



**Way of life:** "The Bakherwals consider themselves children of nature. Not many remember their age, or date incidents to specific years, as they follow the seasonal 'calendar.'" Heading out to the meadows of the Kashmir valley from the plains of Rajouri. (Below) Tahira (in red) and her family prepare a meal on Mughal Road. •NISSAR AHMAD

# The Bakherwals' long walk

The gruesome rape and murder of an eight-year-old Bakherwal girl in Jammu has brought the nomadic tribe under the spotlight. **Peerzada Ashiq** reports on their itinerant lifestyle and the new challenges confronting them

Tahira Begum, all of eight years old, is confident that she is mentally and physically tough enough for the arduous trek across the Pir Panjal mountain range. The passes are yet to open. A sudden snowfall last week brought nine inches of snow and closed down the Mughal Road that connects southern Kashmir's Shopian district with Pir Panjal's Poonch district. But that does not deter Begum from the journey she and her family have embarked on.

Two tents and a few utensils are all they take with them. Food supplies include corn flour, rice, and herbal salt tea, to be supplemented by whatever the forests provide on the way. "Salt tea keeps us full of energy," Begum says. Despite the sudden snowfall, this winter has been warmer than the previous ones, prompting Begum and her family to set off on their three-month trek earlier than usual, in April instead of mid-May.

## Towards the Valley

Begum's family, consisting of her mother Zavra, father Muhammad, elder brother Bashar Ali, and sisters Rukhsana and Dilshad, left their winter hutment in the third week of April, shifting hearth and home from the Sunderbani forest of Jammu's Rajouri district to the foothills of Bafiaz in Poonch. They will stay put here for a while before commencing the trek that will take them to an altitude of 5,183 ft before they reach Drang in the Kashmir Valley, 38 km north of Srinagar. Ali, 17, will climb a hill every morning to gauge the weather conditions before taking a final call on when to move.

Begum hasn't heard of the eight-year-old Bakherwal girl who was raped and murdered in Kathua in January, with the case bringing the spotlight on the nomadic community. All Begum can think of is a friend living on the other side of the mountain, even as she keeps an eye out for her four trained dogs, collecting wood, and fanning the flame for cooking.

Her father Muhammad left a week ago with the Jab, a flock of 250 sheep. "We will raise the flock on green pastures and sell them on Bakri Id in the Valley," she says. Her father will occupy the family's traditional doko, a mud-hut made on the forest slope, before the rest of the family members catch up with him.

## Nomadic traditions

Begum belongs to the nomadic community of herdsmen in Jammu and Kashmir known as the Bakherwals. There are 23.4 lakh Bakherwals in the State, accounting for 11.9% of its population. They are J&K's third largest linguistic group, after Kashmiri and Dogri speakers.

There are two main linguistic groups in the hilly regions of Pir Panjal, Chenab Valley, Kashmir Valley and Jammu – Gojri speakers and Pahari speakers. The Gojri speakers fall into sub-groups, Bakherwals and Gujjars, both Sunni Muslim communities. The Bakherwals migrate from the Kashmir Valley to the plains and hilly areas of Jammu in winters and return to Kashmir in the summers to raise sheep. The Gujjars are more rooted. Many of them own farm land in the Pir Panjal Valley, Chenab Valley, Kash-



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mir Valley and Jammu, and make a living by raising milch cattle.

The seasonal migration of Begum's family and other Bakherwals will involve two months of walking, from their winter hutments in the Jammu forest areas to the Kashmir Valley's meadows, covering a distance of 550 km. A survey conducted in 2015 by Showkeen Bilal, a research scholar of Aligarh Muslim University and published by the *Journal of Business Management and Social Sciences Research*, had found that around 1.2 million Bakherwal women were "mentally and physically fatigued", with 88.1% of those under 13 years of age having below-normal Body Mass Index. Female literacy in the community is just 25.5%, far below the national average of 34.8% among tribal women.

## Caught in the crossfire

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The shoots of the maize crop are yet to gain height in Poonch. "That's a signal for us to leave. We cannot raise flocks of sheep when the crops are around," Ahmad says. He adds that he is good at the tasks he must carry out during the migration, such as counting over 200 sheep every day before dusk. "It takes over an hour to count them based on a colour coding that we do on their back. We count the flock on a daily basis when we start the migration," says Ahmad.

They might be skilled at managing the vagaries of nature, but the challenges posed by militancy are something else altogether, and the community has often been caught in the crossfire.

