

Research Paper

Assessing Perceived Policy Interventions for Inclusive Development: Insights from Tribal Pastoralists in Jammu & Kashmir

Shariqa Hussain^{1*}, Vani Narula²

ABSTRACT

Tribal pastoralists in Jammu & Kashmir—including the Gujjars and Bakarwals—face long-standing socio-economic marginalization despite the presence of multiple government welfare schemes. This study explores how pastoralist communities perceive policy interventions aimed at their development and inclusion. Using a qualitative exploratory approach incorporating interviews, case studies, and field observations along migratory routes, the research identifies persistent access barriers shaped by mobility, documentation constraints, low institutional outreach, and shifting ecological pressures. Pastoralists commonly perceive welfare systems as inaccessible, unfair, or misaligned with their nomadic realities. The study underscores the need for mobility-sensitive policies, improved grassroots service delivery, and greater pastoralist participation in decision-making. Strengthening such mechanisms is essential for achieving inclusive development and aligns with the global momentum created by the UN's International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (2026).

Keywords: Perception, Inclusive Development, Tribal, Pastoralists

Pastoralist communities in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) represent one of the oldest and most ecologically significant socio-cultural groups in the Himalayan region. Their livelihood practices—centered on transhumance, a form of seasonal migration—are not only economic strategies but deeply interwoven cultural and social lifelines. The two major tribal pastoral populations, the Gujjars and Bakarwals, traverse mountain ranges, valleys, riverine landscapes, and alpine meadows in a cyclical pattern that has sustained rangeland ecosystems for centuries. Their movements maintain pasture health, support soil regeneration, prevent overgrazing, and facilitate biodiversity through natural grazing cycles. They also form the backbone of the livestock economy, contributing milk, meat, hides, wool, and other products to regional markets and household consumption patterns.

Despite these contributions, pastoralists remain one of the most marginalized social groups in terms of human development indicators. Their access to education, healthcare, social protection schemes, financial inclusion, electricity, sanitation, and public services remains far below the state average. Deep-rooted structural inequities, geographical remoteness,

¹PhD Research Scholar, Department of Social Work, JMI, New Delhi, India

²Professor, Department of Social Work, JMI, New Delhi, India

*Corresponding Author

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mobility patterns, ecological vulnerabilities, and administrative invisibility have combined to create a persistent development gap (Bonfoh et al, 2016). The study captures this contradiction: although multiple schemes exist, they seldom reach pastoralists due to barriers rooted in governance structures, documentation requirements, and the sedentary assumptions embedded within welfare delivery systems. Pastoralists overwhelmingly perceive welfare services as inaccessible, unhelpful, and misaligned with their daily realities (Devereux & Tibbo, 2013).

Understanding pastoralists' perceptions of these interventions is crucial. Perceptions shape trust, willingness to participate, and engagement with institutions (Kaye-Zwiebel et al, 2014). If communities perceive welfare systems as unfair, rigid, or irrelevant, this results in avoidance, mistrust, failed enrolment, and systemic exclusion. In J&K, this cycle is especially visible among the Gujjars and Bakarwals, who frequently articulate feelings of administrative distance, disrespect, or institutional neglect.

The context of this research gains heightened significance with the United Nations' declaration of 2026 as the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP) (Flintan et al, 2024). This international recognition calls for renewed focus on the rights, visibility, and development of pastoral communities worldwide. For India, and especially for J&K, this presents an opportunity to align domestic policy frameworks with global directives for pastoral inclusion. The study situates this research within that momentum, arguing for the need to strengthen mobility-sensitive and culturally grounded governance models.

This study, therefore, aims to explore how pastoralist tribes of J & K experience, interpret, and evaluate the policy interventions intended for their welfare. Rather than assessing administrative metrics or official performance reports, it foregrounds the voices of pastoralists themselves—their perspectives, frustrations, expectations, trust levels, and experiences with welfare institutions. This focus is essential, as pastoralists' lived experiences reveal deeper structural issues than statistical indicators can capture.

