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## CULTURAL HERITAGE AND TRANSFORMATION: THE GUJJAR TRIBE OF JAMMU REGION

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### ABSTRACT

*Cultural identity poses some essential philosophical questions of tradition, memory, recognition, and continuity of communal life. This paper will analyze the functioning of cultural traditions as interpretive systems by which societies maintain shared meaning in the process of adapting to social change. The case of the Gujjar community of Jammu is regarded as a reflective case study that demonstrates how identity is put into practice as a result of collective practices, historical memory, and social cooperation. The discussion holds that tradition and modernity are not in opposition to one another, and they are interrelated processes of reinterpretation, which brings out the ethical and philosophical significance of cultural diversity in pluralistic societies.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Cultural Identity, Tradition, Cultural Memory, Recognition, Pluralism.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### *Cultural Identity as a Philosophical Problem*

Humans have been organizing their lives in relation to shared meanings, practices and narratives that create meaning to the lives of groups. Such patterns of meaning are commonly called culture; however, the philosophical implication of culture extends beyond practices or tradition. Culture influences how individuals view themselves, how they relate with others and how they perceive the world. In philosophy, cultural identity is not merely a label but a paradigm where a group of people define their belonging, memory and morality. The area of study of cultural identity, therefore, raises some fundamental questions of what community means, continuity and the meaning of human existence.

The most crucial aspect of this debate has been the concept of identity. The cultural identity proves how communities maintain continuity in relation to the various historical conditions. Traditions, languages, rituals, and social institutions are such meaning carriers that link the past and the present. Through them, the individuals transfer systems of value and interpretation, which characterize their moral and social orientations (Saraf, 2016). Cultural identity is not just a source of stability, but it is also a dynamic process, whereby the communities re-write their history in the light of the present realities.

Conventionally, the necessity to maintain tradition is more likely to be a response to the perceived threat of social change. The most widespread processes that disorient the traditional ways of life are modernization, globalization, and restructuring of the economy. As the societies grow more interdependent, and the technology advances, the communities are being subjected to new requirements that they readjust their cultural practices to fit the new settings. The given conflict of continuity versus change has led to a stable philosophical discussion on the role of tradition in shaping collective identity. Some view tradition as a central source of moral direction and others view it as a system that is history specific, and is subject to change as a result of social change.

Of special concern is the issue of continuity of the culture, especially in relation to the minority and indigenous communities. As such, societies are more likely to practice their own unique cultures, which do not relate to the current societal values. Their experiences attract more general philosophical debates concerning the topic of recognition, justice and ethical responsibilities of societies towards

cultural diversity. The awareness of the philosophical ground of cultural identity may therefore be brought into wider discussions of pluralism, the ethical significance of cultural difference.

A good background within which to reflect in the broader philosophical background is given in the Gujjar community of the Jammu region. An example of the philosophical significance of language, livelihood, memory, and internalized social forms as sources of maintaining collective identity is the Gujjar community. In the meantime, the economic change, state policies and shifting settlement patterns have exposed the community to radical change. These modifications may be regarded as the manifestation of the philosophical clash between preservation of cultural continuity and adjustment to the evolving social realities.

Instead of looking at the Gujjar people as an object of ethnography, this paper will look at the community as a philosophy where issues of identity, tradition, and cultural change may be addressed. It is not merely the desire to record cultural practice but to understand the underlying philosophical concerns that are involved when communities establish the connection between heritage and modernity. In this manner, the Gujjar experience is made to act as a prism through which cultural identity is explored as a part of wider discourse on community and social change.

The importance of cultural identity and ethical sense of recognition in various societies has been researched in the past in the realms of philosophy and social theory. Taylor (2021) believes that awareness of cultural identities is an important element that defines the dignity and self-understanding of people in pluralistic societies. Kymlicka (1995) further highlights that the rights of minorities are important in ensuring cultural diversity within liberal democracies. MacIntyre (1981) draws attention to the contribution of traditions to the maintenance of moral thinking in communities. Ricoeur (2004) discusses the issue of collective memory playing a role in identity formation through the passage of time. Gadamer (2013) views tradition as a living process that defines the understanding of tradition through its continuity in history. Herder (1968) emphasizes historical and cultural peculiarities of societies in the formation of human experience. Anderson (2020) studies the ways in which common storytelling generates perceived modes of group membership. Nussbaum (2009) relates cultural dignity to the overall concept of human capabilities and social justice.

