



Education Penetration in a Pastoral Nomadic Society: Analysis of Interplay Between Transhumance and Education Among Van-Gujars.

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Abstract:

In the modern world many communities are still dwelling on natural resources for their livelihood. Such communities mostly consist of tribal people living in symbiotic relationship with the natural habitat. Van-Gujar, a pastoral nomadic ethnic community is one among such communities practicing transhumance as a livelihood strategy. Van-Gujars inhabits North-Western states of India, practicing transhumance between highland pastures in the Himalayan ranges in summer season and lowland pastures in winter season. The community is completely dependent on livestock and livestock by products as a source of livelihood. Hence, being livestock dependent community Van-Gujar practice transhumance between highland and lowland pastures to feed the livestock and sustain livelihood practice. Van-Gujars are one of the least literate communities in the western Himalayan region. There is an interplay between education penetration and transhumance as a livelihood strategy. Being a livestock dependent community Van-Gujar practice transhumance and there is no permanent stay at any place. Hence, provision of education and other welfare provisions becomes altogether a different process for communities which have no stationary habitat. The study analyses the nature of interplay between the transhumance as a livelihood strategy and education penetration and its resultant impact on the socio-economic status of the community. For the purpose of the study a field survey was conducted in which schedule and observation method were employed.

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I. Introduction:

Education is a tool in hand that transforms lives and should be at core of any mission to build peace, eradicate poverty and drive sustainable development. It is a human right for all throughout life. Education is an empowering right in itself and one of the most powerful tools by which economically and socially marginalized children and adults can lift themselves out of poverty and participate fully in society, yet around 258 million children and youth are deprived of education worldwide as a result of social, economic and cultural factors. (UNESCO-2022). Article 3 of the World Declaration on Education for All (1990) identified nomads as one of several groups who are discriminated against in access to education services. Van-Gujars are also pastoral nomads and are one of the most educationally backward community of the Indian sub-continent. Pastoral nomads are livestock herders, practising transhumance in search of pastures to feed livestock. Pastoralism has played a vital role in the development of human civilization. Pastoral nomadism is one among the best ways of utilizing those parts of the earth which are unsuitable for cultivation and where resources are scarce (IIED, 2008). Pastoralism remained a dominant mode of production and predominant livelihood strategy but with the transition from pastoral economy to agrarian and then to contemporary industrial economy, pastoralism is now on the minority side of livelihood activities.

Van Gujar is a community of pastoral nomad inhabiting the northern part of the country consisting of UP, Uttarakhand, Himachal, Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan. There are many views regarding the origin of Gujars in India. The traditions of the tribe give little information about their origin and history. Cunningham claims Gujars to be connected with Yuchi tribe of Eastern Tartars (Central Asia) who came to India around 1st century B.C and 1st century A.D. According to Smith, V. (as cited in Verma, 2000) Gujars formed a branch of white Huns's, who invaded India in the 5th and 6th centuries, made their settlements in the Punjab and Rajputana

tracts. In the early medieval times Gurjara kingdoms established themselves as a prominent force on the political map of India. King Bhoja (840-890 A.D.) belonged to the Pratihara a Rajput clan of Gurjara stock. The period of diffusion and migration of the Gujars to Jammu and Kashmir is not known with certainty. According to one account they penetrated to hills after the loss of political power around middle of 6th century, some attribute their migration due to outbreak of serious drought and famine conditions in Gujrat and Rajasthan around 6th and 7th centuries which forced these pastoral people to migrate into hills (Verma 2000). After continuous and repeated foreign onslaught and internal dissensions in medieval period there was division of Gujar into the one who were able to retain power were called as Rajputs and those who were forced to migrate for security and grazing facilities for their cattle which resultantly migrated to hills (J&K). From J&K Gujars migrated to princely state of Chamba which is adjoining territory of J&K, due to growing need of grazing pastures for their livestock.

