Gujjars of Baramulla District in Kashmir Union Territory: An Observation

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ABSTRACT

Gujjars are semi nomadic tribes found in Baramulla district of Kashmir. Gujjars and Bakarwals both nomadic groups are predominantly living and oscillating in the Kandi areas of Kashmir and they are the third largest tribal groups in Jammu and Kashmir. Most of the Gujjars are nomads and they speak Gujjar which is locally known as “Gujjari”. This tribe has 72 endogamous sub groups such as Phamda, Chechi, Paswal, Kasana, Katari, Daidar, Pode, Jungle, Khatana, Kholi etc., differing in their dialects, food habits and customs depending on the locality. The present paper is an attempt to describe the ethnographic details of Gujjar tribe of Baramulla district in Kashmir Union Territory by employing observation, interview with key informants, and secondary source data.

Keywords: Nomads, Clothes, Culture, Dead, Folk, Kinsmen, Marriage, Pollution, Ritual, Worship

INTRODUCTION

There are many tribal communities that are living throughout Jammu and Kashmir Union Territories (UTs) which become the main cause for the multicultural and multi-traditional nature of this area. The culture, traditions, and customs that these tribals carry makes this UTs different from the other States of the country. The tribal population is scattered in all regions of Jammu and Kashmir. It is being said that most of the tribes of Jammu and Kashmir are descendants of the famous families of Aryans. They live in the high altitude areas of Jammu and Kashmir. Tribals are found in, Rajouri, Poonch, Ramban, Chenani Bhaedwah Kishtiwar and Kathua (Bani, Basholi, and Bilawar) region. The scheduled tribe status to communities residing in Jammu and Kashmir was awarded on 1989 by the President R. Venkataraman after consultation with government to eight communities namely Balti, Beda, Boto, Changpa, Garra, Mon, Purigpa and Brokpa, Drokpa, Dard, Shin. The four communities namely Gujjar, Bakarwal, Gaddi and Sipi were notified as the scheduled tribe vide the constitution (scheduled tribe) order (Amendment) Act 1991. According to Census (2011), there are 12 Scheduled Tribes in Jammu and Kashmir with a population of 14, 93,299 which account for 11.9 per cent of the total population of the State. Total population of Scheduled Tribes in Baramulla district is 37705, males are 20237 and females are 17468 which is 3.74% to the total population of the district (Census 2011). The present paper is attempt to narrate the ethnographic details of Gujjars of Kashmir Union Territory.

Methodology

The present paper is developed on the basis of both primary and secondary source data such as policy records, books and journals; interviews and observation. The study adopts content analysis approach to interpret the data obtained from the selected resources and observation. Interviews with key informants such as aged persons, teachers, and religious leaders has been conducted to elicit the ethnographic details of Gujjars of Baramulla district in Kashmir Union Territory. The present study has been designed to be purely descriptive and narrative.
Gujjars of Baramulla District of Kashmir

