

Anthropology and Transhumance

Bibhash Dhar

Not much of anthropological works exist on the subject of transhumance. To understand transhumance it has to be made clear at the very outset that it is not an English word. Some are of the opinion that it is Spanish while others think it to be Latin. In this context Rafiullah (1966: I) observed, "Etymologically transhumance is derived from Latin words 'trans' and 'humus' which respectively correspond to 'across' or 'beyond' and 'ground or lowest level'. Whatever be the story of its origin, this much however is sure that the economy of transhumance is solely related with herd management. It is a type of pastoral economy where domesticated cattle are grazed in pastures of varying altitudes in accordance with the change of season and linked with the marketing of cattle and the milk products. This economy was founded and developed sometimes in the Neolithic age. It is the Neolithic period that gave the human beings a relative control over food supply. In this context Childe (1970:66) observed, "The first revolution that transformed human economy gave men control over his own food supply. Man began to plant, cultivate and improve by selection of edible grasses, roots and trees. And he succeeded in taming and firmly attaching to his person certain species of animal in return for the fodder he was able to offer, the protection he could afford." So far the age of pastoral economy is concerned, Childe (1970:80) observed that the pastoralists in the global scenario, knowingly or unknowingly, did not leave any bit of hoofmark behind them for the new generation investigators to trace, excavate and estimate the zero hour of the economy of animal herding. It is because the pastoral people mostly utilised the vessels made of leather for their domestic use and used to retire inside the tents during the nights. The tents were mostly made of animal hides with supports of timber inside and none of these items had a long life and obviously perished before the scientists of the present century could excavate and establish the zero hour of this particular economy. It is thus believed to be one of the major constraints in achieving the goal. However, this should not lead one to think that the pastoralists or the transhumants had a pre-plan of not leaving any proof of their existence during the long past but the fact is that the pastoral people preferred to live in the animal hide tents and use the animal skin-made utensils as they were lighter in weight, unbreakable, easy availability and portable

as the people used to remain mobile for most part of the year along with their livestock in search of greener meadows.

In so far as the dawn of the pastoral economy is concerned, some of the archaeologists of Europe, certain parts of Asia and northern Africa once claimed that they were successful to certain extent in offering some sort of transparency on the subject of finding the beginning of the pastoral economy. These archaeologists were of the opinion that the basic industry in that period was of mixed farming and along with the cultivation of the cereals, animals were reared, may be only for food. This was found in certain parts of Europe, Africa and Asia. Childe (1970:76) observed, "In practically all the food producing settlements examined by archaeologists in Europe, Hither Asia and North Africa, the basic industry is mixed farming; in addition to the cultivation of cereals, animals were bred for food. This economy is characteristic of the "neolithic" stage wherever such an economy exists. "It needs to be mentioned here that such an economy was the unique feature of the Neolithic age. Childe (1970) most popularly and correctly named the period, a revolution. The philosophy behind the nomenclature was that it opened the doors to a total new way of life. People took to the production of food by cultivation of cereals and also domesticated some horned cattle, sheep, goats, swine and fowls. This in turn helped the people to gain the confidence of being less dependent upon the freaks of nature and the people also learnt to live in clusters in more or less permanent settlements. It has been observed from some early records that such an attempt or experimentation of domestication of cattle and fowls was even carried out in the Mesolithic period. The economy was then in a developing stage in some of the favoured spots and one of such niches was located in Palestine where a culture called, Natufian, developed. Most of the tools found in the Natufian sites were microliths, having resemblances with those of the Caspian culture in North Africa, but some of the Natufian tools consisted of small blades set in straight handles. These were almost certainly used to cut grass or grain as they possessed a characteristic sheen that generally develop on stones so used. (Beals et al., 1977).

In the early period the practice of animal herding was launched in relatively arid and semi-arid region of the Northern parts of Africa which ex-

tended upto the central regions of Asia. It is presumed that the major centres of pristine pastoralism was the foot hill region and the upland valleys around the Mesopotamia and the highlands of Lebanon and Palestine. It is, however, presumed that these animal herders also used to cultivate certain amount of cereals, but, at the same time this should not lead one to think that human groups living exclusively on pastoralism did not survive. Childe (1970:80) in the above context observed "From this it is no far cry to a pure pastoral economy in which cultivation plays a negligible role. Pure pastoral nomadism is familiar, and is illustrated by several peoples in the Old World; the Beduin of Arabia and the Mongolian tribes of Central Asia are the best known examples. How old such a mode of life may be is uncertain."

