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A RELATIONAL VIEW OF PASTORAL (IM)MOBILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Pitched against the apparently more civilised and modern 'settled', pastoralists have historically been penalised for the seemingly primitive and outdated practice of mobility. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork in western India, this paper challenges this reductive dichotomy and unpacks the many (im)mobilities produced, accessed, experienced and imagined by pastoralists. Adopting a relational lens, it shows how mobilities and immobilities co-constitute and are contingent on each other across social, geographical and temporal scales. Embedded within their own social and political history, the many forms that mobility can take dispel, ontologically, the homogenising effects of rigid typologies, but it also practically offers the capacity to adapt to changing times.

KEYWORDS

India, mobility, nomad, pastoralism, relational

INTRODUCTION

Enough! Now we don't like it, we cannot stay any longer. Now we would like to leave. We miss Gujarat
Pabiben, January 2020

Pabiben is a nomadic pastoralist from the western Indian state of Gujarat.¹ Belonging to the Rabari community, Pabiben's family moves with their sheep and goats throughout the year. In the above quote, she is referring to leaving for their annual winter-summer migration to mainland Gujarat, where they graze on farm residues before moving back to Kachchh, their home district, to graze in the monsoon months. Several families from within their community continue to practice mobile pastoralism as their main livelihood that provides both income and identity, even as they encounter and adapt to changes in their socio-political environment.

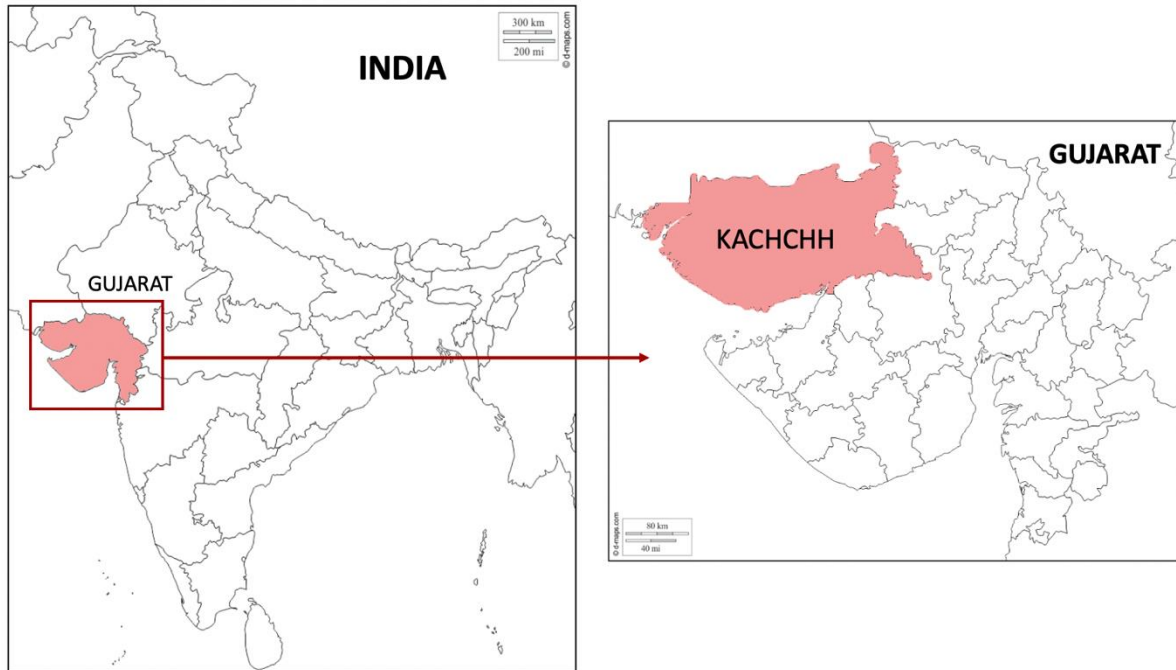


Figure 1. Location of Kachchh district within Gujarat state in India. Source: created by author using maps from <https://d-maps.com>

Mobility is a central feature of pastoralism.² In fact, pastoralists like the Rabari were, and in many cases still are, more commonly recognised as nomads before being recognised as expert animal rearers. Seen with equal fascination and mysticism as wanderers that escaped settled civilisation, they adorn many tourist pamphlets and magazine covers. On the other hand, their mobility is broadly considered ‘outdated, irrational, stagnant, unproductive and ecologically damaging’ (Butt 2016: 463), a practice that must surely be abandoned.

