

History of Burdens: Kashmiri Migrant Labour in Shimla, Present and Past

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Muhammad Ramzan is carrying an old television from the owner's textile store to an electrical goods outlet in the Lower Bazaar. The television is effectively strapped to his back using a rope, and he is hunched over his worn out shoes, panting as he lays it down gingerly at its destination. Ramzan is from the Anantnag district in Kashmir. For the last 30 years,¹ he has been spending six months each year in Shimla, carrying heavy loads from point to point in the Lower Bazaar area. Shimla has christened Ramzan and the numerous other porters from Kashmir with the overarching epithet of 'Khan'.

The dearth of historical studies on the seasonal migration of porters from Kashmir to Shimla is surprising, considering the ubiquity and virtual indispensability of their labour. Writer Raaja Bhasin, who has worked extensively on the history of Shimla and the surrounding regions, confirms that over the course of his work, he has not encountered any substantial writing on the seasonal migration of Kashmiri labourers to Shimla. The possible absence of any written records maintained by the workers themselves necessitates tapping into oral accounts of their histories and contemporaneity as a step towards assembling the scattered pieces of a haphazard jigsaw. Here, colonial, governmental and journalistic records that supplement oral accounts are read against the grain in order to be able to tune into the faint whispers and silences of those who are relegated to the societal fringes. The jigsaw however, remains unfinished – the pieces that have been lost to centuries of apathy and silencing continue to elude the eye.

Prior to the existence of a wide network of asphalted roads, the topography of hill towns like Shimla was such that heavy goods and supplies could not be transported using pack animals along narrow pathways, generating a demand for people who would cart the burden.² Shimla mushroomed from a village into a town perched precariously on the tree-shorn mountainsides under the wilful gaze of the British, who sought respite from the heat of the plains and adopted it as their 'summer capital' from 1864 onwards. Much of what constitutes Shimla

today was built on the backs of labourers who came from places like Kashmir and the Punjab. They hauled construction material, pulled rickshaws, and lugged the baggage of the Englishmen who travelled to Shimla from Calcutta (and later, Delhi) for the summer. Lord Lansdowne noted that there were hill people of all sorts who were great carriers of burdens, 'which an English navy would not think of picking up'.³

Colonial accounts of the life in Shimla are peppered with references to porters and 'coolies'. Raaja Bhasin writes about one such description by an Englishman, Sir Frederick Treves, who witnessed hill men carrying long planks of wood for construction purposes to Shimla along the Hindustan-Tibet Road in 1904. He refers to the labourers as 'creeping wretches in an inhuman procession', crushed by the weight and stumbling down the narrow paths in single file.

In a section titled 'Hints to travellers in the Shimla Hills', Sir Edward John Buck offers advice to the British travelling to Shimla: 'All loads should be of such shape that they can be carried on the back; the Shimla coolies will carry them on their head in preference, but once in the interior, they are carried the other way. The 'Bigarri' brings with him his own rope which he fastens around the load in such a manner as to leave two projecting loops through which he puts his arms up to the shoulder; in some districts they only hitch the loop over the shoulders'.⁴

Buck's use of the term 'Bigarri' is an apparent reference to the *begar* system that was prevalent in the hill states, as elsewhere. According to H. H. Wilson's *Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms*, 'begar' refers to forced labour, and to such a labourer – one pressed to carry burdens for individuals or the public, without receiving any remuneration for it.⁵ Besides the transport of goods, the *begar* system also included other forms of unpaid labour such as work in the fields of the ruler where forced labour was considered a part of the land revenue that the individual owed to the ruler, particularly in areas where the economy was underdeveloped and the use of money was limited.⁶

While the origin of the *begar* system which was known in the pre-colonial period is debatable, it was rampant in India in the 19th century. When the British defeated the Gorkhas in Himachal Pradesh in 1815 and granted *sanads* (deeds) to the rulers of the hill states, confirming their position as rulers of the states in return for their allegiance to the British government, the *sanads* required the native rulers to provide their peasants as *begar* to British officials who passed through their states.

As Shimla grew under British control, the need for labour increased phenomenally, consequently increasing the ruthless exploitation of those who provided it. The government would pay the labour overseers but the money never reached the hands of the labourers. Lord Dalhousie, who was the Governor General between 1848 and 1856, supposedly initiated the construction of the Hindustan-Tibet road in an effort to abolish the *begar* system, applying the logic that a system of roads would allow goods to be carried by pack animals and carts rather than by labourers.⁷ Establishing trade relations with Tibet was allegedly Dalhousie's underlying motive for initiating the construction of this particular road. The economic interests of the British Empire were couched in the rhetoric of munificence against the oppressive *begar* system.