Furthermore, this research responds to a significant gap in existing literature: the lack of qualitative, ethnographic, and perception-based studies on pastoralist development in J&K. Most available scholarship focuses on rangeland ecology, livestock production, or conflict over forest resources. Few examine social protection systems through the eyes of pastoral communities, and even fewer adopt a mobility-sensitive analytic perspective.

The introduction sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of pastoralism in J&K, the structural constraints surrounding welfare access, and the need for inclusive governance. The following section provides an expanded background, grounded deeply in the study, explaining the socio-historical context of pastoralism, structural inequalities, and the policy environment.

Pastoralism in Jammu & Kashmir: Livelihood, Identity, and Ecological Significance:

- Pastoralism is one of the oldest and most adaptive livelihood systems in the Himalayan region. In J&K, the Gujjars and Bakarwals practice transhumance, a cyclical migration system that involves movement between complementary ecological zones. This mobility allows pastoralists to navigate seasonal variations in temperature, rainfall, and fodder availability, sustaining livestock health and optimizing resource use.

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- The Gujjars: Semi-Nomadic tribal Agro-Pastoralists, they primarily rear cattle, buffaloes, sheep, and goats. Their settlements differ by season:
 - winter: foothill villages in Jammu, Rajouri, Poonch, and parts of Kashmir
 - summer: high-altitude dhoks across Ganderbal, Budgam, Anantnag, and Kupwara
- Gujjars often maintain small agricultural fields and depend on forest produce, milk, and dung-based energy systems.
- The Bakarwals: Long-Distance tribal Transhumant Pastoralists. They are among India's most migratory pastoralists. They travel hundreds of kilometers twice a year with large flocks of sheep and goats—from Jammu plains to alpine meadows such as Tosamaidan, Doodhpathri, Gulmarg and Yusmarg etc. Their migration routes are marked by collective movement, rich oral knowledge systems, kinship networks, and trust-based resource sharing.
- These tribal pastoralist communities form an interdependent pastoral landscape that is central to the region's ecological integrity. By grazing livestock strategically, pastoralists prevent shrub encroachment, support soil aeration, enable seed dispersal, and sustain biodiverse meadows. Thus, pastoralism is not merely an economic activity but a sophisticated system of ecological management.

Structural Marginalization and Development Exclusion:

Despite their ecological importance, pastoralist tribes continue to face multi-dimensional marginalization. The study identifies several recurring challenges, many of which stem from a mismatch between pastoral mobility and sedentary governance structures.

A. Poor Access to Education and Health Services

Pastoralists spend long periods in remote meadows fully outside the reach of schools, health centers, Anganwadi centres, ASHA workers, or pharmacies. This results in:

low school enrolment

high dropout rates

untreated illnesses

maternal and child health vulnerabilities

Seasonal migration disrupts continuity of schooling and immunization for children.

B. Documentation Barriers

Documentation is the backbone of modern welfare delivery systems. However, pastoralists face challenges such as:

outdated Aadhaar addresses

mismatched biometrics

ration cards not carried during migration

bank accounts unavailable or inactive

These create hurdles in accessing pensions, scholarships, Ayushman Bharat, PMAY, and food security schemes.

C. Weak Institutional Outreach

Pastoralists repeatedly report minimal or no institutional presence in migratory zones. Government offices, welfare camps, and extension workers seldom visit mountain meadows. As one respondent in this study stated that “Sarkari daftar hamare raste mein nahi hain. Hum

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pahadon par hotay hain.” (Government offices are not on our path; we live in the mountains.)

D. Digital and Financial Exclusion

Online applications, Aadhaar-enabled verification, biometric attendance, and bank-linked payments are fundamental to welfare systems. Yet pastoralists face:

- weak mobile networks in meadows
- lack of familiarity with digital platforms
- inaccessible banks or ATMs along migratory routes

Thus, the very technologies intended to streamline welfare deepen exclusion for mobile groups.

