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MOBILITY-SEDENTARY OPPOSITION:

A CASE STUDY OF THE NOMADIC GADULIA LOHAR

by P.K. Misra

In this paper I propose to argue that sedentary and spatially-mobile human lifestyles are not exclusive categories. Sedentary ways of life as we know them today are a relatively recent adaptation in comparison to the more spatially mobile. In the total of human history one kind of adaptation does not exclude the other. There is an organic relation between the two. Each influences the other and in the process both nomadism and sedentariness have undergone qualitative changes. Nomadic populations camp for varying lengths of time. Settled communities have always encouraged various forms of mobility through exploration, migration, trade, periodic pilgrimages, tourism and in response to a host of political and/or environmental transformations. In India the two opposed modes of life are institutionalized in traditional social structure and organization and at the cognitive level. I will try to illustrate this line of argument by taking the example of the nomadic Gadulia Lohar.

In India both nomads and settled populations have been on the scene for many millennia. The prehistoric record indicates that the Indian sub-continent supported hunters-gatherers until circa. 3000 B.C. (Sankhalia 1974; Thaper 1978). Using the archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence, Murthy and Sontheimer (1980:166-167) have examined the basis of nomadism in the Deccan Plateau: "... there is enough archaeological evidence to know the pre-history of early human populations that inhabited this region. In Pleistocene and early Holocene times, they were conditioned to nomadic food procuring systems based on hunting and food gathering... By around the third millennium B.C., a food producing system based on a pastoral-cum-agricultural economy was introduced into this hunting and food gathering ecosystem by communities who moved in from elsewhere and raised villages in the favourable ecological niches. Some of the excavated settlements ... have shown that their economy was chiefly based on cattle pastoralism supplemented by agriculture and hunting." Once settled villages came onto the scene as a regular way of inhabitation the basis for interactions among the people living in different communities was established through exchanges of goods and services which could not be obtained in a single settlement. Berland has very rightly termed this a socio-ecological niche (1979), which, apart from others, was exploited by a distinct class of nomads.

Archaeological evidence from the Indus Valley (Wheeler 1953) and Lothal (Rao 1973) clearly indicate the development of transport and commerce in ancient India. Wheeler notes: "... the gold used for beads, fillets and other ornaments by the Harrappans may thus have come at least in part through trade channels, some of it probably from South India (1953:58). Who were these traders? What was the mechanism of their activities? How did they move and with what frequency? We have very little or no information on these questions. But it appears that in ancient India, apart from pastoral nomads, there developed a class of spatially mobile specialists who provided various kinds of goods, services and entertainments among more settled populations. They have been referred to in early Vedic literature, the R̥g Veda referring to a number of specialized trades, crafts,

entertainers etc., during the period circa 1000 - 700 B.C. (Basham 1959). Tamil Sangam literature spanning a period between circa 1 A.D. - 600 A.D., refers to a number of itinerants visiting villages and towns (Misra and Misra 1982). Recent surveys in India, Pakistan and elsewhere show a large number of spatially mobile groups who adopt a variety of strategies for their subsistence (Misra 1969a, 1970, 1977a; Berland 1977, 1978, 1979, 1982; Barth 1961, 1973; Pehrson 1966; Gulliver 1975; Rao 1986). This literature is growing, and keeping in mind the need for historical perspective, is much in need of greater systematization.

