



Overcoming Obstacles: The Journey of Gujjar-Bakarwal in Jammu and Kashmir since Independence

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Keywords:

Gujjar-Bakarwal, tribe, social marginalization, education, health, militancy.

ABSTRACT

The Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir is the northernmost part of India. It has diverse ethnic groups with varied culture, ethnicity and linguistic composition. Among these Gujjar-Bakarwal is one of the prominent tribal communities that constitute the third largest ethnic group in Jammu and Kashmir after the Kashmiris and the Dogras. They have a rich cultural heritage and contribute to the diversity of the region. Most of the community leads a semi-nomadic lifestyle, relying on herding livestock and moving with their animals across different seasons. Despite this, they encounter several obstacles and face numerous challenges such as social marginalization, stereotyping and discrimination, limited access to education, lack of infrastructure, deficient healthcare facilities, financial difficulties and inaccessibility of road connectivity. They lived a life of ignorance and backwardness as a result of which they were included in the list of Scheduled Tribes by the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Act, 1991. The present study aims to highlight the obstacles and challenges faced by the Gujjar-Bakarwal community in the contemporary history of Jammu and Kashmir since independence and address various measures required to provide them equal opportunities for their overall socio-economic growth. This study is based on interpreting and analysing the primary and secondary sources. Since Rajouri-Poonch holds the

highest population of the community hence, a field survey was conducted in their randomly selected areas with the help of a structured research questionnaire based on their socio-economic aspects and relations with the other communities.

Introduction

Jammu and Kashmir has a diverse and vibrant history influenced by various dynasties including the Mauryas, Mughals and Sikhs in the past. In 1947, when India gained independence, it was a princely state and had the option to join either India or Pakistan. It initially chose to remain independent, but later, due to political and military developments, on 26th October 1947, it acceded to the Dominion of India through an Instrument of Accession. On 5th August 2019, the erstwhile state was divided into two Union Territories i.e., Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. The Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir shares its border with Pakistan in the North-West, Ladakh in the North-East, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh in the South-East. It is the northernmost part of India and is nestled within the majestic Himalayan mountains. It has diverse ethnic groups with varied ethnicity, culture and linguistic composition. Among these Gujjar-Bakarwal is one of the prominent tribal communities that constitute the third largest ethnic group in Jammu and Kashmir after the Kashmiris and the Dogras. Generally, it is believed that Gujjars came to the Indian subcontinent from Georgia in Russia and eventually reached up to Gujarat.ⁱ V. A. Smith, James Campbell and Gen. Cunningham support this opinion. Another group of scholars (R. A. Chauhan, B. N. Puri, G. H. Ojha and K. M. Munshi etc.) consider them as the aboriginal inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent and descendants of the Kshatriya families.ⁱⁱ From the fifth to the eleventh century, they ruled over the north-western part of India where they faced various campaigns against them, some of them resisted while others went into exile.ⁱⁱⁱ During their exile, they moved to Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and reached far up to Jammu and Kashmir. The search for new meadows and pastures due to frequent earthquakes in Gujarat and Rajasthan in the early medieval period also expedited their migration. Today, they inhabit all the corners of Jammu and Kashmir. The Bakarwals also claim the same origin as Gujjars. Both Gujjars and Bakarwals are ethnically, culturally, linguistically, religiously similar and racially alike and hence, they are often regarded as a single social group.^{iv} The anthropological and genetic research conducted on them also concluded that there is no separation between them. Bakarwal, a subgroup of Gujjar, was first mentioned categorically in the census reports of 1911 and 1921, based on their occupation.^v The only difference is

Gujjars generally possess some agricultural land and tend to rear cows and buffaloes while the Bakarwals hardly possess agricultural land and rear goats and sheep. They are comprised of about 20% of the total population of Jammu and Kashmir.^{vi} The census of 2011 has figured them around 11 lakhs out of 14.93 lakh Scheduled Tribe population of the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir.^{vii} The social activists of the community claimed that their exact population has not been determined yet. They have a rich cultural heritage and contribute to the diversity of the region. Most of the community leads a semi-nomadic lifestyle, relying on herding livestock and moving their animals across different seasons. Based on their backwardness, the Gujjar-Bakarwal were included in the list of Scheduled Tribes by the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Act, 1991.

Nature of Families

The climate of the region where they generally live or migrate is cold with low humidity, low rainfall and medium to heavy snowfall during winters. *Shiwalik* Hills and the valleys of *Pir Panjal* are ecologically suitable for their nomadic pastoral life. They inhabit all the districts of Jammu and Kashmir and are highly concentrated in the Rajouri, Poonch, Reasi, Kishtwar and Ramban districts of Jammu region while Ganderbal, Bandipora, Kupwara, Anantnag and Kulgam districts of Kashmir region.

