

Afghanistan - Kuchis

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Profile

Kuchi, means 'nomad' in the Dari (Persian) language. Kuchi are Pashtun from southern and eastern Afghanistan. They are a social rather than ethnic grouping, although they also have some of the characteristics of a distinct ethnic group. Though traditionally nomadic, many have been settled in northwest Afghanistan, in an area that was traditionally occupied by Uzbeks and Tajiks, after strong encouragement by the Taliban government. Nowadays only a few thousands still follow their traditional livelihood of nomadic herding. Others have become farmers, settled in cities or immigrated. The largest population of Kuchi is probably in Registan, the desert in the Southern Afghanistan.

Tribes are formed among the Kuchis along patrilineal lines. A clan is composed of a core family, their offspring and their families. The leader of the tribe, the Khan, is responsible for the general well-being of the community, for governing the group and for representing it to visitors. Tribes live communally, and on becoming too large separate in order to facilitate more efficient management. Typically, there are three types of Kuchi: pure nomads, semi-sedentary and nomadic traders. The majority are semi-sedentary, living in the same winter area year after year. The purely nomadic Kuchi have no fixed abode, and are dependent on animals for their livelihood; their movements are determined by the weather and the availability of good pasturage. Traders constitute the smallest percentage of Kuchis; their main activity being the transport of goods. The semi-pastoral Kuchis are gradually tending towards a more sedentary way of life. The majority do so because they can no longer support themselves from their livestock.

Life for Kuchis is difficult, especially for Kuchi women. Male and female roles, as in other segments of traditional Afghan society, are rigidly adhered to, with the men tending to livestock while the women hold the major responsibility for child-rearing, are completely responsible for food and water preparation and for sewing and weaving of clothes and tents.

Economic position

The Kuchis constitute a great part of Afghanistan's cultural tradition. For centuries, they have migrated across the country in a search of seasonable pastures and milder weather. They were the main traders in Afghanistan, connecting South Asia with the Middle East. The livestock owned by the Kuchis made an important contribution in the national economy. They owned about 30 per cent of all the sheep and goats and most of the camels. Traditionally they exchanged tea, sugar matches etc. for wheat and vegetables with the settled people. They also acted as moneylenders and offered services in transportation along with additional labour at harvest time. Kuchi have been greatly affected by conflict, drought and demographic shifts. Therefore, it is only a small number of Kuchis who still follow their traditional livelihood of nomadic herding. Despite their history and their previous endowments the chronic state of instability in Afghanistan has left them among the poorest groups in the country.

Historical context

With the development of the road system in Afghanistan in the 1950s and 1960s and the formation of road transportation companies with fleets of trucks, the traditional Kuchi camel caravan gradually became obsolete, greatly impacting the income and lifestyle of the community. The situation for the Kuchi became even more tenuous after the war and during the droughts of 1971-1972 and 1998-2002. These droughts are attributed with being responsible for the death of 75 per cent of the Kuchi animals. Furthermore, the combination of the intensive bombing campaigns by the US-led coalition as well as the spread of land mines during the 23 years of conflict decimated the Kuchi's animal herds, taking away their major source of income. Fighting and control by different warlords also often blocked their migratory routes.

The relation between the settled people and Kuchi has historically been peaceful and based on exchanges of goods and services. The tension began when the Kuchi started settling on land, since their nomadic lifestyle was disrupted. During the Taliban regime, Kuchi nomads (being of Pashtun origin) were encouraged to settle on land that was already occupied by other ethnic groups. The lack of overall policy regarding land tenure and pasture rights by the authorities has created prolonged disputes over the land and resources between the settled Afghans and the Kuchi. The traditional system of pasture rights seems to have been eroded and replaced by the power of the gun. Thus although many Kuchis still hold documents indicating their rights to use pastures and parcels of land (some of which are over a 100 years old) their current value is undetermined and their land rights not recognized by the government when handling disputes.

In recent years there have been increasing tensions between Kuchis and Hazaras over access to land, with periodic clashes between the two groups in central Wardak and Bamiyan provinces. In 2008, Hazara communities went out into the streets, threatening to take up arms against Kuchis if they entered either of the provinces.

Clashes have also taken place more recently in west Kabul, when Kuchi refugees attempting to resettle on their ancestral land clashed with local Hazara residents. The government sought to resolve this dispute by resettling the Kuchi community in the ruins of the Darul Aman in Kabul, where they were forced to live in destitute confinement for months. The Kuchis situation will remain precarious until the government develops adequate solutions, both short and long term, for the Kuchis involved in such land disputes.

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Kuchis currently make up over 70 per cent of Afghans Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs). Conditions in the IDP settlements are arguably better than those in the areas of origin, with potable drinking water and access to education and health care. Thus the real challenge is the creation of pull factors back to their areas of origin, complemented by projects aiming for longer-term reintegration. This reintegration needs to take into account the fact that the Kuchis are facing a higher degree of nutritional and food security risks than others. Most of the 200,000 IDPs, who have not yet returned to their places of origin, are Kuchis who lost their livelihoods during the four-year drought.

Current issues

Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the lives of most Afghans, at least those in the northern two-thirds of the country, have seen some improvement. However the Kuchis have been unable to share in this progress. In the northwest, Uzbeks and Tajiks resented their presence, due to their ethnic association with the Taliban and forced them to flee their lands. Many ended up in dismal displaced person camps near Herat or Kandahar or in dangerous and isolated refugee camps in Pakistan. Kuchis who have livestock are often unable to drive their flocks to their traditional summer grazing pastures in the central highlands. Very little of the foreign assistance extended to Afghanistan by the international community has arrived to aid the Kuchis. Few assistance agencies work in the insecure areas in which they are located, and most donors emphasize short-term economic and humanitarian aid rather than the longer-term assistance the Kuchis need to rebuild their herds. As a result, most of the Kuchi today remain jobless and illiterate.

Although due to their nomadic life-style the Kuchi were never really involved in the politics of the country, they have played a key role in Afghanistan's post-Taliban political revival. Together with the Pashtun they supported President Karzai in the 2005 presidential elections.

They were given their own constituency and allocated 10 seats of the 249 seats, seven for men and three for women, in the new National Assembly. Kuchis were also promised a government department to handle their affairs, but it has yet to materialise.