The latter view reflects the historical tendency to privilege sedentarism over nomadism, both reduced to essentialist conditions that not only refer to mobility but also connote a cultural separation to the detriment of pastoralists. Such linear thinking has perpetuated the binaries of the farmer and herder, civilised and tribal, productive and unproductive, and modern and primitive. While such reified categories have been replaced conceptually with a more inclusive ‘mobile-sedentary continuum’ (Symanski et al 1975), every point on the continuum is still seen in reference to the ever-receding horizons of sedentarism and mobility at either end.

The ‘sediment of nomadism’ (Kauffman 2009) thus settled on scholarship and policy makes it difficult to escape the reductive logic of these typologies. Scholarship has now shown the strength of mobility as a livelihood strategy (Krätli and Schareika 2010) and recognised its benefits to the natural and social environment pastoralists occupy, traverse and engage with (IUCN 2011), inspiring new discourses within international development and policy making (Davies et al 2018). Yet the binary between ‘settler’ and ‘nomad’, arguably remain.

Based on a sedentarist perspective, the unbalanced scale of this binary tips towards state interests that sees movement as a threatening pathology (Pontrandolfo and Solimene, this issue). Born of a tendency to control, track and tax, privileging settled agriculture over pastoralism, several governments sought to sedentarise pastoralists, fragment, enclose and privatise shared resources, and restrict mobility (Korf et al 2015). Policies that claim to support mobility such as community rights to resources or livestock corridors, risk delineating

resources and conferring exclusive rights of use (Fernandez-Jiminez 2002). This undermines not only the flexibility and adaptability of mobility, but also the socio-political manoeuvring, and the emotional-cultural experience of being mobile. Seemingly well intentioned, such policies show a sedentary bias that ‘silently reproduce[s] the same theoretical horizon even when manifestly operating in a new one’ (Krätli et al 2015: 3).

When thinking of pastoral mobilities beyond the continuum, Dyson-Hudson (1972: 9) urges us ‘to cultivate assumptions of variability rather than invariance, of contingency rather than of regularity, of individuality rather than typicality. We should try for realism and detail, and persistently fight the tendency to generalise too quickly from the data we collect’. Therefore, I offer an immersion into Pabiben’s daily realities to re-ground and nuance our understanding of pastoral mobility. In a sweeping generalisation, Pabiben would be considered close to a specialised ‘pure pastoralist’ (Khazanov 1984), characterised by habitation in a mobile camp and the absence of agriculture, but an ethnographic view-from-below reveals the fluidity, heterogeneity and dynamism of her mobility.

The variability of Pabiben’s experiences, through complex forms of mobilities and immobilities in response to emerging contingencies, highlights the multiplicity and heterogeneity of contemporary pastoral movements. The resulting ‘messiness’ often blurs the boundary between the settled and the mobile in practice. This paper explores this ‘messiness’ that ruptures the ‘neat’ conceptual divide between mobility and sedentarism. It aims to unpack pastoral mobility to show how mobilities and immobilities are interlinked, as well as in *relationship with* other mobilities across time and scale. Further it reveals how they are also *relational to* each other and embedded in their own social and political histories. In doing so, the paper concentrates on how mobility is experienced – what it means and what it does – rather than its degree or extent. Imbibing, rather than abstracting, variability is crucial to understanding pastoralists’ capacity to navigate ‘vexingly volatile and constantly changing circumstances’ of contemporary times (Bauman, 2007: 3).

Employing approaches from the ‘mobilities paradigm’ (Urry 2000), I show mobility as a curated everyday experience, rather than a vacuous journey from point A to B. Embodying a ‘web of relationships’ (Cresswell 2006) produced by the unity of land-labour-livestock, and more, mobility exists as much in conception and experience, in discourse, and imagination, as it does tangibly in the form of physical movement. Mobilities and immobilities are seen as experiential, differential and relational (Adey 2006). Expressed as a unity, as ‘(im)mobilities’ (Urry 2003), they co-constitute each other and emerge together.

In the next section, I provide a rich account of the mobilities experienced by Pabiben’s family in a day’s time. This facilitates a discussion in section 3 on the various dynamics of pastoral (im)mobilities to show how they are interlinked and dependent. The conclusion in section 4 summarises the arguments of the paper.

HAAL HAAL NE HAAL: ENCOUNTERING THE DAILY (IM)MOBILITIES OF THE RABARI

Embedded within a complex social, economic and political milieu, the Rabari have seen rapid changes in their context in the past couple of decades. Long ignored on the ‘economic map’ of Gujarat state (Tambs-Lyche and Sud 2016), Kachchh, Pabiben’s home district, was ‘deliberately turned into a corporate business opportunity’ (Menon et al 2014) following an earthquake in 2001. Leveraging on its vast stretches of sparsely populated semi-arid lands the

district has seen the development of large-scale industries, commercial agriculture, large infrastructure and tourism, privileging big business as opposed to local agrarian livelihoods (Sud 2014). While such shifts translate materially into new opportunities and threats for the pastoralists including new livelihood aspirations, changing natural environment, and adverse politics of land management, they also affect the ideas, imaginations and emotions that bind together the experience of mobility.

