would sell a litre of milk at Rs 40 earlier. "Now, shopkeepers are buying one litre for Rs 15, and when we insist, they use the coronavirus as an excuse." We have already delayed our journey by 20 days. Few more days and our animals will fall sick. They are not conditioned to bear the roaring heat,⁵ said **Bashir**. (Sagrika Kissu 22, Aug. 2020 news Click)

Firdous Hassan, 2020, the Bakarwals mostly rear the Australian Merino breed and local Poonchi and Kernai sheep, which cannot bear summer temperatures of the plains. These sheep are used to colder regions, and if the migration does not start in time, the Bakarwals and Gujjars will have to face significant losses in coming days," Rahi said. This delay could have a severe impact on the wellbeing of the animals, said the Bakarwals. The temperatures in the Jammu region had risen above 30 degree Celsius, and the jungles were overrun with herbs, some of which, the shepherds believe, are poisonous for the animals. So, families were taking turns to visit surrounding forests to collect fodder. An advisory from the deputy commissioner of Rajouri district asked for written permits for movement – "mattoos" – from tehsildars. The process of securing permits further delayed the migration schedules said, Basharat Ali. No grazing lands left When the Bakarwals are in Jammu, they lease grazing lands from local farmers, who cannot cultivate these lands during the winter⁶. However, since the migration has been delayed, the farmers have started sowing maize and rice in Jammu, and the livestock is no longer allowed to graze in the fields, said Chowdhary of the Gujjar Bakarwal Welfare Conference. "Now that these fields are being used for cultivating crops, the livestock of the Gujjars and Bakarwals are starving in Jammu areas," said Chowdhary. Normally, the Bakarwals could pay extra to the farmers to extend the lease, said Kavita Suri of Jammu University, who has done extensive research on the Gujjar and Bakarwal communities.⁷ Moreover, due to such circumstances, their livestock has been turning into deadstock to some extent.

Challenges faced during Covid 19 lockdown journey:

After delaying about a month, they got full permission to move, but unfortunately without any facilities. Throughout their journey, they faced problems like lack of basic food for their survival and fodder for their livestock, inadequate transport accessibility, and lack of health and sanitation facilities. Tanveer Ahmad, a resident of Udhampur district while talking to India spend news portal speak about his journey in the pandemic "He took his herd of 400 sheep, reported from Rajouri that he was getting distress calls from community members who had run out of food and medical supplies⁸. There is no open shop. We are managing with what we took from home, and we are afraid to enter localities for fear of the virus". The government has failed to set up medical facilities and has not even deputed enough officials to provide ration and food packets⁹. For the tribes, this annual journey is unthinkable without their clans. "Migration for the Bakarwals and Gujjars means taking entire dera [settlement] along with families," said **Ali** who will be accompanied by an associate instead of his family.¹⁰ "he stated that they are scared as now whenever they cross villages, people look at them and start murmuring things," **Yasser** said that the procedures for seeking permission have changed, they are not being allowed to take milch animals, cows and buffaloes, with them, (something they could till last year) and are worried about the supply of food and security over a journey that will last for a few months. They

⁵ COVID-19: With No Food, No Mask, No Sanitisers, Bakarwals <https://www.newsclick.in/COVID-19-Jammu-Bakarwals-Nomadic-Community-Stuck-No-Masks-Coronavirus>

⁶ Kashmir's Nomads Under Lockdown | Kashmir Observer. <https://kashmirobsrver.net/2020/05/08/kashmirs-nomads-under-lockdown/>

⁷ In Jammu and Kashmir, lockdown has disrupted seasonal <https://scroll.in/article/960770/in-jammu-and-kashmir-inconsistent-lockdown-rules-have-disrupted-seasonal-livestock-migration>

⁸ Lockdown: Delayed Spring Migration Will Cost J&K's Nomadic <https://www.indiaspend.com/lockdown-delayed-spring-migration-will-cost-jks-nomadic-pastoral-tribes/>

⁹ Ibid..

¹⁰ Lockdown: Delayed Spring Migration Will Cost J&K's Nomadic <https://www.indiaspend.com/lockdown-delayed-spring-migration-will-cost-jks-nomadic-pastoral-tribes/>

have been facing one issue after the other. **22-year-old Yasser Chowdhary** stated that "No facilities are being provided to us. Everything is shut, like shops which sold milk or ration to us." **Nazakat Khatana, president of the Gujjar Bakarwal Desh Tehreek-E-Insaaf, said** ration is running out. He has visited several Gujjar Bakarwals families who have set up their deras in different areas. All of them were worried that the government was not arranging facilities for them. The shops that would be open are shut. The people who would give them the only thing the authorities told us that we should maintain social distancing and not stop for rest in the villages that we used to on the way. Even locals beat up some Gujjar Bakarwals in Udhampur. They did not have a choice, they must go to colder climates, or their cattle will die. Their livestock was falling sick due to uncomfortable climatic conditions.

There were more steps added to get the permits for their movement; this had delayed the procedure. They did not understand why the government had to introduce these changes this year. On the one hand, there was a lockdown and having no facilities to visit the official places, and on the other hand, they had to follow additional steps to get the "mottos". They compelled them to in the amid of lockdown; they expected them to go to three more authorities to get permission. Most Gujjar Bakarwals do not have vehicles, and even if they do, they need passes to step out, or they will get harassed by the cops on the way.

Conclusion

Novel coronavirus impacted the people in various spheres of their life, from their economic, health, education to death. Without the vaccine, we must live with the virus do not know till know, so it is need of the hour we live like a most tolerant people on the planet without any prejudice. Migrants and refugees are often stigmatised and unjustly discriminated against for spreading disease. Such unacceptable attitudes further risk more comprehensive public health outcomes, including for host populations since refugees and migrants could be fearful of seeking treatment or disclosing symptoms. Refugees and migrants must be included in national public health systems, with no risk of financial or legal consequences for them. This approach is of the utmost importance, as there can be no public health without refugee and migrant health.

This study emphasises the impact of COVID-19 on the Transhumance and throws some light on the discrimination at the time. Various studies have been done on the 'discrimination in the admist of covid-19' and revealed that people were discriminated based on their nationality, religions, ethnicity, and colour etc. This study revealed that the specific community has been suffering. Thus, transhumant Gujjar and Bakarwal of Jammu and Kashmir has also been trapped between the cross fire of Covid-19 Pandemic and social discrimination. They have refused to sell their products in the market espically in Jammu and Kathud district of the Jammu and Kashmir just for being a tribe. It's the utmost responsibility of the every citizen of the region and above all resbonsibility of the respective Government to actively participate and overcome the problems.

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