The Gujjars are semi nomadic pastoral community found in Jammu and Kashmir. To trace the origin of Gujjar is interpreted from the word “Gujjar”. Till now the word Gujjar has been interpreted in a number of ways. According to Bhat (2017), “the first perspective has been forwarded by Prof. Abdul Gani Shashi after detailed study of Arabic and Persian history. According to him, “Gujjars share with Badou tribe of Arab, a common lifestyle, way of living and culture. It is believed that Gujjars along with Badu tribe are associated with Khizir tribe, who left Koh-e-Kaf during the era of Christ along with their, camels and other domestic animals. The word Khizir got changed to Garzar and then with the passage of time this tribe came to be called as Gujjar. In Islamic encyclopedia, it has been said that why Gujjar community was spirited and courageous and they were known for their shrewdness i.e., despotism in the vicinity of Iran and had destroyed many empires and nations under their reign , that is why they were symbolized first of all by a wolf (Bhediya) locally known as ‘Gurj’. Hence, this word get transformed from Gurj to Gurjar to Gurez and later on these people were called by the name of Gurj or Gujjar or Gurjar.” The sociologist G.S. Ghurye believes that “the name Gujjar is derived from the principal occupation followed by the tribe: cattle-breeding (the Sanskrit word for cow is gau and the old Hindi word for sheep is gadar), though ‘Gujjar’ has come from ‘Gurjar’ which is a Sanskrit word according to Sanskrit Dictionary (Shakabada 1181), has been explained thus: Gur+jar, ‘Gur‘ means enemy and ‘jar‘ means destroyer. The word means Destroyer of the enemy.” The word “Gurjar” predicts the qualities of a warrior community. There are about half a dozen. Gujjar Histories written on Gujjars amongst which like Shahan-e –Gujjar, Gujjar Itihas, Gujjar aur Gujri zuban, Tareekh-e-Gujran, Gujjar Tareekh aur Sakafat. It has been written that the word Gujjar has been derived from “Gauzor” which means body builder (Pehalwan) or fighter. Because this community was famous for its moves and tactics in wars and battles, that is why people called them Gauzor who later came to be called as Gujjars. This community is also called as Gadjeen. There is a book of Hafiz Abdul Haq Sialkot titled Tareekh-e-Gojran that verified this view.”

As mentioned by Singh, K.S (2003), “the Gujjars were all Hindus but now practising Islam during the reign of Aurangzeb, as they changed their religion. However, a small section of them are Hindus. The is a notion that the word Gujjar is derived from Gujarat from where they migrated to Jammu and Kashmir. They claim to be the successor of ancient Yuchi or Kushan but it’s still unconfirmed and debatable. They are spread over Srinagar, Anantnag, Pulwama, Doda, Kishtwar, Jammu and other districts of Kashmir.”

The climate of the region where they live and move in search of pasturage is cold with low humidity, and has low rainfall, thin forest and medium to heavy snowfall during winters. The terrain is hilly and surrounded by the pir panjal and Himalayan ranges. The population figures of the Gujjar are not available. The language of the Gujjar Tribe is known as Gujjar. Now, they can speak either Kashmiri, Hindi or Punjabi while communicating with others. They use the Arabic script. In this region, they are categorized as a Scheduled Tribes. Dastar (long turban), bread, salwar and kameez (shirt) are the dress and identification markers of the community, the kameez is fashioned with specific style with collar and button separating the style of kameez from non-tribal population style. The women population put on a special type of cap (topi) on their head. Most of the senior members have their beard dyed with henna. Nowadays the current generation have adopted the attire of the general masses and wear cloths common with the population of state without any special tribal specific design.

The Gujjars are non-vegetarians and consume meat of goat, sheep, chicken and fish. Their staple food consists of maize, rice and wheat and pulses such as moong (green gram), urad (black gram) and moth (brown gram). Seasonally available vegetables, roots and tubers are also consumed by them. They alcoholic drinks are taboo because of religious prohibition but consumption of milk and milk products is high among them because they always have sufficient number of buffaloes, the rearing of which is their main occupation and also important for their economy. They are fond of taking salty tea with bread. Consumption of tea with sugar is rare among them. Smoking of hookah is common among the old members, but the new generation smokes bidis and cigarettes.
Social divisions among the Gujjar exist on the basis of religion and occupation. There are both Hindu and Muslim Gujjar but in Kashmir all are converted Muslim Gujjar. The Hindu Gujjar are found in Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Among the Gujjars of Kashmir, there are two sections, Jamindar and Dodhi. The Jamindar Gujjar are mostly engaged in cultivation while the Dodhi Gujjar subsist on the sale of milk and milk products and rearing of buffaloes on contract basis. Marriage between the two religious groups are prohibited. Further, the Muslim Gujjar are divided into various exogamous section or gotras (Clans) such as kasana, chechi, padhana, lodha, khatana, paswar and bangri, which regulates the marriage alliances. They perceive themselves in the middle order of the regional social hierarchy and others also recognize them in the same way. Endogamy at the religious and the community level is maintained and considered the rule for the marriage. Both parallel and cross cousin marriages are commonly practised and preference is given to the cousins while selecting a bride for marriage. To avoid heavy expenditure on marriage, badla (marriage by exchange) is common among them where the marriage expenses are mostly met reciprocally. Most of the marriage are performed when the boys and girls attain adulthood. The ideal age of marriage for boys is between 18 and 21 years and for girls between 16 and 19 years. Child marriage, though common in the past is a phenomenon nowadays. Marriages are settled through negotiations but love marriages also take place but far lesser in number. Monogamy is the norm though polygyny is also permissible according to the shariat (Islamic rules). There is not prevalent among them. Rules of residence are patrilocal after marriage i.e the bride goes to live with her husband, and he has more rights and privileges than the wife. Divorce is possible on the grounds of barrenness, adultery, maladjustment and insanity. Likewise, the wife can also seek divorce, children or has not had sexual contact for more than three years. Divorce may be granted either orally or by written document called Talaq-nama. According to the Islamic rules, after divorce the woman is not permitted to remarry for a specified time period called iddat to conform whether she is pregnant or not. It is for three months and ten days after the grant of divorce. The father of this woman is responsible for maintaining the minor children after her divorce. Remarriage for widows, widowers and divorcees are permissible and are practised.

