

Nara Desert, Pakistan

Part II: Human Life

By Rahmatullah Qureshi and G. Raza Bhatti

Introduction

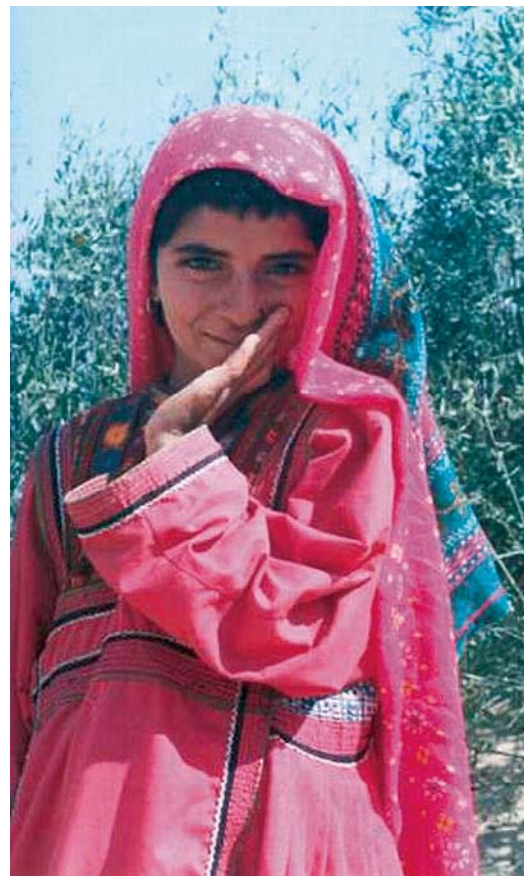
The livelihood of the people of the Nara Desert is largely dependent on their livestock, that is, sheep, goats, and camels. Shepherds with their herds migrate from their *Goth* (villages) toward the grazing grounds, establishing *Wandb* (huts constructed to settle down temporarily), living a nomadic life. There are *Tars* (where wells are situated) with permanent settlement. There are *Wandbs* near the *Tarais* (low-lying areas where water can stay or be stored for some time after rainfall). In addition, there are *Tobas/Tankas* (rain-water stored in manmade tanks) in *Taries*.

Agriculture

Agriculture is practiced on both the left and the right flank of the Nara Canal of this desert. It lies in the same topographical region, but the land under cultivation has been physically modified to receive water for irrigation purposes from the Nara Canal. The outermost boundaries are intermingled with desert habitat. Cotton and *Guwar* are the major crops of *Rabi* seasons, whereas wheat, *Brassica*, and *Alfalfa* are cultivated in the *Kharif* season.

Cultural Heritage

Joint family systems prevail in the Nara as in other parts of rural Sindh. All 3 generations—grandparents, parents, and children—live under 1 roof. The main duties of the men in the family are plowing, animal grazing, mat weaving, and house construction or other cash-earning activities, whereas



A nomadic girl with traditional dress in the Nara Desert.



The camel is the only means of transportation in the desert.

the women's responsibilities include bringing water from wells or ponds, cooking, washing, maintaining the house, embroidering, and so on.

Weddings of daughters are usually arranged without considering her consensus, age difference, or financial status. For the most part, close relatives or members of the family circle or caste are preferred for weddings. Most marriages are made at younger ages as per religious dictates. Marriage ceremonies in the Nara are generally simple and less costly compared to other parts of Sindh. The followers of Pir Sahib Pagara do not engage in drum beating, music, and other ceremonies.

Popular religious festivals in the Nara *taluka* are the monthly congregations at the tombs of Syed Kabeer Shah and Syed Arab Shah near Pharyaro (Monday Moon Night), Pir Moazam Shah near Chundko (Annual Festival), and Qalmee Quran near the Piranoo pattan crossing and Tajjal Sharif. An event of very high religious significance for the majority of population in the concession area is the biannual visit of Pir Sahib Pagara in which he offers *ziarat* (presents) among the followers at various points/villages, *jhalo* (an opportunity for selected followers to pray at their villages and/or accept light refreshments), and overnight stay and dinner with the main *khalifas* (representatives of Pir Pagara).

Socioeconomic Features

In spite of its low productivity, this desert sustains relatively high human and livestock populations—1.05 million and 1.25 million, respectively.¹ This livestock is the major source of meat and wool to the country. There is a tendency to increase the livestock population since it is the only livelihood of pastoralists. This increase in the livestock population is at the expense of the fragile ecosystem. Degradation of the land is verified by verbal information from the inhabitants of the Nara Desert. The overexploitation of vegetation by grazing and the chopping of trees and shrubs for fuel purposes have resulted in environmental degradation that threatens the natural resource base of this region. There is no modern transportation system in the



Local herders with cows grazing in the desert.

study area. Local inhabitants use camels as their mode of transportation.