Combined, these philosophical views prove that cultural identity cannot be reduced to rigid practices or secluded traditions. Rather, identity is produced in an action-focused manner during a circulation between the memory and social practices and the ethical recognition. Placing the Gujjar people in the context of this philosophic discussion, the given paper aims at illuminating the role of cultural traditions as the heritage of the historical past and the changing patterns of sensemaking. By doing this, it can be part of the persisting philosophical arguments concerning identity, tradition, and the moral relevance of cultural diversity in modern societies. This article states that cultural identity is no longer a fixed particle that is inherited but rather a dynamic moral and interpretative form where communities bargain on continuity, recognition and change under the evolving historical circumstances. Applying the Gujjar of Jammu community as a philosophical example, the research demonstrates that tradition is not merely the opposite of modernity or it is not dissolved by the latter, but it is reinterpreted on a constant basis by the way of the social practices.

The article takes the philosophical-interpretive approach methodologically. It is a mixture of the conceptual analysis of identity, tradition, memory and recognition and a specific reflection of the Gujjar community as an example in which the issues are embodied. It is not the exhaustiveness of ethnography but philosophical clarification.

## 2. CULTURE AND TRADITION IN PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT

Tradition and culture have never ceased to be the most significant elements that a philosophic inquiry recognizes the human groups to explain their lives. Culture may be taken as an arrangement of meanings that organizes social life to affect the perceptions individuals have concerning values, norms and relationships. Rather than being enslaved to the visible practices, culture is a symbolic system through which communities practice communal identity and make meaning out of their shared experiences. Within a philosophical perception, culture becomes a means through which human beings generate meaning and convey the transmitted meanings to the succeeding generations.

Culture is also not to be narrowed down to traditions only. At the philosophical level, it may be understood as more of an interpretative horizon, on which practices acquire meaning, and according to which people identify themselves in relation to other people, history, and shared norms.

Tradition in this cultural system plays a significant role. It relates the present and the past due to the continuation of traditions, narratives and dispositions of the values of a moral approach to govern community living (Habermas, 1990). At the philosophical level, tradition is not merely a repetition of the past models but is a crucial process through which societies come to make meaning of the wisdom they receive. Each new generation has its traditions and makes variations on them depending on the new circumstances and yet preserving their latent meaning. Through this continuity and reinterpretation, traditions can be used in a changing historical context.

The importance of historical consciousness is therefore indicated by philosophical exploration of culture. The society is not an isolated system but is enlightened on the memory of the communal experiences, and recollections of events that unite them. Such practices of cultural mindfulness acquire a meaning and legitimacy (Geertz, 1973). In the meantime, culture establishes moral construct, which can be understood by people, as to their obligation to other human beings. By doing so, the cultural practices contribute to shaping of collective identity since the communities can maintain coherence in the process of social change negotiation.

## 3. THE ONTOLOGY OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Ontology of cultural identity is concerned with philosophical question of how societies obtain the feeling of shared existence. The identity of the cultures cannot be restricted to the boundaries of traditions or social practices, but it is an outcome of the historic and symbolical system within which the communities understand themselves. These constructions are language, memory, traditions and moral systems that allow people to recognize themselves as a part of a certain cultural world. One of such manifestations of the social reality is the cultural identity, which is founded on shared meanings and consciousness.

On the philosophical level, the existence of the cultural identity is closely linked with the development of the collective self-awareness at the level of the communities. Cultural practices, customs and histories allow the placing one in a broader historical context. Through these practices the participants of a community develop a feeling that they belong to the similar cultural horizon. This process reflects the more general philosophical idea that identity is created in historical experience and ordinary understanding (Findlay et al., 1977).

The other important element of cultural ontology is the element that concerns the association of people and cultural worlds in which they live. Human beings do not experience culture as an additional set up but as a meaning environment that impose its daily understanding of existence. Cultural identity is then appropriated by individuals in the way they live experience the social life, how they view traditions and inherit forms of meaning (Heidegger, 1962).

At the same time, the ethical questions related to the belonging and the responsibility can also be found in the cultural identity. The identity is associated with the recognition of the ethical standards of belonging to the culture and obligations that people owe to the communities (Appiah, 2023). Through this kind of play of history, interpretation and ethical recognition, cultural identity is made dynamic as a source of collective life. In this aspect, cultural identity does not manifest itself as an accidental characteristic of the shared life but as one of the terms of its existence that cause a community to look at itself as a familiar social world. The ontological meaning of culture is reflected in the fact that it can bring out a common world of meaning as opposed to explain a group of people who have common habits.

