

Beyond Livelihood: Childhood and Human–Buffalo Relations among the Van Gujjars of Rajaji National Park

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Abstract

Pastoral communities are often studied primarily in relation to livelihood, migration, livestock and natural-resource use. Such an approach, while important, can overlook the everyday social relationships through which pastoral ways of life are reproduced. This paper examines childhood, transhumance and human–buffalo relationships among Van Gujjar pastoralists associated with the Rajaji National Park landscape in Uttarakhand. The field observations indicate that buffaloes occupy a position extending well beyond their economic value. Buffalo milk constitutes an important component of the household economy, with milk being sold in urban areas. At the same time, children spend considerable time feeding, bathing, grooming and playing with buffaloes and calves. Individual buffaloes are given names, and children participate in grooming and styling them. Women make beaded strings for buffaloes and decorate the doors of their dwellings. Children accompany their parents during seasonal movement and expressed a desire to continue the pastoral way of life. Religious instruction is also provided to children by a visiting religious teacher. The paper argues that pastoralism among the Van Gujjars is not merely an occupation but a lived social system. Children's interaction with buffaloes represents a space where play, care, responsibility, learning and cultural socialisation overlap. The paper proposes the concept of relational pastoral childhood to understand this distinctive form of childhood in which livelihood and leisure are closely intertwined.

Keywords: Van Gujjar, transhumance, pastoralism, childhood, buffaloes, human–animal relations, milk economy, cultural transmission.

1. Introduction

Pastoralism is an important component of the social and ecological history of the Himalayan region. Transhumant pastoral communities organise their livelihoods around livestock, seasonal movement, access to grazing resources and accumulated knowledge of diverse ecological environments. Their way of life therefore extends beyond economic production and encompasses family organisation, childhood, socialisation, cultural practices and relationships with animals and landscapes [2]. The Van Gujjars of Uttarakhand represent one of the important pastoral communities of the Himalayan foothills. Their traditional livelihood has been strongly associated with buffalo husbandry and the production and sale of milk. Research has documented their long-standing practice of seasonal movement between lower-altitude winter areas and higher summer grazing areas. [2] describe Van Gujjar transhumance as an annual movement involving households and livestock between summer and winter pastures. [3] similarly describe the community as a pastoral group whose economy is strongly dependent upon buffaloes and milk production [2]. The relationship between Van Gujjars and forests has, however, been transformed by conservation policies. Rajaji National Park was notified in 1983, and subsequent conservation and rehabilitation policies affected Van Gujjar access to traditional forest areas and migration routes. [4]

documents the historical tension between conservation policies and the rights and livelihood practices of Van Gujjar pastoralists. More recent scholarship continues to examine the processes through which state policies have attempted to settle or transform transhumant pastoral communities. Much of the existing literature has therefore focused on livelihood, conservation, displacement, forest use and pastoral mobility. The present paper approaches the community from a somewhat different perspective: the everyday social world of children and their relationship with buffaloes.

The central proposition is that the buffalo occupies multiple positions within Van Gujjar life. It is simultaneously a source of livelihood, a household asset, an object of care, a companion and a medium through which children acquire pastoral knowledge.

The paper asks:

1. How does transhumant pastoralism shape the everyday lives of Van Gujjar children?
2. What meanings do buffaloes acquire beyond their economic value?
3. How do children's activities around buffaloes combine play, care and learning?
4. How are pastoral knowledge and identity transmitted between generations?

2. Van Gujjars and the Pastoral Context

The Van Gujjar pastoral economy is closely associated with buffalo rearing and milk production. Earlier studies describe the community as practicing transhumance between forested foothills and higher-altitude grazing areas. Their economic system has traditionally involved selling milk and milk products in lower-altitude markets [5]. Seasonal movement is closely connected with the ecological requirements of livestock. During the warmer months, families move towards higher-altitude grazing areas, while during winter they return towards the foothills. Published accounts describe this movement as an important feature of Van Gujjar pastoralism. The community's relationship with the forest has also been shaped by the creation of Rajaji National Park and subsequent conservation measures. [6] demonstrates that restrictions on traditional forest access affected the pastoral system and made migration increasingly difficult. Against this background, examining children's everyday participation in pastoral life becomes important because the continuity of pastoralism depends not only upon access to ecological resources but also upon the transmission of knowledge, skills and values to younger generations.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative exploratory ethnographic approach.

