

Customs and Rituals among settled Gujjars of Jammu District in J&K

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to study the Customs and Rituals among settled Gujjars of Jammu District in J&K. Customs are nothing but accepted and common ways of acting. They are very much responsible for maintenance of social values and objectives. Tradition, as a result of transference from generation to other gets strengthened by the new generations. These strengthened traditions are called 'customs'.

Keywords: Customs, Rituals, Traditions, Ceremony, Gujjars.

Customs and rituals constitute important components of tribal culture of the Gujjars. Customs are cultural traditions or habitual forms of behaviour within a given social groups. The concept of custom implies not only the statistical occurrence of a given behaviour but also a prescriptive dimension: Customary behaviour is that which is required or expected of the members of society under any given circumstance. To behave contrary to custom may attract sanctions ranging from social disapproval to ostracism or other forms of punishment.

Among Gujjars of Jammu and Kashmir, customs reflect the influence of religion. For them the disobedience to customs means a sin against one's forefathers and a sin against the social faith. Ritual may be defined as a kind of patterned activity oriented towards control of human affairs, primarily symbolic in character with a non-empirical referent, and as a rule socially sanctioned. Right from the child birth to death ceremony, a range of customs is prevalent among the Gujjars. The Gujjar community of Jammu are Muslims by faith and one can see the impact of Islam on their customs and rituals. Most of the customs and rituals prevalent among them today reflect the combination of both customary tribal practices and Islam.

The most important Islamic customs among them are those related to child birth, circumcision **Sunnat** of male child, wedding ceremony and funeral rites. Custom of child birth is a time of gayness and rejoicing. When a child is born of a Muslim Gujjar, the *Imam* (Partiarch of mosque) or some pious and venerable person sounds *Azan* (Muslims called to prayer) in the new born's one ear while as *Takir* (Praise of God-Allah is great) in the other ear. On or soon after seventh day, the child is given his name in a ceremonial gathering called **Aqiquah** in which his/her head is tonsured and then goat or sheep, is sacrificed whose two-third meat is distributed among the poor, friends and relatives. Circumcision i.e., **Sunnat** of new born male child is another occasion in which feast is served when the male child is circumcised and then a girl from a neighbouring family, usually

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belonging to the same community, is called. She applies mehendi (*henna*) on the palms of the boy and the boy gives her some presents and jaggery (*gur*). This girl remains a god sister of the boy throughout his life. The Circumcision is the '**Ibrahimi holy**' tradition and it should be performed according to the method prescribed in **Shariah** (Religious code of Islam). The circumcision ceremony is performed on boys when they are between one and a half years and five years of age.

The ceremonies of **Nabseen** (piercing the nose of a female child) and **Kamseen** (Piercing the ears of a female child) are performed on Gujjar girls when they are between two and six years of age. This is a very simple ceremony and no feast is given on this occasion.

The Clothing/Ring Ceremony (KURMAIYEE) is celebrated with much enthusiasm to fix a match of bride and bridegroom. Commonly some clothes, ring or other ornaments along with some money called *Phandey Bahani* is offered from the grooms side to the bride and the other side may also reciprocate with some gifts. The function is proclaimed as half marriage.

The wedding ceremony is perhaps the biggest rejoicing time for Gujjars society. The custom starts with the date fixing ceremony and continues for days together. In between there are lots of **sub-customs** and ritual locally known as **Matti Khunni**, **Kapra Baterna**, **Lakri Tokni** etc. which are customary in nature. **Matti- Khunni** is the ritual which marks the beginning of the marriage ceremony and in this particular ritual, digging of earth is done with which the walk of the house is plastered. **Kapra Baterna** is an occasion on which a new cloth which is especially purchased for the would be bride/bridegroom is cut and designed by a tailor who is dually called at home for this occasion in the presence of relatives and friends. **Lakri Tokni** is a custom in which Gujjars collect the wood before marriage and then they prepare the food by lighting the collected wood.

There are some major ceremonies. For example, there is Oil ceremony called **Tel/ Chor**. **Tel or Mayin** ceremony wherein **Temol** is paid to the boy or the girl and are formally designated as groom or bride respectively. **Temol** is the money which is paid to the boy or *girl* at the time of this particular auspicious occasion. Special Oil is applied on the body of bride and groom at their respective places. Some rustic people tie on the hands of bride and groom a **Pasham (Ganna)** adorned with iron rings which they consider as a sort of knot to keep the couple safe and secure. After tying of **Ganna** from **Dost or Dharambehn** they are not generally allowed to leave the house. Then there is rice cleaning ceremony when the women from the neighborhood assemble to clean the rice for cooking at the time of marriage, and make other arrangements also. After that comes the **Mehandi** locally called **Neharien** night when the women folk apply "**Mehandi**" paste on the palms and feet of the bride and groom as also to other women. The function is mainly a women function and involves a lot of folk music/songs and dances besides other recreations. In **Mehandi** ceremony, the nearest and closest friends of the Bride or of the Bridegroom brings sweets which are distributed among the guests and other relatives.

