

Pastoral Life of Muslim Gujjars: A Study of Life of Gujjar in Mandi District, Himachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract

Pastoralism is a form of animal husbandry where domesticated animals known as livestock are released onto large vegetated outdoor lands for grazing. Pastoralism plays a contributory role to the economy of developing countries by providing employment and income opportunities to the rural poor. Though the Gujjar tribe is found all over North and West India, but this work deals with the Muslim Gujjar tribe of Himachal Pradesh. These simple and hardworking people move to high alpine pastures in summer in search of good pastures. Himachal Pradesh has accorded the Schedule Tribe status to Gujjars and as a result they have come out in the fields of education. In Himachal Pradesh Hindu and Muslim Gujjars are living. In Himachal Pradesh, Muslim Gujjars exhibit semi nomadic, settled and nomadic lifestyles. This paper is an attempt to highlight the pastoral life of Gujjars.

The paper is based on primary study-based data collected from 250 people randomly belonging to Muslim Gujjars of Mandi District of Himachal Pradesh. The study also highlights that the Muslim Gujjars perform marriages as per Islamic religion and marry their daughters in early age but after marriage they live in their paternal house and moves to her husbands' family as she attains puberty. The study also reveals that the Muslims Gujjars are inextricably linked with the natural resources so they remain careful in maintaining the resources and they believe in the regeneration of resources. It was also found that participation of Gujjar women in agriculture has always been high and it has also increased during the past years because of the migration of immense number of men to get paid work in other parts of India. The study concluded that forests have maintained the existence of numerous tribes including Gujjars.

Keywords: Pastoralism, Gujjar, Muslim, Natural Resources, Nomadic Life

Introduction

Pastoralism is not unknown to the history of mankind. There was a time in our history, when pastoralism was a dominant mode of production and predominant livelihood strategy. Nevertheless, lot of transitions took place from pastoral economy to agrarian economy and then to industrial economy. Gujjars constitute one of the major pastoral tribes of Himachal Pradesh and account for 23.6 percent of the total Scheduled Tribe population of the State (Census, 2011). Animal husbandry and forests are two major sources on which Gujjars depend for livelihood. Settled population has started taking up agriculture and other activities as a means of livelihood (Negi, 1976). The Gujjars of Himachal Pradesh are one of the most

marginalized communities of the country owing to their tribal and nomadic status. Living in the far-flung areas, these tribal groups are the first to be hit by vagaries of nature, such as drought, flood, infectious diseases, economic and cultural displacement, etc. Isolated from the main stream, they have long suffered social and economic marginalization. Their basic livelihood depends on rearing of buffaloes, and they largely depend on earnings through selling milk and milk products to settled villagers. In North-Western part of India, both Hindu and Muslim Gujjars are found and the Muslim Gujjars are found exclusively in the hill areas and lead a pastoral, semi-nomadic life with seasonal migrations between low and high altitudes in search of conducive climate for their milch cattle and for pastures. They have down the generations led a pastoral life, depending almost entirely upon their herd of buffalo for a living and for all necessities of life.

At present both Hindu and Muslim Gujjars live in a complete social and geographical isolation and have separate breeding gene pools. The Muslim Gujjars are exclusively in the Himalayan hills and lead a pastoral, seminomadic life with seasonal migrations, called transhumance, between high altitudes and the plains of Punjab especially during the winter months. Muslim Gujjars are seminomadic people, now partly sedentary on the steep slopes of Himalayas. During the winter months when the severe cold weather does not allow them to stay in the Himalayas, they start the down travelling journeys, the transhumance. Their migratory habits in the hazardous terrains affect their fertility, mortality and the affinities to various diseases.

These communities are greatly neglected by planners and by the researchers (George, 1985). The study on Muslim Gujjars is sparse in this area. The Gujjar tribe of Himachal Pradesh is scattered all over Himachal Pradesh.

Background

Pastoralism in Indian context can be defined as members of caste or ethnic group who are having strong association traditionally with live stock keeping. Gujjars are the major pastoralist groups in India. The origin of this tribe is yet to be established but there are certain views on the place of their origin. Gujjars belong to the same ethnic stock as the Rajputs and the Jats and hence they were part of all Aryan race. While the Rajputs became the ruling class and warriors, the Jats became landowners and cultivators and the Gujjars occupied the marginal areas as pastoral cattle rearers and milkmen. The origins of the Gujjars are unknown; however, several theories place them either as a branch of the White Huns who overran India in the fifth and sixth centuries or as a branch of the Kushan division of the Yueh-Chi tribe, which controlled much of northwestern India during the early centuries of the Christian era (Cunnigham, 1865).