Satyanand Stokes, an American who settled in Shimla and introduced commercial apple cultivation in the area, campaigned vigorously against the *begar* system. He considered it a violation of the rights of the local people that reduced them to 'beasts of burden'. Stokes consistently petitioned the government to reduce the number of permits that allow the use of *begari* and increase the pay given to the labourers. As a result of his efforts, their wages were increased from 4 to 8 annas per day in 1919.⁸ By the beginning of the 20th century, rebellions broke out in hill states like Theog and Dhamsi against *begari*.⁹ The system was officially abolished in 1948.

The Dogra kings who ruled Kashmir from 1846 till the time of independence were also notorious for imposing the *begar* system on their Muslim subjects. Though the system had existed in Kashmir prior to the rule of the Dogras, it took a particularly ugly turn during their reign. A portion of the land revenue was paid in kind, with the state taking half of the yield, while the officials who collected the revenue often took another quarter. The rulers also decided on the number of peasants in each village who would undertake forced labour.¹⁰ Sir Walter Roper Lawrence, a member of the British Council, writes that the people of Srinagar were exempted from *begar* and the demand was placed entirely on the villages and the Muslim peasantry as Pandits, Sikhs, Pirsadas and Gujjars were also free from *begar* obligations.¹¹ The economy was exploitative, leaving many in the villages impoverished.

While it is difficult to place a finger accurately on the date of origin of these migrations of labourers from Kashmir to Shimla, Raaja Bhasin confirms via email that the migrations have been underway since the 19th century. This period coincides both with the rule of the Dogras in Kashmir and their exploitative *begar* system, and the rise in demand for labour in a rapidly expanding Shimla under the British government. The extent to which either or both factors may have contributed to the seasonal migration is up for speculation and cannot be ascertained definitely.

Mohammad Ramzan who works in the Lower Bazaar says that his father and grandfather worked as porters in Shimla before him. Similarly, fifty year old Ramzan, who works at the Lakkar Bazaar bus stand, mentions that his father used to work at the railway station in the 1940s and 50s. Though the migrations may have increased in the recent past due to the political volatility of Kashmir, they had begun even when Kashmir witnessed more peaceful days. In the Lower Bazaar, Mohammad Ramzan says that it is becoming increasingly difficult for him to find work every day since there are more people now who are willing to take it up.

Both of them lament the breaking up of joint families in Kashmir. 'The concept of sharing land and resources has vanished. Now everybody thinks about themselves', says Ramzan at the Lakkar Bazaar.¹² The property and farmland is now divided among a larger number of people and consequently, each person only gets a small share that is often insufficient to support their children. Besides, the political volatility in Kashmir has also greatly disturbed agriculture. Further, excess produce needs to be brought down to Jammu or Delhi to make a profit. This adds to the cost of production and increases the risk of the perishable supplies not reaching the market on time due to curfews or violence en route.

Abdul Rashid, who works at the District Collector's office, says that most Kashmiris continue to migrate to Shimla owing to the weather conditions and a snowy winter. Ramzan shrugs his shoulders when asked why he chooses to come to Shimla. He says he is fated to lift heavy loads here, much like the 'Biharis' are fated to provide construction labour in Kashmir (and Shimla). 'In addition, not much work is available in Kashmir, so we either carry vegetables, supply gas cylinders or work at the bus stand and railway station here', he adds. Much like the word 'Khan', 'Bihari' is a colloquial term for all migrant labourers in Kashmir, whether they are from UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, Punjab or Orissa.¹³ According to the 2011 Census, there are about 5-6 lakh non-local labourers in Kashmir.¹⁴

How much does Ramzan roughly earn for the load he carries? He is in a hurry to return to his work and Rajeev

Kumar, the owner of the electrical goods store to which Ramzan was carrying the old TV, steps in to respond. It depends on the load and the distance. They could charge anything between Rs. 200 and Rs. 300 for a trip up Jakhoo Hill, which is about 6 km uphill from the Mall area and it could take about two hours to complete the trip. Besides, they are likely to charge a smaller amount from a person they know well or somebody who uses their services frequently. Kumar has known Ramzan for three years now and has paid close attention to the Khans in the area. 'As construction workers, they are likely to earn only Rs. 500 per day for 8 hours of work. If they are willing to carry the weight, porters can earn up to Rs. 300 in a single trip', he lists this as one of their motivations to continue with physically strenuous labour. They are usually on their feet from 7 am to 9 pm – waking up and sleeping with the rhythm of the bazaar. 'They are also very hard-working and will carry anything you ask them to. They will not refuse any request', he says.

