



Research Paper

## Traditional Lifestyle, Food and Medicine of the Primitive Tribe Raji: A Historical Study

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### Abstract:

*Raji tribe is a socially and economically underdeveloped tribe of Uttarakhand Himalaya. They are also called by local names like Vanraut, Vanrawat etc. Raji is the most primitive tribe of Uttarakhand and has Austro-Asiatic non-Aryan connections<sup>1</sup>. Whereas anthropologically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman family. The people of Raji tribe were earlier hunters and gatherers and their habitat was limited to the middle of dense forests. Today they live in the forest areas of Uttarakhand on the India-Nepal border. They are a little-known tribal community who are descendants of the prehistoric Kiratas. They were relatively ancient inhabitants of Uttarakhand compared to the Khash, Naga, Aryans and Tibetans. But due to invasions by different ethnic groups, the Kirats gradually disappeared from Uttarakhand and their descendants known as the Raji tribe remained in Kumaon and Nepal. In the last decades, on one hand, the population of Uttarakhand has been continuously increasing and the population of other tribes has remained stable, while on the other hand, the Raji tribe, the most primitive tribe of the state, has been moving towards extinction. Raji tribe has been included among the 18 most endangered human groups in the country<sup>2</sup>. In August 2013, a committee headed by Govinda Chandra Naskar first expressed its apprehensions about the decline in the population of vulnerable tribal groups like Raji<sup>3</sup>. Till a few decades ago, this tribe used to lead a nomadic life and used to live in caves (Prayag Joshi, 2022) and even at present their habitat is limited to the dense forests of India-Nepal border of Uttarakhand. Now some changes have started taking place in their life and behavior. This tribe has its own traditional way of life which they have been practicing for hundreds of years. In this research paper traditional lifestyle, food habits and medical practices of the Raji tribe has been studies.*

*Received 05 Mar., 2025; Revised 14 Mar., 2025; Accepted 16 Mar., 2025 © The author(s) 2025.*

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### I. Introduction:

Uttarakhand is a state in the Central Himalayan region of India, where five scheduled tribes, *Bhotia*, *Jaunsari*, *Tharu*, *Boksa* and *Raji* reside. These tribal communities present their own distinct cultural identity and ethnic diversity. The people of Raji tribe were earlier hunters and gatherers and their habitat was limited to the middle of dense forests. Today they live in the forest areas of Uttarakhand on the India-Nepal border. They are a little-known tribal community, like other tribes, historians and anthropologists are not unanimous on the origin of the *Raji* or *Vanraut*. Some historians and anthropologists believe that the *Raji* tribe is a descendant of the *Kiratas*<sup>4</sup>. They were relatively ancient inhabitants of Uttarakhand compared to the *Khash*, *Naga*, *Aryans* and *Tibetans*. But due to invasions by different ethnic groups, the *Kirats* gradually disappeared from Uttarakhand and their descendants known as the *Raji* tribe remained in *Kumaon* and *Nepal*.

This little-known community was first brought to light in 1823 A.D. by the then *Kumaon* Commissioner G.W. Trail. Their population is distributed in two districts of Uttarakhand, *Pithoragarh* and *Champawat*. There are nine villages of *Rajis* in *Pithoragarh* which include *Kimkhola*, *Bhogtirwa*, *Ganagaon* and *Chiphaltara* in *Dharchula* block, *Jamtari*, *Madanbori*, *Kutachaurani* in *Didihat* block and *Kulekh* and *Aultadi* in *Kanalichhina* block, while two villages in *Champawat* district are *Chakarpur* and *Khitwadi* or *Khirdwari*. Their population in these eleven villages is approximately 800<sup>5</sup>.

*Raji* tribe is also called *Vanraji* or *Vanrawat*. The general meaning of *Vanaraji* and *Vanrawat* is king of the forest or royal people of the forest. People of this tribe also call themselves *Vanraut* or *Rajwar*. *Raji* is the most primitive tribe of Uttarakhand and has Austro-Asiatic non-Aryan connections<sup>5</sup>. Whereas anthropologically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman family. Till a few decades ago, this tribe used to lead a nomadic life and used

to live in caves (Prayag Joshi, 2022) and even at present their habitat is limited to the dense forests of India-Nepal border of Uttarakhand. In Kumaon the descendants of Kirats are called *Rajis*<sup>6</sup>. In Nepal and Kumaon-Garhwal, Kirat is called *Raji*<sup>8</sup>. In 1975, Raji tribes were recognized as a primitive group among the 75 groups declared by the Government of India. In the 1991 census, the population of Raji was 494 but now its population is around 800, distributed in 11 villages.

