

An Ethnographic Study of Raika Pastoral Community

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Abstract

Raika are semi-nomadic pastoralists of India. Each year Raika in collective camps called deras starts on migratory journeys of distance of up to 1000 kms. The present paper is an attempt to present the ethnographic account of Raika Community. Fieldwork has been done in two villages majorly inhabited by Raikas, Raika Ki Dhani and Manpur Bakdi in Pali Sirohi Belt. For studying the Rebari during their sedentary as well as migratory part of life, ten migratory flocks and 45 sedentary families have been studied through ethnographic research approach.

Keywords: Raika, nomads, pastoralists.

Introduction

The All India Nomadic Inquiry Report (1891) has classified all the Indian Nomadic groups into three categories: -

- Pastoral nomads
- *Khanabadosh* (wandering tribes)
- Semi-nomadic tribes

Pastoralists are the people who derive a large part of their income on subsistence from raising livestock in conditions where major part of the animal feed is natural forage and crop residue, rather than specifically cultivated and stored fodder or fenced pasture (Stephen, 1981). Uncertain and variable rainfall, and a socio-political squeeze on common grazing land account for the need to migrate with the flock (Paul, 1998).

Raika are pastoral nomads and they earn their living by rearing sheep, goat and camel. They are the main pastoral nomads of Rajasthan and the

present study is focused on them.

Socio- Economic Profile:

According to Westphal-Hellbusch and Westphal (1974) the term Raika was originally reserved for those Rebaris who served as camel mounted messengers to the royal courts of Rajputs. Mainly spreading from western Rajasthan to the Kutch region of Gujrat, the Raika / Rebari hamlets survive in a harsh climatic zone. In Rajasthan, the mean annual rainfall varies from 100 mm on the Indo-Pakistan border and 210 mm at Jaisalmer to about 350 mm to 400 mm in parts situated more towards the eastern region. But the thorny vegetation of the entire area has supported a significant population of both sheep and camel. Salzman (1986) writes, that less than 5 percent of the village population in Rajasthan owns about 50% of the livestock, with regard to the camel population. Rajasthan had 72% of the 1.10 million camels in India. The sheep can subsist, and often flourish, on coarse feed not relished by other domestic animals. A similar ecological adaptation applies to the camel. What is admired by camel tenders (and also by people in general) is the camel's fortitude under conditions of extreme heat and its ability to cross vast expanses of desert without drinking water (Kohler, 1992).

Raikas combine camel and sheep in their herds in varying proportions. In Bikaner, Jodhpur, Pali and Kota certain Raika hamlets are observed having several camel herds, but flocks of sheep also exist in these hamlets. As we move towards Bikaner, camel herds are larger whereas sheep herds are smaller. In Pali camel herds are smaller but sheep are reared in large number. In Marwar, although the herds do have a couple of camels, which are the beasts of burden, the Raika mainly specialize in sheep breeding and tending. Raikas of Jalore and Sirohi are predominantly sheep breeding communities. As an exception certain Raika hamlets like Jojawar in Pali and Ghum-ki-dhani in Kota are famous for owning large camel herds numbering 2 to 3 thousand animals (Srivastava, 1997). Kohler-Rollefson (1995, 1997) in one of her papers, mentions an exclusively camel oriented Raika community in Pali which not only had a collection of memorable statue depicting camel mounted ancestors but also self-made clay camels with which local children played. Raikas of the district of Mandsoor (Madhya Pradesh) breed camels; they do not keep sheep but rear buffaloes and engage in crop cultivation.

Life of Raikas is full of hardships and challenges. To prevent and to face these challenges for their existence, they believe in invisible and mysteri-

ous powers and seek their help through some ritualistic behaviour pattern. Such of their beliefs, rituals and practices constitute their religion. They are basically Hindus and they believe in Vaishnav *dharma*. Raikas are culturally and educationally backward people and they take religion as a matter of fear or faith. They have a great faith in dreams, and believe that dreams are excellent indicators of one's future.

