Gaduliya Lohars and their Modes of Subsistence: An Empirical Analysis

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Abstract:

Gaduliya Lohars is a nomadic community of North India which has its roots of origin in state Rajasthan. Traditionally it is a wandering community having their own indigenous culture and traditions. But due to changing conditions and their interaction with the urban way of life has brought a number of changes in their life, culture and customs. This paper is based on empirical study made on their habitats in Delhi and attempts to look into the modern experiences of a traditional community with special reference to their mode of subsistence.
INTRODUCTION

The Lohars are a travelling blacksmith community in north India. The name comes from *loha* meaning iron. They are found in small nomadic family groups in such states as Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh (Northern states of India). They claim to be Rajasthani (people of Rajasthan) in origin, but form a distinct in terms of their own traditions and way of life. They call themselves the Gaduliya in Rajasthan and Shilpkar in Himachal Pradesh. Gaduliya refers to the open carts in which they travel and live.

Lohar means "smith", and Gaduliay is the name given to the distinctive type of oxcart used by this group. The term Gaduliya Lohar may thus be translated as "wandering smith", as distinct from the sedentary Hindu smiths belonging to the maru and malviya castes who live in the same region. This dual status of smith and nomad determines their place in India's complex social system.

**Historical Background**

Rajastan is the region of origin of the Gaduliya Lohars, and they claim to belong to the famous Rajput group. Many orally transmitted accounts agree on this point. The present-day Gaduliya Lohars are descended from groups which served the Rajput princes, for whose armies they made and serviced weapons. Consequently, they enjoyed special esteem and consideration until 1567-1568, when the repeated assaults of the emperor Akhbar overcame the seasoned defenders of the Fort of Chittorgarh, bringing the Rajput dynasty to an end. Their traditions claim that they were originally Rajput warriors and weapon makers in the fort of Chitorgarh, southern Rajasthan. When the fort was under siege by Akbar (the great Muslim leader) in 1568, they saw that defeat was inevitable and fled by a secret doorway. For this reason, they believe, the goddess Kali uttered a curse on them and condemned them to a wandering life. Becoming a nomadic people they took five vows. These included never to return to Chitorgarh, never to live in houses, never to use a light at night or use a rope to draw water. They believe their goddess might kill them if they settle. Their caste places them at different levels according to the district they move in. Their status now means their women cannot draw water from the wells of the very villages that depend on them for their craft.

**Social Life**

Life for the Gaduliya Lohars is lived mainly within the group. They do not stay long in populated centres. Much of their time is spent travelling, and contacts with individual peasants or peasant groups tend to be brief. News of their arrival in an area spreads quickly. Traditionally, they travel in bullock carts and make and mend utensils, all kinds of agricultural implements, tent pegs, cart wheel rims, shoes for horses and bullocks, and a variety of iron and copper bowls. The carts are of a distinctive construction, having heavy wooden wheels and the sides sometimes have a wicker design in metal. The family live intents of black tarpaulin at the side of the cart or in carts covered with an awning. The small forge is served by circular air bellows.

They usually live and travel as a group of three to a dozen families, each family with a cart. Each group has its own circuit of villages of about eighty kilometres, and has a regular schedule of visiting certain sites in towns and villages for a few days. They form long-term patron-client relationships with farmers. If a family group cannot fulfil the schedule for customers, another family group takes their place. We can find such groups in Rishikesh, south Delhi and Ghaziabad. They are also known to travel as far as eastern Uttar Pradesh.
During the monsoon season they congregate in towns or villages, where some of them have settled. As many as two hundred families camp together, partly because the roads are impassable, but also to renew family ties. Each band or clan will have its own panchayat or council of leaders or representatives, one from each travelling family group. These settle disputes about work, bride prices and even clothing styles. They are divided into a number of clans and lineages.

They are a fervent Hindu community, worshipping Ram as a Hero god and especially the goddess Kali of Chitorgarh. They carry a small image of her in the thalia, or cupboard where small stores and valuables are kept on their carts. In addition each clan worships its own deity and each family offers daily prayers to the god of the anvil. They participate in all the Hindu festivals. The male Lohar wears a large red turban while his father is alive, white when he is dead. He wears a full moustache, but no beard. They claim to be Adiwashi; speaking among themselves Adiwasi Girasia, a Bhil language from Rajasthan. Their language is listed as Gade Lohar. They readily speak Hindu to outsiders.

