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Pastoralism in Transition: Anecdotes from Himachal Pradesh - A Commentary

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Abstract

In this essay we focus on what appears to be an evolving transition among Gaddi and other pastoralist communities in Himachal Pradesh, India. Contrary to predictions of the demise of pastoralism, we argue that while there is evidence of sedentarization among Himachali pastoralists, there is also an emerging trend of households managing smaller herds over a more limited part of the pastoral landscape. We use material from research conducted three decades ago, in combination with ongoing research studying the pastoral economy to understand the drivers of this transition. The essay explores shifts in labour dynamics, where increasingly pastoralist labour prefer cash payments and temporary work opportunities, indicating a reduced commitment to herding. There is an increasing trend of hiring labour from non-traditional herder households, such as Bihari and Nepalese workers, to manage pastoralist herds. Moreover, transitions to smaller herds enables easier management during the winter months when forage availability is limited. Himachali pastoralism remains profitable, but contemporary logics of herd composition, pastoral routes, and market dynamics no longer align with previous models. The essay concludes by pointing to emerging areas of research that might help in better understanding the nature of the ongoing transition in Himachali pastoralism, suggesting that sedentarization may not be the appropriate term to describe the current trends and that these transitions and their implications must be further assessed before prescribing the eventual demise of pastoralism.

Keywords

Gaddi; pastoralism; sedentarization; labor dynamics; transitions

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Prelude

The bulk of the pieces in this collection speak to the issue of Gaddi identity, particularly as mediated by caste. One of us (VS) has used the word Gaddi as an inclusive identity, perhaps most closely aligned to colonial writings that did not differentiate between shepherd communities in Himachal Pradesh, and for whom the term Gaddi seemed to include a slew of communities involved in animal husbandry involving the seasonal movement of sheep and goat, between summering pastures at high elevation and wintering grounds in the Himalayan foothills.

His (VS) lack of sophistication or awareness on this front caught up with him in 2015, two decades after he had done graduate work in the area, when a young woman from the village of Bara Bangahal in Kangra district, confronted him by pointing out that a documentary film he had helped produce had consistently misused the term Gaddi. She said that Bara Bangahlis were Kanets (claiming to be Thakur/Rajput castes, believed to be the descendents of the Hill Rajas), not Gaddis, and for having spent two years in and out of the valley, he really should have known better.

Many of the pieces in this volume provide a layered accounting of how caste has intersected with Gaddi identity (Christopher 2023; Phillimore 2023; Simpson 2023). We are unfamiliar with anthropological debates on Gaddi caste identity (Christopher 2020), but instead we offer a comment on a series of interesting trends on pastoralism in the region. The bulk of this writing draws on anecdotes or conversations based on ongoing research, and the conclusions presented here point to possible trends that would benefit from future research.

Introduction

The drive to settle pastoralists has been around for a couple of hundred years, with efforts by both the colonial and post-colonial states to limit the mobility of these communities. The rationale for settling pastoralists has changed over time, and has variously centred around ideas of land degradation, animal productivity, wildlife conservation, the ease of providing or accessing services, and so on. And because of this persistent hostility, or, at minimum, a lack of support for such communities, there has been an accompanying narrative around the inevitability of pastoralist sedentarization, in India, but also in most other parts of the world.

Research around the turn of the 21st century questioned this narrative (Saberwal, 1999; Kavoori, 1999), pointing to the myriad ways in which pastoralists were finding ways to circumvent regulations that appeared to work against pastoralist interests. Papers in this volume (Christopher and Phillimore; Bulgheroni) also suggest that this prediction of the imminent demise of pastoralism is, at least amongst the Gaddis, premature. Growing meat prices[1] in particular seem to be responsible for keeping such animal management afloat, despite the challenges of finding forage and a reducing interest within younger generations to continue with what is, fundamentally, a lonely, physically demanding profession.

Sedentarization

Even so, some forms of decline are brewing, and there is growing evidence of an acceleration in sedentarization. We might well be at a point of inflection and this commentary attempts to assess the nature and characteristics of this transition.