Raikas celebrate almost all the festivals celebrated by Hindus in general, but interestingly, they do not celebrate these festivals on the same days as other Hindus do. Their main festival is Akha Teej, which occurs in April every year. During this festival, Nambardars of the community invite five or six important people from the village to share a special meal. Among Raikas festivals and community functions occupy a special significance. According to them festivals maintain the feeling of oneness in the tribe. Community functions also serve as a means of recreation and enjoyment. Fairs and festivals hold an important place and charm for the tradition bound Raikas.

Main deities of Raikas are Gugaji or Gogaji, Pabuji, Ramdeoji, Bhaironji, Sheetla Mata, Ganeshji or Ganpatiji, Hanumanji or Balaji, Shivji, Mamaji, SatiMa, Kuldevi, Bayan Sa, Gudarji-Maharaj, Jaldevi, Hand-Mata, Jhunjharji, Hinglaj-Mata, Purabji, Tejaji, Bhabuta, Siddha, Hariram Baba, Mamai Mata.

Raikas like other Hindu communities have faith in a number of deities and as such they are a multipantheon community. Though their main religious faith is centered around Lord Shiva who is said to be their originator, they in no manner have less faith in other deities like Gogaji, Pabuji, Ramdeoji, Bhaironji and so on. One more important thing regarding their religion is that there is no hierarchy among their deities. Though their main deity is Lord Shiva and they consider Monday as most auspicious day, yet other deities have their own particular areas of influence and no overlapping is observed in these areas. For the ailments of camel, they worship Pabuji, while for small pox the deity Sheetla Mata is worshiped and so on. It was found that the presence of several deities has its origin in traditional dependence of Raikas on spiritual abstraction rather than in finding any scientific solution to their physical, mental or social ailments.

Some traditions of so-called higher castes have influenced their religion and their pattern of worship. It may be because they believe that by doing so they can move a step forward, up in the ladder of caste hierarchy.

From the point of view of Raikas, the divine power is supreme and is placed at top. Then the priority goes to their caste *panchayats*, *thikana* and *nyaats*. After the divine power, it is the caste *panchayat* of which they are afraid most. According to Raikas in general, one shouldn't try to dominate the nature; but should work in harmony with it. They believe in destiny and say that their problems and challenges are their fate. But, they also believe that a man should always work hard and make efforts to turn the course of his fate in his favour.

Greatest characteristic of Raika religion is that it is very tolerant and liberal. It leads them to act in right direction. Besides their local deities, it allows them to worship all Hindu gods and goddesses. Shiva has prescribed certain *dharmas* for Raikas. Ravs of Maru Raikas narrate that when the primeval founders of four castes married the celestial nymphs, Shiva announced twenty moral maxims for them. Shiva advised his sons to live according to their respective maxims if they wanted a happy and glorious life full of prosperity for their future generations. Raikas are following these *dharmas* till today though some small changes have taken place. Rituals and customs among Raikas, are a mixture of upper caste traditions as well as lower caste traditions of Hindus. Like in other castes they are also following the process of social change or Sanskritization.

On an intensive study of the Raikas as a nomadic social group, and an extensive study of other reported migratory groups, we find some common features that leads us to conceptualize certain principles. They helps us to analyse and understand the distinctive characteristics of these communities. It is not that these characteristics have been consciously adopted by these communities on adhoc basis for meeting their short term needs. Rather, these features have grown as part of community's survival strategy over a period of time, and are the result of protracted struggle with conditions of living that were largely hostile and adverse.

One thing worth noting with regard to their customs and rituals is the fact that being pastoralists their main source of livelihood is animal wealth, and therefore the importance of animals (specially camel) is conspicuous in their cultural practices. During marriage, for example the bridegroom sits on camel and leads the marriage. The parents of bride also try to gift a camel in marriage to their daughter, if possible. Thus, camel which is the source of their livelihood, has direct impact on the culture of the community.

