

## **Statement of Purpose**

“My child will not spend his life tied to sheep and goats,” Bilal Ali, a Bakkarwal told me when I asked him why his group had chosen to migrate early. Nomadic communities like Gujjar-Bakkarwals are struggling to continue with their centuries-old migratory lifestyle.

In Jammu and Kashmir, the bi-annual migration between the pastures of Kashmir and Ladakh takes place during summers, and between the plains and Pir-Panjal ranges of the Jammu region during the winters. Though these tribals form one of the largest transhumance communities in the Himalayas, there is a growing sentiment in the next generation regarding giving up the practice of migration and finally settling down. Some blame it on the uneven weather patterns, and others on the apathy of the government regarding implementation of policies that benefit the tribals.

I have previously investigated a story of social boycott faced by Gujjars supplying milk in certain areas of Jammu region. After the story’s publication, the local authorities intervened to protect the interests of these nomads suffering due to Pandemic-hysteria by the public.

But isolated reports cannot convey appropriately the complex problems affecting Gujjar-Bakkarwals. In recent decades, urbanization and climate disasters have put pressure on their livestock-based subsistence economy like never before. Since Gujjar-Bakkarwals were slow to claim private property, their traditional dwellings in the forests are threatened by land-use change. As urbanization increases, patches of forest land which served as temporary homes for the tribals and provided grazing land for their animals are now being diverted towards constructing government buildings and new projects. One such project that stirred the apprehensions of the nomads was proposal to construct High Court complex in Raika forests.

Across mountains and plains, their activities help conserve local soil and water, prevent forest fires, rejuvenate wild flora and fauna and increase farm output. However, the nomadic community’s traditional grazing lands are now under pressure.

Bakkarwals lack access to formal education and health facilities. Though there have been some efforts for improvement in the form of mobile schools. But sometimes, a small group of nomads must separate from the tribe for the education of the children. In one instance, after the Covid-Pandemic, I did a video report on some Bakkarwals who were travelling with over fifty children,

but without their animals from Jammu to Srinagar. When asked, they explained that though the temperature was not conducive yet for the bi-annual migration, schools had finally opened so the children must migrate earlier. Living separate from urban dwellings, Bakarwal communities do not have access to the same kind of public health infrastructure and often complain of neglect in govt health institutions. They are also susceptible to the digital divide and lack resources for the disbursement of information during climate disasters.

But mostly, they are forced to bear an additional burden of abrupt events and epidemics associated with climate change. Sudden change in temperatures or increased exposure to heat or cold could mean death of their animals. Bakarwals end up bearing the additional expenditure of health costs and loss of income due to the death of their animals.

These nomadic tribes have historically been resigned to the margins, unable to fit into norms of private property that have been incorporated into contemporary citizenship and state policy. Due to their communitarian ideals of ownership, the Gujjar-Bakarwals are yet to be given dwelling and livelihood rights. As such, despite the extension of Forest Rights Act in J&K after the abrogation of its special status, there have been various “anti-encroachment” drives that have displaced these nomads from their temporary shelters in the forest, or houses in semi-urban localities. I wish to do a detailed research-based report on the problems faced by the nomads in Jammu and Kashmir due to climate change along with a view of the public health facilities they are provided with when they are camping in the higher reaches of the Himalayas after their migration.