

## Exploring the indigenous language of Gujjar and Bakerwal Communities

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### Abstract

*The study aimed to explore the indigenous language of Gujjar and Bakerwal tribal communities of district Ganderbal of Jammu and Kashmir, India. The design of the study is qualitative in nature. The researcher employs purposive sampling in selecting the sample. The researcher surveyed 81 Gujjar and Bakerwal households and interviewed 22 (19 Male and 3 Female) members of both the communities chosen from villages of Hayan Palpora, Ganwan, Harignawan, Jara Pati, Thune, Syed Basti (Surfraw), Chount Waliwar, and Yechihama of Ganderbal district. The researcher employed semi-structured questionnaire, interview schedule, focused group discussion and observation methods to collect data pertaining to the study. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the collected data. The study concluded that the Gujjar and Bakerwal communities are multi-lingual and, their mother tongue is gojri. Variation in mother tongue with respect to mannerism, tone and symbolic meaning of things has been observed between two communities. In intra community settings, mother tongue primarily used and in inter community settings, they mostly interact in Urdu language. Furthermore, in religious observances, both Arabic and Gojri is used. Gojri language has a close resemblance with Mewari and Urdu languages. The speakers of gojri language are declining as dominant languages like English and Urdu are much preferred in school and other settings. The school going children of both the communities learn and speak these dominant language instead of their own mother tongue that becomes a threat for the survival of the gojri language. The development of content in gojri language and financial support to the writers of gojri literature will be helpful in promoting gojri. The translation of school curriculum in gojri and the inclusion of gojri as a separate language subject besides, the usage of gojri as pedagogical method in educational settings will save the language from extinction.*

**Keywords:** Indigenous language, Gojri, Gujjar Tribe, Bakerwal Tribe

### 1. Introduction

The most apparent indication whether people belong to distinct or common culture is language. Language acts as a cultural universal and cultural capital (**Herskovits, 1953; Bourdieu, 1986**), mirror, and guide to reality especially social **Sapir (1949)**. **Schaefer** stated it, “as an abstract system of word meanings and symbols for all aspects of culture”. Culture shapes our attitudes, tastes, behaviours and norms and language is the chief feature of culture in the sense that the comprehension, configuration, expression and transmission of the culture as well as knowledge is possible through language only. In other words, the whole culture of a community is recognised and registered only through language. The identity of any person or indigenous group is maintained and preserved by the language. Language separates us from the world of animals and often we are called ‘talkative beings’ **Prah (2007)**.

There are 7,117 living languages across the globe and in the recent past, the number of language that have become extinct are 348 and 40 % of the living languages are likely to disappear in coming years. (**Ethnologue, 2020; India Today, 10 August 2019**). While speaking at All India Indigenous writers’ festival **Soren** said, “Every two weeks one language is disappearing from earth”. Linguistic variation and diversity is observed within and across

nations. Some countries are mono-lingual like North Korea while some are multi-lingual like Papa New Guinea and India speaking 839 and 780 languages (**People's Linguistic Survey of India, 2010**) respectively. Linguistically, India is rich, diverse and most complex societies across the globe. In India, there are 19,569 mother tongue's spoken by less than ten thousand people. Officially, there are 121 (22 Scheduled and 91 Non-Scheduled) Languages **Census of India (2011)**.

## 2. An Overview of Gujjar and Bakerwal Communities

Jammu and Kashmir is habituated by diverse ethnic groups. In the words of **Gul & Sheikh (2014)** Jammu and Kashmir is an abode to quite a number of tribal groups, who have settled down in every alcove and corner of this hilly countryside. Constitutionally, 12 scheduled tribes has been recognised but Gujjar and Bakerwal tribal communities were recognised via ST Amendment Act, 1991. The official enumeration of all the Scheduled tribe communities was done for the first time during 2001 Census. Among total population of Jammu and Kashmir including Ladakh, the tribals comprise 11.9 percent. The Gujjar tribal community has the distinction of being most populous tribes among all scheduled tribes. The Bakerwal (60,724) is the 3<sup>rd</sup> most populous tribes among ST's that comes after Bot (96,698). The smallest among ST's is Beda with 128 population only. For centuries, these two tribal communities has been living in Jammu and Kashmir, maintaining their identity by preserving their culture, traditions, language, and customs **Hari (1998)**.

