

# Economic Activities among Barra Community in Sindh, Pakistan: A Case study of Matli Town, District Badin

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## ABSTRACT

This Research paper deals with ethnography of Barra community with special focus on their economic activities. Main concern of research paper is to present a holistic view of this community in general and particular question the relationship between their income generating activities and social life. Research paper is an attempt to provide the analysis of community and way they organize to carry out socio-economic activities. Every community has a distinctive culture, which refers to customary behavior and beliefs that are passed on through the process of enculturation. Barra is a word which is used for calling a boy or child of Ghara community which is now the identity of Ghara community but before the partition they were known as "GhargulaFaqeer" which is another caste of community because their occupations were same, they both sell handmade pots; toys and other things with selling hand made things they were used to beg too but slowly and gradually they diverted toward begging and their identity changed in the process and they started to known as "Barra". They are nomads where ever they found the empty plot and someone give them protection and provide them safety. They have been living in Matli from century and half but as they are nomads so they pasture from one place to another but their center always been Matli. They are Hindus and belong to scheduled caste but they don't consider themselves "Shudar".

**Key Words:** Community, Subsistence Economy, Socio-Economic Activities, Begging

## INTRODUCTION

In view of many stimulating results of community studies, it is not surprising that a considerable time have been considered as the principle means to obtain the necessary empirical material for the construction of ethnological and sociological theories. Ethnographers are sent away on expedition to faraway places to describe the daily lives of unknown tribes and primitive people or busy probing communities in their own societies. Anderson sums up all elements that seem to be of importance in connection to community; "The community, in short, may thought of as a global social unity in which exists various types of social organization; it is also a place where people find means to live,

it is a palace not only of economic activity and of human association, but it is also the palace human association, but it is a palace where memories are centered. Moreover, the community has the equity of duration, representing an accumulation of group experience which comes out of the past and extends to t through time ,even though the individuals making up the community forever coming and going” (Anderson 1960: 20) .

At every stage of human society people have organized certain economic system to fulfill their basic needs through utilization of resources. The economic anthropologists have studied different economic systems. According to Miller the task of anthropologists as follows, “The task of economic anthropologists is first of all to describe the variety economic arrangements developed by human kind in different times and places. Economic anthropologists then sort those diverse arrangements into classes and attempts to fit them with different types of societies and cultures.” (Miller 1979:214) The women in its various roles as mother, wife, daughter, grandmother, daughter in law helps in household affairs to boost the economy so household has been taken as the basic unit of analysis for studying women in economic contribution.

Every culture has its economic structure which can be different according to their norms and customs, for example in an advance city women can do work in offices and organization in accordance with their special fields, but in rural societies women’s economic activities and contribution is quite different. Keeping this in mind, this research will explore women’s participation in relation to production and consumption and how their economic utility transforms into their economic and social empowerment. A research had been done by Farzana Masood and Mahajabeen. In this research they emphasize on the women’s participation in farm operation, “In Economy, women are very productive. They not only participate in group production and livestock management but are also fully responsible for household activities and make handicrafts to maintain a steady flow of house hold income. They also play significance role in farm decision making”. (Masood et al 1989:15)

## METHODOLOGY

Present anthropological study was conducted from February to July 2008 in town of Matli, District Badin. In the Matli Barra community lives only in the two *muhulahs*<sup>1</sup> namely Garibabad and Khatri Paro. The members of the both *muhullah* are living in different conditions and within different ethnic group. The household of community were consisting of 30 households. Data was collected through Key Informant Interviews, Participant Observation, Socio-Economic Survey, In-depth Interviews and Case studies. At initially the researchers met a community member named Virdas, who guided to get permission from four *Patels* (Political leader) then he could able to continue my studies but *Patels* of the Barra community responded me with suspicion. Few of them behaved scornfully and even refused to speak with me but I continue to keep spirits high and started to company them at their “*Thalas*”<sup>2</sup> and their meeting palaces. This how ever did not solve the whole problem but they did not object my presence. but get hostile upon asking questions pertaining to their life. Elderly people tried to keep me at a distance and warned the youth against consequences of talking to me. Despite the high resistance, I succeeded in approaching young people who used to sell clothes in markets; they responded me politely but not friendly. I started to tell them about myself. This chatting provided me a chance to understand their habits, gestures, traditions and their understanding

<sup>1</sup>Muhulah is a geographical boundary which consist of multiple streets

<sup>2</sup> The place more like footpath where they sale their clothes

proved to be much of value later. After repeated assurance about my being student, I could secure the positive opinion of the community. Slowly and gradually I got their confidence but it took me more than two weeks to build rapport then they allowed me to work.



