

Watals and Carrion Consumption: Exploring Community's Culinary practice in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

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Abstract

Watals, a marginalized community within the Muslim population of Kashmir, are present across various districts of the region, struggling against widespread caste-like discrimination in contemporary Kashmiri society. Historically speaking, Watals were notably engaged in the consumption of carrion during the Dogra period. Carrion eating marked a distinctive eating practice, specific to Watal community in Kashmir. This paper seeks to examine the historical phenomenon of carrion consumption among Watals during Dogra rule. Through an in-depth analysis, this work aims to establish the reasons that precipitated the consumption of carrion, as food practice. In addition, it seeks to explore the factors that contributed to its eventual discontinuation.

Keyword: *Watals, Kashmir, Carrion-eating*

Introduction

The *Watals*, also known as *Batals* in the history of Kashmir, were a wandering tribe often referred to as the Gypsies of the region.¹ Despite historical ambiguities, colonial writers generally believed that they were descendants of the aboriginal inhabitants of Kashmir before the arrival of the Aryans.² *Watals* were a nomadic community with a strong inclination to maintain their nomadic lifestyle. For instance, if a family built a permanent hut in a village and settled there for a year, they would eventually leave, continuing their nomadic way of life. Their houses, typically round-shaped and wattled, were located at a distance from the houses of peasants. Their primary occupation was the manufacturing of leather, which they obtained from dead animals like buffalo, goats, sheep, and cows.³

The *Watals* of the first class crafted boots and sandals, while the second class manufactured winnowing trays from leather and straw and performed scavenging jobs.⁴ They held control over the leather trade in the Kashmir Valley, preparing hides in villages, often in raw form, which were then sent to Srinagar for further finishing. Moorcroft, a historical figure, spoke highly of the leather produced in Kashmir, praising the tanners' skills in the country.⁵ A

¹ Walter Lawrence, *The valley of Kashmir*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1895), 314.

² W. Wakefield, *The happy valley: Sketches of Kashmir and the Kashmiris* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, Crown Building, Fleet Street, 1879), 104.

³ Lawrence, *The valley of Kashmir*, 315.

⁴ Lawrence, 315.

⁵ Lawrence, 379.

segment of *Watal*s who gained wealth through the leather trade preferred to identify themselves as *Mochi* instead of *Watal*s.⁶ In towns and cities, they undertook tasks considered ‘unclean.’

Every year, during the month of July, *Watal*s across Kashmir gather at *Lal Bab* Shrine in *Naseem Bagh*, Srinagar, to discuss community matters, settle issues, and form marriage alliances.⁷ *Watal* women, renowned for their beauty, often travelled to cities where they participated in singing and dancing, and, on occasion, were engaged in prostitution. This assertion is substantiated by the census report, which explicitly associates the term ‘*Watalani*’ with the profession of prostitution.⁸ Additionally, they displayed their dance performances at the *Darbars* and festivals organized by the *Maharaja* in Srinagar.⁹

Due to their profession of skinning the hides of dead animals and their practice of consuming the flesh of deceased animals, other Muslim communities consider them outcast and criticised them for not adhering to *Sharia* Islam properly.

Watals and the Culinary Practice of Carrion Consumption

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the *Watal*s exhibited a distinctive culinary practice, namely, the consumption of the flesh of dead animals.¹⁰ This practice led to the formation of two social classes among the *Watal*s. One group refrained from consuming carrion, gaining acceptance into mosques and aligning with the Muslim religion. Conversely, the other class indulged in the consumption of dead animal flesh, resulting in their exclusion from mosques. This peculiar food habit, combined with their occupation of tanning leather from deceased animals, marked the *Watal*s as outcasts within the Muslim communities of Kashmir.

The Muslim belief, rooted in the prohibition of eating the meat of dead animals in Islam, further distanced the *Watal*s from mainstream acceptance.¹¹ Even the Kashmiri Pandits, who accepted uncooked food from Muslims, refused it from the *Watal*s and *Dooms*.¹² According to Lawrence, “the outcast *Watal*s have no religion, but they respect the shrines and often visit them, though they are not allowed to enter the holy precincts.”¹³

⁶ Muhammad-ud-Din Fauk, *Mukamal Tareekh Aqwam-e-Kashmir* (Lahore: Asmat Ghasmat press, 1938), 375.

⁷ Fauk, *Mukamal Tareekh Aqwam-e-Kashmir*, 374. See also, Lawrence, *The valley of Kashmir*, 315.

⁸ Quoted in Fauk, *Mukamal Tareekh Aqwam-e-Kashmir*, 375.

⁹ Frederic Drew, *The Northern barrier of India: A Popular account of the Jummoo and Kashmir Territories* (London: Edward Stanford, 1877), 132.

¹⁰ Lawrence, *The valley of Kashmir*, 314.

¹¹ The Quran prohibits eating certain foods, such as animals that died naturally, blood, pork, and anything that wasn't dedicated to Allah. The Holy Quran, trans. Maulawi Sher Ali (UK: Islam International Publications LTD, 2021), 35.

¹² T.N. Madan, “Religious Ideology in a Plural Society: The Muslims and Hindus of Kashmir,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 6, No. 1 (January 1972): 124.

¹³ Lawrence, *The valley of Kashmir*, 315.

Moreover, their births and marriages were not sanctified by priests. However, *Watal*s resorted to bribing priests to perform these ceremonies, coupled with vows renouncing carrion consumption, to gain admittance into Islam. Despite such promises, their commitment to abstain from carrion remained questionable. The Muslim reluctance to associate with scavenger *Watal*s persisted, as noted by Lawrence, who observed that no Muslim willingly shared a meal with a *Watal*, even if they claimed to have renounced carrion,¹⁴ highlighting the enduring social stigma associated with their unique culinary practices.

