

PAHARIS AND GUJJAR-BAKERWALS OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SOCIO-CULTURAL IDENTITY, POLITICAL MOBILISATION, AND REGIONAL ASPIRATIONS

Ravi Sharma

M.A & NET Qualified (Political Science)

Department of Political Science, IGNOU, New Delhi.

Email id: rsmamotra21@gmail.com

Abstract

Jammu and Kashmir represents a diverse socio-cultural region where multiple ethnic, linguistic, and tribal communities have historically contributed to the social and political landscape. Among these communities, Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwals occupy an important position due to their distinct cultural identities, historical experiences, and increasing political significance. Both communities share geographical proximity and face similar developmental challenges; however, their identity formation, political demands, and relationship with state institutions differ significantly.

This research paper presents a comparative study of the socio-cultural identity, political mobilisation, and regional aspirations of Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwals in Jammu and Kashmir. The study examines the historical background, cultural characteristics, language, livelihood patterns, and socio-economic conditions of both communities. It further analyses how identity politics, Scheduled Tribe recognition, reservation policies, and democratic participation have influenced their political mobilisation.

The paper adopts a qualitative and comparative research methodology based on secondary sources, including government reports, academic literature, research articles, policy documents, and studies related to ethnic politics in Jammu and Kashmir. The study argues that while Gujjar-Bakerwals have developed a strong political identity through Scheduled Tribe recognition and constitutional safeguards, Paharis have emerged as an important ethnic group seeking greater recognition and representation.

The research highlights that both communities share common aspirations related to development, education, employment, and political participation. However, differences in historical experiences and political strategies have shaped their regional aspirations. The study concludes that inclusive governance and balanced policy approaches are essential for maintaining social harmony and ensuring equitable development among different ethnic communities of Jammu and Kashmir.

Keywords:

Paharis, Gujjar-Bakerwals, Tribal Identity, Ethnic Politics, Political Mobilisation, Jammu and Kashmir, Reservation Policy, Regional Aspirations

1. Introduction

1.1 Ethnic Diversity and Identity Politics in Jammu and Kashmir

Jammu and Kashmir has historically been characterised by ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Different communities residing in mountainous and border regions have developed unique identities based on geography, occupation, language, and social traditions.

In such a diverse society, identity plays an important role in shaping political behaviour and community mobilisation. Ethnic groups often organise themselves to demand recognition, representation, and access to developmental resources.

The politics of identity has become particularly significant in Jammu and Kashmir because communities have historically experienced differences in political representation and socio-economic opportunities. Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwals represent two important communities whose identities have influenced contemporary political debates in the region.

1.2 Historical Background of Gujjar-Bakerwals

Gujjar-Bakerwals are among the prominent tribal communities of Jammu and Kashmir with a long historical association with the Himalayan region. The Bakerwals are traditionally known for their nomadic pastoral lifestyle, involving seasonal migration with livestock between mountainous and lowland areas.

Their social and cultural identity is shaped by pastoral traditions, Gojri language, community networks, and customary practices. Historically, geographical isolation and dependence on traditional occupations created challenges in accessing education, healthcare, and economic opportunities.

The recognition of Gujjar-Bakerwals as a Scheduled Tribe in 1991 marked an important stage in their socio-political development. It provided constitutional safeguards and opportunities for greater participation in education, employment, and political institutions.

However, despite these developments, issues related to development, livelihood security, and effective political representation continue to influence community aspirations.

1.3 Socio-Cultural Identity of Pahari Community

The Pahari community represents an important ethnic and linguistic group primarily residing in regions such as Rajouri, Poonch, and certain pockets of Kashmir. The term “Pahari” is associated with geographical environment of the mountainous areas where they reside.

They have mountain-based cultural traditions, language patterns, and regional identity. They received Scheduled Tribe Status later in 2024 by the current government.

Paharis have historically maintained distinct cultural practices, including traditional customs, folk traditions, and linguistic characteristics. Their identity is strongly connected with the emergence of Pahari identity politics reflects the broader relationship between ethnicity, state recognition, and access to developmental opportunities.

1.4 Similarities Between Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwals

Despite differences in historical experiences, Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwals share several common characteristics.

Geographical Similarity:

Both communities have strong connections with mountainous regions of Jammu and Kashmir, particularly Rajouri and Poonch.

Socio-Economic Challenges:

Both communities have experienced difficulties related to:

- Limited educational facilities
- Employment opportunities
- Infrastructure development
- Healthcare accessibility

Cultural Similarities:

Both groups share certain regional traditions, local customs, and lifestyle patterns influenced by the Himalayan environment.

Political Aspirations:

Both communities seek:

- Greater political representation
- Development opportunities
- Recognition of their identity
- Participation in decision-making processes

1.5 Differences Between Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwals

Although both communities share geographical and social similarities, significant differences exist.