A view of Matli Town

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The subsistence economy of Barra community has changed with course of the time and this change in subsistence has also affected the identity of the Barra community. Before Partition in 1947 they use to make pots and clay toys, and with that profession people called them Gurgula Fakeer just because other Ethnic community Gurgala also used to practice same profession and it was their traditional profession. Barra community shared the same identity in among local people due to same economic subsistence. Gradually they started to beg and obtained another identity which was not shared but it is the word which community usually use to call or to get attention of any member in the community, the word was "Barra" caught by the locale people and they started to call every member of community "Barra". Slowly and gradually it became the identity of the community. As community adopted new professions and left ancestral professions because the mobility of community has been restricted and they have started to adopt permanent residence pattern. As their mobility is restricted to the few cities that are also not for longer period's so they started to adopt new professions in terms of their permanent settlements. They have following ancestral professions and new professions too.

**Rope making:** Rope making was their traditional profession. Now very few of them know this art but nobody makes it because now this profession needs lot of hard work and produces very less profit. In other professions which now they practice, can earn more and need very little effort and less investment. In this profession every member of the house hold was being

involved from making of the rope to selling of the rope. The material that is used for the rope making is *sotali* (yarn) from palm netafter then in three four days *dero* (rope ball) is made from *sotalli* (yarn). In last rope is made from that *dero*. This is the also the reason that now in community few members know the art of making rope while new generation didn't know so they can't provide assistance as well as support to old artisans family members

**Making of clay pots and toys:** This profession is practiced before the partition then slowly and gradually they left it. They didn't use any tools to make clay toys or pots but they those clay toys and pots by hands. Females use to make these clay toys and pots and male use to sell them but due to adoption begging, they left this profession. This was the profession which gave them identity of "GurgalaFaqeer" because the Gurgala is the community which also uses to sell clay pots and toys; so due to the same profession they shared same identity. But later they left the profession and which gradually changed their identity to Barra.

**Begging:** After partition in 1947 they started begging with their traditional profession. Slowly and gradually they left their old and ancestral professions and confined themselves to begging only which need no hard work. People of all ages can adopt it easily. During the adoption of begging they obtained the identity of Barra. Recently the young generation has adopted the profession of selling second hand clothes so now they have main economic subsistence.

The Barra are known as beggars but recently young generation of males have adopted new professions like selling clothes (*phari*<sup>3</sup>, ironing clothes, stitching and selling) or shoes polish but still females from young to old women use to beg. They are practicing begging from many years in Matli Town and in nearby villages and cities. In the Barra old men use to beg but they are also in very small number because most of old people are sick and unable to move long distances which is prerequisite for begging. Most of young females go to other cities or villages other than their native town. The reason that they give is that in those cities no one keeps eye on them and that's why it reduces the chances of quarrels among the family. Old women mostly beg in their native town or in surroundings. In the morning when young man go to sell clothes or their professions, the women and men set off for begging on the cities, towns and villages. They beg in the streets and along the market. Children from 4-5 stay at home with their other kinds and very rarely accompany mothers or grandmothers in begging. They begin groups; these groups are based on the on age. Female children from 7- 11 have their own group to beg while boys of that age usually go for polish or collecting garbage. From 13 - 20 young female beg and earn more than other age groups. They make groups on bases of age because they are easy with each other and can converse informally and keep secrets of each other well.