#### **4. TRADITION AND MODERNITY: A PHILOSOPHICAL TENSION**

This clash of philosophies between modernity and tradition comes out particularly clearly in instances when the communities themselves have to contend with a swift social transformation. The conventional frameworks are known to change whereby communities are likely to develop meanings and social structure patterns in long durations of time. Modernity on the other hand is associated with increased pace of change that has been caused by technological change, urbanization and transformed modalities of political and economic relations. Such changes tend to re-establish the social spaces that traditions are exercised in pushing communities to reconsider how inherited practices can be sustainable in the current conditions. In this case tradition is not an issue of continuation and neglect, it is being negotiated and negotiated in the shifting social reality.

The fallacy of philosophy is to believe that tradition and modernity are two opposing concepts. In reality, modernity is more likely to alter the conditions of tradition rather than annihilate its power of normality.

A lot of emphasis has been given to the interpretive flexibility of traditions by philosophers.

Even as they change their practical expression, communities tend to retain stylised elements of their cultural heritage even when the social institutions are radically transformed. This reinterpretation skill allows the traditions to be applicable in the modern settings. The philosophical paradox is, therefore, not the ability of traditions to survive modernization but the way the communities can re-create traditions, which still offer a sense of belonging together and social wholeness. The search of continuity in the evolving historical circumstances illustrates the multidimensional relationship of the memory, identity and social change (Taylor, 1989).

It is made even more dynamic by multicultural societies introducing the more direct contact to a variety of traditions. As many cultures are exposed to the same political spaces, there is the issue of how other cultures can co-exist in spaces without undermining social cohesion. Cultural diversity according to the political theorists should be regarded as a means of securing democratic legitimacy in pluralistic societies. Thereafter, respect in cultural tradition has to be offset by more justice, equality, and inclusion in the commitment to citizenship (Parekh, 2001).

In the meantime, individuals are involved in the process of establishing the bondage between tradition and modernity. The identity of the person is normally solved in terms of reflective attitude towards the cultural discourses that have been inherited. The tradition is re-read to fit the contemporary experience and therefore will result in further development of cultural self (Laitinen, 2002). This way, the traditional and modernity need not be a contrast to each other but are the two sides of cultural development that are interrelated to each other. Then tradition does not survive through rejecting any change, but through preservation of forms of meaning in the process of reinterpretation.

#### **5. CULTURAL PRACTICES AND THE EXPRESSION OF IDENTITY: THE CASE OF THE GUJJAR COMMUNITY**

The cultural context of the Gujjar community can be explained with the help of demographic presence of Scheduled Tribes in Jammu and Kashmir which gives an important social context. According to Census data, there are a number of districts of the Jammu region where the tribal population is high, especially in Poonch and Rajori. Table 1 shows the records of Scheduled Tribe data in terms of population in the various districts (Census of India, 2011).

**Table 1: Population of Scheduled Tribes in J&K (Source: Census 2011).**

NAME	ST POPULATION Census 2001	ST POPULATION Census 2011	% OF ST 2011
Poonch	1,49,018	1,76,101	36.9
Rajouri	1,60,049	2,32,815	36.2
Kathua	33969	53307	8.6
Doda	28400	39216	9.6
Ramban	29353	39772	14
Kishtwar	27917	38149	16.5
Udhampur	42875	56309	10.1
Reasi	60753	88365	28.1
Jammu	42089	69193	4.5
Samba	11740	17573	5.5

The importance of the practices is further made clear as cultural identity is perceived as an action in everyday interaction as opposed to one that is inherited but is a static tradition. Cultural practices enable the members of one community to share a moral and social world. By means of language, livelihood and ritual processes, people absorb the shared values that determine how people relate socially and strengthen a sense of communal unity. In this regard, the cultural practices can be described as living symbolizations of identity that are reproduced by means of participation and social learning.

In pastoral mobility and seasonal livelihood patterns, many of these practices are inculcated among the Gujjars (Sharma et al., 2003). Not only does the mobility of livestock, family labor organization, and kinship network maintenance help to maintain livelihood but it is a common manner of life by the reproduction of social obligations, belonging and common memory. Such practices are not only keeping the economies alive, but also enhancing common experiences that hold together. Like the previous research, the Gujjar pastoral system represents the manner in which the community identity is strongly correlated to the livelihood and social structure patterns developed over generations (Warikoo and Som, 2000).

The other significant dimension of these practices is environmental knowledge. Pastoral societies become so familiar with landscapes, climatic patterns and natural resources that it becomes a cultural heritage. This information is passed through most of its daily endeavors, including herding, seasonal migration, and cooperation in the household, which make sure that the ecological awareness is institutionalized in the cultural practices (Ahmed and Ahmed, 2015). Studies on Himalayan pastoral communities have indicated that these kinds of knowledge systems not only maintain the economic livelihood of the community but also the social cohesion of the community (Bhasin, 2011a). This

knowledge plays a role of philosophical importance as it demonstrates that identity resides in practical relations with the world as opposed to residing in abstract description of the self.