The Gujjar and Bakerwal communities are primarily living nomadic life, shifting and migration from one place to another in search of fodder to feed and raise their animal stock. These communities emphasized on primitive way of living. Usually busy in herding cattle in high and low hilly and semi hilly areas, mountains and pastures. These communities spent most of their life herding cattle and in migration and remain isolated and cut-off from the outer world (**Khatana, 1942**)

Etymologically speaking Gujjar comes from "Gauchar" in which "Gau" refers to "cow" and 'Cher' refers to 'graze'. Therefore, Gujjars are cow herders who raise cows and other pet animals like buffaloes in plain and foot hills of mountains and primarily engage in agriculture, animal husbandry and milk production and supply. The Gujjar community are settled as well as sedentarized having a permanent habitation. They engage both in pastoralism as well as in agriculture.

Bakerwal is combination of 'Bakra' meaning 'goat' and 'Wal' meaning 'on who takes care of'. As the name suggest, Bakerwal is one who rears goats. Although both the communities (Gujjar and Bakerwal) claim common ancestry but they are different as far as their way of living and other things are concerned. Bakerwals community primarily rear goats and sheep but in high altitude areas and mountains. They constantly migrate along with the live-stock from pasture to pasture. They do not have a fixed habitation and are homeless, landless and isolated form the rest of the world. They were labelled as 'traveling gypsies' and they mostly reside in temporary 'bahaks' (a one room house made of mud, rocks and wood) or tents.

## 3. Research Methodology

The design of the present study is qualitative. Purposive sampling was used to finalise the sample of the study. The study was delimited to the Gujjar and Bakerwal communities residing in district Ganderbal. Out of total population of the district Ganderbal, the 20 percent constitute of scheduled tribes. The district is predominantly hilly, almost 70 percent of the district is hilly and semi-hilly which is habituated by diverse tribal communities and ethnic groups. The village with the scheduled tribe population of 31 percent and above were initially selected for the study. During pre-filed visit, it was found that few villages were left out

because they belonged to other scheduled tribes and gujjar and Bakerwal communities in few villages have lost their primitive traits.

The household survey, interview schedule as well as focused group discussions were employed to collect necessary data pertaining to the study. The villages selected for household surveys are Hayan Palpora, Ganwan, Harignawan, Jara Pati, Thune, Syed Basti, Syed Basti Surfraw, Chount Waliwar, and Yechihama. The researcher surveyed 81 households (65 Gujjar & 16 Bakerwal), interviewed 22 members (18Gujjar and 4 Bakerwal) and hold 8 focused group discussions (5 Gujjar & 3 Bakarwal) with members of both the communities in the above mentioned villages. The data was analysed by using qualitative content analysis.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. About mother tongue.**

All the sampled population reported Gojri as their mother tongue. Tribal Gujjar and Bakerwal communities of district Ganderbal primarily use gojri as a medium of interaction and communication. Gojri being the mother tongue of tribal Gujjar and Bakerwal communities is spoken with slight variations among these communities. Gojri is easy, comfortable, frequently used and most preferable language of these tribal communities. Gojri speakers figure third among the largest group of speakers in Jammu and Kashmir after Kashmiri and Dogri respectively. Gojri is one among the oldest ancient language of India. The genesis, usage and practice of Gojri language has been traced by historians before the era of Jesus Christ. “The Gojri language is the language of all the Gujjar and Bakerwal” **Tufail (2014)**.

Gojri is the dialect spoken by Gujjars of Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir **Anrdabi (2016)**. Gojri also holds the distinction of being the mother tongue of nearly 2 crore people living in different parts of Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Delhi, Haryana, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. Apart from India, Gojri is also spoken in neighbouring countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan because of migratory links with these countries. Sahitya Academy also give due recognition to gojri language by incorporating it in tribal language list. In 2006, Gojri language was given the status of mother language and Jammu and Kashmir, Board of School Education (JKBOSE) recognised gojri as mother tongue.

### **4.2. Language Script and writing form**

It was found that the 95 percent of the respondents reported that their mother tongue i.e., Gojri has no script and only 5 percent respondents reported that Gojri language has script. A dominant majority of the Gujjar and Bakerwal community were unaware about the writing form of their mother tongue language. Gojri language lacks its own script but adopts different forms of Arabic and Urdu script for writing. However, in Jammu and Kashmir ‘Nastalique script’ is standardised and mostly used for writing in Gojri language (**Vandana, 2017**).

However, significant steps has been taken to develop gojri writing system. In **1905**, **Baily** published “Gojri Grammar” and in 1992, Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages (JKAACL) published first Gojri dictionary in six volumes and it took a decade to complete this work. Linguistic Survey of India as well as JKAACL greatly contributed in the promotion and publication gojri language and literature in written form by providing a platform to hold seminars and conferences for Gojri poets and writers. JKAACL also publishes Sheeraza as well as Awaz-e-Gurjar Journals to publish gojri literature. The preparation of textbooks for primary level students by JKBOSE in 2006 is a landmark step in gojri writing.

