

## Traditional Food, Health, and Activities of Indigenous People: The Gujjar-Bakarwal of Jammu and Kashmir

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### Abstract

**Objective:** To describe how Indigenous Peoples understand their own traditional food system, health, and well-being and other cultural circumstances.

**Subjects and setting:** Interview were conducted with 6 families of Indigenous Gujjar-Bakarwals including 8 women and 2 men in their home community. The interview was completed over a period of one week. The efforts to record the Gujjar-Bakarwals' food system, health and activities has been welcomed by the community and considered successful.

**Result:** The food system of Gujjar-Bakarwals' is inextricably connected to land, which in turn is interlinked with livelihoods, physical and traditional activities. The cultural diet and the integrity of the ecosystem promotes health and well-being of the community people.

**Conclusion:** The case study of Gujjar-Bakarwals give important information on locally produced, collected, or hunted foods, activities, and health status. Gujjar-Bakarwals' reflections on their local food systems and activities should be encouraged and acted upon to protect and promote sustainability of the cultures. The Gujjar-Bakarwals' food system and active practices clearly have many excellent health benefits. Thus, the cultural activities promote fitness and serve the Gujjar-Bakarwals well.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Peoples, Gujjar-Bakarwal, Traditional Food, Traditional Activities, Health.

### Introduction

It is estimated that there are about 350 million Indigenous People living across the world, approximately accounting 5% of the total world population, who constitute more than 5000

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languages and cultures (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2015). In India, Indigenous People constitute about 8.2% of the total population. It is approximated that about 92% of the Indigenous People lives in remote forest areas, with little or no basic necessities. Indigenous People practice unique traditions and possess distinct belief system, socio-economic, and political characteristics that are different from those of dominant communities. Indigenous communities show historical continuity with their pre-settled societies or their ancestral environments. The other interchangeable terms for Indigenous peoples are 'tribes,' 'aboriginals,' 'nomads,' 'hill people' and 'hunter-gatherers.' However, researchers and other professionals acknowledge that Indigenous knowledge needs to be documented if any of it fits with their interest, utilized, or integrated into scientific corpus. Indigenous knowledge is not specific to Indigenous Peoples rather it also includes those who struggle to survive or still depend on traditional forms of knowledge. One approximation is that 80% of the world population is dependent on Indigenous knowledge for either food or medicine (Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI); Nakata, 2002).

Some researchers focused on assisting Indigenous People to protect their culture and knowledge. The culture and knowledge of Indigenous People is complex which needs ethical approach to record, analyse, interpret, and preserve (Mit et al. 2012; Du, 2017). Du and Haines states that most invaluable knowledge of Indigenous culture is being lost as the older generations die. The recovery and preservation of one's culture and language are the common concern among Indigenous People (Allen, Resta, and Christal, 2002; Du, 2017). Indigenous knowledge varies from one place to another i.e., it is a different thing to different people in different places. It is unique to a given culture or community which is oral, powerless, holistic, and culturally embedded. Understanding the culture of Indigenous population by the non-Indigenous researchers is the challenging task. Du et al. states that Indigenous community require trust, respect from non-Indigenous researcher and the researcher must carry culturally sensitive research methodology. Researcher must be well trained to explain the project information to the Indigenous community in such a way that suits participants' language otherwise a translator must be required. Motivation of community members leads to the success of the project. So, the researcher must be well prepared to inspire, and persuade the participants in a respectful way. Sometimes, it may take a lot of time to earn trust and support from the Indigenous community, so the researcher needs to be diligent and patient.

Gujjars are primarily a nomadic ethnic group which have now adopted a stationary way of life in the villages or on the foothills and have taken land cultivation or pastoral farming as the main occupation. Koundal 2012 states that Gujjar population is the third largest community in Jammu and Kashmir, after Kashmir and Ladakh, it comprises more than 20% population of the

Union Territory. However, in comparison to other communities of Jammu and Kashmir, Gujjars are lying below the poverty line.