Migratory Patterns:

Migration is the best strategy to exploit seasonal pastures for maintaining a regular supply of feed for the livestock, in such areas where it is not possible to store, harvest and produce fodder. The migration cycle of Raikas begins at the end of monsoon and the duration varies from three months to the entire year. Most of the Raikas owning large flocks of animals start their migration cycle shortly after Diwali festival in the months of October–November and they return to the village on the onset of monsoon in late June or early July. Thus, they remain on migration for a period of 8 to 9 months and stay at home for 3 to 4 months only. On a rough calculation, the distance traveled in one migration cycle by a Raika group of herders and herds, reckons to an average of 1000 kilometers.

The group Nambardar takes decision about the choice of direction of movement after consulting his group members. Care is taken to ensure that the chosen route is a familiar one and the group must have some acquaintance with the permanent residents of the villages or townships on way. Raikas move in a zigzag fashion in order to get the best and most easily available resources of fodder and water, which rarely lie in straight direction.

Before proceeding for migration Raikas prostrate themselves before Pabuji and organize *sabha* in his honor. They prefer to carry with them only very essential items of daily use during migration. Raikas generally leave their houses unlocked and open. Quite often old men, women and children don't go on migration.

Raikas migrate in a social unit called *dang*. On an average, *dang* consists of 12 households, each known as an *ewar*, which consists of 5-7 persons (men, women and children), i.e. a composite family coming from the same or from different villages. *Dangs* are known by the name of the group leader called Nambardar or by the name of the village of such Nambardar.

Individually owned flocks, or *ewar* comprises the primary unit of sheep owned by an individual or an undivided family together with the persons accompanying it. *Rewar* comprises of flocks of more than one owner from different families often linked by kinship, and may in addition engage hired help. *Dera* refers to further larger unit of the camp. It comprises of animals and Raikas of two or more *rewars*. *Dang* is the largest migratory entity which is the aggregation of flocks, *rewars* and the *dera*. It comprises of sheep, goat camel and Raikas of one or more villages that come together in order to conduct migration.

It is interesting to note in the context of changing values of the society that Raikas are sustaining their traditional solidarity of clan through *dangs* when even the ties of joint family are at the verge of breaking up and, quite often, even brothers are not able to live peacefully under one roof. *Dang* gives an impression of a mobile village that moves thousands of kilometres under the leadership of a Nambardar.

There is however, a rudimentary form of division of labour in terms of age on the basis of which a distinction is made between old men, the adults and the younger male members. Functional specialization arises in the instance of leadership within the group. As has already been said, the leader is known as Nambardar and the position carries a high social status within the mobile group and outside it. Such leadership is gained through experience, skill, personnel dynamism, traditionally derived status and wealth, usually in the same order.

Functions of a Nambardar include among other things, plotting the course of movement of the entire group and often moving ahead on scouting trips, identifying suitable grazing areas and waiting points, locating suitable halting and camping places, managing relation with local inhabitants and also with other migrating groups, negotiating the recovery of stolen or lost animal of the herd, arranging medicine for the sick and taking care of such sick member at the camp, organizing the shearing of sheep and camels, arranging the sale of wool and keeping the group intact and functional. The group as a whole jointly meets any monetary investment made by the Nambardar in or during the performance of his duties. Individual members perform their duties and functions as a routine and thus contribute to the organization of the migration process.

Raikas generally migrate collectively, which has both advantages as well as disadvantages. It is advantageous in the sense that it allows division of labour and creates sufficient security. It also proves economical in terms of maintenance expenses because the larger the group the lesser the per capita cost of maintenance. These advantages of collective migration outweigh some disadvantages that arise out of difference of opinion in times of decision-making.

Raikas traverse large distances on foot but if some urgency arises in their native village, Raikas return home by public transport - a bus or a train or some other conveyance and then come back to join the group by the same mode.