Based on their socio-economic conditions and migration pattern, they are broadly classified as settled group, semi-settled group and nomadic group.^{viii} The settled group (*Muqammi Gujjars*) includes those who have abandoned the transhumant practice and settled in both urban and rural areas. They have acquired better socio-economic status which depends on agriculture, trade and commerce. The semi-settled group have adopted an intermediate mode of life between the settled and nomadic groups. They are neither fully settled nor fully nomadic. The field survey carried out in Rajouri-Poonch reveals that the majority of the community belongs to this group and the same is the case in other districts. They dwell in villages at the foothills of mountains during winters and migrate to high altitudes in the pastures (*Dhoks*) along with their cattle during summers. They do not move with their entire family. Some members of the family stay back at their homes (*Kacha* houses) in villages to look after the agricultural pursuits and the education of their children. The Nomadic group (*Khana Bhadosh*) consists of those families who practice seasonal migration along with their entire family and cattle. They are completely pastoral, form the poorest section of the community and face greater economic hardships. They do not even have *Kacha* houses and live in tents on pasture land or along the river banks. Most of the community belongs to the second and third category who are transhumant.

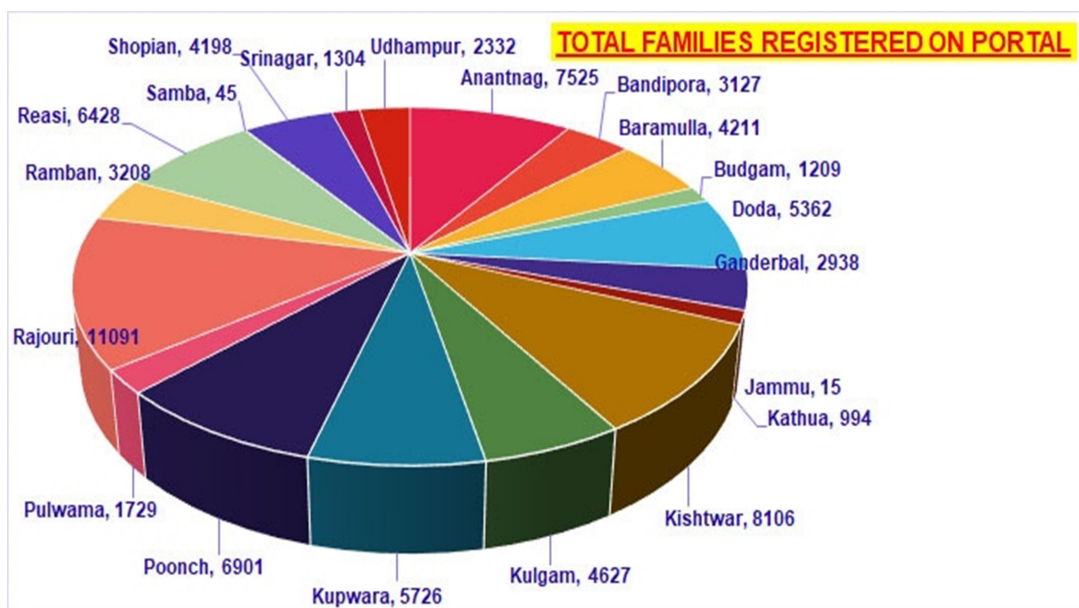


Image showing district-wise numbers of transhumant families.

Source. Tribal Research Institute, Government of J&K.^{ix}

According to the census of 2011, out of a total of 14.9 lakh Scheduled Tribes counted in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir in 2011, 9.8 lakh were Gujjars and 1.1 lakh were Bakarwals. The following table shows the total population of Gujjar-Bakarwal in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. It shows that Gujjar-Bakarwal constitutes about 74% of the total tribal population of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. The social activists of the community claim that the exact number of their population is yet to be counted and it should be done in winter because in summer most of the community migrates to the upper reaches. A Centre for Policy Studies analyzed that the population of Gujjar-Bakarwal grew by 33% over the previous decade, much faster than the state’s average growth of 23.6%.^x

Tribe	Population	% of the tribal population
Gujjar	980654	65.67%
Bakarwal	113198	7.58%

Source. 1. Tribal Research Institute, Government of J&K.^{xi} **2.** Census of 2011.