In the 1990s, Bara Bangahal had 43 pastoral families engaged in herding; a reported 19-20 of them continue herding today. In Mandher village in eastern Kangra, there were 10-15 pastoralist families in the 1990s and only 3-4 continue herding today. In 1995, the first Bara Bangahal boy graduated from class 12 in Bir village; most youth in Bara Bangahal do so today. For these youths, it is almost impossible to continue to participate in herding, simply on account of not having the necessary knowledge, skill sets or aptitude for doing so.

Across India and especially in Himachal Pradesh, there is a growing push to keep pastoralists out of National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries, and Tiger Reserves. In the early 2000s, the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department initiated the process of settling rights within the Great Himalayan National Park, in the Kullu Valley to the east of the Kangra valley. Shepherds were informed that they were no longer allowed in the park. At the time we reported on how herders continued to go into the park, following time-honored practices of reaching out to elected representatives who would then ensure that the Forest Department turned a blind eye to these "incursions". It was a battle of attrition and one that was renewed each year (Chhatre and Saberwal 2006).

A recent visit to Ani village in early 2023, located to the south of the Great Himalayan National Park, found that herders had stopped going into the park. The desire to battle with the Forest Department had gradually faded, and herders inevitably had to find other employment. One became a plumber in Manali, another a taxi driver. Others had found work in the growing number of home stays that have cropped up all over the Tirthan valley (Barnela, personal communication). Even if access to grazing areas within the park is granted, pastoralism in the region is unlikely to restart. Herding from the region has basically stopped.

And then, there are aspirations – perhaps the most common factor leading to a transition out of herding. Two comments point to the pulls away from herding simply on account of the all-consuming and physically demanding pressures of the job: A 50 year old herder in the village of Bir stated that "*Main apne ladke se bartan manjwa loonga, lekin yeh kaam nahin karne doonga*" (I will have my son suffer the indignity of washing dishes in a restaurant, but I will not allow him to continue herding); and then this, from a herder high up in the Kalihani valley: "*Mera pados sarkari naukari karta hai. Ghar laut ta hai aur us ki laadi usse chai pilati hai, aur dono shaam ko TV dekhte hain*" (My neighbour has a government job. When he returns from work, his wife gives him a cup of tea, then the two sit and watch TV for the evening).

Pastoralism in transition

There are more fundamental processes that point to an ongoing transition in Himachali pastoralism. In the 1990s, a *puhal* (a Himachali term referring to hired labor who help manage a herd) would enter into a four-year contract, and receive 40 animals at the start, along with food and board (such as a herder camp might provide!). Implicit in this arrangement was the possibility of remarkable upward mobility – for the forty animals provided to the *puhal* could well become 80-90 animals by the end of year 4. Luck played a major role in this, for there are invariable losses to disease, unexpected snowfall, predators, theft and the like. The unexpected need to pay for a death in the family was equally likely to wipe out some gains in herd size. Despite all of this, the *puhal* entered into employment with the possibility that his herd might double to 80 animals. That would make him a middle-sized herder.

In the mid-1990s, 21 of the 43 herding families of Bara Bangahal village had at some point or another served as *puhals*. Nine of these had built herds in excess of 100 animals, 3 had herds with over 200 animals and one had close to 500 animals. The *puhal* to owner transition was commonplace at the time with no other rural livelihood in Himachal (or anywhere else in India) offering the possibility of such upward mobility. But the 40-animal contract also signified a *puhal's* expectation that he would stay on in herding, a commitment that is less evident today.

Discussions with *puhals* today point to a substantial shift in how such individuals wish to be paid for their labor. The bulk prefer the flexibility offered by cash compared with payment that locks them into the herding profession. Many spoke of working for a season, preferring to retain the option of taking up other seasonal work as and when it becomes available. Even the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (MGNREGA) appears to be a preferable option, although the economic dynamics are perennially muddied by a lack of clarity on how much actual work gets done under the scheme. In effect, MGNREGA employment may generate slightly lower revenues, but may well require less effort. Choosing fewer contractual liabilities and preferring opportunities that are more transient is a preference for individuals seeking employment. As a result, while the labor for pastoralism appears to be available, it is on very different terms, and may be the clearest sign of reducing commitment to herding in the region.