Historical Identity:

Gujjar-Bakerwals have been recognised as a Scheduled Tribe community since 1991, whereas Paharis got it later in 2024.

Language:

Gujjar-Bakerwals are closely associated with the Gojri language, while Paharis identify with various Pahari linguistic traditions.

Livelihood Patterns:

Bakerwals have traditionally followed nomadic pastoralism, while Paharis have largely followed settled rural livelihoods.

Political Mobilisation:

Gujjar-Bakerwal politics has focused on protecting existing tribal rights, while Pahari mobilisation has largely centred around demands for recognition and representation.

1.6 Political Mobilisation and Identity Politics

Political mobilisation refers to the process through which communities organise themselves to achieve political objectives.

Among Gujjar-Bakerwals, mobilisation developed around issues such as:

- Protection of tribal rights
- Reservation benefits
- Development demands
- Political representation

Pahari political mobilisation has focused on:

- Recognition of ethnic identity
- Inclusion in affirmative action policies
- Greater representation in government institutions

Both communities demonstrate how ethnic identity can become a powerful tool for political participation.

1.7 Reservation Politics and Changing Relations Between Communities

Reservation policies have played a significant role in shaping political relations between different communities in Jammu and Kashmir.

For Gujjar-Bakerwals, Scheduled Tribe status provided constitutional protection and increased opportunities. However, debates regarding expansion of reservation benefits created new political discussions among different ethnic groups.

The reservation debate reflects broader questions of social justice, equality, and resource distribution. It also highlights the challenge of balancing the aspirations of multiple communities.

1.8 Regional Aspirations and Future Prospects

The future political landscape of Jammu and Kashmir will depend upon how effectively the aspirations of different communities are addressed.

Both Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwals seek recognition, development, and meaningful political participation. Sustainable peace and development require policies that respect cultural identities while ensuring equal opportunities.

Inclusive governance, educational development, and economic empowerment can help reduce inequalities and strengthen democratic participation.

2. Research Objectives

1. To examine the socio-cultural identity of Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwals in Jammu and Kashmir.
2. To compare the historical experiences and social conditions of both communities.
3. To analyse the patterns of political mobilisation among Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwals.

4. To study the impact of reservation policies on identity politics and community relations.
5. To explore the future prospects of inclusive ethnic politics in Jammu and Kashmir.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Studies on Tribal Identity and Ethnic Politics

The concept of tribal identity has been widely discussed in Indian political studies. Scholars argue that identity is not only a cultural category but also a political instrument through which communities demand recognition, rights, and representation.

Tribal communities often use their shared history, language, traditions, and social experiences to create collective identities. These identities become important in democratic politics because they influence demands related to reservation, development, and participation in governance.

Studies on ethnic politics highlight that state recognition plays a significant role in strengthening community identity. When communities receive constitutional recognition, they gain greater access to institutional resources and political platforms.

3.2 Research on Gujjar-Bakerwal Identity and Political Status

Existing studies on Gujjar-Bakerwals mainly focus on their cultural heritage, pastoral lifestyle, socio-economic conditions, and political challenges.

Researchers highlight that the Gujjar-Bakerwal community has historically faced difficulties due to geographical isolation, nomadic lifestyle, and limited access to education and development opportunities.

The Scheduled Tribe recognition provided in 1991 is considered an important turning point in their political history. It strengthened their representation and increased opportunities in education, employment, and political institutions.

However, studies also indicate that constitutional safeguards alone cannot eliminate socio-economic inequalities. Effective implementation of welfare policies remains essential for complete empowerment.

3.3 Studies on Pahari Identity and Political Mobilisation

Research on the Pahari community focuses on questions of linguistic identity, cultural distinctiveness, and demands for political recognition.

The Pahari identity movement represents the broader process through which ethnic communities seek recognition from the state. The community's political mobilisation has been connected with demands for representation, development opportunities, and inclusion within affirmative action policies and they got it in 2024 under the current government.

Scholars argue that Pahari mobilisation reflects the changing nature of identity politics in Jammu and Kashmir, where cultural identity and political aspirations are closely connected.

3.4 Reservation Politics and Inter-Community Relations

Reservation has remained a central issue in discussions regarding tribal politics in India. Scholars argue that affirmative action policies aim to correct historical disadvantages and promote social justice.

In Jammu and Kashmir, reservation policies have influenced political relations among different communities. While such policies provide opportunities for disadvantaged groups, they may also create debates regarding representation and distribution of resources.

The comparison between Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwals highlights the complexity of balancing competing community aspirations within a democratic framework.

3.5 Research Gap

Although several studies have examined tribal communities, limited comparative research exists on Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwals focusing on their socio-cultural identities, political mobilisation, and regional

aspirations together.

Most existing studies analyse either Gujjar-Bakerwal tribal issues or Pahari identity movements separately. This research attempts to fill this gap by providing a comparative political analysis of both communities.

