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ISLAM, MIGRATION, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF KOHISTANI MIGRANTS IN DIR LOWER

Adnan Khan	Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Email: akhan@uom.edu.pk
Saeed Akhtar	International Postdoctoral Fellow, IRI, Islamabad, and Lecturer, Department of Islamic Studies and Religious Affairs, University of Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Email: saeed111akhtar@gmail.com
Ibrahim	Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Email: ibrahimsocio@gmail.com
Hamid Alam	Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Email: hamid.alam@uom.edu.pk
Mohammad Hussain*	Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Corresponding Author Email: mohammadhussain.soc@uom.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This paper is an ethnographic account of a less-researched community in Dir lower – the Kohistanis. The paper, using ethnographic tools, finds that the Kohistanis have migrated to Dir lower for multiple reasons, the leading one being enmities. They are engaged in various professions, primarily as daily wage laborers and woodcutters. A new trend of seeking government jobs in Pakistan and migrating to the Gulf is being observed. The migration has significant implications for the way they understand and practice Islam, culture, and how their language is fast diminishing and is being replaced by Pashto.

Keywords: Islam, Migration, Cultural Identity, Dir Lower, Kohistanis

Introduction

Migration is a global phenomenon, and it has increased manifold with the development of technology, particularly in means of communication. It is both internal and external. In Pakistan, the phenomenon of migration is widely prevalent in different forms. A considerable number of people from Pakistan are working globally,

particularly in the Gulf countries, and providing invaluable services to the host communities. At the same time, Pakistan's rural-urban migration is also significant, primarily due to the provision of facilities in urban centers.

Similar migration patterns are also observed from hilly areas to the relatively plain areas. The nature of migration to these areas is complex and multidimensional. Some of the reasons could be economic reasons, the provision of health and educational facilities, and enmities in the hilly areas. This paper examines the migration of a non-Pashto-speaking population from hilly areas to lower hilly areas, which are comparatively more developed and offer more facilities than the original hilly areas. The primary reason for the migration of the Kohistanis¹ to the Dir lower is enmity in their hometowns.

This paper aims to investigate the reasons why these individuals migrated to the Dir lower. It further explores the strategies adopted by the Kohistanis² to lead lives in the new areas. This paper also aims to examine how the migration of Kohistanis has impacted their culture and religious practices, which they previously observed in Kohistan, with a particular focus on their language.

Objectives

- To document the reasons why the Kohistanis migrated from Kohistan
- To find out the types of professions they are engaged in Dir lower.
- To explore the impact of migration on their culture and language.

Research Questions

- What are the factors leading to the migration of Kohistanis to Dir Lower?
- What professions are the Kohistanis primarily engaged in, and what are the recent trends in this regard?
- How and in what ways is their culture being impacted by the migration?

Theoretical Background

This work is situated within the framework of Lee's theory of migration, which focuses on the push and pull factors. Lee's theory focuses on the factors linked to the place of origin, factors related to the place of destination, the problems faced, and individual factors (Lee, 1966). Although the focus of Lee remained on economy as the main factor, we hereby use 'economy' synonymously with 'good life' or 'safety' because the Kohistanis who migrated to Dir lower did so mainly because of the threat to their lives. However, the economy was the second main factor that made them migrate.

¹ See Staley (1969) for a general discussion on Kohistan and Kohistanis.

² Godfrey (1912) has written a detailed account on Kohistan. In his paper he presents a holistic picture of the journey to Kohistan and the area.

Methodology

Ethnographic research has been defined by David Fetterman (1998) as:

"Ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture in detail. The description may be of a small tribal group in an exotic land or a classroom in a middle-class suburb."

This article is based on an ethnographic research design, and data have been collected through the ethnographic tools of participant observation and interviews. A total of eight interviews were conducted with men from the Kohistani community.