One of the issues generated by the growing research record is that pastoral and non-pastoral nomads are qualitatively different and should be clearly distinguished. In the past, "non-pastoral" nomads have been variously labeled and often lumped under terms such as wanderers and itinerants. As knowledge about them is improved it has been realized that their movements are not sporadic or haphazard and they are neither aberrations or marginals. Increasingly, new terms are being coined such as symbiotic nomads (Misra 1982) where I have emphasized their close relationship with settled populations. Hayden (1978) has referred to them as service nomads, emphasizing the roles they perform in meeting the needs of settled people. Berland (1979, 1982) in a comprehensive treatment of the subject prefers the notion of peripatetics. Drawing on extensive fieldwork experience in Pakistan and marshalling most of the available evidence has highlighted the distinctions between pastoral and non-pastoral nomads. His main points are that peripatetics rely almost exclusively on human resources and are not food producers whereas pastoralists depend only to varying degrees on settled communities. These distinctions are not entirely correct. For example, in a recent paper Malhotra et al (1983) have pointed out that the Nandiwallas, the Vaidus and Phasepardhis, displayers of bulls, peddlars of indigeneous medicines, hunters and gatherers respectively, derive substantial amounts of food from hunting. He further notes that the different groups within the framework of caste in India exclusively used a particular resource (plant or animal) which enabled them to maintain the ecological balance while contributing to the overall stability of the caste system. Elsewhere, Gadgil and Malhotra (1979) show the different stages through which the Gavli Dhangars have gone through. Initially the Gavli Dhangars were primarily buffalo-keeping pastoralists but have now started keeping some cattle, goats as well as making a change towards shifting cultivation. Recently, they have been drawn into the milk industry, an activity resulting in the over-exploitation of the resources in the regions comprising their habitat. These pursuits conflict with their traditional buffalo herding activities and have promoted goat keeping, shifting cultivation and the pursuit of other economic strategies.

In other words, the activities of nomads, pastoral or non-pastoral, are in continuous interaction with the environment and the surrounding settled populations giving rise to new situations which in turn motivate them to devise new strategies for survival. In turn, these new strategies and resources alter patterns of social organization and group structure. However, in each of these responses something of the old is likely retained. Therefore, to call a group pastoral nomadic, peripatetic, or agricultural and assume their exclusivity is erroneous and inhibits our understanding of the dynamic nature of the total situation. While classification is an important step towards understanding, we should keep in mind that it is only a device and if taken as an end in itself may generate the opposite goal. Will Durrant's observation on oriental influences in the history of civilization(s) bears repeating at this point:

... Hunting and fishing were not stages in economic development, they

were modes of activity destined to survive into the highest forms of civilized society. Once the centre of life, they are still its hidden foundations behind our literature and philosophy, our ritual and art, stand the stout killers of the packing town. We do our hunting by proxy, not having the stomach for honest killing in the fields; but our memories of the chase linger in our joyful pursuit of anything weak or fugative, and in the games of our children - even in the word game. In the last analysis civilization is based on food supply (1954:7).

At the present stage in human history it is no longer necessary to be spatially mobile for constant food supplies. It is becoming increasingly realized that the assumption linking nomadic movement exclusively to environmental factors is not correct (see for example Dyson-Hudson 1972; Gulliver 1975). In his extensive review of the factors associated with spatial mobility, Gulliver clearly illustrates that pastoral movement is not dependent on physio-biotic variables alone. Instead, there is a complex interplay among physical environment and socio-cultural factors in nomadic movement. The physical environment and social factors are relatively clear; however, what about the cultural factors? Berland has remarked " ... certainly when viewed within the appropriate temporal parameters, spatial mobility is characteristic of all human groups and not an exclusive characteristic of pastoral or non-pastoral 'nomads'. Depending on numerous internal as well as external factors, including technology, bio-environmental variability, social and political conditions, each group, as well as segments within each group, utilizes variable degrees of spatial mobility related to resource extraction and survival (1979:2)." That is, one aspect of spatial mobility is directly related to specific subsistence strategies but what about the other elements Berland has suggested are "... characteristic of all human groups?" Can this be understood in more concrete terms? Notably, if it is the characteristic of human beings to be spatially mobile, it is equally characteristic for them to settle down. It appears that the history of settled sites is as old as that for spatially mobile groups. If that is the case, one of the questions much in need of further investigation involves a greater need to understand those conditions promoting settlement and those favoring spatial mobility. Presently, the two seem to be in a binary opposition, linked to a dialectical relationship, producing a variety of lifestyles.

