

Position of Women Folk among the Gujjars of Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract: *The dispersion of Gujjars in Jammu and Kashmir is not definitely known, when the Gujjars of J&K are asked about their place of origin the simply say that their forefathers had migrated from Gujarat and Rajasthan. The coming of Gujjars in J&K is accredited to the outbreak of serious droughts and famines in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Kathiawad. It is affirmed that at the occurrence of droughts, a segment of the rearing, migrating tribes (Gujjars) moved to Punjab while the others moved to further areas now known as Kangan, Swat, Hazara, Gilgit and to Kashmir valley also. There are archaeological evidences to prove that there was a spell of dryness in the sixth and seventh centuries in Rajasthan which led to the out-migration of people and these people along with their cattle entered the green hilly tracts of the Shivaliks and sub-Himalayas. The Gojari language is now recognized to be a form of Rajasthani language which supports the hypothesis that Gujjars have out-migrated from Rajputana (Rajasthan). The Gujjar tribe has its distinct cultural pattern and the set of values which do not conform to the mainstream social structures. The family pattern in Gujjars, it can be argued, is not concurrent with the patriarchal values of the mainstream cultures. The paper analyses the position of women in the tribe focussing on the Gujjars of Jammu and Kashmir. The man-woman relationship is highlighted in the context of origin of the tribe of J&K.*

Keywords : *Gujjars of J&K, Women, Origin, Patriarchy,*

The History of Gojari language can be traced back to centuries. The legacy of Gujjars is as old as their identity. Mohammad Yusuf Taing says:

At some point of time, Gujjar was an educated, prosperous and dignified community. Their reference is not restricted to the books of Indian, Persian, Arabic and Chinese historians but are also talked of by many other writers as belonging from the range of Gurjistan to Central India. (56)

Of the several identities existing in Jammu and Kashmir, Gujjar is one of the important one, since they form the third largest ethnic group in J&K with a total of 20-25% of the population of the state. Gujjar is an ethnic group spread all over the world and in India in the states like Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Delhi, Chandigarh, Gujarat, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra etc. They are not the followers of a particular religion but follow different religions. In J&K they are the followers of Islam, in Punjab they are mostly the followers of Sikhism, in Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat etc. they are the followers of Hinduism. Outside India they are the followers of Christianity e.g. in Russia.

In an article published in *The Daily Excelsior* on June 3, 2007 reported that In India, Gujjars are mainly concentrated in the north, overall they form 10% of India's total population. Although the Gujjar diaspora is found across the world, Pakistan and Afghanistan have significant Gujjar populations. In Pakistan they comprise almost 20% of the population. Gujjars can also be Muslim, Sikh, Christian and presumably Buddhist.

Gujjars are a fine, tall, good looking race with a strong body built, liberal minded and sharp features having a striking resemblance with the Pathans. Gujjars are one of the most ancient tribes and a wandering race. Their great heritage is their language "Gojari". Gujjars had established great empires and constructed cities, towns and villages during their hay days, after the names of their clans, castes and chieftains. These historical places are found throughout the length and breadth of the globe, right from the states of Georgia, Chaichian, Gurjarthan of the erstwhile USSR to Gujjaranwala (in Pakistan), Gujarat and Rajasthan (in India), Gujjar Nagar and Gujjar Colony (in J&K), Gujjar khan (in the West Punjab), Gujjar Kot (in Afghanistan), Juzr and Gurz (in Arab) and many other well-known places of the Indo-Pak Subcontinent besides Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran, Arab etc.

The origin of the Gujjars is uncertain. There are many stories of their origin. Scholar V. A. Smith believed that Gujjars are foreign immigrants. According, to Sir A. Cunningham they originated in Russia (Georgia). Gujjars are Asian stock of tribesmen whose real homeland was Georgia from where their migration started and reached up to the Himalays.

Some Indian scholars are of the opinion that the name Gujjar is amended form of *gao-char*, that is, those who tended milch cows. They are of the view that Gujjars are from the Aryan stock. K. M. Munshi in his book *A Glory that was Gurjar Desha* points towards the Indian origin of Gujjars. He says that the name Gujjar first appears in the Indian literature in the 7th century A.D. Gujjars are the herds-men of Lord Krishna.