The Van-Gujars are Buffalo herders as majority of the livestock is represented by buffalos. Van-Gujars migrate to upper parts of Himalayas along with their herd during the summer season and back to the Shivalik foothills and plains with the onset of winters. During the transhumance cycle Van-Gujars come across many challenges and problems. The Gujars of Himalayan ranges are without sufficient food, fodder for their animals and lack of basic facilities like proper shelter, health, drinking water, education, etc. Moreover, most of the nomads are not aware of schemes operating by the state and central governments for their upliftment and poverty eradication (Koundal, 2012). The un-hygienic conditions, overcrowding in hutments, frequent forest visits and stay in caves during migration exposes to wild rats, thus increasing their susceptibility to plague and other communicable diseases (Goel, Gauri, Kaur, & Singh, 2014). Such conditions prevailing amongst the community are clearly not the characteristics of an educated society or community. Education plays an important role in the development and progress of a society. According to 2011 Census of India records, literacy rate of Himachal Pradesh was 82.80%. According to the Governor report 2019-20 of Himachal Pradesh the literacy rate among the tribal population was 73.64%. In contrast to the descent percentage of literate population in Himachal Pradesh the literacy rate amongst the Van-Gujars of Upper Yamuna River basin, having at least one season stay in Himachal Pradesh the literacy rate was found at low percentage of 25.88% (Table 1). Such contrasting figures poses many questions; therefore, to understand the factors responsible for the poor penetration of education and resultant effects on socio-economic development of the community a detailed inquiry to be carried out was essential.

Study Area:

The upper Yamuna River basin where pastoral Van-Gujars are in considerable numbers and practice transhumance as a livelihood strategy, has been selected for the present study. The study area lies between 30°14' 27" N to 31° 25' 32" N and 77°03' 25" E to 78°37' 27" E. Partially Shimla, Solan and Sirmour districts of Himachal Pradesh and Dehradun, Uttarkashi and Tehri-Garhwal districts of Uttarakhand have been selected for the study due to the presence of transhumance activity in all districts. Study area is mainly drained by the Tons and Giri rivers which are the major tributaries of the Yamuna. Elevation profile of the study area varies from approximately 250 meters in lowlands to 5500 metres in highlands.

Objectives of the Study:

The proposed study intends to know the following objectives:

1. To analyse the transhumance as a livelihood strategy and its impact on spread of education among the Van-Gujar community.
2. To assess the extent of education penetration and its impact on the transhumance as a livelihood strategy.

II. Methodology:

A comprehensive field survey was conducted to understand the transitional lifestyle and associated challenges of the Van-Gujars. Schedule and observation methods were employed for the purpose of the study. Study area nearly consist of 40 Van Gujar groups, out of which 8 groups have been surveyed for the study purpose. The groups were selected through the stratified purposive sampling technique based on group size and location of highland and lowland pastures. Only the group having population of 20 to 150 members and having different location of either highland pastures or lowland pastures. Field survey was conducted at all the stages three stages of transhumance cycle i.e., Highlands (summer camps), Migration and Lowlands (winter camps) hence encompassing all the stages of seasonal migration cycle.

Transhumance cycle:

The transhumance cycle starts in around the second week of April from the lowland areas of altitude 500mts towards high altitude pastures to feed livestock. Elevation profile vary from about 500mts in lowland

pastures to about 4000 -4500mts in highland pastures. After travelling for around 20 to 30 days and covering distance of 150 to 300km, Van-Gujars along with livestock herds reach high altitude areas around first or second week of May. Around the last week of September after feeding livestock in high altitude green pastures for almost four to five months, Van-Gujars start moving back towards lower tracts and reach by the last week of October right before the onset of winter season. Van-Gujars practice transhumance because of dependence on livestock for livelihood. Transhumance cycle is completely dependent and decided by the geographical landscape and climatic conditions of the region. Van-Gujars move to highland pastures for the summer season as fresh green grass is abundant during this period of time which act a rich and nutritious source of fodder for the livestock. Moreover, the temperature in the low altitudinal areas is high during the summer months to which livestock breeds are not adaptive. Hence, both pull and push factors are responsible for the seasonal migration towards highlands. During winter season highlands get laden by snow due to precipitation in the form of snowfall, which compel Van-Gujars a nomadic pastoral community to move to lowlands in the Shivalik foothills and surrounding areas where climatic conditions are conducive for the livestock.