E. Ecological Vulnerability and Livelihood Stress

Climate change and environmental pressures intensify pastoralists' hardships. These include:

- erratic snowfall disrupting migration
- drying water sources
- shrinking pastures due to land-use change
- restrictions due to forest conservation laws
- increased livestock diseases due to warmth and grazing pressure

These factors require adaptive governance that recognizes pastoral vulnerabilities.

F. Gender Inequalities

Women face:

- limited mobility
- near-zero direct interaction with institutions
- dependence on male members for documentation
- reduced awareness of entitlements
- heightened labour during migration

The study highlights that gender further compounds barriers to scheme access.

G. Mismatch Between Policy Timelines and Migration Cycles

Most administrative deadlines—school admissions, scholarship renewals, PM-Kisan verifications, Ayushman Bharat e-KYC updates—coincide with peak migration seasons. This mismatch structurally excludes pastoralists from welfare.

Perceptions of Policy Interventions: Why They Matter:

Perception is not merely an opinion; it is a lens through which communities interpret state intentions, fairness, legitimacy, and trustworthiness. Negative perceptions of welfare and governance have real consequences such as:

- reduced willingness to seek enrolment
- distrust toward officials
- belief that government ignores pastoralists
- avoidance of formal institutions

Pastoralists perceive welfare schemes as inaccessible and they view officers as indifferent or unhelpful. They feel the procedures are complicated and unfair. These perceptions reflect deeper structural and relational inequalities.

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A Global Policy Moment: IYRP 2026:

The declaration of 2026 as the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists recognizes pastoralism as: a climate-resilient livelihood, a model of sustainable rangeland use, cultural system requiring support, a marginalized group needing stronger representation

For India, this aligns with the following points: tribal welfare missions, digital governance reforms, SDG commitments on poverty, gender equality, and climate action, new demands for mobility-sensitive welfare models.

Importance of the study:

1. Pastoralists remain invisible in mainstream development discourse.
 2. Welfare access is low despite policy abundance.
 3. Perceptions reveal underlying trust deficits and structural failures.
 4. J&K is undergoing rapid administrative transition after state reorganization.
 5. Global policy emphasis (IYRP) demands fresh engagement with pastoral issues.
 6. Few existing studies analyse perceptions through qualitative, ethnographic lenses.
- Thus, this expanded background establishes the foundations for the rest of the research paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pastoralism has historically been examined through multiple disciplinary lenses—anthropology, ecology, development studies, political economy, and governance. Globally, scholars emphasize pastoralism as a climate-resilient, adaptive livelihood system that depends on mobility for its efficiency and sustainability. Yet, despite international recognition, pastoralist communities in many developing regions remain underrepresented in state planning processes and continue to face structural barriers to development.

Pastoralism and Development Policy

International debates around pastoralism often highlight a persistent tension between mobility and state-centric development models (Fratkin,1997), which are built on assumptions of sedentary populations. Development interventions in many countries assume that stability, fixed location, documented identity, and institutional accessibility are foundational to welfare delivery (AA Mohamed,2019). This systemic mismatch often results in pastoralist exclusion. Research across East Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East shows welfare systems struggling to reach mobile populations (Scoones,2020) due to geographic inaccessibility, lack of flexible administrative procedures, and limited recognition of pastoral rights within legal frameworks (Manzano et al, 2021).

Mobility-Induced Exclusion

Scholars argue that pastoral mobility is frequently misinterpreted as a barrier to modernity rather than a rational economic adaptation (Galvin, 2009). As a result, policies meant for inclusion fail to engage with pastoral rhythms, resulting in exclusion from healthcare (Gammino et al ,2020), education, and social protection schemes. Studies from Kenya, Mongolia, Africa (Magnani & Ancy ,2023) and Afghanistan, arid and semi-arid regions (Mabhuye et al,2015) document a clear link between migration cycles, changing environments (Gammino et al, 2020) and administrative incompatibilities, leading to missed enrolments, absent documentation, and disrupted service delivery and climate change is also one of the reasons (Kwanhi et al, 2024). These global patterns closely mirror the situation in

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J&K described in this study. Pastoralists there also find welfare offices physically inaccessible and bureaucratic procedures incompatible with their migratory routes.

