An Ethnographic Account of Migrant Life in Kashmir.

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Tarsem Lal, a 51-year-old carpenter from Kathua, has been visiting Kashmir for the last eleven years. He is friends with a few Kashmiri people, mostly other laborers from different vocations who call him when they are offered a new contract, or who "put in a good word" in his favour to influence the contracting party's decision. I met Tarsem when he was doing the interior woodwork of an under-construction house in Sarwatabad area of district Anantnag. He had worked for his current employer, as a carpenter in his Jammu house, and this year in February, he received a call from him, asking him to work in his new Kashmir house. He has been occupying a room in the said house since March 2018, the month he came from Kathua. The other inhabitant of that room is 35-year-old Satinder Singh from Bhogpur in Jalandhar, for whom, this is the very first visit to Kashmir. Satinder has been working as a carpenter for nearly 11 years, and has often worked in Jammu, but this is the first time he decided to cross the Jawahar Tunnel. Together they inhabit the only finished room in that unfinished house which is the more "sophisticated" accommodation available to migrant workers. The walls and the ceiling are ornately decorated in woodwork in the Kashmiri style. There is a table atop which food supplies have been kept, and the corner demarcated for the gas chullah is clean and well organized. Tarsem has set-up a small temple in the corner, and right next to the statue of Lord Rama, there is a picture of Guru Nanak, which Satinder said was given to him by his dad as protection. Both Tarsem and Satinder have ancestral farming lands back where they come from and they plan on going back to their families and farms in the month of November. "Why come to work in Kashmir?" Their answers are different. Tarsem says that he is too used to the place now, that he loves the weather, and that he feels right at home here. Satinder came to know of this job through a friend who works for the same person whose house is being built. They were offering good money, Rs. 700/ a day, to be precise. "Carpentry doesn't pay much in Jalandhar, or even Jammu. Kashmiris have a lot of money.", Satinder says. Over the course of my research,

this was a common theme throughout these interactions with immigrants; that working in Kashmir, despite the political situation (which didn't seem to bother many people), is monetarily rewarding, and the weather makes otherwise grueling physical labour, easy on the body and the mind. Tarsem has been bringing his family (excluding his mother who is too old to make the journey) to Kashmir every other year since 2007. His kids, a boy of 13 and a girl of 11, love going to Pahalgam and Kokernag for the scenic beauty. It is a welcome respite from the searing Jammu heat, and "a chance to give them a better childhood than he had". Tarsem's idea of a good life for his children is to have them educated, and for them to be do something better with their lives than he had done with his.

An estimated 0.5 million people from all over India form the backbone of the informal labour force in Kashmir, working in agriculture, horticulture, brick making, construction etc. Masons, carpenters, barbers, hawkers and the like coming into Kashmir from different parts of the country have been fulfilling the labour demands of the valley for well over two decades now. A news report from the Deccan Chronicle dated July 20, 2016 asserted the following: "Better wages, a cool environment and enough work have been the main driving forces for the migration of labourers who number between two hundred thousand to around half a million at the peak of summer. 46.9% of the migrant labourers belonged to Bihar, followed by 15.33% from Uttar Pradesh, 8.86% from Gujarat, 8.60% from Rajasthan and 8.14% from West Bengal." There are specific places in every major town where the immigrant laborers are concentrated. In Anantnag, for instance, the Wanpoh area which lies 16 kms from Qazigund, an important town on the Srinagar-Jammu National Highway, is known as *chota* Bihar. *Bihaer*, in the local parlance, is the common term for any and all immigrant labourers from anywhere in India. According to estimates from the local revenue department, the number of immigrant laborers living in and around Wanpoh could be as high as 1200. As my research took place in the months of June and July, the numbers were at the highest. During the months of December-March, in harsh winter, the same localities which are otherwise bustling with life, wear a deserted look. The political situation notwithstanding, these areas continue to witness an increasing influx of seasonal migrants. Skilled labourers, with better economic prospects, live in small rented rooms, which, in its own right, is a viable source of income for Kashmiris. The rent varies from Rs. 300 a month, for very small rooms in villages to Rs. 1500 a month in the main town. Often, as was the case with Tarsem and Satinder, labourers occupy rooms in the very places they're employed to work

at. It saves money on accommodation and travel, and there is a sense of security that comes with it. When I asked Satinder about the security situation in Kashmir and whether that scares him, his response was that he's safe inside a Kashmiri house.