Migrating with their flock still remains attractive for the pastoralists not only because of the dryland ecology of Kachchh and the lack of open grazing, but also to meet specific economic and social goals. The Rabari usually select agricultural ‘hotspots’ in Gujarat, giving the chance to graze on choicest fodder as well as to earn cash or grain in exchange of manure (Choksi and Dyer 1996). Migration to Gujarat generates a complex migratory dynamic and allows for new and familiar encounters in a constantly changing social and environmental landscape. Through their migration the Rabari also encounter the fruits of the developmentalism described above. They graze in farms that receive canal irrigation from the country’s largest dam. They cross the highways connecting the biggest ports and special economic zones in the country to big cities like Mumbai and Delhi. The increasing reliance on institutional education, and the spread of communication and transport technology all impinge on their lifeworld.

Given these variabilities in their socio-economic and political milieu, the case of Pabiben provides fertile ground to dig deep into the dynamics of pastoral mobility in current times.

The vignette below shows the various circuits of (im)mobilities lived by the pastoralists. It shows the way (im)mobilities are produced, accessed, experienced and imagined, not as discrete and isolated acts but rather as complementary phenomena entrenched in their particular social and historical contexts. Highlighting the fluidity in pastoral (im)mobilities offers the opportunity to see how pastoralists engage with variability in their context as they seek to manage and achieve various goals.

Fieldwork vignette

‘Pabiben! Kem cho?’ (Pabiben! How are you?) I exclaimed as I approached her *‘uttaro’* or camp. *‘Bas! Have amne faavtu nathi, amarathi rahevatu nathi. Have toh bas bhagi javu chhe. Gujarat ni yaad aave chhe’*. (Enough! Now we don’t like it, we cannot stay any longer. Now we would like to leave [lit.run]. We miss Gujarat) she said as I was putting my bag down.



Figure 2. Pabiben moving home (*uttaro*). Photograph by the author.

The afternoon sun was bearing down on us; it was nearly the end of winter. It took me 6 hours to cover the 107 kms from town to the camp. I took a bus, and then another, then a shared taxi, hitchhiked a short distance on a tractor, and then walked the final couple of kilometres to arrive.



Figure 3. Moving camp by tractor in the absence of a camel. Photograph by the author.

The camp was in a harvested field not very far from Pabiben's home village. I could see that the camp was leaner; some of the 'furniture' had been sent back to their village in preparation of the migration to Gujarat. This year, first the death of their camel and then unusually late rains had kept them closer to home, spending an extensive 6 months and more in Kachchh. By this time the previous year, they had reached an area 200 kms from their current spot.

Pabiben prepared some tea and, entrusting me with the care of the young lambs at the camp, went into the village to wash. The camp could not be kept 'redhu' or unmanned. Chores had to be completed before the flock was back in the evening at which time Pabiben would become occupied with preparing the evening meal for the camp members.

