Dar *Pastoralism (2023)13:1*
https://doi.org/10.1186/s13570-022-00264-2

Pastoralism: Research, Policy and Practice

RESEARCH

Open Access

The Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir and their changing marriage rituals

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Abstract

The Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir are a nomadic pastoral group, notified as a Scheduled Tribe (ST), under the Jammu and Kashmir Scheduled Tribes Act, 1991. Ensuing from ethnographic fieldwork conducted with the Bakarwals in the Jammu and Kashmir region, this paper argues that the traditional marriage practices of the Bakarwals have transformed in the contemporary times with respect to the various processes associated with globalization and the increasing access to the new facilities of mobility. The cultural transactions resulting as a part of liberalization and globalization have led the Bakarwals to associate with modern traditions, rituals and customs, which are essentially non-Bakarwal patterns of life. This paper highlights the new patterns and meanings adopted by the Bakarwals of Kashmir as a mode of their new existence. The exposure to new variants of contemporary culture and shrinking pastures have made many Bakarwals to give up their traditional occupation of rearing livestock —an occupation once seen as sacred. Many of the Bakarwals have started practising agricultural farming, while few have started working as labourers and others have started taking "modern" occupations like driving. In marriages too, the Bakarwals are seen to follow the traditions and rituals followed by the non-Bakarwal groups. The Bakarwals used to have their own traditions, customs and rituals in marriages which were not seen in other non-Bakarwal groups. However, in contemporary times, the Bakarwals are avoiding these ancestral traditions, rituals and customs. This paper is an attempt to document the changes in the marriage practices and rituals, which were once cherished by the Bakarwals but now seem on the verge of extinction.

Keywords Cattle, India, Extinction, Modernity

Introduction

The Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir were included in the list of Scheduled Tribe in 1991 (under The Constitution Scheduled Tribes Order Amendment Act, 1991). They were enumerated officially for the first time during the Census 2001. The Bakarwal are a nomadic group that seasonally migrates from one pasture to another in the search of grassland for their livestock. During summers, they migrate to Kashmir, and during winters, they return to Jammu. Moreover, Gujjars and Bakarwals are often clubbed together into a single social group because both groups have the same ethnicity and the same linguistic, religious and cultural traditions. However, Gujjars and Bakarwals constitute two different groups on the basis of their chosen occupations. The Bakarwals are a nomadic community who rear sheep and goats while the Gujjars are a settled community who rear cows and buffalos.

Marriage

Marriage is an important institution in a society. It is a socially acceptable bonding between men and women. Coontz (2005) defines it as a social and legal union between men and women. In India, marriage is seen not only as a union of men and women but as a union of two families. Rao (1998) while discussing the marriage in Bakarwals argues that like other social groups, the

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Bakarwal marriage also binds two individuals, two families and sometimes two factions or two sets of people. Across cultures, marriage as an institution is seen as a structure governed by community rituals. These rituals in different social groups change with the transition from traditional to modern societies. Some societies and social groups welcome these changes; however, some have espoused their traditions, practices and rituals. While looking at this institution in a marginal social group of Jammu and Kashmir named *Bakarwals*, one would explore changes in the traditional marriage system of these social groups.

The Bakarwals strictly marry within their *zaat*/*biradri* (community or clan) (Khatana 1976). Thus, marriages outside the *zaat* are very rare. The marriages held outside the *zaat*, including love marriages, have no consent from parents in general. According to Tufail (2014), the majority of the Bakarwals' (97%) marriages happen within the same caste and are arranged and less than 3% are love marriages.

