



livelihoods

today and tomorrow

June 2018

‘Sukshetram’

Palanquin Bearers

Palanquin, a human powered form of wooden transport which requires manual lifting, used to be considered as a tradition, custom, means of communication or a luxury in ancient days. Since time immemorial, it has been a source of livelihoods for many people in pilgrimages, tourist areas and other heritage sites, located in hilly and difficult terrain areas of the country. The Palanquin bearers carry tourists in these palanquins from source to destination. Livelihoods ‘Sukshetram’ tries to comprehend the real burden of these Palanquin Bearers.



Palanquin, a human powered form of wooden transport which requires manual lifting, used to be considered as a tradition, custom, means of communication or a luxury in ancient days. Since time immemorial, it has been a source of livelihoods for many people in pilgrimages, tourist areas and other heritage sites, located in hilly and difficult terrain areas of the country. The Palanquin bearers carry tourists in these palanquins from source to destination. Livelihoods ‘Sukshetram’ tries to comprehend the real burden of these Palanquin Bearers.

The origin of the word ‘Palanquin’ is from the Sanskrit word “palayanka” which means a *traveling bed*. In Hindi and Bangla, it is called palki. The Portuguese had added a nasal termination to any of these words and called it palanquin. In England, it is called a sedan chair and it has a number of names and forms in other countries.

The Palanquin is borne on the shoulders of two, four or even eight bearers belonging to a special caste, class or community. The smallest one is called doli, which is borne by two persons only, and was used to carry the bride in a traditional wedding. The larger palanquins were borne by four to eight persons. The very affluent and aristocratic people used to move in large and decorated palanquins borne by eight bearers. The Palanquin was also one of the means for troop movements during Akbar's reign and after. Palanquin, as a mode of transport, began to decline from the mid-nineteenth century when steamer and rail communications started and general transportation began to improve. However, these palanquin bearers/ palakiwallas still continue to ferry pilgrims or tourists across the country and earn their livelihoods by the strength of their shoulders. The pilgrims who suffer disabilities, breathing problems due to obesity, those who are aged and those who can't walk for longer hours seek to avail the palanquin services.

The palanquin bearers belong to various communities or castes which are distributed throughout India. The Kahar, Dhimar, Kalla Shanars, Bhois, Baniki Bauris are few of the communities, castes and sub-clans of the Palanquin Bearers.

The Kahar were once palanquin bearers. This community derives its name from the Sanskrit word “Skandhakara”, and Hindi words kandha (shoulder) and bhar (burden), and denotes ‘one who bears burdens on his shoulders’, pointing to their traditional occupation of palanquin bearing. This is a tribe which engages in cultivation particularly in connection with growing water nuts in lakes, fishing, palanquin carrying, and domestic service. This large community is distributed throughout the North Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Delhi, Rajasthan, West Bengal,

In Bihar, Kahar people are also known as Ravani, Ramani, Kamkar or Chandiramani. In Uttar Pradesh, they are known as Dhimar. In Rajasthan, they are called Mehra. In Dadra and Nagar Haveli, they are known as Raj Bhoi. The Kahar synonym in West Bengal is ‘Kahal’. The Kahar are also known as Sardars, especially in Murshidabad District. Kahars are sometimes known as Mahra (Sanskrit, Mahila, “a woman”), because they have the entry of the female apartments. They also exist as a Muslim community (converts from Hindu caste and are Sunni Muslims) in the North East and Bangladesh. However, this Muslim community has abandoned the traditional occupation of palanquin bearing and have adopted agriculture as their main occupation.

remote North-Eastern state of Tripura and the union territory of Dadra and Nagar Haveli. Almost all the Kahar speak Hindi along with their native tongue.

The Dhimar Caste which is found in UP and Central India is a caste largely comprising of fishermen and palanquin bearers. This caste is also known by several other names such as Kahar, Bhoi, Palewar, Baraua and Machhandar. In some parts of the country, the Bhois and the Dhimars are considered as distinct castes, but in the Central Provinces they are not distinguished and both these names are applied indiscriminately to the castes. It is believed that the

name Bhoi is more particularly applied to those who carry palanquins, whereas Dhimar is applied for fishermen. The **Bhoi** (also known as **Bauri**) are usually found in the Khudra District of Orrisa. Their traditional occupation is that of agriculture merchants. However, in Gujarat, their traditional occupations include acting as palanquin-bearers, fishermen and water-carriers. The Bhoi are also found in Assam, where they are a Scheduled Tribe

In Maharastra, the Bhoi are the palanquin bearers or doli carriers; there are altogether 22 sub-groups namely Zinga Bhoi, Pardesh Bhoi, Raj bhoi, Kahar Bhoi, Gadia Bhoi, Dhuria Kahar Bhoi, Kirat Machwa Bhoi, Hanzi, Jati, Kewat, Dhiwar, Dingar, palewar, Macchindra, Havadi, Halhar, Gadhav Bhoi, Khodi Bhoi, Khare Bhoi and Devra.

In Gujarat, the Bhoi consist seven sub-groups namely Bhoiraj, Dhiman, Zinga Bhoi or Kevat-Bhoi, Macchindra Bhoi, Paleshwar Kirat Bhoi, Kahar Bhoi, Pardeshi Bhoi and Shrimali Bhoi.