On the other hand, when we keep in mind temporal parameters along with patterns of variation in environmental, social and cultural factors, these modes of adaptation do not appear to be final arrangements. People may start as food gatherers and/or hunters, take to agriculture and even cattle breeding and pastoral or peripatetic nomadism. Depending on a host of circumstances people are likely to combine these diverse strategies and lifestyles. Salzman (1972; 1984) has captured the multi-faceted nature of this process in his notion of multi-resource nomadism; however, we should keep in mind that new lifestyles may appear to be replicas of old strategies, but are not, either in practice or in all details. A survey conducted by Misra (1971) in certain parts of Karnataka and Andhra fully substantiates this generalization. For example, Gautam (1983) has shown that the Kanjar, a nomadic group in northern India, have settled down in a colony, taken up a variety of occupational activities but still remain free in their movements.

While it is characteristic of human beings to be mobile, the more spatially mobile elements have a low status in the eyes of sedentary populations throughout the world. Across the diverse regions of the world there are many reasons for this; however, one of the most common factors is lack of knowledge among sedentary communities about nomadic lifestyles and this often generates suspicion. In caste

based Indian society there is another reason. Nomads, on account of their mobility, cannot observe the rules of purity and automatically are relegated a low rank. This status often combined with pressure from more static communities to restrict movement often motivates them to gradually accept the norms and values of the sedentary world, at least in the public domain. Berland (1977) noting a common lament among the spatially mobile Qalandar in Pakistan about their nomadic life has noted: "... everywhere we go, new things force us to move our camps."

Throughout South Asia, in fact, world wide, nomads are encouraged and often forced to settle down. But do they really "settle" in all senses of the term? Even if settled, they may retain traditional values and may even bring back spatial mobility in a different form. For example, in Hindu society, there is the notion of Sanyasa which is nomadism par excellence. A Hindu has been prescribed four stages in life, the last stage that of Sanyasa. Sanyasa means renouncement of all worldly affairs and not residing in one place. A Sanyasa has no territorial identity and must be a true wanderer. At a practical level, though Sanyasa are respected and given high regard, people are expected to remain householders. Once again there is a tussle among considerations regarding ideals and expectations linked to real life. All this may be relevant from the sedentary's point of view; however, how do more spatially mobile populations perceive these considerations? Elsewhere (Misra 1977a) I have discussed the fact that different nomadic groups have diverse reasons for their movement. Some say their movement is simply tradition, others report that besides tradition mobility permits them to earn a little more. A few groups link their mobility to the fact that they have no land to settle on and others attribute their nomadic activities exclusively to activities associated with earning a livelihood. On the other hand, there are groups whose spatial mobility is related to responsibilities and rituals associated with their religion (Misra 1977b). To illustrate the diverse nature of the role of spatial mobility and sedentarism in human adaptation I present the case of the Gadulia Lohar among whom I conducted fieldwork in 1962-1963 (Misra 1977a). Before doing this let me summarize the position of nomads in Indian society.

Nomads have been on the Indian scene for a long time. The Vedic literature refers to numerous categories of nomads. Ancient Tamil literature refers to nomads who were anxiously anticipated by kings and laity alike for news, goods, services and the like. Recent research has shown that in India there are large numbers of nomadic populations involved in a wide variety of occupational activities. These diverse activities are relevant and meaningful in local communities and then across local cultures into a network connecting them with the larger society. Since the Indian economy has not undergone any radical transformations a large number of people live at subsistence levels. Nomads in general, barring a few exceptions, interact primarily with lower and middle peasantry in rural areas and their counterparts comprising the lower and middle classes of urban areas. To this extent structural factors relegate them to relative poverty and lower caste status. They have to be innovative and skillful to adapt to varying conditions and changes within each niche they operate. Once they are in a particular milieu "... they refine, systematize and elaborate their respective skills and knowledge, and relate them with reference to the culture of the larger society that is Indian civilization. On the one hand, all this can be considered as strategy to earn their subsistence and on the other, the nomads no doubt add variety and charm to the rural life in India. In a way this kind of nomadism integrated different aspects of rural life, and together with other aspects, provided an intricate network, despite numerous diversities, through which India could remain India: providing an autonomy of a sort and yet maintaining the linkages (Misra 1982:21)." This system allowed even the

lowest groups in the Indian society to develop some stake in the hierarchical system because they could look down on some nomads and derive some services from them. Thus on the material level the nomads are intricately linked with the structure and culture of Indian society. At both the secular and ritual ideational levels we have the concept of Sanyasa. To illustrate these observations let me turn now to the case of the nomadic Gadulia Lohar.