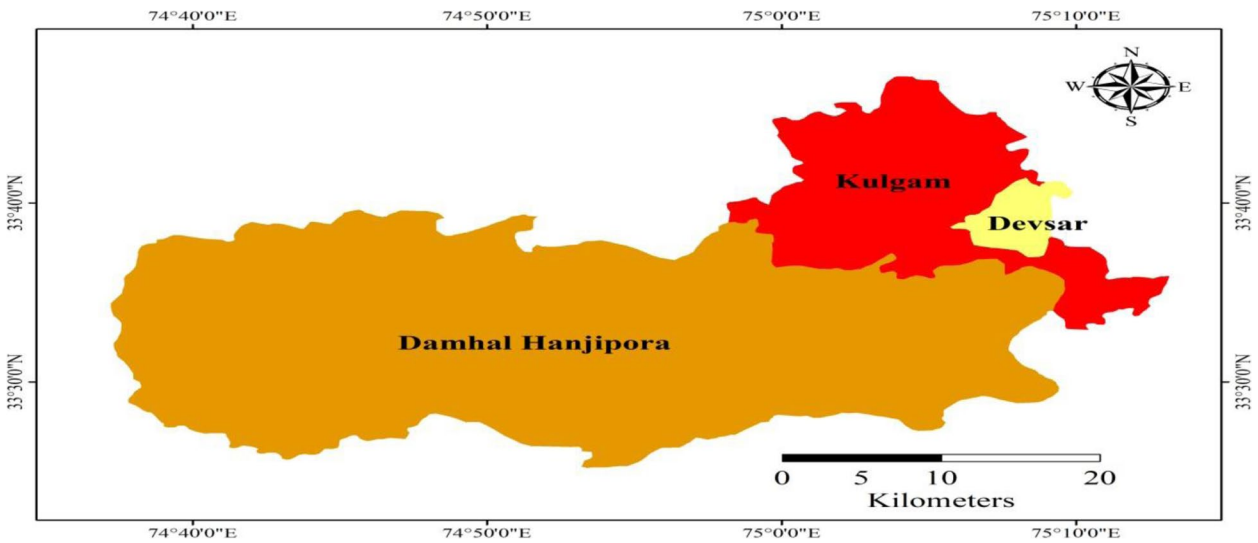
The Bakarwals, like other social groups in Kashmir, believe that *zaat* is an "essence or inherent" nature of an entire group and it tells you everything that a person wants to know. Among Bakarwals, it is believed that if one knows the *zaat*, one knows both good and bad about the people of that group (Rao 1998). It is a commonly held belief that marrying within one's *zaat* is a way to avoid social and cultural incompatibilities within the family. Rao (1998) argues that the major reason for marrying within the *zaat* ensures maximum social and familial security through the purity of blood. It also helps to avoid further sub-division. However, in the recent past, a major shift has been witnessed in the Bakarwals' marriages where instead of "purity of blood", good fortune and material benefit are gaining priority. This paper is thus trying to map the unconventional shift in the age-old marriage traditions in the Bakarwal community.

Study area

The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act 2019 declared that the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir shall be divided into two Union Territories namely Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. The Bakarwals migrate between the plains of Jammu to the meadows of Kashmir valley in the Himalayas during summer and vice-versa. The rationale for selecting Rajouri and Kulgam as the site of the study is that a large population of Bakarwals migrates to these two Districts with their livestock.

Kulgam

District Kulgam was carved out of Anantnag District (also known as Islamabad; a name given by Ismail Khan), and it started functioning as an Administrative unit with effect from 2 April 2007 (Census of India 2011a). District Kulgam has a total population of 424,483, having 217,620 males and 206,863 females. The population lives in 231 villages and 59 Gram Panchayats (Census of India 2011).

