

9th – Pastoralists in the Modern World I



Pastoralism has been important in societies like India and Africa for years. Pastoralism is a way of keeping animals such as cattle, sheep that involves moving from one place to another to find water and food. Nomads are people who do not live in one place, but move from one area to another to earn their living.

Movement of Pastoral Nomads in Mountains: Mainly pastoral communities are found in mountaineous regions.

Gujjar Bakarwals: Gujjar Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir are great herders of goat and sheep. Many of them migrated here in the 19th century in search of pastures for their cattle and settled here. In winter, when the mountains were covered with snow, they lived with their herds in the low hills of Siwalik range. Here, the dry scrub forests provided pastures for their herds. They crossed the Pir Panjal passes and entered Kashmir valley. In summer, when the snow melted in the mountains and mountainsides were left lush green, they moved onto high levels. The variety of sprouted grass provided rich nutritious forage for their animals. By the end of September, they used to start moving again for their downward journey back to their winter base. Several households came together for this journey forming a Kafila.

Gaddi Shepherds: Gaddi shepherd is a pastoral community of Himachal Pradesh. They had a similar cycle of seasonal movements like Gujjar Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir.

Movement of Gaddi Shepherds: During winter, Gaddi Shepherds grazed their flocks in scrub forests of the low hills of Siwalik range. By April, they moved North and spent the summer in Lahul and Spiti. Further to the East, in Garhwal and Kumaun, the Gujjar cattle herders came down to the dry forests of the bhabhar in the winter and went up to the high meadows—the bugyals in summer. Many of the Gujjar cattle herders were originally from Jammu and Kashmir and came the to up hills in the 19th century in search of good pastures. When the snow melted on the high mountains, they moved onto higher mountain meadows (dhars). By September, they began their return movement. On way, they stopped once again in the villages of Lahul and Spiti, reaping their summer harvest and sowing their winter crop. On the way down, they stop for a while to have their sheep sheared. The sheep are bathed and cleaned before wool is cut. Uhl valley near Palampur in Himachal Pradesh is one of the areas where shearing of wool is being done. Then, they further descend to their winter base—the Siwalik Hills.

Bhotiyas, Sherpas and Kinnauris: Many pastoralists of Himalayas like the Bhotiyas, Sherpas and Kinnauris also followed cyclic movement between summers and winters in search pastures. They all had to adjust to seasonal changes and make proper use of available pastures. When the pasture was exhausted or unusable in one place, they moved their herds and flock to new areas. This continuous movement of the pastoralists allowed the pastures to recover.

Movement of Pastoral Nomads on the Plateaus, Plains and Deserts: The pastoral communities are also found in the plateaus, plains and deserts of India.

Dhangars: Dhangars were an important pastoral community of Maharashtra. In the early 20th century, their population was more than 4 lakhs. They were mainly shepherds, blanket weavers and buffalo herders. Dhangars stayed in the central plateau of Maharashtra during the monsoon. In the monsoon, this tract became a vast grazing ground for their flocks. By October, the Dhangars harvested the bajra



9th – Pastoralists in the Modern World I



and started to move towards West. After a month, reached Konkan which had high rainfall and rich soil. Here, they were welcomed by the Konkani peasants.

After the harvest of Kharif crop, the fields had to be fertilised and made ready for the Rabi harvest. Dhangar flocks manured the fields and fed on the stubble. The Konkani peasants also gave supplies of rice which the shepherds took back to the plateau where grain was scarce. With the onset of monsoon, they returned to their settlements on the dry plateau as sheep could not tolerate the wet monsoon conditions.

The Goltas, Kurumas and Kurubas: The Gollas, Kurumas and Kurubas are the important pastoral communities of the dry central plateau of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The Gollas herded cattle. The Kurumas and Kurubas reared sheep and goats and sold woven blankets. They lived near the forests, cultivated small patches of land, engaged in a variety of small trades and took care of their herds. The movement of these pastoralists, depended monsoon and dry season.

In the dry season, they moved to the coastal tracts and left when the rains came. Only buffaloes liked the swampy, wet conditions of the coastal areas during the monsoon months. Other herds had to be shifted to the dry plateau at that time.