Pastoralists, as a norm, move between the different meadows along with their herds once the fodder become scarce in a given area. Pastoralism as referred to in the International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences (Sills, 1972:456), "... is traditionally and in certain cases, currently practiced by Mongols, Turkic, Uralic, Semitic and Hamitic people is generally nomadic.

Pasture is often discontinuous and connected by routes of access; villages are mobile and maintained as distinctive entities whether they are within or beside the pasture.

These people have a well developed institution of property which is held in herds, pasture and the routes between pastures. Their legal arrangements include the means for control over the pasture, identification of herds, regulation of access to routes, and regulation of disputes over property rights.

The herds of many of these peoples are complex in composition, but under the ecological dominance of man they have come to nomadize conjointly. The Mongols traditionally caused herds of horses, cattle, sheep, goats, camels and yaks graze and move in a single nomadic cycle, according to man-made rules; thus the different species coformed in their behavior to the pastoralist culture." The pastoral nomads in other parts of the world started the practice of moving to the different meadows along with their herds with the change of seasons.

Sheep and cattle were forced to mountain meadows during the warmer months in the arid regions and again used to drive them down during the winters. This necessitated a regular company of families to accompany the herds to take care, to ward off the wild animals, to milk them and market the products. In this context Rafiullah (1966) observed that the Neolithic people in the arid and semi arid regions of the middle east raised goats and sheep along

with agriculture and used to force the herds to the mountain pasture whenever the fodder became scarce in the plains. Such a practice compelled the concerned communities to spare some of the members to remain mobile along with the herds. In the subsequent period a group of people accepted the practice of keeping themselves mobile along with the herds with the change of season best suited for the purpose. Such an oscillation between the permanent villages and the temporary camps of the herders along with the stock with change of season came to be known as Transhumance. One important aspect observed among the transhumants is that they do not move on any direction at their will but always follow a certain prescribed route and reach upto a certain point stage by stage from where they return to their permanent settlements following the same route stage by stage. This shows that although the activities of the wandering nomads but in fact they move between two fixed points between their permanent settlement and the farthest grassland from where they return every year in accordance to the season. It is because of this reason that transhumance is also known as "oscillatory nomadism". In other words such type of nomadism can be compared with the oscillation of pendulum in a wall clock which moves between two fixed points. Transhumance has also been defined as the altering seasonal movement of the livestock and the herders between the permanent settlements and the makeshift camps located at the different elevations with appreciably different climatic conditions. Blache (1933) in the context of transhumance observed, "Transhumance is the seasonal movement of herdsmen and their animals between summer and winter pastures." In the International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, Sills (1972:457) has defined transhumance as highly developed form of pastoralism practiced by the sedentary cultures whose major economic activity is agriculture. It is best known from Europe but is also practiced, although to a lesser degree, by a number of peoples of the Caucasus, the Middle East, and mountainous parts of Asia as far as Tibet. In the transhumant pattern, pastoralism is closer to parity with agriculture.

In the Mediterranean countries, villages engaged in transhumant at pastoralism traditionally send their herds of sheep, goats and cattle to summer pasture. The stock is given into the charge of shepherds, goatherds or cowherds specialized in their task, and they have a defined place in the village and their respective national economies. In terms of the specialization of labour and marketing institutions, transhumance is a higher development than the mixed farming-herding mentioned above, just as the agri-

culture of these transhumant villages is more highly developed both technically and institutionally than the agriculture of semi-pastoralists.

It has been observed from the above paragraphs that no importance has been given to the aspect of season although season plays the vital role in the transhumant activities.

Transhumance (or oscillatory nomadism) has been broadly categorised into two, basing solely on the direction of the movement of the transhumant nomads and their herds. Whenever the movement is from the lower valleys to the upland braes, it is known as the normal transhumance or the transhumance in its original form. Again when the movement is on the reverse, that is, from the upland braes to the plains, it is the inverse transhumance. Apart from these two categories, Blanks (1995:69) has founded the third category practiced largely by the communities whose habitats are in the foothill regions and enjoy the access to drive their stocks in both upward as well as in the downward direction. Blanks (1995) has coined it as the mixed transhumance.