The reducing availability of labor from within traditional herding households is likely fueling a second form of transition, and that is the turn to labor households that are not traditional herders. While we have not managed to get confirmation of this, we are told no herder from Bara Bangahal is a *puhal* today, signifying a major shift from the mid-1990s. We are only just beginning to explore this issue, but there are stories from Kinnaur[2] and from Ladakh of Bihari and Nepalese labor, respectively, originally brought in to build border roads, being hired to manage pastoralist herds.

And finally, there appear to be transitions in animal management. Preliminary findings from our ongoing research in Kullu, Kangra and Chamba are suggesting a large number of households now manage much smaller herds—in the region of 20-30 animals. We are yet to obtain clarity on the nature of these households—are they pastoralist households with formerly larger herds? Are these households that have not traditionally been associated with herding?

The rationale for a transition to smaller numbers, amongst at least a portion of pastoral and/or non-pastoral households appears straightforward and linked to both the difficulty of obtaining forage in the winter, and the poor quality of winter forage. Access to winter grazing can be difficult on account of the multiple claimants to these lands (not a feature of the uninhabited alpine pastures grazed in summer). In addition, these landscapes are characterized by poor quality forage, with much of it overtaken by an unpalatable weed, *Lantana camara*. Both the poor quality of winter forage and the difficulty of accessing it were occupational hazards in the mid-1990s, and so are not new. What is likely triggering the shift to smaller herds is the reducing availability of family labur. Smaller herds can be managed during the winter in the vicinity of herder villages, at altitudes between 6 and 8,000 feet. During the summer, these herds are merged to form larger herds that are managed by a herder who has access rights to summer pastures. The shift to smaller herds appears to hold the potential, then, to enable herders to take advantage of higher productivity in summer, without the associated costs and challenges of obtaining winter forage.[3]

A similar shift towards smaller herds, grazed in more local loops has been reported from Eastern Kumaon, Uttarakhand, for well over the past decade (Theophilus personal communication). The bulk of the sheep and goat herders now manage their animals through the winter in these localized grazing loops, going out to pasture for brief periods of time, but always within a day or two of their home, before moving their animals to the summer pastures. Six months at home, and six months on the move with herding labor consisting of hired help and family members. A variant on this theme is seen amongst the Van Gujjars in Uttarakhand, who are increasingly choosing to spend the summers in Bijnor, in the plains of Uttar Pradesh, rather than migrating to alpine pastures, a response to the greater opportunities to market milk (Unpublished data, CfP). This seems to align with Axelby's (2017) account of Himachali Gujjars finding forage and markets in the Punjab, and thereby reducing their dependence on alpine pastures during the summer.

Himachali pastoralism has always been profitable. Phillimore (1982) makes the point that herding represented the principal means of generating a cash income in the early 1980s, and that families no longer involved in herding were often less well off than those that were still active in herding. Estimates in the mid-1990s were that a herder with 100 animals probably made a profit in the region of Rs. 20,000/year (Saberwal 1999); the same herd today earns closer to 2 lakhs a year. An adult goat sold for between Rs. 600 and 700 in the 1990s now sells for 10-15 times that amount, a reflection of the rapidly growing demand for meat. And profitability remains the key reason for households to remain invested in herding, in some shape or another.

Preliminary data from the field tells us that herd compositions, pastoral routes, markets and commodities no longer fit previously understood pastoral logics. The question of labor is central to this transition. The multiplicity of commodities produced by a single animal is no longer valued by the market—the idea that sheep could potentially contribute to the wool, dung, milk and meat economy in its entire lifetime. Access to forage has further worsened with the rampant construction of four-lane highways, dams and other infrastructure projects—not forgetting the continued efforts to keep pastoralists outside of protected and conserved areas. In contrast to the economics of scale, to keep pastoralism profitable, anecdotes from Himachal Pradesh suggest a larger number of people are now keeping smaller herds with more contained grazing patterns.

