



Raji Tribes of Uttarakhand (India) : History Society and Contemporary Development

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Abstract : Tribes are unique social groups found all over the world including India. They live in isolation, follow one culture, or religion; speak a common language, and form a dynamic society. In this fluctuating world, they have been struggling for their basic amenities. Tribal communities have their own specific identity that reflects tribal people's fondness towards nature, their beliefs, and fear of outsiders means non-tribal communities. One such tribe is the Raji tribe which is one of the five tribes of Uttarakhand. The Raji people are classified as a Schedule tribe under the list of the government of India in 1967.

Historically, they have been considered as one of the oldest communities in the region, with roots that trace back centuries. They have been called names such as Banraji, Banravat, Ban-Manush, and cave dwellers, reflecting their connection with nature and the forests where they have traditionally lived. Both the terms Banravat and Ban-Manush are used for people who are closely associated with the forest and live in the forest. These names are proof of their dependency on the natural environment for survival and a distinctive way of life. They are hunters and gatherers and follow a nomadic lifestyle.

This paper focuses on the small primitive Raji community in Pithoragarh, Champawat, and Udham Singh Nagar districts of Uttarakhand state of India. The main argument of this paper is that their contemporary developments were successful or unsuccessful. This tribal community has been included in the PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups) due to their demographic status. Why did this happen to them? There were many schemes by the government for the Raji for their development. But at ground level what is the reality of these Tribal communities? Finally, this paper documents the contemporary development of the tribal area.

Keywords: Raji Tribes, PVTGs, Uttarakhand.

Introduction- The Rajis are an indigenous tribal community believed to be of non-Aryan origin. They primarily inhabit regions such as Askot, Kumaon, and the lower Himalayan areas of Uttarakhand. Known for their distinct cultural identity, the Rajis are considered one of the primitive tribes of the region. Historically, they have been associated with forest-dwelling lifestyles and are often linked to ancient tribal groups mentioned in Sanskrit texts. Their unique traditions, language, and customs set them apart from other communities in the region. Despite their rich heritage, the Rajis face challenges in preserving their identity and adapting to modern socio-economic changes.

Traditions of Origin of Raji: In Sanskrit literature, the Raji tribe is referred to as 'Kirat,' often grouped with other tribal communities like the Shaka and Shabara, who were described as forest dwellers or outlaws. The Varaha Samhita locates them between Amaravan and China, which likely corresponds to Jageshwar and Tibet. The term 'Rajya Kirat' has been interpreted to mean 'Legal Kirat' or 'Kirat of the Kingdom,' hinting at their supposed royal origins.

The earliest documented accounts of the Raji tribe were provided by Mr. Trail, who observed that the Rajis claimed descent from a tribal king of Kumaon. According to their oral traditions, this king fled into the forests with his family after being overthrown by a tyrannical ruler. Due to their assertion of royal ancestry, the Rajis traditionally avoid offering typical Eastern greetings, even to individuals of higher social status, as a mark of their unique identity.

Trail also noted that the Raji language was entirely distinct from Kumaoni and proposed that the Dorn caste might be descendants of the Rajis. This theory was later refuted, as there was no evidence of Negroid features among the Rajis, which had been previously speculated due to the Dorn caste's dark skin and curly hair.

Dr. Pritchard suggested that the Rajis share similarities with other tribal groups living along the Himalayan borders, emphasizing their unique cultural and geographical characteristics. Similarly, Dr. Latham compared the Rajis to Nepal's Chepong tribe, highlighting possible connections between these communities.

These varied theories reflect the complexity and mystery surrounding the origins of the Raji tribe. Despite the absence of conclusive evidence, the Rajis remain an integral part of Uttarakhand's cultural and historical tapestry, carrying forward their distinct traditions and heritage.

Culture and Society: The Raji tribe leads a modest and straightforward life, as observed by Captain Strachey. Their demeanour often reflects a mix of fear and simplicity. They are skilled in making wooden utensils and reside in temporary forest shelters, which they frequently relocate. Their primary sustenance comes from forest produce and hunting, although they sometimes acquire cooked meals from nearby villages. While they have their own distinct dialect, some members are also able to communicate in Pahadi Hindi.

Traditions and Marriage Practices: The Raji people are also referred to as Rawat, a name used both by the community and by outsiders. They claim to descend from the servants of the king of Kutpur, who were forced into the forests following an offense. This historical event is believed to have taken place during the reign of King Neel Kapal of Kutpur, although the exact timeline remains unclear.

The Tribe's patron deity is "Baghnath" (Lord of Tigers), whose temple is situated in Kutpur. The Rajis adhere to traditional Hindu marriage customs and practice exogamy, ensuring that marriages occur outside their clan.

I. Marriage Rules:

- Marriage between two sisters is forbidden.
- Monogamy is customary, though secondary wives may sometimes be permitted.
- The groom's father or a close relative is responsible for organizing the marriage.
- Parental consent is required if the bride and groom are minors.
- A bride price is customary, part of which is paid before the marriage and the rest afterward. This payment belongs solely to the bride and remains with her in case of divorce.

II. Divorce and Remarriage:

- Divorce is allowed if the woman is proven unfaithful or suffers from diseases like leprosy.
- Divorced women have the freedom to remarry.
- Widows may remarry, but only to their late husband's younger brother.

III. Inheritance of Property:

- If a widow remarries, her deceased husband's children are cared for by their paternal uncle.
- In the absence of a male heir, the father's brother inherits the property.

