

The Raji Tribes of Uttarakhand: A Sociological Overview

Jagriti Pant

(Department of Sociology, Kumaun University, Nainital)

Email: jagritipant@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper examines the socio-economic and cultural challenges faced by the Raji community, a marginalized tribal group inhabiting remote regions of the Central Himalayas. Drawing upon secondary sources such as government reports, census data, scholarly articles, and existing ethnographic studies, the research highlights critical issues including geographical isolation, inadequate health facilities, agricultural vulnerability, poor transportation infrastructure, infertile soil, educational deprivation, lack of basic amenities, documentation gaps, and political exclusion. The methodology relies on synthesizing and analyzing these secondary resources to identify recurring patterns of marginalization and structural barriers that hinder the community's development. The findings reveal that the Rajis' isolation has restricted both research and policy outreach, resulting in limited access to healthcare, education, and welfare schemes. Their dependence on rainfed agriculture, coupled with infertile soil, has reinforced economic vulnerability, while inadequate documentation and low political participation have perpetuated systemic exclusion. Based on these insights, the paper proposes a set of recommendations aimed at holistic development, including infrastructural improvements, healthcare interventions, agricultural reforms, educational initiatives, documentation drives, and political empowerment. The study underscores the need for context-sensitive policies and sustained research efforts to ensure the socio-economic inclusion of the Raji community. It concludes that bridging these structural gaps through coordinated interventions is essential for transforming their marginalization into meaningful development and dignity.

Keywords — Rajis, Central Himalayas, Isolation, Marginalization, Welfare schemes

Introduction

The Raji tribes are indeed one of the smallest and most endangered tribal communities in Uttarakhand. Confined to the districts of Pithoragarh, Champawat, and Udham Singh Nagar, they were recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in 1957 and later categorized as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in 1975. Their demographic decline has been noted in earlier studies, such as Samal et al. (2000), which observed a reduction in population between 1991 and 1997.

Currently, the Rajis inhabit only eleven villages—nine in Pithoragarh, one in Champawat, and one settlement in Chakkarpur, Udham Singh Nagar, located in the plains. They are also referred to as Van Raji, Van Rawat, or Van Manus, terms that

signify “those who rule the forest.” Over time, they have adopted many aspects of Hindu and Kumaoni culture, blending their indigenous traditions with regional practices. According to the ARPAN Report (2023), the total population of the Raji community stands at 1,076 individuals, underscoring their precarious demographic condition and the urgent need for targeted interventions to ensure their survival.

Methodology

This study relies on secondary resources to examine the socio-economic and cultural conditions of the Raji community. The analysis draws upon government reports, census data, ethnographic studies, and published scholarly works that document the demographic trends and

challenges faced by the Rajis. In particular, the ARPAN Report (2023), prepared by a grassroots organization, provides valuable insights into their present circumstances, which are supplemented by earlier research and other academic contributions. By synthesizing these diverse sources, the paper identifies recurring themes of marginalization, including geographical isolation, health deficits, agricultural vulnerability, educational deprivation, and political exclusion. The methodology emphasizes comparative review and thematic analysis of existing literature rather than primary fieldwork, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the community's situation while highlighting gaps that future research may address.

History of Rajis

The Raji community traces its ancestry to the region of Askot in present-day Uttarakhand. According to their oral traditions, the origin of the tribe is linked to a story of two brothers. In this account, the younger brother assumed kingship and established authority, while the elder brother withdrew into the forests, adopting a life of hunting and gathering. The Rajis identify themselves as the descendants of the elder brother, thereby situating their lineage within a tradition of forest-dwelling and subsistence living.

In addition to this Askot narrative, the Rajis also claim a Kirati origin. The Kirat people are historically associated with the Himalayan belt and are known for their hunting and forest-based livelihoods. By connecting themselves to the Kirati tradition, the Rajis emphasize their deep-rooted association with the natural environment and their continuity as one of the earliest tribal groups inhabiting the Central Himalayas.

Inapproachable Areas

The Raji community inhabits remote and geographically challenging regions of the Central Himalayas. Accessibility to these settlements is severely limited, which has shaped both their isolation and the difficulties faced by researchers. Most existing studies have concentrated on Kimkhola village, as it is comparatively easier to reach. Other villages remain underexplored due to

the extreme terrain and climatic conditions. Fieldwork in these areas is highly seasonal. The months from March to May provide relatively favorable weather, making visits possible. In contrast, the monsoon season brings heavy rainfall that renders paths unsafe, while the harsh winters further restrict mobility. These environmental constraints have contributed to the limited scope of research and the lack of comprehensive documentation of the Raji settlements.