Why Transhumance as a Livelihood Strategy and how does it impact the spread of education among the Van-Gujars?

Transhumance is a form of pastoralism that has been practised around the world since animals were first domesticated. In most simple terms transhumance can be described as the seasonal movement of livestock from one to another pastures. The Oxford English Dictionary defines transhumance as “the action or practice of moving livestock from one grazing ground to another in a seasonal cycle, typically to lowlands in winter and highlands in summer”. Transhumant practices represent an important range of past and contemporary human mobility strategies developed by the livestock herders (Costello and Svensson, 2018). Variations can be seen in the forms of transhumant practices. Khazanov's (1994) classifies transhumant pastoralism practices into 1) Nomadic pastoralism 2) semi-nomadic pastoralism 3) semi sedentary pastoralism. Nomadic pastoralism in purest form as defined by Khazanov (1994) is complete absence of agricultural practices and people involved lack a fixed base or dwelling place. Semi-nomadic pastoralism which is much more wide-spread around the globe, involves some elements of agriculture along with periodic changes of pastures. On the other hand, sedentary pastoralism is characterised by arable farming as main element as a consequence only few members in the family move with the livestock while other remains at a fixed base where farming practices are carried out. Davis (1941) observed two types of trans-humance prevalent during his time i.e., ‘Mediterranean’ transhumance which was driven by the hot summers as a consequence the need to get livestock out of the parched lowland and the other was ‘Alpine’ transhumance which was driven by the need to free up land in the lowland for cultivation of crops during the summer season. Transhumance as a livelihood emerged from the pastoralist's adaptation to the various challenges such as need for diverse stock management, economic responsiveness, social mobility, competition for land and as a response to climatic challenges. Transhumance is one of the adaptation strategies adopted by the pastoralists for the sustenance of livelihood. Pool of livelihood adaptation strategies adopted by Pastoralists include seasonal transhumance, commercialization, sedentarization, diversification and adoption of alternative livelihood options similar to other farming counterparts.

Van-Gujars falls in the nomadic pastoral type of classification as the community is completely dependent on livestock and most of the families do not own any land and do not practice agriculture. Being a livestock dependent community Van-Gujars are bound to feed and protect the livestock for sustenance of their own livelihood. Van-Gujars have been practicing transhumance for many generations, but present generation do not know why and when exactly their ancestor's adopted transhumance as a livelihood strategy. There are mainly two theories about the origin of Gujars and their adoption of livestock herding and pastoral nomadism as a livelihood strategy. One set of scholars believe changes in climatic conditions bringing drought conditions was the trigger point; whereas, second set of scholars believe the loss of geo-political power in the medieval times set the path for adoption of nomadic pastoralism. What is clear is that it was adopted as an alternate livelihood strategy owing to the various conditions. According to Gooch (1992), for most of the pastoral nomadic communities in the world, nomadic pastoral lifestyle is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain as the context in which they perform their traditional pastoral management is rapidly changing. Salzman (1988) points out that many pastoral "castes" in India have been able to take advantage of attractive socio-economic changes in society, but Gujars for a variety of reasons, has not been able to utilise expanding market for its produce. Gujars seems caught up and lagging way behind in the modern development; a development which threatens their survival without offering them any practical opportunities for integration into the mainstream societies.

