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The Bakhtiari

Many tribal groups of disparate ethnic origins, speaking local dialects of Persian or Kurdish, Turkish or Arabic, live and migrate within the massive ranges of the Zagros chain of mountains which run from the north-west to the south-east of western Iran. Most of these tribally organised mountain peoples are nomadic or semi-nomadic herding flocks of sheep and goats and migrate twice a year in spring and autumn between their summer and winter pastures. Many tribesmen also practice agriculture to some degree growing mainly wheat and barley with a range of vegetables and fruits depending on the possibilities of their particular areas.

Within the Zagros mountains there is great variability of ecological exploitation and land use both within and between these tribal groups, from those who grow no crops, are totally dependent on animals and live in black goat hair tents common to this region, to those who practise agriculture exclusively and are permanently settled in hamlets or larger villages with populations of several hundred.

In recent decades many nomadic tribesmen have built houses in their summer or winter quarters living in tents for only part of the year or when actually migrating. In increasing numbers the nomadic members of the tribes are turning to cultivation, encouraged in this by the Iranian Government which during the 1960's carried out an extensive programme of land reforms throughout Iran.

The Bakhtiari, who speak Luri, a dialect of Persian are one of the largest of these nomadic tribal groups of the Zagros. Their tribal neighbours to the north of Bakhtiari territory - the Lur tribes of Luristan and to the south, the Kuhgelu tribes, belong to the same ethnic stock as the Bakhtiari also speaking Luri with local dialect variations.

The Bakhtiari inhabit an area of approximately 30,000 square miles in the central region of the Zagros chain. The western winter quarters of the tribe lie in the foothills of Khuzistan Province. This region consists of a series of fertile plateaux and mountain valleys between 2,000 and 6,000 ft. in which hundreds of villages and recently settled hamlets are situated. Extensive cultivation is carried out on the valley floors and many, though not all of the villages are inhabited permanently. The upper slopes of the foothills provide grazing for the herds of sheep and goats. It is on these upper slopes that the purely nomadic members of the tribe live through out the winter months in their tents.

Both crops and grass are dependent on the winter rains which fall mainly between November and January. However the climate is unreliable and the rains do not always come or they come late, resulti in complete crop failure or low yields and grazing is frequently poor. Some areas have heavy rainfall while contiguous valleys may be sufferi drought conditions. Every year brings a variety of unpredictable climatic problems for the nomads. Plagues of locusts and animal epidemics can also occur destroying crops and grass and decimating the flocks or donkeys which are used as pack animals.

In the late spring the winter pastures, called "garmsir" or "warm country" by the tribesmen, begin to dry up and the grazing is rapidly denuded by the flocks. The summer months in Khuzistan are arid and hot with temperatures rising to more than 100 degrees F., extreme conditions which the flocks can not survive. The sheep depend on a constant supply of grass and water, which the nomads obtain by moving to higher summer pastures in the east, which come into season later than the winter pastures.

For the Bakhtiari this movement entails a journey across roughly 200 miles of entirely mountainous country before reaching their summer quarters on the eastern side of the Zagros ranges. These summer pastures, called "Yeilaq" or "Cold country" are located in the Chahar Mahall and Firaydan valleys of Isfahan Province. In these high valleys the summer climate is cooler and the animals can be grazed until the late autumn moving slowly down to the valley floors from the higher slopes to graze on the harvest stubble fields of the many tribal and peasant villages of this fertile region.

Before the intense cold and the heavy snows of winter start, again conditions which the herds can not survive, the Bakhtiari return across the mountains along the same routes to their warmer "garmsir" quarters in Khuzistan. The life of Bakhtiari nomads consists of this constant movement twice a year between winter and summer pasture lands, thus avoiding extremes of temperature. It enables the maximum exploitation of a mountainous area which has elevations ranging from less than 1,000 ft. to almost 13,000 ft., providing optimum pasture for their livestock at different seasons throughout the year. This method of land use makes possible the maintenance of a larger animal population.

