



Pastoral Migration across the Pir Panjal: The Movement of Gujjars and Bakarwals in Kashmir

Rashid Manzoor Bhat¹ | V. Thirumurugan²

¹ Postdoctoral Research Fellow, (ICSSR) Department of History, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Tamil Nadu, India

² Professor and Head, Department of History, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, Tamil Nadu, India

Email: rsdbhat@gmail.com¹, thiruauihis2000@gmail.com²

* Corresponding Author:

Rashid Manzoor Bhat

Email: rsdbhat@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the historical movement of Gujjar-Bakarwal pastoral communities across the Pir Panjal and into the Kashmir region. It focuses on the routes they followed, the mountain passes they crossed, the seasonal grazing areas they used and the customary practices through which access to pastures was maintained. The study draws on historical writings, census records, administrative documents and ethnographic studies and uses a qualitative historical and descriptive approach. The available evidence does not allow a precise date to be assigned to the arrival of Gujjars and Bakarwals in Kashmir. Historical records and community traditions instead point to different phases of migration from areas such as Poonch, Rajouri, Jammu and Kishtwar towards the Kashmir Valley and the higher grazing areas of the Pir Panjal. Their annual movement generally followed a seasonal cycle, beginning in the lower winter pastures and passing through intermediate areas before reaching the higher summer pastures. This movement was shaped by knowledge of local environmental conditions, customary access to grazing land, community organisation and dealings with administrative authorities. Over time, forest regulations, changes in land use, tourism, territorial changes, armed conflict and restrictions on pasture access disrupted established migration routes and contributed to the adoption of more settled ways of life among some pastoral families. The study also considers the difficulties involved in formally recognising and recording the rights of communities whose livelihoods depend on seasonal movement across different areas.

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INTRODUCTION

The history of pastoral communities in the north-western Himalayas cannot be reconstructed solely from records of modern migration. The names used for these communities, the territories associated with them and the meanings attached to pastoral identity have changed over time. This is particularly important in the case of the Gujjars and Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir, whose present-day identities should not automatically be projected backwards into earlier historical periods. The term *Gurjara* occurs in early medieval historical literature in geographical and political contexts, but the presence of the term in an earlier source does not, by itself, establish an uninterrupted ethnic or occupational identity with the Gujjar pastoral communities documented in modern Jammu and Kashmir. The distinction is important because much of the older historical evidence concerns political territories and ruling groups, whereas later records increasingly describe communities through occupation, settlement and administrative categories.

Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* (12th century) is one of the major sources for the early history of Kashmir. It is the oldest significant historical record of Kashmir and is a valuable source of political geography of the Kashmir region. Meanwhile, it must be analysed critically, due to the fact that the work is a mixture of historical information and earlier traditions and literary narration. Stein's important discussion of the text focused on the importance of analysing the nature of Kalhana's sources and separating historical facts from historical traditions (Stein 1900). Such methodological reservations are applicable to the approach of study of pastoral communities because every mention of a people, territory or political entity in a medieval chronicle does not necessarily mean that it is evidence for the later social composition of Jammu & Kashmir.¹

The setting of the geographical location of Jammu and Kashmir also gives a historical background to know the issue of pastoral mobility. The area is situated within the plains of the Punjab, and the higher mountain ranges towards the north-western Himalayas. This terrain linked the economies of both lowland and mountain regions, and introduced pastoral groups to settled cultivators, traders, and other pastoral groups in the mountains. Such relationships were not necessarily based upon permanent settlement. Seasonal availability of pasture, water and agro wastes may induce economic interaction between mobile herders and settled people. Pastoralism is thus not only about the movement of herds but also a part of an exchange between ecological areas.

