

Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Gujjars of Jammu District

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Abstract

The unexpected COVID-19 pandemic situation has adversely affected the Indian population. Barely any sections of society could escape the disastrous effect of this pandemic. The Gujjar community was also affected by COVID-19 pandemic. Gujjar is the most populous Scheduled Tribe in Jammu District of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. COVID-19 has affected many parts of world and India. It has also affected the socio-economic life of the Gujjars. The purpose of this paper is to study the socio-economic condition of Gujjars at the time of COVID-19 pandemic and how it gave birth to different kinds of issues and caused poverty and hunger like conditions among them and also how due to lockdown restrictions, Gujjars had faced transportation problems for their milk and milk products. Gujjars and Bakarwals are the third largest ethnic group after Kashmiris and Dogras inhabiting the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir. According to the 2011 census, the Gujjars and Bakkarwals constitute 11.9% of the total population of Jammu and Kashmir-1.5 million out of 12.5 million. Traditionally nomadic communities, with their names indicating the livestock they reared (Gujjars reared cattle, Bakarwals reared sheep and goats-“Gau” means cow, and “Bakara” is goat”), the communities have adopted somewhat different paths. The Gujjars of Jammu & Kashmir are predominantly Muslims and their way of life, language and customs are strikingly different as compared to their counterparts settled mostly in the plains of the Union Territory. Due to increase in COVID-19 cases in Jammu and Kashmir, it became harder for them to sell their dairy products. Data for the study has been collected by using a designed interview schedule. In this paper an attempt has been made to assess and evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on Gujjars of Jammu District. The results of the study concluded that marginal people suffered a lot in comparison to salaried people. The economic activities has been halted which put an economic burden on this marginal community.

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Introduction

Globally COVID-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented challenges to communities worldwide and the Gujjars in Jammu District have not been exempted from its impact. Nearly ten millions people are at risk of falling into the extreme poverty. Nearly half of the world's workforce is at risk of losing their livelihoods. Non-salaried workers are vulnerable because of the lack of social protection and access to quality health care. “No income means No food” or less nutritious food during lockdowns (WHO 2021). This study is an attempt to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic condition and lockdown affected the lives of the members of the Gujjar community which is already come under the category of economically marginal community.

Who are Gujjars

Gujjars constitute a very large and visible tribal-ethnic group in the regions of Jammu and Kashmir. According to the 2011 census, the Gujjars and Bakkarwals constitute 11.9% of the total population of Jammu and Kashmir-1.5 million out of 12.5 million. Traditionally nomadic communities, with their names indicating the livestock they reared (Gujjars reared cattle, Bakarwals reared sheep and goats-“Gau” means cow, and “Bakara” is goat”), the communities have adopted somewhat different paths. The Gujjars of Jammu & Kashmir are predominantly Muslims and their way of life, language and customs are strikingly different as compared to their counterparts settled mostly in the plains of the Union Territory. They inhabit the sub-mountain regions all over the Kashmir valley and Jammu region. Gujjar community mostly

reside in far flung, hilly mountainous areas near forests and on the Indo-Pak line of actual control. They are originals from Rajputana, Gujarat and Kathiawar. They migrated from there due to famine. On April 19, 1991 the Govt. of India while recognizing the backwardness of Gujjar Bakarwal community of Jammu and Kashmir declared them as Scheduled Tribe.

Out of the total Gujjar population who are mostly scheduled tribe in Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, a majority came under Below Poverty Line. The Gujjars in the Jammu district depend mainly on the milk economy as their major source of livelihood but due to traditions like Pastoral Nomadism and Transhumance, this community continues to live in social isolation and leads a more or less marginalized economic existence. Due to Covid-19 their conditions have worsened, and they faced a lot of problems. They used to move to upper hills with their livestock by the end of March. Covid-19 restrictions restricted their migration to upper hills in 2020. Owing to the spread of deadly Covid-19 pandemic, their migration practice got affected.

COVID-19

Corona Virus Infection disease started in December 2019, at Wuhan China. WHO announced "COVID-19" as the name of this new disease on 11 February 2020, following the guidelines previously developed with the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Since December 2019, many cases of pneumonia of unknown etiology have been confirmed in Wuhan city, Hubei province, China. Wuhan City is a major transportation hub with a population of more than 11 million people. Symptoms of COVID-19 infection include fever, cough and acute respiratory disease, with severe cases leading to pneumonia, kidney failure, and even death.