The Gadulia Lohar are a nomadic artisan community found in various parts of Northwestern India. They are most numerous in Eastern Rajasthan and Western Madhya Pradesh. The traditional occupation of the Gadulia Lohar is blacksmithy; however, they also trade in bullocks. The Gadulia Lohar move in bullock carts which also serve as their homes. Bullock carts are specially built to accommodate their tools of trade, household possessions while also providing shelter from the elements. Their population is divided into a number of groups and each group usually moves within a specific region. They camp to work and trade, to have food and leisure, to socialize and meet fellow Gadulia Lohar. They have developed new technology to meet competition from other blacksmiths and industry.

A good number of Gadulia Lohar have settled down in Western and Southern Rajasthan. Development agencies have been active among them and have been proposing the "for their proper development," education programs for their children and economic change are necessary for them to settle. They have also been provided with some agricultural land. Overall, these efforts have not been successful in either region. However, the Gadulia Lohar are increasingly aware of difficulties associated with mobility because changes are taking place in the niche they have exploited across the years. Further, despite hard work, their economic situation is not improving. The gap between their standard of living and that of the settled people in rural areas is becoming conspicuous. Every year their traditional areas for camping are being taken away for some other purpose, leaving very little opportunity for them to move and camp at familiar or convenient locations. At the same time, traditional patterns of communication and channels of information among settled agriculturalists and the nomadic Gadulia Lohar have become increasingly tilted in favour of more settled elements. The nomads feel "unsettled" in their habits of exploiting the human resource niche. Apart from the efforts of the government and other voluntary agencies to settle them, there have emerged Gadulia Lohar individuals who support these ventures and actively work for "upliftment" of their community. Obviously the concept behind these activities are value loaded and closely linked to their own historical beliefs about nomadism.

Gadulia Lohar claim Chittigarh as their ancestral home which they were forced to leave when it fell into the hands of the Moghul army. Udai Singh, ruler of Mewar, fled to the hills and refused to acknowledge the suzerainty of the Muslim administration. Following Udai Singh's death, his son Maharana Pratap Singh, waged uncompromising resistance against the Moghuls. At the time of his death he exacted a pledge from his chiefs that the country would not be abandoned to the enemy (Majumdar et al. 1950:450). Regional tradition has it that the group now known as Gadulia Lohar also left Chittorgarh when it fell to the enemy but promised that until Chittor was liberated they would not:

1. go up to the fort of Chittor
2. live in houses
3. sleep on cots

4. light lamps

5. keep ropes for drawing water from wells.

There are several versions of this story. As regards the vows, none are observed except the one prohibiting living in houses. This story is quite popular among non-Gadulia Lohar; however, we have their own account. In Gadulia Lohar terms the story goes thus:

... Maharana Pratap was a very brave man. Our ancestors were also with him. He had won many battles. He had the blessings of Kalka Mata. She had told him that she would always be at his back in war, but that he should never look back. When Rana Pratap saw a very large army of the enemy he became frightened and looked back to make sure his chiefs were still with him. Behind him was Kalka Mata and he saw her. Such a disregard of her instructions infuriated her and she placed a curse upon him insuring his defeat in battle. Rana was defeated in the war and was forced to retreat and live in jungles. He had to eat bread made of grass and wear clothes made from woven wild grass and leaves. ' ... One of Rana's brothers had built a house in Udaipur and was living comfortably while his brother was suffering in the jungle. After Rana was defeated, our ancestors also came out of the jungles with him. He had a sister called Padma. Rana told her that his people were deteriorating and asked her to go and see if anything could be done for them. She traveled in a chariot to visit our people in the jungle; however, enroute, the axle broke. Our caste people saw this and told her that because they did not know the art of blacksmithy and lacked any tools it was impossible for them to repair her charriot. She asked them not to worry and assured them her assistance. At that time bellows were patterned after the nose, the forge after the mouth, the anvil after the knee of the left leg, tongs after the left hand, and the right hand served as the example for a hammer. With this equipment they repaired the axle of her chariot. She was greatly satisfied and said that from that moment on these items would form their tool kits and black-smithing would be their profession.