Shakir is a painter-turned-contractor from Azamgarh in Uttar Pradesh who has been visiting Kashmir every summer for the past 9 years. He lives with 4 of his associates in a two-room set with a separate kitchen. The building he resides in, is right next to the house of the owner. He shares a cordial relationship with the elderly owner of the building who affectionately calls him Shakir *Saeb* or *sahab*, a term used in Kashmir to affectionately refer to one's children. Shakir refers to the elderly man as baba, claiming that he has two fathers, one in Uttar Pradesh, and one in Kashmir. The Kashmiri family often invite Shakir to have morning tea with them because he is fond of the noon chai (salted tea) and can't seem to get the taste just right whenever he tries to make it. Shakir worked as a painter for six years, before finally graduating to the level of contractor. Now he says that he only picks up the paint-brush himself when the new kids can't get it right, or when they make a mistake. Shakir's family lived with him for 3 years, before his wife had to finally go back to U.P. with their three kids to look after the ailing father. While she was there, Shakir lived with only his family in that two-room set, and once she left, the others moved in. Shakir owns a smartphone, and asks me to download a movie in it for him, which I have to explain is difficult because of the limited storage and data. Two of Shakir's associates are elderly men, in their 50s, who have been working with him since his days in Uttar Pradesh. Shakir called them over after he decided to become a contractor, and they have been working with him ever since. Their kids are also labourers, both of them good friends working in Peerbagh, Srinagar. Their area of expertise is flooring, bathroom tiling and granite work. They learned the trade in Uttar Pradesh and have been coming to Kashmir for the last two years because Rahmat, one of Shakir's associates, feels like there are better economic prospects. The kids come to visit at least twice a month and they give some money to their fathers to send back home. Remittances from the workers in Kashmir are the main source of livelihood for their families. Rahmat has a daughter who is married, and whose husband is currently employed in the Ramky construction company, which is currently working on the Srinagar-Jammu National Highway.

The Govt. Girls Higher Secondary School, located in Lal Chowk, is in the heart of district Anantnag, which I visited on the 26th of July, 2018. The school has employed, through a contractor who is from Odisha, 15 workers who have been living in the new school building that they're working on, since March. There had been an encounter in the Lal Chowk area, barely 100 meters from the where the school is located on the 25th, a day before my visit. Two of the laborers, both young men of the ages of 16 and 19 named Shahab-ud-din and Qamar, and both visiting Kashmir for the first time, admitted to being scared and crying. But the others, who have been making the seasonal trip for many years now, assured them that they needn't be afraid. The residential arrangement for this set of labourers from different villages in West Bengal, was different than what I had observed in Tarsem and Satinder's case. These people, all of them from West Bengal, live in one of the bigger rooms in the building. The room, a future computer lab, is big enough that the 13 people who inhabit it, are accommodated within it easily. The door and the windows are unfinished, with only the framework in place. The room is dark, as it has only been plastered, and not whitewashed or painted. They sleep on Styrofoam, which has been neatly rolled and kept in the corner. The "kitchen", a gas cylinder and *chullah* provided by the school authorities, is kept to the left of the sleeping area. Towards the door, a line of rope runs from a nail in the door frame to a window on the other side. Thrown with disdain on the rope, are a number of clothes, which the workers prefer not to work in, as the day is relatively hotter. I happened to reach the school while the group was having lunch; a helping of rice, with potatoes and onions. Shahab-ud-din says that he prefers rice over chapati, but there are others who say that they make chapatis for dinner because having rice two times a day is not good for your health. "Rice has fat in it. That's why eating too much rice leads to a big gut.", says Inamul, who is also from West Bengal, but clearly has different dietary preferences. In one of the other rooms in the school, the contractor Manoj is having a discussion with the school's junior engineer and one of the people from the administrative department. A labourer, Ashraf is also close-by listening to the interaction, and occasionally pitching in with his thoughts. Manoj, the engineer and the administrator are seated in chairs, and Ashraf is squatting on the floor next to the engineer. As everyone else leaves, I start talking to Ashraf about his life in Kashmir. He says that it was the best decision of his life because he was an addict, and the three months he has been here, he has overcome the addiction. It was his chagrined father who sent him with the "labour party" (which is what they refer to the group as) headed by Ashraf's uncle, Sohaib, a mason who