I observed them begging many times, usually they start before the sun rise from Barra settlement and reached the main bazaar within fifteen minutes then different groups take buses for different cities and some groups spread out in cities. They beg for food, used clothes, and money. During begging they begin groups and reached to the city centers and they separate from each other in different direction on deciding the place where they have to rejoin. Every female beggar covers each shop and home because of that each female beggar is able to know everybody in city by name and so is the case with shopkeepers that they were also familiar with them even they knew their relation among them selves. The technique which female beggars used in begging was very simple and they don't have to struggle for getting food or money even they beg for cigarettes. They have beg as they have every right to take money or food form shopkeepers but from

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<sup>3</sup>it resembles a Sunday Bazar in cities but in rural areas it is called phari

strangers they only forward their hand and say “Allah jay nalaytesath” (give me in the name of Allah) and don’t emphasis. In contrast to young women old women had to struggle and get very little amount in begging in comparison to young women. They had to struggle with every stranger so they mostly cover homes in street where they get enough food items. After begging for three or four hours, they come to prearranged point in that area where they share food items with each other and mostly they eat fruit and smoke some cigarettes. After some break they move to next place and go through same process. At evening all female beggars gather at center of the market where they buy the essentials for the home and for dinner. Slowly and gradually they move to their settlements.

The technology of begging includes wooden stick which is only used by old female beggars and a bowl which is use to drink tea or water because they don’t use utensils of other ethnic communities and Muslims. They also carry shoppers which are used to put fruit and vegetables or eatables to put into it. Some times in the course of begging they make certain types of pretenses and concoct different stories to gain the sympathies of the people such as they utilize the illness of any member of the group. Sometimes, the death of the person amongst them also publicized for begging and stories of family quarrels are told and retold to the women to earn more than the usual amount.

Now day’s young generation started to consider begging of females as humiliation and they have started to protest. Many of the young members of the community are not in the favor of the begging. They are of the view that they were actually of high caste and purest amongst the Hindus but female begging is the reason that makes them impure. One of the young member from the community told that they want to abolish begging from community but the reason that we are not able to eliminate because most us (males) not able to earn through labour or they are not able generate enough money that they can fulfill their need so every one of us has to depend on their daughters, sisters, mothers or wife. There is also another reason that another member told me was about curses of female beggars which may impairment them and to prove that he told me an incident that of their grandfather who tried to restrict the females to home and didn’t allowed them to beg. He almost succeeded but curses of female beggars worked and he became mental.

**Table1: Percentage of Persons Involve in Begging**

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Males	8	4.65
Females	57	33.14

Source: Socio-Economic Survey

**Selling Clothes:** This profession has been adopted very recently and by the young generation of the male members of the community. By this profession most of the members earned respect in the community and as well as money. This profession was actually diffused from their relatives living in Hyderabad to them. Their relatives from Hyderabad often come to Matli to sell their clothes and in this way this transmitted to the community living in Matli. Main reason for adopting this profession was also that it may cover the every family member from young child to old man or women. This profession includes several sub profession in which every member is used to save the cast and generate more income. Those sub professions are as following

**Phari:** *Phari* is term which is used for collection of old clothes through exchange plastic utensils of home by moving through cities and villages. This sub profession is adopted by

the most of the young generation because it is more profitable than other sub profession in selling clothes. For *phari* members of the community have to go Hyderabad to buy plastic utensils which are mostly consisted of *balti* (plastic buckets) and *kownro* (small plastic bucket) and visits to Hyderabad depends upon the utilization of plastic utensils. After buying plastic utensils, they go to particular city or village as to move around that city or village to collect old clothes in exchange of plastic utensils. They exchange depends upon the quality of clothes and value of plastic utensils. There are not any specific standards for the exchange because of variation in customers. Most of customers don't care about what is given back to them in exchange just because either they only wanted to get rid of clothes or they exchange old clothes in sympathy and some are very much conscious of what they have given and what they are getting in exchange. They collect all clothes in big sheet which they take it by right hand with support of shoulder and in left hand they take plastic utensils. *Phari* is mostly practiced by the young generation it needs strong hold of hands and stamina because of heavy weight of clothes and plastic utensils. For the collection of old clothes they even stay in different cities such as Tando Mohammad Khan, Badin, Talhar and small towns. They mostly have their relatives in all above cities and small towns and if they have no relative in specific town they stay at *ottaq*<sup>4</sup> of well-to-do person. Such stay of any individual give him more profit than working nearby area of Matli. This sub profession also reflects the nomadic life of members of the community members.

**Stitching of Old Clothes:** As there is proverb that "Stitch in time saves nine", this proverb really fits with this sub profession. As collected clothes are old and are mostly torn so those need some stitching as to make it as proper as to get more profit from customer. Mostly stitching is done by the person who collects clothes through *phari* but every family there has enable person who able to mend the clothes and it varies to family to family either it is female (wife, sister or mother) or male who provides assistance but in other cases one who does this job takes money in against every cloth depending on stitch.