The tradition of *Watal*s engaging in carrion consumption was prevalent between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; however, both before and after this period, there is a noticeable scarcity of recorded evidence regarding carrion eating. Prominent figures such as Walter Lawrence, Frederic Drew, W. Wakefield, and Muhammad-ud-Din Fauk have documented instances of carrion eating among *Watal*s. This phenomenon appears to be particularly existing during the *Dogra* rule in Kashmir. The prevalence of carrion consumption during this time could possibly be attributed to the severe famine that plagued Kashmir and the oppressive taxation policies implemented by the *Dogra* rulers.

In the late 1870s, a series of scarcities afflicted various provinces and princely states in British India, some escalating into severe famines, including one in Kashmir. In 1877, Kashmir was gripped by a devastating famine that claimed a substantial portion of its population, rendering villages desolate. During this crisis, a majority of the crops were lost, and the available food for the people consisted of whatever scant grain they possessed. As the meagre food stocks declined, the population survived on crude sustenance, resorting to bread made from bark, grass seeds, weeds, roots, wild herbs, and, for many, oilcakes and rice chaff.¹⁵

The scarcity triggered distressing scenes of food-related conflicts, pushing some individuals to desperate measures, including abandoning and selling children.¹⁶ Particularly among the lower classes and semi-nomadic tribes, the sale of girls became a common tactic to acquire food.¹⁷ The state, regrettably, displayed a lack of sympathy towards its subjects and was alleged of claiming its share from whatever could be salvaged, exacerbating the plight of

¹⁴ Lawrence, 315.

¹⁵ Suhail-ul-Rehman Lone, "Famines in late Nineteenth century Kashmir: State-Engineered or a Natural Calamity?," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 77 (2016): 451. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26552671>. See also, M. Y. Ganai, "History from Below: A Study of Watal Community in Rural Kashmir (1846-1990)," *The Journal of Kashmir Studies* 7, no. 1 (2020): 46.

¹⁶ Suhail-ul-Rehman Lone, "Famines in late Nineteenth century Kashmir: State-Engineered or a Natural Calamity?," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 77 (2016): 451.

¹⁷ Lawrence, *The valley of Kashmir*, 215.

peasants.¹⁸ The taxation policy under the *Dogra* rule was notably harsh and rigorously enforced, adding to the hardships faced by the populace during this tumultuous period.

In addition to *Rasum* and land revenue, villagers were subjected to a “multitude of additional levies, comprising *tambol* (imposed during royal marriages), *Nazrana* (levied quarterly), *pattu* (tweed), fruit tax, ghee tax, marriage registration tax, and poultry tax.”¹⁹ The purchase or sale of horses also incurred taxation, and even the ritual practice of grave-digging was not exempt from fiscal demands.²⁰ Prostitutes and menial Muhammadans were also subjected to taxation.²¹ An illustration of this is the taxation imposed on the *Watal*s, a lower-class community in Kashmir, which was determined by the quantity of cattle hides they owned each year.²² Lawrence, commenting on this taxation system during *Dogras*, noted that “everything save air and water was brought under taxation.”²³

In such circumstances, where a peasant, the primary cultivator of crops, is compelled by the situation to resort to substandard food, the *Watal* community, engaged in menial professions, might find themselves compelled to turn to carrion consumption as a last resort.

The community experienced major hardships during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, “with the improvement in socio-economic conditions since the 1890s and especially in the post-1947 period, there was a betterment in their day-to-day lives as well.”²⁴ However, this progress remained comparatively slow when contrasted with other sections of society. Though the carrion eating practice of *Watal*s could no longer be detected towards the end of the second half of the twentieth century. There are no textual or oral evidences that talk about the practice post 1947. It seems that this practice ended with the improvement in the life standard of *Watal*s with the passage of time.

Conclusion

During the *Dogra* era in Kashmir’s history, the *Watal*s were known as the Gypsies of the region owing to their nomadic way of life. Within the *Watal* community, a distinct dietary habit was observed, namely the consumption of carrion, based on which they were divided into two factions. One faction adopted this practice and was barred from accessing mosques, while the other refrained from it and was accepted within the Islamic fold, allowed entry into

¹⁸ Lawrence, 215

¹⁹ Asif Ahmad Bhat, “Contribution of Christian Missionaries to Education in Kashmir 1854-1930,” (M. Phil. Thesis, Jamia Millia Islamia, 2018), 13.

²⁰ Lawrence, *The valley of Kashmir*, 236.

²¹ Lawrence, 236.

²² Lawrence, *The valley of Kashmir*, 418.

²³ Walter Lawrence, *The India we served*, (London: Cassell and Compant LTD, 1928), 134.

²⁴ Ganai, “History from Below,” 39.

mosques. Due to their primary occupation in leather tanning and carrion consumption, they faced ostracization from other Muslim communities in the Kashmir Valley, which persisted even after they stopped carrion consumption. Evidence and references concerning the practice of carrion consumption among *Watals* primarily indicate its prevalence during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This period coincided with severe challenges in Kashmir, including the oppressive taxation policies under *Dogra* rule and catastrophic famines like the devastating famine of 1877. This famine led to widespread devastation, causing significant loss of life and compelling people to resort to extreme measures, including selling their children, due to the scarcity of food. Peasants, the primary cultivators, were compelled to consume unconventional food sources such as grass seeds, roots, wild fruits, and oilcakes to survive. Under such dire circumstances, it is plausible that the *Watals*, as a lower-class group, might have turned to carrion consumption. However, as socio-economic conditions improved, especially after the 1890s and notably post-independence, the practice of carrion consumption among the *Watals* seemed to cease. There is a lack of historical evidence supporting the continuation of this practice beyond that era, suggesting its disappearance as living standards improved.