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The narrow alleys of the Lower Bazaar in Shimla are crammed with people and wholesale vendors of everything from fruits to books. The sanitized Mall that is thronged by tourists breathes down the neck of the Lower Bazaar, but is a world apart from it. Shimla cradles some of its colonial legacies – while the Englishman strategically perched the Lower Bazaar below the Mall to distinguish his haunts and minimize contact with the natives, the bazaar firmly holds on to a flavour that is its own long after the last groups of Englishmen drifted down to the plains.

In 2007, the Shimla Road Users and Pedestrians Act banned the plying of vehicles in the Mall area. This was done to ensure pedestrian safety and protect the fragile area that appears to be sinking into the mountainside. Since vehicles could not supply the numerous shops that line Mall Road and the bazaars below it, the Khans carry large cartons up and down the slopes, supplying the stores with their wares. The proprietor at the Embassy Cafe a little distance down Mall Road says that all stores in the Mall area are supplied by the Khans. Trucks with vegetables and other provisions are often unloaded on Cart Road, below the Mall, and carried up to the bazaar by them. 'They usually have contracts with the wholesalers in the Lower Bazaar who send the supplies up to the stores', he says.

Ramzan lives in the Ganj Bazaar – one of the numerous alleyways that branch off from the Lower Bazaar – in a crammed space that is shared by 15 other labourers from Kashmir. The rent is roughly Rs. 3000 per month and is divided among the people sharing the space. One from

among the group is assigned the task of cooking and there is meat one day of the week. If there is some money to spare, butter or dry fruits for the kahwa and hookah are indulgences. If they moved to Shimla along with their families, they would not be able to make do with a cranny in a hall that houses several other people. Ramzan has left his wife, two daughters and a son in Anantnag.

What does Ramzan think of the political situation in Kashmir? He is a little peeved at the question. 'I am illiterate and have nothing to do with politics', he says, 'I hope to hear about the well-being of my family in Kashmir and that is enough'. But how is it possible to turn a blind eye to the violence? 'It is the poor people who die because the government's money does not filter down to them', he says simply.

Muhammad Ramzan, who mans the cloak room and loads buses at the Lakkar Bazaar bus stand laments the loss of young life in the Kashmir. 'They are still children! That is not the age to die', he says. He believes that more Kashmiris began to migrate from Kashmir to Shimla after the partition. 'The partition did not happen properly. That is where the problem has started. I have heard stories of how people would walk from Kashmir to Jammu and then take buses out of the state, soon after the partition of the country', he remembers.

All workers coming into Shimla from other states are required to register themselves with the local police station with details of when they have arrived and where they stay. 'With the militancy worsening in Kashmir, the police may sometimes create issues for us around 15th August and 26th January in the name of security. They round us up unnecessarily. When the Prime Minister came to Shimla in 2017 during the election campaigning, the police rounded up a lot of Kashmiris and locked them up. There has been no violence here though', says Ramzan.

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The *musafirkhana* (traveller's inn) at the Jama Masjid in the Middle Bazaar has rolls of bedding and blankets neatly arranged on the floor. *Phirans* (Kashmiri overcoats/parkas), jackets and ropes that function as straps hang from nails on the walls of the hall that houses around 50 people at any point of time. Most of them are Kashmiri porters who work in Shimla.

Abdul Rashid, who works at the District Collector's office, is sitting outside the *musafirkhana*, puffing on a hookah with his friends. They are all over fifty years old and from Anantnag in Kashmir. Rashid is on his lunch break from the office. Though he can have his meals at the canteen in the District Collector's office, he chooses to eat at the two restaurants inside the masjid complex that

serve Kashmiri food. His family is in Anantnag and he has a comfortable room allotted to him at the DC's office. He likes spending the free time he has at the masjid, where he has friends and the sense of belonging to a larger community. He has been in Shimla for thirty years now and has no relatives here. He gestures to a couple of rooms in the corridors above the courtyard of the masjid and points out that some people move to the town with their families and live here. The masjid complex, including the *musafirkhana*, houses around 150 people. Rashid's wife looks after their walnut and apple orchards in Anantnag and his children are still in school. He makes the two and a half day journey home by bus whenever he is allowed leave at the office.