Raikas face many problems. Major problem arises due to improper and unsystematic disposal of pastoral products as a result of which Raikas have to sell their produce at a much lower rate than the actual market price. They also face the problem of lack of medical and other facilities during transit. In spite of the fact that the Government of Rajasthan have made arrangements for the issue for migration cards in order to facilitate their transit, yet Raikas become victims of corrupt officials. On their migratory routes, they have also to face arrogant sedentary population. Shrinking pastures due to constant conversion of wasteland into agricultural land and non-irrigation land into irrigation land is again creating problem for Raikas. Moreover, in the recent past open forests of Madhya Pradesh, which used to provide good fodder for animals of migrating Raikas are not available to them for past some years as a ban has been imposed on the entrance of migrating animals. The literacy of Raikas combined with their mobile lifestyle keeps them out of touch with modern advancements in technology even in the spheres in which they earn their living and they remain unaware of the programmes conducted by the government in the field of health, education and economic upliftment of the poor.

Some of the non - governmental organizations have been working for the amelioration of difficulties faced by nomadic communities particularly Raikas. The efforts made by PUCL (People's Union for Civil Liberties - Rajasthan Unit), Lok Hit Pashu Palak Sansthan (LPPS) at Sadri in Pali district, League for Pastoral People (Germany) are worth appreciation.

Raikas have to deal with several kinds of people - acquaintances and strangers, peace loving and aggressive, cooperative and arrogant during their march on migratory routes. They interact with settled farmers for setting campsite, for purchase of food, for obtaining water from common sources and for collecting fuel. As far as their herds are concerned they have to be rested at night and fed during the day. Nowadays, most of the grazing lands belong to private owners, which again creates problem for Raikas. Interpersonal conflict rarely takes place during migration or within a *dang* because the responsibility of taking decisions and keeping harmony in the mobile camp lies with the Nambardar or the council of elders, who make conscious efforts to avert estrangements. But in case some altercations occur between members of mobile group, the Nambardar resolves the conflict.

During the sedentary part of the year, when Raikas stay in the native village, there are occasions when conflicts arise between them and the permanently settled other residents of the village, on the issues like grazing of

herds, sources of drinking water, destruction of crops by animals and so on. Raikas always find themselves socially and politically weak because of their nomadic lifestyle. They are away from the mainstream of development and political composition of the local society. Their interference in local politics and participation in power structure is little or negligible.

There are three decision-making authorities during migration, viz., Nambardar, Kamdar and the Council of Elders. Nambardar is the leader of camp. Kamdar is the second in command within the mobile group. In case any misconduct on the part of Nambardar is disclosed to the group, the members have the right to sanction the leader by leaving the camp in the middle of migration and returning to the village, which will greatly disrepute the Nambardar.

During the sedentary part of the year, their caste councils called *thikana* and *nyaat* resolve their conflicts. *Thikana* is their local caste council. It takes up cases of conflict injustice and violation of the code of community ethics. On an average about fifteen villages constitute a *thikana*. Contrary to the other caste councils, *thikana* consists of a large number of council members (*panchas*). No election is held for picking a *panch* and whoever attends the council meeting is treated as a *panch*. Generally, the elderly members of Raika community who have left the work of grazing herds, and have a lot of experience, attend meetings. Unlike, other tribes, *thikanas* of Raikas do not believe in ordeals or in supernatural punishment.

Nyaat are social gatherings of the caste, occasioned on festivities such as child birth or marriage, & also on occasions of grief, such as death of a member of community.

Apart from *thikana* and *nyaat*, there is the village *panchayat*, which is one of the most obvious forms of state involvement in local political process. Funded by the state, it is a thirteen-member body that carried out development works within its jurisdiction. Elections are held for the post of *panch* and *sarpach* in *panchayat*. Raikas cast their votes, if at the time of election they are not on migration and are at the village. Women are least interested in casting their votes.

Raikas are critical of village *panchayat* because according to them *panchayat* has powers to do good things but it uses its powers only for the benefit of upper castes. As far as Raikas are concerned *panchayats* only create problems for them by enclosing common grazing lands.

