



Socio-economic status of Ponywallas associated with Shri-Amarnath Yatra and ecotourism in Kashmir valley

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ABSTRACT

The study was carried out to investigate the socio-economic status of ponywallas associated with Shri-Amarnath Yatra and ecotourism in the regions of Pahalgam and Sonamargh of Kashmir valley. Majority of ponywallas in the Pahalgam (79.17%) and Sonamargh region (78.75%) were illiterate and the majority of the families from Pahalgam (63.33%) and Sonamargh (63.75%) were medium sized with 5–8 members. Followed by large families with > 8 members 34.17% in Pahalgam and 36.25% in Sonamargh, respectively. Most of them were associated with recreational usage of ponies belonging to age group of 40–55 years with 64.17% in Pahalgam and 63.75% in Sonamargh, respectively followed by 18–40 years age group with 24.17% in Pahalgam and 21.25% in Sonamargh, respectively. All ponywallas were having marginal land holdings. Majority of the respondents were using ponies for recreation services with 71.67% in Pahalgam and 57.75% in Sonamargh area as their primary occupation followed by other services (20%) and livestock rearing (8.33%) in Pahalgam and in Sonamargh livestock rearing was 27.5% and other services 8.33% as primary occupation. Majority of ponywallas in Pahalgam (74.16%) and in Sonamargh (65%) were in the income group of ₹ 11,000–20,000/month. About 26.25% from Sonamargh significantly more than Pahalgam region (11.67%) were falling in the income group with monthly income below ₹ 10,000. Thus it was concluded that the ponywallas in both the regions were illiterate with a very low land-holding and reared equines to sustain their livelihood but the rearing methods were mostly unscientific so they require attention from concerned authorities.

Keywords: Amaranth yatra, Ecotourism, Ponies, Ponywallas, Socio-economic

Jammu and Kashmir also known as “Paradise on Earth” is blessed with its rich flora and fauna, wild animal’s sanctuaries, snow clad mountains, rich cultural heritage and world famous pilgrimage destinations, etc. It is one of the most popular and fastest growing tourist destinations in India (Wani *et al.* 2020). It is estimated that almost 50–60% of total population of J&K is directly and/or indirectly engaged in tourism related activities. Tourism contributes about 15% to state gross domestic product (Mir 2014). Tourism is a double-edged activity as on one side contributes positively to the socio-economic achievements and on the other side its fast, unmanaged and uncontrolled growth is proving to be the major cause of degradation of the environment. In Jammu and Kashmir, ponies are usually owned only by socially and economically deprived, landless, marginal and small farmers and play a very important role in the socio-economic life of the regional population (Fazili and Kirmani 2011). Population of horses and ponies in Jammu and Kashmir 0.63 lakh with 2nd rank

in India in terms of population in 2019 (20th Livestock Census 2019). Jammu and Kashmir being the recreational destination for tourists from all over the world throughout the year is also host to annual pilgrimage of Shri Amarnath Yatra where Hindus from throughout the world go to pay homage. In all these cases the ponies are used as an alternative mode of transportation attracting more fun and adventure loving tourists and for helping in improving the states GDP and the terrain being hilly and some extremely beautiful destinations being not yet connected with macadamized roads all such place can be explored by utilizing the plight of equines and further that extensive construction of concrete roads in such places is resulting not only in damage to the fragile environment of these regions but it is also leading to destruction of scenic beauty of these areas (Singh and Bahadur 2018). Thus it gives rise to concept of ecotourism associated with pony husbandry. However economic status of these equine owners/ponywallas have not been studied properly yet.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study was conducted in Pahalgam and Sonamargh region of Anantnag and Ganderbal districts,

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respectively which are located at 34.01°N latitude and 75.19°E longitude and 34.23°N and 74.78°E, respectively. Pahalgam is located at an altitude of 7200 feet (2200 m) mean sea level and Sonamargh at an altitude of 9,186.352 ft (2,800 m) msl.