Historical care is also needed to distinguish the Gujjar and Bakarwal identities. Although settled or cattle-keeping Gujjars and more mobile sheep- and goat-herding Bakarwals are often grouped together because of common linguistic, cultural and social traits, occupational differences have historically served as a criterion for distinguishing the two groups (Contemporary scholarship). The Bakarwal identity is not seen as a static identity, however, by more recent research, which suggests that the identity might not have existed as it is today in antiquity. Verma, Gandhi and Dash (2019) suggest that the Bakarwals emerged as a recognisable contemporary pastoral group as a consequence of the convergence of the pastoralists and peasantry from various regions of the north-western frontier in the early twentieth century. This interpretation complicates the heritage of a community, which is one in which the notion of a fixed, ancient identity of the tribe is prevalent.² Also the administrative nature of the mechanism of state recognition of these communities was transformed during the twentieth century. The Bakarwals were added to the list of the STs of Jammu and Kashmir in 1991 and their official enumeration in the community started in a more systematic manner in 2001 Census.³ This is historically important because it shows how a community's social life and existence differed from the one that it later came to be known as, under the constitutional and administrative organisation of the Indian state. The classification of a pastoral population under which it is counted can affect how the population is recorded and access to state institutions, as well as the representation of the historical identity of pastoral groups.

Review of Literature

The literature on pastoralism of Gujjar-Bakarwal in Jammu and Kashmir has grown over the historical, anthropological, ecological and livelihoods studies. It is very important to have a historical account of the Gujjars of Jammu and Kashmir to understand their movement, settlements and traditions of origin as done by Warikoo (2000). Khatana (1992) has investigated the community mainly through the lens of pastoral migration and transhumance economy, thus offering important insights into the understanding of mobility as an organised economy system, rather than just seasonal movement. Later research has increasingly examined the social and environmental dimensions of pastoral mobility. Suri (2014) studied the effects of armed conflict on the seasonal migration of Gujjar and Bakarwal communities and demonstrated how insecurity altered established

pastoral practices. Verma, Gandhi and Dash (2019), while focusing on healthcare access, provide substantial ethnographic information on Bakarwal transhumance, including the organisation of households, seasonal mobility and the relationship between pastoral movement and marginal environments. Their work is particularly useful because it combines field-based evidence with an examination of the effects of conflict and sedentarisation.

Recent scholarship has expanded the field further. Dar and Das (2023) examine Bakarwal transhumance from an ethnoarchaeological perspective and emphasise the flexibility of pastoral identities, settlement patterns and subsistence practices. Dar (2023) examines changing Bakarwal social practices and links transformations in community life with shrinking pastures, sedentarisation and wider social change. Rashid, Banka and Ghosh (2025) focus specifically on the ecological and temporal dimensions of Gujjar-Bakarwal migration and the knowledge underlying established migratory practices. Despite this expanding literature, historical reconstruction of migration into Kashmir remains comparatively fragmented. Existing studies tend to examine either historical origins, contemporary mobility, ecological adaptation, conflict or social change. The present study brings these strands together by examining the historical movement of Gujjars and Bakarwals alongside the routes, institutions, ecological practices and political conditions that shaped the continuity of pastoral migration.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to examine the historical development of Gujjar-Bakarwal pastoral migration into Kashmir, analyse the organisation of seasonal mobility and access to grazing resources, assess the role of customary institutions and ecological knowledge in sustaining pastoral practices and examine how state regulation, land-use changes and conflict have affected the continuity of transhumance.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical and descriptive approach, drawing primarily on published historical works, census records, administrative documents and existing ethnographic studies on Gujjar-Bakarwal pastoralism. The available evidence is examined through historical source analysis and comparative reading to trace patterns of migration, seasonal mobility, grazing practices, customary institutions and changes in pastoral life. Particular attention is given to the relationship between pastoral movement and changing political, administrative, ecological and territorial conditions. The study also critically evaluates differences in historical accounts and avoids assigning a single chronology where the available evidence remains uncertain.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Movement of Gujjar and Bakarwal Pastoral Groups