They marry only other Lohars, but from another clan. They are monogamous and divorce is rare. All marriages are arranged years beforehand often when they are still children, the partners not even knowing each other. Bangles are worn as tokens of marriage. The women grind the grain and bake, raise the children, but unlike many Indian women have contact with other people, including men. This is because the women share the iron-working equally with the men, a wife often swinging the hammer or working the bellows for her husband until her sons are old enough to help. They supplement their income by sales of bullocks and small numbers of cattle.

The Lohars shun idleness, often working a ten-hour day for meager income. Keeping a household and business on the roadside is difficult and unhealthy. Some villages have given them a plot of land to build a one-room house as a local base. Even those who have houses tend to store the equipment in the house and camp outside it, but otherwise they travel and live in or by their bullock carts.

PRESENT STUDY

Here, this microproject is based on a group of 100 people of Gadulia Lohars who are residing in Dhakka Gaon near radio colony in the northern district of national capital Delhi. This is a community of gadulia lohars consisting of 22 households in which around 25 families are living. According to them they have been staying here for almost 30-35 years.

These lohars have set up their temporary houses by the roadside which in fact is a main road which connects ring road to the main bypass. Here, in the back of their houses there is big factory of signboards and hoardings. This, in fact, is a crowded place having a market of all kind of daily need items. There is also a small vegetable market nearby. Actually this whole area comes under the Kingsway Camp which in fact, is wholly inhabited by refugees who came India from Pakistan during partition.

Here, in this present study, I have tried to find out their different modes of subsistence, actually what are their different medium to earn bread and butter. Here my emphasis is mainly on the different occupations they are adopting now-a-days and also how they manage their routine life with the penny they earn.

Although, these ironsmiths are staying here for a long time but one can notice a considerable change in their occupation. Through this study I have also tried to reveal out the occupational changes which they are adopting in order to fulfill their needs. As in present time, in this costly city, it is not easy to survive with the application of traditional modes of earnings and so I focused on their part time jobs which they adopt to get some extra money for the leisure of their family members and themselves.
METHODOLOGY

Social research is a systematic method of exploring, analyzing and conceptualizing social life in order to extend correct or verify knowledge, whether that knowledge aids in the construction of a theory or in the practice of an art. Social Research may be defined as a scientific undertaking which by means of logical and systematized techniques aim to discover new facts or verify and test old facts, analyze their sequences, interrelationships and causal explanations which were derived within an appropriate theoretical frame of reference, develop new scientific tools, concepts and theories, which would facilitate reliable and valid study of human behaviour.

It’s obvious that no single scientific technique in gathering and analyzing the complex data would suffice. Research studies generally utilize not only a variety of techniques but approach the subject matter from a variety of viewpoints. No single technique of study can be regarded as sovereign. Each is a complement to others. Thus, an appropriate integration of techniques is indispensable for an effective fieldwork.

This project is a kind of descriptive research as in this I have tried out to explain their modes of subsistence and moreover, a sufficient literature is available on the Gadulia Lohars. Here I didn’t make any hypothesis as during all my four visits to the locality, I didn’t realize need of making a hypothesis.

Though this study is not an extensive one, I used mainly two tools in order to collect information. These are observation and interview. Observation is a systematical and a purposeful investigation of social problem with the help of sense of vision and hearing in co-ordination with mind. Here I relied on the two types of observation i.e. Quasi-participant observation and Non-participant observation. Quasi-participant observation involves partial participation on the part of researcher in the social situation. While keeping aim of the research in mind, the researcher adopts a suitable role for some time. On the other hand, in non-participant observation, observer is detached from the social situation and is not a part of the social group.

Interview is a meaningful and purposeful conversation employing verbal questioning as its principle technique of data collection. Here I mainly used unstructured interview that goes like a normal conversation but a notion of getting information is always remain in the back of researcher’s mind. Interview is a flexible technique and can be adjusted to meet diverse situation.

As far as difficulties faced during data collection are concerned, I hardly faced any kind of problem cause these people are living in urban context and are well aware with all the things of the present moreover, my key respondent was an educated lohar named Sanjay. He studied upto 10th standard in the nearby government school and seemed to be a knowledgeable fellow as he responded all my inquiries in a clear manner.

MODES OF SUBSISTENCE

Traditional Occupation

The new activities of the Lohars after the defeat of Chittorgarh must have been influenced by the nature of the environment in which they found themselves. They must have had to devise a balanced economic system based on the relationship between man and nature, between the natural and the artificial in a region like Rajasthan where natural conditions and features can vary sharply from area to area and from season to season. For instance, the rainy season puts a stop to nomadism, and so fixed camp sites were established for the Lohar groups. Even today the Lohars still stay at these sites, known as thiya, every year from mid-May to mid-September. The period from May to July is devoted to rest, visits, weddings, and
meetings of the group's ruling council. From July to September visits are made to local livestock fairs to purchase draught animals.