These observations, philosophically, can be used to support the view that shared practices develop a framework where individuals become aware of their duties to others. Common modes of living lead to the involvement in common norms and a feeling of mutual responsibility. Civic philosophers have contended that societies on the basis of common practices bring about moral involvement as it allows people to perceive themselves as an integral part of a shared morality (Sandel, 1998). Similarly, pluralist theories assert that cultural traditions are forms of expressing social meaning that are allowed by various societies and that it is desirable to uphold plurality of cultures in the quest of justices (Walzer, 2008). In this view, the Gujjar people exhibit their cultural practices as a way of illustrating identity that is produced with the help of lived experiences that are a mixture of social cooperation, historical memory and moral commitment. The Gujjar case therefore demonstrates that identity is practiced prior to being discoursed.

## 6. ETHICS OF CULTURAL PRESERVATION

The issue of cultural traditions as a method of preservation poses significant ethical concerns in modern philosophical debate on justice and social responsibility. Cultural practices are usually a representation of historical experiences and values of communities especially those that have an identity which is characterized by long-standing links with land, livelihood, and collective memory. With these traditions being threatened by economic, political or social change, it is questioned whether societies bear a moral responsibility to save the cultural structures on which communities maintain their identity. Ethically, therefore, cultural preservation is closely related to the larger concept of protection of human dignity and communal autonomy.

The fact that cultures are disappearing is not simply a sociological transformation, it can also amount to a kind of moral damage when societies are denied the circumstances in which they are able to maintain the inherited versions of meaning. It is important to see ethical preservation, then, not as the freezing of tradition but as the safeguarding of those social conditions upon which communities may make their own interpretations and reproductions of ways of life.

Ethical aspect in question arises particularly within the case of a marginalized/minority community. Sometimes, development policies and modernization efforts tend to interfere with the traditional lifestyles, which leads to conflicts between economic development and cultural preservations. Research studies on tribal development programs have indicated that policy interventions should address the cultural context of the communities in order to prevent subversion of social structures, which support the identity and collective welfare (Thakur and Sharma, 2012). Cultural preservation must be ethically reflected on thus being sensitive to the realities of the community lived by people as opposed to dictating general types of development.

The vulnerability of the cultural traditions is also affected by socio-economic issues. Studies on marginalized tribal groups in India have shown that economic deprivation, disparities and lack of access to resources may aggravate stresses on cultural continuity thus exposing the community to cultural erosion (Kapoor et al., 2009). When this happens, the preservation of cultural heritage gets entangled with the struggle of dealing with structural inequality.

The recent empirical research of the Gujjar community also suggests that cultural identity is still strictly correlated with the livelihood, mobility, and social organization patterns in pastoral societies (Majeed, 2025). Ethical methods of cultural conservation should then be able to appreciate the connection between cultural practices and social-economic factors that facilitate a community to sustain their lifestyles.

## 7. CULTURAL MEMORY AND COMMUNITY CONTINUITY

Cultural memory plays the core role in preserving continuation of communities across time. At the philosophical level, memory is not a document of the existence in the past only, but a system based on which the societies can make sense of their being together. Communities generate a sense of historical awareness, which intergenerationally links communities through the common stories, rituals

and practices inherited. Cultural memory is therefore an act through which values, traditions and social meanings are transmitted to enable the population to possess a coherent identity despite the fact that they might change in accordance with the social situations. The philosophical importance of memory is that it assists in linking the past and the present and societies to retain their identity on the basis of the continuity of the narratives, but not by the repetitions.

In traditional cultures, cultural memory is embedded in the everyday activities and societal structures in most societies. These traditions assist in preserving the data of the life of a group, interpersonal relationships, and the history of the past. Anthropological data of the tribal societies in India indicate that the collective memory is usually a significant issue in the social structure and continuation of the culture, and allows the community to preserve their identity even when there is a greater social transformation (Singh, 1994). Such memories are a repository of cultural knowledge that assists in guiding social processes and social responsibility.

The fact that the documentation of social realities is done with the assistance of the institutional power such as the census studies is useful in the understanding of the continuity and change of the marginalized groups also. The analysis of census highlights the impact of demographic changes, social organization, and the state of the economy on the perceived experience of Scheduled Tribes in India, which offers the insights of the situations of change in which cultural identities are maintained (Bhagat, 2017).