**Washing and ironing of clothes:** As it is also sub profession for females who stay at home and do not go for begging and males who can't move or go for the work. Mostly community member involve the family members as they can save money. Mostly for this activity females at home are utilized. When all clothes are stitched properly then they are washed by hands on the stream outside the city where they also take bath. If there is no body that can iron clothes in the family then they give clothes to other person on some conditions. For ironing clothes if one provides coal iron then one will pay 1:50 rupees per dress and if he can't provide the iron then he has to pay 3 rupees per dress.

After washing and ironing, clothes are ready to sell to customers. So to sell these clothes some have shops like. Some sell clothes on footpath which is totally reserved to only them and some sell on *pieri* which occurs in different areas on different weekdays. Some community members don't collect clothes by *phari* but they directly buy from Hyderabad or from Karachi and sell in Matli Town and there was such a person from community because he is not able to walk properly so that is the reason he is not able to collect clothes through *phari* so is the case with other old members of community.

### Other subsistence patterns

**Shoe polish:** This profession is mostly adopted by very young children from ten years to eighteen years. As in Barra community everyone is independent and has to earn for him /her selves so most of the young boys earn for themselves by polishing shoes. Those

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<sup>4</sup>The is common place owned mostly by the landlord of the area for the male guttering

young boys do not earn on regular bases but they often go to city by taking the wooden box to earn money by polishing shoes.

**Selling Balloons:** As mentioned earlier Barra community used to sell clay toys, but now they have switched over to sell balloons as economic source. This profession mostly practiced by the mid age people from 40 to 50 because it does not need much of the labour and not necessary to heavy load also they don't have to invest more money. The children do not practice this profession because they are not able; they are so strong to move around with bamboo with which balloons are carried. Young generation does not practice because it does not provide them enough profit.

**Garbage collection:** This profession is practiced only by children whose age is six to ten. They use to collect the recyclable garbage specially papers from their surroundings and they give that garbage at shop which in their *mohallah* and earn their pocket money.

**Table 2: Percentage of People Involved in Different Occupation**

Sr. No	Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
1	Begging	65	37.79
2	Selling clothes	42	24.42
3	Selling Balloons	9	5.23
4	Collect wastage	8	4.65
5	Shoe polish	16	9.30
6	Rope Making	1	0.58
7	Idle males	5	7.56
8	Idle females	13	9.91
9	Small children	11	6.39

Source: Socio-Economic Survey

## PROPERTY

The concept of *Property* is a cultural universal. For a group to utilize the natural resources at its disposal with degree of security and continuity, it must have adequate definitions for the rights of ownership and its use. Rules regarding the possession, handling and disposition of property are found in every culture. In the Barra community Property is mostly treated as being of two types: naturally movable or unmovable. Among Barra community lack of immovable property encourages their vagrancy. In the Barra community property consists of stuff food, tools, dogs, ceremonial items such as Gita, Garnth, clothing, some light ornaments, household utensils. These can be borrowed and tools are shared among them.

Inheritance of property follows a well-defined set of rules. When a person dies all his property goes to his spouse. When both the parents die, their property is divided among the sons. If sons are not alive, then it goes to daughter of the deceased and grandsons or if daughter is deceased then to granddaughters. If they have no son as well, then property goes to female side. And even they have no son as well as no daughter then their property is distributed among male and female collaterals. Mostly property is possessed by person who is more close to them from their relatives consanguineals of males or his affinal i.e. consanguineals of female in the cases he lives with after the death of her husband.

On the occasion when parents die leaving behind young children, inheritance is suspended until they become adults and guardian is charged with the responsibility for the property, usually a guardian is a father's brother, if he has no brother then mother's brother.