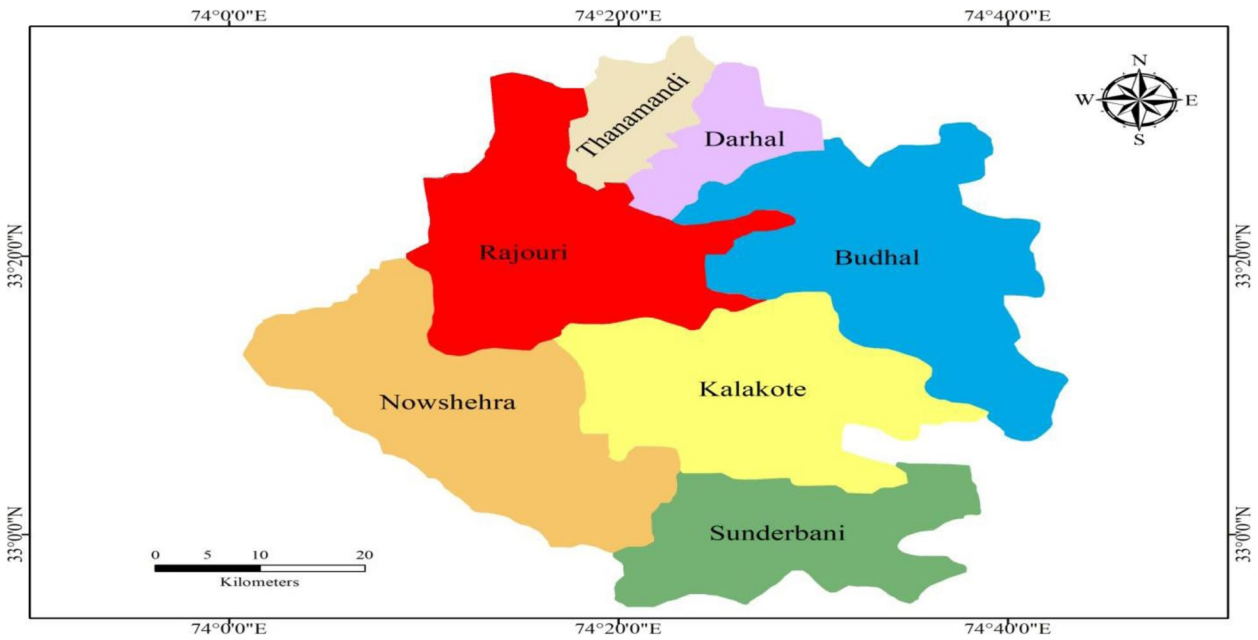


Source: Survey Registrar General, Census of India 2011

Kulgam District has a tribal population of 26,525 which is 6.25% of the total tribal population of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Out of the total Scheduled Tribe population in Kulgam, the male population is 13,888 (6.38%) and the female population is 12,637 (6.11%). Among other blocks, Dhamhal Hanjipora (D.H Pora) has the highest Scheduled Tribe population. The total Scheduled Tribe population of the block is 18,343 (i.e. 16.43%) with a male population of 9595 and a female population of 8748. Pahloo and Devsar blocks represent the 2nd and 3rd highest Scheduled Tribe populated with a population of 3777 and 3454 respectively.

Rajouri

On 22 September 1967, District Poonch was bifurcated into two Districts namely Rajouri and Poonch. Rajouri emerged as a separate District from 1 January 1968. It has six Tehsils (Sub-District) namely Rajouri, Nowshera, Sunderbani, Kalakote, Budhal, Darhal and Thannamandi (Census of India 2011b).



Source: Survey Registrar General, Census of India 2011

Rajouri District has an area of 2,630 km^2. The total population of the District is 642,415 comprising 345,351 males and 297,064 females. It constitutes 5.12% of the total population of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. In terms of population, Rajouri ranks 7th in the Union Territory. The Scheduled Tribe population of the District is 232,815 or 36.24% of the total population of the District and includes 121,374 males and 111,441 females (Census of India 2011).

Methods

The study is qualitative in nature and an ethnographic approach is employed. The research tools that are used to collect data include observation, semi-structured interviews and field notes. The data is collected over a period of 6 months. Three months were spent in District Rajouri and 3 months were spent in District Kulgam.

Sample size

The study was based on a sample size of twenty *dheras* (households). The selection of a *dhera* is done through snow-ball sampling. The reason for choosing twenty *dheras* (households) is based on the rationale that there would be difficulties in tracking the groups due to their migration. Ten *dheras* of Bakarwals were followed in Kashmir Administrative Division and ten *dheras* were followed in Jammu Administrative Division. Another reason for choosing twenty *dheras* is based on the idea that

a limited number of *dheras* will help in an in-depth study of the group without losing the sight of the whole. In addition to these 20 *dheras*, 15 families of settled Bakarwals are also interviewed. In total, 35 *dheras* were narrowed down for the research.

Marriage rituals among the Bakarwals

In the Bakarwal tribe, marriages are fixed by elder members of the family and are performed through negotiation between two families (Shahbaz. 2015). In this context, Tufail (2014) while discussing the involvement of the families in the marriages notes that 49% of the marriages are decided by the male members (mainly the father) while 20% of the marriages are decided by the female member (mother). A woman decides household affairs only if the husband is dead or is not competent to manage a household. The role of women is very minimal in managing the family affairs which includes the decision-making in the marriages of their children.