Health Facilities

The health infrastructure available to the Raji community is extremely inadequate. Proper hospitals are absent in close proximity to their settlements, and ambulance services remain inaccessible due to poor road connectivity and the challenging hilly terrain. Malnutrition is a widespread concern, further compounded by the prevalence of alcohol addiction among men, which has contributed to lower life expectancy compared to women. Women face additional health challenges arising from early marriages and pregnancies. For a long period, childbirth was managed by traditional midwives, reflecting the absence of institutional medical support. In recent years, however, the responsibility has shifted to Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), who provide basic maternal and child health services. Despite this improvement, the overall health care system remains insufficient, leaving the community vulnerable to preventable diseases and health risks.

Irrigation and Agriculture

Agriculture constitutes the primary occupation of the Raji community. Their cultivation practices are predominantly dependent on rainfall, as no organized irrigation systems exist in most of their settlements. This reliance on rainfed agriculture has led to the prevalence of a monocrop system, which restricts both agricultural productivity and long-term food security. The absence of irrigation infrastructure not only limits crop diversity but also exposes the community to significant risks during periods of irregular rainfall, thereby reinforcing their economic vulnerability.

access to learning opportunities and limiting their prospects for social and economic mobility.

Transportation

Transportation infrastructure in Raji settlements is highly inadequate. Many villages lack road connectivity and can only be accessed on foot, which severely restricts mobility and communication. This isolation has resulted in several areas remaining unexplored, thereby limiting the availability of reliable data on the living conditions and amenities of the community. The absence of proper transportation facilities not only hinders research but also obstructs the delivery of essential services such as healthcare, education, and market access, further reinforcing the marginalization of the Raji people.

Soil Constraints

The physical environment of Raji settlements poses significant challenges to agricultural sustainability. In most areas, the soil is infertile and unsuitable for diverse cultivation, which restricts agricultural productivity and reinforces economic vulnerability. The only notable exception is Chakkarpur in Udham Singh Nagar, where fertile soil and access to irrigation facilities have created more favorable conditions for farming. Consequently, a considerable portion of the Raji population has migrated and settled in Chakkarpur, while other settlements continue to struggle with poor land quality and limited agricultural opportunities. This uneven distribution of resources highlights the critical role of geography in shaping livelihood patterns and settlement dynamics within the community.

Educational Deprivation

There is an absolute lack of educational attainment among the Raji community. According to available data, only one individual in the entire village has successfully completed schooling up to class 12. The community generally perceives formal education as unnecessary, considering it a waste of time and resources. For them, survival is closely tied to physical labor, and schooling is not viewed as contributing to their immediate livelihood. This perception has reinforced a cycle of educational deprivation, leaving younger generations without

Essential Shortfall

Access to basic amenities in Raji settlements remains highly inadequate. Electricity and gas connections have not reached all villages, leaving many households dependent on traditional sources of energy. Fuelwood continues to be the primary source for cooking and heating, despite the environmental and health challenges associated with its use. In an era of advanced technology and infrastructural development, the absence of such fundamental facilities underscores the marginalization of the Raji community.

Documentation Gap

The Raji community faces a significant lack of official documentation, which prevents them from accessing the benefits of government schemes designed for their welfare. Essential identity and entitlement documents such as ration cards, Aadhaar cards, voter identification cards, birth and death certificates, and health cards are either unavailable or incomplete among the majority of households. This absence of documentation creates systemic exclusion, as eligibility for most social security and welfare programs requires formal proof of identity and residence. Consequently, the Rajis remain marginalized, unable to claim the rights and services that are intended to support their survival and development.

Political Exclusion

Political awareness and participation among the Raji community remain considerably low. Out of the entire population, only six individuals have contested in local governance elections. This limited engagement reflects both a lack of political mobilization and the broader marginalization of the community within democratic processes. The absence of active participation not only restricts their representation in decision-making bodies but also perpetuates their exclusion from policies and programs that could address their socio-economic challenges.