Discussion

In 1947, partition rocked the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir and split it into two parts.^{xii} Despite their loyalty to Maharaja's army, thousands of Gujjar-Bakarwals were massacred in Jammu and surrounding areas and those who escaped went to Pakistan but the Gujjar-Bakarwals of Rajouri-Poonch and Kashmir did not shift and continued to reside here in India only.^{xiii} But the partition had left serious repercussions which jolted the Gujjar-Bakarwals of Rajouri-Poonch as well. Due to the illegal occupation by Pakistan in the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK), the movement of Gujjar-Bakarwals across the valley was restricted with the formation of the Actual Line of Control (ALC). Many of their families were divided across the line. The partition has shattered the community socially, politically and economically.^{xiv} They were living in backwardness and ignorance in the quest for Gujjar consciousness. Despite this, they have played a pivotal role in resisting Pakistani aggressors in 1947, 1965 and 1971.^{xv} In the 1960s, they began to voice their dissent against discrimination. In 1968, an awareness conference for the community was organized by Balraj Puri which was attended and addressed by then Governor Bhagwan Sahay and Chief Minister Syed Mir Qasim. It played a significant role in removing the fears of Gujjars and building Gujjar consciousness among them who actively took part in subsequent such conferences. He claimed that by convincing Mrs. Indra Gandhi about the vital role of the community he was put in contact with Inder Kumar Gujral, the then Minister of Information and Broadcasting, who agreed to broadcast the Gojri Programme from Radio Kashmir Srinagar in 1968 and later on from Radio Kashmir Jammu too in 1978.^{xvi} Indra-Abdullah Accord of 1975 brought special packages for the welfare of Gujjar-Bakarwals. An amount of Rs 13 crores was released from the fifth five-year plan for their upliftment. In this regard, an Advisory Board for Gujjar and Bakarwal Welfare was established in 1975. Education was emphasized and the construction of hostels was initiated. Mobile schools were started to teach the community's children in the upper reaches. Gojri's section was established in the State Cultural Academy.

All these efforts have not much changed their lifestyle and a breakthrough came with the Presidential order of 19th April 1991. They were included in the list of Scheduled Tribes by the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Act, 1991. ST status was meant for their upliftment and it has been paying a way forward but to date, it has not achieved many significant objectives. Rather than getting the due shares they became victims of another kind of discrimination. A significant proportion of non-Gujjars in Jammu and Kashmir possess counterfeit ST certificates, four such certificates were declared null and void in 1991 by Mr. Parvez Dewan, the then Deputy Commissioner, Jammu.^{xvii} Soon

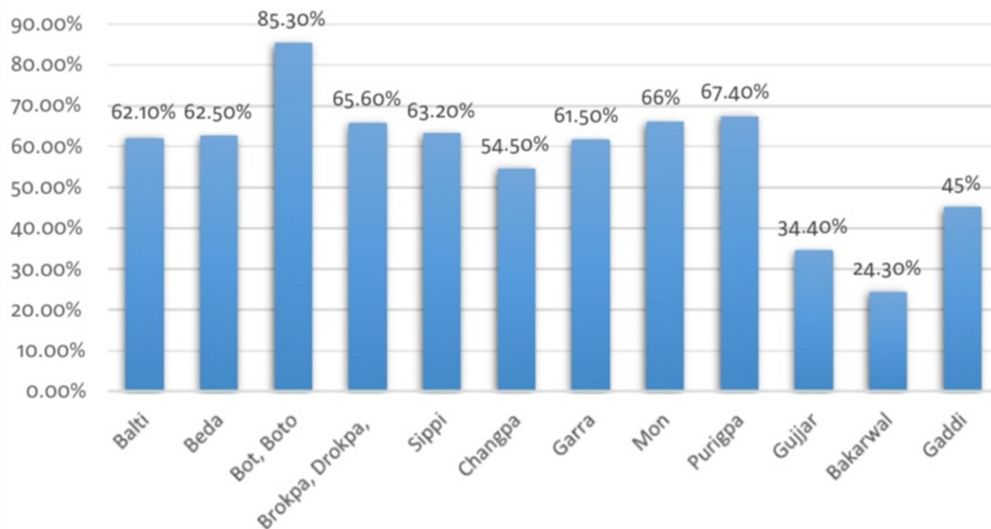
after the declaration of this status, some influential and political non-Gujjars initiated a compromise formula and raised the demand for the same status.^{xviii} The demand was the outcome of a deep-rooted conspiracy of so-called Paharis. There is no exact identification or definition of Pahari and such a class was neither figured as a weaker or backward class in Gajendragadkar, Wazir and Anand Commissions.^{xix} This was an elusive move backed by dominant political and bureaucratic non-Gujjars to deprive Gujjar-Bakarwals of their advantage and fully marginalize them in the political, administrative and other institutional spheres.^{xx} They did not fully succeed but in 2016, a separate reservation of 4% was given to them as Pahari Speaking People which satisfied their demand for reservation but a new movement arose after the abrogation of Article 370. The Gujjar-Bakarwals who were not getting political reservations in Jammu and Kashmir were given this benefit through the Delimitation Commission Report. The same compromise formula was raised again by non-Gujjars who were not happy with the political reservation to Gujjar-Bakarwals and it justified that their demand was political in a real sense. Recently, on 26th July 2023, a bill was introduced by the Central Government to include Paharis, Gadda Brahman, Kohlis and Paddari to ST status on the recommendation of the G. D. Sharma Commission Report. The Gujjar-Bakarwal community is again fearful and traumatized by this move. They claim that Paharis are not tribals but heterogeneous groups, elite classes, highly educated and have the highest level of business and power in their areas. Hence, the Gujjar-Bakarwal will have to face greater challenges to compete with them in education and recruitment. Being in fear they have been seen protesting peacefully on the roads and demanding the withdrawal of this bill to overcome the said challenge. Some images of their protest are given below. Irrespective of their opposition the bill was passed on 6th February 2024 from Lok Sabha and on 9th February 2024 from Rajya Sabha. The Gujjar-Bakarwal community is again fearful and traumatized by this move. The ST status granted to the Gujjar-Bakarwal community has not yet been effective in achieving significant objectives for their upliftment and development. They claim that Paharis are not tribals but heterogeneous groups, elite classes, highly educated and have the highest level of business and power in their areas. Hence, they will have to face greater challenges to compete with others in education and recruitment. It has angered the Gujjar-Bakarwals who fear losing constitutional rights, opening up caste division in an already tense region.^{xxi}