Methodology

The present study which has been undertaken in Jammu district of Jammu province is quite relevant, as it is important to understand the impact of COVID-19 on Gujjars of Jammu. For the present study, both primary and secondary data has been used. Jammu district comprises of 21 tehsils out of which Ranbir Singh Pura tehsil was selected for the present study from which 50 households were randomly selected for investigation. Data for the study was collected by using a designed interview schedule.

Gujjars Struggle during Pandemic

The Gujjars of Jammu and Kashmir primarily depend on livestock rearing and seasonal migration for their sustenance. However, the pandemic induced restrictions and lockdowns disrupted their traditional patterns of movement. Due to COVID-19 pandemic, it became harder for Gujjars to sell their dairy products. The fear of contacting the virus resulted in dwindling finances and huge losses for them. Due to lockdown, Gujjars are unable to sell their milk and milk products. Due to this Novel Corona Virus, all the sweet shops and other related shops were closed and it directly affect the Gujjar community because Gujjars mostly sell their milk and milk products to these shops. One of the most important problem is transportation because mostly Gujjars use public transport and due to lockdown it has not been working. Shortage of fodder for the cattle has also been a major problem during the lockdown period.

The educational level among the tribes of Jammu and Kashmir especially Gujjars of Jammu is quite low. Nomadism has also contributed to their lagging behind in the field of

education. Access to education has been another significant challenge for Gujjar children. With schools closing and the shift to online learning, many children of this community already facing educational disparities were further marginalized due to lack of internet connectivity and technological resources.

Access to healthcare has always been limited for Gujjars due to their remote living conditions. The pandemic worsened this situation as they faced barriers in accessing medical facilities and information about preventive measures. This lack of access heightened their vulnerability to COVID-19 and other health issues. The pandemic has also disrupted the social fabric of Gujjars. Traditional gatherings, festivals and social events were either cancelled or significantly scaled down to adhere to safety protocols. This had a psychological impact on the community, affecting their sense of belonging and cultural practices.

Findings

The Gujjar community herd buffaloes. Members of Gujjar community are in the habit of migrating to upper parts of Himalayas along with their cattle during the summer season and back to the plains with the onset of chilly winters. Gujjars perhaps is the only community which has preserved and maintained its originality throughout ages.

Table 1: Occupation

Occupation	Households
Dodhi Gujjars	45
Zamindars	03
Casual Labours	02

Source: Field Based Data

The above table-1 shows that the majority of the Gujjars is Dodhi Gujjars and milk production and milk products like cheese, ghee is their primary occupation.

Table 2: Economic status (Income level) before lockdown period

Income	No. of Households	Percentage
1000-5000	05	10
5000-10000	10	20
10000-15000	30	60
15000 and above	05	10
Total	50	100

Source: Field Based Data

The above table-2 shows that the majority of the Gujjars come under 10000 -15000 income level. Only few households were found above the monthly income level of 15000 and above.

Table 3: Economic Status (Income level) after lockdown period

Income	No. of Households	Percentage
1000-5000	15	30
5000-10000	25	50
10000-15000	10	20
15000 and above	Nil	Nil
Total	50	100

Source: Field Based Data

The above table-3 shows that the majority of the Gujjars are facing problems due to Covid-19, the monthly income level has fallen during the lockdown period. Before lockdown period, for 1000-5000 income level 05 households were found and during the lockdown period 15 households were found for

the same income level. The table-3 also shows that for the next income level before lockdown 10 households were found and during lockdown 25 came under this level. 10 households were found in the 10000-15000 income level which reveals that the monthly income level has fallen from 60% to 20% for all of the Gujjar households due to the impact of Covid-19.

Government Interventions

Government intervention and support have been crucial in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on Gujjars. Measures such as providing financial assistance, distributing food supplies, and facilitating access to healthcare services have helped alleviate some of the hardships faced by the community. However, there is a need for more targeted and sustained efforts to address the specific challenges faced by the Gujjars.

Conclusion

On the whole it has been concluded that due to restrictions imposed by the Government to contain the spread of deadly COVID-19, their migration practice got affected. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated the socio-economic disparities faced by Gujjars in Jammu District. While the challenges are significant, the resilience and adaptability demonstrated by the community coupled with government support and intervention, offer hope for overcoming these adversities. Moving forward, it is essential to prioritize the needs of marginalized communities like the Gujjars and work towards building more inclusive and resilient societies.

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