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Migrant labourers in Shimla are required to register themselves with the local police station when they begin working in the town. The register entry keeps a record of the current address of the workers in Shimla, their address in Kashmir and their photograph and phone numbers. Once registered, they receive an ID card that is a source of credibility and trust for those who employ them. There are records of workers who migrate to Shimla from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab as well, but the numbers are considerably smaller than that of workers coming from Kashmir, although this might be changing now as large numbers of migrant labourers from Jharkhand are coming in to work in the construction boom that is happening at the moment.

Policeman Roshan at the Sadar Police Station in the Lower Bazaar has recorded 389 new entries in the register from Jammu and Kashmir in 2017. This is against 183 new entries from Kashmir in 2016. 'As the situation worsens in Kashmir, the number of migrants is only increasing', says Roshan. 'But there is a change in terms of the fact that most of the recent migrants are not willing to lift heavy loads anymore. They are more educated and come here to work as tourist guides or take up other jobs', he adds. He clarifies that these numbers are only for the area that falls under the Sadar police station's jurisdiction. Other workers could register with police stations in other localities in Shimla.

However, considering the higher probability of finding work in the bazaar and the railway station nearby, and the possibility of staying at the *musafirkhana* in the mosques in the Lower and Middle Bazaar, the Sadar police station is likely to record a higher number of migrant workers, as opposed to those in other parts of Shimla. A number of Kashmiris also stay in the Ganj Bazaar and Krishnanagar areas that are close to the police station.

The officers at the police station say that the earliest

registers in their office are from 2003-04. However, they suspect that this system of registering migrant workers had been going on for some time before that as well, though they are not aware of when it may have originated.

The registration process could be a possible result of the Interstate Migrant Workmen Act of 1979 which seeks to protect migrant workers from exploitation by contractors. Under this Act, migrant workers are entitled to (among other benefits) home journey allowances, accommodation and medical facilities, while the contractors are required to maintain registers with details of the migrant workers on their payroll.

However, considering the unorganised nature of their work and the fact that they are not necessarily employed by contractors, more specific regulations will have to be implemented with regard to the Khans. 'The Interstate Migrant Workmen Act does not apply to those moving to another state individually. It applies only to those workers who are employed by a contractor', contends J. John, Secretary at the Centre for Education and Communication, whose areas of specialisation are unorganised labour and small producers. The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act of 2008 provides for the creation of a National Social Security Board at the central level which must recommend social security schemes for unorganised workers. John says, 'This category of porters will definitely fall under the provisions of the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, as they do fall under the category of unorganised labour. But problems arise with the implementation of this Act and identifying the migrant labour population can be difficult'.

Since a record of migrant workers is being maintained at the local police stations, identification may not be the problem with regard to implementation. 'If the police are already maintaining a record, the question that comes up is what are the migrant workers entitled to? It is the responsibility of the state government to constitute a body which will lay down what this population is entitled to under the Act. Till the state government constitutes this body, the recommendations of the National Social Security Board will remain schemes. These workers will be entitled to a minimum wage as specified by the state government, but will not receive any other benefits unless this state level body is constituted', says John.

Pratap Singh Verma, Labour Officer, Shimla District, confirms that Himachal Pradesh has a welfare board for Building and Construction Workers, and no other board has been constituted for unorganised workers. 'The Khans will not fall under this board. There must be another board specifically for unorganised workers', affirms John. According to the Press Information Bureau's list, which was last updated in April 2013, 11 states have

constituted the requisite board for the implementation of the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act. Himachal Pradesh is not on the list, in spite of 83 per cent of workers in the state being employed in the informal sector.

Santosh Poonia, who heads legal aid and worker education work at Aajeevika Bureau, an organisation that offers training and aid to migrant workers, says that it can be very difficult to implement laws in cases like this where the labour is very casual and the porters are attached to a specific store or employer only for a few hours. 'It depends on the state government to implement measures', he says. He refers to the Mathadi Welfare Boards that have been set up in Maharashtra under the Maharashtra Mathadi Hamal and other Manual Workers' Act, 1969. 'Mathadi' refers to workers who carry heavy loads, and this Act ensures benefits like social security (gratuity, medical benefits, bonus, leave wages) for this category of workers.¹⁵

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At the Lakkar Bazaar bus stand, a bus to Rohru arrives at 9 am and Muhammad Ramzan, along with Abdul Rashid and Muhammad Yusuf, rushes to load it with luggage and vegetables that are to be taken up to the town which is about a 100 kilometres higher up in the mountains. By dint of the fact that he is the only one who is literate among them, Ramzan is in charge of reading the slips that accompany the parcels – they detail the contents of the parcel and where it is headed – and handing it over to the bus drivers. Ramzan has studied till the 9th standard in Kulgam, Kashmir.