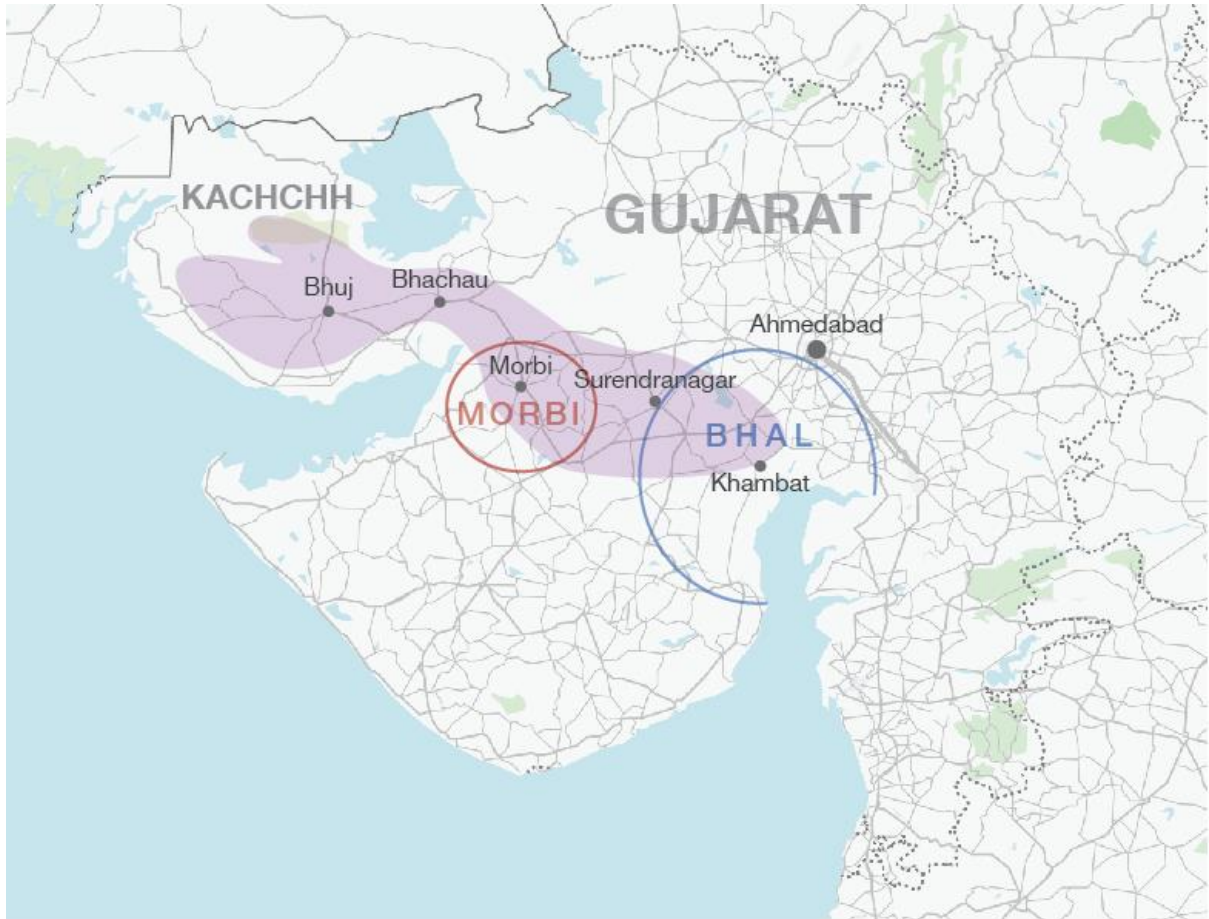


Figure 4. Approximation of the Rabari annual migration area showing the agricultural hotspots in Morbi and Bhal. Source: created by author using maps from Google maps.

The high-pitched bleating of the lambs filled the air as the flock returned against the backdrop of a multihued sunset – my favourite time of the day. The lambs fed, the sheep administered their medication, and some fresh milk procured, we soon found ourselves chatting around the fire on which Pabiben was busy making millet bread. The men spoke of their busy day and about how Pabiben has it easier. She turned to me, and asked, ‘Aaje hu paanch minute pan bethii choon? Bas haal haal ne haal’ (Have I sat even for five minutes today? Only walk, walk and walk [referring to all her work such as washing, collecting water, collecting firewood, bringing fodder for the camel and lambs, etc]).

