

A Culture of Indifference: What the Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir Endure

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This is the second article of a two-part series on the Bakarwal community. Read part one [here](#).

In the picturesque landscapes of Jammu and Kashmir, the nomadic Bakarwal community finds itself grappling with the harsh realities of 'second-class citizenship'. Despite being categorised as a Scheduled Tribe (ST), the Bakarwals face numerous challenges due to state intervention, policy gaps, and an overall lack of access to basic services.

The Bakarwals, a nomadic Muslim tribe, lead a marginalised and invisible existence. As primarily shepherds, their livelihood depends on livestock, and they have retained their traditional way of life despite minimal integration into mainstream society.

Unfortunately, this lack of integration has resulted in severe socio-economic disadvantages, including limited access to education, healthcare, land rights, and other basic amenities. Lack of state intervention and policy gaps have further perpetuated their marginalisation.

While harsh weather conditions, minimal special integration and widespread political unrest has contributed to their marginalisation, the situation is made worse because of coercive ideals of 'hygiene' and 'civilisation' imposed on them by the state. These do not account for the community's way of life and unique knowledge systems.

This minimal spatial integration of the Bakarwal community can be attributed to the limited accommodation of their lifestyles by dominant groups rather than a deliberate choice made by the community itself. As evidenced by the interviews conducted in the area, integration or assimilation is not a decision that can be imposed upon the Bakarwals.



Members of the Bakarwal community with their cattle. Photo: Special arrangement

If they were inclined towards integration, a significant portion of the community would have already abandoned their nomadic lifestyle and merged with the dominant groups. However, the fact that they continue to adhere to their traditional way of life indicates a strong desire to preserve their cultural identity and uphold their unique practices.

Explaining the practice of Nomadism, Mohammed Sadiq (58) said, “It was a fulfilling way of life, characterised by owning and herding sheep and goats while migrating between different locations, spending summers in Kashmir and winters in our homeland of Rajouri. However, we faced significant setbacks when we lost all our livestock, which forced us to stop our nomadic lifestyle. For the past three years, we have been residing in Srinagar and are no longer engaged in Nomadism.”

The Centre for New Economics Studies’ (CNES) Visual Storyboard Team, O.P. Jindal Global University, spent a few months in Jammu and Kashmir with the Bakarwal Community, attempting to understand the lived experiences of members of the community. Our findings, discussed in a two part series, reveals a wide gap in the existing socio-economic policy of the state and the Union government that fails to uplift and promote the welfare of nomadic groups and the preservation of their cultural identity.

Access to education

In the tapestry of India's diverse communities, the Bakarwal tribe stands as a stark example of educational marginalisation and exclusion as they continue to grapple with abysmal literacy rates and limited access to education. Official census data reveals that as a tribe, the Bakarwals experience one of the lowest levels of literacy in Jammu and Kashmir.

With a literacy rate below 30%, they are among the few tribal communities in India struggling to attain educational empowerment. The lack of educational opportunities severely hampers their prospects for socio-economic advancement and perpetuates their space within the social hierarchy. Sher Mohammed (60), said, "With six months spent in Poonch and six months in Kashmir, our constant movement makes it difficult for our children to receive consistent education. We wish for support from the government, which would enable us to settle down in a particular location."

The educational prospects for the Bakarwals, particularly beyond the high secondary level, are dire. Only a small fraction of students manages to pursue education beyond this stage, and even then, it is primarily restricted to the relatively privileged '*maldar* Bakarwals' (rich Bakarwals). The majority of Bakarwal students are unable to access higher education due to a combination of systemic barriers, socio-economic constraints, and limited institutional support.



Children from the Bakarwal community. Photo: Special arrangement

During our ethnographic study, we had in-depth interactions with a number of Bakarwal *deras* (a combination of a few families and households) to ascertain their concerns regarding 'access' to basic education, healthcare, and other amenities.

Only two male respondents from the deras were able to pass the matriculation exam, highlighting the significant educational gap. A closer examination of different age groups within these families revealed that most Bakarwals either never attended school or, if given the opportunity, received education only up to below-primary level.

When asked about the level of education within their families, Sher Mohammed said, “Even those among our children who have managed to attain some level of education find it challenging to secure government jobs. The absence of mobile schools further compounds our educational struggles.”

This lack of access to education perpetuates a vicious cycle of poverty and limited opportunities for the Bakarwal community. Without adequate education, individuals face restricted employment prospects, limited social mobility, and an increased vulnerability to exploitation. The resulting, intergenerational cycle of educational deprivation further reinforces the community’s second-class status as citizens and denies them the chance to break free from the confines of marginalisation.

Mohammed Nazir (65) told us, “Despite holding many cards for government schemes, I have rarely witnessed any tangible benefits from them. This disparity between the launch and actual implementation of education and employment initiatives adds to the difficulties we face in securing stable livelihoods.”

The role of the state and the socio-economic status of the Bakarwals

The Bakarwal community, once a vibrant and self-sustaining nomadic tribe, now finds itself neglected by the state. Despite the government’s claims of upliftment and support, the reality on the ground tells a different story. Through first-hand accounts from community members, it becomes evident that lack of state interventions has contributed to the ongoing marginalisation of the Bakarwal community.