Six months of the year from late October till early April are spent in the warmer climate of Khuzistan and four months in the cool summer conditions of the highland valleys of the eastern slopes of the Zagros.

Roughly two to three months are spent on the two migrations. The migration in the spring is made slowly, grazing the animals on the progressively higher pastures. In the autumn, after the sun of the

summer months there is little if any grass even high in the mountains and this movement is always one of privation with minimal grazing for the animals. The nomads move as quickly as possible taking little more than three weeks, whereas the spring move can take as long as eight weeks.

The country across which the nomads migrate is wild and spectacular presenting many natural hazards. The young and the old, the healthy and infirm climb on foot over higher and higher ranges of mountains, through windswept rocky gorges, along precipitous cliff faces, across icy fast-flowing rivers and over freezing snow bound mountain passes. Between the parallel ranges of mountains are valleys lush with grass in the spring in which the nomads can rest their animals before tackling the next mountain.

The climatic conditions encountered particularly during the spring movement increase the difficulties of an already difficult environment. Lack of sufficient water, intense heat and frequent duststorms which make movement impossible are characteristic of the start of the migration in the dried up winter pastures. Gale force winds and rainstorms with occasional electric storms sap the energy of the animals and make the going underfoot very treacherous. In places the only path way possible along the several cliff faces which must be climbed are only a few feet wide. The pack animals frequently panic and collapse under the weight of their loads having to be encouraged and forced, usually by a hefty whack and much screaming by irate tribesmen, to move along these dangerous tracks in single file, nose to tail. Worn as smooth as glass by centuries of tribal traffic and often slippery with rain or the blood of animals with wounds and cuts on their limbs, these paths are frequently the scene of pack animals slithering over the cliffs and crashing hundreds of feet below. The loss of a donkey with

its load of food, household equipment or even worse the tent spells disaster for a Bakhtiari family. Snow storms and sub-zero temperatures are common in the highest ranges, the topmost peak of which reaches a height of 14,920 ft. A sudden overnight drop in temperature can wipe out whole herds. To be unexpectedly caught by a blizzard while only half way over an exposed mountain pass and so unable to go forwards or backwards to shelter may result in the death of people as well as animals. There are many tales of nomads being so caught and found much later frozen to death. Fingers and toes in particular are affected by frostbite. Swollen with melting snow the rivers present another severe hazard to the nomads and their animals. The herds have to be swum across and hundreds if not thousands of sheep and goats are drowned annually. In particularly bad years the only way of crossing the Karun and Bazuft rivers, until bridges were recently built over them, was by "kalak" or rafts built on the spot by lashing branches to inflated goat skins. Equipment, some of the younger animals unlikely to be able to swim across and people are swept down river and across to the other side. It usually takes a full day for a single camp group to cross.

These weather conditions vary from year to year, as well as almost daily. Nomads travelling the same route but separated in time by a few days or weeks as the case may be, can encounter very different types of weather. Decisions such as when to start migrating, whether it is advisable to cross a particular pass at once in spite of threatening weather, or where to swim the animals across the rivers crucially affect the survival as well as the wellbeing of people and animals. Virtually the only control the Bakhtiari nomad has over these severe ecological and climatic constraints is his own knowledge of the mountains and his skill, acquired by long experience. Good judgement is a prerequisite for efficient herding and the successful nomad is one who

has learned to negotiate the physical hazards of the environment with minimal losses to his flocks. However misfortune strikes the efficient and inefficient without discrimination, and luck plays an important part in nomadic life. Poor judgement can steadily erode a flock over a period of years resulting in gradual impoverishment, but sheer misfortune and chance can wipe out a whole flock, and thus the individual's wealth and livelihood, at the one time. It takes years to build up a new flock of sheep.