In the past the Gujjars were considered marauders and vagrants. Today they are law-abiding pastoralists and cultivators. Many Gujjars were converted to Islam at various times and in different places, beginning with the attack of Mahmud of Ghazni on Somnath in Gujarat in 1026. The Gujjars of Oudh and Meerut date their conversion to the time of Timur in 1398, when he sacked Delhi and forcibly converted them. By 1525, when Babur invaded, he

discovered that the Gujjar in the northern Punjab had already been converted. Until the 1700s the conversions continued under the Mogul ruler Aurangzeb, who converted the Gujar of Himachal Pradesh at the point of a sword (Nusrat, 2015). The Pathans and Baluchi drove the Gujar converts from their land, forcing them into a nomadic existence. What is interesting to know that irrespective of any view prevalent, the Gujjars were pastoralists. Gujars speak Gujari, a dialect of Rajasthani, an Indic language of the Indo-Iranian Sector of the Indo-European Family. In Himachal Pradesh the language is mixed with Western Pahari. Gujars write in the Urdu script (Rose, 1911).

Origin of Gujjars

Ghurye(2004) believes that the name Gujjar is derived from the principal profession 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 which according to Sanskrit Dictionary has been explained Gurjjar; 'Gur' means 'enemy' and 'jar' means 'destroyer'. The word means "Destroyer of the enemy". The word "Gurjar" predicts the qualities of a warrior community. Under the provisions of the Indian Constitution the Gujjar are notified as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) in Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir. This listing grants them special benefits like fixed quotas in Government jobs and higher educational institutions as well as lower benchmarks in competitive examinations.

Review of Literature

Chatterjee and Das (2013) explored the indigenous perception of the uses of space among the 'Gujar' of Himachal Pradesh and the meanings attributed to specific space/s by the people of different age groups in their research study. The unique life-ways of the 'Gujjar' pastoral community of India have evoked significant interest in recent time as they are struggling hard to retain their cultural identity against the increasing pressure of different forces of change. The 'Gujjars' are wedded to herding buffaloes since long past.

Negi (1976) in his book on Scheduled Tribes of Himachal Pradesh gives an account of almost every tribe of Himachal Pradesh with respect to their customs, habitation, occupation and culture. The book provides information about the Gujjar tribe of Himachal Pradesh

Koundal (2012) in his study on Poverty among Nomadic Gujjars- A case study of Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh found that nomadism and pastoralism are linked with economic activities. The study also revealed the extent of poverty in the nomadic society of Gujjars in Udampur of Jammu and Kashmir and Kangra District of H.P. is very high.

Verma (1999) in his book Ban Gujjars: A nomadic tribe of Himachal Pradesh gave ample information of Muslim Gujjars of Himachal Pradesh. This book deals with the socio-economic, political, historical and cultural life of nomadic Gujjars.

Research Methodology

The present study is based on primary and secondary data. The primary data was gathered from 250 Muslim Gujjars of Mandi District of Himachal Pradesh, India. A questionnaire was designed to get responses of the respondents. Reviews of secondary data related to Muslim Gujjars were also undertaken.

Sample Design

The State of Himachal Pradesh has been selected because the study related to Muslim Gujjars so far is scanty and this is an under-researched topic. Multi-stage sampling process was adopted for selecting the sample of the study. Himachal Pradesh consists of 12 districts but keeping in view the geographical and topological setting, the present study has been confined to Mandi District of the State. There are 11 development blocks in Mandi district. Out of 11 blocks, Mandi Sadar block was selected for the study because the area is socio-culturally homogeneous with a sizeable population of Muslim Gujjars. Hence, 250 Muslim Gujjar respondents were selected randomly on the basis of their availability.

Limitation of the Study

The topography of Himachal Pradesh is not only diverse but also difficult to survey. The settlement pattern of Gujjar is very scattered due to hilly topography. Limitation of the study lies because of time constraints also.

Objectives

- To understand the socio demographic profile of the Gujjars in Himachal Pradesh.
- Recommend a new strategy to empower and enable them to take up livelihood opportunities based on sustainable and equitable use of natural resources in Himachal Pradesh.