**Objective:** To study of Traditional Lifestyle, Food and Medicine of the Primitive Tribe *Raji*.

**Methodology:** The research is based on both literature review and field study. In this study used research field work, interviews with local people and government reports as primary sources. Various research papers and literary evidence have been used as secondary sources.

## II. Study

### Traditional Lifestyle

*Raji* tribe exhibits a high level of cultural and ethnic diversity. Till a few decades (perhaps even the 70s) the *Raji* lived a completely nomadic life, living in caves, gathering food and had no permanent place of residence. They were completely dependent on forests. But at present they have started leading a permanent life, yet their dependence on forests remains the same as before. Now all of them have permanent residences and gradually their permanent settlements have taken the shape of villages. But still they have not entered the main stream of society. This tribe is still away from basic needs like education, health and pure drinking water. One reason for this is their traditional thinking, the most important of which is their staying away from people outside their community. If we talk about the social aspect of *Raji*'s, they can be called a shy tribe, feared to talk to people of other community. They are far away from the literacy and means of communication and transportation and therefore deprived from all sorts of intra-tribal relations. With the acceleration of development and communication with the outside world and other communities the *Raji* have struggled to keep up a way of life the greatly value. Apart from their own community, they do not like to mix with other neighboring tribes and non-tribal communities. Due to which they are deprived of all types of inter-caste or tribal relations<sup>9</sup>.

Despite the rapid changes taking place in the outside world and development in communication medium, *Raji*'s still maintain their traditional lifestyle. They give a lot of importance to their traditional beliefs. It is said that the *Raji* tribe does not greet anyone except the king of Askot. Even today, marriages in *Raji*'s take place at an early age, especially girls. But there are no examples of widow remarriage or divorce in this tribe. This tribe has its own dialect called *Rajwari* which is quite different from the neighboring tribes and non-tribes. Generally these tribes use this dialect but *Raji* also speak *Kumaoni*, Nepali and Hindi.

There is a patriarchal system in this tribe. The oldest man in the family is the head of the family. They have another specialty, as we know *Raji* tribe does not contact people outside their community, their marital relations are limited to the villages of their own community. (सूल का पानी और कुल की लड़की) This is a proverb of the *Raji* tribe (Prayag Joshi, 2022). *Raji* is the most underdeveloped community of Uttarakhand. In 2011, the *Raji* people were classified as a Scheduled Tribe under the reservation program of positive discrimination of the Government of India. Due to the efforts of government and non-government organizations, children of *Raji* tribe have now started going to school, but due to economic weakness, many children are hardly able to get education beyond primary school.

*Raji* worship Hindu deities, among which the local goddess *Nanda* or *Bhagwati* is prominent. Statues and pictures of Hindu deities can be seen at their residence. But they also have their own gods and goddesses. This tribe has different gods according to different clans, like *Kedar*, *Masani*, *Betal*, *Hunshikhar* and *Syagwala* Dev etc. *Raji* is also a nature worshipper<sup>10</sup>. The *Raji* tribe builds open altars near which flags or cloths can be seen waving for prayer. There is no caste division in the *Raji* tribe; there are no Brahmins to perform rituals like marriage etc. Marriages are decided with the consent of the family members and in the *Raji* tribe marriages take place between cousins.

Till the time *Raji* was nomads and lived in caves, they did not wear clothes; they used *Malu* (*baubinia vahlii*) leaves to cover their body parts. Their women used to wear nominal clothes but at present *Raji* women wear clothes like other neighboring communities and tribes which include *salwar-kameez* (suit), *saree* etc. Men have now started wearing trousers, pants, shirt etc<sup>11</sup>.