## **CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN IN ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES**

A woman is the companion of a man in all sorts of development including her contribution in the economic activities of household. The women in its various roles as mother, wife, daughter, grandmother, and daughter-in-law helps in house hold affairs to boost the economy. So in a Barra community woman plays also an important role in their life. Women from child to old contribute in household economy. Women do not depend on the other family members for economic resources but contribute through different ways. In the Barra community women mostly follow the begging profession from young girl to old women. In every household wives, mothers, daughters and grandmothers use to beg and mostly they are the only ones who runs the house without the contribution of males because most of them are sick or drug addicts. Women who beg leave their homes at very early morning and join their group mates and disperse and collect money, fruit and vegetables for the utilities for the house hold. New born children always been with women while begging and they fulfill their needs in whole day such as they provide them lunch, fruit and complete their wants whole day. Gather different items for other children too and whenever they get any fruit or eatables they always shared it with their children. While coming back they buy all utilities for home and come back to home before sunsets. When they reach at home they fulfill their household chores such as cleaning hut, making dinner and taking care of children. The women who stay at home are very rare but they all engage themselves in helping their brothers, fathers and husbands in profession such as stitching clothes, airing balloons and ironing clothes. They are also responsible to take care of the weak and sick people in the other huts surrounding them. In Barra community house hold activities are run by women who are mother or grandmother and she is one whom family members give their earnings. She is responsible for savings and responsible for spending for house hold utilities. One for my key informant told me that they now they don't give whole the earnings to their mother because if we give her, she saves that money and don't give us back to invest it in our business but we still give her enough money to run home affairs.

## **ROLE AND STATUS OF WOMEN IN BARRA COMMUNITY**

Women in the Barra community are not liable to give explanations to other fellow unless they commit such thing which is considered taboo in the community. A woman plays very important role in the economic activities of the Barra community because she is source generating resources and runs household activities so women member is also considered equally important in the community as male member in the community. Woman is fully independent to choose her spouse in the community who is feasible to get married with and before getting married women have affairs in the community and no one in the family to questions about it. In extreme condition, family may show loathe but cannot restrict women to keep affairs because woman in the family equally contributes in household economy and acquires equal status as male have. Women behave more like men in the community such as they smoke openly and are addicts from young girls to old women. There are two women members who sell drugs in their community and those whom they know personally. In the community women also have children before marriage and it's not considered taboo in the family.

## **CONCLUSION**

As community adopted new professions and left ancestral professions because the mobility of community has been restricted so they have started to adopt permanent residence pattern. They have left their ancestral professions and now few of them know the art of making rope, clay pots and toys making, which were practiced before the partition then slowly and gradually



they left it. Making clay pots and toys was the profession, which gave them identity of “GurgalaFaqeer”.

After the partition they started begging with their traditional profession and slowly and gradually they left their old and ancestral professions and started begging, which did not need hard work and could easily be adopted by child to old. During the adoption of begging they obtained the identity of Barra, but they are practicing begging from many years in Matli Town and in nearby villages and cities. In the Barra old men use to beg but they are in very small number, because most of old people are sick and unable to move to long distances which is prerequisite for begging. Most of young females go to other cities or villages other than their own city. Recently the young generation has adopted the profession of selling second hand clothes so now it is their main economic subsistence. This profession includes several sub profession such as *phari* in which old clothes are collected in exchange of plastic utensils by moving through cities and villages collected clothes are old and are mostly torn so those need some stitching as to make it proper as to get more profit from customer. After washing and ironing, clothes are ready to sell to customers at shops, footpaths and *phari*. By this profession most of the members has earned respect in the community as well as money. This profession was actually diffused from their relatives living in Hyderabad to them. Their relatives from Hyderabad often come to Matli to sell their clothes and in this way this transmitted to the community living in Matli. Main reason for adopting this profession was that it involved every family member from young child to old man or woman in economic sphere. In the Barra community women mostly follow the begging profession from young girl to old women. In every household, wives, mothers, daughters and grandmothers use to beg and mostly they are the only ones, who run the house without the contribution of males because most of them are sick or drug addicts. Women, who beg, leave their homes at very early morning and join their group mates and disperse and collect money, fruit and vegetables for the utilities of the household. New born children always have been with women while begging and they fulfill their needs in whole day such as they provide them lunch, fruit. In Barra community household activities are run by women who are mother or grandmother and she is one to whom family members give their earnings. She is responsible for savings and responsible for resource management. One of my key informant told me that they don't give whole the earnings to their mother because if they give her, she saves that money and doesn't give them back to invest it in their business but now they give her enough money to run home affairs.

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