

## GUJJARS OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR

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### *Abstract*

*Jammu and Kashmir is a geographically diverse region and at the same time is home to multiple religious, linguistic and ethnic communities. The Anthropological Survey of India has studied one hundred and eleven ethnic communities/groups in Jammu and Kashmir under its People of India Project (Bhat, 2017). According to the census of 2011, Gujjars and Bakerwals are the “third largest ethnic group after Kashmiris and Dogras and constitute more than 11.9% of the total population of the state.” Kalhana, in his text, Rajatarangini mentions that Gujjars used to rule over the states and surrounding areas of the Kashmir Valley. Despite having such a glorious past and a strong population, the present socio-economic condition of Gujjars is quite deplorable. Their political representation is not satisfactory either. The changing climatic conditions directly affect the livelihood of Gujjars and Bakerwals. This paper aims to understand this community, its origin, geographical distribution, social organization, socio-economic status and the response of the government towards the same in Jammu and Kashmir employing the analysis of available literature.*

*Keywords: Gujjars, Bakerwals, origin, social organisation.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

While investigating tribes, it must be remembered that there is no uniformity in the use of the concept of Tribe.<sup>1</sup> According to Ralph Linton, “In its simplest form the tribe is a group of people occupying a contiguous territory or territories and having a feeling of unity deriving from numerous similarities in culture, frequent contacts and a certain community of interests”. Maurice Godelier (1977) states that “tribals are a society however small they may be, they have a language, territory, law and governance systems, social and cultural practices like any other kind of society but the kinship differentiates tribals from other societies”. 8.6% of India’s population consists of tribal communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Yogesh Atal, *Indian Tribes in Transition: The need for reorientation* (1<sup>st</sup> edn, Routledge 2015)

The Constitution of India nowhere defines the word, Tribe. Article 342 of the Indian Constitution states that: “The President may with respect to any State or Union territory, and where it is a State, after consultation with the Governor, thereof, by public notification, specify the tribes or tribal communities or part or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes in relation to that State or Union territory, as the case may be.” As per the latest statistics, there are 645 tribal communities in India.<sup>2</sup> There are similarities as well as differences between them. In Jammu and Kashmir, there are numerous tribes like Gujjar, Bakerwal, Mon, Purigpa, Sippi, Balti, Beda, Boto, Dard, Changing, Gaddis, and Garra. Among them, Gujjars and Bakerwals are the most populous scheduled tribes. The population of scheduled tribes exists in all the districts of Jammu and Kashmir. District Poonch has the highest population of the scheduled tribe having 176101 population followed by Kargil, Anantnag and Leh districts with 122336, 116006 and 95857 populations respectively. On the other hand, districts Srinagar, Samba and Budgam have the lowest population of scheduled tribes which are in numbers 8935, 17573 and 23912 respectively.<sup>3</sup>

Gujjars tend cattle, but mainly cows and buffaloes. The term Gujjar comes from ‘Go’ meaning cow. Some argue that it comes from Khazars (a tribal community to which some attribute the descent of Gujjars). Hussain and Afsana (2019) mention that the word Gujjar is derived from two words, ‘gur’ and ‘jar’ meaning brave or warrior community. The term “*Bakarwal*” is derived from the combination of two terms “*Bakri*” meaning goat/sheep and “*wal*” meaning “one who takes care of”. There is no agreed-upon theory of arrival and origin of Gujjars and Bakerwals. Multiple researchers have come up with their findings leading to the development of over ten theories of origin of this community. Further, extensive studies of these theories and the following arguments can be considered. Firstly, it is pertinent to note that a lot of Gujjars claim to have descended from Suryavanshi Kshatriyas and associate themselves with Lord Rama. It is believed that Gujjars were sun worshippers and were devotees of Lord Surya. M.K. Kennedy argues that the Gujjars who settled in Kashmir were sun worshippers. This also coincides with the theory that claims that Gujjars came from Russia since sun worship was

