

Ethnicity in Kashmir: A Study of Watalis

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Introduction

The term ethnicity is socio-linguistic derivation from Greek term ethnos and French ethnic with associated adjective ethnique and ethnic in modern English. The word ethnos was used as simile for large undifferentiated groups of either animals or warriors[1]. The term has been used differently by different scholars. Aeschylus used ethnos to describe the Furies (Eumenides 366). Sophocles used it for wild animals (Philetetes 1141). Pinder employed the term to describe groups of like people, whose location or conduct put them in some way outside the sphere of Greek normality. Aristotle used it for foreign or barbarous nations (Politics, 1324, b.10). Early Greeks used Ethnos to modern English tribe. During Ottoman empire, Millet was the term applied to various religious communities. Probably, ethnos was the term used to translate the term 'millet'[2] In about mid-19th century scholarship has made ethnos, a word meaning something like group of people of shared characteristics[3].

The term ethnic (adjective of ethnicity) came into widespread use in modern sense since the post war period. An ethnic group is considered very much like a race but without its biological aspect. The term race did not discriminate and within the discourse of this term everybody has one, everybody belongs to one race. However, it is argued that not everybody belongs to an ethnic group or has ethnicity[4]. Ethnic groups are considered to be minorities in a population (Schermer Horn, 1974-82).

In order to determine the membership of particular ethnic group the following considerations are to be made: Political incorporation, Geographical location, Historical continuity, Language and Culture[5].

Ethnic Groups

Kashmir is home to many ethnic groups. They are: Hanjis, Gujjars and Bakerwals, Kashmiri Pandits (Hindus), Dums, Chopans, Band, Sikhs, Watalis with some occupational groups viz., Kralis (Potters), Washermen, Barbers and Kanlies (willow workers).

The people who dwell in boats are called Hanjis. History affirms that Raja Prasatsen introduced boatmen from Sangaldip[6]. Probably they are the descendants of those people. They themselves claim to be descendants of Prophet Noah. Hanjis have many divisions viz. Demb Hanz (vegetable gardeners), Gani Hanz (who gather water nuts from Wular lake), Bahats Hanz (who carry grain etc. in boats), Dunghanz or passenger boatmen and Gada Hanz (fishermen) who traditionally formed a sub-group of these people, but are presently considered a distinct ethnic group.

Upto the beginning of 14th century the population of valley was mostly Hindu. Then, there was conversion to Islam and some of the Hindus remained there, who, as affirmed by traditions, numbered only eleven families. Their descendants are known as Malmas, while those who came from Deccan and settled there are called Banmas[7]. Out of these Hindus, those who are Brahmins are called Pandits. Others are Khatries (Buher), Bakers etc. The Pandits are of distinct classes. Astrologers or Jyotshis, Priest class (Guru) and the working class of Karkun[8]. The Hindus of Kashmir do not follow occupations like cobbler, potter, porter, boatmen, carpenter, and mason or fruit seller. Pandits of villages are rarely farmers though they own land. These people are mostly government employees. It is a highly urbanised ethnic group of Kashmiri society.

These people claim to be the descendants of old Tsaks. But it is believed that they are descendants of Sudras. They were traditionally very powerful in their localities. They worked as village watchmen and in addition to police function they also looked after the crops[9]. Later, after independence, they lost that power and remained simply the cattle tenders of village. They are called Ganais in some areas.

The Shepherds of Kashmir are known as Chaupan or Pohl. They often bear the kram name 'wagay'[10]. They spend summer within the highland pastures along with flocks of sheep. They receive the service charges, of tending villager's sheep, in the form of grain in harvesting season.

The minstrel Kashmir Bhagat or Band was traditionally recognised by long black hair. They are singers as well as actors. They used to wander from place to place and display their songs and acting performances in villages and towns and collect money by begging. Now a day, they have organised theatres called Bhagat theatre and entertain public through electronic media.

These people live in fringe of mountains of the valley. Gujjars live, a more or less, settled life but Bakerwals are nomads. Gujjars rear buffaloes and raises maize crop. Bakerwals own big herds of sheep and migrate from place to place. These people speak a distinct language from Kashmiri called Gujri.

The Sikhs of Kashmir are said to be from the Brahmans of Punjab. They are believed to have come to Kashmir along with the Lieutenants of Maharaja Ranjit Singh[11]. In Kashmir, Sikhs are chiefly found in Srinagar, Tral, Beeru and Baramullah. Sikhs have been able to preserve the Punjabi language within themselves and communicate in local language with others.