is having lunch in the other room. The first few days he was here, he asked around, trying to get a fix. But he couldn't find anything. Now, he claims, he's recovered and can't wait for his father to see him in his better state.

The Roots of Migration

Tracing the roots of this influx of migration, the owner of a brick kiln tells me that it has to do with changing preferences in styles of construction. The traditional Kashmiri style of architecture known as *taq* and *dhajji-diwari*, which employs the use of wood and mud, known in the local parlance as *zawyul-board* has died. "People nowadays prefer stylish houses", Mohammad Ramzan, the owner tells me. The style of construction that relies on mass construction of frames, intricate decorative work done in Plaster of Paris, etc. are techniques that are relatively new to the Kashmir context. "The old technicians are a dying breed.", informs Ramzan. Besides, he believes that the Kashmiri worker is lazy but the *bihaer* are hardworking and dedicated to their work. Contract-based work is not popular among Kashmiri workers, who prefer to be paid by the day, allowing room for slacking in work. And therefore, contractors who offer their services for a fixed amount based on the right estimates have found a lease of life in Kashmir. The newer constructions in Kashmir (one can refer to early 2000s as the period marking a significant departure from the old style) are almost exclusively made in the new styles of construction. The over-reliance on wood and mud as frame making agents has greatly reduced, and even in villages, cement-concrete structures are the norm. *Taq* and *dhajji-diwari* is a dead art, I'm informed. With a shift in perception towards the requisite modes of construction, there has been a marked shift in preferences of whom to employ in Kashmir. Manoj says that local labourers take those coming in from outside of Kashmir. For modern designs, Kashmiris rely on migrant skilled workers, whose expertise lies in marble work, tiling, flooring, PoP work, carpentry, painting etc. They've carved out a niche of their own in the labour market in Kashmir. For the Kashmiri worker, as a mason who was employed on a site right next to Tarsem's house, the *bihaer* is an intruder. The strong sense of othering of the migrant labourer stems from the

increasing competition for jobs, which fits into the larger debate on migration all over the world. The Kashmiri mason went so far as to say that he hopes that the bus which was carrying labourers from a nearby site would crash. On the researcher's own new under-construction house, the family has employed a group of Kashmiri masons to construct the framework, and a group of migrant labourers to do the unskilled work, because of the perception that they work harder. The researcher's father informs that once the frame is done, he will "pay the Kashmiris off, and employ a group of skilled migrant technicians to do the rest of the work including flooring, carpentry and designing faux-ceilings which Kashmiris don't know a thing about." It was a common theme throughout the sites that I visited, where Kashmiri workers had been employed to do the initial construction work, and design the frames of doors and windows, which, people say only Kashmiris know how to do, and then immigrants had been called in to complete the job, as it were. Now, migrants are cutting into that aspect of work too, further cementing the sense of intrusion.

