

Special Section Research Article

The Shepherd Who Did Not Lead

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Abstract

This flash ethnography captures an encounter with a Gaddi shepherd amidst the mountainous regions of Himachal Pradesh. The Gaddis are a semi-nomadic tribe who have traditionally engaged in agro-pastoralism across the western Himalayas. In this piece, I recount how this solitary shepherd, through a subtle gesture and unspoken words, disrupts my preconceptions of journeys and time.

Keywords

Flash ethnography; shepherd; time; fieldwork; Gaddi

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His flock wandered many miles ahead, vanishing amidst the undulating hills that blended into each other. But he remained calm. He knew their route; he knew their destination; he knew these hills. He was not one to lead.

The shepherd had joined the four of us as we walked toward the glacial lake of Kareri Dal. We had taken a taxi from Dharamsala to Kareri village and spent the night at a homestay before starting our journey. Where had the shepherd come from? When did he join us? We were not sure, but we were glad for his sturdy, confident presence. He belonged to the Gaddi tribe, a semi-nomadic, agro-pastoralist people who live across the western Himalayan belt. His face was aquiline, regal, burnt sienna from the sun. Furrows etched his forehead toward his eyes, deepening when he smiled. His gaze was intense, quiet. He wore a *Pahari topi*, the distinct Himachali cap with triangular designs across its broad crown. As he walked behind us, he neither broke into a sweat nor lost his breath. He carried a small cloth bag, a contrast to the substantial rucksacks we were heaving up the hill. Every time we struggled, took breaks, drank water from our stainless-steel bottles, he sat down in the shade on his hams, smoking a *bidi*. He spoke, but only a little and only when asked a question. We shared cigarettes.

Over the years, the traditional transhumance pastoralism of the Gaddis has declined, with many settling for wage labor and sedentary farming. Those who persist in this life built around herding must navigate a labyrinth of land permits and compete for pasturelands, while contending with the precarity of living in a zone charged by climate crises. The Gaddis who have settled in Dharamsala have a formidable reputation, laced with rumors about their tightly guarded endogamy, the ravages of alcoholism, and their proclivity towards violence. Beyond such typecasts, they are a proud people. In their origin myth, it was their refusal to yield to an invading king that made them retreat into the hills. Even as their migratory lifestyle recedes and their community structures alter, they continue

to assert themselves as a people, a tribe. They have not yielded.

The mountainous air was cool against the high-altitude sun. We crossed rivulets and walked on the edge of the hills; we glimpsed snowy peaks around corners; the view ignited our excitement. We were anticipating the night: bone chilling, a canopy of stars above snow-covered mountains glistening in their light; glorious. In our excitement, we pointed to every spot of beauty, demanding reactions from each other.

Our travel companion saw everything we did but expressed neither amusement nor disinterest. For the shepherd, the journey was an inseparable part of his life's work. For me, the journey was a pursuit of beauty and solitude. The shepherd was someone who belonged. I was just passing by.

One of us started to trail behind, breathless. Despite his suffering, he was adamant about continuing. We were hesitant. If we slowed down, it might get dark before we reached our destination, and that would be dangerous. We stopped to make Maggi instant noodles. A joint was rolled and passed around. As we sat there, in the still, haunting presence of the hills, conversation broke out. Our friend, who was both unhappy at being sick and desperately trying to put on a brave face, asked our companion about his routes across the hills. He spanned the horizon with a sweep of his hand, took a drag of the joint, and answered that he travels across these hills into Kashmir. He sees his family once every few weeks. I wondered about his solitary life of few possessions, amidst so much silence, in this powerful, unrelenting terrain._

That's when I asked him, "*Kitna time lagta hai jaane ko?* (How much time does it take to get to where you are going?)"

He looked at me quizzically. "Time?" he responded. His answer was a gesture: twisting his lined hands to indicate *Whoever knows?* Or perhaps, *How Does it Matter?* His gesture reversed the gaze—my curiosity turned into a questioning of my own idea of journeys, as time bound, elliptical; about

reaching—a conquest; and returning—a homecoming. I felt the presumption of my question in his refusal to submit to my notion of time. We inhabited different temporal realities: mine governed by an external timekeeper, his shaped by the entanglement of human and non-human rhythms. His time was relational; mine was solipsistic, a desire for changing the now into the then. Perhaps in his gesture lay a quiet critique of my yearning—for beauty, for conquest, for becoming.

During that pitstop, we decided that we would turn back. Our companion went on his journey with a slight smile as goodbye.

Ishani Dasgupta is an Assistant Instructional Professor at the Pozen Center for Human Rights at the University of Chicago. Previously, she was the Andrew W. Mellon HILLS Postdoctoral Scholar at Case Western Reserve University and a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Asian Democracy, University of Louisville. She earned her joint PhD in Anthropology and South Asia Studies from the University of Pennsylvania in 2022. Ishani's research focuses on refugees, exploring questions around citizenship, protest movements, and alternative polities created by politically marginalized groups. She has spent several years living within the Tibetan refugee community in India, working closely with grassroots political organizations and studying their culture of resistance.