Challenges of the Palki-Wallas

The palanquin bearers have tough challenges in order to make the steep climb of faith easier for the pilgrims and an enjoyable experience for the travellers in the tourist places. There is a huge occupational hazard effect on these “Palki -Wallas” as the major challenges are the rough terrains, steep inclinations and the large number of steps they climb while carrying the people or any load. The Hilly terrain changes the biomechanics of the human movement resulting in high physiological cost and as a consequence high strain and fatigue to the bearers. According to few a researchers, extended usage of the palanquins can also give them physical deformity such as musculo-skeletal disorder. It also affects the stability and sitting comfort of their passengers. Another major concern is that few of the palanquins approximately weigh 65 Kgs which also affects the ergonomics of the palanquin bearers. The youth get involved in the activity in order to earn livelihoods for their families. They also tend to migrate to other pilgrimages like Amarnath or Kedarnath from Vaishno devi during the season which impacts their health at the young age and also their education. The palanquin bearers have a greater responsibility on them as they have to carry the passengers who are usually disabled or aged on steep slopes keeping in mind the comfort. They also face a lot of challenges during the off - season and struggle to get alternate sources of livelihoods. Many of them, in certain parts of the country, have abandoned this traditional occupation. They also face tough competition from other porters such as pony wallas and pithu carries.

The palanquin bearers and owners are registered with municipal committees or with the pilgrimage boards and have identity card or a token number through which the customers can be assured. The cards/permits are renewed every year and a new card with a fresh validity date is issued. Any card that is outside the scope of this validity date is invalid and disqualifies the owner from offering services. Sometimes, the local authorities such as the security at the pilgrimages also obstruct them from providing their services efficiently. They are not allowed to enter or allowed only till certain point at that particular tourist place or pilgrimage.

Many of the pilgrimages and tourist spots have fixed the rates of the services offered by the palanquin bearers. The rates range between Rs. 4000 to Rs. 8500 (to and fro) depending on the weight of the person who is availing the services; which is very less as there is a lot of physical strain involved in the process. The bearers also struggle in voicing their opinions to the committee or to the government. Only few of the places have associations formed for them. They are not many efforts directed towards the welfare of this community from the government except a few initiatives. The government has not created a database or statistics on the exact count of the palanquin bearers. There is an urgent need to classify and include them as an integral part of the informal or formal economy. Though the palanquin bearers face lot of socio-economic hurdles in their journey of life, the only motivation that keeps them going is the satisfaction of providing a comfortable journey to the tourists or pilgrims which leads them on a positive path.

Embarking a positive journey!

The Palaquin bearers may belong to different castes, communities or religions but the intentions of providing quality services to the tourist and pilgrims echoes in every palanquin bearers’ heart. There are many positive and

In Katra (Mata Vaishno Devi shrine), nearly 70 per cent of around 30,000 porters, who earn their livelihood as palki-bearers, pithu carriers and pony-wallahs, are Muslims. Out of this, there are over 5,000 palanquin bearers in the area, out of which around 3,500 are Muslims, often seen chanting “jai mata di” on top of their voices during their steep trek to-and-fro the shrine. These palanquin bearers come from Poonch, Rajouri and Reasi, buy bamboo, chairs and ropes to make a palki to carry pilgrims from the base camp at Katra to the shrine. Approximately 20,000 of Kashmiri palanquin bearers from Katra and other parts migrate to Amarnath every year for few months during the Amarnath yatra to help the aged or ailing pilgrims in climbing the difficult mountainous trek of Baltal up to the Amarnath cave. Few of the palanquin bearers opine that

“Amarnath yatra is beyond business for us. Apart from earning our livelihood, it gives us an opportunity to serve thousands of visitors every year who come to Kashmir. It creates a bond of friendship, love, religious tolerance and compassion between Muslims and Hindus.” “We trek even during our Ramadan fast. People are so nice to us, they wait while we read the namaz during our working hours.” A perfect example of communal harmony.

In 2012, the health and family welfare department of Himachal Pradesh planned to deploy the aluminium-made open palanquins to ferry patients from 500 remote and inaccessible mountain villages in state that don’t have road access to ambulances or hospitals. One palanquin was allocated to each village. Source: IANS and India Times

Relief for the Palanquin Bearers!

In a recent decision, Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board is shortly going to launch totally redesigned ‘Palkis’ for the comfort of the pilgrims and the Palkiwalas. The new Palki have been developed by a team of the Industrial Design Centre of IIT Bombay and NITIE, Mumbai. Palki has been redesigned for improving the conditions in which Palki bearers make a livelihood.

- The Palkis are much lighter (33Kgs) than previous ones (65Kgs), sturdier and are aesthetically designed.
- The Palki is of stainless steel and created after getting a first- hand feedback from the Palkiwalas and these have been developed based on ergonomic studies to make the journey comfortable for the pilgrims.
- This has a longer life and nil maintenance issues compared to the previous palki.

The new Palkis come as blessing for pilgrims as well as the palki bearers.

appreciable scenarios in which the government, common man has utilized the services of the palanquin bearers. The activity/process of palanquin bearing also becomes a good symbolic representation of a team or an organization. Few authors even compared the activity with the servant leadership model as the leaders (palanquin bearers) carry the team (customers) on his shoulders, enabling them to reach their goals.

Conclusion

Palanquin and its bearers become the true resemblance of our age-old tradition. The palanquin bearers are also one of the rare examples of communal harmony. Despite the struggles and the difficulties faced by them in their

occupation, It is interesting to watch the coordination in each step with which they carefully take to ferry their customers from the source to destination in such tough conditions. Many of us travel to the pilgrimages and hilly regions in the summer vacations (month of May-July) and it could be interesting to appreciate the issues, challenges and the dynamics in livelihoods of the palanquin bearers by directly interacting with them from the lens of a tourist. The burden they bear for earning a meagre livelihood makes people quite guilt-ridden; what they need is remuneration equal to the work they carry out, and dignity of life!! ❖