Recommendations

Geographical and Infrastructure Development:

To overcome the challenges of isolation faced by the Raji community, it is essential to strengthen rural road networks through targeted development schemes that ensure year-round accessibility. In areas where conventional road construction is difficult due to steep terrain, ropeways or cable transport systems should be introduced as viable alternatives to connect remote settlements. At the same time, expanding solar electrification projects and promoting clean fuel distribution such as LPG and biogas would significantly reduce dependence on fuelwood, improve living standards, and align the community with sustainable energy practices. Together, these measures would not only enhance mobility and access but also contribute to the overall socio-economic integration of the Rajis.

Health and Nutrition: Improving the health and nutritional status of the Raji community requires a multi-layered approach. Mobile health clinics should be established to provide regular medical services in remote settlements, while Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) must be strengthened through proper training and the provision of essential medical supplies. Alongside healthcare delivery, nutrition programs need to be launched to combat widespread malnutrition, ensuring access to fortified foods and balanced diets. Equally important are awareness campaigns that address pressing issues such as alcohol addiction, maternal health, and preventive care, which would not only reduce health risks but also foster healthier lifestyles. Together, these measures would create a more resilient health system and improve the overall well-being of the community.

Agriculture and Environment: Strengthening the agricultural base of the Raji community requires both infrastructural and ecological interventions. Rainwater harvesting and the development of small irrigation projects would reduce their dependence on unpredictable rainfall and ensure more reliable crop production. Alongside this, soil enrichment programs using compost and fertilizers could improve fertility and enhance long-term

sustainability. To break the cycle of monocropping and vulnerability, crop diversification should be encouraged, with a focus on climate-resilient varieties that can withstand changing weather patterns. Equally important is the formation of community cooperatives, which would allow farmers to share resources, pool risks, and collectively negotiate better access to markets and government support. Together, these measures would strengthen agricultural productivity, improve food security, and reduce economic vulnerability.

Education and Awareness: Enhancing education and awareness among the Raji community requires both infrastructural support and cultural sensitization. Establishing residential schools or hostels in nearby accessible towns would provide children with a stable environment for learning, while scholarships and incentives could encourage regular attendance and reduce dropout rates. At the same time, vocational training programs linked to local livelihoods would make education more relevant to their immediate needs, bridging the gap between survival and skill development. Equally important are community sensitization drives aimed at changing perceptions about formal education, helping families recognize its long-term value for social mobility and economic security. Together, these measures would foster a more inclusive and sustainable educational framework for the community.

Documentation and Governance: Addressing the documentation and governance challenges of the Raji community requires targeted administrative interventions. Special documentation camps should be organized within their villages to ensure that essential identity and entitlement papers such as Aadhaar, ration cards, voter IDs, and health cards are issued without delay. To make the process more accessible, procedures must be simplified through doorstep enrollment and the deployment of mobile documentation units that can reach even the most remote settlements. In addition, training local volunteers to assist with paperwork and scheme applications would empower the

community to navigate bureaucratic requirements more effectively. These measures would collectively reduce systemic exclusion, enabling the Rajis to access welfare schemes and exercise their rights more fully.

Political and Social Inclusion: Promoting political and social inclusion among the Raji community requires deliberate efforts to strengthen their voice in governance and collective decision-making. Awareness workshops on rights and governance should be conducted to educate community members about their entitlements and responsibilities within democratic structures. At the same time, capable local leaders must be encouraged to contest elections, thereby ensuring direct representation in decision-making bodies. Their participation can be further reinforced by securing stronger representation in tribal welfare boards, which play a crucial role in shaping policies for marginalized groups. Additionally, the formation of local councils or cooperatives would provide a platform for collective dialogue, enabling the community to articulate its concerns more effectively and advocate for its needs. Together, these measures would foster empowerment, enhance political visibility, and integrate the Rajis more fully into the democratic process.

Research and Policy Support: Strengthening research and policy support for the Raji community requires a more inclusive and context-sensitive approach. Fieldwork should be expanded to under-documented villages during favorable seasons so that a fuller picture of their living conditions and challenges can be captured. Government schemes must be tailored to the unique geographical and cultural realities of the Rajis, ensuring that interventions are not only accessible but also relevant to their way of life. To guarantee accountability and long-term impact, robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be established, enabling policymakers and researchers to track progress, identify gaps, and refine strategies as needed. Collectively, these measures would bridge the existing knowledge

deficit, strengthen policy design, and ensure that development initiatives genuinely address the needs of the community.