Ethnographic Observations and Analysis

A small minority group in Dir Lower, who have come from Kohistan, up a mountainous valley in the Dir District. Due to their affiliation with Kohistan, these people are commonly referred to as Kohistanis. They came to Dir Lower in the mid-1970s. Their mother tongue is Gujro, a language spoken in the Kohistan area, which is distinct from the Pukhto language. However, the Kohistanis living in Dir Lower claim that they learn both languages from birth. Poverty, enmity, and harsh weather in Kohistan are the three primary factors driving the migration of the Kohistani people. Their primary source of income in Kohistan is working as woodcutters in the forests. Labor work is significantly affected in the winter due to heavy snowfall, and local people rely on their earnings for the rest of the year. Besides Kohistan and Dir, Kohistanis can also be found in Charsadda District, near Peshawar.

In Dir Lower, the population of Kohistanis is unknown. Initially, all of them lived as tenants in other people's houses, working as laborers and tenants, primarily for the landholding individuals in the villages. At the same time, some also resided in rented, small houses. This is typically a one- or two-bedroom house, often made of mud, located adjacent to the owner's residence. In some cases, the landlord doesn't collect rent from the Kohistanis, and some are even provided with free electricity and water. The reason why such small homes are constructed next to one's own house is that the services of the Kohistanis are readily available to the owner. Another reason is that the services of female Kohistanis, who work within the owner's house, assist with domestic tasks.

The Kohistanis are not paid for their services, and such services, for which there is no cash reward, are known as beegar (meaning something done without any financial reward). The same way the male kohistanis do beegar for their landlords in their fields and orchards. If the labor work exceeds half a day (4-5 hours), it is not considered a beegar, and the owner pays the laborer a full day's wages, which is 800-1200 Pakistani rupees.

Some of them also work in the *hujras* of their landlords as paid servants, while others are responsible for keeping the *hujra* clean and entertaining the guests. The Kohistanis

also use the *hujra* of their landlord when a male guest from Kohistan visits them. A reciprocal relationship is evident between the Kohistanis and their landlords. The Kohistanis do not simply work for their landlords; the landlords also assist them with any work in the main town of Timergara. For example, due to enmities, they often have matters to resolve in the courts and at the police station, and their landlords assist them on all these occasions. The court imprisoned Abdul Kohistani for killing his rival. Still, it was his landlord, an influential person in the province, who helped him get out of jail. The family of Abdul is now looking after the house and Hujra of the person, who is settled in another city and visits the village occasionally. They are not paid anything for this Job of looking after the house and Hujra. Abdul vows to serve his landlord until his death because he is obliged towards him for saving his life. Here, too, the notion of badal is evident. Abdul killed his rival in Badal and was imprisoned; his landlord assisted his release, and now he is reciprocating in the form of services.

Kohistanis in Dir Lower are primarily daily wage laborers and woodcutters. Due to their physical toughness, they are often preferred over local laborers. The reason why they are considered tough is that they come from a mountainous area with harsh weather and fewer facilities. It is generally assumed in Dir Lower that any person belonging to the mountains would be stronger than those living in plain areas. Similarly, the people of Bandas, located in the mountains of Dir Lower, are also considered physically strong. The Kohistanis have strong social bonds within their community, and they are all fully involved in each other's occasions unless they are enemies. They often marry within their communities at a young age, typically between the ages of 14 and 20.

Over time, they have formed friendships and established reciprocal relationships with the people of Dir Lower as well. The local Kohistanis consider their customs to conform with those of Dir Lower, but they insist that their customs are simple due to the factor of poverty. Some of them also consider their way of life superior to that of the local people because, in their view, Kohistan's culture is stricter in terms of Purdah and ghairat.

The migration of kohistanis is often the result of the fear of badal by their enemies, who may have suffered a physical loss. To restore their honor, they owe it to themselves to exact revenge. A kohistani in Dir Lower was killed some 15 years back by his enemies, inside his house, indicating that migration wouldn't make them safe, and Badal must be taken. Even today, most of them live in the same fear, and this is also a reason why they live as tenants with influential people who could help them in their police cases. The Kohistanis in Dir Lower have a strong affinity for Badal, and to them, Badal will inevitably be taken, regardless of the teachings of Islam. An old Kohistani in his discussion on Badal put it this way;

"There are two choices to live a good life with honor here or to wait for the unseen; I think we should live with honor here because God also loves the brave and will forgive the brave for little mistakes"

Interestingly, the Kohistanis also utilized the concepts of Pukhto and Pukhtunwali, although they are not Pakhtuns. The Kohistanis in Dir Lower held the view that, in the eyes of their fellow villagers in Kohistan, they are not as honorable and brave because they have left their village and fled from the harsh life. Also, another reason why the migrant Kohistanis are considered not so courageous is that they have adapted the culture of Dir Lower, and educate their children, especially the girls. Sending a girl to school is considered an act that can put the honor of the individual at stake because, by doing so, the villagers may see the girl, and the women being seen by an outsider is not a sign of an honorable man. Additionally, attending school may foster the suspicion that the girl may develop an affair with someone, as she is away from home without her parents' supervision.