The children (an adult boy or an adult girl) do not have a choice in choosing their partner. Their likes or dislikes do not hold much importance. Gupta and Beg (2012) mention that marriage among the Bakarwals is about the linking of the two families and the boy and the girl merely act as the couple to make such an alliance possible. The will and liberty of a boy or a girl to choose their partner do not count. In fact, it is seen as improper or disrespectful to even think about such a choice in the first place and those who choose their partners are seen as insolent and disloyal to their parents, family and society. Rao (1998) mentions that it is the girl's father, her grandfather, her elder brother, or her mother's brother who has the right to decide, to give her hand to whomsoever they consider most suitable. It is also seen that mothers can and do express their opinion regarding future spouses for their children, but the final decision is entirely a paternal affair.

Excerpt from an informal conversation with one of the respondents about marriages among the Bakarwals:
Researcher: 'Are you married?'
Respondent: 'Yes'
Researcher: 'Did your parents ask you when you got married?'
Respondent: 'No'
Researcher: 'Did your parents ask you with whom you want to get married?'
Respondent: 'No, I was not asked'.
[The children are never asked 'when and to whom to marry. The family decides whatever they like. Even, if they choose a girl who is blind, deaf or has any other disability, we have to marry her]
Researcher: 'Did you know to whom you were getting married?'
Respondent: 'No'.
[Brother, not only me but no one knows to whom he or she is getting married]
Researcher: 'Did you ever get any chance to see her before marriage?'
Respondent: 'No'.
[Sometimes you get a chance and sometimes you don't]
Researcher: 'What if you see her and you don't like her?'
Respondent: 'It hardly matters whether you like it or not'.
[Whether you like her or dislike her, it is irrelevant. You have to like her. You cannot say no. Whatever the family decides is final]
Respondent: 'Let me tell you how my marriage took place'.
[My father went to the girl's place, he liked her and at that moment only, he told her father that I like your girl and she is now ours. Her father said 'yes, she is yours'. Then we got married.]

In most cases, it is the family of the boy who goes to the girl's family for a marriage proposal. This practice is also common among non-Bakarwals. The boy's father or a fatherly figure goes to the girl's house for a cup of tea. In most cases, both the families know the purpose of tea while in certain cases the family of the girl does not have a clue. While having tea, the marriage proposal is discussed and negotiations are made by the families. After the discussion and negotiations, if the proposal is accepted by the family of the girl, the boy's father or any relative gives a token money - an amount of Rs. 11 (0.14USD) or Rs. 111 (1.37 USD) or Rs. 511 (6.31 USD) to the girl (to-be bride). A pledge is made from both sides. This practice is locally known as *mangnoo* or *piyalas trawun*. It is also practised in non-Bakarwal Muslim groups in Kashmir. A similar practice or a substitute to *piyalas trawun* is *kudhmayi*. *Kudhmayi* is a practice where the bride and groom exchange rings with each other. However, it may be noted that the rings are not exchanged in person by the bride and the groom. Consent is taken from the boy and girl by their respective representatives (*wali*) who then meet at the girl's place and exchange rings.

The next stage in the process of marriage is *nikkah*—a formal contract outlining the rights and responsibilities of the bride and groom. It is verbally done by chanting Quranic verses by some respected person having knowledge of the Quran in the presence of guests and family members from both sides. The chanting of Quranic verses in a *nikkah* is similar in Bakarwals and

non-Bakarwal Muslim groups. During *nikkah*, *mahr* is decided and is either paid at the time of the *nikkah* or in certain cases it is paid after marriage. *Mahr* is the amount of money or possession paid by the groom (locally known as *maharaaz*) to the bride (locally known as *boti*).