The pastoralists, accustomed to nomadic life, are opportunistic and do not adhere to regular movement patterns or timing for their pastures. They possess large herds of livestock, mainly camels and cows. They follow the distribution of rainfall and the resultant forage. Around the months of April–May, they move out of the desert toward surrounding irrigated areas. They are forced there by rising temperatures and the depletion of vegetation for food and of water in the desert area. The attraction for this movement includes browsing of livestock on weeds/wheat stubbles and drinking water for humans and livestock. The nomads and their herds return to the desert around July–September with the advent of the monsoon rains. There is no limit on traveling distance for migration purposes. The natural vegetation is the only source of food for browsing livestock. *Tobas*, *Tankas*, and wells serve as drinking water both for nomads and for their livestock. *Tarr* or *Tobas* belonging to the same clan are generally situated close to each other.

Nomads attach high value to their herds. Livestock are the only source of their living wage in the desert. A person's



Flocks of goats sitting under the shadow of *Prosopis cineraria* in a *Taraies* (flat area) in the desert.



Herd of cows in *Taraies* (low-lying flat area).



Chopping of *Prosopis cineraria* for charcoal formation.

status in the desert nomadic lifestyle is represented chiefly by his herd's size.

Correlation Between Plants and Human Life in the Nara Desert

In contrast to plants being used as forage, local inhabitants use them for different purposes, such as food, shelter, and medicine. A total of 160 plant species are recorded from this desert, and out of these, 148 are reported to have been used for various purposes by local inhabitants of the area under study. They used them in folk medicine, fuel wood, forage, food, vegetables, wild fruits, flavoring agents, tea making, roof thatching, agricultural implements, timber/furniture, matrices making, rope making, basket making, sitting chairs, broom making, tooth sticks, clothes washing, leather tanning, detergent, fencing/hedge, shade, ornamental/recreational, soil binders, windbreaks, and poisons.² The different uses of the native flora have been discussed in detail.³ Medicinal properties of native flora have been discussed as well.⁴⁻⁶ The people who live on the periphery of the desert collect tree trunks and shrubs as a source of fuel and timber material and sell them in local towns. For many years, the *Pathan* clan has chopped down the *Prosopis cineraria* trees and processed them into charcoal. This clan is also providing timber and fuel to the local market. A large area is being depleted by this practice and has disturbed the entire wildlife environment.

Problems of the Area

The main problems of the area under study are observed as follows:

1. The indiscriminate cutting of trees for fuel, timber, and coal formation has resulted in environmental degradation, which has threatened the natural resources base of the region.
2. Overgrazing by livestock in the area is damaging the vegetation. When livestock walk over young seedlings, the regeneration becomes difficult; this is one of the main causes of the gradual disappearance of some species.

3. Grazing directly on the topmost fertile layer of the soil results in soil deterioration.

Conclusion

The major concern of pastoralists is the quantity and quality of available forage in the desert so that the demands of their animals can be met. However, there are other factors that determine their movement patterns. These include extreme heat, a need for shade, avoiding disease-ridden areas, being adjacent to market, the availability of labor, and social/ritual relations.

The needs of the inhabitants of the Nara Desert are few and simple. There is a tendency to increase the livestock in the desert, so it is imperative to understand the balance between living and nonliving components under a given set of conditions. Major problems include shortages of drinking water for both human and animal populations and basic health facilities for living beings.

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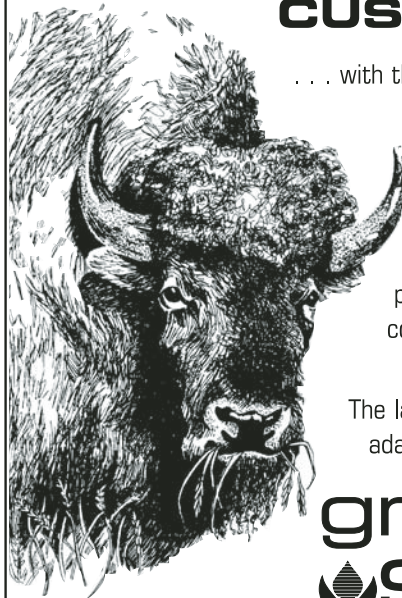
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