In the Indian context a few transhumant communities have been identified in certain pockets of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. They are the Bakarwals of Kashmir valley, the Gujjars of Himachal Pradesh and Gaddis of Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh. The Bakarwals are the sheep rearers and with the change of season they move from Anantnag to Pahelgam upto the Amarnath cave and return with the onset of winter. The Bakarwals also follow the other route, namely, Anantnag to Sonmarg via Tral, Srinagar and Kangan and also via Khilonmarg to Uri. The Gujjars of Himachal Pradesh come down upto the Dehradun district and rear their buffaloes in the Mohand forest and subsequently move to the uplands. The Gaddis of Uttar Pradesh move to the various pastures of Himachal Pradesh with their flocks of sheep from the Chakrata tehsil of the Dehradun district. They also move upto Yamunotri via Uttar Kasi and then follow two routes, one route is to certain regions of Kinnaur district upto an altitude of about 12,000 feet above the mean sea level via Rampur-Bushar and the second route is towards the Bandar Punch mountain peak.

Transhumants are also found in certain high altitude regions of Arunachal Pradesh. Till date four small tribal communities, which are largely unknown having habitats in the remote locations, have been found in the western highlands of the state in the district of Tawang. Tawang district is strategically located and it borders the mountain kingdom of Bhutan on its south and west while China (Tibet)

is on its north. All the four transhumant communities, namely, the Pangchenpa, the Thingbupa, the Magopa and the Luguthangpa are found in the remote mountains near the MacMohan Line. Altitude of the habitats of these transhumants range from 8,000 to 12,000 feet above the mean sea level with sparse vegetation but with a thick growth of grass during the brief summer. Out of these four groups only the Pangchenpas practice some casual cultivation while among others cultivation is almost a taboo. A similar observation has been made by Nanda (1982:7) while she was posted as Assistant Commissioner at Tawang. However, on a close examination it seems that she has used the term in a wider sense because it has been found that the soil which is relatively unfertile does not support any agriculture and thus the people do not think of any effort towards cultivation on the rocky soil. Rather they wisely thought to leave those patches of earth untouched so that grass would grow during the summer which would be the fodder for their sheep and goats.

The Pangchenpas are found distributed in eight villages in the Zemithang Administrative Circle of the Tawang district, while the other three groups are found in the Thingbu Administrative Circle of the same district. As all of these habitats are remotely located and largely inaccessible thus even the other tribal communities of the district do not have any clear knowledge about them. Instead many mysterious stories about the communities under study could be heard in and around Tawang. Keeping these points in view the Anthropological Survey of India decided to undertake a study on two of the communities, namely, the Pangchenpa and the Thingbupas as a first phase. Thus, in 1995-96 field investigations were carried out on the two communities. It has been found that both the communities under study possess a series of mountain pastures in the high altitudes and practice normal transhumance. It has also been found that the pastures are in the names of the individual families and each pasture has a stone hut with fire place at the centre constructed by the concerned families for their temporary stay whenever they visit the pastures with their herds during the oscillatory nomadism. These oscillatory nomads move from one meadow to another once the foliage diminishes and tender grass appear in the next higher pasture with the snow giving way during the brief summer. The people move from their respective villages on the fixed routes to the pre-assigned pastures and remain mobile for almost five months in a year commencing from April-May and retreat to their permanent villages with the onset of winter.

It has been observed that the total population of the transhumants of the world at large is relatively low. This is because the economy is unable to support a bigger population as found among the communities with agricultural economy. In this context Dhar (1997:266) observed, "Pastoralism and agriculture together, generally, provide for a denser population than could be supported by hunting-gathering or livestock economy." Swift (1997) has offered a more specific proposal for low fertility among the pastoralists. He points out that pastoral (as opposed to agricultural) production is relatively unresponsive to increased labour inputs, and that therefore small and stable population sizes are likely to be advantageous. This phenomenon is more or less true to both the Thingbupas and the Pangchenpas and it would not be out of place to mention that the total population of the Thingbupas has returned only 174. So far the constitution of the domestic herds of the Thingbupas are concerned, the minute details are as follows: 49.92 per cent yaks, 44.27 per cent sheep while the horses are only 5.80 per cent. Horses are the only pack animals of the people and they use them whenever they come to the villages situated at the lower altitude to exchange their milk products for food grains. The livestock of the Pangchenpas constitute of 77.63 per cent of the cows, 15.66 per cent of yaks and 6.69 per cent of sheep.

TRANSHUMANT CYCLE AND MANAGEMENT: A BRIEF CASE STUDY OF THE PANGCHENPAS

The Pangchenpas are a small tribal community of about 1200 souls. There are eight villages in total and all these line up on both the sides of the mountain stream known as the Nyamjang-chu which flows in a north-south direction. Nyamjang-chu flows turbulently from China (Tibet) and washes the country of the Pangchenpas before flowing into Bhutan. Some of the villages of the Pangchenpas are on the mountain tops overlooking the river.