Generally, *mahr* is demanded in the form of money but *mahr* does not have to be money only. Anything given as *mahr* must have a monetary value. However, it is mandatory for a groom to pay *mahr*; otherwise, the marriage is seen as illegitimate (*haraam*). The mode and amount of *mahr* are different when compared with other Muslim groups. The mode and amount of *mahr* also vary from family to family or individual to individual. For example, the majority of the Bakarwals pay animals as a substitute for the amount demanded as *mahr.* Some pay cash and some pay both cash and animals. The animals include sheep, goats and horses. In the case of non-Bakarwal groups, the *mahr* is mainly paid in the form of money or jewellery (gold and silver). After *nikkah*, a reception ceremony is organized wherein the groom and his relatives attend a feast prepared by the bride's family. Sometimes *nikkah* and reception are held together.

Once the couple is wedded, the woman is expected to fulfil all the emotional, psychological and sexual needs of a man. She is expected to work both inside and outside the house. She cooks food for the family and looks after the livestock (if needed). The man is expected to fulfil the monetary, emotional and psychological needs of the woman. Although women play a pivotal role both inside and outside of household chores, they do not have much control over the household affairs nor do they have the power to govern their private life. Both personal and family affairs are in the hands of their husbands. For example, Rao (1998) reports that women do not enjoy many choices in their sexual life. A woman does not have a choice to decide whether she wants to have sex with her husband or not. On the other hand, men enjoy the liberty to have sex or to not have sex with their wives.

The Bakarwals marry at a young age. They believe that once a boy (*lado*) or girl (*baitki*) is *jawaan*/*baalig* (adult) they should be married off. However, Seema (2013) in her study reported that the age of marriage is correlated to the socio-economic condition of the family. Those who are well off marry early and those who are economically weak marry late. The men marry between the age of 14 to 20 years while the average age of engagement for girls is 12 to 20 years. The men prefer to marry girls who are younger than their age. It is believed that a girl should be 3–4 years younger than a boy. Tufail (2014) in his study reports that the average age of marriage among boys and girls is 20.5 and 17.3 years respectively. On the other hand, Rao (1998) in an earlier study reports that the average age is a bit less for both girls and boys as 19.0 and 13.2 years respectively.

The Bakarwals practise monogamy. However, like other Muslims, they are allowed to marry more than one woman. In most cases, the Bakarwals marry once in life; in other words, they marry one woman only. However, very few marry twice or have two wives. Mostly, Bakarwals re-marry when the wife dies or keep another wife when the first wife is unable to bear the child. Shahbaz. (2015) also mentions that polygamy among the Bakarwals is quite low. Like other social groups, polyandry is not accepted among the Bakarwals too.

Major rituals of marriage in Bakarwals

After the dates are fixed, every close relative and neighbour is invited to attend the marriage ceremony. The process of inviting close relatives and neighbours is locally known as *saadah*. It is separately done by both the families. The bride's family invites their relatives by going to each of the relative's house and the same is done by the groom's family. Tea, lunch or dinner is served to the person/persons who invite the relatives or neighbours. The inviter includes males and females or both. *Saadah* is done a few days before marriage.

The *dhera* is polished fresh with mud water from outside. Once this mud polish dries up, flowers, pots, lines, dots, triangles, squares and circles are made on the walls both inside and outside. A few buy artificial decorating materials like plastic plants, leaves, garlands made of shimmering threads and so on. The *dhera* is broomed both inside and outside. Outside the main entrance, wood dust (sawdust) mixed with colours is used to make certain circles, squares and triangles to beautify the entrance of the *dhera*. Those who live in tarpaulin tents do not decorate their tents much (Fig. 1).

On the day of marriage, both bride and groom at their respective places wake up early in the morning. The bride sits outside in a lawn with one or two friends, while the rest of her friends go to the nearest water resources like streams, ponds, waterfalls etc., to collect water. The water bought by her friends is used for bathing the bride. The water is kept outside in the lawn. The bridesmaid and friends make a circle around her with a curtain in their hands. After the bath, her friends help her to wear a bridal dress.

Similarly, the groom also wakes up early in the morning. He along with his friends goes to the nearest water body to have a bath. While leaving his house, his friends chant a rhyme *Subhaan Allah Subhaan Allah Teri Shaan Allah* till he reaches the nearest water body which is a stream, a pond or a waterfall. The groom takes a bath. The same rhyme is chanted while coming back to the *dhera*. The groom wears his new clothes after taking a bath. Once the bride and groom wear their clothes, they

Fig. 1 Decorated house, groom, food and tea. Source: Fieldwork 2016, Rajouri, Jammu and Kashmir

are not allowed to perform any kind of work till the marriage ceremony is over.

