

**Pragya Sharma**

## **LIFEWORLD OF WOMEN IN A PASTORAL NOMADIC COMMUNITY: A CASE OF THE RAIKA**

### ***Abstract***

*Raika are semi-nomadic pastoralists of Rajasthan. Each year Raika in collective camps called deras starts on migratory journeys of distance up to 1000 kms. This paper aims to investigate the lives of Raika women. Fieldwork was conducted over 15 days in two predominantly Raika villages, Raika Ki Dhani and Manpur Bakdi, located in the Pali Sirohi region. To study Rebari women during both their settled and migratory phases, one migratory group and 45 sedentary families were examined using an ethnographic research approach.*

**Keywords:** *Raika, nomads, pastoralists, women, lifeworld*

### **Introduction**

Pastoralists are the people who derive a large part of their income on subsistence from raising livestock in conditions where major part of the animal feed is natural forage and crop residue, rather than specifically cultivated and stored fodder or fenced pasture (Sanford 1981:3). Uncertain and variable rainfall, and a socio-political squeeze on common grazing land account for the need to migrate with the flock (Robbin 1998:112).

Pastoralism is differentially associated with nomadic existence. But pastoral groups in India have their permanent villages to which they return after completing their grazing expeditions. Some of them combine pastoralism with agriculture. In Rajasthan there are several non-pastoral nomads such as trading nomads (*Banjaras, Ghattiwala Jogis, and Gowarias*), artisan nomads (*Gaduliya Lohars and Sattias*), and types of nomads who live by providing entertainment to other communities or by offering certain supernatural services (such as *Nats, Kalbelias, Jogis*). They are now in different stages of sedentarization.

Pastoral nomadic communities in Rajasthan have a unique way of life, centered around livestock rearing and seasonal migration. These communities play a crucial role in the socio-economic fabric of the region, adapting to the

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harsh climatic conditions of Rajasthan. Some of the prominent pastoral nomadic communities in Rajasthan are *Raika* (*Rebari* or *Rabari*), *Gujjar*. Pastoral nomads play a crucial role in the ecosystem management of arid regions, maintaining the balance through their migratory practices. Their deep knowledge of animal husbandry and the local environment is invaluable for sustainable development in Rajasthan. Supporting and preserving the unique lifestyle and culture of these pastoral nomadic communities is essential for the ecological and cultural richness of Rajasthan.

Husserl defines the lifeworld as a place distinct from and different to the more systematic observation and considered reflection that characterizes science (1970:132). It refers to the everyday, lived experiences and social realities of individuals, encompassing personal relationships, cultural practices, and social contexts that shape and give meaning to their lives.

The present paper focus on exploring the status and lifeworld of *Raika* women during sedentary as well as migratory part of life.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Analyzing the status of *Raika* women and exploring their lives within the pastoral nomadic community can be understood through the lens of feminist ethnography and cultural ecology.

Feminist ethnography is an approach within anthropology and sociology that seeks to understand and document the lives and experiences of women and other marginalized groups from their own perspectives. It emphasizes the importance of gender as a central category of analysis and is committed to social justice and the empowerment of those studied. This approach lay stress on the importance of understanding women's experiences, roles, and agency within their socio cultural context, focusing on how gender shapes their lifeworld. Moreover it involves immersive, participatory research methods to capture women's voices, narratives, and daily practices. Visweswaran discusses how feminist ethnography challenges traditional ethnographic practices by incorporating reflexivity, considering power dynamics between researcher and subject, and emphasizing the importance of women's voices and experiences. The subject of feminist ethnography is wide-ranging, but the flexibility of its definition is crucial for capturing the diverse experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups (1994:48).

Cultural Ecology is a theoretical framework that examines the relationship between human cultures and their environments. It focuses on how cultural practices and social structures adapt to environmental conditions and how these adaptations influence human behavior and societal development (Steward 2016 : 12). This approach provides a lens to explore the intricate relationship between the *Raika's* nomadic lifestyle and their environmental adaptations. It examines how ecological constraints and opportunities influence

social structures, economic activities, and cultural practices, with particular attention to gender dynamics. This perspective considers how *Raika* women navigate their roles in animal husbandry, resource management, and familial responsibilities within a pastoral economy.