The remaining eight months are spent travelling, according to a pattern which has not changed since the sixteenth century and which enables each group to cover a particular part of the region. Every group has established relations with the peasants in its area, and these relations have been kept up by both sides for generations.

The defeat of the arms manufactured by them was felt by the Lohars as a serious blow to their reputation, and they swore to give up this traditional activity until the dishonour was repaired, devoting themselves in the meantime to the peaceful manufacture of domestic utensils and agricultural implements. In order to avoid conflict with smiths belonging to other castes who were already established in the large centres of population, they decided to take to the roads and serve towns and villages far from the main highways.

Traditionally these Gaduliya Lohars have the occupation of making different tools of iron for household purposes. In their tool box still there are many things which have been using since previous time. These are their main implements through which they earn and so, these tools are kept with full regard. These are:

- **Dhan**: It is a kind of hammer made of pure iron. It is mainly used for hitting the other things in order to make them a shape. It consists a very important part of their tool box.

- **Handsi**: It is an implement which consists of two bars jointed at one point in the middle just like scissors. It is mainly used for gripping the things which cannot be touched by hand like red hot iron, etc.

- **Dat**: It is a kind of iron plateform which is of more or less cubic shape. It is mainly used as a base slab to give the iron things a shape. It is in fact meant for providing a platform for working. It is also known as **Eran**.

- **Eran**: It is a kind of small furnace which is mainly powered by coal. It is an underground entity having only one thing above the ground that is the place on which iron things are hotted up. Now-a-days they also use electric or fuel furnesses.

They mainly build the things on order which shopkeeper or other factory persons place. All of these things are made up of iron as these people are expertise in making iron items and so are well known as lohars. The items they make can be categorized into three types.

a) Medical items
b) Factory items
c) Household items

Medical items include all those things for which they get order. A list of these items is here

- Surgery items
- Artificial body parts
- Iron walkers
- Iron boxes
- Tool hanging bars
- Wash trays
- Iron plateforms

Factory items include:

- Sign boards
- Hammers
- Big nails
- Iron rods
- Iron bars
- Sickle
Household items include:
- Tawa
- Chalni (filters)
- Knives
- Grippers
- Tripods
- Implement for chopping
- Iron bars

**Importance of Gada (cart)**

Life of Gaduliya Lohars revolves around their cart i.e. Gada or Gaduliya. Not only it provides them a place for habitation, but also it also constitute a very important part of their occupation as they are always associated with that of cart. The gaduliya is made from kikar (Acacia arabica) wood, and is stronger and heavier than other types of cart. Its peculiar features are the thalia and the pheechla. The former is a fairly spacious triangular chest which forms the forepart of the cart. The middle and rear parts, which are uncovered, constitute the pheechla, to which side panels are attached. The carts are built only by a small number of craftsmen who are established at Gangura for the north and west of the region, and at Barmer for the south and east.

The side panels, or pankhalas, the outside of the chest, and the wheels, are the only surfaces which the owner can decorate to give a distinctive aspect to his gaduliya. This decoration consists of bronze plates fixed to the wood. Those which cover the side panels are invariably divided into four sections, each containing sixteen compartments, and it is by means of the motif chosen to decorate each of these compartments that the family gives a distinctive appearance to its vehicle. These motifs include squares, lozenges, stars and stylized flowers. The long shaft by which the oxen are attached to the cart is decorated with plaited strips of buffalo hide.

The gaduliya is the real centre of family life. All the family belongings are stored there according to an unchanging order. In the triangular chest in front, the small door of which can be locked for security, are kept cash, jewels when not being worn by the women, gold, sweetmeats, solidified butter, needles and thread, the looking-glass, kohl and other cosmetics. In a word, the thalia is the family treasure chest. In the open part of the vehicle sacks of rice, lentils and flour are placed in the centre, while domestic utensils are placed on one side and the smith's tools on the other. The family clothing is stored between the sacks and the thalia.

**Occupational Changes**

In the cultural mosaic of India, the Gaduliya Lohars occupied a distinctive place in Delhi; they were accepted as an essential factor in the region's social and economic structure. They were not in competition with sedentary smiths. Each group had its own clientele. This situation prevailed for more than 300 years until in this century large-scale industry began to alter the pattern of India's economy.