Discussion

What does all this mean for pastoralism in the region and at large? An uninterrupted trope over close to 200 years within the Forest Department and amongst conservationists is that irrational herders are overstocking the land (Mishra et. al. 2001). The underlying concern regarding the impacts of such overstocking has changed in accordance with global narratives of the time. In the late 20th century, concerns centered around how overgrazing by pastoralists was responsible for civilization-threatening soil erosion (Ives and Messerli 1989); by the early 20th century overgrazing was associated with revenue losses owing to reduced timber generation (Saberwal 1999); wildlife conservation had become the rallying point against pastoralist grazing in the 1970s (Sharma et. al. 2003); biodiversity (Ibid.) by the early 2000s and now, grazing by pastoralists is increasingly seen as contributing to climate change (Cao et. al. 2013).

Central to the ecological arguments against pastoralism is the idea that increasing animal numbers increases the pressures on the landscape. But there is a clear sense of pastoralist sedentarization, and that should, logically, be accompanied by reducing numbers of animals. Alternatively, if the transition we are positing here holds water, what does this mean for the total number of animals? Are there more or less animals? How do the changes in animal numbers and animal management impact mountain ecology?

Do we begin to rework our understanding of pastoral mobility given that herd sizes are smaller and longer migration routes might become less common? There is an urgent need to investigate how Himachali pastoralism in transition may unfold. Is the transition we speak of simply part of a historical trend of pastoralists adapting to changing ecological, market and political contexts? Is there the possibility of pastoralists remaining dormant, small scale and opportunistic—awaiting an opportune moment to rebuild herds, a phenomenon observed amongst camel herders in Kutch (Sheth 2021)? In thinking about transition we need to keep in mind that along with climatic conditions and high quality fodder, pastoralists respond to markets and the opportunity to make money.

What are the economic consequences of such a transition? From an enterprise point of view, pastoralists have historically used their livestock as capital, much like ATM machines, providing ready cash whenever needed. As mentioned above, Phillimore (1982) was reporting in the 1980s that households with no animals were less well off than those still herding. Could decreasing herd sizes contribute to enhanced financial insecurity, or does the act of retaining a toehold in herding guard against that? More broadly, do reducing animal numbers have implications for regional economies, or particular interest in a state like Himachal Pradesh, where pastoralism is thought to be a significant contributor to the state's economy?

Conclusion

Perhaps the takeaway from our preliminary work assessing the current state of pastoralism in Himachal Pradesh is that terms like *sedentarization*, *decline*, *fading*, *diminishing*, and *slowing down* are insufficient to capture the current experience within pastoral communities, at least within mountain ecosystems. Mountain lands are sub-optimal from an agricultural perspective, while remaining supremely optimal from the perspective of mobile animal husbandry. Economic profitability may trump our continued expectations that pastoralists will, willy-nilly, settle—a rational response to increasingly scarce resources, an unsupportive state, and a youth increasingly unwilling to walk the high passes. Since there are still lucrative markets for meat and milk, pastoralists are continuing to find new ways to retain a foothold in a historically successful extensive livestock system.

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Endnotes

1. Kavoori (1999) talks of herders choosing 'small stock' as a response to growing market economies. In later parts of his book, Kavoori describes how animal management and herd composition is closely linked to demands of a growing market-based economy where competition plays a role in prices and sale.

2. Apple growing in the region is more lucrative and far less demanding physically. Households wishing to retain a stake in herding are simply turning to the available labour, which happens to be Bihari road building gangs.

3. The act of merging herds was common in the 1990s, but the herd owner was almost always present, part of the labor that would manage the combined herd. There would rarely have been more than 2 herds being managed together, and both herds would have had relatively large numbers of animals. The change to large numbers of households maintaining small herds appears to be a relatively new phenomenon.

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