Conclusion

The study of the Raji community reveals a complex interplay of geographical isolation, infrastructural inadequacies, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and institutional exclusion. Their settlements, located in remote and challenging terrains, remain largely inaccessible, which has limited both research and the delivery of essential services. Health facilities are inadequate, agriculture is constrained by infertile soil and lack of irrigation, and education continues to be undervalued, perpetuating cycles of deprivation. The absence of basic amenities, coupled with documentation gaps, further restricts their access to welfare schemes, while low levels of political participation leave them without a strong voice in governance.

The recommendations outlined ranging from improved connectivity, healthcare delivery, and agricultural support to educational reform, documentation drives, and political inclusion highlight the need for a holistic and integrated approach. Addressing these issues requires not only infrastructural development but also sustained policy interventions tailored to the unique cultural and geographical context of the Rajis. By bridging these gaps, empowering local leadership, and ensuring equitable access to resources, the community can move toward greater social inclusion, economic stability, and political representation. Ultimately, the path forward lies in combining research, policy, and grassroots participation to transform marginalization into meaningful development and dignity for the Raji people.

References

- [1] Atkinson, E.T., 1981. *The Himalayan Gazetteer*. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications. (First published under the title *The Himalayan Districts of Northwestern Provinces of India*, Vol. XII, of the Gazetteer N.W.O. 1882, Allahabad).
- [2] Bhowmick, P.K., 1990. Approach to tribal welfare. In: Chaudhury, Buddhadeb (ed.), *Tribal Development in India*, pp. 295–305. Inter-India Publications, New Delhi.
- [3] Bisht, Puran, 1997. *Tamam dabon ke babajood upekshit paden hai Van Raji* (in Hindi). *Nainital Samachar*, January 1–14, 1997.
- [4] Bose, Ashish, 1991. *Demographic Diversity of India: 1991 Census*. B.R. Publishing Corporation (P) Ltd, Delhi 110007.

- [5] Bose, N.K., 1964. Change in tribal cultures before and after independence. *Man in India*, 44(1): 1–10.
- [6] Danda, A.K., 1973. *The Tribal Economies and their Transformation*. ICSSR, New Delhi, 1991. *Tribal Economy in India*. Inter-India Publications, New Delhi.
- [7] Dube, S.C., 1977. Introduction. In: Dube, S.C. (ed.), *Tribal Heritage of India*. Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi.
- [8] Ghurye, G.S., 1963. *The Scheduled Tribes*. Popular Prakashan, Bombay.
- [9] Gupta, R.K., 1988. The tribe in India. *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 35(4): 309–318.
- [10] Hasnain, Nadeem, 1990. *Tribal India Today*. Harnam Publications, New Delhi. pp. 336.
- [11] Joshi, N.C., Dhoundiyal, N.C. and Dhoundiyal, V.R., 1996. Education of the Raji tribe: bottlenecks and remedy. In: Samal, P.K. (ed.), *Tribal Development: Options*, pp. 408–417. Gyanodaya Prakashan, Nainital.
- [12] Joshi, Prayag, 1986. *Van Rajion ki Khoj Mein* (in Hindi). Jugal Kishore & Co., Dehradun.
- [13] Joshi, P. & Pande, P.C., 1995. Ethnobotany of the Rajis of Kumaon Himalaya: a preliminary study. In: Joshi, M.P. & Joshi, L.P. (eds.), *Uttaranchal Himalaya*, pp. 242–263. Shree Almora Book Depot, Almora.
- [14] Maharatna, Arup, 1996. Fertility, mortality and gender bias among Indian tribes: What do we really know? In: Samal, P.K. (ed.), *Tribal Development: Options*, pp. 85–118. Gyanodaya Prakashan, Nainital.
- [15] Ministry of Home Affairs, 1988. *Report of the Working Group on Tribal Development during VU Plan*. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi.
- [16] Pande, G.C., 1991. *Indian Tribes: Habitat, Society, Economy and Change*. Anmol Publications, New Delhi.
- [17] Tewari, S.C., 1986. Some aspects of religious practices among the Rajis of Kumaon. In: Vidyarthi, L.P. & Jha, Makhan (eds.), *Ecology, Economy & Religion of Himalaya*. Orient Publications, New Delhi.