### **4.3. Books read in mother tongue.**

Only five respondents reported that they have read books in their mother tongue. These were literate and one of the respondent has completed his Bachelor's degree and second respondent was pursuing her Bachelor's degree. One respondent (*name withheld*) reported that, "I have read books in gojri language especially books of Zabeer Rajourvi, Rafiq Anjum and Javed Rahi on poetry". Dr. Javed Rahi and Dr. Rafiq Anjum are the stalwarts of gojri literature who have wrote numerous books, dictionaries and poems in gojri language. Majority of the people among Gujjar and Bakarwal communities are illiterate especial elder populace. **Suri (2014a)** cited poverty as main reason for educational backwardness of gujjar and bakarwal children. The proportion of school going children among both the communities is very low especially in case of girls. Higher wastage, stagnation, dropout, child marriage. Child labour, malnutrition, lack of access to schools, lack of basic amenities etc. are mainly responsible for their educational backwardness (**Handu, 1977; Sharma, 1988; Anand, 1995; Dubey, 2009; Suri, 2014b**)

#### 4.4. Language Skills

Table 5. Shows proficiency in languages skills among Gujjar and Bakarwal communities.

Skills	Males	Females
<b>Speak and Understand</b>	Urdu, Kashmiri, Pakhtoon, Pahari, English	Urdu, Pahari, Pakhtoon
<b>Read and Write</b>	English	Nil

It was found that Gujjar and Bakerwal tribes are multilingual in nature and can speak more than two language. A dominant majority among these communities are illiterate, hence the proficiency and usage of English language is meagre. The educated people of the tribal communities can proficiently speak, understand, read and write in Urdu and English because of the fact that these two language are part of school curriculum. It was observed that the male members of the Gujjar and Bakerwal community can proficiently speak and understand more than three languages like Gojri, Urdu, Kashmiri, Pakhtoon and Pahari only. However, the small literate portion of community can understand, speak, read and write in Urdu and English only. Usually the male members of Gujjar and Bakerwal community are outside their homes for most of the times due to daily labour, business transactions and other activities with other communities and that is why they are multilingual. In case of female members of the community, they are proficient in speaking and understanding Gojri, Urdu, Pakhtoon and Pahari languages only because of the fact that their neighbouring communities speak such languages. It was observed that a very negligible proportion especially literate females are proficient in reading and writing Urdu and English only because these two languages are mostly taught in schools.

The result of the study are in line with **Bashir (2016)** which confirmed the multi-linguistic nature of gojri speakers especially Gujjar and Bakerwal communities. The two communities are more proficient in Gojri, Urdu and Kashmiri respectively. The Gujjars of Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir fluently speak languages like Kashmiri, Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, Pashto, Kangri, Pahari and Dogri (**Bhat, 2018; Gupta & Beg, 2012**)

#### 4.5. Language usage and community settings.

The sampled population of Gujjar and Bakerwal community revealed the mother tongue i.e., Gojri is used as a medium of interaction and communication with fellow community members. The use of mother tongue in home domain is intimate as well as informal in comparison to other secondary languages. The sustenance of any language can be preserved at home although if it lost its- vitality in other areas and spheres of life. Almost all the socialised roles and tasks of these ethnic communities are accomplished by using Gojri i.e., their mother tongue. In family conversation, discussion, calling for meals, asking for

things etc etc Gojri ie extensively used all the time. It is considered highly immoral and undesirable to use other language in intra community setting and sometimes people who communicate in language other than their mother tongue in intra community setting, face social disapproval and social boycott.

In communicating with other community members and settings, the most preferred language is Urdu. Although, Gujjar and Bakerwal community can speak other languages like Kashmiri and Pahari but they are most well versed with Urdu and in most of the inter community and administrative settings. The other communities like Kashmiris, Pakhtoons, Dards and Paharis are too well versed with Urdu and use it frequently in communication with Gujjar and Bakerwal communities. Urdu has attained the place of secondary language among all the communities of Jammu and Kashmir. **Azhar Ud Din (2015)** also revealed that both Gujjar and Bakerwal communities while corresponding between them use *gojri* i.e., their mother tongue and with other people and communities rely principally on Urdu language.

In case of tourists, English language is used by those who can speak and understand English language. Mostly tourist guides among two ethnic communities use English while communicating with tourists. The engagement in religious activities like praying obligatory Salah, reciting Holy Quran, Supplication and religious seminars, conferences, Arabic language is used.