The Gujjar prefer to live in extended families. Newly married couple normally establish a new household after marriage. Interpersonal relationship among the family members is established with due love towards youngsters and respect towards their elders. The eldest member of the family is treated as the head and he takes the responsibility of looking after the family affairs. Avoidance relationship is maintained between the daughter-in-law and parents-in-law and between the younger brother’s wife and husband elder brother. Property is divided among the sons, daughter, and widow, but daughter get smaller share than their brothers. Succession is follow by the male line, from the father to the eldest son. Among the Gujjar, the woman have equal status and play important roles in the economic, social, and religious spheres of life. They remain engaged in household works. Milking of cattle, collection of fuel and fodders, bringing potable water as their duties besides assisting their menfolk in agricultural activities. Beside controlling the family expenditure, they contributes to the family income by engaging themselves in productive work.

Life cycle ceremonies among Gujjars

Birth

Among Gujjar, the rituals connected with childbirth, marriage, death and other social function are observed with great zeal and enthusiasm. There are certain restriction imposed on the expectant mother. She is allowed to carry heavy loads and do tedious work even after five months of pregnancy. In most of the cases, delivery take place in the camp with the help of a warim (Traditional Birth Attendant) who is either an old experienced woman of the same community or any other knowledgeable woman available in the area where the camp is present. She is rewarded both in cash and respect. Just after birth the baby is given a bath and a senior male member recites Azaan in the ears of a baby and sweets are distributed among relatives and neighbour. A feast is served on the third day. Sunder rituals is celebrated on 3rd day after delivery when the parturient mother is given her first bath and on this day, the child is also named by the family priest or any
old member of the family. On the fourteenth day, the parturient mother takes her final purificatory bath and starts doing the normal household work. Similar observation was made by Rao, P. D., Babu, M. S., and Rao, V. N. (2006) about “the timing of giving bath to the mother and the new born after delivery”. When the baby is six month old Zerakasi rituals is observed, in which the male child head is tonsured by the family barber who is paid money and given new cloths. Sometimes a feast is also arranged on this occasion. *Khatnahal* (Circumcision) is another important ceremony for a boy baby observed according to the Muslim religious doctrines. It is performed by the family barber, and a grand feast is arranged to mark the occasion.