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<sup>2</sup> Sudeshna Karkun, ‘Tribes are the anthropological genesis of Indian society’, (*Times of India*, 16 March 2023) < <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/thethinkingcap/tribes-are-the-anthropological-genesis-of-indian-society-51537/>> accessed 31 January 2024

<sup>3</sup> Mohd Abdullah, Yasar Mehmood & Nazir Hussain, ‘Historical Background and Socio-cultural Aspects of Gujjar Community in Jammu and Kashmir: A Case Study’ [2020] 68(48) *Our Heritage* 52

prevalent there. Some theorists argue that Georgia was traditionally called Gujaristan (Gorjestan). It is believed that the ancestors of Gujjars migrated from Georgia. In the book, *Kashmir: Land and People*, mentions that “Gujjars have been the inhabitants of Georgia, a territory lying between the black sea and the Caspian Sea, who left their territory under certain compulsions and through Central Asia, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan crossed the Khyber Pass to enter into the Indian Subcontinent, settled in Gujarat wherefrom they migrated to Punjab, Kingman, Swat, Hazara, Gilgit and the valley of Kashmir. Anthropological surveys of India have authenticated this perspective.<sup>4</sup> Further, the same can be amplified due to the following points: -

- Tartars of erstwhile Soviet Union: According to Alexander Cunningham and A.H. Bingley, Kushans/Yachii or Tocahrians of the Indo-Scythian tribe of Eastern Tarat community were the ancestors of Gujjars of Kashmir. Tartars are a Turkic community.<sup>5</sup>
- Descended from Khazars: James M. Campbell argues that Gujjars are descendants of Khazars (Bombay Gazetteer, Vol. 4). Khazar is a nomadic tribe. The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (1905) endorsed this fact. The association of Gujjars with Khazars is also mentioned in Bombay Gazetteer Vol. 1.
- Migrated from Mount Abu: According to scholars like Baji Nath Puri, Mount Abu (ancient Arbuda mountain) region of present-day Rajasthan had been the abode of the Gurjars during the medieval period (Bhat, 2017). Multiple epigraphs like Tilakamanjari of Dhanapala associate Gurjars with this mountain. This theory further states that Gurjars migrated from Arbuda mountain in the 6th century to Rajasthan and Gujarat. Before Mughal rule, a large part of Rajasthan and Gujarat was known as Gurjarartra or Gujarbhumi.
- Aryans: Many theorists reject the theories of migration in Gujjars. They argue that Gujjars are natives and are not associated with separate ethnic groups. They argue that Gujjars are Aryans.

As stated by Dr Javaid Rahi, the State of J&K has five big Sub-tribes of Gujjars<sup>6</sup>, which include:

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<sup>4</sup> K.A. Bhatt, ‘The Arrival and Origin of Gujjars and Bakerwals of Jammu and Kashmir State’ [2017] 7(11) IJRSS 186

<sup>5</sup> Javaid Rahi, *The Gujjars: A Book Series on History and Culture of Gujjar Tribes* (J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Language 2012)

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

- Banhara / Dodhi Gujjars. Dodhi Gujjars who are presently inhabit the areas of Jammu, Udhampur, Kathua and Doda. The main business of this sub-tribe is dairy products etc.
- Bakarwal Gujjars: - This Sub-tribe resides almost in every district of the State in a substantial number. However, they are mostly the residents of Kalakote, Reasi, Nowshaira, Bandi-Pura, Shopian, Kulgam, Pahalgam, Tral and Uri etc.
- Alahiwal Gujjars: - This Sub-tribe has migrated from the frontier province of Pakistan and is mostly nomads.
- Kanhari Gujjars: - This Sub-tribe has migrated from Swat and Hazara areas in present-day Pakistan. Nowadays a good number of these Gujjars live in Kalakote in Rajouri District.
- Semi-nomad Gujjars: - One more Sub-Tribe of Gujjars are those who have by and large settled in various parts of the State.”<sup>7</sup>