A custom of water fetching is also celebrated by women on the occasion of marriage. One of the girls is appointed as sister called **DHARAM BEHEN** to the bride or groom at their respective places. She is provided with a pitcher to fetch water from a nearby spring or stream in a procession of women called '**PANIBARNO**'. This water is used for bathing the bride or groom as this water is believed to be sacred. This is a colorful function in which beautiful songs are sung. The peak ceremony is marriage party's departure from the house of the groom and its reception at the house of the bride. The reception is marked with folkgames like **Beni panjo** (Arm holding), **Bustler** etc. This is followed by **Nikah** or Nuptial ceremony. During this period many smaller rituals are performed like '**Surma**', The **Surma** to be applied by the youngest sister-in-law. First, the sister-in-law applies "**Surma**" in one eye of the bridegroom, then she starts demanding money from her would be Brother-in-law. After some bargain, the bridegroom offers some money as agreed upon with the sister-in-law. After receiving the amount, she applies **Surma** in the other eye. The Gujjars perform the **Nikah** ceremony to solemnize the marriage and the form of this ceremony is the same as the

one prescribed by Islam/ The **Maulvi** sits on a slightly raised platform surrounded by all the invitees and two adult males from the boy's side go over to the girl's parents to find out if she is agreeable to her marriage. She affirms her agreement through one of her friends and her affirmation is announced by the witness to the marriage party. Similar affirmation is then sought from the boy. Once the consent of both the parties has thus been obtained, the **Maulvi** recites an offering (**Fatiha**) from the Kuran.

As soon as the **Nikah** has been read, the bridegroom's father is required to fix the dower (**Mehr**). This can either be deferred or handed over immediately, and paid in cash or in kind. Usually, forty percent of the dower are usually prolonged and a great deal of haggling takes place, the settlement usually being brought by the **Maulvi** and the other elders present. When the boy's father accepts the sum proposed, a marriage contract (**Nikah Nama**) is drawn up by the **Maulvi** a copy of which is given to the bridegroom while the original is kept by the **Maulvi**.

The custom of contributing a prescribed amount of money is also prevalent-called as **Nindra**. Finally there is a departure of **Doli** (the Palanquin)

It is also customary to invite the bride and groom to the house of bride parents for a special feast with in a few days of their marriage. The occasion is called **Bathvera**.

Among the Gujjar society the death of dear one is announced among the community. The dead body, after giving a bath is wrapped in clean and fresh clothes. Then it is taken into a procession for prayers in which verses from the Holy Kuran are Recited by the **Maulvi**, this is called **Janaza-e-Namaz** and after that the dead body is laid to rest in grave. At the house of the bereaved family cooked food is brought from the neighbourhood. The bereaved and the relatives from far off are served food and consoled for three days. During this period recitations from religious and Sofiyana poetry books are recited and sung. Local poets and saintly persons are very much quoted. The bereaved and the relatives observe mourning for three days. On the fourth day, the customary mourning is lifted and the relatives return to their houses to pickup their normal chores of life. But the deceased is remembered on different occasions and prayers for the departed soul are held especially on fortieth day and then on the anniversary. The occasion is called **KHATAM or NIAZ. Urs or Bhandara** is also a custom among the Gujjars of J&K.

They observe the death anniversaries of their common saintly persons while congregating at their shrines and offering cash and kind. A big meal is held on the occasion and men, women and children feel blessed after taking the meals. This is not only a spiritual act but also a socio-cultural occasion.

Tradition

The community is conservative in which superstitions and myths play a dominant role in their day to day life. The Gujjars are mostly addressed and sport the titles of:

1. **Mukkadam**
2. **Chowdhary**
3. **Khan or Sardar**

Their women folk are addressed as **Mehri** or **Chowdharani**. On occasions of festivals, marriages, and *melas* singers and flute players are generally asked by elders to display their skills and art.

Folk Beliefs of Gujjar Tribe

The Gujjar people have their own way of life, their culture, customs as well as beliefs. Those in Jammu and Kashmir have all embraced Islam and under the influence of religion many of the folk- faiths and beliefs have disappeared but one cannot deny the fact that a lot of traditional belief still prevail among the Gujjars. Even in this computer age, they love their traditional values and folk- beliefs. For example it is common among Gujjar tribe to avoid starting a project on

Tuesday and Wednesday .e.g laying foundation of a building, starting marriage function or a journey towards east. It is commonly said — You never journey to upward places on Tuesday or you will loose even almost won battle. The Gujjar tribe believes in good and bad omens. The Friday is understood to be a day of patience. So starting a work on this day means it will take much time to complete that. Thursday is supposed to be a great day. It is believed among Gujjar tribe that one who dies this day is really a happy soul. It is a tradition that on Friday some Gujjars do not sell milk or use at home but offer one time milk, free of cost to those who are deprived of the commodity.

There are some beliefs about timing also. Many of the Gujjars do not make a plan at night or at noon or at the time of sunset . Others believe that noon time is not fit for doing a job and prefer to take rest that time. At the time of Sunset even the small children should be woken up. They believe that this is the time of meeting of five elements locally known as “**Panjh Peer**”.

In normal eases if you sneeze, it is believed that you are missed by who is dear to you. Weeping cries of a dog is an impression that some havoc will inundate the area, It is also forbidden to sweep at night. Seeing a mirror in the night is also prohibited. The belief says if you feel itching in your feet, it means some journey await you or it will rain. If the itching is on the upper side of the foot it is believed that you will be honoured or revered. If your hand feels itching it denotes that money will come to you. Similarly palpitations of your eye means coming of guests,

Gujjars believes that those who do not get married for a long, they should cat the left out meal of a bride or a groom to get the problem solved.

Many people among Gujjars keep a knife or a piece of a metal under the pillow of a newly born child or a woman believing that the evil spirits are afraid of metal and hence keeps away. When a baby cries and parents believe she fell prey to some bad looks then some chillies or certain grains are fired on a fire and the smoke allowed to touch the baby so that ill effect is undone.

In brief there are number of beliefs to which these people ding to even in this age of computer. The belief may be true or false but it certainly brings some satisfaction to the believer.

To conclude, it can be said that right from birth to death, Gujjars have specific rituals and customs to perform. Their social life is very much linked with their religious life. On each occasion of their social and religious life, **Maulvi** performs all rituals. Thus, **Maulvi** occupies an important place in the lives of Gujjars. The customary rites and ceremonies continue to enjoy a very strong hold on the community.

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