The survey was carried out through a face to face interview of ponywallas and personal visits to places where animals are kept/shelters in the Pahalgam and Sonamargh region during the period of Amarnath Yatra. The ponywallas where selected without any distinction with respect to the number of animals maintained by them. The convenience (accidental/grab) sampling technique was followed in selecting the respondents (ponywallas) and data was collected from such accidentally selected ponywallas (200 in number) hailing from different regions of the state and in particular from local residents of the Pahalgam and Sonamargh region. The number of respondents (proportionately on the basis of population) from Pahalgam and Sonamargh were 120 and 80, respectively. The primary and secondary data was collected through a pre-formed questionnaire (interview schedule) based on different aspects of socio-economic life of ponywallas but it is also to be emphasized that slight modifications were brought up in questionnaire during the course of study at the actual ground of the survey with a view to cover all the aspects of socio-economic status of ponywallas associated with tourism in Kashmir valley.

Simple technique of average and percentage was used. Percentages of various parameters under study were taken from each region and to arrive at an overall district figure, the values from two regions of study were taken together. However, to compare proportions pertaining to two regions of the study, test of proportions (Z-test) was used. In order to compare means, analysis of variance (ANOVA) followed by post-hoc analysis using LSD technique was done.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results indicate that majority of ponywallas in the (79.17%) Pahalgam region and 78.75% ponywallas from Sonamargh region were illiterate and had never received any formal education, not even up to middle school level (Table 1). In a similar kind of study by Swai and Bwanga 2008 in northern Tanzania it was found that the majority of respondents (57.2%) were primary school dropouts, 36.6% had no formal education and only 6.2% were secondary school leavers. Agriculture and livestock farming were considered to be main source of income. Besides, Pal and Legha (2008) studied socio-economic status of mule producers and managerial practices followed in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand states found that people engaged in mule production belonged to mainly minority community. Majority of them were poor and illiterate.

The analysis of family type of ponywallas in the study area revealed that majority of the families from Pahalgam and Sonamargh were medium sized type with 5–8 members in each family. Followed by large sized families with > 8

Table 1. Education, family type, age groups and land holding

Parameter	Practice in vogue	Pahalgam N(120)	Sonamargh N(80)
Education	Literate	20.83 (25)	21.25 (17)
	Illiterate	79.17 (95)	78.75 (63)
Family type	Nuclear (2–3 members)	2.5 (3)	0 (0)
	Medium (5–8 members)	63.33 (76)	63.75 (51)
	Large (> 8 members)	34.17 (41)	36.25 (29)
Age group	18–40	24.17 (29)	21.25 (17)
	40–55	64.17 (77)	63.75 (51)
	Above 60	11.67 (14)	15 (12)
Land holding	Marginal		

Figures in parenthesis are number of respondents out of 'N' no. of total respondents respectively.

members in each family (Table 1). In a study by Pal and Legha (2008) of mule producers in Haryana, Uttarpradesh and Uttarakhand states found that mean family size of mule producers was 8.48 ± 0.40 which is similar to our observations.

Similarly Bhat *et al.* (2018) in district Anantnag of Kashmir valley observed that the equine owners were socio-economically weak and reared equines in order to add to their earnings. Besides, Pal and Legha (2008) studied socio-economic status of mule producers and managerial practices followed in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand and most of them were poor and illiterate. Their major occupation was only mule production. Mean family size was 8.48 ± 0.40 .

With respect to age group mostly associated with recreational usage of ponies and pony rearing it was observed most of the respondents were belonging to an age group of 40–55 years with a percentage of 64.17% in Pahalgam and 63.75% in Sonamargh region, respectively followed by 18–40 years age group with percentage of 24.17% in Pahalgam and 21.25% in Sonamargh, respectively. Women were not involved in any sort of activities related to management and rearing of ponies (Table 1). In a similar type of study, Biswas *et al.* (2013) found that most (73%) of the pack animal owners were in the middle age group (18–45 years). Among them 57% owners had animal husbandry as their main source of income and majority of the owners had experience in rearing and earning from pack animals.