Van-Gujars are still among most backward section of the society. According to a survey conducted by the Himachal Consultancy (HIMCON) in 2006 almost 43,100 Gujars in the state were the poorest, living in sordid conditions, had no access to education and highly vulnerable to food insecurity. According to Gooch (1992), the vulnerable position of pastoral Gujars in Indian society is attributed to various reasons; pastoral Gujars do not have any fixed addresses; therefore, are not registered anywhere as Indian citizens and so do not have any voting rights. Exploitation under the banner of forest management which started under the British

colonial rule is still prevalent. Penetration of the market economy and competition has further negatively affected the pastoral Gujars. At present the situation is slightly different as most of the pastoral Gujars have been conferred with voting rights and other welfare schemes; but pastoral Gujars somehow have not been able to utilise the rights and welfare schemes to their advantage. Van-Gujars are still living in sordid conditions, are one of the educationally backward communities in India. Despite the right to free and compulsory education being conferred to each and every citizen of India in 2009, the literacy figures are poor amongst the community in the study area. Only 25.88% of the population is literate in the study area which is far below the national average of 74.04%. Drop-out rate from primary school was found at a staggering high percentage of 91% (Table 1).

There is an interplay between transhumance and literacy penetration among the Van-Gujar community. Among various other reasons the most responsible factor for low literacy rate and poor penetration of education amongst the Van-Gujars is the transhumance as a livelihood strategy. Due to the nature of lifestyle Van-Gujars are not stationary at any place. They along with livestock undergo a transhumance cycle from lowland to highland pastures and vice-versa. The route of transhumance cycle is characterised by various climatic and physical challenges and in some cases inter-state borders put up administrative challenges. Moreover, the highland pastures are at such high altitudes and far from permanent human settlements which made them inaccessible to the general public and state authorities for provision of basic amenities and other welfare measures. Van-Gujars for a brief period come in proximity to inhabited areas in lowlands for winter season. Some children are enrolled in Schools and Madrasas, but at the onset of summer season when the trail starts for highland pastures most of the children leave schools. There is no provision of formal education institution along the route length and at high altitude; therefore, leaving them with no education facilities for the rest of the transhumance cycle. This phenomenon also contributes to the high drop-out rate from schools among the community. In early 2000s mobile schools were started on pilot basis in the region but due to inaccessibility owing to difficult terrain and distance from inhabited areas the project could not attain success as human resources (teachers) found it impossible to provide services at such locations. Therefore, all the efforts made for providing education didn't achieve much success which can be attributed to the transhumant lifestyle of the Van-Gujar community. Hence, it is clear that the transhumant lifestyle of the Van-Gujars for their livelihood is the major reason for poor penetration of education resulting into low literacy rate in the community.

This raises a question mark why then the Van-Gujars are still engaged in livestock herding and performing transhumance and living destitute life, despite the various employment opportunities available in the modern and surely more developed world? There are various reasons which have left them with no other option but to continue the nomadic lifestyle for livelihood. Van-Gujars are people with no agricultural land and have no permanent place of residence. Even though majority of Van-Gujars are willing to leave the age-old practice and opt for permanent settlement but there is no viable alternate livelihood practice available for them. All offers of development and permanent settlement have incorporated giving up pastoralism and trying to survive on tiny plots of marginal, agricultural land. Land offered for permanent settlement is not enough for sustaining livelihood for Van-Gujars with large joint-family structure as is the case for most of the deras.