In 2020, the government introduced a transportation facility to assist the Bakarwals during their migratory journeys. However, this initiative has largely remained inaccessible to most of the community, as only a small percentage from the wealthier class can avail this service. The transportation facility was envisioned to alleviate the hardships of traffic accidents and weather-related issues. Regrettably, the reality is that a mere 1% of the community benefits from this scheme.

The government’s claim of providing mobile clinics to the Bakarwals is yet another instance of unfulfilled promises. Veterinary doctors rarely travel or stay with the community in the forests, leaving their animals without proper care. This absence of medical professionals not only affects the well-being of the livestock but also places additional burdens on the community, who are left to rely on their own limited supply of medicines and employ traditional means of tending to their animals.

Speaking about the difficulty in accessing healthcare and transport, Nazir said, “Adding to our hardships, living in proximity to forest areas means we lack access to healthcare facilities. In cases of medical emergencies, we resort to makeshift solutions by carrying

patients on wooden *charpeis* on our shoulders, as there are no nearby medical facilities available.”

The Bakarwals are deeply connected to their centuries-old nomadic practice of relying on forests and pastures for their livelihoods. However, the government’s current policy on forest preservation fails to protect and ensure the preservation of their traditional lands and access to their traditional pastures. The closure of forests and the appropriation of vital grazing areas have disrupted their way of life, severely impacting their socio-economic conditions.



A child from the Bakarwal community. Photo: Special arrangement

The community calls for forest rights and access to their traditional pastures, as well as the construction of shelters along their migratory routes. They are sure that these measures would greatly benefit the Bakarwals and contribute to the continuity of their nomadic existence. The community’s reliance on forest resources for firewood is hindered by the fear of arrest and imprisonment. Gathering firewood from the forest, a traditional practice for cooking meals, has become a risky endeavour due to legal restrictions. This restriction further exacerbates their economic hardships, as alternative fuel sources may be limited or costly, putting an additional burden on the community’s already strained resources.

With limited opportunities for sustainable income, the Bakarwal community heavily relies on agricultural work to sustain their families. However, accessing suitable employment opportunities often comes at a high cost. The journey to Kashmir’s summer pastures in the valley involves significant financial burdens. In order to reach their destination, community members are required to bear substantial expenses, including the cost of hiring trucks from Rajouri, Poonch, and other districts of Jammu.

This highlights the challenging nature of their nomadic practice. What was once a traditional and inherent part of their way of life has now become a difficult and costly activity. The need to rely on external transportation services adds a layer of complexity

and financial strain to their already marginalised existence. Mohammed (60), a resident of Poonch said, “It is crucial for the government to extend support to our community by providing mobile schools and mobile health clinics. Additionally, assistance in the transportation of our livestock from Rajouri to Kashmir and back is essential.”

These instances raise concerns about the effectiveness and implementation of other government initiatives that claim to empower the Bakarwal community. The challenges faced by the Bakarwal community have led to an uncertain future for their nomadic way of life.

Without sufficient support and facilities to sustain their nomadism, many community members contemplate abandoning their Bakarwal identity and transitioning to settled lifestyles to secure education for their children. The loss of traditional routes, the increasing taxes imposed on them, and the absence of accessible pastures have further jeopardised the viability of nomadism for the Bakarwals.

Providing ‘agency’ to the community

The Bakarwal community’s journey to the summer pastures in the Kashmir Valley serves as a testament to their unwavering resilience in the face of numerous challenges. Despite the lack of support structures and the financial burdens they endure, they persist in maintaining their centuries-old nomadic practice. Their determination to preserve their unique way of life and sustain their livelihoods is truly remarkable.

However, it is crucial for society and the state to recognise the value and significance of the Bakarwals’ nomadic practice. Efforts must be made to provide them with the necessary support and infrastructure to ensure the continuity of their traditional lifestyle. This includes affordable transportation options, access to healthcare facilities, protection of grazing lands and forests, and avenues for economic empowerment.

The Bakarwals’ nomadic lifestyle is not only a cultural heritage but also a sustainable practice that is deeply connected to the natural environment. It is imperative that steps are taken to protect and promote this way of life, allowing future generations to embrace their cultural identity and continue the legacy of their ancestors.

By recognising the rights of the community and investing in their lives-livelihoods by providing them access to basic amenities and socio-economic opportunities, the state and the Union government can help foster the integration of a marginalised community into the mainstream. At the same time, this would promote an inclusive consciousness of democratic fundamentals– built on the celebration of diversity, upholding the fundamental, constitutional principles of equality and social justice for all.

It is imperative that there are safeguards to protect a community’s centuries-old way of life and ensure that their resilience is rewarded, not tested further.

Deepanshu Mohan is Professor of Economics and Director, Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES), Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P. Jindal Global University. Ishwaq Ahmad Wani is a Doctoral Student and a Research Analyst with the Visual Storyboards, CNES. Tavleen Kaur is a Senior Research Assistant and the Team Lead, Visual Storyboards, CNES. Hima Trisha is a Senior Research Assistant and the Co-Team Lead, Visual Storyboards, CNES.

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This series of field studies is produced and anchored by the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES) Visual Storyboard Team, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P. Jindal Global University.