

Women Empowerment among Bakarwal Community of Jammu and Kashmir

Farhat Chowdhary

Corresponding Author: Farhat Chowdhary

Date of Submission: 18-07-2019

Date of acceptance: 05-08-2019

I. INTRODUCTION

Women play a pivotal role in overall progress of the nation as they constitute about half of the human population of a country. The Indian Constitution mentions the principles of gender equality in Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles. The first Prime Minister of India stated that “when the women moves forward, the family moves, the village moves, and the Country moves”.

For a balanced development every section of the society must develops equally and in harmony with each other. To achieve all the success goals women empowerment is primary need of the hour.

Women’s empowerment is a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination. Empowering women is one of the most crucial concerns of the millennium Development goals of the United Nations.

In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women. Women’s status has been considered as an important measure of social development in any community and women’s status can be measured in the form of freedom and degree of equality enjoyed by women. The indicators contributing to the status of women i.e., Literacy, Age at Marriage, Decision-making role, Occupation and Income are the prominent ones.

I. BAKARWALS

Bakarwals mainly are goat herds and shepherds by profession. The meaning of the words has got significance. Bakarwal is deduced from Punjabi, Urdu, Dogri, Kashmiri and Hindu terms. The word Bakarwal is derived from two terms with different meanings- ‘Bakri’ or ‘Bakar’ means ‘Goat’ and ‘wal’ connotating one who takes care of. In general, the name Bakarwal signifies ‘high altitude goat herds or sheep herds’. They are beautiful, tall and thin figured. They herd goat and sheep and are subset of the buffalo-herding Gujjars of the state. They undertake some of the most extreme treks they move with their cattle from the plains of Jammu to the alpine meadows of Kashmir.

The pastoral Bakarwals is a special nomadic tribe, mainly found in the Pir panjal range of mountains located between the two states of Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh. Bakarwal tribes are also found in every corner of Northern Provinces of the Himalayan range namely the states of Uttarakhand, H.P and Punjab. This tribe is also known as *Dhanger* in several parts of India. In Jammu and Kashmir alone, Bakarwal tribes are stretched out in all the three regions of the state- Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. They are found in almost every district of the state but they are mostly concentrated in the districts of Poonch, Rajouri and Kathua of the Jammu province and in Kashmir valley they are mostly found in Anantnag, Badgam, Pulwama, Kulgam and Kupwara districts. Once Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru when he was at Pahalgam saw a group of Gujjar and Bakarwals along with their luggage and baggage he at once named them as “*The King of Jungle*”.

The Gujjar- Bakarwals are sheep and goat rearing transhumants, which oscillate between high and low altitudes in the hill tracts of Jammu and Kashmir with their Revar (flocks) and household goods. Their economy mainly depends on the products of their flock and the use of natural pastures round the year. A majority of them are seen in different seasons of the year in the areas extending from Poonch to Kathua in the South, and over the Greater Himalayan ranges in the north. The pastoral nomads of Jammu and Kashmir move from pasture to pasture as per a time-tested schedule of movement determined by signals heralding a change in season. One cycle between winter and summer pastures has been termed as a ‘migration orbit’. A standard orbit operates as follows. The nomads stay for about four to five months from mid-November to the end of March at their winter bases in the outer hills of the Shiwaliks. With the advent of Spring by mid-April, the tended and thatched

settlements and other temporary residential structures are dismantled and leaving a deserted look, i.e., the great movement towards the summer pastures starts.

The herders remain at the alpine pastures till the beginning of autumn in early October. With the advent of autumn the reverse position of the orbit starts i.e. from the high altitude pastures to the Kashmir valley and then across the Pir-Panjal to the hibernages (winter location) in the lower foot hills where they reach by middle of November with the herders' arrival at their winter camping sites, one orbit of transhumance is completed. It may be pointed that return trip is undertaken at a much faster pace because of the advent severe winter conditions at higher altitudes. This seasonal round leads them through an 'orbit' which is repeated year after year. Thus the orbit becomes principal means of resource stabilization through movement.

