

The Migration

Climate

The movement of the Bkahtiari is primarily constrained by weather conditions. The winters are spent in the foothills of Khuzistan which provide grazing for the flocks if the winter rains come. The weather is unpredictable and changeable from year to year. The grass for the animals does fail with some regularity. Rain is essential in the months of November and December. At this time of the year electric storms are common and occasionally severe hail storms. The rain when it falls does so very heavily indeed causing flash floods in the many defiles where the nomads have their camp sites. Stories of camp groups washed down hillsides are told with considerable glee except by the victims of course. A surprising number of animals get drowned in this way.

Rains in January and February are particularly necessary for the crops. This rain need to be spaced over several months otherwise the wheat and barley can fail to ripen successfully. If the rains are late then the wheat fields can be flattened and ruined by a single heavy rainfall at the wrong time.

Every year brings its own special problems. Only vegetable and fruit gardens are irrigated. So the crops are totally dependent on rainfall. For a people who practice a dual economy with both flocks and crops, a bad year for the animals may lead them to invest more heavily, money and time in agriculture the following year. If much time and money is invested in the crops only to have them wiped out, then many Bakhtiari concentrate subsequently on their animals.

The wealthy, such as the Kalantars have sufficient personnel on which to draw for the labour requirements of herding sheep and goats, and for tending the crops. For the bulk of the nomads agriculture is only perfunctorily carried out, with the minimum of labour inputs. This inevitably results in low yields. Poor quality seed wheat produces only a yield of 6-1, poorly looked after, whereas sowing more expensive, higher quality seed wheat, and carefully weeded and attended, then the yield can rise to 20 or 25-1. The initial investment in time and of money is necessary for the agriculture to become profit making.

Few Bakhtiari raise as much wheat as they need for their own consumption. A small proportion of their wheat is paid to the millers, owned by wealthier Bakhtiari. In the towns. market towns such as Lali, Masjid -i-Suleiman and Izeh, running in a southerly direction, there are power mills. In the mountains the mills are water powered. The Bakhtiari do not use hand querns daily, but get their wheat ground into flour in bulk. Occasionally a heavy stone is used to roughly ground wheat or more often amongst the very impoverished Bakhtiari deep in the mountains, to grind acorns which is then laboriously made into a bread called Khalk. The constipating qualities of this bread are remarkable. It has a very low nutritional level.

A balance between the needs of the animals, crops and people is aimed at though not always possible to achieve.

As spring time arrives, the weather changes, the temperature rises and the grass begins to dry up.

The summer climate in Khuzistan, in the winter pastures is unsuitable for the maintenance of large herds of sheep. The grass withers, the water, which is not always plentiful even during the winter, is salty and dries up. The bulk of the population migrates with the animals to the pastures on the other side of the Zagros mountain ranges. Not everyone moves, and not everyone migrates every year. Those with very few animals can readily survive the summer, and there is an increasing amount of permanent settlement in the Khuzistan region of the Bakhtiari foothills. There are hundreds of settlements ranging in size from isolated houses to the many small hamlets of up to 20-25 homes, a population of about 100 people. There are several large villages with populations of about 2000 people, such as Sardasht, the major market centre of the Chahr Lang; Lali, the market centre for the Babadi, Osiwand, Beidarwand sub tribes of the region. Masjid i Suleiman is a thriving oil company town with many Bakhtiari living there.

Andeka, a very fertile area in which one finds Zarraswand, Mowri, Babadi groups, Qandali and other Duraki groups, has hundreds of hamlets of up to 60 households. Residence in these settlements may or may not be permanent. Many hamlets are vacated in the summer months while the Bakhtiari move to the summer pastures. Others are permanently lived in as the activities of the inhabitants turn more and more to agriculture under the encouragement of the central government. This process has certainly accelerated in the last fifteen or so years and particularly since the onslaught of the land reform program of the 1960s.

Lali The lali area is a particularly poor area for permanent settlement. The water in the region is very sparse and very saline, unsuitable either for animals or people. What settlement there is and particularly the town of Lali itself is dependent on water provided by the Oil Company. Lali is an oil town, established in the 1920s. When the oil well became less productive the Oil Co. moved further south and now Lali has the air of a derelict abandoned town in place, with oil company buildings, store houses etc falling into almost total decay. Many of these buildings are now inhabited by destitute Bakhtiari and their few animals. In fact Lali is a thriving market centre for the entire Lali plain area, in which several thousand nomads live in the winter. Lali is the headquarters of the Osiwand taifeh. This group had their summer pastures stolen from them by the Khans and now tend to settle in this region of Lali, not having the alternative of summer agricultural areas. They could not do so but for the water provided by the Oil Co. In fact other groups describe the Osiwands as "finished". They are also described as "warriors". In spite of their poor economic condition, many Osiwands persist in migrating well into the summer with only a handful of animals.