The most accepted theory of their origin is that of Russian origin i.e. in Georgia. Prof. Georgi Chogoshvili of the *Georgian Academy of Science* pointed out striking similarities between the Georgians and Gujjars in support of the Russian theory of origin in his book *A Study of the Gujjars* (1967).

The gujjars are traditionally and professionally animal lovers. They live close to nature—away from the “meddling crowd”. A vast majority of them inhabit the mountainous areas of J&K, rich in green gold, charming valleys, dales and meadows and fascinating waterfalls, streams and springs. They are forest dwellers and their habituation is in the thick of forest. They live in complete harmony with nature without harming the ecology or the environment. They are also called “nature’s own children” and “lords of the forests”. The features common to all societies referred to as ‘nomadic pastoral’ is that they, all to a greater or lesser degree, rest upon nomadic pastoral productive activities. Living on such rough and difficult terrain, their body adapt to environmental conditions. Their nomadic journey begins in the lowlands. They spend their winters at lower altitudes and summers at higher altitudes. Once the grass has been grazed to the earth they began looking for a fresh pasture for their herds and flocks of goats, sheep, cattle and buffalo. Being a nomadic tribe their material assets are very limited. Their main possessions are their animals (buffaloes) and a house to live in, which is a temporary tent. The community is conservative like most of the tribal societies and don’t mingle up easily with other communities.

The main source of income is through milk procurement, sale of ghee, butter, milk, wool, goat hair, etc. Their financial conditions are miserable because of the burden of grazing fee which they consider as a ‘humiliation fee’. Their problems are mainly because of ignorance, chronic indebtedness, uneconomic holdings and primitive techniques of cultivation. Majority of the Gujjar population lives below the poverty line. The entire of earnings are spent on the purchase of food grains, the cost of which is touching the sky. It is going out of the reach of an average nomadic grazer. Goat-hair and sheep’s wool are also important sources of income—the world famous pashmina shawls are made from the wool of their sheep.

There is not much improvement in the literacy rate and educational status of this community because they lead a nomadic life migrating from one place to another. As per estimates of Gujjar intellectuals, only 5% are literate. Tribal Research and Cultural Foundation has revealed that only 7% of Gujjars are getting education in schools and for female the number is still lower.

According to Sir Walter Lawrence:

Their good faith is proverbial and they are generous people giving away all the milk on Friday in charity. They believe in the policy of forgive and forget even when they are badly deceived and cheated. They have faith in the day of judgment where wrong-doers are bound to be punished. (qtd. *Himalayan Gujjars*)

Division of labor is not market based. It is environment based and is therefore equal among man and women. Gujjars have a “sustaining economy” and the sustainability depends upon nature. Both males and females depend upon nature for sustaining life. Gujjars believe in equality. There is no discrimination on the basis of birth, caste, gender, status etc. None is high or low in their social system except the aged who are looked and respected by all.

Gujri, the name given to a Gujjar woman, has definite attraction as a subject of poetry for a poet. In Gujjar society a Gujri has an important role which has very important bearing on the prosperity of the household. She is not confined only to the four walls of her house but enjoys more liberty and freedom in Gojari culture than any other women in any other culture and community, chaste and full of compassion a Gujri is a model by any standard for the other women of the society. Braving the hardships of nomadic life, a Gujri shares everything which comes in the way of men folk. Among the Gujjars, the women 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 fodder, and bringing potable water are their duties assisting their men folk in agricultural activities, selling milk and taking note of the dues of the milk is her domain. Besides controlling the family expenditure, they contribute to the family income by engaging themselves in productive work. Gujjars—both men and women are self-employed. She is an adept in horse riding. As and when required she knows how to tend and manage the flock. She is the master of the home and hearth but at times, she is not indifferent to other responsibilities.