**Marriage**

According to Singh, K.S (2003), “marriage ceremonies is start with Gandum (Engagement) and on this occasion, Bride groom’s father presents money and other gifts to the bride and her father, and the former through the ritual are Doonleiz receives money and either a pot full of nuts, in return. Marriage invitations are sent to the relatives and friends after the engagements. At least three days before the actual marriage rituals of *malasbehoun* is performed at the bride’s place, in which the bride is refrained from doing household jobs and taking bath. This is followed by another rituals called *Massmechravoun*, when the woman relatives comb the bride’s hair. On the first day of marriage called *Mendiraat*, the hands and feet of the bride are dyed with *mehndi* at night. On the second day of marriage called *Yenevoul*, the bridegroom’s father sends dry fruits, sweets, clothes, and ornaments for the bride. When the marriage procession starts, it is followed by the women relatives singing in chorus. The bridegroom is received at the bride’s place by the female relatives of the bride, where all the participants are served with tea and snacks. *Nikah* is the most important ceremony of the marriage and is presided over by the *Maulvi* (priest). There are two types of *Nikah* in the community. One is Nikah Asaltan in which the bride and bridegroom are present and give their consent for the marriage in presence of the witnesses. The second type is *Nikah Vakaltan* which is performed when both the bride and the groom are minor and the consent is given by their parents. The custom was prevalent in the past when child marriages were in practices, but now it is losing its importance. *Mahr* is fixed at the time of *nikah*. It varies from Rupees 9000 to 21000 and is promised for future payment. Generally, it is demanded by the bride’s party at the time of divorce. After the *Nikah* ceremony, a grand feast is arranged by the bride’s female relatives follow her for at least ten days. On the fourth day, a grand feast called *Wathal* is served, in which relatives and friends are called to have a dinner and all the participants give presents to the new couple. After the marriage the bride starts living with her husband and in-laws.”

**Death**

With regard to Death among Gujjars, Singh, K.S (2003) stated that “they bury their dead. The dead body is given ritual bath by the *Snangor*, a professional bath giver. The body is then placed in a coffin, taboot, and wrapped in white cloth, Kafan. Then it is laid on the ground facing Mecca and a prayer is recited by the family Maulvi (priest). Thereafter, the coffin is carried to the grave (*lahad*), placed in it and covered with clay and stones. *Lahad* is dug by a malkhos or gorkun (professional grave-digger) who is paid money and given tea with bread. On the fourth day, the relatives friends and the maulvi recite the verse of *Koran* for the peace of the departed soul. This is repeated on the fourteenth day. These rituals are known as *Chaharum* and *Chehallum*. Pollution of death is observed for forty days.”

**Livelihood and Social Conditions of Gujjars**

As noticed by Singh, K.S (2003), “there are two types of Gujjars such as Jamindar and Dodhi in Jammu and Kashmir. The primary occupation of the Jamindar Gujar is agriculture, besides animal husbandry, but the Dodhi Gujjars are exclusively pastoral people. They still move from low to high and high to low altitude hills in search of pastures for their buffaloes on which their whole economy is based. They survive mainly on the sale of milk and its products. Sometimes, they rear buffalos on contract basis.
Agriculture is also taken up by them as a secondary occupation and is done only in winter when they stay in their native habitat. During other seasons, they give the land to the share croppers. Most of the milk and milk products are sold in the cities, but during their summers pasturage the products are sometimes exchanged with other essential commodities. The Jamindar Gujjars possess large size of land than the Dodhi Gojjars. There is no bonded labour system among them, but the child labour of the family is sometimes engaged for paddy and maize cultivation. They also work as graziers. Pastoralism is still considered their traditional occupation, but they are now taking up other occupations such as business, government and private jobs, and even defence services. A few of them are engineers, doctors, school teachers and administrative services. They are directly linked with the market and do their business mostly in cash, but sometimes exchange of good is also followed. Payment of wages to labours employed by them is made in both cash and kind form. Changes in their age-old occupation of cattle herding have occurred after independence and they have adopted new types of occupation for their livelihood.

The Gujjars have their own Biradari panchayat to resolve dispute within the community. Nambardar who is the head of the panchayat, is elected by the voice vote. Generally old, knowledgeable and sometimes educated person are also elected as Nambardar of the community. They also have community association at regional level besides the Biradari panchayat, to look after grievances of its members. The headman in consultation with other elderly persons of the community gives his verdict when the disputes arise among the members. Social boycott or impositions of cash fines are the general modes of punishment for the accused. Statutory village panchayats are also there of which they are members. Those panchayat plan and implement the welfare program and work for development of village as a whole. Because of the nomadic life, no change have been reported in their political organisation of the Gujjars.

