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Understanding the Gujjar-Pahri Faultline in J&K

A Pahri Perspective

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Although, Pahari signifies the mountaineers in J&K, for the purpose of this report it will be restricted to those people whose mother tongue is the Pahari language. Paharis are the habitants of the Pir Panchal region and constitute 51 per cent of the population of this region. They occupy a large terrain starting from the south of Banihal and going up to Muzafarabad. Poonch, Rajouri, Uri and Karnah fall in the J&K state while Muzafarabad, Bagh, Sudhnutti, Rawalakote, Kotli, Mirpur and Bhimber are located in the POK.

The Paharis are comprised of various castes, creeds, sects and religions. They are Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs and are bounded to each other only through their mother tongue Pahari while canvassing distinct cultural heritage, social, economic and historical backgrounds. As per Fredric Dew, the author of 'The Northern Barrier of India,' Paharis are strong, hardy, tough, brave and an active race with power and fame.

Muslim Paharis suffix the word Khan or Sardar with their name to indicate their status. Majority of them reside in far flung, remote and cut-off areas near the forests in high pasture lands in the Pir Panchal region and along side the LoC, but their basties and habitations also exist in the Kashmir valley and other parts of the Jammu province. Their economic growth is negligible due to topographical disadvantages, non-availability of infrastructure facilities and proximity to the Actual Line of Control. The state of their living is abysmal: 37 per cent people of this community are still living below poverty line, 63 per cent population is residing in Kucha houses without bathrooms, 34 per cent people are still illiterate and 49 per cent basties are without power supply. There are no commercial avenues, industrial environment or big hydel projects in Pir Panchal region. Therefore, unemployment is rampant among skilled, unskilled as well as educated youth and their economic condition is quite vulnerable.

Similarities between Gujjar and Paharis

The following similarities can be observed between the Paharis and the Gujjars. First, Gujjars and Paharis are neighbours to each other and have lived together in a very cordial atmosphere in the same *basties* (habitations) and villages for centuries together. There is a similarity in their life styles, diet and general outlook. Second, being neighbours, the Gujjars and Paharis face similar problems and miseries. During the Indo-Pak war of 1947 the LOC was established in the heart of Pir Panchal region; both the Gujjars and the Paharis equally suffered the pain of division. Their economic growth has also been hampered due to repeated conflicts in 1965 and 1971 on the border, and the continuous firing and shelling and internal disturbances due to the spread of militancy from 1989 onwards.

Third, both communities are surviving in congruent geographical conditions and envisage similar lifestyles. Both the communities either live in remote, far-flung and inaccessible hilly areas of the Pir Panchal region or their *basties* are located exactly on the LOC. Due to geographical disadvantages they are unable to avail the benefits of development happening in the rest of the country and in turn remain economically backward.

Fourth, both the communities speak and understand the Gojri and Pahari languages. Therefore, at the grass root level there is no communication gap and the people of both the communities meet, interact and help each other in day today life, social functions, festivals and other occasions. Fifth, the livelihood of the majority of these ethnic races is dependent on agricultural activities, rearing of cattle, sheep, goats and labour-oriented works. There is no administrative setup or modern day infrastructure; the Gujjars and Paharis resolve their disputes through traditional norms within their own local courts.

Sixth, the folk songs of both the communities resembles each other like the Kanchi, Dolan, Mihia, Shopia, Surma, Doli etc. The Sufiana Kalam Saif-ul-Maluk (devotional songs) and Se Harfies of great Gujjar spiritual saints Hazarat Baba Jee Sahib and Hazarat Haji Baba are equally popular among the Paharis and Gujjars. The religious shrines of Hazarat Pir Ghulam Shah Badshah Shah (a Pahari origin) Dara Sharief Rajouri and Hazarat Baba Jee Sahib Larvi (Gojri origin) Wangat Sharief are also equally respected by both the

communities because these saints always spread the message of love for mankind, tolerance and restraint. Finally, poverty, illiteracy, economic backwardness, suppressions and atrocities are common factors between these two communities.

Roots of Gujjar-Pahari Tension

In 1974 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited J&K and on the request of the Gujjar leaders sanctioned Rs. 12 crore for their development, keeping in view their economic vulnerability. In the meantime the political scenario of J&K state changed and Sheikh Mohd Abdullah came to power on 24th February 1975. He constituted a board for the development of Gujjars and Bakerwals, established residential hostels for the children of this community, sanctioned scholarship for the students and created infrastructural facilities in Gujjar *basties* along with establishment of Gujjar Nagar Jammu, construction of shop lines for the unemployed Gujjar youth and rehabilitation of nomadic Bakerwal tribes. Therefore tensions began to simmer in the Pahari community. They felt neglected by the state as well as central government and were denied benefits which were being given to other communities living in the same belt under similar economic conditions. Thereafter, the Paharis started a struggle under the banner of Pahari Welfare Forum in 1975 for a Schedule Tribe status.