Documentation and Welfare Access

Documentation has become central to welfare targeting in India after Aadhaar-based digital governance reforms (Sasi, 2025). While these reforms aim to increase transparency and efficiency, they often impose new burdens on marginalized populations. Research from tribal areas in Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Odisha reveals that biometric requirements, Aadhaar-PDS linkages, and digital payments exclude communities with limited documentation literacy, irregular access to internet networks, or seasonal migration patterns (Arjjumend, 2024).

The J&K study replicates these national challenges through a pastoralist lens where families often lack updated Aadhaar addresses, carry ration cards inconsistently during migration, or have inactive bank accounts (Bhusal & Awasthi, 2024). These gaps result in pastoral exclusion from pensions, Ayushman Bharat, PMAY, and tribal scholarship schemes.

Gendered Barriers in Pastoral and Tribal Communities

Gender plays a significant role in structuring access to welfare and state institutions among indigenous groups. Studies across India demonstrate that tribal and nomadic women face mobility restrictions, lower literacy rates, limited interaction with formal institutions, and limited awareness of entitlements (Venkatasubramanian & Ramnarain, 2018). Among pastoral groups, women additionally bear labor burdens during migration, child-rearing challenges, and responsibility for household management (Verma & Khadka, 2016) in remote locations. The study corroborates these patterns by documenting pastoral women's dependence on male intermediaries for scheme enrolment and their limited mobility to government offices.

Pastoral Perceptions, Trust, and Institutional Engagement

The field of governance studies increasingly recognizes perception as a critical determinant of institutional trust and policy effectiveness. Communities' interpretations of fairness, responsiveness, and accessibility directly influence their choice to engage with or withdraw from public institutions (Bonfoh et al, 2016). Among marginalized populations, negative perceptions often stem from repeated transitions (Kaye-Zwiebel et al, 2014), exclusion, discrimination, or administrative indifference.

The study demonstrates this phenomenon clearly: pastoralists often perceive government officers as unhelpful and systems as deliberately complicated. This distrust shapes how families approach welfare schemes, often resulting in disengagement or avoidance.

Global Momentum: IYRP 2026

International scholarship increasingly frames pastoralism as a vital component of sustainable development, climate resilience, and biodiversity conservation. The UN's declaration of 2026 as the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP highlights global recognition of pastoral livelihoods and the need for inclusive governance). This aligns with calls for flexible welfare systems, mobile service delivery, community participation, and socio-ecological protection frameworks (Flintan et al, 2024). The J&K context is deeply embedded within this global shift, making this research academically relevant and timely.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative exploratory research design, ideal for capturing nuanced perceptions and lived experiences. Given the limited availability of published literature on pastoralists' views of welfare governance in J & K, a qualitative approach enables a grounded understanding directly from community narratives.

Study Area

Fieldwork was conducted across several pastoralist-dominated zones in Jammu & Kashmir, representing diverse migratory routes, ecological contexts, and administrative divisions:

- Budgam (Doodhpathri, Tosamaidan) – known for its highland dhoks and summer grazing belts
- Kupwara – border regions with long-standing pastoral movement
- Poonch & Rajouri – major migration routes for Bakarwals
- Anantnag – home to alpine grazing areas and seasonal settlements

These areas were selected to ensure representation of both short-migration and long-migration pastoral families.

Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was adopted to recruit participants who could provide rich insights into welfare access. Participants included:

- 25 pastoralists (men and women) of varying ages
- elders and community leaders
- herders undertaking long-distance migration
- households with differing socio-economic status within pastoral communities
- The sample aimed at diversity rather than statistical representation.