## II. SOCIAL ORGANISATION

At the social level, the Gujjars have ordered themselves into three principal kinship groups: the Dera (household), the dada-potre (lineage) and the Jat or Gotra (clan). The Dera (household) is the basic family unit which consists of husband, wife, children, and old parents. The dada-potre (lineage) group consists of patrilineally related kinsmen tracing their ancestry to a common ancestor up to seven generations. The Gotra (clan) is a group which is based on a belief among the Gujjars about their Hindu ancestry. The names of the gotras are common to Hindu Gujjars, Sikh Gujjars and Muslim Gujjars in the Indian sub-continent. Members of some gotras while claiming their ancestry to the legendary figures, philosophers and warriors also assert the superiority of their gotra over others. A few prominent gotras are Khatana, Hakla, Bajjar, Chechi, Rathore, Chauhan, Bhatti, Rana, Thekria, Noon, Bhadana, Gors, Bagri, Kasana, Bajran, Kohli, Khari and others. The main function of gotras is to regulate marriages, as the Gujjars maintain gotra exogamy, like Hindus. The Gujjars have an established system of Jirga (Panchayat) which decides the disputes among its members (Warikoo, 2000). There are almost 150

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<sup>7</sup> Javaid Rahi, *The Gujjars: A Book Series on History and Culture of Gujjar Tribes* (J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Language 2012)

castes/Ghots of Gujjars in the State of J&K, out of a total of nine hundred Castes of Gujjars scattered across the Sub-continent.<sup>8</sup>

The nuclear family is an important characteristic feature of the Gujjar and Bakerwal tribes. In those cases where his son is not financially independent, joint families do exist. Once the son gets married, he sets up his household. It can be attributed to both economic and religious reasons. When it comes to decision-making, the principle of primogeniture is followed. The male head (patriarch) makes decisions for the family. Everyone has to follow it. He also has the power to punish those who disobey. After the death of the patriarch, the eldest son takes charge. There is an established institution among the Gujjars and Bakerwal called Zirga (a kind of panchayat). It is a dispute-resolving body. There is a gendered division of labour among the Gujjars and Bakerwals. The women perform tasks like cooking, fetching water, cleaning, washing, upbringing of children, collecting wood, spinning and making woollen garments. On the other hand, the men of the family rear cattle, collect fodder, plough and harvest the crops. They also make milk products for domestic consumption as well as sale. Gujjars and Bakerwals migrate in large groups consisting of multiple families. These groups are called Qafilas. The Qafila has a leader who has the decision-making authority and is the temporary head of the group for that migratory season. They have their elaborate customs, ceremonies and traditions and many of them are influenced by their migratory pattern of life. These tribes have retained a lot from their past, including transhumance, eco-friendly way of life, rituals and other practices but at the same time are open to change. Many of them now have a sedentary life or work as labourers. Intermarriage with other communities is also more acceptable in this community now.

- **LANGUAGE**

The main language of the Gujjar and Bakerwal tribes is Gojri. They also speak Urdu, Pahari, Kashmiri, Punjabi and Pashto. They have their literature and music. Doordarshan also airs the Gojri programme on its DD Kaeshir Channel. There are Gojri programs on All India Radio Kashmir as well.

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<sup>8</sup> ibid

- **RELIGION**

The Gujjars and Bakerwals of Jammu and Kashmir are mostly Muslims. All the rituals related to birth, marriage, divorce, death, etc are dealt with according to Islamic Law. They follow the basic tenets of Islam and also believe in the Sufi saints and practice the Murshid-Mureed culture. They visit shrines regularly to pay their respects. They celebrate all festivals according to the Islamic Calendar, along with Nauroz (Parsi New Year) and Baisakhi. They start their upward migration towards the meadows on Baisakhi.

- **MARRIAGE**

Gujjars and Bakerwals get married at an early age. The process usually included mangni (engagement), nikah and rukhsati. The ceremony is quite simple. Islamic law is followed. Polygamy is also allowed. Divorce rates are very low.