Despite repeated memorandums, rallies and dharnas there was no response from state as well as the central government in favour of the Pahari community and their demands remained unattended to even now, except for opening of a Pahari section in the J&K Cultural Academy for the development of Pahari language. It was only in 1991 with the ascendance of the Chander Shekhar government that for the first time, the Pahari's appeal for reservation was heard by the government, but the proposal was kept pending on the pretext that the formalities had not been completed. The state government sanctioned the Advisory Board for development of Pahari speaking people in the mean time (1997) and provided funds for residential hostels for the Pahari children and sanctioned scholarships for Pahari students.

In the initial years the Paharis and Gujjars did not assess the impact of the ST status on economic growth of these people. Now when there is a reservation for ST students in professional and technical colleges, services and promotions and they are vying for concurrent socio-economic status, there is a great resentment in Paharis on being ignored. The main demand of the Pahari people is the provision of ST status which is not fulfilled until now. In fact the Paharis are not against the ST status for Gujjars which they deserved but are demanding the same status for themselves. Presently, there is a complete ethnic division between these two sections of societies and is likely to continue in the near future.

Despite the great rift between the Gujjar and Paharis there are still some positive signs in both the communities which indicate that there is still hope for rapprochement and the historical ties have not been completely severed. While, there is no official platform for the interaction between the Gujjar and Paharis in the state as they have become absolutely politically polarized by the politicians for their political benefits, there are still a number of social platforms where these communities intermix and exchange their views. They are working side-by-side in agricultural fields and participating in each other's social functions. There is thus no rift at grass root level between the Gujjars and Paharis.

The Road Ahead: Exploring the Alternatives

Paharis must convince the Gujjars that the demand for the Schedule Tribe status is not at the cost of the Gujjars. They should also try to motivate the Gujjar leaders and intellectuals to support the genuine demand of the Paharis. For this purpose, moderate leaders from both the communities can contribute on an agreeable solution to the Gujjar-Pahari tension without compromising the ST status of Gujjars. There is a Pahari and Gojri section in J&K Cultural Academy working for the promotion of linguistic and cultural aspects of these two ethnic groups. There is a need for joint Gojri-Pahari intellectual conferences so that they can contribute in diffusing tensions between the two communities through dialogue and consequent reconciliation. It is also critical to work for the restoration of old traditions of brotherhood between Gujjars and Paharis if one wants to bring these ethnic groups on the same table for a dialogue.

The following measures need to be adopted by the Union government and the State government of J&K for the purpose of establishing amicable relations between the two communities:

- Few years earlier, a proposal for the ST status in favour of the Pahari community was approved



by the state government on recommendations of the State Legislative Assembly of J&K and endorsed by the central government thereafter. But there has been no subsequent action by the central government so far. Therefore, the state government needs to take up the matter yet again in front of the central government.

- There is a need for defining the Paharis by conducting a proper economic survey so that a sustainable development of this section can take place. The Paharis have not yet been given a proper definition by the Planning department of the J&K State, and since no proper survey has been made on their economic vulnerability there is no proper indicator to judge their development.
- Till the Paharis are granted a Schedule Tribe status, the state government should make a provision to reserve seats for the Pahari students in professional and technical colleges. Also, the state government can declare this community under the OBC category (other backward classes) so that they get reservations in some services and opportunities for promotions.
- Further on, there is a need for construction of a Pahari Cultural Centre at Poonch, Rajouri, Uri and Karnah. Residential hostels for girl students may be established at Poonch, Rajouri, Uri and Karnah to attract the girls from the poor Pahari families residing in remote areas and around the LOC.
- The funds provided under sub plan for the development of the Pahari people are generally very meagre. There is an urgent need for linkages to scattered Pahari *basties*, and provision of drinking water, power supply, accommodation facilities for schools, health institutions and Anganwari centers in the Pahari basties. These schemes may be included in the sub plan so that the Pahari people residing in hilly and border areas can get some benefits from implementations of these plans. A Pahari Nagar at Jammu and Srinagar on the pattern of Gujjar Nagar will provide avenues to those Paharis living in remote areas to own houses in big cities, thereby giving some access to a better life.
- The central government should accept the demand for the ST status by the Paharis, which has been pending with it for over 35 years, as early as possible to de-escalate the tension among Paharis and Gujjars in the border belt of J&K.
- Funds for preservation of the Pahari folklore, folk music and vanishing traditions should be made available under Pahari sub-plan so that they can be documented and preserved for generations. The Pahari language has its own distinct historical and cultural significance and hence can be developed as a medium of modern literature. There is a pressing demand from the Paharis for its inclusion in the 8th schedule of the Indian constitution.
- Pahari people are in majority in the POK and Pir Panchal region (Poonch, Rajouri, Uri, Karnah) in J&K state and there is a strong cultural affinity between the Paharis of both parts of Kashmir. There is a need to start the Pahari Doordarshan channel from Poonch, this will help a lot in encouraging the Pahari writers, folk artists and dramatists on the one hand and bring people from both the communities closer to each other.
- A seat for the development of the Pahari language can be established at the central university of Jammu for a more systematic development of the language.