



GUJJARS OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

Gujjar or Gujjar are a pastoral agricultural ethnic group in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. They have their own language – ‘Gujari’. They variously follow Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism. The Gujjars are classified as OBC and ST. Hindu Gujjars were assimilated into various varnas in the medieval period. Gujjar Community mostly reside in far flung, hilly mountainous areas near forests. They are migratory. Their main profession is rearing sheep, goats, cows, buffaloes. In all fields of life they are quite backward. The benefits of education have not reached them because of their unsettled life. In spite of many State & Central Govt. efforts the community is still socially , educationally , economically and politically lagging behind and backward.

Key Words : Gujjar, bakerwals, pastoral, goatherds, shepherds, rearing, pastures, cultivators, nomads ,Dera ,lineage, clan, Dodhi, Banyara, Mountainous,

Introduction

Gujar or gujjar are a pastoral agricultural ethnic group with populations in India and Pakistan, and a small number in north eastern Afghanistan. Although they are able to speak the language of the country where they live, Gujjars have their own language known as Gujari. Indian Anthropologists have defined the Gujjars as of fair complexion, long, nose, and tall, long head and wide forehead. They variously follow Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism. The Gujjars are classified as Other Backward Class (OBC) in some States in India, however, Gujjars in Jammu and Kashmir and parts of Himachal Pradesh are categorised as a Scheduled Tribe. Hindu Gujjars were assimilated into various varnas in the medieval period.

Origin Of Gujjars:

Bakarwals have some gotra or clan like Gujjars. They belong to the same ethnicity as the Gujjars, and inter-marriages take place among them. 'Bakarwal' is derived from the Gojri, Urdu, Punjabi, Kashmiri, Dogri, and Jammu and Pashto terms, bakra meaning goat or sheep, and wal meaning "one who takes care of". Essentially, the name "Bakarwal" implies "high-altitude goatherds/shepherds". Bakarwal (or Gujjar – Bkharal) is a mostly – Sunni Muslim nomadic tribe. They are found in the entire Kashmir region between India and Pakistan and in the Nuristan province of Afghanistan.

Some take the opinion that the Gurjar Bakarwals are the descendants of the Kushan and the Yuezhi (Yechi) tribes of Eastern Tatars (Turkic-speaking people in South-West Russia). It is strongly believed that before their march to the subcontinent of India, they occupied some places in Iran, Central Asia and Afghanistan. When they came to India, they named certain areas as Gujranwala (a district in Pakistan), Gujargarh (Gwalior). Many smaller places also have their names of Gujjars. As one of the major traditions of the Gujri people is that they used to give their tribal name to the places and localities they inhabited.

Gujjar community mostly reside in far flung, hilly mountain areas near forests and on the Indo-Pak line of actual control. They are originals from Rajputana, Gujrat and Kathiawar. They migrated from there due to famine. Historians could not fix exact date of their migration. According to some historians they lived on borders of Kashmir in 9th and 10th Centuries.

About 34 lakhs gujjars Bakerwals live in the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Excluding Ladakh region Gujjars can be found in Poonch, Ramban, Doda and Kishtwar. Districts of Jammu Division and Srinagar, Badgam, Anantnag Pulwama, Baramula & Ganderbal Districts of Kashmir Division. But they are in majority in District Poonch and Rajouri.

Socio – economic Life :

The main difference amongst two sects (Gujjar and Bakerwal) in Jammu and Kashmir is that those who are adopting sheep rearing as their main profession for their livelihood are called Bakerwals and those who depend upon agriculture and buffaloes and other animals like cows are called Gujjar.

Bakerwals are famous for their courage, bravery and hospitality. Most of them are nomads. They are migratory when they move from one place to another by loading on horse along with their herds of sheep and head of cattle, household articles, families, they move sectwise and live in pastures. They do not construct a house to live permanently in them. Mostly, each family keeps about 400 sheep, 100 goats, 6 to 8 horses, 4 to 5 dogs and 2 to 3 hens. Bakerwals usually do not keep buffaloes and cows.

As far as the life of settled and half – settled Gujjars of Jammu & Kashmir State is concerned, the cultivators construct their houses permanently in the pastures of warm climate with their head of cattle and stay in them. After winter months they leave for Peer Panjal along with their belongings as there they can have sufficient grazing fields for their cattle. These people's way of life is different from Bakerwals. Bakerwals don't settle permanently in one place. Only a small tent takes the form of their house. Some Gujjars also go to the hilly pastures in summer and return in winter.