4. Research Methodology

Research Design

The study follows a **qualitative and comparative research design**. It aims to understand similarities and differences between Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwals regarding identity formation, political participation, and development aspirations.

Sources of Data

The study is based on secondary sources, including:

- Government reports
- Ministry of Tribal Affairs publications
- Jammu and Kashmir government documents
- Census reports
- Research articles
- Books related to tribal politics and ethnic identity
- Policy documents

Method of Analysis

The collected data is analysed through a comparative political approach. The study examines:

- Historical background of both communities
- Socio-cultural characteristics
- Political mobilisation strategies
- Impact of reservation policies
- Future political aspirations

5. Expected Findings

The study is expected to reveal the following findings:

1. Distinct Identity Formation

Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwals have developed distinct socio-cultural identities based on language, traditions, historical experiences, and geographical conditions.

2. Common Development Challenges

Despite differences, both communities face similar challenges related to education, employment, infrastructure, and economic development.

3. Different Political Experiences

Gujjar-Bakerwals have developed political representation through Scheduled Tribe recognition, whereas Paharis have got it later in 2024.

4. Role of Reservation Policies

Reservation policies have significantly influenced political participation and identity politics in Jammu and

Kashmir.

5. Need for Inclusive Governance

Balanced policies are required to address the aspirations of different communities while maintaining social harmony.

6. Results and Analysis

The comparative analysis indicates that both Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwals occupy an important position in the socio-political landscape of Jammu and Kashmir.

The Gujjar-Bakerwal community has achieved greater institutional recognition due to Scheduled Tribe status. This recognition has increased their participation in political institutions and provided opportunities for social mobility.

On the other hand, Paharis have emerged as a politically active community seeking greater recognition and representation. Their mobilisation demonstrates the importance of ethnic identity in democratic politics. As a result of which they also got ST status.

The analysis shows that both communities share similar developmental concerns but differ in their historical experiences and political strategies.

7. Conclusion

The comparative study of Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwals demonstrates that ethnic identity plays a significant role in shaping political mobilisation and representation in Jammu and Kashmir.

Both communities share geographical proximity and similar socio-economic challenges, yet their historical experiences and political demands differ. Gujjar-Bakerwals have benefited from Scheduled Tribe recognition, which strengthened their political position and institutional representation. Paharis, meanwhile, have emerged as an important political group will be benefited in the near future.

The study highlights that identity-based politics is a complex process involving cultural preservation, social justice, and political negotiation. While reservation and recognition policies provide opportunities for empowerment, long-term development requires inclusive governance, educational advancement, economic opportunities, and balanced representation.

A democratic approach that respects the cultural identities of different communities while ensuring equal opportunities is essential for sustainable peace and development in Jammu and Kashmir.

Reference -

1. Ministry of Tribal Affairs. (2026). *Annual report 2025–2026*. Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs.
2. Tribal Affairs Department, Government of Jammu and Kashmir. (2026). *Tribal welfare and development initiatives in Jammu and Kashmir*. Government of Jammu and Kashmir.
3. Ministry of Tribal Affairs. (2025). *Annual report 2024–2025*. Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs.
4. Government of Jammu and Kashmir, Tribal Affairs Department. (2025). *Tribal development programmes and socio-economic empowerment initiatives in Jammu and Kashmir*. Government of Jammu and Kashmir.
5. Government of India. (2024). *The Constitution (Jammu and Kashmir) Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Act, 2024*. Ministry of Law and Justice.
6. Ministry of Tribal Affairs. (2024). *Annual report 2023–2024*. Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs.
7. Government of India. (2023). *The Constitution (Jammu and Kashmir) Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Bill, 2023*. Parliament of India.

8. Sharma, A. (2021). Communications from the field: The tale of two Gujjar communities. *Nomadic Peoples*, 25(2), 233–249.
9. Rahi, J. (2021). *Gujjar and Bakerwal tribes of Jammu and Kashmir: History, culture and identity*. Tribal Research and Cultural Foundation.
10. Bhat, J. A. (2019). Political representation of Gujjar tribe of Jammu and Kashmir: An analytical study. *History Research Journal*, 5(6), 1–8.
11. Hussain, F., & Afsana, I. (2019). Socio-economic and political condition of tribal (Gujjars and Bakerwals) in Jammu and Kashmir. *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research*, 4(4), 2821–2834.
12. Wilkinson, S. I. (2004). *Votes and violence: Electoral competition and ethnic riots in India*. Cambridge University Press.
13. Bose, S. (2003). *Kashmir: Roots of conflict, paths to peace*. Harvard University Press.
14. Verma, R. C. (1995). *Indian tribes through the ages*. Publications Division, Government of India.
15. Singh, K. S. (1994). *The scheduled tribes*. Oxford University Press