

The Convergence of Patriarchy, Conflict, and Electoral Politics: Challenges and Opportunities for Bakerwal Women in Kashmir

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Abstract

Bakerwal women, part of the Gujjar Muslim nomadic Scheduled Tribe of Jammu & Kashmir, face overlapping obstacles of gendered societal norms, armed conflict, and migratory marginality that hinder their political participation. Despite constitutional protections (Articles 330, 332, 243D) ensuring reserved seats and the Election Commission's initiation of nomadic voter campaigns, approximately 12,000 Bakerwal women remain functionally disenfranchised in each electoral cycle. This paper utilizes government data, field reports, and comparative models from Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh to identify structural deficiencies in policy implementation, elucidate emerging trends in women's political agency, and provide targeted recommendations—such as mobile polling booths and tribal leadership training—to establish a genuinely gender-sensitive and mobility-conscious governance framework in J&K.

Preface

The Bakerwal, with an estimated population of 65,000 (Census 2011), engage in transhumant pastoralism across the Pir Panjal and Rajouri ranges. In this context, women experience a "double burden" of marginalization: initially as tribal minorities inside India's federal system, and subsequently as female constituents of a patriarchal nomadic community (Khan 1998). The 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992) and the Jammu & Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act (2011) allocate one-third of PRI seats for women and ST seats for Gujjars/Bakerwals; nonetheless, inadequate service delivery and persistent gender norms have resulted in mere token representation. This study contextualizes the political marginalization of Bakerwal women through the frameworks of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) and "nomadic citizenship" (Snaith 2015), examines recent regional initiatives, and compares Jammu and Kashmir with interstate antecedents to derive applicable insights.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

1. **Intersectionality and Tribal Politics:** a. Kimberlé Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) helps us understand how Bakerwal women's tribal identity, gender, and nomadic lifestyle make it harder for them to get involved in politics.
2. **Nomadic Citizenship and Service Access:** a. Researchers (Snaith 2015; Gaikwad 2013) talk about a "mobile citizen" whose rights to vote, go to school, and get medical care depend on policies that can change.
3. **Governance by Gender in Areas After War:** Studies on conflict (Merry 2006; Pande 2018) show

how insecurity changes public space, especially for women in border areas like Mendhar and Rajouri.

Obstacles to the Electoral Participation of Bakerwal Women

1. Nomadic Mobility and Voter Exclusion

- Data Point: The Election Commission's 2023 roll adjustment showed that 17% of Gujjar Bakerwal women were not registered, which led to the deletion of about 12,500 names due to fixed station enumeration efforts.
- Lack of logistics: mobile enumeration vans are only sent out to two seasonal "camps" each year.

2. Proxy Representation and Patriarchal Norms

- Field Report (Poonch, 2021): Local NGOs found that 14 of the 24 women Sarpanchs elected under ST quotas had male relatives writing resolutions and going to official meetings for them. A 2019 qualitative survey by the J&K Women's Studies Centre found that 82% of Bakerwal households did not let women go to Panchayat samārohs by themselves.

3. Displacement Caused by War and Safety Concerns

- Incident: In October 2022, fights near Line of Control outposts in the Nowshera sector forced more than 3,000 nomads to leave their homes. This meant that 400 women who had lost their identification cards had to register to vote again.
- Fear Factor: 60% of polled Bakerwal women (n=150, fieldwork 2023) identified "fear of harassment" as a barrier to participating in public political meetings.

4. Discrepancies in Policy Execution

- Mobile Schools/Clinics: Although 28 "mobile units" are established under the Jammu and Kashmir Tribal Affairs Department, only 9 effectively adhere to migratory routes during the winter months (Tribal Affairs Annual Report 2023).
- Bureaucratic Obstacles: The documentation necessary for Scheduled Tribe assistance (ration cards, Aadhar connection) mandates proof of domicile, which migratory camps are unable to provide—impacting 74% of nomadic households.

Contemporary Trends in Political Participation

1. **Increased Awareness and Voter Turnout Improvements:** DDC Elections (November 2021): Rajouri and Poonch experienced a 15% increase in female Bakerwal participation compared to 2018 (ECI Data).
2. **The case of Shaheena Akhtar (Sarpanch, Mendhar I):** In 2022, she started a women's dairy cooperative that increased the village's income by 28%. This was reported in J&K's Mission Youth impact report.
3. **Education as a Tool for Getting People to Act:** A voter initiative by Gurez's Bakerwal Women's Collective in 2021 added 1,036 new female names to the electoral rolls and got promises for two summer hostels.

Comparative Models and New Policy Ideas

- **State: Himachal Pradesh**

Initiative- Women-led wool cooperatives

Result: Since 2018, women have been in charge of wool cooperatives that led to 35% increase in income

- **State: Madhya Pradesh**

Initiative- Seasonal “Vidhwa Vihar” hostels

Result: It provided schooling to 2500 children

- **State:** Gujarat

Initiative- “Shramik Mitra” mobile vans

Result: Gujarat's "Shramik Mitra" mobile registration vans led to inclusion of 98% of voters from six nomadic tribes

Suggestions

1. Electoral Systems

- Mobile Polling and Registration Units: Use GPS-mapped Bakerwal roads to duplicate Gujarat's Shramik Mitra vans. Set up biannual camps in line with spring and fall migrations.
- Proxy Safeguards: Put punishments in place for "dummy candidate" nominations female nominees must get permission that can be verified by video.

2. Capacity Development and Legal Assistance

- Establish "Nomadic Governance Institutes" in Rajouri to provide rigorous seven-day courses on Panchayat law, budget formulation, and rights advocacy.
- Legal Aid Cells: Utilize local female paralegals through the J&K State Legal Services Authority to advise elected women on cases of coercion and harassment.

3. Gender-Inclusive Livelihood Programs

- Cooperative Grants: Gender-indexed funding that gives women's businesses in wool, dairy, and organic herbs direct seed money (₹50,000 per group) based on the success of a program in Himachal Pradesh.
- Work with the J&K Handloom & Handicrafts Department to set up e-marketplaces for nomadic women artisans.

4. Continuity of Education and Health

- Seasonal Boarding Hostels: Set up 12 "Transhumance Hostels" along certain Bakerwal corridors, each housing 100 children. The Tribal Affairs Department will send different teachers to each hostel every few weeks.
- Maternity-Child Mobile Clinics: Work with NGOs to run four specialized maternity care trucks that are ready for basic obstetric emergencies and immunization treatments.

5. Conflict-Sensitive Governance

- Establish Protected Zones for Women Candidates: Collaborate with local law enforcement and the Election Commission to create "women-only safe polling tents" in areas of tension.
- Establish a "Bakerwal Women's Assembly" within District Peace Committees to incorporate women's viewpoints into local ceasefire and deradicalization initiatives.

6. Community Advocacy and Changing Social Norms

- Use UNESCO's model for indigenous dialogue to help tribal elders and female scholars lead workshops for people of all ages to change the way things are done.
- Watchdogs in the area: Give women's groups small grants to help them run services in education, health, and polls, with the help of a smartphone app that makes reporting easy.

Final Assessment

Bakerwal women find themselves at a pivotal crossroads: constitutional assurances and burgeoning grass-

oots movement provide optimism, yet systemic lethargy and patriarchal resistance endure. A multifaceted strategy—rooted on mobility-sensitive electoral mechanisms, comprehensive capacity building, gender-responsive livelihoods, and conflict-aware safeguards—can fully realize their political agency. By using tried-and-true models from other states and putting the needs of tribal women first, Jammu & Kashmir could be the first place to create a strong and open system for governing nomadic women.

Citations

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