The cultural memory is expressed in terms of collective histories of pastoral life, mobility and ethnic identity in the case of the Gujjar and Bakarwal communities of Jammu and Kashmir (Bhat and Khan, 2021). The stories contribute to the strategic expression of the identity within the complex social and political contexts (Wani and Hassan, 2025). At the same time, ecological adaptation and transhumant pastoralism show the correlation between cultural memory and the knowledge of the environment and the resilience of the population (Tufail et al., 2024). The combination of these dimensions demonstrates how continuity of the community by memory is possible in such a way that cultural identities are not predetermined but change with the changing historical conditions. It is then that community continuity is not merely given to material survival, but to continuity of structural forms of symbol and narrative in which a given group views itself across time.

## 8. CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE FUTURE OF TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES

The cultural change is an unavoidable feature of the social life particularly to those individuals whose traditional means of livelihood is directly associated with the ecological space and mobility. The cultural transformation in no way implies the loss of identity, philosophically the cultural transformation is frequently the ability of the community to redefine inherited practices under the changing social conditions. The traditional communities therefore are confronted with the issue of continuity and change where their cultural heritage keeps the important elements of their culture and adaptation to the new economic, political and environmental realities.

Pastoral and transhumant groups in Himalayan region have also been considerably influenced by the process of social change. A case in point is that of gradual sedentarization of pastoral society in Jammu and Kashmir where the state policies, administrative orders, and infrastructure changes are re-establishing historically important patterns of movement and livelihood (Sofi, 2013). Philosophically, this explains how cultural change has been known to occur via the change of the institutional conditions and not by a pure rejection of tradition. On the one hand, these shifts may offer new opportunities of being socially integrated and having access to the services on the other hand, it raises the issue of maintaining cultural practices through which people have always formed the life of a community.

The circumstances of the cultural transformation are also evolving in relation to the gender relations. Studies on transhumant societies have established that women play an important role in the economic sustainability of households and provision of overall support of the social networks despite the fact that distribution of roles in the community is part of dynamic socio-economic change (Bhasin, 2011b). This suggests that cultural continuity is not ensured by the abstract tradition that has perpetuated the cultural continuity and that have internalized social roles, which can also be reinterpreted to uphold the cultural continuity. Such changes put the focus of cultural adaptation such that the social roles of the same are redefined without sacrificing the bigger picture of group identity.

Still the cornerstone of the cultural and economic life of some Gujjar communities is pastoralism which is livestock-centered. The fact that pastoral traditions continued to live points out that identity can exist even in the modernizing society so long as pragmatic

types of meanings could be preserved within the society. The studies of livestock economy of nomadic Gujjars confirm that pastoral practices are not merely the economic strategies but also aspects and components of cultural identity and environmental knowledge (Koundal, 2017). In the meantime, the conservation policies and relocation campaign have established new clashes between the ecological policies and the traditional livelihood systems (Hussain et al., 2016).

The traditional communities are also adaptive as shown by the ethnobotanical knowledge. Such kinds of knowledge prove that tradition can be young and yet remain tradition. The local information about plant resources was the generations of contact with the Himalayan environment and results in the preservation of culture and environmental sustainability (Mahmood, 2020). These examples show that cultural change cannot be imagined as a loss of culture, but as a change process whereby communities' trade-off the future of their cultural identity.

## 9. CONCLUSION

The philosophical question of culture and identity reveals to us that traditions are not objects that are handed down but dynamic forms according to which communities derive meanings of their lives. Cultural identity is a strong construct through which individuals are bonded together using common historical experiences, values and societal customs. The traditions help the communities to retain the past and provide moral directions to the present social existence. Such continuity is philosophically required since it helps individuals to find their place within some larger narrative of common belonging. In the meantime, the interaction between tradition and modernity process demonstrates that cultural identities are not objects that are fixed. Social change, technological and political transformation, is always altering the contexts within which traditions are operating. These processes are more of encouraging reinterpretation and adaptation as opposed to eliminating the cultural identities. Such modifications are bargained within communities by trying to sustain significant symbolic meanings and adapting the practices to the new realities of the present. In that sense, the change of culture is an indicator of the dynamism of human society. The preservation of collective identity amid changing environments is the case with the Gujjar community, which applies to the culture and its practices, social organization, and historical memory. The plural societies are ethically and intellectually highlighted

by philosophical thinking on such communities. The recognition and reward of cultural practices are not only useful in protecting the heritage but also understanding more about the human condition, wherein identity, memory and collective meaning

are yet the fundamental elements of social life. Due to this fact, the philosophical justification of cultural diversity is not just a defence of heritage, but defence of the plurality of the human modes of being in the world.

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