The population of Lali is very mixed. Many Osiwands, a few Bakhtiari and Babadi and the "Bazaris" merchants and traders who are from the towns of Shushtar, Dizful and a couple from Shahr Kurd - a major market town in the distant summer quarters in Isfahan province.

It is to Lali that the migrating Bakhtiari of the region come to buy all the supplies they need for the migration, to have their wheat ground. They are usually in debt to several of the merchants.

The gross shift in climatic conditions leads to the form of long range nomadism practiced by the Bakhtiari. Summer temperatures in Khuzistan plains rise to 120 degrees. Many Bakhtiari go to the summer pastures "for the cool air" even when they have few sheep, not requiring the move to survive. Within the region micro-climatic conditions vary from valley to valley as well as from year to year. One valley may well have excellent rains one year with good grazing and crops, while a neighbouring valley is suffering drought conditions, poor grazing and no crops to speak of. The ecological conditions faced by different Bakhtia groups may therefore vary a great deal. Those with poor grazing tend to start their migrations early. Those with plenty of grazing will wait until the grass begins to dry up before contemplating a move. Those with extensive crops will delay their departure to attend to their crops, some waiting until they can bring in their harvest in May. Before undertaking the migration. Yet others may leave early in spite of good grass, to return, the men only quickly to bring in their harvest and then move back to the summer pastures to rejoin their families and flocks.

There are songs sung about the women waiting for their men to return to them - rather lewd songs with a strong sexual connotation which cause a lot of merriment.

The total picture is one dominated by variability, by changeability and the necessity to be highly adaptive to such constantly changing environmental conditions. The Bakhtiari have to manipulate a diverse and changeable ecological situation, where decisions taken on a short

term may lead to disaster. The failure of the crops one year is not as disastrous in a pastoral economy as the failure of grass for the animals. If the flocks die, it takes longer to grow, increase one's herds that it does to grow a new crop. The Bakhtiari reckon that at least once every seven or eight years the grazing completely fails and once every five or six, the crops fail. Good management, but good luck, in optimum conditions, all too rarely coincide. Even the very best management can not control the weather, and disaster strikes the efficient and the inefficient alike with a randomness bordering on the capricious.

The early sixties were very bad years for the Bakhtiari. One there were locusts which ate the grass and crops. The following year the weather was very bad and the grass and crops failed. The next year, a disease affecting the horses and pack animals swept across southern Iran almost wiping out the pack animals and decimating their horses. The winter of 1964 was a total disaster. In November, after a long period of no rain and a very arid, harsh autumn migration from summer to winter pastures, the rains suddenly fell very heavily. Very lush grass grew which produced a severe stomachic flux of diarrhea in the sheep and goats who in their weakened condition died in hundreds of thousands throughout the entire region. Estimates of animals lost are inevitably difficult, but the Bakhtiari reckoned they lost as much as 70 % of their animals in the course of a few days. This sort of disaster is not rare, though the culmination of several bad years radically impoverished the entire Bakhtiari people. It takes approximately 8 years to recover from such

a catastrophe. Many Bakhtiari were wiped out by these successively bad years. When this happens, according to Barth's work on the Basseri their poverty forces them out of the nomadic complex altogether. This is only possible where the tribal territory is close to settled areas. For many Bakhtiari this is not possible and they hire themselves out as agricultural workers or shepherds for wealthier Bakhtiari. Usually not with relatives but with other Taifehs. Labour conflicts with kinship obligations, so Bakhtiari are understandably reluctant to employ kinsmen towards whom or with whom they have social ties involving a range of mutual rights to help, assistance etc.

Migration : the move to the summer pastures inevitably has to be responsive to the particular local conditions, but broadly it begins just after the 21st March, the beginning of the Persian New Year, the spring equinox. The ideal date is the 15th day of the New Year. The actual day and time of the day chosen for departure is done by consulting the omens - the Qoran, or the writings of Hafez are opened at random and read for good or bad signs. Every day may be either auspicious or inauspicious, as is the time of day. The stars are consulted as well for signs of good augury.

The migration starts slowly. Activity gradually builds up after the New Year feasting and visiting. Supplies are collected and bought in the nearest market towns.

The Migration takes anything between three and six weeks depending on prevailing climatic conditions.