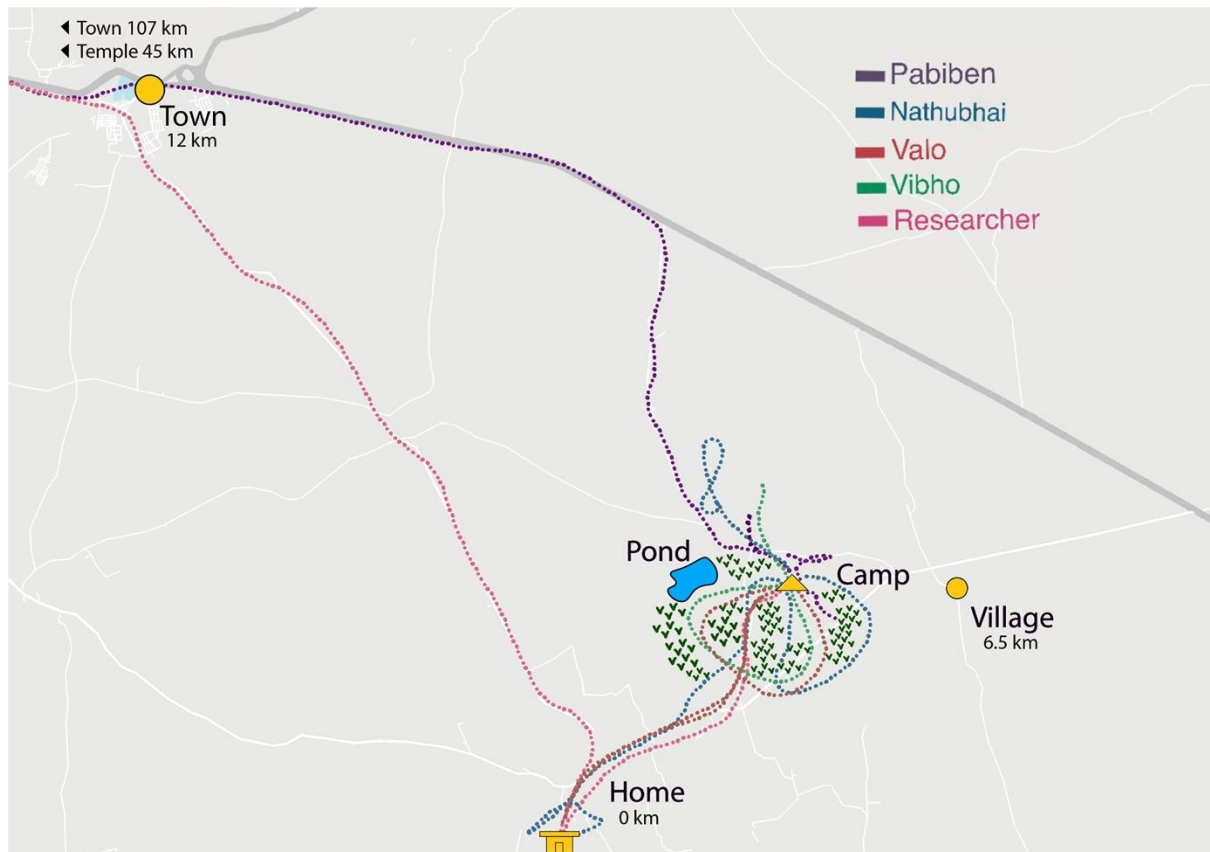


Figure 5. Rough estimation of the mobilities of all the members of the camp described here. Shortest road distances shown in reference to the home village. Source: created by author using maps from Google maps.

Fed and tired, we slept with the swishing sounds of the new windmills in the area for lullabies. Pabiben and I slept on the only ‘bed’ at the camp, while the men slept on the ground by the flock keeping guard.

The next morning Pabiben left to go to a temple nearly 45 kilometers away for an annual festival sermon. Alternative arrangements for food had been made and the camp remained in the same spot that day so that she could comfortably leave and return. As she was preparing for her day away that morning, her 20-year-old son, Vibho, the shepherd of their flock, complained that he had never been to that temple, and that he did not have the chance to enjoy any festivities. He was carelessly browsing through TikTok³ videos before he took the flock out for the day.

The flock spent the day browsing on millet residues over a radius of 5-7 km under Vibho’s and his brother’s watchful eyes. His 23-year-old brother, Valo, would ritualistically hop on the late-night dairy van after a day of shepherding to return to the village to spend some time with his wife and newborn child. He would return every morning when the dairy van went on its morning round. Vibho, on the other hand, was expected to remain at camp at night to watch over the sheep.

Their father, Nathubhai, serves as the ‘*mukhi*’ or head of their group. He spent the day *doing* ‘*niharu*’ (scouting) in the surrounding area to see which farms were being harvested to graze. He went to the village to speak with the farmers and ask for their permission. He also went to the local government office to submit some forms for compensation for damages to his farm from the late rains. He visited other pastoral camps in the area that invited him to a ‘*jaatar*’ or

a religious feast that night. He then spent some time at the village tea shop catching up on local news and gossip. During the day, he made a couple of trips to the camp where he helped with chores such as taking the camel to graze. He eventually returned to camp before the flock came back in the evening.

UNDERSTANDING PASTORAL (IM)MOBILITIES

Mobilities and immobilities

The vignette above paints a picture of some of the many (im)mobilities experienced by a pastoral family in a day's time. It highlights the spatio-temporal scales and forms through which mobility takes place among the family and presents some of the relationships attached to this mobility. There are the mega annual loops they make eastwards and westwards contingent on climate and agrarian conditions, among others. Then the daily rounds the shepherds make grazing the flock, as well as the micro scale of Pabiben's 'haal haal and haal' as she undertakes chores throughout the day. They also take various forms; from physical flock movement, to the imaginative and aspirational mobility that Vibho undertakes through the consumption of TikTok videos. Less detailed above is the social scale of mobility, going from family/flock to migrating group to the community level.

