

## Book Review

### **Review of *Sustainability of Van Gujjars: A Transition of Muslim Pastoral Tribe in Himalayan Region* by Rubina Nusrat**

**Navneet Kaur**

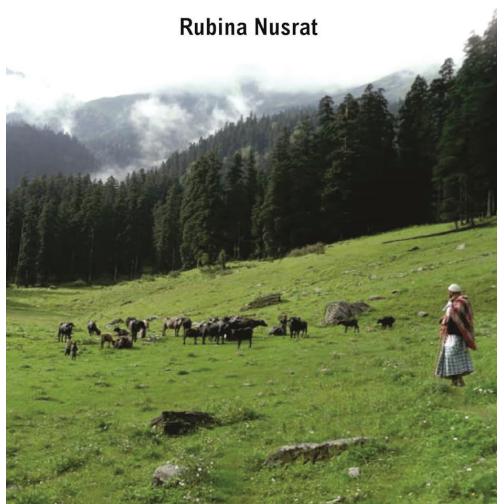
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**SUSTAINABILITY  
OF VAN GUJJAR**  
A TRANSITION OF MUSLIM PASTORAL  
TRIBE  
IN HIMALAYAN REGION

**Rubina Nusrat**



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Since India's independence, economic development and the interests of the country's tribal people have been in constant conflict. Displacement, marginalization, and vulnerability have been the fate of tribal people on the mainland. These people have suffered due to the adoption of neoliberal economic policies and exclusive development projects in the last few decades. In her book 'Sustainability of Van Gujjars,' the author highlights the tribal sustainability issues of the Van Gujjars of Uttarakhand. This book draws on the large body of literature about the "Forest Dwelling Gujjars" who originally migrated from Gujarat to Jammu and Kashmir and later to Uttarakhand (then Uttar Pradesh). The book covers three main themes: literature about the historical and socioeconomic conditions of Van Gujjars, cultural extinction, marginalization, and the vulnerability caused by displacement (later resettlement), as well as future strategies for sustainable livelihood and development using a sustainable livelihood framework.

At the start of the book, the author reviews information about the origin of the Gujjar tribe. Various past records have been ingeminated to present accounts of Gujjar history. Further, the spatial settings and socio-cultural perspectives of this mobile Muslim tribal community have been described. The author asserts that globalization has adversely affected the Van Gujjars in both economic and cultural terms. (p.65). These issues are also highlighted by Suratha Kumar Malik in his book *Land Alienation and Politics of Tribal Exploitation in India* (2020). Industrialization has destroyed pastoral lands and disrupted the Van Gujjars' mobility patterns. Later, as a nomadic tribe, they became "victims of conservation" due to political marginalization in the absence of permanent addresses and cultivation lands. Historical marginalization dating from the British era and lack of social, legal, and human rights ultimately led to the displacement of these tribals. Exclusion from development policy-making, the attitudes of villagers, and lack of cooperation by forest authorities have ensured the political marginalization, vulnerability, and cultural extinction of

Van Gujjars. These factors have constrained their economy and damaged their region's unique cultural heritage, as well as affecting the community's rich experience in creating conservation-based livelihoods.

Nusrat, in the chapter "Examining Gender Roles in Gujjar Community," explores gender roles in pastoralist livelihoods and examines the factors determining these roles in Gujjar communities. Women work with men in livestock management, but due to the *Islamic* (religious identity) custom of *pardah* (veil), the social mobility of women is restricted to the proximity of *dera* (house). Women are zoophilists as they love and give veterinary care to animals, and they are naturalists due to their dependence on nature for *dera* building materials, traditional medicines (ethnoveterinary), and animal fodder. Women understand nature. As the author writes,

*Gujjar women seem to depend on natural resources to even interweave the dead aspects in their living aspects.*  
(p.98)

Marriage is usually arranged through a barter system: i.e., "your daughter for my son" and "my daughter for your son." The husband gives livestock as *mehr* (dowry) to his wife at the time of marriage, which ensures that the majority of the livestock are under the ownership of the Gujjar women, and inheritance laws follow *Sharia* (Islamic) law. *Sharia* law dictates that women should have restricted mobility and social interaction. Such practices predominantly reflect religious norms rather than tribal rules.

Nusrat further argues that marginalization during the British era has led to the Van Gujjar's persistent exploitation as they are denied access to the forests and are branded as "forest destroyers." The resulting sedentarization and conflicts with the locals have brought an end to their traditional lifestyle, and they are compelled to work as wage laborers to survive. Food insecurity, reduced income, and loss of animals have become the new normal for this tribal community. (p.104).

In the chapter, “Indigenous Knowledge of Van Gujjars,” the author explains that the traditional lopping technique of the Van Gujjars is equivalent to leaf fall. Similar arguments have been suggested by Clarke et al. (1986) in their study of Rajaji National Park. These cases demonstrate that the tribals use their indigenous knowledge to create strategies to coexist with nature (p.143). The seasonal migration of the Gujjars and their buffaloes to higher *bugyals* (pasturelands) allows the grass to regenerate, contributing to the carrying capacity of the forests (p.148). This sustainable practice of the Van Gujjars is reflected in the prefix to their name—*Van* (forest).

In the final chapter, “Strategy of Development,” Nusrat emphasizes the urgent need for this tribal community to be included in mainstream development policies on a social and political level, explaining that they have fallen behind because they are socio-economically vulnerable and lack political representation. The author emphasizes the need for workable State Government schemes for the settlement of this semi-nomadic tribe. Properly implemented, such schemes could pave the way for the Van Gujjars’ socioeconomic development (p.171). Nusrat’s book is a pioneering work that disseminates information about the socio-cultural as well as the economic status of Van Gujjars in Uttarakhand. It is highly recommended for scholars and students of Himalayan Studies, Political Ecology, Indigenous Studies, Anthropology, and Rural Development, as it provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and dynamics faced by indigenous communities in the region.

**Navneet Kaur** holds a Ph.D. in Geography from Jamia Millia Islamia, India, specializing in gender and land rights issues among tribal communities in the North Himalayan States of India. Her academic journey began with a Bachelor’s in Geography Honours from Banaras Hindu University, India, followed by a Master’s degree at Jamia Millia Islamia, India, which deeply informed her research focus. Her Ph.D. work, adopting an intersectional framework, explores maternal healthcare among the Gujjar and Bakarwal tribes in Jammu and Kashmir, highlighting how geographic inaccessibility affects their health-care-seeking behaviors.