By integrating these perspectives, the framework highlights the interplay between gender, culture, and ecology. It explores how *Raika* women's lifeworld is shaped by their contributions to the pastoral livelihood and the broader socio-environmental context. This approach allows for understanding of the complexities and resilience of *Raika* women, acknowledging their critical role in sustaining their community's way of life amidst ecological and socio-economic challenges.

### **Profile of Raika Community**

The *Raikas* are the main pastoral group in western Rajasthan, also known as *Rebari* or *Dewasi*. The term *Raika* was originally reserved for those *Rebaris* who served as camel mounted messengers to the royal courts of Rajputs. Mainly spreading from western Rajasthan to the Kutch region of Gujrat, the *Raika / Rebari* hamlets survive in a harsh climatic zone. (Westphal-Hellbusch 1975:126). According to Sharma, Hukumat-Ri-Bahi or the court records have entries, which prove that the *Raikas* were the confidants of the kings. They were entrusted with the task of carrying confidential mail from one state to other(1970:166). Elson while discussing about descent of Raikas says, their descendants (i.e. the descendants of Shamal, the first Raika and his wife, the celestial nymph) are said to have lived in Haryana until about a thousand years ago. Need for additional grazing land forced the Rebaris to leave their original home and they wandered through Rajasthan, Sindh and Gujrat, before arriving in Kutch. It is therefore evident that Raikas migrated to Marwar and Kutch regions only under pressure for finding appropriate grazing lands for their herds(1979:23).

Raikas are engaged only in sheep, goat and camel breeding, but they have traditionally herded and taken care of the livestock of other castes as well. Although a few Raikas are specialized camel herders, the community as a whole identifies itself closely with this animal. They combine camel and sheep in their herds in varying proportions. In Bikaner, Jodhpur, Pali and Kota certain Raika hamlets are observed having several camel herds, but flocks of sheep also exist in these hamlets. As we move towards Bikaner, camel herds are larger whereas sheep herds are smaller. In Pali camel herds are smaller but sheep are reared in large number. In Marwar, although the herds do have a couple of camels, which are the beasts of burden, the Raika mainly specialize in sheep breeding and tending. Raikas of Jalore and Sirohi are predominantly sheep breeding communities (Srivastava 1997: 18). Kohler-Rollefson, mentions an exclusively camel oriented Raika community in Pali which not only had a collection of memorable statue depicting camel mounted

ancestors but also self-made clay camels with which local children played.(1995:56)

According to their myth of origin, the first Raika was created by Lord Shiva or Mahadev (the great god) for the specific purpose of looking after the first camel that Parvati, the *ardhangini* (wife) of Lord Shiva, created from clay. The Raikas are divided into two large endogamous groups, the Maru Raika and Godwar Raika. Traditionally, the Godwars are reputed to have bred only camels, whereas Maru group breeds sheep. At present, however, both groups keep sheep as well as camel, and less frequently other cattle (Srivastava 1997: 20).

In Rajasthan, Raikas typically live outside the main village in their own hamlets, known locally as dhanis. These dhanis are sometimes located a few kilometers from the main village. Many Raikas own small plots of land, primarily to maintain village ties rather than for economic purposes, although they often practice a form of 'take-a-chance' cultivation. Each year after the rains, hundreds and thousands of shepherds embark on migratory journeys in collective camps, traveling up to 1000 kilometers and lasting up to nine months. They camp in a new location almost every day, moving at least two villages away for each new campsite. The smooth coordination of such large groups is possible because individual shepherds delegate many decision-making responsibilities to the camp leader, the Nambardar, or to a 'council of elders,' while retaining control over the day-to-day management of their own flocks. They return home once a year around the festival of Holi.