The Barbershop

The barbershop is a unique place in the whole dynamic of interaction. There are 13 barber shops in the main Anantnag town that I visited, 10 of which are run by migrants. In this sphere, the job market has been undeniably cornered by the migrant workforce, with very little room for Kashmiri barbers who claim to have been run out of the market by the "*Naushads*" (Naushad being the first famous immigrant barber in Anantnag). The barber has traditionally been seen as having a close relationship with his clients, as there is an element of physical contact, besides the idea of making someone look a certain way. The place of the migrant barber in Kashmir is similar. Of the 10 places that I visited, at least 7 people in 3 different places could speak some Kashmiri. A-Von hair salon in Anantnag has been run by Jamshed bhai for 14 years now. He speaks fluent Kashmiri and has a very cordial relationship with the people from the auto-stand nearby. Jamshed's family lives in a 3-room set behind the shop, and the other employees in the shop are his nephews and one of his sons. Two of his other children, a boy of 8 and a girl of 10, go to a private school. Jamshed's father comes to visit every summer, and spends time sight-seeing and teaching the kids Islamic education. For Jamshed, "Kashmir is the real home." Two of his former employees have set up their own businesses in the locality. They too describe their relationships with their regular customers as friendly, with one of the Kashmiri youth present at

the time saying "*Irfan gov boey*" (Irfan is my brother). They share cigarettes and as if to prove a point, the local boy shared tea with Irfan from the same cup.

The barber's trade is not subservient to the vicissitudes of weather. For them, migration is not seasonal. It is more defined by the kind of work they're able to get, and the only time they travel back home is when they want to, or when something back home needs their presence. Their ties with the local populace are on par with those shared by people like Shakir. Here too, the patterns of migration, and when it started can be traced back to the opening up of Kashmiris to the new style trends around the country and the world. The traditional Kashmiri barbers are not seen as technically adept and as abreast of modern styles as those coming in from outside. How true that is, is a matter of conjecture. But a classic example of growing up in Kashmir, at the heart of all of this, would be me. My grandfather had a barber come over every Monday to groom him. Growing up, I was made to go through the same routine two Mondays in a month. But, in high school, I switched to a different barber, a migrant, because I felt that my grandfather's barber did not give me trendy haircuts. This conviction is shared by most of the young men, and even some older people, albeit a few exceptions. Given the sociological significance if the barber, and his close role in the daily apparatus, migrant barbers have fostered close ties with the Kashmiri communities they serve.

Jobbing in Kashmir

Jan Bremman highlighted the significance of contractors in the process of integration of migrant labourers in the new place. Here too, as Shakir and Manoj display, the contractor is central to the process of interaction. The contractor acts as a mediator between the workers and people offering work, facilitating interactions, inter-mingling and in the process of building professional ties. Vijay, a contractor employed by a neighbour's family believes that all of those who work under him are like his children. It is his responsibility to ensure that they get adequate work and that they are provided for when the need arises. Barbers too, in this context those who have established ties with the community, facilitate the same processes for new people coming in. Jamshed has taken it upon himself to teach his recruits some rudimentary conversational Kashmiri. He asked them to tell me the phrases they've learnt and they respond with "batte khyotha? (have you eaten?). Theek chukha? (how are you?). Chuchwur, lawasa, girda (Kashmiri breads)." This signifies the role played by "old-timers", people who are familiar with the place,

in integrating the newer migrants into the set-up. Bremman refers to these elements as jobbers, locals who mediate the interactions, often exploitatively. While not local, the jobbing work done by them is unmistakably important.

The level of integration, however, will be dealt with in subsequent sections of this study.

Squatter Settlements and Slums

Alan Mayne characterises slums as demonstrating a concentration of multiple deprivations experienced by the urban poor, exclusion from achieving their political, social and economic rights, urban decay, high rates of poverty & unemployment.

In Jammu, all the slums are located on private land and in Kashmir, about 93% of slums are located on private land. 89% of slums in urban J&K are surrounded by residential areas whereas 66% of slums across India are surrounded by residential areas. Out of this, in Jammu 60% of the slums are surrounded by residential areas and 40% of slums are surrounded by industrial areas whereas in Kashmir division, 92.5% of slums are surrounded by residential areas and about 7.5% of slums were surrounded by commercial areas. (NSS 69th Round, 2015).