Gujjar-Bakarwals are homeless tribe of Gujjars who travel from one place to another as a part of their traditional journey. In summer season, these people start moving with their articles by loading on horses to the heights of mountain pastures with their flocks. This ethnic group usually keep up to 400 sheep, 100 goats, 6-8 horses, 4-5 dogs, 4-5 hens and 2-3 donkeys. These people have spent their entire lives surrounded by quadrupeds which is the main source of their livelihood. As this tribe specifically rear sheep and goats, hence named as Bakarwal. They do not have a house, rather a tent made of old pieces of cloth and sticks to live in.

### **Methodology**

Data was collected from the Bemina area of Srinagar district of Jammu and Kashmir, where several families of Gujjar-Bakarwals had set their tents. Each family were interviewed including 8 women and 2 men. All interviews were conducted over a period of one week. Ten members were interviewed to explore their unique culture; distinct belief system, traditional activities, health, and food system.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of the study is to explore the cultural knowledge, traditional food, and activities and how does it promote health and well-being of the community peoples. The study calls attention to the significance of Gujjar-Bakarwals' cultural diet and the integrity of the ecosystem for the promotion of health. The current study will discuss the traditional activities, traditional diet, and health status of Gujjar-Bakarwals of Jammu and Kashmir.

### **Gujjar-Bakarwals' Tradition**

For thousands of years, the well-being of Indigenous Peoples has been sustained by their traditional food, physical activities, as well as keeping in tune with natural environment. The food, health, livelihood, and belief system of Indigenous People are tied up to their cultural heritage. The diet and active practices of Gujjar-Bakarwals' promote fitness and add immeasurably to the overall picture of health.

- **Traditional Activities**

Traditionally the Gujjar-Bakarwal men dedicate some part of their time to hunting. The individual hunter within community shares the traditional food with the elders and other members who are not able to hunt. It is a way to display responsibility and respect for others, provides skills to survive, develop confidence, learn patience and other personality qualities. The hunted animals such as wild goat, jackals, and the different wild birds. The products obtained from hunting have

nutritional, and medicinal value. Some parts of the hunted products like teeth, bones, feather, and leather have some artisanal and witchcraft use, for instance bird beaks, bird feather primarily the feather of the vulture is used as a witchcraft for children and young individuals. The hair or the nail of lion, and seashells are believed to protect young individuals from magic spells. Women are only in charge of food preparation while male members never contribute in this work. Both the male and female members of the community gather food and firewood from natural resources. Children are also taught how to find and collect food from forests.

- **Traditional Diet and Plants as Medicine**

The traditional diet is primarily based on, vegetables, pulses and cereals particularly maize flour, and whole wheat flour. Birds include hen, cock, pigeon, and crane and animals such as goat, sheep, and cow are eaten occasionally. In addition to meat, organs and many parts of animals are eaten like tongue, kidney, liver, brain, stomach, head, heart, etc. Wildberries are the most popular fruit that are dried and canned are then added to traditional drinks (*sharbat*) and sweets. In general, most vegetables are dried for the winter use. However, the primary method of cooking food is stewing, and roasting on fire.

Plants of several kinds are harvested for food and medicine, for example *Kutwol* (a wild plant) is used to treat the bones and joint problem. *Dandas* (walnut bark) used to clean teeth. *Chutyad* (a wild herbal) used for hair growth.

Noon chai is considered to have a lot of medicinal value. It reduces stress, builds immunity, and is very effective in pregnancy. However, ghee, *sheera kadai*<sup>1</sup>, *semolina sharbat*<sup>2</sup>, wild greeny, and eggs are the traditional diet for pregnant women. *Kehwa*<sup>3</sup> or *kodi chai*<sup>4</sup> is used to treat cough, cold, fever and body ache. In addition, rice paste, or outer gourd covering is used to treat mumps<sup>5</sup>—a common illness among children of the community.