Watals have been referred to as the gypsies of Kashmir. Some opine that Watals are the remnants of the original inhabitants of Kashmir[12]. It is believed that Aryans occupied Kashmir and reduced the original inhabitants to the status of menials. Most of them were forced to leave Kashmir and only a few of them remained in the valley[13]. Nevertheless, the stigma of menial work appended to them became the permanent feature of this ethnic group. Watals are considered as lowest in the occupational and social hierarchy of Kashmiri society. It is mentioned that Watals in the ancient Hindu period worked as scavengers of temples without any pecuniary interests[14]. They engaged themselves in making shoes and winnowing tracts of leather and straw[15]. Some of them were musicians and dancers. It is reported that mughals in Kashmir had

given these people the opportunity of being musicians and dancers. The dancing girls in the courts of Dogra Rajas and at other festivals held by them were from among the Watalas[16].

Settlements

Traditionally, Watalas did not settle at one place but moved from one place to another and they were rightly called gypsies[17]. However, at present they have shunned the gypsy ways and are settled. A couple of families are found, more or less, in every village of the Kashmir valley, but their houses are generally at a distance from the other houses of the village[18]. Same is the case in urban areas where they are not in close proximity to the other houses.

A major settlement of houses has come up along the ruined walls of Hari Parbat fort, which is not far away from the main city. Being the largest concentration in the proximity of the city, an attempt has been made to study cultural behaviour of this ethnic group. The dwelling comprised 125 households. All the families were contacted and data was collected by employing an interview schedule and also by observation.

Basic Economy

The ethnic group is further subdivided. Those who adopted scavenging and craft making as a profession are the lowest sub-group and those who have adopted other professions including safai workers are higher in the hierarchy[19]. But the present study reveals that occupational structure has crisscrossed. And some of the traditional occupations have altogether been given up as the scavenging of dead animals and tanning. A separate occupational group has emerged called 'GUANZ' who are involved in the process of tanning the skins but not of dead animals. The traditional shoes makers in Kashmir are no more among Watalas. They are called Siraj. However, cobblers are all Watalas. The table-I below gives occupational structure of Watalas in the community under study.

Table – I

Total Population –Males: 408 Females: 392 (of sample)

Occupation	Males Percent	Females	Total
1. Safai Karamchari in S.M.C., Sgr.	23%	6.6%	15.0%
2. Safai Karamchari in other deptt.	5%	4.5%	4.6%
3. Class IV employees (Non-Safai karamchari)	3%	0.3%	1.6%
4. Skilled and Un-skilled occupations			
a. Copper Smithry	4.6%	---	2.4%
b. Carpet weaving	6.6%	---	3.4%
c. Labour	1.2%	---	0.6%
d. Tailoring	1.2%	---	0.6%
e. Embroidering	---	3.3%	1.6%

f. Hawkers	1.4%	----	0.8%
g. Apprentices in	---	1.0%	0.5%
h. Namda saazi	0.4%	---	0.3%
i. Misc. crafts	2.2%	1.0%	1.6%
j. Pashmina spinners	--	1.0%	0.5%
5. Cobblers	1.5%	---	0.8%
6. Winnowing traft makers	2.2%	---	1.6%
7. Begging	---	0.5%	0.3%
Overall	52.7%	17.9%	35.7%

There are 19.6% of the total population working as safai karamcharies, out of which men formed 28% of the total population and females formed 12.1%. The other traditional professionals; i.e., cobblers and winnowing traft makers were 2.4% of the total population. Hence, 22% workers of the population of the community were following their ancestral occupation. The other professions/occupations found among these people were skilled and non-skilled works, which included copper smithry, carpet weaving, embroidery tailoring, namda saazi etc. It was found to be 12.3% of the total population, which comprised 13% of the male population and 6.3% of the female population. In the government employment sector, there was overall 21.2% population involved, which included 31% of the males and 11% of the females. This sector included both the traditional and other jobs. Safai karamchary jobs were done by 19.6% and non-scavenging by 1.6%.

The workers were found within the age group of 10-80 years. 51.4% of the persons in this age group were employed which had 72% of the males and 31% of the females. Some women did crafts such as embroidery and spinning of pashmina. Traditionally, Watalas have no history of performing these skilled jobs. There were 0.5% cases of female beggars. Children were employed mostly in skilled crafts such as; carpet weaving, copper smithry, namda saazi and some of them worked as hawkers and labourers. The shifting of these people to non-traditional occupations may be due to the fact that there was saturation in their own occupational sector. The cause of these people taking to the above-mentioned skilled occupation may be that there were such craft centres found all around their locality. Also, the government has established training centres of these crafts etc. especially for girls.