Severe animal losses are a significant factor in inducing some of the Bakhtiari to turn to cultivation and settlement. An alternative method of adjusting to catastrophic losses, yet remaining within the nomadic style of life is to become a contracted shepherd, working for a wealthier tribesman in return for sheep. Such agreements usually last for several years. Since the possibilities of such employment are not unlimited many Bakhtiari are forced to accept a sharp drop in their standard of living, bordering on subsistence, or alternatively may be forced to rely on kinsmen for help.

Animal wealth is precarious and unstable and most of the wealthier nomads invest in agricultural land. Although crops can and do fail the land can be replanted for the following year. Lost animals can not be replaced. Some nomads may own over 1,000 animals but they must be split into several manageable herds under the care of shepherds. The returns from more animals tend to become increasingly smaller with the delegation of responsibility for the herds to strangers. A herd of more than 200 sheep becomes unmanageable for one shepherd. Beyond this size the loss rate of animals under the mountainous conditions increases rapidly making it more economic to split the herd. This requires more personnel than may be available. There are therefore a number of checks to the

potential growth of a tribesmen's flocks.

Many Bakhtiari continue to migrate with fewer than a dozen sheep which is not enough for a family to survive. Such tribesmen eke out a very sparse existence and usually will eventually be forced out of the nomadic situation.

The fortunes of the tribesmen may vary to a considerable extent throughout their lives swinging from comparative wealth to considerable poverty. Agriculture provides a more stable alternative for the wealthy nomad and an increasing number have settled permanently in either summer or winter quarters, handing over responsibility for their herds, on which they are no longer entirely dependent, to kinsmen, leaving their time free to pursue cultivation more efficiently.

The exact population of Bakhtiaris is difficult to assess but estimates of approximately 600,000 are probably fairly accurate. Of these possibly 200,000 still migrate regularly.

The nomadic element of the population live and migrate in camp groups of between four and fifteen tents. The composition of encampment varies from year to year. The same people do not necessarily migrate together every year, but at any given time the members of a camp group will either be close patrilineal kinsmen, members of the same descent group or will be related by marriage. Such groups of close kin are bound by mutual kinship obligations, forming a cooperating group. Nomads are dependent on kin for help in times of difficulty and expect to receive help such as food, on the loss of a pack animal carrying supplies. The size of camp groups tends to increase for purposes of defense in times of insecurity, caused by feuds between different sects of the Bakhtiari or by the danger of marauding tribesmen. Thieves

abound in the mountains particularly in the central more isolated region and great care is exercised to protect the flocks. Since the height of tribal independence at the turn of the century the Bakhtiari, like most of the Zagros tribes have been since subject to sporadic and successful attempts to disarm them by the Iranian Government. Rifles can still be found in the Bakhtiari but the majority no longer have the arms to defend themselves against armed raiders. The presence of one or more rifles in a camp is now usually sufficient to ward off any raiders. Conflicts also tend to arise between camp groups moving through territory belonging to different sections of the tribe and the members of that section.

The size of any camp is also dependent on the total numbers of sheep owned by the individual members. The availability of water and grazing conditions limit the number of sheep which can be effectively grazed together. In the winter quarters camps tend to remain smaller than the most effective camp size while moving.

Differences may arise between camp members resulting in the hiving off of individual members or the camp may split into two smaller units. Common disputes arise from differences of opinion concerning the myriad difficult decisions that have to be made during the migrations. Each camp has an informal leader, usually the most senior member of the kin group, but he has no coercive authority. Any member who disagrees with the leader is at liberty to move to another group, taking his individually owned sheep with him.

Daily life in the camps has strikingly different tempos between the often hectic and strenuous activity of the migrations, and the leisurely life style in the more stable periods in summer and winter pastures. Men are responsible for the herding and protection of the animals. This involves patrolling the flocks during the night when



on the move particularly in the early stages of the migrations. Loading and unloading the pack animals, and pitching the heavy tents is done mostly by the men. At the end of the spring migration, the sheep are sheared, a task in which all the men of the camp work together. Men are of course responsible for the buying and selling of sheep. Ewes, the productive capital of the nomads, lamb in the early spring and are only sold after they have ceased to produce lambs. All young male sheep of about a year old are sold to the peasants and townsmen. A few males are kept for breeding purposes, not usually more than one ram to fifty ewes.