#### **4.6. Language acquisition.**

As the child is born, the process of socialisation starts. The language acquisition and development is both receptive and expressive i.e., it involves hearing, understanding and speech (**Dr. Kaplan June 12, 2018**). Language of a child is shaped by different social circumstances and factors which directly and indirectly affect the child. The symbolic codes of language are gained through social interaction with members of society. The multilingual set up and neighbourhood of Gujjar and Bakerwal communities provides multifaceted social circumstances and social interactions that becomes basis for such communities to learn multiple languages. The Gujjar and Bakerwal communities are surrounded by different communities like Paharis, Pakhtoons, Shinas, Kashmiris etc. and interactions with them is a routine process. The learning of different languages by the members of Gujjar and Bakerwal communities serves distinctive purposes to them like that of social interaction, business, work, daily labour so on and so forth.

The members of Gujjar and Bakerwals learn the Gojri language at home while interacting with the members of the family. The languages like Pahari, Pakhtoon, Shina, Kashmiri, and Urdu are learnt from the environment. These languages are acquired by them as a result of social circumstances and social interaction with the members of these communities. The languages like Urdu and English are acquired both from the school as well from the environment. The researcher during field visit came across a situation where he found a Gujjar boy of school going age who acted as a guide to two Australian tourists and has no issues in communicating with them. However, the language acquisition process of male and female members of Gujjar and Bakerwal communities varies as male members are outgoing and stay outdoor for work and other activities and are in frequent contact with members of other communities hence acquire more than three language. While as female members stay indoors most of the times and have limited contact with people of other communities hence acquire less than four languages.

#### **4.7. Language resemblance.**

All the respondents reported that Gojri languages resembles with Urdu and Mewari (Rajasthani). This resemblance is because of the fact that both Urdu and gojri language have many things in common. Both languages belong to the family of Indo-Aryan languages. Their script or written form is same as well as their gojri uses a lot of words of Urdu like '*GojriMahri Zubaan*' meaning 'Gojri is my language' here the word '*Zubaan*' is an Urdu word. Nadvi as cited in Ahmad (2007) "The in-depth linguistic relationship between *gojri*

and Urdu language is; it is impossible to find such relation between two other languages' [Translated]. Gujjar and Bakerwals are said to have habituated in Rajasthan in previous times and the resemblance with Rajasthani language is because of their historical past.

Gojri language is known by different alternative names like Gujari, Gujer, Gujar, Gurjar, Gojari, Gujuri, etc. Script source (n.d.). Gojri as a language belongs to the language family of Indo-Aryan's. The gojri language is quite similar to Rajasthani, Punjabi, Pahari, Dogri, Gujarati, and Haryanvi dialects and languages and these languages have phonological as well as morphological characteristics that are quite similar to Gojri. Hence, these languages are known to be closest kins of gojri language. Gojri language is said to be originated from Rajasthani Language. **Lawrence (1967)** stated "Parimu or Hindki" as the language spoken by Gujjar. **Drew (1875)** classified Gojri as a variant of Pahari language. However, in 1941 the Census of India after a thorough investigation remarked, "Gujari [Gojri] the language of the Gujars is included with Rajasthani". Gujari or Gojri is a variant of Marwari which a dialect of Rajasthani language (**Grierson, 1916**); **Sharma, 2002 and Khatana, n. d.**)

**Warikoo (2000)** stated that the Gujjars resemble with the tribes of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and other India states not only in customs, traditions, occupation, manners, Ethnicity and other aspects of culture but also in language.

#### **4.8. Linguistic similarities and difference between two communities.**

It was found that slight linguistic differences occur between Gujjar and Bakerwal communities in using Gojri language. Although both communities speak gojri language but the mannerism, pronunciation, tone, and name of things vary. The Bakerwal community have high pitched tone. They speak fast and it becomes extremely difficult to understand what they are saying. While as Gujjar community have moderate pitched tone and one can easily understand their language. Both communities call same things by different names. Gujjars call children as 'Gadri' and while as Bakarwals call her as 'Gadre'. Gujjar name wooden pillar as 'Khamba' and Bakerwal name it 'Phaut'. If both communities have to say where are you going? Gujjars say 'tukiyaChalo' and as Bakerwals say 'tu kit chalo'.

#### **4.9. Views about School language and mother tongue.**

Mother tongue facilitates learning and enables persons to clear concepts and phenomena's. The community members of the both tribal groups reported that almost all the subjects should be in mother tongue. However, the school education curriculum is predominated by two languages-English and Urdu. The majority of the subjects are in English and only one subject is in Urdu. The absence of Gojri content or subjects in school education curriculum makes it extremely difficult for us to understand the content and that ultimately affects academic achievement as well as becomes reason of stagnation and dropout. In Jammu and Kashmir, Gojri speakers happens to be the third largest tribal group, unfortunately figures among marginalised and neglected languages of Jammu and Kashmir, neither included in 8<sup>th</sup> schedule nor is taught in schools, colleges and universities **Mir (July 28, 2018)**.