Data Collection Methods

The following qualitative tools were used:

A. Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 25 pastoralists. Topics explored included: access to welfare schemes, documentation challenges, institutional experiences, perceptions of state responsiveness.

B. Key Informant Interviews

Community elders, tribal leaders, and experienced herders provided historical perspectives on policy changes, migration patterns, and institutional interactions.

C. Participant Observation

Observations were recorded in dhoks, migration routes, and grazing areas, capturing real-time interactions with institutions, field challenges, and daily routines.

D. Case Studies

Several households were selected for detailed case narratives to illustrate documentation barriers, gendered constraints, and policy mismatches.

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E. Field Notes

Daily field notes recorded non-verbal cues, administrative encounters, environmental conditions, and contextual details.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted using manual coding. Data were categorized into the following major themes: policy accessibility, documentation barriers, institutional trust, mobility-related exclusion, gendered perceptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The lived experiences of Gujjar and Bakarwal pastoralists reveal a complex landscape of exclusion, resilience, and negotiation with state institutions. The findings of this study underscore that pastoralists' encounters with welfare schemes are shaped not only by administrative barriers but by broader structural, cultural, and ecological conditions that define pastoral life in Jammu & Kashmir. This expanded section elaborates on six major themes identified in the field and offers a critical discussion situated within contemporary development and governance debates.

Perceived Inaccessibility of Welfare Interventions

Pastoralists consistently expressed that welfare systems are physically, institutionally, and socially distant from their daily realities. Welfare offices—district secretariats, block-level departments, revenue offices, and social welfare centers—are typically located in townships far removed from migratory corridors. During summer, when pastoralists occupy alpine meadows such as Doodhpathri, Tosamaidan, Bangus, or Gadisar, the nearest government office may be several hours or days away on foot. As articulated repeatedly in interviews, “Sarkari daftar hamare raste mein nahi hain” (Government offices are not on our path).

This perceived inaccessibility translates into an experiential divide between the state and pastoralists. Schemes such as pensions, Ayushman Bharat cards, scholarship renewals, and PMAY formalities require regular physical presence at administrative offices—an impossibility for communities whose survival depends on remaining close to their herds. Many participants explained that a full day's walk to an office risks livestock safety, exposes families to wildlife threats, and disrupts grazing patterns. Development systems in India assume sedentariness. Schemes are spatially anchored in fixed administrative spaces, but pastoral lives are anchored in mobility. This spatial mismatch transforms physical distance into structural exclusion.

Documentation emerged as the single largest determinant of access to welfare schemes. The document outlines pervasive problems with Aadhaar, ration cards, bank passbooks, residence certificates, and caste certificates. These findings were expanded during fieldwork, revealing that documentation challenges arise from multiple interlinked factors:

1. Migration and Broken Administrative Continuity
2. Lack of Stable Addresses
3. Weathered Biometrics
4. Non-availability of Documents During Migration
5. Gendered Documentation Challenges

As a result, many pastoralists remain excluded from PMAY, pensions, scholarships, and Ayushman Bharat, not because they do not qualify, but because they cannot comply with

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administrative requirements. These patterns reflect what literature describes as the documentation trap of digital welfare regimes, where the poor are rendered invisible due to rigid identity verification systems.

Documentation is intended to standardize welfare access, but for mobile communities it becomes a mechanism of exclusion. What policy frameworks view as "simple" verification becomes an impossible barrier for those whose livelihood requires seasonal shifts across ecological zones.

Deep Mistrust and Institutional Alienation

The study found that pastoralists not only experience administrative challenges but also interpret these experiences through lenses of fairness, respect, and social recognition. Many respondents described interactions with government offices as humiliating, unhelpful, or unwelcoming.

Several experiences shaped mistrust: perceived disrespect by officials, unclear procedures, delayed benefits, arbitrary rejections, fear of seeking help.