The historical evidence does not establish a single date for the arrival of Gujjar and Bakarwal pastoral groups in Kashmir. K. Warikoo notes that no authentic historical record fixes the migration of the Gujjars into the hills of Jammu and Kashmir with precision.⁴ The historical record is stronger for tracing Gujjar settlement and migration than for establishing a precise date for the arrival of Bakarwals as a separately identified pastoral community. The geographical origin of the Gujjars is itself disputed. Warikoo records traditions associating the community with the Gurjara regions of Rajasthan and Gujarat, while also discussing accounts connecting them with Gurjistan and territories extending through the Caucasus, Iran, Afghanistan and the Indus region.⁵ Bhat records further theories linking the Gujjars with Central Asia, the Huns, Kushans, Khazars, Georgia and indigenous populations of the Indian subcontinent.⁶ These explanations do not possess equal evidentiary status and cannot be used to establish a single geographical origin for all Gujjar groups in Jammu and Kashmir.

A more specific account appears in the *Census of India, 1941*.⁷ The Census associated the movement of Gujjars towards Jammu and Kashmir with a severe famine affecting areas identified as Rajputana, Gujarat and Kathiawar. It referred to this as the Satahsiya famine, while noting that the precise period of the famine-related movement had not been established. The Census distinguished two migration streams. One moved directly from areas associated with Rajputana, Gujarat and Kathiawar, while another consisted of Gujjars who had first settled in Punjab and subsequently moved further north. The movement extended towards Kaghan, Swat, Hazara, Kashmir and Gilgit.⁸ Settlement evidence from the Jammu region provides a further basis for tracing Gujjar presence. Warikoo records Gujjar families in Rajouri, Reasi, Jammu, Poonch, Udhampur and Kathua who claimed ancestry from the Gujarat district of Punjab, now in Pakistan.⁹ Bhat identifies Bhimber,

Nowshera, Kalakote and Rajouri among areas associated with Gujjar settlement and describes Poonch as a traditional centre, followed by Reasi and Jammu.¹⁰

The historical evidence concerning Bakarwals is more limited. Bhat records their presence in the Kandi areas of Kathua during winter and associates their pastoral economy with cattle, goats, sheep and horses.¹¹ Warikoo distinguishes between settled and transhumant Gujjars and includes Bakarwal Gujjars among the transhumant groups, particularly in relation to sheep and goat herding.¹² These accounts place Bakarwals within the transhumant pastoral population of Jammu and Kashmir, but they do not establish a securely dated first arrival in the Valley. Migration traditions preserved among Valley Gujjars provide additional evidence of remembered movement. Warikoo records one tradition according to which Gujjar ancestors entered Kashmir between 1539 and 1542 CE. The same account records another tradition placing their arrival between 1127 and 1154 CE, during the rule of Bajay Singh in the territory beyond the Pir Panjal.¹³ Neither date can be treated as an established chronology of the first Gujjar arrival because both are presented as community traditions rather than dates confirmed by contemporary documentary evidence. Their historical value lies in recording remembered accounts of migration and settlement.

Routes, Mountain Passes and Seasonal Grazing Areas

Gujjar-Bakarwal seasonal migration operated through established mountain corridors connecting lower pastoral territories with the higher grazing areas of the Kashmir Himalayas. Khatana identifies the Pir Panjal and Banihal routes as major components of the Gujjar-Bakarwal migration system.¹⁴ Suri identifies Poonch, Rajouri and Kishtwar as major areas from which seasonal migration took place and records particularly heavy movement from the Poonch and Rajouri sectors.¹⁵ Pastoral groups from localities including Marhot, Mendhar, Surankote and Thanamandi joined routes leading towards the mountain crossings.

The Pir Panjal Range formed the principal mountain framework through which a major part of the seasonal movement was organised. Pastoralists crossed the range through mountain passes locally referred to as *gallis*.¹⁶ Two crossings were particularly important in the Poonch-Rajouri sector: Pir Gali and Nandan Sar Gali. Pir Gali connects the Bafliaz-Surankote area of Poonch with the Shopian side of the Kashmir Valley, while Nandan Sar Gali provides a route from the Rajouri side towards Pulwama across the Pir Panjal.¹⁷ Khatana also records the Pir Panjal Pass, Banihal Pass and Rattan Pir among the named locations associated with pastoral movement, grazing and temporary settlement.¹⁸ These crossings linked successive sections of the migration route.