Back in the summer of 2003, Poonch's Hillkaka would have ended up facing a Kargil-like situation had it not been for the Bakherwals, who not only passed on crucial information but also joined the police's Special Operation Group to lead them to the insurgent camps that had been set up at an altitude of 11,000 ft. The village elders even met the then Union Home Minister, L.K. Advani, and spoke to him about "ending the militancy" in the region.

"Operation Sarp Vinash lasted five months, starting in January that year. Around 300 militants were hiding in shelters established in the inaccessible recesses of the Pir Panjal range. We helped the Army reach the peaks and the hideouts. Over 60 militants were killed in the operation," says Tahir, a Bakherwal who was one of the first members of the Village Defence Com-

mittee (VDC) that was formed to counter the insurgents.

The VDCs were set up in 1995 to arm villagers in areas that were either inaccessible to security forces or highly vulnerable to militants. They were mainly concentrated in the border areas to thwart the militants. The Gujjars, stationed on the upper reaches, were trained and armed with .303 rifles for self-defence.

## At the receiving end

The Gujjar-Bakherwals say that they have been the backbone of the Army manning the borders. "The movement of the Bakherwals has always proved fruitful to the Army. They strengthened our defence. You cannot call them pro-Pakistani," says Masud Choudhary, retired vice chancellor of Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University in Rajouri and one of the first local police officers to have served in Kashmir, at the peak of the militancy in 1990s. "It's not a good idea to antagonise them. One should bear in mind that they even know how to fight leopards and bears," he adds.

Their legendary bravery notwithstanding, Bakherwals such as Babu, 65, a resident of Poonch's Degwar-Noorkote on the Line of Control (LoC), strike a despondent note. Since he lives on the other side of the Army's fencing around the village (the Army has fenced many villages near the LoC with the idea of creating an additional buffer zone to curb infiltration by militants), Babu says that he has to register every guest or mason who comes to his house, and also his own movements in and out of the area on a daily basis. "We become the first casualty in case of shelling too. My close relative Muhammad Sadiq's 15-year-old daughter, Shamim Akhter, died in shelling on October 2 last year. We are constantly on the edge," Babu says.

Many villages in the area have been bifurcated by Army fencing, with only a single gate on the access road for entry and exit. Villagers living inside the fenced areas must make an entry in the register every time they leave or enter the village. Anyone intending to stay out for the night must inform the Army in advance.

Unlike other Bakherwals, Babu owns a piece of land on the wrong side of the fence. "These days, half of my family stays back and avoids coming with me here because of the experiences I went through in the Valley," says Babu. "I no longer trek to my traditional dokes in Baramulla's Boniyar area. One summer

we found that the Army had set up a camp there. We pleaded with them to allow us access to the dokes. But they wouldn't.

Many Bakherwals fled to safer locations during the militancy. Haji Muhammad Yousuf, 63, is fighting a court battle in Jammu since 1998 to get his migration benefits. Once a shopkeeper at Surankote's Madhote area, Yousuf ended up in the middle of a military-militant confrontation.

"In 1998, both the Army men and the militants used to come to my shop to buy groceries. It was Pakistan in the night and India in the day for me. But there came about a perception that I worked for the Army. So the militants became suspicious of me. Once that happened, I had no option but to leave my shop and land and migrate permanently to Jammu. Now two decades have passed, and still my application for the benefits of a migrant is pending in the deputy commissioner's office. Is this justice?" asks Yousuf, who now lives in Jammu's Narwal locality.

## Fresh wounds

Today the Bakherwals see themselves as being cornered on a number of issues. They have had to deal with a sudden surge in cow vigilantism since 2014. Instances of locals attacking them were video-recorded and circulated widely. Every year they register their family members, cattle strength, and the places they visit, with the deputy commissioner's office. Only then do they get the permits to move the flock from one place to another.

According to police data, while 42 cases of bovine smuggling were filed in 2016, the number jumped to 97 in 2017. "We allow the Bakherwals to move on during the seasonal migration. However, we get tough if the permits are violated for smuggling," says Rajiv Pande, Senior Superintendent of Police, Poonch.

In February this year, when the Government of India's special representative for J&K, Dineswar Sharma, visited the State, the Gujjar-Bakherwal community submitted a proposal to him, seeking the creation of an exclusive Army regiment of Gujjars, on the lines of the Gorkha and the Assam regiments, "to defend the borders".