Results and Discussions

The study has been conducted with a broader scope and from variety of socio demographic perspectives. Hence, after the data was collected, the information has been classified, tabulated and interpreted in simple frequency distribution and percentage was taken out accordingly. The thorough examination, discussion and findings are given below:

Socio Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 1
Gender wise Distribution of the Respondents

Sr. No.	Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1.	Male	55	22
2.	Female	195	78
	Total	250	100

Gender is an integral component of every aspect of economic, social daily and private lives of individuals and society and of the different roles ascribed by society to men and women. Table 1 shows the gender of the Muslims Gujjars. It was found that majority of the respondents (78%) were females and 22% respondents were males.

Table 2
Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Age	Frequency	
	(N=250)	Percentage
18-25	37	14.8%
26-33	43	17.2%
34-41	51	20.4%
42-49	63	25.2%
50+	56	22.4%
Education	Frequency	
	(N=250)	Percentage
Illiterate	227	90.8%
5 th	10	4%
10 th	8	3.2%
12 th	5	2%
Type of Family	Frequency	
	(N=250)	Percentage
Joint Family	190	76%
Nuclear Family	60	24%
Total	250	100.00

Table 2 shows the demographic profile of the respondents in the study area. Majority of the respondents 25.2% were in the age group of 42-49 years followed by that of 50+ years which constitutes 22.4% and then 20.4% in the age group of 34-41 years, 17.2% in the age group of 26-33 years and least were i.e. 14.8% in the age group of 18-25 years. Education wise, majority of the respondents (90.8%) were illiterate, 4% were educated up to 5th level, next highest 3.2% were educated upto 10th level, 2% were educated up to 12th level. Family type

wise, majority of the respondents 76% belonged to joint families and 24% belonged to nuclear families.

Pastoral Life of the Gujjars

The Muslim Gujjars were well known for their nomadic life, but as now transitions are taking place, some of them are settled, some are semi settled and some are leading a nomadic life. Table 3 represents the data.

Table 3
Distribution of the Respondents on the Basis of Their Settlement

Sr. No.	Responses	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1.	Settled	10	4
2.	Semi-settled	50	20
3.	Nomadic	190	76
	Total	250	100

The Muslim Gujjars exhibit semi-nomadic, settled and nomadic lifestyles in Himachal Pradesh. Table 3 shows that majority of the respondents (76%) were nomadic, 20% were semi settled and 4% were settled. Hence, it can be concluded that the nomadic Gujjars Muslims remain isolated from the mainstream, and mostly maintain their own traditional cultural identity.

Marriage System Among Gujjars

The study also highlights that the Muslim Gujjars perform marriages as per Islamic religion and marry their daughters in early age but after marriage they live in their paternal house and moves to her husbands' family as she attains puberty. The respondents were asked do they know about the legal age of marriage. The responses are shown in table 4.

Table 4
Showing the Awareness of Respondents about the Legal Age of Marriage

Sr. No.	Responses	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1.	Do not know	55	22%
2.	Know but don't accept	185	74%
3.	No response	10	4%

	Total	250	100
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Table 4 shows that majority of the respondents (74%) know about the legal age of marriage but they don't accept it whereas 22% respondents did not know the legal age of marriage. Further, 4% respondents gave no response to this question. This shows that child marriage is a common feature of Muslim Gujjars.

Housing Conditions

When asked about housing conditions, it was found that cent percent respondents said that huts are owned by nomadic or migrant Gujjars of Muslim community living in interior areas inside jungles, indicating that they are the most backward section among the Gujjars. The Muslim Gujjars are mostly semi-nomadic, due to this, the Muslim Gujjars remain cut off from the mainstream of society, thereby losing all opportunities. This makes them poorer and hence, more vulnerable than the Hindu Gujjars. A few settled gujjars work as daily wage labourers.

Culture

It was also found that cent percent respondents replied that Gujjars are culturally very much involved in dancing, religious rites and customs etc. The tribes have got an inclination towards religion. Some of them have been converted to Islam during the medieval period. They are the tribes who strictly follow old traditions and customs.