Interestingly enough the information about these people in the anthropological world is scanty and fictitious and the Monpas, a neighbouring tribal group, do not venture into the Pangchen country unless it is essential. The Pangchenpas since the time immemorial are carrying out the transhumant activities in the mountain meadows but in the recent past the people have been found to put in some serious efforts to cultivation of food grains such as barley, millet and mountain wheat along with their age-old transhumant activities. The people

carry out the agricultural operations in their casual cultivation plots nearby their permanent villages.

During the course of field investigation it has been found that all the villages, namely, Soksen, Lumpo, Muchut, Kalayaiktang, Kharman, Brokenthang and Zemithang possess a series of *Mro* (grassland) in high mountains to pasture their livestock. It has also been found that the *Mrokpas* (herders) of a single village form a cohesive social unit so long they remain in the *Mro* along with their livestock forming a single herd. A similar observation has been recorded by Tomka (1992:413) during the course of his study among the Alota, a settled agropastoral community in the southwestern Bolivia. Tomka (1992) in the above context observed, "While each nuclear family has its own Llama herd, often the small herds of related nuclear families (e.g. brother's herd) were retained in a single large herd." Observable difference that could be observed between the herders of Bolivia and the Pangchen is that the latter being Buddhists do not corral their animals to be chosen for slaughter or be sent to abattoir. Pangchen diet is predominantly vegetarian and killing of animals is almost a taboo. However, the people sometimes enjoy meat but only of those of their livestock that have died a natural death. The people use vessels of leather for storing milk products.

Herd Management: Members of the family that herd the domesticated animals segregate in the Dawa Sumpa (April-May), the third month as per the Tibetan-Buddhist lunar calendar and start for the *Mro*. They remain on the move from one *Mro* to another, higher and higher in the mountains as snow clears the stage bit by bit. After a good grazing in the mountains these pastoral nomads descend to the lower pastures along with their herds in the *Dawa Chupa* (November-December) as the winter sets in. Finally the *Mrokpas* return to their respective villages to stay for about three to four months. During the period while they remain mobile the *Mrokpas* carry with them the daily provisions and other equipments which they require for churning butter, storing milk and a number of items such as a number of indigenously made blankets and hides to keep them warm during the rain and snow. Out of the hundred studied households it has been found that 92 per cent of the families are nuclear and this is largely true with most of the pastoral communities of the world. Tomka (1992:413) also observed the same phenomenon in his studies on the pastoral communities in the southwestern Bolivia. This is because, it is relatively hard to support a higher family members with the economy of pure pastoralism. Agriculture and pastoralism together or agriculture alone

could however provide the support for a denser population always.

Transhumant Political Organization: The indigenous village political organization of the Pangchenpas is known as the *Mangma*. The *Mangma* constitutes of the village headman, the Anchal Samiti (Panchayat) member, assisted by three other officials known as the *Ganjen* for smooth running of the village administration. The *Mangma* faces problems so far the administration is concerned when the *Mrokpas* remain away from their respective villages for a considerable period of time during their activities of oscillatory nomadism. As a solution to this problem the *Mangma* after much thought has evolved a relatively simple type of an organization to keep a control over the mobile *Mrokpas*. The people, however, could not give any nomenclature to this noble and mobile political organization. For leading a regulated life by the *Mrokpas* while in the mountain pastures the *Mangma* has made it mandatory for each large group to select two pasture leaders known as *Dropn*. It may be mentioned that *Dropn* is originally a Tibetan word and it means pasture leader. The selection of *Dropns* well before the *Mrokpas* prepare to leave their respective villages for their *Mro*. A *Dropn* remain in office only for one year. *Dropns* are part of the *Mangma* but remain all powerful while the *Mrokpas* remain away from their respective villages. The *Dropns* are also responsible for the maintenance of law and order in the high pastures. As a norm a few days prior to the departure for mountain pastures the *Mrokpas* formally handover the list of members from each family who intend to remain mobile along with the livestock to the *Dropns*. The *Dropns* in their turn sit together, discuss and finalize the sex composition, age structure and the number of persons from each family. Once everything is finalized then the pasture leaders consult the Tibetan-Buddhist almanac with the help of the village Lama (Tibetan-Buddhist priest) to find out an auspicious date for the *Mrokpas* to march out for the mountain meadows. A week prior to the selected date for the march, the *Dropns* generally flag off an advance party comprising of a few able bodied young men to undertake the repair works of the small and indigenously built wooden bridges and clear the porter tracks so that their women, children and livestock find it relatively easier to climb the steep mountain braes.