The Banihal route constituted another important channel between Jammu and the Kashmir Valley. Khatana identifies the Banihal Pass route alongside the Pir Panjal Pass route in his treatment of Gujjar-Bakarwal migration.¹⁹ As route origins, areas including R.S. Pura, Jammu, Reasi, Rajouri and Poonch were connected with the Banihal and Pir Panjal corridors, with some movements continuing towards Sonamarg and Shopian. The Kashmir Valley was not necessarily the final destination of every migrating group. Verma, Gandhi and Dash describe Bakarwal migration across the Shiwaliks, Pir Panjal, Kashmir Valley, side valleys and the Greater Himalayan ranges. Some groups travelled more than 300 kilometres during the annual migration, passing through several ecological zones with their livestock.²⁰ The Valley consequently formed part of the route system for groups moving towards higher grazing territories.

The annual migration can be divided geographically into three broad stages: winter pastures, intervening pastures and summer pastures. Lower areas of Jammu and the Siwaliks provided winter grazing. The middle mountain areas formed intervening zones through which pastoralists moved as conditions changed. During summer, groups proceeded towards higher-altitude *margs* and *dhoks*, where fresh vegetation became available.²¹ Suri records that seasonal migration traditionally began during the first week of April and that upward movement was generally completed by the last week of June or the first week of July. Bakarwals tended to move earlier because sheep and goats could make use of the shorter grass and shrubs appearing after winter.²² The movement was therefore staggered according to the seasonal availability of grazing. Recent field research records highland grazing areas including Hafktodh, Jadh, Doongi Marg, Kamalkota and Toonda, with Pir Pass and Nandan Sar Pass identified as routes leading towards such grazing territories.²³ These locations represent particular sections of the summer grazing system.

The route system included temporary settlements and recognised halting places. Among these were the *dhoks*, which functioned as seasonal pastoral settlements or shelters associated with grazing. Suri records that particular *deras* followed particular routes and used some *dhoks* and grazing grounds as staging points

during seasonal movement.²⁴ The movement also had a collective form. Verma, Gandhi and Dash describe Bakarwal migration in organised *kafilas*, or caravans, in which families travelled together during the seasonal cycle.²⁵

Conditions of Pastoral Migration

Verma, Gandhi and Dash record that Bakarwals moved towards pastures above approximately 2,745 metres during summer, while annual movements could extend across elevations ranging from approximately 2,940 to 4,291 metres.²⁶ Access to pasture was not necessarily distributed equally among pastoral households. Ethnographic research indicates that particular *dhoks* and grazing areas could be associated with specific lineages. Lineage organisation therefore provided a social basis through which claims to grazing resources could be maintained.²⁷ The distinction between use and ownership is important in relation to pastoral land. Sharma's study of Bakarwal pastoralism notes that substantial areas used by nomadic pastoralists for grazing were not regularised in their names. Communities continued to use state land for pastoral purposes even where formal legal ownership remained elsewhere.²⁸ Customary access could involve lineage claims, established use, administrative permission, negotiated arrangements and access mediated through local authorities.

The relationship between pastoralists and political authorities was expressed through registration, grazing permits and regulation of forest and pasture resources. The 1961 Census of Jammu and Kashmir encountered the administrative problem of enumerating nomadic and shepherd populations whose seasonal movement took them between different parts of the State. Families in snow-bound areas were required to produce grazing permits, which helped officials establish their identity and determine their expected winter destination.²⁹ Earlier arrangements under the Dogra administration also involved registration and regulation of pastoral access. Historical accounts indicate that Gujjar-Bakarwal groups obtained access to forest areas under systems of registration, while some families received land for habitation and cultivation. Grazing became subject to increasing administrative control as forest management became more formalised. Regulation also extended to livestock. Regulation also extended to livestock. The Dogra administration exercised increasing control over pastoral grazing through forest regulations and grazing arrangements. Such regulation reflected official concern with the use of forest resources by livestock-dependent pastoral communities.³⁰