Other Findings during the Field Survey

- Majority of the respondents revealed that their income is also very low as they are either nomads, semi nomads or very few are settled.
- It was found that Muslim Gujjars preferred to keep buffaloes found whole the year moving up and down with their animals. But it is decreasing because of the limited grazing land available.
- The Muslim Gujjars of the Himalayan regions, who are mostly devoid of medical facilities due to inaccessible hazardous terrains and dwellings on the mountainous region, are prone to the following diseases which take a high toll of life. Tuberculosis, Bronchial asthma, Dysentery and Diarrhoea (due to parasitic infestations) gastro-intestinal pains, anaemia, during delivery, accidents, etc.
- Daughters have no inheritance except for Muslim Gujjar women who are granted the right according to the Sharia (Islamic law). Gujjar women have a secondary status to men but play a very important role in the economic activities of the family. Besides collecting fuel, fodder and water and cooking food, they work in the fields alongside their menfolk and also help in taking care of the animals. They also have a vital role in social and religious spheres.
- The majority of the respondents said that the mullah conducts the marriage ceremony. Divorce and remarriage are accepted. A woman may leave her husband and live with another man, who is obligated to pay compensation to the ex-husband.

- They celebrate Id-ulFitr, Id-ul-Zuha, Shab-I-qader, Miraj-alam and others. The dead are buried and a mourning period is observed.
- Another very important and effective organization among the nomadic Gujjars of Himachal Pradesh is the *Dera* or a group. The number of families who live together at one place is called the *Dera*. Every *Dera* has its own leader called *Lambardar*.
- The most important social organization among the nomadic Gujjars is the *Biradari Panchayat*. It deals with the cases involving sex, property, and status.
- Their houses are constructed of muds which are called 'Kotha'. Oftenly, the condition of these Kothas is very bad. It contains one big room with only one door. There is no ventilation or window in this Kotha. These people keep their cattle alongwith them in Kotha.
- It was also found that participation of Gujjar women in agriculture has always been high for settled Muslim Gujjars and it has also increased during the past years because of the migration of immense number of men to get paid work in other parts of India.

Recommendations

- The Government should take necessary steps for the settlement, betterment and upliftment of the nomadic Gujjars and the policies should be framed after having the discussion of the problems being faced by the community.
- Gujjars who live in the rural areas of Himachal Pradesh contribute significantly to the rural and urban economy by providing milk and milk products. Being committed to their cultural tradition, it is imperative that special attention be given to this tribe of Himachal Pradesh so that they are able to improve their socio-economic condition through improved dairy farming. Various developmental agencies should concentrate their efforts on dairy development for the Gujjars.
- Conservative Gujjars should be educated to scientifically improve their breed of buffaloes. Providing free insurance cover to nomadic people for their animals will be a positive step towards their livelihood security and economic empowerment.
- Promotion of veterinary health services to look after the health of animals is highly essential.
- Development of pasture land with the help of Forest Department and cooperative societies can be established.

Conclusion

While observing the overall social and demographic conditions of Muslim Gujjars in Mandi District of Himachal Pradesh, India, it was found that the majority of the respondents are illiterates and still maintaining the joint family housing structure. They have not been provided with any kind of permanent settlement so the majority of them are Nomadics. The study revealed that child marriage is prevalent despite the fact there is legal age of marriage because of the lack of exposure to the mainstream society. Muslim Gujjars have total dearth of basic amenities and their economic conditions compel them to live in the unhygienic and

filthy conditions and as a result they get number of diseases. They are still socially conservative and economically pastoral. They preserve their own traditional cultural identity and strictly follow old traditions and customs. The study also revealed that Gujar women have a secondary status to men but play a very important role in the economic activities of the family and there is an effective organization among the nomadic Gujjars of Himachal Pradesh which is known as *Dera* or a group. There is a *Biradari Panchayat* which deals with the cases involving sex, property, and status. Their houses are constructed of muds which are called 'Kotha'. The study concluded that the participation of Gujar women in agriculture has always been high for settled Muslim Gujjars and it has also increased during the past years because of the migration of immense number of men to get paid work in other parts of India. The study also revealed that they are not aware of schemes started by State and Central Government for their upliftment.

It can be concluded that the pace of transformation among Muslim Gujjars of Himachal Pradesh with the changing environment is very low therefore various Government and Non-Government agencies should come forward with plans of development without harming the culture of Gujjars so that they can be uplifted and become a part of mainstream society. Now it is hoped that these people will also come forward in line with other prosperous communities provided sincere efforts are put.

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