It has been observed among the Pangchenpas that the involvement of women of all age groups in the different spheres of pastoral life is largely equal to that of the males. They actively take part in milking the cattle and storing *Mar* (butter) and *Churpi* (a

hard cheese-like substance) which are to be exchanged for food grains in the subsequent period. This situation is in contrast to that of the Nuers, as observed by Evans-Pritchard (1940:22), "Milking is performed twice daily by women, girls and uninitiated boys. Men are forbidden to milk cows...." In the context of involvement of women in the pastoral activities Stenning (1959) in his monumental work on the pastoral Fulani of Nigeria has observed that the Fulani women are responsible for marketing of milk and milk products. However, among the Pangchenpas it has been observed that their women work even harder and their involvement is much bigger compared to the Fulani (women) of Nigeria. Bates and Conant (1981:94) observed a similar involvement of women folks among the pastoralists of the Sinai mountains. In Sinai, women and children tend flocks with adult males and also work in agricultural projects.

So far the marketing of milk products like *Mar* and *Churpi* is concerned, the Pangchenpas do not have to undertake any trouble such as trekking into the difficult mountain terrains with the pack animals but their customers such as the Bhutanese, the Monpas and other neighbouring tribes keep on visiting the Pangchenpa villages to procure butter and *Churpi* which are greatly in demand in the region. In exchange, loads of millet are given to the Pangchenpas who require a great quantity of the grain as their diet consists of millet porridge exclusively and millet beer.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am indebted to the Director, Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta, for giving me a chance to work among the high altitude transhumant community, the Pangchenpas. My thanks are also due to Shri A. Mitra of the survey for his help in writing this article.

KEY WORDS Nomadism. Transhumance. Pastoralism. Pangchenpas. Politics.

ABSTRACT Many Scholars think that nomadic pastoralism is on its way out. It will not be able to survive the onslaught of many changes emerging from modernity. By contrast, this article shows that transhumance is able to survive in the modern world. Observing the lack of works on transhumance, this paper provides a brief account of a community of the Pangchenpas and its successful adaptation.

REFERENCES

Bates, D.G. and Conant, F. P.: Livestock and livelihood. In: *Fu-*

- ture of Pastoral People*. J.G. Galaty (Ed.). Ottawa, Canada KIG 3 H9 pp 89-100 (1981).
- Beals, R.L., Hoijer, H. and Beals, A.R.: *An Introduction to Anthropology*. Macmillan Pub. Co., New York, 5th Edition (1977).
- Blache, J.: *L'home et la montagne*. Gallimard, Paris (1933).
- Blanks, D.R. Transhumance in the middle ages: The Eastern Pyrenees. *The Journal of the Peasant Studies*, 23: (1995).
- Childe, V.G.: *Man Makes Himself*. Watts, London, Glasgow (1970).
- Evans-Pritchard, E.: *The Nuer; A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political institutions of the Nilotic People*. Oxford Univ. Press, New York (1940).
- Nanda, N.: *Tawang The Land of Mon*. Vikas, Delhi (1982).
- Rafiullah, S.M.: *Geography of Transhumance*. Aligarh Muslim Univ., Aligarh (1966)
- Sills, D.L.: *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* Macmillan & Co., The Free Press New York, London, (1972).
- Stenning, D.J.: *Savannah Nomads: A Study of the Wo Daa Be Pastoral Fulani of the Western Bornu Province Northern Region*. Oxford Univ. Press, London (1959).
- Swift, J.: Sahelian pastoralists: Underdevelopment decertification and famine. *Annual Reviews of Anthropology* (1977).
- Tomka, S.A.: Vicuñas and Llamas: Parallels in behavioral Ecology and Implication for domestication of Andean Camelids. *Human Ecology*, 20: (1992)

Author's Address: Dr. Bibhash Dhar, Anthropologist (Cultural), North East Regional Centre, Anthropological Survey of India, Government of India, Shillong 793 001, Meghalaya, India.

©Kamla-Raj 2001

Human Ecology Special Issue No. 10: 151-156 (2001)

Human Ecology in the New Millennium

Veena Bhasin, Vinay K. Srivastava and M.K. Bhasin, Guest Editors