As it so happened, the nomadic way of life turned Raikas and their women folk sturdy, strong and agile. This physical constitution of Raikas prompted feudal lords and royalities to patronize them as messengers and runners between feudal states. They performed this function to the great satisfaction of feudal administration because of their acquaintance and familiarity with various migratory routes. Since the Raikas could never have a settled place of living, they still continue to be a nomadic tribe, although their general standard of living has declined due to lack of patronage by erstwhile feudal lords and royalities.

### **Research Method**

The study has two objectives: First one is to analyze the status of Raika women and the second is to explore lifeworld of Raika women. An exploratory research design and qualitative methods were employed for this study, using non-probability purposive sampling. Fieldwork was conducted over 15 days in two villages predominantly inhabited by Raikas, Raika Ki Dhani and Manpur Bakdi in the Pali Sirohi Belt. To examine the lives of Rebari women during both their sedentary and migratory phases, one migratory flock and 45 sedentary families, who consented to participate, were studied using

an ethnographic research approach.

Various tools were utilized for this study. A semi-structured interview schedule served as the primary tool, supplemented by interview guides, interviews with key informants, and observation to study the sedentary life and general pattern of life of Raika women. This schedule was further supported by quasi-participant observation and interviews to examine their migratory patterns. Group interactions and focused group interviews were also employed to some extent. One migratory group of Raikas was studied in-depth through quasi-participant observation. Overall, a leisurolological approach was adopted for a deeper understanding of the various facets of their lives. Every effort was made to share the respondents' leisure and free time to uncover the truth of their lives and achieve the closest reconstruction of the reality of Raika women.

### **Analysis**

The status of women in the Raika community is deeply intertwined with their roles within the family structure, and it varies significantly based on the position they hold at any given time.

#### **'Woman as a Daughter'**

Girls are rarely sent to school and are expected to help with pastoral and household tasks. However, after marriage, their status increases when they visit their parental home, often being treated with higher regard than their brothers' wives.

#### **'Woman as a Wife'**

Marriage begins with the *muklava* ceremony, often when the girl is around sixteen or seventeen. Initially, she is referred to as a *bindni* (bride) and is tasked with numerous household chores and caring for family members. She must endure any sarcastic remarks in silence and maintain *purdah* (veil) in the presence of all elders. A married woman's status improves once she bears a child, especially a son, but failing to conceive can lead to divorce or her husband taking another wife.

#### **'Woman as a Mother-in-Law'**

A woman's status peaks when her son marries and brings home a *bindni*. She gains authority over her son, his wife, and any grandchildren.

#### **'Woman as a Widow'**

Widowhood is the most challenging phase, significantly lowering her social status and subjecting her to immense suffering. Remarriage is rare, especially if she has children. If childless or with only one child, she might

return to her parents' home, where remarriage is possible.

### **Daily Tasks of Raika Women**

Daughters-in-law are responsible for most domestic work, including fetching water, cooking, cleaning, grinding grains, washing clothes, sewing, and caring for children. Occasionally, they receive help from their husband's unmarried sisters or their mother-in-law.

### **Role in Economic Activities**

Raika women are known for their strong bargaining skills, often keeping their families free of debt. Their dominant role in household economics is significant, especially since men frequently migrate for pastoral activities, leaving women to manage the household and interact with the community.

### **Identification and Ornaments**

*Raika* women are identified by their distinct attire and ornaments. Skirt (*ghaghra*) is typically a dress with eighty pleats, armband (*chura*) is worn on both lower and upper arms, head dress (*ati*) is a conical headpiece. Ornaments are often made from *gillette* (an alloy of brass and zinc) due to financial constraints, though silver is preferred. Key ornaments include, *gokdo* which is a set of four bracelets, *kataria* refers to bracelets worn above the elbow, *payal* is an ankle ornament with jingle bells, *hansli* is a necklace, *nath* is a gold nose ring, *mandalia* and *badia* are thick wrist rings, *mundri* are finger rings, *kandhara* is a waist chain, *kada* and *bichhia* are foot ornaments. Married women are distinguished by certain ornaments like *chuda*- ivory or plastic bangles, *atia*-a conical headpiece, *bichhia*-rings for the feet, *hansli*- a mandatory necklace.