Education

The survey revealed the following information about the educational level of these people.

Table -II

School Going Children of the Community

Age Group	Male	Females	Total
5-10	24.2%	32.53%	29%
10-15	36.4%	15.4%	26.2%

15-20	23%	7.1%	11.1%
Overall	25.3%	22.5%	23.4%

Table – III
Adult Literacy

Age Group (Years)	Primary School		Middle School		High School	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
20-25	14.8%	0.0%	4%	7.4%	3.7%	3.7%
26-30	0.0%	0.0%	7.7%	0.0%	7.7%	5.1%
31-35	9.5%	4.8%	0.0%	0.0%	19%	0.0%
36-40	0.0%	3%	0.0%	0.0%	3%	0.0%
41-45	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
46-50	5.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
51-55	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
56-60	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Overall	5.6	3.1	4.1	1.3	5.6	1.3

Total Literacy Percentage of Adults: 11.0%.

The total literacy rate of this community was found to be 13.62% from the above-mentioned table –III. The male literacy rate was 15.7%, while the female literacy was 11.5%. Among adults (above 19 years age) the literacy rate has been found to be 11%. Out of which, the male literacy was 15.3% and the female literacy was 5.6%. 25.3% of the male children and 22.5% of female children in the age group of 5-20 years were attending educational institutions. Overall attendance of the children in this age group was 23.4%. This was described in table-II. Further analysis showed that the percentage of dropouts increased with increase in age. It was because most of the parents compelled their children to give up education after they attained the age of 16 years in order to support the family. However, the children studying in the age group of 10-15 were found more than of the lower age group. It was due to the fact that most of the parents send their children to school after the age of 10 years because of the drive of the social forces.

Social Organisation

Watals, as mentioned, are dispersed throughout the valley and the community under study is the largest settlement of these people in Srinagar. Watals were traditionally divided into two classes. One of those, who were considered Muslims, did not touch the dead animals. They were mostly cobblers and at present they are called Sheikhs. The other class, was of those people who used to skin the dead animals, they were not considered Muslim[20], and are presently called *KHUMWATALS*, *CHUHRAS*, *LASHIWATALS* of *SHUPRIWATALS*. The Sheikh cannot be much

easily distinguished from the common Kashmiris. The other group can be easily recognised from their dark complexion and a conspicuous language, not intelligible generally. The Sheikhs consider themselves superior to the rest and do not associate with them.

The family structure among these people was mostly, nuclear. The nuclear families being 90% and 10% were joint. In most cases, the families were patrilocal, 3% of them were matrilineal. In patrilocal families, men and women had more or less equal authority. It may be due to the fact that women folk, in most of the cases, shared the economic burden of the family equally with the men folk.

The strength of the families varied from 2 to 12 members. Some families had even 10 children. The families were both monogamous and polygynous. There was one case where sororal polygynous was observed. The people were not much interested to plan their families. This was substantiated by the following data:

Family Planning and Choice of People

No. of Families:150

In Favour of Planning	Not in Favour of Planning	No View
38%	52%	10%

38% families, having children between 2-7, were in favour of planning their families. 52% families, having children between 1-10, were not in favour of the family planning. 10% of the interviewees did not give any opinion in this regard. People in favour of family planning considered it an economic burden to have excessive children. Those who were in favour of this considered the adoption of the means of the family planning as irreligious. The community did not live in a fraternal way. It was not cohesive. There was no association of any nature among them barring a trade union viz., (Union of Safai Karmcharies of Srinagar Municipality Employees). Day to day conflicts were common among those people. They themselves admitted the presence of daily quarrels and conflicts within and without the families. There were regular cases of abusing and beating their wives and children.

Sex and Marriage

Watalas of Kashmir are notorious for their sexual character. It is believed that they used to run brothels in different parts of Kashmir. A place called Watal Mohala in Sopore Kashmir, had been one such instance[21]. Watalani (Watal woman) is the word used for a prostitute[22]. It is also opined by some people that Watalas lack permanency in marriages. The woman leaves one husband and marries another within days as mentioned earlier, there was one case in the community under study, who had married two real sisters at the same time, which is strictly prohibited in Islam.