Lunch is served by both the families at their respective houses. Each family takes care of their guests and serves them lunch. However, there is a special lunch for the groom and accompanying guests at the bride's house. The groom along with accompanying guests locally known as *jhanjee* reaches the bride's house and settles down. A long rectangular sheet (*dastarkhawan*) of cloth is spread. All the guests (*jhanjee*) sit on one side of this sheet. After the hands are washed, plates are kept in front of each guest. Once the plates are kept before each guest, a person comes in and puts rice on each plate, followed by another person who serves meat (mainly mutton) on each plate. Two more persons, one with a bucket of curry and the other with a bucket filled with *salad*, serve the guests. There are some marriages where a piece of chicken is also served to each guest. The chicken is served only by the well-off Bakarwal families. There are few guests who do not eat meat and who tend to be vegetarians. They are known as *vaishnavas* or *sufis*. Their number ranges from 1 to 5 guests.

Once the lunch is over, the bride (*boti*) leaves her parental house. She walks on foot if the distance to the groom's house is short. If it is far, she is either taken on a horseback or in a palanquin locally known as *doli*. The men who accompany *doli* are known as *paachoo*. Among the Bakarwals, it is observed that once the bride leaves her parental house in *doli*, whether on horseback or on foot, the groom never walks ahead of the bride. He has to walk behind her till she reaches her in-laws' house.

The Bakarwals used to follow their own traditions and customs, and some of the traditions and practices that were followed (nowadays rarely followed) by the Bakarwals are discussed as follows:

Bowa Pakadani: In this ritual, once the bride reaches the groom's house, she does not enter the house until she is given a gift mostly in the form of sheep, goat or a piece of land from her mother-in-law. The bride does not communicate directly with her mother-in-law but her friends on the behalf of the bride ask for a gift from her mother-in-law. The bargain for the gift goes on between the friends of the bride and mother-in-law. Once it is over, the bride enters the house. Later, her mother-in-law unveils her face, locally known as *chund kholna*. After the unveiling is done, the bride is served milk or tea.

Bugdhar (stone lifting): Another important practice that used to be followed in a Bakarwal marriage is *bugdhar*. In this practice, a stone weighing around 100–150 kg is kept in the courtyard of the bride's house. When the groom along with his guests reaches the courtyard of the bride's house, they are not allowed to enter the house until someone from the side of the groom lifts the stone on his shoulder without taking any help.

The one who is the strongest member from the groom's side comes forward and the remaining form a circle around him. The invitees from both the families watch the game and sing songs. Once the member lifts the stone, the groom along with his accompanies is allowed to enter the house. If the person fails to lift the stone, the marriage is termed void or it is cancelled. However, no such story is reported ever where the member from the side of the groom failed to lift the stone. The practice is seen as fun. The other side of this game is to testify the strength of the groom or his family. Some consider it as a test to check how safe their daughter is in an odd situation.

Tramben: sister-in-law and applying antimony (surma): Another common practice followed by the Bakarwals is applying antimony (*surma*) to the groom by his sister-in-law. Once the groom enters the house of the bride, he sits on a mattress that lies adjacent to the wall facing the door. A new towel is spread on his knees. A glass of lukewarm sweet milk filled with cashew nuts and almonds is served to him. Later on, *sharbat* (a sweet drink) is served to the groom and his close friends. After sipping the *sharbat*, the empty glasses are returned with some money or gifts. After it, the sister-in-law comes with a small bottle of antimony (*surma*). She applies antimony in one eye of the groom and leaves the other without antimony. For applying antimony in the other eye, she demands money or a gift from the groom. In between the demand for money or gifts, there is an exchange of jokes between the friends of the bride and the groom and between the sister-in-law and the groom. The process continues till the demands in the form of money and gifts are provided to the sister-in-law. She finally applies antimony in the other eye of the groom.

Gana on the wrist: Another game played at the time of marriage is tying *gana* on the wrist. *Gana* is a string/thread decorated with pom-pom balls. The game starts by tying *gana* on the wrist of the bride and the groom respectively. Once tied on their wrist, both have to undo it as quickly as possible and throw it in the air. While the *gana* is falling down, the one who catches it first wins the game. The title of a "lion" for the groom and "lioness" for the bride is given to the winner.