### **Dress of Raika Women**

Raika women prefer colorful garments, with the lower half covered by a long skirt (*ghaghra*) and the upper body by *kurti*, *kanchli*, and *odhni*. These are often decorated with beads and golden frills (*gota*). Widows wear maroon and black garments, while younger women occasionally wear sarees.

### **Dress of the Bride**

During marriage, a bride wears colorful clothing provided by the groom's family, avoiding white and black. The bride's dress is adorned with golden frills, and she wears a *mod*, a decorative cardboard piece, on her head.

### **Leisure Time of Raika Women**

Understanding the leisure time of Raika women is crucial to gaining a

comprehensive insight into their lifeworld. Leisure activities provide a window into their cultural practices, social interactions, and personal well-being. In the context of the *Raika* community, a pastoral nomadic group, leisure time is intertwined with their daily responsibilities and seasonal migration. By examining how *Raika* women spend their leisure time, we can better understand their social roles, coping mechanisms, and the cultural significance of their traditions. This exploration also highlights the resilience and adaptability of these women in balancing their demanding lifestyles with moments of rest and recreation.

### Leisure Hours Available to Girls

55 girls below seventeen years of age have been included in this category. They were interviewed and their responses were recorded for this study.

**Table No. 1: Leisure Hours Available to Raika Girls**

S. No.	Leisure hours per day	Extent of Participation N=55	
		Frequency (f)	%
1.	<2	3	5.45
2.	2-3	22	40.00
3.	>3	30	54.55
	<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Table No.1 shows that almost all *Raika* girls have more than two hours of leisure time. And, if we look to the numbers who have more than three hours of leisure, it compares well with boys and even exceeds their number. One of the main reasons for girls having more leisure time than boys is that in *Raika* community is they do not go to school. They do not also go on migration. They generally stay home and help elderly women in household chores, kitchen work and cattle care.

**Table No. 2 : Priority of Leisure and Recreational Activities Amongst Raika Girls**

Priority	Name of Activity	Extent of Participation N=55	
		Frequency (f)	%
1.	Group Oriented	13	23.64
2.	Quietistic	9	16.36
3.	Family Oriented	8	14.55
4.	Artistic and Cultural	7	12.73
5.	Hobby Oriented	7	12.73
6.	Games and Sports	6	10.90
7.	T.V. Viewing	5	9.09
	<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Table No.2 shows that *Raika* girls prefer to indulge in group-oriented activities during their leisure time. They form homogeneous groups for past time activities. Quietistic activities and family oriented voluntary work are their second and third priorities respectively.

Group-oriented activities include chatting, meeting friends, moving with friends, attending social gatherings like festivals and socio-cultural occasions like birth and marriage. They give second priority to quietistic activities, relaxing and walking. Among the family-oriented activities the most popular are talking and gossiping with the members of family keeping and playing with children, taking care of the old, helping mother and *bhabhi* in household chores, taking care of kids and so on. Another activity, which accounts for the participation of 12.7% *Raika* girls is artistic and cultural, which includes wide range of activities such as visiting and participating in the *melas*, enjoying fun, merrymaking and singing Rajasthani folksongs along with other women of the house. Leisure time activity which accounts for the participation of about 12.7% girl respondents is hobby oriented. Of this past time, they are fond of stitching their traditional coloured dress (*kurti, kanchli, odhni, ghagra*). Some are interested in making garlands of glass beads, flowers etc. They are also very fond of *char chunda* or *jhula khana* (to swing). Activities under the category of games and sports are reported by 10.9% of *Raika* girls. They are very fond of playing imitation games of wedding dolls. Some girls form bride's side and others the bridegroom's side. Bridegroom's side girls decorate a doll as a bridegroom and go to bride's house in procession. Girls of bride's side decorate the doll as a bride. Then they perform marriage rituals, imitating them to the extent they know, and thus play it as a game. Sometimes, small boys and girls become bride and bridegroom (*beend and beendni*) taking seven nuptial rounds, just to initiate a real marriage in a game. The category of audio-visual activities received the minimum favour from girl respondents, as only 9.1% reported this activity as their leisure past time. No girl was reported listening to radio, they only watch T.V., but that too rarely because, has been said earlier, only two T.V. sets are available in the whole *dhani*, and they are seldom allowed to go to owner's house to see it.