Further, the draft Srinagar Master Plan– 2035 asserts that the Srinagar district comprises 52 percent of the total slum population of the state. Besides slums, there are large number of informal housing clusters spread over the city and its suburb, especially along the highways which are predominantly inhabited by the service population, the report suggests.

In the context of Kashmir, owing to the very clearly defined citizenship rights, the political and social rights of migrant labourers are further constrained. Politically, there is no presence in the rights set-up for migrant labourers owing to Article 35 A. There have been instances of people buying small houses or even substantial property under a Kashmiri citizen’s name, but the political aspect of rights remains strictly constrained. Any and all activism remains limited to the domain of the social and the economic, never infringing upon what constitutes a very sacred political aspect in the context of Kashmir. The specific political situation that presents itself in

Kashmir, implies that there is little to no political leverage that groups of migrant labourers can claim, besides there being a lack of unionization or any formal presence in the socio-political landscape. In that sense, the deprivation faced, especially by people from slums who, as I will try to explain, travel with their families through J&K without belonging to a particular context-specific group or organization, is severe. While a slum dweller in Mumbai holds a political identity that the politician can seek to turn in his favour through concessions, or appeasement or general grandstanding, it is different for the slum dweller in Kashmir. He doesn't get visits from local politicians, not even in an election season. I asked a few respondents whether they go back to their homes when an election is happening there, and an overwhelming response was that it doesn't matter. On the level of exercising of political rights, there is a clear indifference towards these issues. The routine of migration, which becomes so central to the lives of migrating people, obscures political expression and the awareness of it. This is especially true of the people living in these slums, none of whom could remember who their local representative was, or the last time they voted in their local elections. The alternative to this expression, in the form of unionization or any other formal (as well as informal) organization is absent in Kashmir, which is generally not true of the slums around the rest of India. This holds true to a certain extent for the skilled labourers as well, who despite possessing a better understanding of their political rights, and the expression of those rights, showed a marked indifference towards any questions on the matter. The barbers' case stands out in this particular instance as well, as the barbers' association includes them in matters concerning them. However, as Jamshed pointed out, outsiders don't really have a major say in issues, and they just accept what is handed down to them.

Batengoo, a small town situated on the National Highway, close to Anantnag and the outskirts of Rangreth, an industrial area on the periphery of Srinagar are home to substantial populations of migrant labourers who fall outside the realm of where Tarsem, Shakir, Manoj and the like belong. People here live in squatter settlements, characterized by accommodations made from makeshift tarpaulin tents, lack of basic amenities, and general extreme poverty. Salman Khan is an inhabitant of such a settlement in Batengoo. He lives with his wife and four kids, all under the age of ten. I meet Salman at 7:30 in the morning, as he's getting ready to leave for the Anantnag Bus Adda where he sells brooms. Salman is taking a bath with water collected from a nearby irrigation channel in a bucket. He's warm and cordial and seems excited to be talking about his