The Gujjars follow Islam. On different occasions, they visit the mosques and other sacred shrines. All the Muslim festivals are observed by them. Besides them, Id-ul-Zuha, Id-ul-Fitr, Shab-e-Qadr, Urs-e-Nabi, the Prophet's birthday, Id-ul-Milad, and Miraz-e-Alam (Sharif) are also celebrated. On the birthday, the Prophet's hair relic is displayed at the Hazratbal shrine. They participate in the Urs such as Urs-est Hamdan. Urs-e-Batmaloo, Urs-e-Naqqshband Sahib and Urs-e-Rafimal are celebrated with others, besides these, another Urs which is very important for the Gujjars is celebrated every year in the month of July at Wangat valley of Srinagar district. It is held on the fifth day of Rajab on the death anniversary of father of the Gujjar leader Mian Bashir. A, the festivals are of socio-religious and socio-economic significance. There is no exclusive art or craft of the Gujjars, but a few member have the skill of making certain woollen articles from sheep wool. The folk songs are sung by women on different social occasions, but there are no traditional musical instruments of this community. Since they roam around along with their cattle in search of green pasture, they establish cordial relations with all the Muslim and non-Muslim communities of the region where they camp.

Their relations with the Bakarwals are very close as they are considered a section of the Gujjar and who originated from the same stock. Business relations are amicably established with all the Hindu and Muslim communities as they supply milk and milk products to them and also rear their cattle on contract basis. Services of the Tarkhan, Nazzar, Shaksaz and Sangtarash are made use of for different purposes. There is no restriction on accepting kacha (uncooked) or pukka (cooked) food from other communities except the Watals whom they avoid to some extent. Intercommunity linkages are established with other neighbouring communities through exchange of food, sharing of water sources, burial grounds and sacred religious shrines. Landlord-tenant and patron-client relationships also exist among them.”

The attitude of the Gujjar towards formal education is not positive, particularly towards the girl's education, because they lead a nomadic life. Boys study up to the primary level and a few of them have reached higher level. Girls do not study due to social reasons and nomadic way of life. Though a few mobile primary schools have been introduced by the government to provide education to their children, the scheme could
not be successful due to their stay in one camp and their frequent movement to new places having extreme climate and difficult access.

They do not pay much attention towards modern Medicare system and still prefer the traditional indigenous medicines. The modern Medicare facilities of the primary health centres are also not available to them in certain areas where they live. Family planning programmes are also not favoured by them due to their nomadic life and their traditional occupation as it requires more and more helping hands to work and cope with the arduous conditions of life.

Drinking water and electricity facilities are available in their original homeland, but during the winter season when they return to their homes, the supply of electricity is generally poor. Tap water, streams and springs are the sources of drinking water. They are self-employed and only a few of them are serving in the government or private organizations. Radio is the only medium of communication and they occasionally visit cinema. Firewood, cow-dung cakes and kerosene oil are the main fuel resources for them. Though the Jamindar Gujjars depend on agriculture and Dodhis too have lands for cultivation, they lack proper irrigation facilities.

**Conclusion**

It is noticed that the culture of Gujjars is relatively influenced by neighbouring tribal communities. There is a change in their socio-economic conditions by virtue of modern education system in improving their living conditions. They completely rely on cattle rearing, selling milk and milk products, agriculture, woollen work and government service for their subsistence. It is observed that the youth is interested to join the government service to make some changes in their socio-economic conditions. Therefore, there is a need for further studies to know the changing patterns of culture among nomadic tribal groups of Jammu and Kashmir. However, the Tribal Research and Training Institutes and concerned research organizations of Ministry of Culture, Government of India should record and document the ethnographic details of Gujjars to make it available for future generation since the native culture of Gujjars is endangered due to influence of interaction with other tribal groups and non-tribal population.

**References**


