



International Journal of Advance Studies and Growth Evaluation

Transition in Process: Changing Family, Marriage and Kinship Patterns of Gujjars of Jammu

*¹ Dr. Nisha Sharma

^{*1} Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Reasi Campus, University of Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir, India.

Article Info.

E-ISSN: **2583-6528**

Impact Factor (SJIF): **6.876**

Peer Reviewed Journal

Available online:

www.alladvancejournal.com

Received: 25/Feb /2025

Accepted: 28/March/2025

Abstract

The Gujjars constitute an important ethnic group in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir and enjoys the status of scheduled tribe since 1991. 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 Bakarwals 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. Gujjars as a community are distinct people and stand apart from the rest. They are from a distinctive racial stock having sharp features. They dress differently. Gujjars follow Islam and have a language of their own called Gojri- which is their mother tongue. Gujjars maintain their kinship and matrimonial relationship within the confines of their community. Social divisions among the Gujjars exist on the basis of religion and occupation. They perceive themselves in the middle order of regional social hierarchy and others also recognize them in the same way. The Gujjars who led a nomadic life for a long period of time and engaged in transhumant economy with main occupation of cattle herding and cattle rearing that determined their social life are becoming a settled community in recent years. The process of settling down has witnessed several changes in the social structure comprising of their family, marriage and kinship patterns as a result of modern indicators like education and employment. The present study is an attempt to highlight the changes in the social structural aspects of Gujjars.

*Corresponding Author

Dr. Nisha Sharma

Lecturer, Department of Sociology,
Reasi Campus, University of Jammu,
Jammu and Kashmir, India.

Keywords: Gujjars, zirga, biradari panchayat, family, clan, kinship, marriage, divorce.

Introduction

Family

Family is the most important primary group and almost all human beings have grown up in some kind of family. It is through families that societies present themselves biologically and culturally. The basic unit of Gujjar community is patrilocal family with its patrilineal descent and inheritance rules. The father or the elder male member is the head of the family and remains so till death. In other words, father or the elder male member is the supreme authority in the household, but the entire activities of the household are shared by the members of the family. In case no adult male member survives, an adult or aged woman becomes the head and she enjoys the same line of hierarchical authority for the family as did the male head of the family.

Changing Family Patterns

Previously joint family system was realistically operative among the Gujjars of Jammu. The joint family refers to staying together of grandparents, father, mother, uncles, aunts and grandchildren under one roof eating from the common hearth i.e. joint both in the structural and functional sense. This is akin to the definition given by Iravati Karve in her book, “Kinship Organisation in India”. According to her, “joint family is a group of people who generally live under one roof, who eat food cooked at one hearth, who hold property in common, who participate in common family worship, and who are related to each other as some particular type of kindred”.. But now, it is seen that parents with their unmarried children live together. Among Gujjars, the joint families are slowly changing into nuclear families under the impact of external influences mainly urbanization. It has been

observed that the main cause of the split of joint family setup is usually petty domestic issues like the distribution of workload among the family members and contribution of income towards family expenses.

Earlier, joint family system was the common pattern of living among the members of Gujjar community but now in the present era, the joint family system has gradually being replaced by the nuclear family system among them. Earlier they were ignorant about the importance of family planning and never adopted any method to control the size of the family but now the Gujjars to some extent have understood the importance of family planning and are interested to control the size of the family by adopting family planning methods. In the past, women of Gujjar community were not permitted to take any initiative or decision in family affairs but now, women of their community have been permitted to take initiative or decision in family affairs. Now the members of their community speak language other than Gojri language like official and link languages so that they may not lack in proper communication and wear dresses other than their traditional dress also. Earlier, they prefer to settle their disputes (like family disputes, marriage disputes and land related disputes) through their community panchayat/biradari panchayat known as Zirga within the community members without police or court intervention but now they prefer to settle their disputes through statutory panchayats or judicial courts.

The Gujjars have an established system of Zirga, which is an ancient institution of settling disputes and providing social control in their society. The zirga decides the disputes among its members.

The most important social organization among the Gujjars is the biradari panchayat (caste panchayat based on brotherhood). Generally a number of deras (families) merge to form a biradari panchayat. But these deras keep their independent identity as well. The leader or the head of the biradari panchayat is called zaildar (chief or head of the biradari) who is also selected on the basis of his age, his ability to work for the welfare of the biradari, and his experience as a group head. It is noted that a head of the biradari panchayat is always the most respected and influential person and is considered to be an authority by the members of the group.