life in Kashmir. He offers me some tea and introduces me to his wife, Sumayra, and his kids. Sumayra is making chapatis, using an earthen chullah, with firewood that she collects from a nearby thicket of trees. None of Salman's kids have ever been to school. When inquired, Salman says that school is not for people like the. "The government makes schemes but what do people like us do when we spend our entire year traveling from place to place, barely making ending meet." This is Salman's fourth consecutive seasonal visit to Kashmir. Before that. He came with a group of people and worked at a brick kiln in Pehru, a small village on the outskirts of the Anantnag town. While the kiln owner offered decent wages, Salman says that being exposed to that dust and his habit of smoking *beedis* worsened his health. Sumayra says that she'd rather have him sit at home than go back to another brick kiln. She calls another woman, Zainab, from a distance, whose husband has been away at a brick kiln in Brakpora, 15 kilometers from Batengoo. Ismail, her husband, goes to the kiln every Monday and returns with money on Saturday evenings. Zainab, during the week, takes her 2 kids, boys of 18 and 16 to the local scrap dealer. Scrap dealers in Kashmir pay ragpickers better than they do in Delhi, says Zainab. She earns Rs. 100-150 day in Kashmir, while she used to earn Rs. 40-50 a day when the family used to make the annual trip to Delhi instead of Kashmir. "Isiliye hum Kaasmeer aate hain.", she says. Salman agrees by saying that the money is better than what they got in Delhi because "janta kam hai" (there are fewer of us here). Besides, there is open land where nobody disturbs them. If the occasional "sarkari banda" comes along to ask questions, they just collect a couple of hundred bucks from the entire group and pay him off. When asked who the "sarkari banda" is, Salman says "choro sahab. Phasana hai kya." I don't probe the matter any further. In Delhi, Salman says that he has had to see his family sleep on the road, a sight which prompted the change in their seasonal migration routine from Delhi to Kashmir. Salman leaves, and Sumayra confides in me that she prefers that the family stay in Kashmir. Salman used to drink, and since the family has started moving to Kashmir every summer, those habits have changed because he can't buy alcohol.

Occasionally, a contractor would come along and ask for a group of people for a construction project. Unskilled labourers, who carry the cement concrete mix from mixing sites to where it is required, carrying bricks, sand, cement bags, digging work etc. They get paid up to Rs. 350/ a day for such work which again, for Zainab is more money than she made doing similar work in U.P. or Delhi.

A striking observation that one can witness is that the places where contractors generally visit to meet the labour demands are thronged only by Kashmiris. Local labourers assemble near designated areas, like Sherbagh, and wait there till people in need of labour work show up offering a single or many days of work. People from the slums, however, do not go to these places, which are seemingly reserved for Kashmiris. The only hope they have of finding gainful employment through this route is if a contractor shows up to the settlement area and hires them there.

Sumayra too has worked on the construction of the local Toyota showroom, where she would take her kids and they'd play around till 5 p.m. when the day's work ended. During those days, as these, her daily routine consists of waking up at 6, preparing breakfast for the whole family, leaving by a bus at 9-9:30 and coming back at 4. She then proceeds to prepare dinner. Last night, the family had chicken feet, which people in Kashmir don't eat. The local poultry shop owner keeps the feet from all the chicken he has sold during the day, in a bucket. Salman or one of his boys then go to the shop and on days that he's feeling generous, the owner gives them a small plastic bag which they fill with the discarded feet and have for dinner. For the people living in such settlements, the most that they interact with the local populace is occasions as these, or when they're trying to make a sale. A marked distinction from the interactions for Tarsem, Shakir or Manoj.

Occupational prestige, in terms of not just economic, but social aspects is crucial to understanding the hierarchisation on the level of inter-penetration of the islands of existence of different levels of labour and Kashmiris. From the above-mentioned ethnographic accounts, it becomes apparent that with a certain level of occupation (not considering other parameters of caste, sex or religion) there is a degree of inter-penetration through interaction which can be observed. It varies from Shakir's affectionate relationship with his landlord, to Tarsem Lal's subdued relationship which is mostly professional, to a total disconnect for the families of Zainab and Sumayra.

The brick kiln where Zainab's husband, Ismail works is located deep inside a village, at least 3 kilometers away from the nearest residential area. There are 21 labourers on the site, and the owner tells me that on a busy day, he employs up to 40 people, most of them hired from squatters as the one described earlier. They live inside small rooms made from the very bricks

they forge, minus any mortar to bind them. These “rooms” have been constructed atop the site, next to the kilns. Of the 21, there are 8 people, including Ismail, who live in these rooms. The rest travel back to their families who are accommodated in settlements relatively close-by. Subhas, from Jharkhand, has been residing in one of the rooms there for the last 2 months. His family is back home, where they own barely 2 *kathas* of land. In that extremely dusty environment, the migrant labourers toil hard every day for Rs. 350/ a day.