Taman:In this game, which is rare now among the Bakarwals, a target is kept at the top of an erected pipe/pole. This target is to be hit by a stone from the side of the groom. Unless anyone among the people, who accompany the groom, does not hit the target, no one is allowed to have food. The game continues till the target is hit.

Chadar pakadna: The practice of *chadar pakadna* used to be an important practice now rarely seen to be followed by the Bakarwals. In this practice, two persons from the side of the bride used to hold a sheet or a blanket in their hands. They walk with this sheet or a blanket in front of everyone. The guests mainly relatives or friends drop money in this blanket locally known as *chadar.* The money collected is given to the family of the bride. The aim of the practice is to help ease the financial burden of the family.

Tambal: In this practice, the Bakarwals tie a bottle at the tree top with the help of a string/thread. The bottle is targeted by the *jhanjee's* (accompanies of the groom). The attempt to hit the bottle continues till it gets hit by the *jhanjee's*. At occasions, the game continues for hours. If none of the *jhanjee's* is successful to hit the target, a local hunter is called to hit the bottle with a gun and the game gets over. The *jhanjee's* are then served food.

Panjoov: Bakarwals used to have this practice where one person from the side of the bride and another from the side of the groom come forward and hold each other's wrists. The one who is able to open the grip and removes his hand wins the game. The game ends with fun and laughter.

In the tradition of marriage, different rituals which were followed by the Bakarwals earlier—like *chadar pakadna*, *taman*, *gana on the wrist*, and *bugdhar* are rarely followed nowadays. The marriage rituals which were earlier inseparable parts of their culture are now considered archaic or unimportant. There seems to be an intrusion of the rituals from other social groups. The gifts earlier given to the bride in the form of goat or sheep are now replaced by money and ornaments. Dowry is also gaining traction in the last few decades (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 Tent, bed and tin trunk brought by the bride. Source: Fieldwork 2016, Rajouri, Jammu and Kashmir

Marriages which used to happen in trampoline tents or mud *kothas* are now held in modern tents used by other mainstream communities. The use of fancy utensils to serve guests is also commonly seen in the Bakarwal marriages. The new generation is now leaving their traditional dresses and has started wearing modern dresses. The traditional dress used to be the *kurta shalwar* for both males and females. It is now segregated on the basis of gender where men wear plain *kurta-pyjama* and women prefer floral prints. The turban locally known as *safoo/lungi* is hardly worn by the younger males. In a similar way, women used to wear *topi*, which is not seen now in younger girls. Modern gadgets like phones, solar lights and solar plates are also seen to be used by the Bakarwals. They used to travel on foot all along with their animals and luggage from Jammu to Kashmir and vice-versa. Now they hire vehicles to carry their luggage and family members.

Conclusion

The sedentarization process of nomadic life has changed their economy and lifestyle. It changed their social institutions, culture, customs and rituals that had been part of them for centuries. Marriage is one such institution which is "corrupted" with the mainstreaming of this nomadic population. The traditional marriage practices of the Bakarwals are replaced by the practices borrowed from other ethnic and social groups. The change which is seeping into their traditions is mainly because of increasing economic well-being, access to the new technologies and social and cultural contact with other social groups. The shrinking pastures have tremendously escalated their problems, thereby forcing Bakarwals to give up their traditional social practices. Thus, the practices which were cherished by this nomadic population for centuries are on the verge of extinction.

Acknowledgements
NA

Author's contributions
The author(s) read and approved the final manuscript.

Author's information
NA

Funding
The research was not funded by any agency/organization.

Availability of data and materials
The author hereby acknowledges that the *Pastoralism: Research, Policy and Practice* journal does not carry responsibility regarding the content, information, result and conclusion of this manuscript.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate
The research had taken care of the informed consent and ethical approval of the participants.

Consent for publication
The author hereby provides the consent for publication of this manuscript.

Competing interests
The author declares that he has no competing interests.

Received: 14 April 2022 Accepted: 13 December 2022
Published online: 31 January 2023

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