In return for the money realised on the sale of wool and male sheep, the nomads buy their provisions of wheat flour for bread, which forms part of the staple diet of the Bakhtiari, rice, tea, sugar, salt, and clothes. The nomads buy and sell in the peasant villages on the edges of their tribal territory preferring usually to trade with specific merchants. Long standing debts owed to these merchants are paid off by the sale of young animals, although if the nomad has lost his animals, he falls deeper into debt buying on credit at high rates of interest. After several weeks moving through the mountains, provisions of food are always low and the nomads are in a weak position to obtain good prices for their animals which they must sell to buy what they need and the prices they are charged tend also to be high. Enterprising nomads sometimes travel to more distant towns in order to get better prices.

The women do all of the domestic chores, organising the tent, the loads of the baggage animals are arranged to form a wall over which the tent is pitched. Collecting water, kept in goat skin containers, daily milking of lactating sheep and goats, making yoghurt cooking meals

and baking mounds of paper thin unleavened bread over an open fire are the major female activities. Bread and yoghurt are the staple diet, with rice and occasional meat except for the poor. Little meat is in fact eaten except on ceremonial occasions such as funeral feasts, wedding celebrations and when entertaining guests. Rules of hospitality are strictly adhered to and food or at least tea drunk in large quantities are offered to passing visitors. The more prestigious and honoured a guest the more lavish the hospitality and an animal is sacrificed as a mark of esteem. Women never eat with the men if there are any strangers or guests in the tent. As is common to most Muslim societies the world of women is separated from that of the men. Tribal women enjoy considerably more freedom than peasant women. They are not veiled and the seclusion of women within the privacy of a house is not feasible under nomadic conditions. While excluded from much of political life, tribal women can exert considerable if indirect influence. They do not hesitate to fight along side their men when the occasion demands it. In fact a few women have played important political roles in tribal life. Such women are called "Lion women".

The Bakhtiari are divided into many tribes and more numerous sub-tribes or "Taifeh". These taifeh groups have their own territories in both summer and winter pastures. The taifeh's are the most relevant social and political units within which most of the social, economic and political activities of the Bakhtiari occur. Each of the many taifehs have leaders who arbitrate disputes between members of the taifeh, and who represent the members of the taifeh in their relationships with other taifehs. Members of a taifeh think of themselves

as all being descendants of one distant ancestor although this is often a political fiction, that the moral obligations of kinship regulate relationships within the taifeh. Such obligations do not apply to relationships between members of different and territorially discrete taifehs. Such relations are often antagonistic and blood feuds between many such groups persist for generations. Marriage is rare between members of different taifeh except for the case of the leaders who contract marriages of political importance with women from other taifehs. Most marriages are made between close kin with a preference for the daughter of one's father's brother.

The taifehs or sub-tribes are further subdivided into smaller descent groups so that one's neighbours are one's close agnatic kin. Camp groups are composed of members of such small descent groups. The smallest descent group with communal rights to land is called "Korboh" which means literally son's of the father. Reliance on the help and cooperation of one's kinsmen are a prerequisite of nomadic life. As more nomads concentrate increasingly on agriculture at the expense of pastoralism such reliance on close kin will become less relevant. Agricultural land is owned individually unlike the pasture lands, rights to which belonged to the descent groups.

With the gradual decrease of nomadic life much of the independence, the pride and distinctiveness of the Bakhtiari will disappear. The traditional values of the Bakhtiari nomads are however kept alive in their rich and varied folk songs which extoll the dangers and heroic deeds of their mountain life.

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