The main festivals of *Raji* are *Gaura*, *Attali* and *Makar Sakranti*. During *Gaura* festival, *Raji* tribe sings songs in group which is called *Khel*. The traditional dish *Ghughuta* is prepared during the time of *Makar Sakranti*. *Raji* also worship *Navratri* which they call *Naurata*, the festival of *Diwali* is also celebrated by this tribe but they do not have the tradition of celebrating *Holi*.

The people of the *Raji* tribe are skilled in making wooden utensils such as *Theki*, *Paraya* (vessel for making buttermilk), *Parothi* (vessel for setting curd), handles of agricultural implements, *Daaba* (an agricultural tool), *Nishura* or Plough and *Juwa* (a yoke placed on the shoulder of oxen), pestle and mortar. These are their traditional occupations. Presently *Raji* tribe does animal husbandry, fishing, agriculture and labor (agricultural

labor or forest labor or daily wage laborers) for livelihood. They do not have good agricultural land due to which they are able to grow minimum quantity of food grains and vegetables. During the research trip, the researcher got a chance to see the daily routine of Raji tribe of *Kimkhola (Darchula, Pithoragarh)*. They wake up in the morning and go to the forest, collect grass and wood and sell it in *Jauljeevi* market. This is the daily work of women of all the families of the village and also the source of income, men are mostly daily wage laborers. This tribe also suffers from economic deprivation.

### **Traditional Food Habits**

The *Raji* tribe is omnivorous. Apart from barley, maize, rice, *madua* etc., they also use wild fruits and tubers as food. The life and economy of the *Raji* tribe runs on the principle of "search every day, eat every day". Wild vegetables like *Linguda* or fiddlehead fern (*Matteuccia Struthiopteris*), *Kuthudaka*, *Phafar* etc. along with tubers like *Genthi* or *Varahikand* (*Dioscorea pentaphylla*), *Turud* or *Teru* (*Dioscorea deltoidea*) etc. are the main ingredients of their diet. *Turud* or *Varahikand* has a lot of importance in this tribe. When someone from the girl's side goes to the boy's house with a marriage proposal, then there is a custom of taking *Turud* or *Varahikand*. The process of digging the *Turud* tuber is very difficult and only *Raji* girls dig it. The girl who digs out the *Turud* tuber quickly is considered more skilled<sup>12</sup>.

Fruits and pods of *Chyura* (butter tree), *Thakala* or wild date palm are included in their diet. Herbal medicines like roots of *Vankakkari*, *Vanjeera* (black cumin and *Vernoniya Anthelmintica*), *Guruvanshi*, *Salampanja* or *Salamishree* (*Dactylorhiza Hatagirea*), *Ratapatia* or *Neelkanthi* (*Ajuga bracteosa*), *Vanpyaz*, *Kachnar* (*Bauhinia Variegata*), *Sakina* (*Cassia indigo*, *Indigofera Cassioides*) are part of their daily diet<sup>13</sup>.

*Raji* tribe eats non-vegetarian food like goat, deer, monkey, *langur*, chicken, other birds and fish. Porcupine meat is the favorite meat of *Raji*. *Raji* are considered to be expert in hunting porcupine. Unlike other tribes, *Raji* tribe did not traditionally consume alcohol but now the trend of drinking alcohol has increased a lot among *Raji* which is becoming a problem.

When the *Raji* tribe lived a nomadic life, their cooking methods were also natural. They would dig a pit in the ground and make holes on both sides of it, light a fire on one side and put meat wrapped in leaves of *Malu* (*Bauhinia vahali*) on the other side. Along with this, they would also wrap tubers like *Turud*, *Gathin* etc. in *Malu* leaves and keep them in the fire and leave them to cook after covering them with soil. They used a bamboo pipe to cook rice. Three parts of rice and one part of water were put in the bamboo pipe and placed on the fire so that the rice could cook with the heat of the fire<sup>14</sup>. This type of cooking method is also popular in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Cambodia, China, Malaysia, and South East Asia.

### **Traditional Medicine**

The *Raji* tribe is well acquainted with plants. Due to their direct contact with nature, they make full use of plant medicines. The *Raji* use medicines inspired by food values. *Genthi*, *Triguna*, *Chuur* and wild greens are the main part of their food. Therefore, they are also well versed with plant medicines.