In terms of pack size possessed by the ponywallas the results indicated that from both the regions they were having 1–5 in number in a pack and in terms of working hours each ponywallas (100%) for more than 6 h worked a day in both the regions. However in terms of other livestock reared by the ponywallas, majority of ponywallas (68.33%) from Pahalgam region were not at all possessing any other livestock other than ponies followed by (30%) possessing 1–10 animals and (1.67%) possessed 10–20 animals, respectively in Pahalgam region. But in Sonamargh region majority of ponywallas (53.75%) possessed 10–20 animals and 46.25% possessed 1–10 animals from other livestock.

In Pahalgam a significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) number of ponies were used as in safari (72.5%) than Sonamargh (53.75%). The results also revealed that Sonamargh had a significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) (46.25%) number of ponies being used as pack animals than Pahalgam (27.5%). Biswas *et al.* (2013) found that for majority of pack animal owners 57% had animal husbandry as their main source of income and majority of the owners had experience in rearing and earning from pack animals.

It is evident from the results that majority of the respondents in the Pahalgam area were using ponies for recreation services (71.67%) as their primary occupation followed by other services (20%) and livestock rearing (8.33%). However in Sonamargh area, majority of respondents were using ponies for recreation services (57.75%) as their primary occupation followed by livestock rearing (27.5%) and other services (8.33%). The proportion of ponywallas having livestock rearing as their primary occupation was significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) in Sonamargh (27.5%) than Pahalgam (8.33%). Region-wise comparisons further revealed that recreational services (71.67%) were the major primary occupations in Pahalgam and Sonamargh regions. It was also observed that none of respondents from the two study areas of the survey were employed in white collar services. Besides the results of the survey on sub-occupation/ secondary income sources of the ponywallas revealed that labourer (71.67%) in Pahalgam followed by guest house rentals (21.67%) represented the major sub-occupations of ponywallas in the Pahalgam region of study area. But in Sonamargh, labourers (71.25%) followed by recreational services (18.75%) were the major sub-occupations. The region-wise comparisons revealed that Pahalgam had a significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) proportion of guest house rentals (21.67%) as sub-occupation/ secondary income source than Sonamargh. It was also observed that Sonamargh had a significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) proportion of recreational service as sub-occupation/ secondary income source than Sonamargh areas. Contrary to the present study in a similar type of study on mule producers by Pal and Legha (2008) in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, it was found that the major occupation of respondents was only mule production. Moreover it was observed that 26% of mule producers maintained the mares on sharing basis and they shared the amount received from the sale of mule foal in a ratio of 50 : 50 with the owner of mare.

The results indicated that majority (74.16%) of ponywallas in the Pahalgam region and 65% in the Sonamargh region were in the income group of ₹ 11,000–20,000/month. However 26.25% from Sonamargh and 11.67% from Pahalgam had a monthly income below ₹ 10,000 with proportion of such respondents being significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) in Sonamargh (26.25%) than Pahalgam (11.67%) region. Region-wise comparisons also indicate that only 14.16% in the Pahalgam and 8.75% in Sonamargh regions were in income group of ₹ 20,000–30,000/month. With none of the respondents from both the

study areas falling in the income group of ₹ 30,000 above/month. Contrary to this Biswas *et al.* (2013) found that most (73%) of the pack animal owners were in the middle age group (18–45 years) and animal husbandry was their main (57% owners) source of income and had also experience in rearing and earning from pack animals. Thus from the above results it was clear that the household income of ponywallas was higher as compared to Bareilly and Izatnagar as ponywallas were not stuck to ponies only for income but also relied hugely on daily wage labour work and besides, both the study areas were popular tourist destinations of Jammu and Kashmir state putting them at an advantage. Thus it was concluded that the ponywallas in both the regions were illiterate with a very low land-holding and reared equines to sustain their livelihood but the rearing methods were mostly unscientific so they require attention from concerned authorities.

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