Community leadership formed part of traditional resource management. Ahmed et al. (2023) identifies *qafila* leadership as part of traditional Gujjar-Bakarwal resource management.³¹ The *dera* also operated at the household level within the migration system. Long-distance movement required the coordinated transport of livestock, household possessions, food, water and temporary shelters. Household members performed different tasks associated with movement and livestock management. The organisation of these activities was therefore connected with the continuation of the pastoral household as a mobile economic unit. Collective leadership also involved relations with external authorities. Community representatives could speak for households in matters concerning grazing access. Pastoralists moved through territories administered by different authorities.

Gujjar-Bakarwal pastoralists possessed knowledge of the environments through which they moved. Rashid, Banka and Ghosh describe migration as being shaped by knowledge accumulated over generations concerning the relationship between time, altitude and resource availability.³² This knowledge had direct practical uses. Pastoralists had to determine when conditions permitted movement, how long livestock could remain in a particular grazing area and when it was necessary to proceed to another location. Snow conditions, water availability, grazing quality and livestock requirements varied between years. The pastoral calendar therefore provided a framework for movement rather than an inflexible timetable.³³ Environmental knowledge was transmitted through participation in pastoral life. Younger members learned the practical requirements of migration through involvement in seasonal movement and livestock management. This allowed households to modify established movement practices according to annual environmental conditions.

The conditions supporting migration became increasingly vulnerable during the twentieth century. The conversion of some traditional grazing areas to other uses, expanding forest controls and later armed conflict affected access to territories used for pastoral movement. Pastures in areas such as Gulmarg were reportedly affected by conversion to tourism-related uses, while the spread of militancy from the 1990s made some forest and grazing areas difficult or impossible for pastoralists to use. Verma, Gandhi and Dash report that conflict significantly affected Bakarwal mobility and that traditional summer pastures in Gilgit-Baltistan became largely inaccessible after 1947. Later insecurity altered movement patterns and contributed to sedentarisation among sections of the community.³⁴ A 2012 survey reported that more than 39 per cent of Gujjars had

relinquished their migratory lifestyle. The survey attributed the decline to factors including killings of pastoralists in higher reaches, restrictions imposed by security agencies and militants, and the closure or loss of access to pasturelands.³⁵

The Forest Rights Act acknowledges the rights of communities including rights to use of forest resources in a manner that may include grazing and traditional seasonal use by nomadic and pastoralist communities. As far as administration is concerned, the use of land by mobile pastoralists is a problem because this does not take place in a single settlement, but rather in a number of territories visited from time to time. The analysis of the Gujjar-Bakarwal case shows that rights are hard to define and to record, given the mobility of resource users and the recurrent nature of their relationship with the resource, as opposed to being permanently residential.³⁶

CONCLUSION

History of Gujjar-Bakarwal pastoralism reveals that pastoral mobility in the western Himalayas can not be understood as a fixed or isolated practice. It was formed through the processes of movement, changing boundaries, political divisions, ecological diversity and interactions with settled populations. An important conclusion from the evidence is that mobility per se was an adaptation strategy: pastoral households adapted to varying land and resource availability without abandoning their overall system of economic activity. Another aspect of history also notes that pastoral identity has never been settled. The definitions given to words, such as Gujjar and Bakarwal, have changed over time as the communities have come into contact with new political and administrative structures, and suggests caution in reading the social categories of the current day into the past. Also important is the difference between customs and formal recognition of land rights, pastoral communities might have long-standing relationships with certain landscape dispositions without having formally registered and been recognized as the owners of those land dispositions. The pastoral migrations, in this sense, are also a history of the change of access to common resources. The knowledge of this historical relationship is important in the understanding of the meaning of pastoral rights in the present; because policies that are formulated and grounded only on permanent settlement, tend to overlook the territorial and seasonal aspects of pastoral livelihoods.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest associated with this article.

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