Marriage in most cases was monogamous and a small number was polygynous. Marriage age was found to be 18 years for males and 15 years for females, but in a few cases girls were married at the age of 12. The mate selection in 80% cases was done by parents. There were very less number of marriages in which children married of their own choice. All marriages were endogamous. There

was one case in the community here a non-Watal had married a Watal girl. The husband was residing with the in-laws, for it is a rule in Kashmiri society that a person marrying a Watal is also treated as Watal. There was no case of hypergamy of Watal males, for no non-Watal girl would be ready to marry a Watal boy. The upper class of Watal does not marry a lower class one. Hence, there are two endogamous groups within Watal, which are mutually exogamous.

It was reported by informants that in most cases, they did not require to give any dowry or bride price. There were only 5% cases among upper caste Watal who mentioned the presence of dowry system among them- in the form of a few gold ornaments and clothes. Some of them did serve traditional Kashmiri wazwan to the guests and Baratis, usually cooked by their own men. In most cases, services of traditional Kashmiri cooks (wazas) are not required.

Watal and Muslim Society

Religion of Islam rules out any discrimination on the basis of caste, creed or colour. It has declared all Muslims as brethren. None is considered inferior or superior but for his deeds (Alquran 49:10 & 13). It is on the basis of this Islamic dogma that the Watal in Kashmir, who were traditionally despised to a great extent, have been allotted the title of sheikh. Mostly, all Watal in Kashmir write sheikh, as their kram name (family name). Sheikh is an Arabic and Quranic word and it means an elderly and respected person. Sheikh is also used for religious scholars of Islam (among Shia Muslims). It is for the eradication or the stigma of inferiority, which is traditionally annexed to these people that sheikh title has been used for them. In this way, it has been tried to raise them upward in the social hierarchy. Sheikh is also used as kram name by many Kashmiri Muslims such as Sheikh Mohamad Abdullah. This use of sheikh for Watal also facilitates their social mobility. A Watal after the achievement of higher economic, social or political position can move to higher stratum and his caste name (kram name) sheikh remaining same, he can be considered from among the non-Watal Sheikhs. There is no restriction for a Watal to practise religious practices and rituals along with other Muslims. They participate in collective prayer in mosques along with other Muslims. Their deads are buried in graveyards along with other Muslims. Among the Watal, there are many spiritual personalities who act as spiritual advisers for the Muslims as a whole. Many of them act as theology teachers in their own localities, running darsgahs (schools). However, at social level much discrimination is manifested towards these people.

Social Discrimination

They face this discrimination due to their menial occupation and ill ethical reputation. It can be understood from the below mentioned social restrictions observed by the Kashmiri society, as a whole, in dealing with these people.

1. Watal are considered as lowest in the social hierarchy of Kashmiri society. No marital relation can be contracted with them.
2. People, generally, restrict from entering the houses of these people. Even to live in their neighbourhood is considered ill.
3. Inter-dining with these people is not generally liked.
4. The tradition of eating from the same plate by four persons, which is prevalent among Kashmiri Muslims, is not observed with any person of this ethnic group.

However, social mobility of these people is not restricted. When a person of this ethnic group achieves material prosperity or a position in administration, politics etc. or achievement in artistic field or a charismatic quality, he considers himself separate from this ethnic group and attitude of the society also tends to be different towards such person. However, taboo in marriage is still observed.

Conclusion

Watalas have been recognised as the lowest in the social and occupational hierarchy of Kashmiri society. They live as a separate group in different parts of Kashmir. They have been serving as scavengers and cobblers. Most of them still perform those occupations. In the sample studies, 59% of the working people were the government employees. In most families, both men and women were earning hands. Child labour was present and they had been, in most cases, trained in non-ancestral occupations. In spite of this, their living condition was not good. They lived in ordinary houses with ordinary or little furnishing. Less care was taken towards the cleanliness of the environment. Educationally, they have been found backward. The literacy rate found 13.93% was much less than that of the state, as a whole, being 22.93%, as per the census of 1981[23]. The literates were not higher than matriculates.

Ethnically, these people have no good reputation. They have ill reputation for sexual character. The stigma of menial occupation and ethical ill reputation are responsible for their lower position in the social hierarchy.

They are endogamous in strict sense, with two exogamous groups. Marriage ceremony is free from complexities of dowry etc. The Watalas have been enlisted as social castes under the constitution of Jammu and Kashmir. Though most of the social groups of Kashmir have been declared as scheduled tribes, these people have been denied such benefit. This may be due to the fact that these people have little representation in the bureaucratic and political sphere of the state.

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