Another Kohistani Masal in his early 40s, while commenting on how they are perceived in Kohistan, said;

"Last month despite having financial problems, I borrowed money so that I could attend a funeral of one of my relative in Kohistan, without understanding our situation my relatives want me to be present at all the occasions, and if I miss one by any chance, I will t take them no time to label me as someone with no honor, also they laugh at me when I visit them next time"

The Kohistanis are experiencing an identity crisis, as they are perceived as outsiders in both Kohistan and Dir Lower.

A recent trend of sending boys to Saudi Arabia was also seen among the Kohistanis of Dir Lower. I also met a Kohistani, Mabat, who later left for Saudi Arabia. His elder brother, Dayam, has been in Saudi Arabia for the last three years and is said to have earned a substantial amount of money. Some villagers assisted Dayam in obtaining a visa for himself, where he currently lives. This trend was borrowed from the local villagers, but they viewed the migration of two Kohistani brothers as a step towards settling in Dir Lower. Many local people argued that the Kohistanis would first purchase land in Dir Lower and later construct houses, after which they would become part of Dir Lower, as they are already an integral part of the Dir Lower community. The process of land ownership will not only give them an identity but also acceptance in the local community, which they have been striving for decades.

Another growing trend among the Kohistanis is their interest in government and non-government jobs. The elder Kohistanis admit that, after living here, their younger generation lacks the physical strength that the elders possessed, and they are inclined towards easier jobs, such as working as bodyguards in an office or serving as a personal

assistant to a government officer. In securing such jobs, politically influential people assist them, and in return, the Kohistanis reciprocate by providing their services when needed.

The presence of Kohistanis in Dir Lower and the surrounding villages is also reported to have contributed to an increase in the crime rate in the area. According to the local people, the young Kohistanis are involved in small-scale looting and theft of batteries from vehicles in different villages. Due to such involvements, a couple of years ago, the people of a village in Dir Lower held a grand village Jirga, deciding to oust all the Kohistanis from the village. Still, the influential landlords, who were supposed to suffer the most from this decision, showed resistance; hence, the matter was set aside.

Similarly, when asked whether they speak Gujro at home or Pashto, almost all of them speak Pashto with each other. The new generation, in particular, feels ashamed when they speak Gujro. One elderly Kohistani, Nafees, told me:

"I am sad because our new generation does not speak Gujro, or maybe they do not want to speak, or perhaps they feel ashamed to speak in their mother tongue. I don't think our next generation will even stay in contact with their roots in Kohistan." Almost all respondents reported using the Pashto language, and many expressed concern about the phenomenon of losing their own identity and adopting a new one that has not yet been accepted. George Grierson, the editor of the Linguistic Survey of India in 1921, while researching the Kohistani languages of northern Pakistan, noticed that:

"These languages are being gradually superseded by Pashto, and are dying out in the face of their more powerful neighbor. Those of the Swat and Indus Kohistan are disappearing before our eyes." (Grierson 1921:124).

Conclusion

The Kohistanis in Dir Lower have left their hometowns for various reasons, primarily due to enmities. They have adopted Dir lower as their new home and are currently undergoing a transformative phase in their professions, having started as daily wage laborers. However, this growing trend of government jobs and migration to the Gulf has been observed. The migration to the Gulf is primarily an attempt to address the identity crisis they face in Dir Lower. In their opinion, migration will enable them to earn money, purchase land, and build their own houses here. According to them, buying land will give them a local identity; however, the local people are very conservative in accepting them into their ranks. The migration has significantly altered their culture, and almost all of them have stopped using their Gujro language, which was worrisome for the old generation of the Kohistanis.

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