The primary material was generated through a field visit to selected Van Gujjar settlements associated with the Rajaji National Park landscape. The researcher interacted informally with adult family members and children and made direct observations of their everyday activities, livestock practices, domestic arrangements and educational and cultural activities. The observations included:

- children's interaction with buffaloes and calves;
- feeding, bathing and grooming of buffaloes;
- naming of individual buffaloes;
- buffalo grooming and hair styling;
- women's beadwork and buffalo adornment;
- decoration of household doors;
- seasonal transhumance;
- household organisation and housing;
- informal religious education;
- and the milk-based livelihood.

The fieldwork was exploratory rather than a structured survey. Consequently, no statistical generalisations are attempted. The observations are used as qualitative evidence and are interpreted in dialogue with existing scholarship. Ethically, individual participants and children are not identified by name [7]. The paper also distinguishes between direct observation and information provided by community members.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Transhumance as a Family Way of Life

The Van Gujjar families encountered during the field visit described a seasonal movement between higher and lower areas. According to the accounts received during the field visit, families travel towards Uttarkashi during summer and return towards the Dehradun region during winter. An important observation was that children accompany their parents during these seasonal movements. Thus, transhumance is not simply an economic activity undertaken by adult livestock owners. It involves the household as a whole. Children grow up experiencing movement as part of ordinary life.

The children encountered during the field visit also expressed a desire to continue the pastoral way of life. This is particularly significant because it suggests that pastoralism may be reproduced not only through economic necessity or parental expectations but also through children's own attachment to the pastoral lifestyle.

This observation is consistent with the broader literature showing that Van Gujjar pastoralism is a deeply embedded way of life rather than simply an occupation.

4.2 The Buffalo as Economic Resource

The buffalo occupies a central position in the Van Gujjar household economy. Milk obtained from buffaloes is sold in urban areas, creating an important link between the pastoral household and the urban market. Earlier research has similarly identified milk production and the sale of milk and milk products as central to the Van Gujjar economic system. However, the field visit demonstrated that the economic value of the buffalo represents only one dimension of its significance. The same animal that generates household income also becomes part of:

- children's everyday activities;
- household consumption;
- hospitality;
- emotional relationships;
- aesthetic practices;
- and cultural learning.

One particularly revealing field experience occurred when rain began during the visit and the family served the researcher hot tea prepared with freshly obtained buffalo milk. The incident illustrates how the product of the pastoral economy moves seamlessly between market, household and social exchange.

4.3 When Livestock Become Companions

One of the most striking observations was that each buffalo had a name.

The children did not speak about the buffaloes merely as economic assets. They interacted with them individually and demonstrated familiarity with their characteristics.

Children were observed and reported to:

- feed buffaloes;
- bathe them;
- groom them;
- play with them;
- care for calves;
- and spend substantial amounts of their time with them.

The children also described giving buffaloes different styles of haircuts or grooming.

These practices indicate a relationship that combines economic dependence with familiarity, care and attachment. The buffalo can therefore be understood as occupying a position between commodity and companion. Its economic significance is undeniable, but the naming and individualised care of animals suggest that the relationship cannot be explained through economics alone. This provides an important sociological insight: economic relationships can simultaneously become social and emotional relationships.

4.4 Childhood, Leisure and the Blurring of Work and Play

The original interest of the field visit was to understand what Van Gujjar children do in their leisure time.

The field experience, however, challenged the conventional distinction between work and leisure. Children spent considerable time with buffaloes and calves. They played with them, but they also fed, bathed and groomed them. From an urban perspective, these activities could be classified as livestock-related work. Yet for children they may simultaneously provide companionship, enjoyment, responsibility and learning. This leads to the tentative concept of relational pastoral childhood [8]. Relational pastoral childhood refers to a form of childhood in which children's leisure, learning, family responsibilities and identity are embedded in relationships with animals, family and the pastoral environment. This concept is useful because it avoids imposing an urban definition of leisure on a pastoral community.