Syed Maqsood Andrabi, a poet in his poem *A Gujjar* published in his anthology *Sound Mind in a Healthy Body* praises the liberty and equality enjoyed by a gujari. Where he says:

The most fascinating people around
In J&K are the gujjars found
Their distinct ethnic entity
Makes them a self reliant community
Extremely will their womenfolk they treat
Faith in women’s emancipation none can beat
Their cosmopolitan character is very striking
Live they all to everyone’s liking. (qtd. *Awaz-e-Gurjar* 31)

Though Gujris by and large are not educated in the modern sense but worldly wisdom is in many ways more practical and dependable. Their understanding of changing moods of nature is unparalleled. If provided with proper atmosphere and education she can revolutionize the entire community. Veil or purdah has nothing to do with a gujri. She is not dependent, and instead in certain matters men are dependent upon her. She is a loving mother, a trustworthy life partner, affectionate sister and obedient daughter-in-law. She never wants to be a parasite. She carefree roams in the forests at will and works freely along with the men. She is full of life and her love for life has made her the embodiment of perfect women hood. She is a symbol of dedication and if provided with facilities she can touch the pinnacles of fame and glory because she has shunned all that which is still the lot of other women.

Among the Gujjars of J&K, endogamy at the religious and the community level is always maintained and considered the rule of marriage. Both parallel and cross-cousin marriages are practiced and preference is given to the cousins while selecting a bride for marriage. To avoid heavy expenditure on marriage, marriage by exchange is common among them where the marriage expenses are mostly met reciprocally and the burden is not wholly and solely put on the bride side. Most of the marriages take place when the boys and girls attain adulthood. Both the bride and the groom are dressed in their traditional dress which is salwar suit for girls mostly red and black in color and also *salwar qameez* for groom with white turban on head. The females are fond of heavy jewelry. Marriages are settled through negotiations but love marriages also take place. Elopement is one of the characteristic of Gujjar community which requires no dowry. Early marriages, eloping with paramours, (irrespective of age) is very common and is taken as an accepted way of life.

On the occasion of marriage, the traditional songs are sung to mark every stage in the ceremony. Their oral literature helps them to reinforce and engage their faith in their own culture and tradition and in themselves as a society. Marriage ceremonies start with engagement and on this occasion, the bridegroom's father present gifts in the form of money or eatables and the bride's father accept it and give an earthen pot full of nuts, in returns. The burden of marriage expenditure is shared and divided. The feast at the house of both the bride and the groom are also supplemented by the villagers and the clan members in the form of curds, food grains, and cash which are reciprocated turn by turn in due course of time. The family of the bride is paid in cash and kind by the house-hold of the groom to supplement the marriage expenditure. The exchange of gifts takes place but no dowry is given or accepted. With the Islamisation, the muslim gujjars have to give *haq-meher* to the bride at the time of *niqah*. Bride-price and dowry systems are not prevalent among them, and there is no concept of dowry in this culture.

According to a state survey conducted by the Government of J&K under the *Digest of Statistics* in 2012 there were zero dowry deaths recorded among the Gujjar community as compared to the other two communities of the state—Kashmiri and Dogras. Till date no dowry death has been reported in this community and no such cases of dowry demand and dowry murder has been registered anywhere in the state.

Remarriages for widows, widowers, and divorcees are permissible and are practiced freely without any restrictions in the Gujjar community. These are some appreciable practices in this community. Whatever property they have it is divided among the sons, daughters and widows. There exists no gender prejudice among Gujjars.

With permanent settlements among gujjars, they are adopting the rituals of the already settled communities. Thus, in rare cases, few dowry cases can be seen in which the bridegroom's family demand Cattle or buffaloes in dowry. But still it is not that severe which leads to murdering of the bride. Dowry a new evil has now begun to penetrate into the community through settlements of gujjars but can be seen only among sound gujjars.

Thus, the physical characteristics of gujjars, their language, manners, customs, dress, social organization and economic activities are quiet distinct from other ethnic groups of the state. No community can beat the Gujjars in treating their womenfolk so well. Their faith in women emancipation is unquestionable. The degree of equality of sex in operation amongst the Gujjars is not seen elsewhere. This way Gujjars prove to be the healthiest limb of our society. Their cosmopolitan character makes them different from other communities. They are truly the citizens of the world. Local, regional and even national divisions have failed to affect their typical ethos.

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