#### **4.10. Views about Language preference in schools.**

There were mixed responses on language preference in schools. A dominant majority of the respondents favoured mother tongue i.e., Gojri and only few respondents especially young school going children favoured Urdu. Since Gojri is our mother tongue it becomes easy for us to understand different concepts. Those who favoured Urdu stated that our school lack curriculum in gojri and for most of the times in schools and with other community settings we heavily rely on Urdu language.

There is no doubt that children learn better when taught in mother tongue. Yet our education systems fails pays attention to the fact. The inability of the tribal children to learn at early stages of school is not due to their inability but due to problem of learning an alien

language. Not only this, teachers are also unfamiliar with pedagogical language thereby affecting learning of the child **Furnis (2014)**.

#### **4.11. Language extinction and preservation.**

The sampled population reported that Gojri as a language is in a state of extinction. Greater access to education has significant effect on our mother tongue as the future generations speak and are taught languages other than their mother tongue. One of the respondents who is enrolled in middle school said, "Urdu should be given much priority because in schools and most of the social circumstances we use Urdu for communication. Apart from homes, we mostly rely on Urdu". Language survives when it is spoken. The decline in speakers of Gojri languages is a matter of concern as it is related to our identity. If our language dies, our identity also dies. We are recognised by our language and culture. The initial efforts for the preservation and sustenance of Gojri language must start from home. It is said that language is caught rather than taught. In all types of communications mother tongue must always be used at home so that the children will caught the native language. Rahi (2011) stated that the survival and progress of any language depends on appreciation, acknowledgement and due importance by its speakers.

The struggle of Gojri is undoubtedly challenging and the objective of raising the status of gojri on par with Kashmiri and Dogri languages seems to be an unfulfilled dream. Schools can be a big boost for survival of Gojri language. It is quite unfortunate that the schools with cent percent enrolment of students from Gujjar community and schools specially established for such community did not taught gojri despite Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages prepared textbooks in gojri for elementary level students. Even, the highest seats of learning have not given due weightage and recognition to gojri language that is spoken by the third largest group of Kashmir but the universities have separate department of Persian, Sanskrit and other foreign languages that are not even spoken in Jammu and Kashmir.

The preparation of content and books in Gojri and the inclusion of these as a part of regular school curriculum as well as pedagogical methods in gojri in areas where Gujjar and Bakerwal children are enrolled can save the language. Gojri as a separate subject in school education curriculum and translation of texts in Gojri will be useful in saving a language from getting extinct. The financial support from Jammu and Kashmir as well as Ministry of Tribal Affairs for the preservation and development of gojri language can prevent gojri language from marginalisation and extinction.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The study concluded the mother tongue of Gujjar and Bakarwal tribal communities is *Gojri*. It is commonly spoken by both the tribal communities with little variations and linguistic differences in mannerism, tone, and symbolic meaning of things. The indigenous language of Gujjar and Bakerwal communities lacks its own script, it relies on Arabic and Urdu scripts for writing. The unawareness about the writing form of their indigenous language was observed due to illiteracy, shortage of literature and books in indigenous gojri language.

The tribal communities of Gujjar and Bakerwal are multi-lingual and can proficiently speak and understand the languages of other neighbouring communities like Kashmiri, Pahari and Pakhtoon besides Urdu language. In all intra community interactions and transactions, mother tongue is dominant, in other community transactions and communications, they rely mostly on Urdu and in religious observances, Arabic is dominant. The gojri resembles with Urdu and Mewari (Rajasthani) languages because of their common family and the historical past of both the communities.

The community members preferred gojri as a medium of instruction in school education settings and gojri as a separate language subject in school education curriculum so that the gojri language and culture can be preserved from extinction. The speakers of gojri

language shows a declining trend because of the fact that the future generations of the communities have more access to school education and educational institutions mostly focus on dominant languages of English and Urdu. The future generation of the communities learn and speak Urdu and English in schools. There is no scope for gojri language in schools which is a matter of grave concern. Language can be preserved when it is spoken by its members. The most significant step towards preservation and transmission of gojri can be started from home and school. At home, in all type of communication, gojri must be used that will keep the language alive. The preparation and inclusion of gojri literature in school curriculum and adoption of gojri as medium of instruction can save the gojri language from dying or getting extinct.

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