## **Cultural Characteristics**

- **Cultural Attribute of Traditional Food**

Gujjar-Bakarwals' agree that the traditional food and traditional physical activities enhances individual's health —physically and mentally. Traditional food is considered healthier and less expensive than market food. The fresh and pesticide free food enriches the food quality

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<sup>1</sup> Sheera Kadai is a traditional desert made with maize flour, desi ghee, wild herbals, black pepper, and gudd/jaggery.

<sup>2</sup> Semolina Sharbat, a traditional drink made of semolina, onion, green chili, salt, cumin, water, lemon.

<sup>3</sup> Kehwa a tea made of water, cinnamon, cardamon, black pepper, jaggery, kodi chai.

<sup>4</sup> Kodi chai is a noon chai without milk.

<sup>5</sup> Mumps is an infection that affects salivary glands which are located below the ears.

which in turn contribute to health and well-being of the community members. Elder community members think that the purchase of market food is inconvenient to health and well-being.

- **Family Structure**

Gujjar-Bakarwals' tradition comprised of nuclear family system where several related families live in a semi-dispersed way in tents relatively near to each other. These families extend as the son marries and his wife came to live with his husband in a separate tent. The dominant family structure is primarily patriarchal, where the principal authority is man.

- **Education**

In Gujjar-Bakarwals' community there is a government teacher responsible to teach community children. However, the education level is deficient, owing to lack of infrastructure, education material, etc. The prevalence of education is high in boys as compared to girls in the community.

### **Overall Health Status**

Health is a state of complete emotional and physical well-being. Good health is a centre of happiness, longer and active life. Good health involves pursuing a healthful lifestyle —develop muscular strength, body composition, and flexibility. Gee et al. 2014 states that the well-being of individual and community is determined by the individual's connection to land, ancestry, tradition, and culture. The quest of well-being is as old as the man of ancient times. Since technologies, have changed values, and patterns of a man. But whenever man faces health issues he returns to nature in search of a suitable answer, and he always get a positive response. The living of life in tranquillity, and in the lap of nature leads a complete life in true sense of the word.

An individual's perception of his or her own health is reflected in self-assessed health status. An individual's current health status provides a broader view of the overall community health (ABS 2019; AIHW, 2020). Delpierre et al. 2009 states that the health of a community depends on the individual's awareness and expectations about their own health.

Despite the hardship, Gujjar-Bakarwals live their life far away from the human civilization on the height of mountains. These people live amicable, healthful, and well contented life in the scenic beauty of nature. They breathe the purest air possible which is free from any toxic foreign particles. As nature plays an essential role in health and well-being, the nature alone is sometimes enough to enhance the overall health of an individual.

### **Results**

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Gujjar-Bakarwals are now facing new challenges due to globalization or modernization, spanning all the dimensions of life. The key concept to maintain health and well-being is to retain the cultural identity, traditional system, and environmental integrity. Gujjar-Bakarwals are inextricably connected to ancestry, which in turn is interlinked with livelihoods, traditional activities, and health. The cultural heritage is the centre of Gujjar-Bakarwals' identity and well-being. The hunting, gathering, and sharing of traditional food provide survivance and social cohesion. Thus, there is a strong cooperation, and a sense of commitment to one's community.

## Conclusion

The case study of Gujjar-Bakarwals gives important information on locally produced, collected, or hunted foods, activities, and health status. The active practices of Gujjar-Bakarwals' clearly have many excellent health benefits that promote fitness and serve the Gujjar-Bakarwals well. The traditional food and related resources add immeasurably to the overall picture of health determinants, as it will for all the members of the community. Community members show a wealth of traditional knowledge and unique utilize in their ability to recognize, grow, and prepare these foods, and to also use them as medicine. Many types of uncultivated green leaves are consumed as vegetables which are considered as essential for the growth and maintenance of normal health. Gujjar-Bakarwals' reflections on their local food systems and activities should be encouraged and acted upon to protect and promote sustainability of the cultures. It is, therefore, important to gain further insights into nutrition indicators and related processes.

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