## A deathly silence

In the aftermath of the rape and murder of the eight-year-old Bakherwal child in Kathua, the ideological shift in the Poonch-Rajouri belt is palpable.

"For quite some time, there have been no marriages between Muslim Gujjars and Muslim Paharis because of language-based identity politics. But the rape and murder of a Gujjar girl and the politics around it in Jammu is now forcing the Gujjars to think of their identity along religious lines," says Asad Noman, a social activist and a Gujjar leader in Poonch.

"When I watch the news or read the newspapers, my blood boils," says Ghulam Maryam, a Class 11 student at Poonch's Gujjar-Bakherwal Girls Hostel. "This is unforgivable. This could happen to me. I fear stepping out in the dark now. The culprits deserve stringent punishment. We have pinned our hopes on Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti."

Gujjar leader Masud Choudhary says that an anti-Gujjar wave is being created in Jammu. "Gujjars form just 4-5% of the population in Kathua, R.S. Pura and Samba. But it's being said that this percentage will change demography of the place. How is it possible?" asks Choudhary, alluding to allegations by Hindu right-wing groups that Gujjars are deliberately settling in Jammu's Kathua in order to change the district from being a Hindu-majority to a Muslim-majority one. But he adds that the collective outrage over the Kathua case has given the community hope that the people of J&K will ensure justice for the victim's family.

In Kathua, which is 300 km from Poonch, a deathly silence envelops the home of the father (and a Bakherwal herdsman) of the murdered eight-year-old. His two-room house is locked. The family has left with its flock of sheep and entire belongings for the green pastures of Kargil, over 500 km away. A shiny metal amulet hangs on the lock, a sign that the family hopes to return.

The incident, many locals say, has changed the dynamic between communities in Kathua. "When one goes out to get an Aadhaar card or visit the ration shop, you can feel the change in Hindu-Muslim relations," says Choudhary Nazakat Khatana, a Gujjar and Bakherwal leader from Kathua. "I am sur-

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prised that the Gujjars, including the victim's family, who have been living in the Rasana forests for ages, are now being looked upon with suspicion."

## Question of forest rights

Deputy Commissioner, Poonch, Mohammad Aijaz, says the Gujjar-Bakherwal community only have grazing and access rights to dokes, and anyone settling illegally on forest land will face eviction.

Since the Forest Rights Act, 2006 is not applicable in J&K, no one from the community can claim ownership or settlement rights in the forest land. "Their access to forest lands is a traditional understanding only, and a purely verbal one," says Aijaz.

BJP leader and former State Forest Minister Choudhary Lal Singh took advantage of the absence of a land rights law for the Bakherwals to evict illegal settlements of the community in Jammu and launch an enclosure drive of the forest land. The BJP's coalition partner in J&K, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), did try to introduce a legislation on this issue in the Assembly but was stalled by the former. Ironically, the legislation on extending Forest Rights Act 2006, adopted across the country, was stalled by the BJP. The proposed Bill would have decided on granting dwelling rights to the Bakherwals within the forest land besides giving them traditional grazing rights.

"We are in favour of extending forest rights to the community. Until such a law comes into force, no State law should be used to give an impression that there is an eviction drive against a particular community," says the State Public Works Minister and senior PDP leader Naeem Akhtar.

Akhtar says that Chief Minister Mufti has already issued a directive to the police that any eviction by the Forest Department, a portfolio currently held by Deputy Chief Minister Nirmal Singh, should be done in consultation with Tribal Affairs Minister Chowdhary Zulfkar Ali.

In contrast to the BJP's official stand, the party's Muslim MLA from Kalakote, Abdul Ghani Kohli, supports the extension of the Forest Rights Act to J&K. "Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that the Forest Rights Act should be extended to tribal communities across the country. We believe that it should be. These people have been living in these forests for ages now," he says.

The communal flare-up following the Kathua rape and murder has forced the local administration to step in and douse the communal tension. In Rajouri, Deputy Commissioner Shahid Iqbal Choudhary kicked off a Hindu-Muslim-Sikh-Isai Twenty20 cricket tournament. "Such a tournament will promote the message of peace and communal harmony. It is the best way to positively channelise the energy of the youth," says Choudhary.

Oblivious thus far to the political churn in Kathua, Begum will reach Drung next week, weather permitting. For the next six months, the eight-year-old, like others from the community, will be cut off from the rest of the State as her family's flock grazes in the meadows. It remains to be seen what the coming winter offers them when they return to the plains of Jammu.