

Pakistan is one of the South Asian countries on the world map. It is mainly an agricultural country with 70% of its population living in the rural areas. The concept of the family remains deeply embedded in the Pakistani ethos. The coin of family life has two sides, the urban family and the agricultural or rural family. With the passage of time, there have been changes in household size. In 1990, agricultural family size was 8 to 10 persons as against 4 to 5 persons in urban areas. Since 2000, with the advent of the new millennium, both types of family have reduced in size, with an average of 5 to 6 persons in agricultural households compared 3 to 4 persons in the average urban family.

Since Pakistan is an Islamic country and male dominated, households are predominately headed by males and only 7% to 10% of all households (urban and rural) are female headed as widows or separated women. The presence of extended families has decreased with the passage of time, but parents and grandparents are still part of the central family unit, especially in the agricultural family system. A number of factors currently impact agricultural and rural families, such as rapid urbanization, industrialization, increased poverty, environmental degradation and out-migration.

This article will describe the overall scenario of agricultural life in Pakistan and, in particular, deal with the “Marwari Bheel” Hindu Tribal Community, Pakistan.

1. Education and Literacy Rates

According to the most recent data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS), Pakistan had an adult literacy rate (age 15 and over) of 59% in 2017, putting it among the bottom 20 countries of the world on this measure. In the same year, over 6 million Pakistani children and over 4 million adolescents were out of school (UNESCO eAtlas of Literacy, 2018). Factors such as culture, lack of educational facilities and poverty have intervened to keep literacy rates low and youth out of school. Women are most affected and neglected. Therefore, in Pakistan, women’s education is in great need of improvement.

2. Poverty Levels

According to the World Bank (2020), the

poverty rate in Pakistan was 24.3% in 2015, but with a significant difference between urban and rural poverty rates at 12.5% and 30.7% respectively (World Bank, 2019). As the same report says: “Between 2001 and 2015, poverty in urban areas declined at an annualized rate of 9 percent, compared with 6 percent in rural areas. In 2015, rural poverty was more than twice as high as poverty in urban areas and, despite a decline in the share of rural population, rural areas still account for four out of five poor individuals—the same share as at the beginning of the century” (p. 4).

3. Out-migration

Mughal (2019) states that in Pakistan, out-migration has affected the family negatively. Case studies of villages in Punjab, for example, show that jobs provided have been outside the villages. As migration is largely male and somewhat skilled, it has left behind a village of women and

low-skilled labor. Villages have been polarized into migrant households and non-migrant households. Women have increasingly entered into production in the absence of male members who have migrated. The increased migration of young men is changing the gender division of labor on farms.

Marwari Bheel Hindu Tribal Community, Pakistan

The Marwari Bheel people are one of the forty or so scheduled castes who today live in the south Punjab and Sindh Provinces of Pakistan. They are part of the original inhabitants prior to the Aryan invasions. Linguists agree that the word name ‘Bheel’ means bow or bowman implying that they were hunters. Originally they were not Hindus and had their own tribal belief system which, like the Dravidian language they spoke, are now lost. They were conquered by the Aryan invaders and gradually took on the religion

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of the Aryans - Hinduism. They are understood as being outside of the four major Hindu castes and in former times were known as 'untouchables' or outcasts.

They have a history of rejection and non-acceptance from Hindu, Muslim and even from the Christian community, which impacts negatively on how they understand themselves and their place in society. There are a few prominent features of the Marwari Tribal Community including language, the colourful clothing of their womenfolk as well as their social mores, which distinguish them from the majority in society. In this context it may be observed that they are fiercely independent and proud of their culture and will not change their dress to win social acceptance. The majority of the "Bheel" community does not live in towns or cities but resides in rural areas on sand dunes near landlords or in the western outskirts of Sindhi or Punjabi centers of population where the sun sets, thus their shadow will not fall on the rest of the townspeople!

There is tension between their identity and way of life and their attempt to integrate into the Pakistan of today. Being Hindus, they often feel very much under threat as it is presumed that their sympathies lie with their homeland and co-religionists across the border in India.

Education

The literacy rate among the Marari Bheel is minimal, and even lower among their womenfolk, but it is gradually increasing due to the Government's emphasis on 'education for all'. Most children work in the fields helping their parents from an early age. Their parents see no chance of better employment even after with some education. If a child goes to school he will bring home different norms, values and religious teachings.

However there is a growing awareness of the need to be able to read and write - to be able to read one's name and messages on the mobile phone which everyone possesses! A survey conducted some years ago showed that on average 50% of their income was spent on food, 35% on medical expenses, 5% on clothing, 5% on education, 5% on other expenses.

Mode of Work

Most find employment on the land as seasonal farm labourers for sowing and harvesting the wheat, cotton, sugar cane and rice crops. Others are the share croppers on the land of a landlord. Where land is poor, and shortage of water or debts due to sickness, weddings, funerals abound, many young men migrate to Karachi to

work as construction labourers and in clothing factories. Most families have some domestic animals such as goats, a cow or a buffalo.