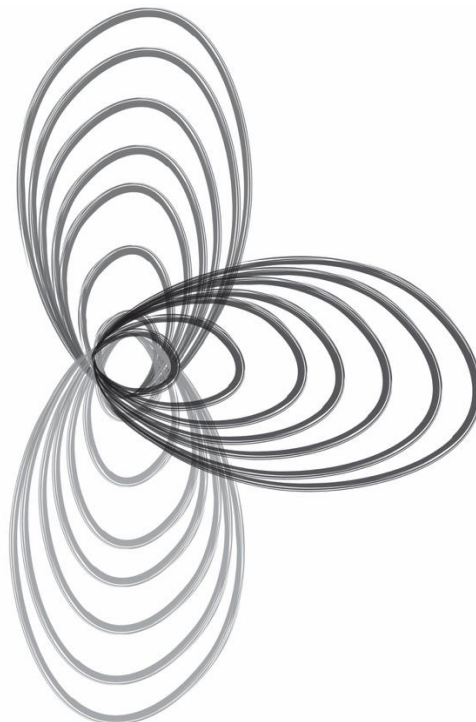


Figure 6. Overlapping, intersecting and nested mobilities. By the author.

These overlapping and nested mobilities emerge from, fulfil and respond to a constellation of social, economic, ecological, cultural, political and aspirational relationships that are tied to and impinge on each other. For example, Pabiben's visit to the temple immobilises the camp in a place, but reflexively her visit is also enabled by the fact that enough fodder was available in the vicinity of the camp allowing the camp to stay in that location.

From the vignette we also see that the flock's mobility immobilises the shepherd, Vibho, within his role and prevents him from going to the temple for leisure. The immobility of Valo's wife and child at home in the village extends the commute for him. Complementary, interconnected

and interdependent these examples show that mobility and immobility give rise to each other. Appearing as two sides of the same coin rather than interacting on a continuum, they co-constitute each other and emerge together in a rather yin-yang fashion (Sullivan and Homewood 2003). They act not as a clash of oppositional forces, but rather as a unity, as the clasp of (im)mobilities.



Figure 7. The clasp of pastoral (im)mobilities. By the author.

Further, certain ‘fixed’ institutions and infrastructures, ‘moorings’, ‘enable, produce and presuppose’ mobilities (Urry 2003: 138). The invariable or fixed role of women as the ones that move and set-up camp, for example, allows for flock mobility. The immutable role of the camel in transporting the camp is highlighted when in the absence of their camel Pabiben’s family was unable to go farther in the monsoon leg of their migration.

This interaction between mobility and immobility can also be seen in the ‘twofold character of the family’s economic [and social] base’ – the home and the camp (Habeck 2006: 126). While they remain in camp throughout the year, Pabiben’s family also has a permanent brick and mortar home in the village, equipped with electricity, water lines and permanent fixtures. This dual experience is also reflected in their cultural codes. Among the Rabari, a newly married couple is given both the gift of livestock, called ‘*juriyu*’, and the gift of furniture for their village home, called ‘*dameno*’, which includes a ‘city’ bed, cupboard and utensils. Furniture for the migrating camp must be bought by the couple themselves when they establish their independent flock.

The division between the ‘pure pastoralist’ and the ‘outside world’ (Khazanov 1984), which remains implicit in our scholarship as discussed above, is also rendered irrelevant when thinking of livelihoods in Pabiben’s family. Among her four sons, while Vibho and Valo are shepherds, a third studies in college and dreams of an office job, and the fourth is a hired tractor driver for another Rabari who has given up shepherding but capitalised on his farmer connections in Gujarat to take up jobs such as harvesting, ploughing, and trenching with a tractor, migrating with his machines just as shepherds do. Her husband Nathubhai also has farming land that he leases to landless peasants to sow showing the rigid boundaries between farming and shepherding as a methodological artefact (Toulmin 1983). Moreover,

demonstrating ‘multi-resource pastoralism’ (Salzman 1972) he pays a specialised Jat⁴ pastoralist to keep his few camels as an absentee livestock owner.

While this discussion ruptures the nomadic-sedentary continuum for ‘mobile peoples’ it does so simultaneously for the ‘settled’. In Pabiben’s case, as they began their journey to Gujarat a few weeks later, Valo decided to stay back to see if he could start up a dairy franchise of his own and called on his uncle to take his place instead – mobilising someone who had not been on migration in a few years.

Importantly, not only are mobile pastoralists ‘settled’ and the ‘settled’ mobile, but also their movement intersects. For example, Nathubhai himself spent 5 years working in a factory in Mumbai in his youth along with others from his village and from other parts of the country. His third son goes to college in town with students from ‘settled’ backgrounds, and many ‘settled’ folk would be at the temple Pabiben visits because of their shared religious affiliation. It is crucial not to re-box these (im)mobilities into separate circuits and reinforce the divisions already criticised above.