Low literacy rate and poor standard of education due to poor penetration of education owing to transhumant lifestyle has acted as a barrier for the community to enter into other professions of the modern industrialized world. As Van-Gujars have for the generations been pastoral nomads and remained socially excluded from the general public, hence they only excelled in livestock herding and remained unskilled according to the requirement of the modern employment opportunities. World around them kept changing, but they remained untouched by the positive changes. Illiteracy binds the community from exploring new employment opportunities as lack of education acts as a barrier to acquire the skills necessary. This was observed in the study area as out of the 402 people none was employed/engaged in any other profession. Other than livestock herding they are only capable of doing manual labour work. Therefore Van-Gujars cannot afford to leave livestock-herding in favour of irregular and manual labour work which makes it an unviable option. Unskilled nature makes them un-available and unqualified for other employment opportunities. Due to lack of education, the community have not been able to utilise the various welfare schemes and rights available. Van-Gujars could not take the advantages various welfare initiative and other modern technological developments and hence has remained underdeveloped. Hence, there is a presence of a vicious cycle along with the transhumance cycle. Transhumance as a livelihood act as a barrier for the penetration of education which results into the educational backwardness and lack of modern age skills amongst members of the community. Lack of modern age skills left them with no other option but to continue the traditional practice of transhumance as a livelihood strategy. Transhumance as a source of livelihood comes at a great cost of underdevelopment of the Van-Gujar Community. Pastoralism remained a dominant mode of production and predominant livelihood strategy but with the transition from pastoral economy to agrarian and then to contemporary industrial economy, pastoralism is now on the minority side of livelihood activities as it has become economically unviable to continue the age-old practice. Therefore, being deprived of and neglected on almost all the aspect of development Van-Gujars are in poor state finding it difficult to sustain their livelihood through age old pastoral

nomadic lifestyle. Hence, nomadic lifestyle along with the inability of the state to provide necessary support are the major reasons for poor socio-economic conditions of the Van Gujar community.

III. Findings and observations:

It is found that nomadic Gujars earn more income in highlands as compared to lowlands as milk productivity is more in highland pastures due to sufficient availability of nutritious green grass as compared to lower tracts where there is always a scenario of lack of fodder. Resulting into decrease in milk productivity. To increase productivity of milk Van-Gujars are left with no other option than to buy animal feed and fodder from market which increases the input cost. Gujars buy feed and fodder for winter months at the price of 7000-8000 per truck or they are rented lands for grass at the rate of 1000/bigha. Therefore, due to high input cost, net revenue from the livestock herding is very less compared to highlands. Also, there are alternate income earning opportunities as manual labourers in and around highland pastures. Van-Gujars get labour work in fields and orchard as due to well-built physical stature; they are well suited for labour work in the farms and fields where mechanization is in still initial stages and hasn't penetrated among the masses. Due to lack of other skills, they are not suited to work in industries which are main economic activities in lowland areas due to rapid industrialisation and farm mechanisation in the lowlands. Most of the work in plain farms and fields is now being done by machinery. Van-Gujars rarely get any alternate work in lowlands, which adds to the income earning disparity at highlands and lowlands.

IV. Solution and Suggestion:

To end the vicious cycle of interplay between transhumance cycle and poor socio-economic conditions there is only possible solution i.e., to raise the standard and penetration of formal education so that the community members can acquire skills which meet the standard of modern society.

1. Use of modern technology, such as tele-communication services, drones and solar energy equipment can be the best and tools to impart the education among the Van-Gujar community. Communication tools powered by solar energy can be helpful in providing tele-education facilities in distant and difficult terrains. Similarly, the same tech and tools can be used to deliver other basic facilities such as emergency health services and ration supply during the climatic disaster and health emergencies.
2. Residential schools can be a success if implemented with the proper planning and no economic bearings on the community. In residential schools, children can acquire education where as elders can continue their livelihood without worrying about children.
3. Effort should be made for the settlement of the families which are ready for permanent settlement, but enough land or other income generating opportunities should be provided for sustaining a descent and dignified livelihood.

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Table 1
Study Area: Levels of Education

Groups	Levels of Education				Total Members
	Primary	Secondary	Higher	Illiterate	
1	23	5	1	35	64
2	7	0	0	37	44
3	34	4	1	94	133
4	3	0	0	20	23
5	9	0	0	26	35
6	6	0	0	38	44
7	9	0	0	29	38
8	2	0	0	19	21
Total	93 (23.13)	9 (2.33)	2 (0.49)	298 (74.12)	402 (100)

Data in the parentheses are percentage to the total.

Source: Field survey January, April, May 2021.