Relationship Ties

The family bond is primary in the Marwari Bheel culture with all its intricate relationships among cousins, aunts and uncles and sub-caste connections. For every family, marriage is perhaps the most important value in the sub-continent. For the individual and her or his family and for the cohesion of the group as a whole, Bheel weddings have an enormous importance unequalled by any other family or social event. Marriage is considered as much a union between two families as it is a union of two individuals. Most marriages are arranged by the family elders. Weddings also have a major economic element involving an exchange of money and goods (dowry) that extends beyond the families of the spouses to all the invited guests. In Muslim law, marriage is a civil contract but for the Bheel it is of cosmic significance and performed after midnight witnessed by the North Pole star to which the earth's axis is aligned. Dates for the wedding are arranged by the astrologist according to the position of the stars or the horoscope of the bride and groom. He is also consulted for the names of new born babies



which depend on which star under which they were born. As in all cultures, children are the joy and hope of the Bheel families, but there is happiness at the birth of a boy and subdued sadness at the birth of a girl.

Purdah "Veil"

The practice of purdah or veiling a woman's face within the household or village, before one's in-laws as well as in the presence of all male relatives who are older than her, is obligatory. Girls and women once married are regarded as the chattels of their in-laws. Men and women sit separately during times of celebration as in times of grieving.

Religion and Belief

The religion of the Marwari Bheels is a mixture of classical Hinduism, popular religion and superstitions. The religious dimension is a major factor in their understanding and evaluation of life and its most common and public expression is bhakti or devotional singing. Pictures of gods and goddesses adorn their mud walled homes. They fast regularly. Pilgrimages are made to shrines, small and great, such as to Rama pir, Hinglajmata as well as to bathe in the Ganges in India. Evil spirits and the evil eye are much feared and they have rituals to exorcise them.

Bhakti is a liturgy of loving surrendering devotion to a loving God as revealed in the Bhagavat Gita, their most revered scripture. A typical bhakti liturgy consists of a gathering of religious singers (bhagats) and any number of invited guests, the sharing of a meal, followed by all-night singing of devotional hymns (bhajans) in praise of Krishna and of how the devotee should be before him in his daily living. The well known bhajans of Kabir, Birmanand and Meera Bhai speak to peoples' hearts as they are concerned with loving devotion and self-surrender. Most do not understand the bhajans fully because they are full of religious symbolism and idioms in poetic Hindi but many bhagats do their best to explain them in common parlance. People however believe that just being present at a satsangat (a gathering for worship) is bhakti, an expression of their devotion to God.

Bhakti has exercised a great appeal on ordinary men and women as well as on many of the great Hindu leaders. Great men, like Tagore and Gandhi used bhajans and drew inspiration from them for their social and political involvement.

The Role of the Catholic Church

The long and hard struggle of the Catholic Church over fifty years has brought changes into the mindset of Marwari people, especially Marwari youth. The educated and uneducated Marwari youth are equally significant in the pastoral activities of the Catholic Church. The youth have little awareness but are very enthusiastic and concerned about community development and uplifting their community. They are a little shy and do not mix easily with other groups of society. The identity crisis has put lots of pressure on the Marwari Bheel younger generation. Most of the time, they find themselves strangers among the Muslim majority of Pakistan.

Youth meetings and games provide us with an opportunity to influence young Marwari. We arrange Marwari youth programs at parish centres where we talk with them on different issues, i.e, children's education, or the social, political and economic development of Marwari community. Cricket is like oxygen for Pakistani youth. Often we arrange cricket tournaments and matches for the youth. All these activities promote harmony and love. Mutual understanding is enhanced and it becomes an occasion of celebration and joy.

As far as our Christian community is concerned, looking at the role the bhagats and their bhajans, we encourage talented members of our community to put prayers, Bible stories and Church teachings into simple bhajans which people can understand and with tunes that appeal to them. In doing so, we pay special attention to the liberating aspect of our gospel message; Good News for them - not apart from but precisely in their situation of oppression. To support this effort, we select from the existing bhajans those which emphasize human values and can inspire also us Christians to become more committed to change.

Conclusion

Family is the central part of the Church and society. Consequently, the concept of marriage for all its members remains very central to the culture. The advent of the new millennium with its scientific and information technology developments, has transformed the life of the whole planet earth. A great shift has been taken place both in urban and rural life. Further, it has also affected agricultural

family life and its values. The agricultural family has also adapted to the modern way of living, using harvesting tools and scientific research in the fields of harvesting. This has transformed their lives for the better. Now the agricultural family life has become semi-agricultural. Despite all this, in Pakistan still there is a gap between the urban and the agricultural family in terms of education, social status, values, and economic wellbeing.

There is no doubt that the agricultural family is playing a vital role in the economic development of the country. However, on the other side, they are not paid according to their labour. They are ignored in their fundamental rights and needs. They are living without the basic necessities of life including health, education, job opportunities, safe drinking water, basic infrastructural facilities, roads and transport system etc. Our government should make serious decisions for improving their life style and productivity in order to improve our country. This can be made possible by controlling population, improving the literacy rate, focusing on health, eradicating poverty, and raising economic resources.

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