AFFECT, MEANING AND THE POLITICS OF MOBILITY

The above discussion shows how the lives of pastoralists criss-cross across activities, roles, identities, and ways of being at different social, geographic and temporal scales. While it challenges the ‘exoticisation’ of pastoralists as nomads, it also risks generalising to such an extent that it obscures any differences between pastoralists and others, such as myself. Therefore, the focus of this article is on pastoralists’ experience and articulation of (im)mobilities that indicate how, when, where and why (im)mobilities are made meaningful and life-shaping.

Mobilities become apparent only when seen in reference to one another and their past histories, that is, when seen in relief or as difference. Adey (2006: 77) emphasises this aspect of mobility and asks, ‘in relation to what do things move and constitute space, and how does this have an impact upon whether we consider something as mobile or not?’ Through the example of airports, he shows how there is no absolute but only relative mobility and relative immobility, the question being that of space and time. Distinctions of (im)mobility across different types of circumstances are therefore best approached not as binary distinctions between movement and stasis, but as representations of significance and possibility attributed to varying forms, durations and timings of movement, as well as the intervals between them (Salazar 2018).

Not only must mobility and immobility be seen in relation to each other, but also in relation to other possible forms, patterns and pathways. Figure 8 serves to simplistically explain such a relational approach, where the darker path appears to be curvier/longer than the lighter path. In the absence of the knowledge of the lighter path, the darker path would be experienced as a straight line or shortest path between A and B. It is only in the deviation or difference between the two paths that they can be fully understood. Similarly, pastoral (im)mobility can best be understood when seen against other alternate manifestations of the web of relations that compose it.

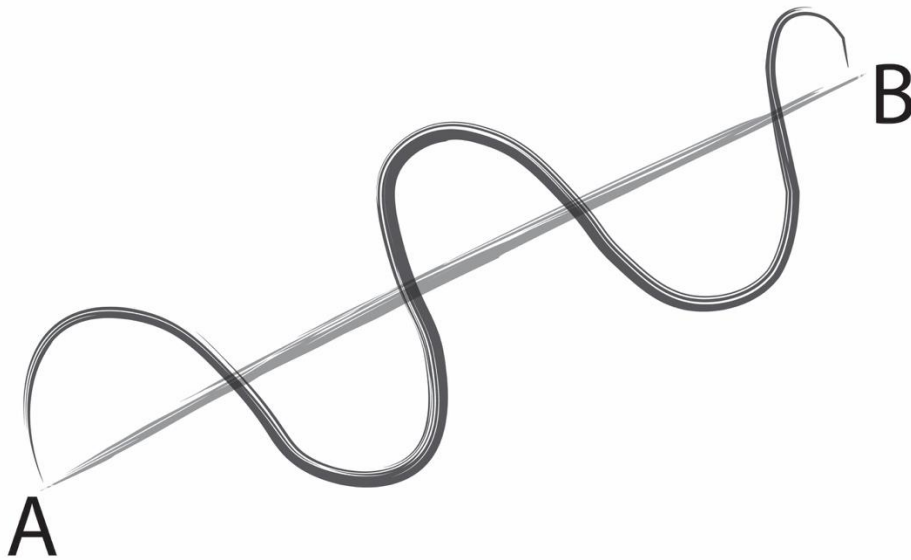


Figure 8. Diagram of relationality. By the author.

By employing a relational lens to mobility, it is possible to reveal its political dimension made of the constraints and freedoms, the capacities and aspirations, the potentials and possibilities of various forms of movement. As discussed in this section, mobility is differentially accessed and understood. Acknowledging the relational politics of mobility, allows to contextualise it and intimately ties it to its social and political history.

For example, in the quote above Pabiben displays a longing for Gujarat and the migration experience while already being on the move. Her feeling of stasis and frustration, therefore, is relative to the meaning attached to her past experience which is expressed affectively through words such as '*faavtu*' (to like) and '*yaad*' (to miss). Migrating to Gujarat means having a larger migrating group, easy access to borewell water, greener environs, a chance to change both the social and environmental landscape. It involves an entanglement of complex feelings, such as trust, fear, friendship, diplomacy, that are an integral part of their daily experience while on the move and encountering others, familiar and unfamiliar. Therefore, Pabiben may go to X's farm, not only because X grants them access, but also because Pabiben likes X, and/or because X's farm lies on the way to an important pilgrimage she wants to make.

The Rabari usually select agricultural 'hotspots' and rely on farmers to grant access to choicest fodder resources. The politics of land and resource allocation in the area has meant that pastoralists must rely on farming cycles and communities for access to grazing, which demands a certain social investment and diplomatic sense. Factors such as rainfall as well as the availability of government subsidies, irrigation infrastructure, agricultural labour, state support, as well as religion, caste, etc, determine when and where pastoralists can migrate. In the end, though, the power balance is tipped in favour of the farmer who ultimately controls the resource.