Patterns of Migration

When asked about where they will go once summer ends, which marks the end of construction season in Kashmir, the answers vary. For Tarsem, Satinder and the other skilled labourers, they will journey back to the places where they come from. Winter is either reserved for farming, or for taking up similar jobs in their places of origin. Tarsem is building a new house of his own, and he will go back to restarting that project. Satinder will tend to his farms, before returning the next year. He has already chalked out a plan for a new house, the owner of which wants cheaper sheesham wood to be brought in from Punjab. Satinder hopes to serve as the focal point of that contract, besides working as a carpenter on the same house. For the unskilled labourers, the journey is towards Jammu. Over the last 5 years, the localities like Bhatindi, Bajaltha and Sidrah in Jammu, have witnessed a surge in the number of Kashmiri people migrating for the winter. They have purchased plots all over these localities and are in the process of constructing houses for themselves. Therein, migrant labourers who have been toiling in Kashmir for the better part of summer, find employment opportunities.

In Jammu too, there is obvious competition among the Kashmiri workers who migrate to Jammu, and the rest of the migrant labourers who make that transition. Near the Wave Mall in Jammu, just like in Sherbagh, labourers assemble every morning hoping to find employment. Except, in Jammu, the area is not reserved for any particular group. Kashmiri or not, they all assemble in one common place looking for jobs. The employment opportunities for Kashmiris in Jammu are limited. Owing to the political dynamic which plays out in the street, Jammuiites do not prefer to hire Kashmiri labourers. Amir, a Kashmiri labourers explained that he faces a lot of difficulty finding good jobs in Jammu because the Kashmiris prefer migrants for their own reasons, and the Jammuiites prefer migrants for unrelated reasons. While it is understandable that the

employment opportunities in Jammu for Kashmiris would be limited owing to similar perceptions, this aspect is undeniable, at least in the minds of Kashmiris looking for work there. Sumayra says that in the month of October, when finding work in Kashmir becomes extremely difficult, their family would move to Channi Himmat in Jammu. A tract of private land in the area is where they will set up camp, and look to replicate the same process they went through in Kashmir. The last three years of their lives have been an exercise in repeating this routine of migration, during which time, they have been able to go back home only twice. “Khaana khaane ke liye ghar chorna toh padega (We have to leave our homes if we are to eat).”, reiterates Zainab.

Migration: A Brief Cultural Overview

Culturally speaking, departure from a culture of close-knit communities, which operate as social security nets and entry into the anonymous place, is dealt with by recreating cultures of their place of origin. There is a tendency of socio-cultural clustering of like persons and institutions. This often results in residential segregation of groups. There is however, also an apparent discontinuity caused by spatial mobility. This is the emergence of a new cultural consciousness given the necessity of adaptation to their places of destination. These processes of integration, cultural pluralism, assimilation and gradual fossilisation shape the landscape of the urban spaces. Migrants have to reorient their lives and activities according to the new environment. Kashmir, as a society, has very particular cultural practices which are very different from those practised in places where the labourers come from.

The cultural aspect of life in Kashmir for an immigrant labourer is critical to understand as it fits into the whole argument of migration to a place like Kashmir, distinct in many ways from their places of origin. Janet Carsten’s ethnographic study of the Langkawi in a Malaysian fishing island asserts that kinship ties are developed through relatedness, and not just through blood. Further, she highlights the centrality of women in the fostering of these ties. For these clusters in Kashmir, the same can be observed. In the bare observable aspects of daily life, the role of women in recreating “ghar jaisa mahaul”, as Sumayra puts it, is central. Of the thirteen families that live in the squatter settlement in Batamaloo, Srinagar, only 2 of the families had had known each other prior to their migration this year, apart from being the only two families that had lived in the same area. Some of the families from last year, they explained, did not migrate this season, and some did, but to other places in Kashmir. For those women, the relationships they foster over