The remaining group leaders and some elder members from the groups become the members of the Biradari panchayat. In case of a dispute firstly the group leader in consultation with the elder members of that group tries to settle the dispute. In case a person does not feel satisfied with the decision then the dispute goes to the Biradari panchayat. The decision of the Biradari panchayat is final. It is remarkable to note that the Gujjars approach the statutory panchayat or the judicial courts for the settlement of disputes only when the dispute is with the non-tribal society. Intra-tribal disputes are settled only in the Biradari panchayat.

According to the study being conducted by Tribal Research and Cultural Foundation, the Zirga are under the threat of extinction in J&K. The Tribal Judicial system Zirga popular in Gujjars of Jammu and Kashmir since centuries will become a history of past in next few decades if timely steps are not being taken by State legislature for its recognition and protection by making these "Tribal Courts" constitutionally valid through an enactment, said a latest study conducted by "Tribal Research and Cultural Foundation" a premier voluntary organization of Gujjars of Indian States.

Marriage and Kinship

Marriage as an institution carries high sanctity among the Gujjars. According to R.P.Khatana, Marriage constitutes an important basis out of which Kinship relations grow and are sustained. In general, monogamy is the norm of the Gujjars but because they have embraced Islam, they have been permitted to keep more than one wife.

Previously, among Gujjars, marriage within the boy's gotra was avoided. However, such restriction is no longer strictly adhered to and marriage within one's gotra as well as in one's other's gotra is not objected to but not quite common. Previously, the Gujjars used to marry within their own community but of late they have started marrying non- Gujjar Muslims also.

Earlier marriage customs such as Matti Khunni, Lakri-Tokni, Kapra Baterna etc were common customs and practices among them but now many of the marriage customs have been abandoned by them. Earlier members of their community were in favour to keep more than one wife but now they are not in favour to keep more than one wife. Matti Khunni is the ritual which marks the beginning of the marriage ceremony and in this particular ritual, digging of earth is done with which the walls of the house are plastered. Kapra Baterna is an occasion on which a new cloth which is especially purchased for the would be bride/bridegroom is cut and designed by a tailor who is specially called at home for this occasion in the presence of relatives and friends. Lakri Tokni is a custom in which Gujjars collect the wood before marriage and then they prepare the food by lifting the collected wood.

Earlier, divorce was not uncommon among Gujjars and initiative was mainly taken by the women. However, because of the shortage of the women in the Gujjar community, cases of men divorcing their wives were rare. If a divorce took place, it was mostly at the part of women and assumes the form of elopement but now the practice of divorce among them has been minimized to a great extent.

Clan

The Gujjar community is divided into a number of clans. The clan is based on a fiction of common descent. The main function of clan among Gujjars is to regulate marriage. The traditional function of clan division among the Gujjars is the same as that among Hindu Gujjars. Like the Hindus, Gujjars also maintain gotra exogamy but this does not seem to be the case today. Old Gujjar say that inter-marriage among the members of the same gotra was avoided in the past, but this does not seem to be true now days and cases of inter-marriage among clan members are not unknown. The significance of the clan group among the Gujjar has declined gradually and it does not perform its traditional function of regulating marriage nor is it today a very effective kinship grouping among them.

Among Gujjars, marriage between members of the same clan is a taboo. Among them patrilineal parallel-cousin marriage is usually avoided i.e. between father's brother's daughters and sons but it is also observed that they practice patrilineal cross-cousin marriage i.e. between father's sister's daughter and sons. They also practice matrilineal cross-cousin marriage i.e. between mother's sister's daughters and sons. In case where mother and mother's sister belong to same clan, marriages between their children are prohibited but this is not seemed to be the case today. Similarly, patrilineal parallel-cousin marriages i.e. marriages between father's brother's daughters and sons have also been practiced.

Conclusion

On the whole, it has been concluded that joint families are now giving place to nuclear families. The Gujjars have understood the importance of family planning. Women of their community have their say in the family matters. Members of the Gujjar community prefer to solve their disputes like property disputes, family disputes, divorce, intra-community disputes through Biradari Panchayat and when they do not feel satisfied with the decision of the Biradari Panchayat, they approach the Judicial courts. It has also been concluded that all types of cousin marriages may it be parallel-cousin type or cross-cousin type are prevalent among them.

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