Gender roles among the Rabari are fixed and reveal another dimension of the politics governing mobility. Vibho, for example, would like to pack and unpack the camp, but because of his male gender he must perform the task of shepherding instead. Nathubhai's movement displays a rather haphazard 'schizophrenic' pattern as he goes scouting, takes the camel to graze, goes to the village, and goes to other camps making several trips back and forth. Being both older and male, he has the greatest flexibility and spontaneity. He dismisses Pabiben's 'haal haal ne haal' as being easier than the men's work. Pabiben's agency to move is limited by the timeline of the male shepherds for whom she must cook.

The relational lens discussed here is important to decipher how pastoralists inscribe flexibility and diversity in their mobility when engaging with vastly fluctuating contexts.⁵ The interconnectedness of mobilities provide the room to manoeuvre changing circumstances by mobilising alternate mobilities in response to variabilities. What becomes mobile, and what becomes immobile, how they are connected and assigned meaning to is also governed by the relational politics of mobility. Such a political orientation helps understand the wider universe within which pastoral mobilities take place.

Conclusion

Pitched against the 'settled', pastoralists have historically been penalised for their mobility. While there is growing recognition of the importance of mobility, there has been limited conceptual advancement in trying to understand mobility in itself as it unfolds in an increasingly mobile world. I employ new approaches from the emerging 'mobilities paradigm' in social sciences to better engage with the process and experience of mobility. I unpack the dichotomy of mobility and immobility that has so marked pastoral development and problematise both – the rigid and fixed categories of 'sedentary' and 'mobile', as well as the continuum that holds them as ideal state.



Figure 9. Pabiben and Nathubhai on the move. By the author.

Instead I show, firstly, that (im)mobilities must be seen in relationship with each other as occurring in a clasp rather than as divergent forces. Secondly, (im)mobilities are also relational to each other and are better understood when seen against each other.

I draw on the experiences of a pastoral family to highlight the ‘complex intersections of ‘endless regimes of flow’, [of pastoral (im)mobilities] which move at different speeds, scales and viscosities’ (Law, 2006, as quoted in Sheller and Urry, 2006: 213). Recognising the multiplicity of contemporary pastoral movements is important as it shows that pastoral (im)mobility is not simply the search for fodder and water for livestock, but a tapestry of several intersecting social, economic, cultural, etc, mobilities that have a bearing on each other.

Further, (im)mobilities are embedded within their own social and political contexts that determine who can move, when and how. The relational politics of mobility (Adey, 2006), thus made apparent, limits not only which mobilities are able to manifest but also determines the experience of them. This has methodological implications too.

(Re)observing the interactions of mobile lives with an increasingly mobile world through the relational lens reveals how pastoralists imbibe and deploy variable (im)mobilities in response to the variability in their economic, ecological, social and political contexts. Recognising the variabilities in mobility dispels the homogenising effects of rigid typologies ontologically, but also practically offers the capacity to adapt to changing times.

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¹ Names of the pastoralists have been changed to protect anonymity.

² I shed the romantic, loaded and essentialist notion of nomadism adopting ‘mobility’ as a broader concept that encompasses ideas such as movement (implying corporeal action), migration (understood as destination-bound practice of mobility that seeks to temporarily or permanently settle), and displacement (because it connotes a deviance from emplacement). Moreover, I use ‘mobility’ not only to indicate the actual performance and experience of moving, but also the potential for it. Immobility is the quality of not moving. (Im)mobility is used to describe the twin nature of mobility and immobility that are interconnected and exist simultaneously.

³ TikTok is a social-networking site that allows users to share short videos directly from their cellphones. It is a sensation amongst the young Rabari pastoralists due to its easy user interface, and the medium of video that supports the aspirations of often illiterate pastoralists.

⁴ The Jat is a community of shepherds that specialise in rearing camels, especially the famous Kharai camels that swim and feed on mangrove vegetation. Often Jat shepherds will pool camels from several owners, along with their own flock, receiving a grazing fee per animal.

⁵ See also Roe, E. 2020. *A New Policy Narrative for Pastoralism? Pastoralists as Reliability Professionals and Pastoralist Systems as Infrastructure*. STEPS Working Paper 113, Brighton: STEPS Centre, for a discussion on how pastoralists seek to increase ‘process variance’, that is, variance in their strategies such as mobility, to match high ‘input variance’ (such as in the availability of fodder) so as to achieve stable production or low ‘output variance’.