The homeless Gujjars can be divided into two tribes -

Dodhi Gujjars and Bakerwal Gujjars.

Dodhi Gujjars : In Jammu and Kashmir State one tribe of Gujjars is known as 'Dodhi ' or 'Banyara' Gujjars. These people keep buffaloes and lead a nomadic life. When the summer sets in, these people start moving to the heights of Himalaya where green grass is available sufficiently for their cattle. They sell milk and ghee for sustenance.

Bakerwal Gujjars : Other tribe of the homeless Gujjar is known as Bakerwal Gujjars. These people mainly keep sheep and goats besides other animals and these are main sources of livelihood.

There are about 28 lakhs Gujjars in Jammu & Kashmir State, in which the Bakerwal Gujjars are more more than 6 lakhs. The sub - castes of these Gujjars are - Hakla, Bajjar, Kohli, Chechi, Kahtana, Badhana, Bagdi,Goosi and Kalas etc etc. These people lead nomadic life too.

Previously, all these were homeless, but now, some of them have their own houses and have started to lead a life with permanent settlement at a place.

The Gujjar – Bakarwals have divided themselves into three principal kinship groups: -

- i. The Dera (household)
- ii. Dada – potre (lineage)
- iii. The Gotra (clan)

The Dera is the basic unit of social structure among the Gujjar – Bakarwal. A Dera usually comes into existence when a person establishes an independent household, which happens normally after his marriage. A Dera usually consists of 5 to 6 members .There is a division of labour among the members of the household on the basis of sex and age. Females perform the domestic tasks of cooking, washing, fetching of water, upbringing of children, collection of wood and spinning and making of woollen garments. On the other hand , Males perform more strenuous tasks like herding of flock and cattle, repairing of tools and equipment , collection of grass , herbs, deer – musk , hunting of wild animals and ploughing and harvesting of crops.

The household is thus a primary economic unit (the production and consumption). The elders want the eligible married youngsters to shoulder the responsibility of looking after the flock of sheep and goats independently. This would ensure greater security to the herds and sharing all responsible jobs by the adult members.

Several Deras (households) constitute a lineage (Dada – potre) .The lineage, thus, consists of several generations and includes cousins and distant relatives. They share the common pastures. The lineage unit is quite powerful administrative unit. In a lineage there may be about two hundred persons. Usually a Gujjar – Bakarwal father divides

his property (animal wealth) among his male children as and when they get married. Each lineage has a head who is responsible for the socio – economic and political activities of his group.

Problems & Solutions :

During this period of science and technology, when communities are taking very active part in the developments, these people are lying far away from the life of civilization on the heights of hills. In all fields of life, Gujjars are quite behind. Problems and need of Gujjar Bakerwals are quite different from other communities of the state. Language and Culture of Gujjar community is also different than those of other communities of this state and such the community has distinct identity.

Gujjars possess their own panchayat which is called 'Jerga'. This is a body comprising some old, honest and responsible persons of the community. They decide their matters, keeping in view the welfare and prosperity of their tribe. But the benefits of education have not reached them. In their unsettled life it is very difficult for those people to educate their children. So they can not compete with other communities in the field of education and are far behind in respect of education for centuries.

Though the Govt. Of Jammu & Kashmir state has opened the Mobile School for these nomadic Gujjars, but even then the level of education of these people has not improved. But in Jammu & Kashmir State ever since Gujjar sub-plan and besides other schemes of educational facilities like Gujjar Hostels constructed at district H .Q level most of the people have been attracted to engage their children in studies. Apart from this with the efforts Social committees and other prosperous people of Gujjar Bakerwals Community, people have started to send their children to schools. Now a good number of people are receiving education have joined good posts.

In April 19, 1991, under the Indian Government's Reservation Programme of positive discrimination the Govt. of India recognized the backwardness of Gujjar - Bakarwal Community of Jammu & Kashmir State and declared them as Scheduled tribe. The president of India granted Scheduled tribe status by way of ordinance No.03 of 1991 under article 342 of the Indian Constitution to them.

In spite of many efforts of State and Central Govt the Community is still socially, educationally , economically and politically lagging behind and backward.

Even after the laps of over 25 years since their grant of Scheduled Tribe Status the state Govt. of Jammu & Kashmir could not impliment to give full benefit of Scheduled Tribe Status to Gujjar - Bakarwal Community of Jammu & Kashmir.

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