Rao and Casimir (2003) in their work explained that the emergence of the Bakarwal in Jammu and Kashmir as a distinct community in its present form can be traced back to the early years of the 20th century and the first documentary reference to them in Jammu and Kashmir is dated 1899. They are culturally akin to the Gujjar of the greater Punjab, Swat-Kohistan and the Kashmir area, but also to Pashtun, Awan, and other communities further west and south-west. Their ancestors immigrated some 150 years ago from the valleys of Allai and Kunhar, now in Pakistan, in response to a variety of circumstances, including excessive taxes levied by oppressive landlords on Hazara, droughts further south, and pasture shortage in the Punjab induced partly by the canal colonizers. It is not yet clear whether at that time the Bakarwal were a specific community of pastoralists, or transhumant villagers of various communities who took their flocks into the mountains in summer. Today, south and south-east of the Indo-Pakistan ceasefire line, Their summer areas lie in the semi-alpine and Alpine belt north, north-east and north-west of the Kashmir Basin, at altitudes ranging between ca. 2,500 m and ca. 4,200 m. Their winter area is in the Collin belt between Poonch and Kathua, at altitudes of ca. 500-900 m. This pastoral community migrates twice a year, and considers itself nomadic (*Khanabadosh*). Since the herds cannot survive the year through in either the summer or winter areas, migration is a must and land and herds are not considered real alternatives.

In 1991, the then Prime Minister Shri Chandra Shekhar granted Scheduled Tribe status to Gujjar and Bakarwal of J&K state. The Census 2011, shows the entire ST population of the Jammu and Kashmir state is 14, 93,299. Bakarwals constitute 1, 13,198 with 59,621 males and 53,577 women population (census, 2011).

Role of Women Among Bakarwals

The studies of pastoralism largely ignore women's economic activities and social status. It is a fact that there is a lack of information about the nomadic house-hold organization and their social organization, their gender division of labour and lamentably there is an underestimation of the role that nomadic women play in livestock production and management of labour. Unquestionably, women in pastoral societies have a critical role in the socio-economic and cultural activities, and the management and conversation of natural resources and environmental amenities of the household and communities.

Bakarwal Women is no exception here, she contributes a lot in the occupational life of their community while performing all the household chores.

- **Household Chores:** Women perform all the household chores which mostly include collection of fuel. Collection of fodder, cooking, fetching water, washing clothes.
- **Social Activities:** Women participate in all the social and religious functions.
- **Animal Care:** Women's involvement in activities related to birthing and caring for the newly born or sick animals is fundamental to the pastoral economy. In fact, the balance of work is such that women frequently spend more time than their husbands in animal care.
- **Milking:** As "Milk Manager" they are responsible for milking, processing and marketing of their products.
- **Sheep Shearing:** Sheep shearing is the process by which the woollen fleece of a sheep is cut off. It is mainly done by the male but in the absence of male, women performs this task and are also responsible for the processing of the wool.
- **Shepherding:** Bakarwal women also do the job of shepherd, they look after and safe guards the livestock.

II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Study Area: The study was carried out in Jammu, Samba and Kathua districts of Jammu region. The study has been conducted during winters and the districts were purposively selected because in Jammu and Kashmir state a considerable concentration of Bakarwals are found in these districts during winter season.

Sampling: A sample of 60 respondents was chosen purposively and it was divided into two sections, 30 females and 30 males.

OBJECTIVES: The Present study was undertaken with the following objectives:

- The study the literacy of Bakarwal women.
- To examine the age at marriage of Bakarwal women.
- To examine the decision-making role of Bakarwal women.
- To analyse the occupation of Bakarwal women.
- To study the income of the Bakarwal women.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Literacy: The Census 2011 reveals that the majority of the population is illiterate. Total population of Bakarwal is 1, 13,198, out of which only 28,652 population is literate and the rest of the population remains illiterate. Out of 28, 625 , Male population constitute major share i.e., 19,168 while the female population holds only 9,484 number, if we compare both the sexes, the female population is far lower in the ladder of education.