There are two methods of treatment of diseases prevalent in the *Raji* tribe. *Rajis* consider diseases to be the wrath of ghosts and the influence of supernatural powers. Therefore, the first method of treatment is exorcism and *Tantra-mantra*. The *Raji* tribe has so much superstition that when they fall ill, they prefer exorcism for treatment. The practice of sacrificing is also seen in them in this exorcism. Many times, even when the sick person is dying, they keep doing exorcism instead of taking him to the hospital. If any *Raji* falls and gets injured, they consider it to be the influence of ghosts and perform exorcism. They sacrifice goats and chickens for the treatment of diseases. They also do exorcism for the treatment of paralysis. They keep these methods of exorcism secret.

In the second method of treatment, the *Raji* tribe uses herbal medicines. Following are the treatment methods used by the *Raji* tribe (herbal medicines and home remedies)<sup>15</sup>.

- Cow urine is used to wash the wound. Raw turmeric and Bermuda grass are ground and applied on the wound and pine resin is also applied on the wound.
- In case of bone fracture, *Dolu* (*Rheum australia*) is ground and mixed with flour to make a paste and is applied as a plaster.
- *Dolu* (*Rheum australe*) is applied to the swollen area. *Dolu*, also called *Archa*, is dried by the *Raji* tribe and is mixed with water and drunk in case of injury. The stem of a tree called *Syun* is boiled in water and the swollen part is fomented with this water.
- Flowers of *chyur* (butter tree, *Diploknema butyracea*) are used for the treatment of asthma and diabetes. Also, water from the roots of *kingoda* (*Berberis aristata* and Indian barberry) and *punarnava* (*Boerhavia diffusa*) are used for the treatment of diabetes.
- The *Raji* tribe makes tablets of *Shilajit* (*Asphaltum*) and consumes it in cases of illness or weakness.
- The blood of the *Jadai* or *Kakad* (barking deer) and the meat of the wild rabbit are used to treat pneumonia. The liver of the porcupine is consumed to treat TB or tuberculosis. Crab soup is given to the patient

to treat jaundice and tuberculosis. The *Raji* tribe keeps the meat of the porcupine dry and uses it to treat jaundice, obstetric diseases and asthma.

- *Kuthudka* (a wild green fern) and *Quiral* or *Kachnar* vegetable are consumed for treating stomach pain and intestinal worms. For stomach pain, the root of *Moosyavilo* (a wild herb) is ground in water and given to the patient.
- Leaves of a plant called *Turukya* are used to treat typhoid and mouth rashes.
- *Gurjaavilo* or *Giloy* (*Tinospora Cordifolia*) is peeled and boiled in water and used to treat cough and fever.
- The seeds of *Indwe* or *Bhattya* or *Bhatkantari* (*Solanum Xanthocarpum*, wild eggplant) are heated in mustard oil and used for massage to treat arthritis.
- *Gandharayana* (*Angelica glauca*) and *Bandhaniya* (*Cyathocline purpurea*) are used for the treatment of gastric problems etc.

### III. Conclusion

Prayag Joshi has written about the *Raji* tribe that "They were as innocent as children and had as much knowledge of the world as they could see." He said this on the basis of his survey in the seventh decade of the last century. At present, the *Raji* tribe has abandoned its nomadic life and started living in settlements. But till now they have not been able to come completely into the mainstream. Today it is also a cause of concern that this tribe is on the verge of extinction. This tribe also has its own traditions and prejudices behind this. Not marrying outside the tribe and marrying only among close relatives is also the reason for the decrease in their population. Due to this, new chromosomes are not able to develop and the immunity of children decreases. Due to lack of awareness, they are not able to take advantage of government schemes. Children of this tribe are not able to get education above primary education. Also, superstition is very high in this tribe. Also, this tribe has no contact with other tribes and human groups around them. While other tribes and ethnic groups around them have entered the modern world, they still stick to their old beliefs. Studies also show that they lack mental awareness. There is a need to promote awareness and education in this tribe. So that they can protect their traditions and expand their tribe. The special dialect of the *Raji* tribe, which is spoken only by this tribal group, also needs to be preserved.

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