For long times, two severe criticisms are levied against the pastoral nomads, one, that they overgraze their animals and second that they lead to soil erosion. But, it has been observed that the rate or speed at which flocks move from one place to another ensures that a pasture or field or fallow is not seriously damaged after a flock has grazed on it, because Raikas move very rapidly making their flocks graze only on the upper portion of the crop. As for soil erosion, apart from moving animals the nature of soil is also an important contributing factor. Grazing on hard soil of harvested and fallow fields or on the oroans does not appear to lead to soil erosion. Erosion is observed only in freshly ploughed fields or soft soils or sandy areas.

General picture of personal and community hygiene among Raikas is very dire and dark. They are not aware of the usefulness and hygienic value of daily teeth cleaning and ablution practices. They believe that it is not at all necessary. Some of them even expressed the feeling that daily brushing or rubbing the teeth with some powder may loosen the gum and cause teeth to fall at an early age. This lack of awareness about oral hygiene has ill effects on the entire community. Most of the members suffer from emission of foul smell from their mouth, and from bleeding gums and early tooth decay. Raikas have uncommon notions about the cleaning or oiling of hair as well. They believe that washing hair is not only non-essential, but also wastage of time and water. Frequency of washing hair further decreases during migration.

Some positive changes are, however, occurring in the attitude of younger generations with regard to personal hygiene. These changes are the result of modernization following contacts with people of other castes and the diffusion of ideas. Youngsters in the community have started realizing that the rampant malady of lice infection among them is due to their lack of awareness about this part of their personal hygiene. But they also realize that they cannot afford soap or oil as frequently as is required for this purpose. Their poverty is perhaps a reason why even males among Raikas keep long hair and can afford a hair cut only once in 3 to 4 months.

The migratory lifestyle of Raikas along with lack of awareness about personal hygiene, poverty and scarcity of water leads to several ailments like blisters, ringworm infection and scabies.

Both during the sedentary and migratory periods, Raikas lack proper sanitation and toilet facilities. They go out in the open for defecation. This results in improper disposal of night soil and human excreta, leading to

certain health problems to the entire community, such as direct infection from one person to another, contamination of water and soil, hookworm infection and transmission of diseases through bacteria, insects and animals.

Raikas also suffer on account of lack of clean drinking water both in their villages and in their *deras* during migration. Water where available, is polluted due to unsystematic waste disposal. The same water which is available for drinking purposes might as well be used for bathing or washing at the source. It is a source of diseases and renders the entire community prone to health hazards. One can only say that the body resistance of the people of this community has become so strong due to their exposure to unhygienic living conditions right from their early childhood that they can survive even this kind of pollution.

During their sedentary life Raikas reside in small houses in their *basti* - the residential area in the village. Most of them live in *kuccha* houses, which generally comprise of two small rooms with a kitchen outside. They generally have joint families and the average number of persons in a family are 9-10 members. These houses have no provision of light and the ventilation is also quite poor. In such a space overcrowding of persons not used to take bath daily, and not aware of the hygienic value of oral cleanliness must obviously make life very pungent. Raika as a community is in the grip of various circles of poverty, illiteracy, dogmatism and conservatism, leading to lack of collective will for change.

Conclusion:

Raikas are a tradition bound community entrenched deeply in religious and superstitious beliefs. They need social and government support to improve their economic and physical status. They deserve immediate attention in regard to their general health and hygiene. A well thought out plan of action for improvement of herding techniques and a concerted effort to boost marketing of their animal products can go a long way in the betterment of their general standard of living. It is however, reiterated that the survival of Raikas as a community need not necessarily mean that they should be led or prompted to discontinue their nomadic pastoral life. Developmental agencies and the government should rather endeavor to apply technology and modernization to improve the wage earning power of these people without disturbing their basic values and livelihood patterns.

The fact however remains that no community can reap the fruits of developmental processes unless it actively involves in the ensuing changes. Members of Raika Community will have to come half way to receive the benefits of development by accepting the basic tenets of general development. They will have to cast off some of their inhibitions and conservative mind-set to accommodate with the main stream of development. NGO's can play an important role in socially educating Raika community in shedding off some of their aloofness from the larger society. Similarly the government will also have to prepare plans for the development of this community in such a manner that does not drastically interfere with the basic roots of their culture and traditions.

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