Young girls of 6-7 years of age assist their mothers in the household chores like cooking, grinding grains, giving fodder to lambs and so on and at other time they are free to idle away their time. Boys and girls play together till the age of 4-5 years, after which girls play in the company of girls only. They are married at an early age, but *muklawā* takes place at the age of 14-17 years. Till that time, a girl gets informal training in cooking, cattle rearing and other household chores. They are also taught lessons in submissiveness, which is greatly desired on the part of girls among *Raikas*.

### **Patterns of Leisure among Women**

Daily work schedule of *Raika* women is very hectic. Their whole day just passes in fulfilling the demands of home and hearths. Moreover, they



have to look after the cattle and extend help to their male members in agriculture in case they possess any land. Thus, one is always curious to know whether they at all get any leisure time and if so, to what use or utility such hours are put to. For understanding leisure pattern of Raika women, 120 women above 18 years of age were interviewed and observed.

**Table No.3 :Leisure Hours Available to Raika Women**

S. No.	Leisure hours per day	Extent of Participation N=120	
		Frequency (f)	%
1.	<2	40	33.30
2.	2-3	60	50.00
3.	>3	20	16.70
	<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Table No.3 shows, one third of the respondents have less than two hours or upto two hours of leisure everyday. Half of them get 2 to 3 hours of leisure time and less than 17% enjoy larger leisure time i.e. more than three hours. This last group mainly consists of older women. Thus, most of the younger women have a tight and hectic schedule with little time for leisure and relaxation.

**Table No.4 : Priority of Leisure and Recreational Activities Among Raika Women**

Priority	Activities	Extent of Participation N=120	
		Frequency (f)	%
1	Group Oriented	49	40.84
2	Family Oriented	21	17.51
3	Quietistic	16	13.33
4	Artistic and Cultural	11	9.16
5	Economic and Self Employing	10	8.33
6	Religious	9	7.51
7	T.V. Viewing	2	1.66
8	Deviant	2	1.66
	<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Three most common means of recreation which *Raika* women enjoy and prefer to indulge in during their leisure in order of priority are group oriented activities then family oriented activities and the last quietistic activities. Among the group-oriented activities, the most popular are gossiping, meeting neighbours, a visit to relatives, attending social calls and socio-cultural occasions like birth, marriage and so on. Some other group oriented activities that *Raika* women enjoy are social gatherings sitting together in the afternoon and singing of group songs together. *Raika* as we know is a nomadic tribe, and the returning of *dang* to village is itself an occasion for them and they celebrate it together by singing songs. Second priority is given to family oriented