the course of a season, are markers of the development of community ties within the group. As asserted earlier, like Salman said when a “sarkari banda” comes along, the entire group pitches in to pay him off. Zubeda’s husband, Ishfaq said that his wife had given birth while they were in Kashmir last year. The travel charges for taking her to the hospital in Lal Chowk and for the next couple of months after her delivery, women from the other families would prepare meals for their family everyday without fail. They also contributed some money for buying medicines for the newborn and for the mother. Conspicuously absent from the lives of the skilled labourers that I interviewed, was the aspect of a cohabitant family. From a metric standpoint, of the 121 skilled labourers that I talked to, 118 of them did not bring their families along. In these instances, too however, clustering based on common origin, or pre-established ties was prevalent. There was a group of Christian carpenters from Ludhiana led by a young man named Sonu, who claimed that Sonu is like the father of the group, the mother as well as the elder brother. For them, the journey after winter is in almost all the cases, back home. For some others who can afford to have their families come over, if they’re seeking further employment in Jammu, they have their families travel to Jammu for a few days and then continue to work. Otherwise, the winter trip is almost inevitably home, highlighting the difference in migration patters for the skilled and unskilled labourers. Hierarchisation in the experience of working in Kashmir, I observed was on the lines of occupation and other factors such as religion, caste or place of origin do not play a significant role in the matters of employment. There is a significant Hindu, Christian and Sikh population among the immigrants. The social dimension, however, which includes inter-mingling, commensality and cohabitation takes these factors into account. Inter-mingling has been easier for Muslim immigrants who share places of worship, eating habits and other social aspects of lived experience. For Muslims like Shahub-ud-din, the fact that Kashmir is a predominantly Muslim state, makes the transitional experience smoother. Or as Shahab-ud-din claimed, religion is an important factor in the decision to migrate, because there is a sense of security that they associate with it. The Christian carpenters from Ludhiana are clustered in the area around Nai Basti in Anantnag. Cohabitation and commensality for them is an important part of living here. While avoiding strongly opinionated views on the matter, Sonu argued that a man tends to live and eat with people that he feels are his own. In a slightly boastful tone, he said that he had never had anything more than chai in a Kashmiri home, because “khaana apne logon ke saath khaana chahiye (one should eat with his own people).” For Zahrul from West Bengal, the custom of

eating from the same plate or *traami*, as Kashmiris do in weddings, is very strange, as is the habit of turning the loudspeakers on in mosques after every prayer. “We finish our *namaz* and leave. We don’t know the prayers in the Kashmiri language.”, he says.

When I questioned Tarsem about whether he finds it difficult to profess his religious views in Kashmir, he said that he wouldn’t have been coming here every year had that been the case. Tarsem said that he visits the Great Martand temple every week, and twice so far, it was his employer who drove him there. The experience, therefore, is very individualistic in certain aspects, but there is also a sense of shared religious experience. Tarsem, for instance shares his quarters with a Sikh. Santosh Kumar, from Sipole in Bihar lives with fellow painter Zakir Khan from Aradiya in Bihar. Santosh had been working in Shopian for 3 years, but he claims that the political situation in Shopian, the heart of militant uprising in Kashmir, made it difficult to work there. He was quick to point out that it was only because work was hard to come by, and not because of any sense of fear that he felt while living there. This further reinforces the point that I was making about the individuality and sharing of lived experience in Kashmir.

Conclusion

The object of this ethnographic study is to understand the experience of migrant life in Kashmir, focusing on the lived experience and patterns or migration. Through semi-structured interviewing, I have tried to arrive at a better understanding of these experiences, including cohabitation, commensality, integration and a brief insight into fostering of ties on different levels corresponding to the job market, through the prisms of occupational prestige and other parameters which, although on a lower level, still play a significant role. I have tried to map the patterns of seasonal migration, again relying on the ideas of distinctions stemming from the differences in vocations.

Sociological research into the Kashmir-specific case of seasonal migration is limited, and given the unique nature of this migration, merits in-depth sociological insight.

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