Banjara Tribes: They were an important group of graziers, which were found in the villages of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. In search of good pasture land for their cattle, they moved over long distances. They sold their plough cattle and other goods to villagers in exchange of grain and fodder.

Raikas: They lived in the deserts of Rajasthan. Before 1947, they used to migrate to Sindh and grazed their animals on the banks of the Indus. But after partition, when Sindh became a part of Pakistan, this activity was restricted. Now, they started migrating to Haryana where sheep can graze on agricultural fields after the harvest. The rainfall in the region was less and uncertain. So, they combined cultivation with Pastoralism. During the monsoon, the Raikas of Barmer, Jaisalmer Jodhpur and Bikaner stayed in their home villages, where pasture was available. By October, when those grazing grounds were exhausted, they moved out in search of new pastures. They returned in their home villages during the next monsoon.

Maru Raikas: One group of Raikas was known as Maru Raikas who reside in the Thar Desert near Jaisalmer, Rajasthan. Their settlement is called a dhandi. They herded camels and another group reared sheep and goat. Maru Raikas know the history of their community from genealogist. The genealogist is the one, who recounts the history of tribes. Such oral traditions give pastoral groups their own sense of identity.

Camel Fairs: The camel fairs are held at different places of Rajasthan such as Pushkar, Balotra, etc. Camel herders come to the fair to sell and buy camels. The Maru Raikas also display their expertise in training their camels. Horses from Gujarat are also brought for sale at this fair.

Factors that Contributed of Movement of Pastoralists: The life of pastoral groups is not easy. It was sustained by a careful consideration of a host of factors. They had to judge how long the herds could stay in one area and know where they could find water and pasture. They needed to calculate the timing of their movements and ensure that they could move through different territories. They had to set up a relationship with farmers on the way, so that the herds could graze in harvested



9th – Pastoralists in the Modern World I



fields and manure the soil. They combined a range of different activities viz., cultivation, trade and herding to make their living.

Colonial Rule and Pastoral Life: The Colonial Government made different laws from time to time which severely affected the lives of the pastoralists. Their grazing grounds shrank, their movements were regulated, they had to pay high revenue, their agricultural stock declined and their trades and crafts were also affected adversely. The colonial power believed that all grazing lands were wastelands because they were unproductive. These lands did not produce revenue or agricultural products. From the mid-19th century, Wasteland Rules were enacted in various parts of our country.

Wasteland Rules and Forest Acts: The government granted selected individuals various concessions and encouraged to settle them in these areas. Even some of them were made as headmen of villages. In most areas, the lands taken over were actually grazing tracts used regularly by pastoralists as their customary rights. They believed that grazing destroyed the saplings and young shoots of trees that germinated on the forest floor. The herds crushed the saplings and munched away shoots. These prevented new trees to grow. The Forest Acts made by the British Government changed the lives of pastoralists. Some forests which produced commercially valuable timber like deodar or sal were declared as reserved. In the reserved forests, no pastoral activity was allowed and in the protected forests their activity was strictly restricted. In the protected forests, they needed a permit for entry. The permit specified the timing of their entry and departure. If they overstayed there, they were liable to fines.

Criminal Tribes Act: British officials were very suspicious of nomadic people. They wanted to rule over a settled population which could be easily identified and controlled. In 1871, the British Government in India passed the Criminal Tribes Act. By this act, many communities of craftsmen, traders and pastoralists were classified as Criminal Tribes. They were stated to be criminal by nature and birth. As a result of this act, these communities were expected to live only in notified village settlements and they were not allowed to move without a permit. The village police also kept a strict watch on them.

Imposition of Grazing Tax: In the mid-19th century, Grazing Tax was introduced by British Government in most pastoral lands of India. In order to increase income, the government imposed tax even on animal. The tax per head of cattle went up rapidly and the system of collection was made increasingly efficient. In the decades between the 1850s and 1880s, the right to collect the tax was carried out by contractors. These contractors tried to extract high tax, so that they could earn profit. By the 1880s, the government began collecting taxes directly from the pastoralists. Each of them was given a pass. The pastoralists had to pay tax on every animal they grazed in the pastures. To enter a grazing tract, the pastoralist had to show the pass and pay the tax.