In other versions of this story it is emphasized that once Kalka Mata (considered to be a powerful female deity of the Shakti cult) was infuriated by the Gadulia Lohar and cursed them to an unsettled or nomadic life. A story prevalent among the peripatetic Qalandar collected by Berland (1982:75-76) also refers to a curse of a fakir prohibiting their settling down. Since this theme is relatively common among peripatetic populations throughout South Asia I rather suspect it is more than a coincidence.

The point of these stories is to emphasize that the Gadulia Lohar have not always been nomadic. They had to take to more nomadic lifestyles in response to particular circumstances. In their cognitive map they were once a settled people and their movement has been related to very special circumstances. In one part of the story we note that while Rana and his loyal followers were suffering in the jungle, his brother was enjoying settled life. This record conveys several messages. One is that nomadic life involves certain amounts of discomfort, the other is a moral theme. That is, though nomadism meant suffering, their peregrinations were linked to a specific cause. Here nomadism is legitimized by the interference of supernatural forces and by moral commitment. This is one aspect of their cognitive



map. On the other hand, the Gadulia Lohar of Chittorgarh have rejected all efforts to settle down; but in other regions such as Ajmer and Beawar, they have begun settling on their own with assistance from government programs. In Beawar (Misra 1969) their transition was relatively easy. Here their sedentarization was part of a process which had already been in operation for several decades. There has been no change in their traditional skills. Some of the settled Gadulia Lohar have combined sedentary status with periodic movement, usually a few months each year. In their settlements they have retained the same group composition as they did when they were more nomadic. Further, though they had taken to settled life in a small town, most of the people maintain their traditional bullock carts in front of their houses where they store some of their possessions. Old people still sleep under their carts rather than inside their homes. While many have been living in their houses for sometime, they always cook meals outside. By in large, their houses are primarily maintained for storage. Thus at the cognitive level, the Gadulia Lohar use their houses as bullock carts rather than in the same style as sedentary populations in the same area.

The case of the Gadulia Lohar suggests that whatever reasons motivating their nomadic life may be, socially, cultural and economically they are a part of the wider network of the region they operate in. Their diverse levels of spatial mobility are legitimized both at the supernatural and moral levels. However, because the wider framework of the society in which they operate is constantly changing, the Gadulia Lohar have made necessary changes in their own habits and patterns of social organization and spatial mobility. The Gadulia Lohar in Chittorgarh region do not move as far or wide as they used to and in some cases they have totally rejected the idea of settling. In Western Rajasthan most of the Gadulia Lohar have settled; but in Beawar they have only partially settled - many visiting neighboring villages during certain seasons. Most, while settled for several years, maintain both at the everyday and cognitive level many of the activities of more spatially mobile elements across their total population. Thus, across their society we may observe diverse patterns of spatial mobility and settled life.

This pattern of diversity and flexibility among Gadulia Lohar appears to hold for the larger Indian society as well. Spatial mobility and sedentary life are not just two mutually exclusive patterns. Spatial mobility is built into the larger social system and among more spatially mobile populations we find great diversity. While some patterns are abandoned, newer forms appear. For example, in traditional India, among sedentary populations, pilgrimage, participation in fairs, etc., were a regular feature of life. These activities are less popular among urban populations but new forms of spatial mobility are emerging among this segment of society as well. The Sanyasa is a nomad par excellence, but this is an ideal in the same way that a true sedentary adaptation is. The two processes are constantly interacting and generating new lifestyles in response to constantly changing factors in complex social systems.

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