Elderly and women especially fear being scolded or turned away.

These experiences consolidate into what scholars call institutional alienation, where marginalized groups come to expect exclusion as a norm. This alienation reinforces the cycle of non-participation: the more alienated pastoralists feel, the less likely they are to approach welfare offices.

Gendered Dimensions of Welfare Access

The findings clearly demonstrate that women are disproportionately marginalized in the welfare ecosystem. While men face mobility-related challenges, women face mobility + gendered norms + domestic load.

Women's Limited Physical Mobility

Women rarely travel to block offices due to cultural norms restricting their movement outside pastoral camps or villages. Migration makes this worse: mountain terrains, forest routes, and the presence of livestock make official visits impractical and unsafe.

Low Awareness of Entitlements

Many women in interviews expressed that they had only vague awareness of schemes such as: maternity benefits, tribal scholarships, Anganwadi entitlements, pensions for widows.

This lack of awareness stems from low literacy and minimal direct contact with institutions.

Dependence on Male Family Members

Men carry responsibility for documentation, enrolment, updates, and interactions with officials. This dependency means women's access is mediated, inconsistent, and vulnerable to delays.

Care Burden During Migration

Women shoulder heavier workloads during migration—cooking, collecting fuelwood, caring for children, milking animals, and maintaining camp hygiene—leaving no time for administrative tasks.

Health Vulnerabilities

Women often experience childbirth, menstrual health issues, and illness during migration with no medical access, deepening gender inequities.:

Welfare systems designed without gender sensitivity compound existing patriarchal structures. The failure to consider gendered constraints reflects broader systemic oversight in policy design.

Mobility–Administrative Mismatch as the Core Policy Failure

The most fundamental finding is that nearly all welfare systems—from education to healthcare to social protection—are built on the assumption of fixed residence.

This assumption manifests through: school admission schedules, scholarship deadlines, biometric verification cycles, ration distribution calendars, FRA documentation procedures, Ayushman Bharat renewals, PM-Kisan land verification, pension e-verification timelines.

These schemes require pastoralists to be in their home villages at precise administrative moments. But pastoral mobility follows ecological calendars—not bureaucratic calendars.

As a result of this—children miss admissions while migrating, families miss ration updates during summer migrations, shepherds cannot verify pensions while in meadows, students lose scholarships due to missed deadlines, families cannot build PMAY houses while migrating and many more. Because of this even when pastoralists want to comply, the system is not compatible with their way of life.:

Pastoral exclusion is designed into the system, not accidental. Policies assume sedentariness, stability, and digital connectivity—conditions that pastoralism fundamentally lacks.

Ecological Pressures and Their Socioeconomic Consequences

The study uncovered that ecological stressors—climate change, shrinking meadows, forest restrictions, and erratic weather—have intensified dependence on welfare systems. Yet these same stressors increase barriers to accessing those systems.

- Examples from the field: unpredictable snowfall delays migration, disrupting schooling, forest guards restrict grazing in certain belts, forcing families to take longer routes, drying water sources increase labour burdens for women, disease outbreaks among livestock reduce income, increasing dependence on schemes.
- However, when pastoralists turn to welfare systems during ecological crises, they find themselves excluded due to documentation or mobility constraints.
- Ecological vulnerability and welfare exclusion reinforce each other. Policies aimed at climate resilience must integrate mobility-sensitive welfare access.

Pastoralists' Expectations and Aspirations for Inclusive Governance

Despite systematic exclusion, pastoralists expressed clear, actionable expectations for improving welfare delivery:

- Mobile welfare camps

Teams that travel during migration seasons to handle documentation, renewals, health check-ups, and enrolments.

- Fixed service points along migratory routes

Health posts, ration depots, or welfare kiosks in major grazing belts.

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- One-time, permanent documentation

Eliminating yearly renewals or biometric updates that are impractical for mobile groups.

- Seasonal hostels for children

Allowing children to continue education while families migrate.