Source:- Social media news portal of Prime Post, Lazawal, JK24*7News Digital.

Despite all these efforts, the community is facing serious challenges since independence. The community has been facing social exclusion, discrimination and stereotyping since independence. They have been subjected to poverty, unemployment, limited access to financial resources and market opportunities.^{xxii} The word Gujjar/Gujjra is used as a derogatory remark to abuse, taunt and mock them based on their backwardness.^{xxiii} One of the leading news channels of Jammu and Kashmir “The Straight Line” reveals that the Gujjar-Bakarwal community is being mistreated by other communities who do not even share a seat with them on a bus and used to call them Gujjar/Gujjra to show their backwardness.^{xxiv} In the radio show “Kath Bacha”, Rayees Mohiuddin plays the character of “Khan Boye” who speaks Kashmiri with a Gojri accent to portray them as primitive, backward, uncivilized, unhygienic, uneducated, and unattractive.^{xxv} Former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah and IAS officer Shah Faisal have been verbalized as Gujjar and *Gaddar* on social media to describe their pro-Indian sentiments. It infers that the word Gujjar is deeply rooted in stereotyping and used as a derogatory remark for ill-treating someone.

Education is the most significant challenge for the Gujjar-Bakarwal community. They have a low literacy rate and a poor educational system.^{xxvi} The following image shows their literacy rate along with the other tribal communities of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir.



Source. Raziq, M. (2022).^{xxvii} Census of 2011.

The elders of the community lack interest in education, are unable to understand its importance and do not prefer to send their children to the schools. If by any means, they have to choose, they prefer boys over girls.^{xxviii} Early marriage of girls is also commonly prevalent. Instead of spending money on their education, they want to save it for their dowry even though there is no actual demand for dowry from the bridegroom’s side.^{xxix} The mobile schools are operating on a small scale and most of these are ‘mobile’ only on paper. The teachers do not show much interest in teaching nomadic children and hesitate to move with them.^{xxx} Due to their absenteeism, most of these schools have either become stationary or shut down permanently. As per the data released by the J&K Government in 2007, 291 mobile schools were functioning in Jammu and Kashmir, out of which 217 were stationary and only 74 schools were mobile. Another data was released in 2011 by the J&K Government, 263 Mobile Schools were established in the Jammu division, out of which only 88 were still mobile while 175 had become stationary.