The impact was such that many groups of Gaduliya Lohars were obliged to abandon their traditional circuits and sought new customers in other areas. It was a severe test for a nomadic smith to have to compete with other nomadic or sedentary smiths from neighbouring...
areas, to give up old connexions, and above all to face the risk of coming into contact with other cultural models which were powerful enough to undermine his group's stability. The roads westward lead to the desert regions of the Sind, which are ill-suited to agriculture. The only practicable route led eastwards, where lay prosperity and promise. Many groups migrated in this direction; others stuck obstinately to the old circuits. The latter have suffered greatly from the changes which the invasion of the market by mass-distributed industrial products has brought to the region's economy.

The alternatives of the occupation other than iron work that gaduliya Lohars of Delhi have adopted are as follow:

- Workers in the factories
- Drivers
- Salaried employees on the shops and showrooms
- Timber agents
- Labour agents
- Seasonal workers
- Mechanics
- Self employed

Many of the young people of the area have joined the factories of signboards which is just behind their habitational place as workers. They get a nominal salary in addition to their traditional work of iron smith and that seems to be sufficient for their life as most of them were satisfied with the money they were getting from factory. Another mode of occupation that they have adopted is the job of driver. They are not in the permanent type of job of a house cars but they do it on the daily wages basis and only on the private local buses. On asking about their adopting only job of private buses they revealed that by doing so they have two additional advantages; one is that they are not accountable for anyone and second is that by doing so they get sufficient time for their traditional work of iron smith as they usually get back to their place latest by evening.

Sometimes they do a job of some kind of agents for both timber as well as labour for working with private contractor. Some of the people have associated themselves with the job of mechanic only if they know the tactics behind it. Some of them have stuck to the self-employed kind of work like they have setup a small shop in which they sell the iron implements made by them in addition to the household things.

Now, here we can see that a drastic change has been taken place in the pattern of their occupation. They are no more stick or dependent to their traditional mode of subsistence. However, they have adopted new areas of employment as per requirement of the new environment of the new area of Delhi. But still they have not discarded their traditional modes of occupation i.e. iron smith for which they are known since starting.

Income and Expenditure

According to Sanjay, their main source of income can be divided into three broad categories. They are:

a) Money which come by taking the order
b) Money which come by selling their iron items
c) Money which come by employment other than iron work

As it is mentioned earlier that these people usually get order from shopkeeper or by other factorias or from surgical shop, etc. They have a good bargain when an order come to them and the money which is fixed, includes all the expenditure including cost of raw material and their labour charges as well. For them it is their basic income on which their household expenses depend. It is the income which is in fact return of their own work or
reward of their talent as iron smiths. Through this mode of getting income, they usually earn around Rs. 1500-2000 per month. The major portion of this income is spent on their basic needs like food and clothings.

In addition to the income discussed above, they also sell the iron items that they made by themselves other than the order they get. In selling these products, the women of household help as they set a small stall in front of their houses and it is open throughout the day. Dealing on these stalls is being done by the women. Moreover, they also set up their stall at the local market which is held on every Thursday nearby and popularly known as Veer Bazar. If the market is far away from their place of residence, it is the duty of men to deal with that market, while a stall in the nearby market is handled by women only. Through this mode of subsistence, they get an extra income of around Rs. 1000-1500. This money is used on their leisure and other means of entertainment and also on the shopping for the festivals. From this income they also get some modern electronic items like television and stereo system etc.

Away from all these modes of income, almost one person of each household is involved in alternative occupation in one way or the other. The income which comes from these sources remains with the person who earns it if he is single. Otherwise if he is married, he spends this income in fulfilling his family’s extra demands like child care and insurance, etc. This income varies from one person to the other depending on the kind of job in which they are involved.

Conclusion

The acculturation process as an inevitable consequence of their contact with urban societies is reflected in terms of changes in the life style of the Gaduliya Lohars, some of which are very striking. The style of dress, especially for women, has been changing, becoming adapted to the new environment. Men, too, are changing their appearance by, for instance, adopting a less traditional hairstyle.

Faced with a hard struggle for survival, those who have remained faithful to the traditional circuits are also finding it difficult to preserve all their traditions, whether it be the decoration of their vehicles or the feasts and ceremonies of their traditional calendar. The situation is one which is not, unfortunately, confined to the Gaduliya Lohars. A social group is faced with a terrible dilemma when it has to decide whether to remain faithful to its traditions and risk the very survival of its members as a group, or to abandon these traditions and expose itself to all the risks of acculturation but ensure a level of economic well-being that satisfies its members' needs. This is directly reflected in their changing patterns of subsistence.

This change in their mode of subsistence clearly indicates the adoptability of the traditional community to the urban life style. The impact of surrounding environment has always been influencing the culture and means of production and Gaduliya Lohars’ community is not an exception. The various urban forces are impeaching not only their community life but also influencing their culture as well. And for the same culture is known as a mode of adaptation.
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