- **ECONOMY**

The Gujjars are mostly a nomadic community. They possess livestock and practice animal husbandry and also migrate to margas (meadows) to graze animals for others to generate income. Migration is a regular feature of the Gujjars and Bakerwals community. They cover around 600 kilometres annually. The probable reason for the majority of respondents migrating regularly is the higher need for fodder for their livestock.<sup>9</sup> Some settled Gujjars practice Agriculture as well. They sell milk and milk products, walnuts, ghuch (a rare, expensive variety of mushrooms), etc. Some Gujjars also own horses. They charge tourists and pilgrims for horse-riding. From an economic point of view, Gujjars are very backward. They rarely own any profitable business, most of them do not have permanent jobs, and their representation in the government sector is also less. It is a subsistence economy. The money is spent on regular household expenses and marriages. It is rarely invested in anything that can generate income. The Changing climatic conditions have an impact on the eating habits, growth, breeding patterns (summer sterility), wool-producing capacity and immunity of sheep. This makes them unfit for sale and well as wool production and therefore, become a liability financially for these tribes.

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<sup>9</sup> Tariq Iqbal, Rakesh Nanda, Rajinder Peshin,& Y.S Bagal, 'A Study on Socio-economic status of Gujjars and Bakerwals of Jammu Division of India' [2018] 29(1) AJAEES 1

• **EDUCATION**

In the field of education, this community is quite behind time. It is partly because of the nomadic nature of the community because of which children have to leave schools early and to a great extent because of poverty along with the lack of proper policy measures, poor planning and inefficient administration. The government started mobile schools for nomadic communities but it wasn't very successful. The field research for the present study threw ample light on the fact that 'most of the schools which were still 'mobile', were only on paper and the majority of those were not moving with the nomadic communities. Besides, all the mobile schools in Poonch district meant for the nomadic population have stopped moving with the migrating population, while few schools in Rajouri still move with the nomads.<sup>10</sup> Also, there is a lack of proper representation of Gujjar and Bakerwal people who would advocate for them in the institutions of power and policy making. The educational level among the Gujjars and Bakerwals is not impressive. An analysis of the educational Status of this community shows that the majority of the population is illiterate, in total 25.5% of the population is literate in the Gujjars community, and 18.4% are literate among the Bakerwals.<sup>11</sup> If we compare it to the General population, the general population has 71.23% of the literacy rate.<sup>12</sup> In all the district's general population has a higher literacy rate in comparison to the Gujjars and Bakerwals because a major proportion of the Gujjar and Bakarwal population still practices transhumanism, and they keep moving all around the year, so they get fewer opportunities for educating their children as compared to the rest of the population.

### III. THE POLITICAL ANGLE

Kashmir has been a site of conflict for decades now. There were multiple political conflicts locally before the independence of India as well. This conflict has affected the Gujjar and Bakerwal communities greatly. Theirs is a unique condition. From the side of the Kashmiri people, there is a trust deficit as these people are seen as collaborators with the army. Operation Sarpvinash, the largest operation against militants in the militancy history of J&K was also based on the help received by the Indian military from the

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<sup>10</sup> Kavita Suri, 'Education, Conflict and Development: A Case Study of mobile schools for pastoralists in Jammu and Kashmir' (2014) 4(1) IOSR JRME < <https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jrme/papers/Vol-4%20Issue-1/Version-5/C04151219.pdf>> accessed 31 January 2024

<sup>11</sup> Umer Jan Sofi, 'Education Status of Tribals of Jammu and Kashmir: A Case of Gujjars and Bakarwals' (2014) 3(3) IJSS <<https://ndpublisher.in/admin/issues/IJSSV3N3d.pdf>> accessed 31 January 2024

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

Gujjars.<sup>13</sup> The army, on the other hand, also questions them repeatedly and uses them to track the militants, as these people know the topography of the forests and the mountains. As for politicians, the Gujjars and Bakerwals themselves say that they are seen as a vote bank. They point out that they only engage with the state during the time of elections and nothing has been done to benefit people at the grassroots.