4.5 Learning Through Participation

The children appeared to acquire pastoral knowledge through direct participation rather than through formal instruction alone. A child who learns to feed a buffalo, recognise an individual animal, bathe it, groom it and care for a calf is simultaneously acquiring practical knowledge about the pastoral household. This form of learning is significant for the continuity of pastoralism. The child's relationship with livestock is therefore not simply recreational. It can function as a mechanism of intergenerational cultural transmission. The children expressed desire to continue the pastoral way of life adds an important dimension to this argument. If further research confirms this preference among a larger group of Van Gujjar children, it would challenge the assumption that occupational modernisation necessarily requires the abandonment of pastoral identity.

4.6 Women's Cultural and Aesthetic Practices

The field visit also revealed cultural and aesthetic practices associated with women. Women were observed making strings of beads for buffaloes. This practice adds an aesthetic dimension to livestock care. The researcher also observed decorative designs on the doors of houses. These observations suggest that cultural expression occurs both in the domestic environment and in the relationship between humans and animals. The significance of these designs should not, however, be assumed without further investigation. A subsequent study should ask women about the names, meanings, occasions and methods associated with the designs. Nevertheless, the observations demonstrate that the Van Gujjar pastoral environment is not simply organised around economic survival. It also contains practices of beautification, creativity and cultural expression.

4.7 Material Life and Adaptation to the Environment

The dwellings observed during the field visit were mud houses with a large multipurpose space used for cooking and sleeping. Wood was used as cooking fuel. Near the entrance of the houses, the researcher observed a pit-like structure in which residents reported burning wood at night to protect themselves from wild animals. These arrangements reveal the close relationship between domestic life and the surrounding environment. The dwelling is therefore not simply a physical structure; it is part of a broader adaptation to:

- mobility;
- forest surroundings;
- climatic conditions;
- livestock keeping;
- availability of local materials;
- and perceived risks from wildlife.

The field observations should not automatically be interpreted as indicators of poverty. Their meaning needs to be understood in relation to the community's pastoral and mobile way of life.

5. Theoretical Interpretation: Relational Pastoral Childhood

The central proposition emerging from the fieldwork is that childhood in a transhumant pastoral community may be organised through relationships rather than through sharply separated categories of work, play and education. The Van Gujjar child learns by participating in everyday life. The buffalo becomes part of:

- play;
- care;
- responsibility;
- economic life;
- emotional experience;
- cultural learning;
- and future occupational identity.

This suggests that pastoral identity is reproduced through everyday practices. The concept of relational pastoral childhood therefore provides a way of understanding how pastoral societies reproduce themselves socially and culturally. It also contributes a micro-level perspective to existing studies of Van Gujjar pastoralism, which have predominantly examined forest use, livelihood, conservation, displacement and state-pastoralist relations.

6. Conclusion

The field observations presented in this paper demonstrate that Van Gujjar pastoralism is much more than a milk-producing economic system. Buffaloes constitute the economic foundation of the household, but they also occupy an important place in children's everyday lives. They are named, fed, bathed, groomed and played with. Children develop practical knowledge and familiarity with individual animals and, according to the field conversations, express a desire to continue the pastoral way of life. The seasonal movement of families further demonstrates that transhumance is a family experience rather than simply an occupational movement. Children participate in this mobility and acquire pastoral knowledge through everyday involvement. Women's beadwork for buffaloes and decoration of household doors demonstrate additional dimensions of aesthetic and cultural expression. Religious instruction provides another channel of socialisation. The most significant finding is therefore the overlap between livelihood, leisure, learning and cultural identity. The Van Gujjar child does not necessarily experience the buffalo simply as livestock. The animal can be a source of income, a companion, an object of care and a medium of learning at the same time. The paper consequently proposes the idea of relational pastoral childhood: a childhood in which play, work, care, learning and cultural transmission are intertwined through relationships with animals, family and the pastoral environment.

The study is exploratory and based on a limited field experience. Future research involving a larger number of settlements and children could examine gender differences, educational trajectories, changing aspirations, digital access, seasonal mobility and the future of pastoralism among younger Van Gujjar generations. Understanding these experiences is important not only for sociology but also for policies concerning pastoral livelihoods, education, conservation and cultural continuity.

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