activities, which forms 17.5% of their leisure time engagement. It includes spending time with children, taking care of the old, keeping the kids, sitting with family members (specially with women of the household), telling tales to kids, singing songs for kids, gossip with family members, teaching children what is good and leaving them what is bad. Another activity, which provides recreation to 13.3% of respondents falls under quietistic category, which includes day sleeping staying idle at home, relaxing for sometime after the hectic schedule, just doing nothing except thinking about oneself. Artistic and Cultural activities provide recreation to 9.2% of respondents. This group includes the activities, which can be included in aesthetic. The concept of doing things, which have both beauty and utility is the keynote of folk aesthetics. It can be seen in the decoration of their dwellings. Their sensitivity to art and beauty is particularly evident in the way they decorate their homes with *mandna*, adorning the façade, walls, and floors. Their designs typically feature simple motifs such as flowers, animals, and birds. Occasionally, these motifs are combined to create intricate and fantastical designs. Sometimes, all designs are combined together and some fantastic designs are created. They also decorate walls with Goddess *Durga* during *Navratri*, and with *Sheetla Mata*, the protecting Goddess of children, on *Shetlaashthmi* day. *Paglia*, footprints design is also sometimes made on floor. According, to their tradition, the courtyard of a dwelling must never be left without a floor decoration after it has been cleaned and coated with cow dung. Another, leisure time activity falling under this category is decoration of hands and feet with *mehandi* (*henna*). It is regarded as symbolic of good luck for married women. A sticky paste is created by mixing a small amount of water with *henna* leaf powder and is carefully applied using a matchstick. This leisurely process results in delightful patterns that, once dried, leave red designs imprinted on the skin. The designs typically feature leaves, flowers, and similar motifs. The other leisure time activity, which accounts for the participation of 8.3% of respondents, is economic and self-employing. This category includes, making cow dung cakes and drawing *ghee* out of curds. *Raika* women also utilize their spare time in making *papad*, *rabodi kari* (a dish. prepared by cooking *Bajra* or maize in buttermilk), preparing pickles, and cleaning the house with cow dung. Next came the activities, which can be included under the category of religious activities. It accounts for the participation of 7.5% of these women. Remembering *mat-pita*, *gurudev* (mother, father and the teacher), doing mental exercise for remembering God 'the Almighty' (*mala pherna*) singing *bhajans* and songs of *Pabuji*, *Ramdeo*ji and attending singing sessions of *Pabuji's* episodes, which are generally held at night. It is quite surprising to note, that no *Raika* women in the area of study was observed visiting temples which is a frequent leisure time activity among women (specially old age women) of other castes. Two more leisure activities, which provide recreation to about 1.7% of respondents each are T.V. and deviant activities. The reasons behind less percentage of respondents watching T.V. is, the non-availability of sufficient number of T.V. sets in the village. Moreover

they can't see T.V. along with male members of the household or else in their presence they have to see it in veil, which is quite inconvenient for them. Deviant activities includes, taking *bidi & gutka*. These ill habits are found mainly among old women.

### Conclusion

In the Raika community, patriarchal living is the prevailing family structure. Sons inherit their father's name, making the community both patronymic and patrilineal. However, what's remarkable is the dominant role of women within this social setup. Raika men often need to ask their wives for pocket money, and it's the women who decide whether men should share information with others through gestures or words. This dynamic can be attributed to the nomadic lifestyle of Raika men, who frequently migrate, leaving women in the village to manage household responsibilities and interact with various people.

Despite the conservative nature of Raika families, women serve as spokesperson for the entire community. Interestingly, there's a saying in village communities: "*siyani Rebarin janme bhola Rebari, aur bholi Baniyani janme siyana Baniya.*" This proverb suggests that intelligent and cunning Rebari women give birth to simple *Rebari* men, while straightforward *Baniya* women give birth to intelligent and shrewd businessmen.

Although *Raika* women typically adhere to *purdah* (veiling) practices and are primarily housewives, they step up to protect their families and community from external threats. Despite lacking formal education and not participating in voting during political elections, they collectively face challenges alongside their male counterparts. *Raika* women play essential roles within their community, even though they face restrictions in other aspects of life.

In communities where men frequently move due to herding activities, women naturally take on significant roles in family and social management. During men's absence, women supervise families consisting of elderly members, children, and nursing mothers. They protect their families from life's uncertainties and handle interactions with other families and social groups. Additionally, women who accompany male relatives on journeys to find fodder for herds play crucial roles in managing temporary camps. They collect fuel, cook, count cattle, settle disputes, and draw on their knowledge to interact with settled communities. Overall, *Raika* women exhibit a strong presence, balancing traditional pastoralism, social networks, and cultural practices while preserving ancestral wisdom in the face of modern challenges.

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