The data shown in above table has been taken from the Director of School Education Jammu. It is quite clear from the above table that educational level among the Bakarwals is not impressive. The analysis shows that the majority of the Bakarwals are illiterate. The number of girls enrolled as shown in the table is less than the boys enrolled.

The study has shown that 90 per cent of the Bakarwal women are illiterate. Frequent seasonal migration is one of the biggest hurdles in the education of Bakarwal community. Although Government has taken the initiative of educating the community by opening of the mobile schools but this has not been a huge success. There were respondents who informed that they had not been allotted mobile school facility yet and those who had the facility of mobile school have complaints of shortage of teachers.

Majority of girls of this particular community have never entered the schools. Although Bakarwal girls are intelligent and capable but their educational achievement is poor. Now the young parents are very interested in educating their daughters but their interest is damped because of their economic condition. The actual problem of education is social obligations of the girls who are much engaged in their domestic duties. The social conditions of Bakarwal women are the main cause of their Illiteracy.

Age at Marriage: The study has shown that most of the female respondents were married between the age group of 20-22 years. But this cannot be ignored that marriage of Bakarwal women began as early as 14 years. This shows that child marriage still persists in this community.

Decision-making role: The study has found that Bakarwal women take decision with respect to the situation like day to day family living and household activities, woman plays an active role in taking decisions, whereas, in economic matters or important events such as selling and purchasing of cattle, financial matters, deciding issues related to family keeping relation with kin and community people, education, earning activities, male members especially the eldest one play a major role.

The decisions taken by men which are credited with much well-being are the only ones recognized as "decisions" (*phesla*). Especially those actions which analytically must be categorized as decisions but are locally considered as pertaining to the purely domestic domain are disregarded as decisions - by both men and women.

Occupation: The study has revealed that majority (83.33 %) of the female respondents were dependent on males, it could be their husbands, fathers or their sons. Whereas, 13.33 per cent of the female respondents worked as Labourers when they migrate to Kashmir they work in garden or fields.

Income: Majority of the women respondents were dependent so there did not earn anything. But the reality is that they do work but they do not consider their work as payable work and taken it for granted as a routine work.

Conclusion: The study has concluded that the status of Bakarwal women is low. The reasons for this are their utter deprivation due to poverty, migratory way of life, illiteracy, superstitions and lack of awareness. The root causes for their low socio-economic status are inter-related. Women among Bakarwals seem to enjoy freedom while they move with herds, they smoke openly and join their men shoulder to shoulder in their work but the hidden realities are different as it seems.

The study has shown that 90.00 per cent of the women respondents are illiterate. Although Bakarwal girls are hard working and capable and their parents are positively interested in educating them, but their interest is tempered by their social and economic condition. The actual problem of education is due to social entanglement of the girls in their domestic duties. Bakarwals cannot afford to send their wards to school, it effects their economic activities but if they need to choose between their sons and daughters to send school, they choose their sons over daughters. But an emerging change can be seen coming among Bakarwals as few families have taken their daughters education seriously. No doubt, Govt. has taken an initiative to educate Bakarwals but it does not prove a success. The enrolment number of Bakarwals especially of girls recorded in the Govt. records is left in the papers only. In spite of contributing in the family income women do not get the right of taking decisions in any economic or an important matter. In fact men think that women are not capable of decision-making. The study shows that majority of the women respondents, despite of their inevitable contribution in the family

income, are dependent on men. It is because of the underestimation of the women's role in the economy. And of course there is low level of income of Bakarwal women.

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Farhat Chowdhary. " Women Empowerment among Bakarwal Community of Jammu and Kashmir." IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 24 no. 07, 2019, pp. 28-31.