The next most significant challenge for the community is healthcare. Due to residing in remote areas, they are unable to access proper healthcare services. They do not follow proper diet as per requirement and it leads to various health problems. Women in the community suffer a lot. Due to inadequate education, they have their own beliefs and taboos about menstruation such as not touching kitchen

utensils, taking a bath and looking into a mirror during menstruation.^{xxxix} Menstruation is considered as a shameful and disrespectful subject while sanitary pads are seen as a social taboo.^{xxxix} The sanitary products are beyond the means for many women due to their financial constraints and they repeatedly use a piece of cloth as an absorbent material during periods. They never even inform their mothers about their periods and bear the pain of period cramps alone for many months due to fear, shame and hesitation. In this way, it becomes difficult to diagnose whether they have encountered any infections. During seasonal migration, pregnant women have to travel all along with their families and give birth to a baby on the way. Without proper rest, she has to continue her journey which impacts the health of both mother and child.^{xxxix} Those residing in the upper reaches have to travel long distances to reach the hospitals, some of them deliver babies even before they reach and sometimes they even die on the way.^{xxxix} Snowfall and the harsh climatic conditions in winter also add to their problems. They have to take emergency patients on their shoulders or makeshift stretchers for long distances as depicted in the below images.



Source:- Bisma Bhat, Gaon Connection, 20th February 2021.

Therefore, they never visit medical institutions for check-ups until encounter a severe condition. Ultimately, they frequently suffer from problems of cervical, anaemia, arthritis, spondylitis, cholesterol and heart.

Gujjar-Bakarwal also became the foremost victim of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. Militancy has adversely impacted their seasonal migration. Hundreds of them were killed who refused to obey the orders of militants. Though there is no concrete data, a PTI report in January 2002 stated that militants had killed 230 members of the community in the Rajouri-Poonch districts during the last six months.^{xxxv} The community has faced psychological trauma and challenges of displacement, loss of family members, rape and threats to their safety. Here, it becomes significant to recognise their strength and resilience and acknowledge the contribution of their Village Defence Committee (VDC) to fight and expel the militancy from the Kulali, Hill-Kaka and Marrah villages of district Poonch.^{xxxvi} The Gujjar-Bakarwals in Rajouri-Poonch provided a sigh of relief for security forces and played an equally important role in fighting against the militancy. Operation *Sarp-Vinash* in Hill-Kaka is the best example of this cordial relationship between the Army and Gujjar-Bakarwals. The images below depict their participation in the above said operation.



Source: The Tribune, 27th April 2016 and old newspaper cutting managed by author.

They have also faced harassment at the hands of forest officials and the closure of pasture impacted the practice of transhumance.^{xxxvii} In many places, the forest department restricted the entry of Gujjar-Bakarwals by closing the pastures. In certain areas of Rajouri like Kalakote, Nowshera and Budhal etc. closures have been erected and restrictions have been imposed on their seasonal migration.^{xxxviii} The community's long demand to introduce the Forest Right Act 2006 came into force only after the abrogation of Article 370 but its implementation at ground level is still negligible.

Conclusion

In the history of Jammu and Kashmir, they have been wronged because of their simplicity and patriotism. For more than 150 years they received the worst from the British rulers and thus most of the Gujjars of India fought valiantly against the British. They faced trouble and torture due to the partition of the sub-continent and the invasion/aggression of Pakistani raiders. They have been still victimized by the terrorists and many of them lost their lives as they refused to toe the line of terrorism. Despite this, they played a great role in resisting Pakistani aggressors in 1947, 1965, 1971, 1999 and 2002.

Over the 75 years of Independence, efforts are being made and numerous policies and programmes have been introduced. To date, the community is not getting the due shares of benefits and improving at a slow rate. A slow process of sedentarization has taken up over the past fifty years. As a result, a section of the community has evolved with a better socio-economic lifestyle. Recently, the Tribal Affairs Department has revived the educational system by increasing scholarships, constructing new hostels, providing coaching for competitive exams and establishing residential schools (EMRS). How influential it will be in bringing exposure to their career and meeting their challenges will remain a matter of analysis again in future.

Proper implementation of all the schemes at the ground level with a check and balance system is much more required than a mere introduction. Mobile school needs to be revamped with a proper check on teachers to reduce their absentia. There is a dire need to provide better educational opportunities and improve healthcare facilities and accessibilities in their areas. The Tribal Affairs Department should collaborate with the Social Welfare, Education and Health Department to spread awareness by organizing awareness camps on education and health and by setting up medical camps in their routes of migration. The department has to reach out to them to scale up all the initiatives and aware them of their benefits. The department also needs to establish different startups based on their expertise to provide them with convenient means of income. The survey conducted reveals that Scheduled Tribe status has not achieved many significant objectives and it will take a long time to uplift the community provided, the appropriate implementation of all the schemes and utilization of funds. Hence, to align them with the mainstream, the Centre must look at all the moves made by non-Gujjars which aimed at creating a counterpoise to the hopes of the Gujjar-Bakarwals.

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