When the bus leaves, he returns to the cloak room adjacent to the bus stand and gets a cup of tea. There are rolls of bedding piled up inside the cloak room that doubles as the living quarters for Ramzan, Yusuf and Rashid. All three of them hail from Kulgam, where their families reside while they work in Shimla as porters for roughly six months of the year between October and May. The small cloak room has corrugated tin sheets for walls and a roof, and is shared by four people. Another tin sheet separates a little room on the inside that serves as the kitchen from the sleeping area.

Muhammad Ramzan has been working in Shimla for six months of the year since 1981. His father was in the hill town before him, working as porter at the railway station – a job that he gave up as he grew older and returned to Sopor, leaving Ramzan, his oldest son, to earn some extra money for his three brothers and himself. One of Ramzan's brothers is in the BSF, another is a teacher in a government school and the third works in a hospital. 'I was the only one who came to Shimla and never left', he says wistfully. Ramzan has three children who are all

in school in Kulgam. 'Children these days want to do better than the next person. One of my daughters wants to become a doctor and has been asking for tuitions to do better in school. I must earn for them', he says.

Ramzan owns a piece of land, some cattle and a house in Kulgam. He works his own land during the summer months in Kashmir. He's going home in June this year. 'In a few years, when I cannot lift heavy weight anymore, I will anyway have to go back and look after my land. I would like to earn some money here while I have health on my side', he says.

As I wonder aloud about the word 'Khan' with reference to workers from Kashmir in Shimla, Ramzan tells me he is just as perplexed about the word. 'Workers who come here from Punjab are called Chaudhuri, those who come from Sirmaur are called Sirmauri. By that logic, we should be called Kashmiri. At home, nobody calls us Khan', he says. Like most other aspects of Shimla, the use of the word 'Khan' can also be traced back to the British and the fact that they may not have known any better.

It is a busy morning at the bus stand and Ramzan's phone is constantly buzzing with calls from wholesalers about which buses have been loaded and which ones are yet to come in. He takes a break to tell me a parable that he uses to summarize his life in Shimla.

'A king, distraught by his defeat in a recent battle, sat down with his back against a tree. He observed an ant climbing up the tree with a grain of rice. The ant would fall down twenty times and begin his ascent again, trying ceaselessly to carry the grain of rice up the tree. The king recognised his lesson – as long as he has his faculties and army intact, the battle is never lost.'

Notes

1. The people quoted are aware of the use of my interviews with them as a part of this article.
2. Jaideep Negi, 'The Begar System in the Shimla Hill States during the British period', *Proceedings of the India History Congress*, Vol. 55 (1994), 693-697.
3. Raaja Bhasin, *Simla: The Summer Capital of British India* (Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2011).
4. Edward J. Buck, *Simla: Past and Present* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co, 1904).
5. H. H. Wilson, *Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms* (London: WH Allen & Co, 1855).
6. Negi, 'The Begar System', 693-697.
7. Bhasin, *Simla: The Summer Capital*.
8. Asha Sharma, *An American in Gandhi's India: The Biography of Satyanand Stokes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
9. Manjit Singh Ahluwalia, *Social Cultural and Economic History of Himachal Pradesh* (Delhi: Indus Publishing, 1998).
10. Mohamad Ashraf Khaja, 'A European Account of the Socio-Economic and Educational Condition of Kashmiris under

- the Dogra Rule: A critical appraisal', *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, Vol. 6, Issue 11, 2016.
11. Sir Walter Roper Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir* (Charleston: Nabu Press, 1895).
 12. These conversations were in Hindi.
 13. *Life of Migrant Labourers in Kashmir*, Video Volunteers, accessed on 3 February, 2018: <https://www.videovolunteers.org/life-of-migrant-labourers-in-kashmir/>
 14. *Kashmiri Workforce Shrinks Each Year*, Kashmir Reader, published on June 20, 2017: <https://kashmirreader.com/2017/06/20/kashmiri-work-force-shrinks-year/>
 15. 'Mathadi Boards', Department of Labour, Government of Maharashtra, accessed February 4, 2018: <https://mahakamgar.maharashtra.gov.in/lc-mathadi-boards.htm>
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