- Recognition of grazing rights

Clarity on forest permissions, rights under FRA, and regulations on alpine meadows.

- Respectful treatment at offices

Many pastoralists said respectful behavior matters as much as the scheme itself.

- Accessible information

Awareness campaigns in local languages and through community leaders.

The findings collectively illustrate a governance framework fundamentally misaligned with the pastoral way of life. The welfare state functions through bureaucratic fixity, technological dependence, documentation-heavy structures, and spatial centralization. Pastoralists function through seasonal mobility, ecological symbiosis, oral knowledge systems, and geographically dispersed life worlds.

The collision of these two logics produces exclusion.

CONCLUSIONS

The experiences and perceptions of Gujjar and Bakarwal pastoralists in Jammu & Kashmir reveal a profound and persistent misalignment between pastoral realities and the design of mainstream welfare interventions. Despite the existence of numerous schemes—ranging from healthcare and pensions to education, livelihood support, housing, and rations—these benefits remain largely out of reach for mobile pastoral groups. The barriers identified in this study, including documentation gaps, geographic distance from administrative centers, sedentary policy frameworks, limited institutional outreach, and gendered inequalities, are not incidental technical glitches but structural outcomes of a governance system built around fixed residence, digital verification, and bureaucratic rigidity.

The pastoralists' perceptions—of inaccessibility, neglect, indifference, and unfairness—are rooted in repeated encounters with exclusionary administrative processes. These perceptions are not merely passive opinions; they actively shape engagement, trust, and participation in welfare systems. When pastoral communities feel unseen, unheard, or disrespected by the state, they withdraw from institutional spaces, deepening the cycle of marginalization. Their voices in this study highlight not only the burdens they face but also the emotional and psychological toll of systemic invisibility.

Importantly, the findings of this research challenge dominant assumptions about pastoralism. Instead of viewing pastoral livelihoods as backward, inefficient, or incompatible with modern governance, this study underscores pastoralism as an ecologically rational, culturally sophisticated, and economically vital system. Mobility is not a barrier—it is an adaptive strategy that sustains livestock health, biodiversity, and rangeland resilience. Policies that ignore mobility inadvertently criminalize or marginalize pastoral ways of life.

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The conclusion emerging from this research is clear: inclusive development for pastoral communities requires a paradigmatic shift, moving away from sedentary governance models toward mobility-sensitive, place-based, and rights-oriented frameworks. Welfare delivery must be redesigned to follow pastoral rhythms, not require pastoralists to conform to administrative calendars. This includes establishing mobile welfare units along migratory routes, simplifying documentation, providing flexible school calendars or seasonal hostels, creating gender-sensitive outreach programs, and institutionalizing pastoral rights in forest and land policies.

The study also highlights the urgency of strengthening institutional trust. Respectful treatment, clear communication, culturally informed service delivery, and proactive outreach can significantly transform how pastoralists perceive the state. Empowering community leaders, training frontline workers, and decentralizing decision-making can further strengthen governance relationships.

At a broader level, the research contributes to national and global dialogues on inclusive development, rangeland governance, and tribal welfare. The upcoming United Nations International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026 presents a historic moment for India—and particularly for Jammu & Kashmir—to rethink pastoral policies through a lens of justice, equity, and ecological sustainability. Aligning local reforms with global frameworks offers an unprecedented opportunity for long-overdue recognition of pastoral systems.

Ultimately, this study affirms that pastoralists do not seek charity; they seek recognition, respect, and responsive governance. They want welfare systems that understand their lives, honor their knowledge, and acknowledge their contributions. By centering their perceptions, this research demonstrates that inclusive development is not only about delivering schemes—it is about reimagining relationships between the state and some of its most mobile, resilient, and marginalized citizens.

Creating such a governance model is not merely a policy necessity—it is a moral imperative and a step toward ensuring that the pastoral heritage of Jammu & Kashmir continues to thrive for generations to come.

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Conflict of Interest

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