IV. Social Organization:

- The Raji tribe upholds equality among its members, allowing marriage within the community. Their distinct social and cultural traditions set them apart from other forest-dwelling tribes, offering them a unique cultural identity.

Contemporary Development: The Raji tribe, designated as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), is predominantly located in the eastern regions of Pithoragarh district, Uttarakhand. Known for their distinct cultural identity, they were officially categorized as a Scheduled Tribe under the Indian Constitution in 2001. Their population remains small, with an estimated 1,075 individuals spread across five blocks in Pithoragarh, Champawat, and Udham Singh Nagar. Historically forest-dwelling, they now face challenges such as limited access to education, healthcare, and basic infrastructure. Efforts are underway to integrate them into mainstream development while preserving their unique traditions and linguistic heritage.

Population and Distribution: The Raji tribe, residing in the remote mountainous regions of Uttarakhand along the Indo-Nepal border, consists of approximately 1,075 individuals across 249 households. These communities are dispersed across five blocks: Dharchula, Kanalichhina, and Didihat in Pithoragarh, as well as Champawat and Khatima in Udham Singh Nagar. Despite their rich cultural heritage, the tribe faces numerous challenges in terms of development and access to basic services. A significant study conducted by the Association for Rural Planning and Action (ARPAN), a local organization in Pithoragarh, highlights the difficulties the Raji people endure, including limited access to healthcare, education, and transportation. These issues contribute to high school dropout rates, substandard housing, economic hardship, and inadequate access to government schemes, all of which hinder their overall development.

Socio-Economic Challenges: The Raji community grapples with various socio-economic difficulties, particularly limited access to essential services like healthcare, education, and transportation. In Khirdwari village, Champawat, residents must walk 11 kilometre's and travel an additional 38 kilometres by road to

reach the nearest public health centre. Accessing primary education is equally challenging, as some villages lack nearby schools, requiring children to undertake long journeys. These conditions exacerbate the community's struggle to improve their living standards and hinder their development, highlighting the urgent need for better infrastructure and services.

Development Initiative: The Uttarakhand High Court has instructed both the Central and State Governments to take swift and effective measures to improve the welfare of the Raji community in Uttarakhand. The Court, led by Chief Justice Vipin Sanghi and Justice Rakesh Thapliyal, called for affidavits detailing the actions already taken and plans to address the tribe's challenges.

This directive followed a petition by the Uttarakhand State Legal Services Authority (USLSA), highlighting the decline in the Raji population and the lack of essential services in their villages. The plea emphasized that many Raji individuals, particularly those over 55 years old, faced extremely low life expectancy, compounded by limited access to healthcare and education. Primary Health Centres are located at least 25 kilometres from their villages, and educational facilities are scarce.

The Court noted that these issues fall under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, and the State cannot justify inaction.

Proposed Solutions for Development and Protection of the Raji Tribe:

1. Improved Infrastructure:

- Prioritize infrastructure development to address the distance challenges for healthcare and education.
- Establish mobile health clinics to bring healthcare services closer to remote areas.
- Increase the number of local schools or provide transportation to existing schools to improve educational access.

2. Targeted Healthcare Programs:

- Launch health outreach programs and mobile health services aimed specifically at remote tribal communities.
- Address the health vulnerabilities of the Raji people, especially in the context of COVID-19.

3. Economic Support and Livelihood Diversification:

- Implement economic development programs such as skill-building and financial inclusion initiatives.
- Promote livelihood diversification, including sustainable agriculture, handicrafts, and tourism, to reduce dependency on traditional and unsustainable sources of income.

4. Education and Awareness:

- Focus on improving education outcomes by building more local schools and offering scholarships.
- Raise awareness about the importance of education, particularly for girls, and work to reduce the high school dropout rates.

5. Legal and Policy Advocacy:

- Advocate for effectively implementing the rights and entitlements of the Raji tribe under the Forest Rights Act and other relevant legislation.

- Conduct regular monitoring and training of local authorities to ensure proper application of these policies.
- Raise awareness about tribal rights and encourage community participation in legal and policy matters.

Conclusion: To address the socio-economic challenges faced by the Raji tribe, a holistic approach is essential, focusing on development and protection measures tailored to their unique needs. Prioritizing infrastructure development is key to bridging the gap in access to essential services like healthcare and education. Establishing mobile health clinics, enhancing local educational facilities, and providing transportation can bring critical resources closer to their communities.

Targeted healthcare initiatives are necessary to mitigate health vulnerabilities, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Programs such as health outreach and mobile medical services can improve overall well-being. Similarly, livelihood diversification through skill-building, sustainable agriculture, handicrafts, and eco-tourism can enhance economic stability and reduce dependence on traditional sources of income.

Education must be a cornerstone of development. Efforts should be directed at reducing school dropout rates and improving literacy, especially among girls. Scholarships, awareness campaigns, and increased access to local schools can drive positive change.

Legal and policy advocacy is equally crucial. Ensuring the enforcement of tribal rights under the Forest Rights Act and other relevant laws will empower the Raji community. Regular monitoring, training of local authorities, and community involvement in decision-making processes will ensure effective implementation. These initiatives can uplift this vulnerable group while preserving their cultural heritage and promoting social equity by fostering collaboration between government bodies, NGOs, and the Raji community.

In conclusion, targeted health, education, financial, and livelihood initiatives, combined with continuous monitoring and community collaboration, are essential to address the population decline among the Raji tribe. These measures will not only promote their population growth but also ensure their socio-economic upliftment while preserving their cultural identity and heritage.

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