- **STEPS TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT**

- Article 15(4) of the Indian Constitution states that nothing in this article or clause (2) of Article 29 shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.
- Article 16(4) of the Indian Constitution states, *“Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the state.”*
- Article 243 (D) argues for reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Panchayati Raj Institutions.
- Article 275 (1) provides for a grant-in-aid from the consolidated fund of India for promoting the welfare of Scheduled Tribes every year.
- Article 335 provides that, *“The claims of the members of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes shall be taken into consideration, consistently with the maintenance of efficiency of administration, in the making of appointments to services and posts in connection with the affairs of the Union or of a State.”*
- Article 338 (A): National Commission for Scheduled Tribes.
- Article 342 points out that, *“The President may with respect to any State or Union territory, and where it is a State, after consultation with the Governor thereof, by public notification, specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes in relation to that State or Union territory, as the case may be.”*
- 73rd Constitutional Amendment.

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<sup>13</sup> Zafar Choudhary, ‘A Gujjar Perspective’ (2011) IPCS Special Report <<https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/130468/SR106-EW01-GujjarPerspective.pdf>> accessed 31 January 2024



- The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.
- Pre-Matric Scholarship for ST Students.
- Post-Matric Scholarship for ST Students.
- The ‘Jammu and Kashmir Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes & Backward Classes Development Corporation Limited’ in collaboration with National Scheduled Tribes Finance & Development Corporation (NSTFDC), New Delhi is providing Educational Loans to the students of the target group for pursuing professional /Technical courses in India.
- The Government of Jammu and Kashmir established book banks for ST Students studying in universities and other institutions of higher learning. The Director of Social Welfare is the issuing authority.
- The administrative council of Jammu & Kashmir revised the reservation policy of the UT in December 2019. The Administrative Council has pegged 10 per cent reservation for Scheduled Tribes (STs) of the UT. The reservation should be applicable in direct recruitment, admission in professional institutions and distribution of seats in professional institutions at the PG level in Medical, Engineering, Agriculture and similar other postgraduate courses.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Gujjars and Bakerwal are an important tribal community of Jammu and Kashmir. Many policies and programs that aim at uplifting these tribal communities in Jammu and Kashmir. However, the statistics from government sources, as well as other researchers, show that the condition of Gujjars and Bakerwals is still very poor. The Government needs to re-evaluate all the measures and, most importantly, take all the stakeholders along while making policies for people. The current approach of looking at tribal people as subjects of study to be worked on or infantilising them like the colonial masters would do reflects a very objectionable way of policy-making. Our way of looking at tribal communities is quite similar to what it was a century ago. We still see them as a subject to be studied and written about. Just like the Europeans believed that they were the most evolved of human beings in all spheres and therefore the burden of ‘civilising’ the other so-called primitive peoples rested on their shoulders, we also choose to believe that tribal people cannot think for themselves, are backward (quite a problematic word used in most

of the definitions of tribes) and therefore we should decide for them. This reflects our flawed way of thinking. A few measures can be taken to “uplift” this community but the important question is whether the community believes that they lack any kind of power or require any kind of “development” in the modern sense of the term. This is a very significant point. This can be one of the reasons why the dozens of policies made by the government have failed. Imposing our idea of development on tribal communities is a sign of our colonial mentality. Who gives the non-tribal communities the right to decide for the tribals? Their lifestyle, idea of a good life, economic system, political organisation, social setup, traditions, etc are different from ours. A one-size-fits-all approach to policy doesn’t benefit when the population is heterogeneous. We need to come out of our ‘messiah complex’ and listen to the other side before making decisions for them. Many questions need to be asked to be able to ensure that the tribal populations in general and Gujjars, in particular, enjoy the fruits of welfare policies. They include:

- What are the patterns of migration undertaken by the community?
- What is the level of political representation and electoral participation?
- Is the community deriving benefits from the banking institutions by saving money in bank accounts, taking loans, etc.?
- Do they have their indigenous dispute resolution and social control mechanisms, or are they visiting courts?
- Do they find themselves excluded from the mainstream? Impact of reservation policy?

Furthermore, we must analyse the reasons behind the lack of success of mobile schools and the underrepresentation of certain groups in government employment. It's important to conduct a qualitative analysis of the factors contributing to the lack of cultural, economic, and political integration within the community, which has resulted in challenges related to women's safety, such as the Kathua rape case, as well as issues like social security deficits and flawed policy-making by the state.