

Exploring Lifecycle Rituals of the Gujjar Tribe in Kashmir Valley

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Abstract: This paper explores the rituals and traditions interwoven within the cultural fabric of the Gujjar tribe of Kashmir Valley. By adopting an ethnographic approach—characterised by prolonged engagement through participant observation and in-depth interviews—this research seeks to unravel the multiple layers of meaning embedded within the community's ritual practices. Focusing on various lifecycle rituals, the study seeks to illuminate the intricate symbolism, historical trajectories, and contemporary relevance within the shifting socio-cultural landscape of the Gujjar tribe. By examining the cultural tapestry of the Gujjar tribe, this research not only contributes to a deeper anthropological understanding of their heritage but also highlights the dynamic tension between tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Gujjar tribe, rituals, traditions, ethnography, cultural heritage, socio-cultural dynamics, symbolic anthropology

Introduction

The Gujjars

The Gujjars are a semi-nomadic community predominantly found in Jammu and Kashmir. During the winter months, they reside in the lower mountain ranges, where they occupy their permanent dwellings, known as *makan*. However, with the onset of summer, they engage in transhumance—a seasonal migratory practice—relocating to their highland abodes, referred to as *kothas*. This seasonal movement is driven by the need to access alpine pastures, where they graze their livestock, a crucial aspect of their subsistence economy and pastoral lifestyle. Their presence is in all districts except Ladakh. The Gujjars mainly engage in raising buffaloes, cows, goats, and sheep. They

also own horses for transporting goods during their migrations. Their nomadic lifestyle is closely tied to the needs of their livestock, which is their main source of income. The primary occupations of the Gujjars include animal breeding and trading milk and dairy products like clarified butter (*ghee*) and cheese. Additionally, they also trade in raw wool, beef and mutton.

For the Gujjar community, customs and rituals are deeply ingrained in daily life, profoundly shaping their social fabric. These customs and rituals, heavily influenced by religion, are not merely descriptive but prescriptive, governing behaviour and reflecting adherence to communal faith. As followers of Islam the Gujjar community, adheres to rites of passage from birth to death and reinforcing religious identity as Muslims. The adherence to customs (*Urf*) and rituals (*Shayair*) among the Gujjars underscores their significance as markers of social faith and community cohesion. Deviation from these prescribed practices is not merely a divergence from tradition but a transgression against communal belief systems. Through the lens of anthropology, studying the customs and rituals of the Gujjar tribe offers insights not only into their cultural heritage but also into the intricate interplay between religion, tradition, and social identity within tribal societies. The ritual, in fact, has the long-term effect of emphasising all the more trenchantly the social definitions of the group (Turner, 1969: 172).

The Study Area and Research Method

This research paper endeavours to record and provide an analysis of the rituals prevalent within the Gujjar community in Kashmir Valley. It takes into account the Gujjars living in the northern and southern regions of Kashmir, specifically those residing in the districts of *Baramulla and Ganderbal*, respectively. The rituals discussed in this paper were meticulously documented during extensive fieldwork conducted over a period of one and a half years in the Nagin-I, Nagin-II, Hokarpathar, Kathanwali, and Chandoosa regions of Baramulla district, as well as the Thajwas area of Ganderbal district of Kashmir.

The ethnographic research work among the Gujjars of these regions involved participant observation and in-depth interviews with members of the community. The first author had the opportunity to personally observe numerous rituals and customs, that has enriched this paper with insights into the cultural practices of the Gujjars. However, due to cultural restrictions first hand data could not be collected, particularly those associated with women. Owing to the concept of *purdah* (basically refers to a distance that a Muslim man and woman maintain in public spaces, when not directly related by blood. For more information on *purdah* see Zaman, 2016) these were strictly off-limits to individuals of the opposite gender. In such cases, the data on these rituals were gathered exclusively through interviews with respondents at a later date. The rituals

observed were all public in nature, which allowed for participation as a researcher. Before translating these observations into a textual format, all details were shared with the respondents, ensuring that the representation of their practices remained accurate and maintaining informed consent.

Rituals

Rituals are an inherent aspect of human social existence, fundamental to the fabric of society. Rituals reveal values at their deepest level (Monica, 1959). They permeate all levels of social interaction, from grand communal events to intimate personal experiences, reflecting the diverse tapestry of human culture. Rituals are transformative acts that symbolise and effect transitions from one stage of life or condition to another (Turner, 1969: 94). This centrality of rituals to societal dynamics has long captured the attention of anthropologists, recognising their rich potential for socio-cultural analysis. In anthropology, rituals and customs are distinct but interrelated social behaviours specific to particular cultures. Rituals are intentional actions imbued with symbolic meaning, often serving specific cultural purposes such as marking life transitions or reinforcing community bonds. Customs, on the other hand, are unwritten norms governing behaviour within a society, encompassing the everyday lived experiences.

Life cycle rituals within an ethnic group are viewed as a cohesive and interconnected series of activities. They are the rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age (van Gennep, 1909). These rituals are governed by specific norms, customs, and taboos, encompassing aspects such as preferred foods, auspicious colours, auspicious months, blessings, and the involvement of specific individuals in each rite. Activities deemed appropriate for inauspicious occasions, such as funerals, are prohibited during auspicious events like weddings. Additionally, astrological considerations often influence matchmaking, and certain cultural preferences dictate wedding attire, such as avoiding the colour red and favouring black. Within the Gujjar community, specific months are considered auspicious or unfavourable for conducting rituals. As per the Islamic Calander, the first month (*Muharram*) and the third month (*Rabi-ul-awal*) are conspicuously regarded as unsuitable for the observance of any ceremonies or rituals like marriage, etc. Conversely, the tenth month (*Shawal*) emerges as a favoured temporal setting for the initiation and execution of rituals. Furthermore, gender roles dictate certain aspects of ritual participation, such as the exclusive involvement of males in the final funeral rites. These ritual practices are deeply ingrained within the community, passed down through generations, and contribute to the development of a distinct ritual style reflective of their unique beliefs and traditions. They celebrate ceremonies and rituals in their own distinctive manner, reinforcing social bonds and facilitating mutual learning among participants. These occasions serve as opportunities for individuals

to forge meaningful connections, share experiences, and gain insights into the diverse approaches to significant life events. Consequently, these ritualistic moments emerge as periods of heightened emotions and profound significance for those directly engaged.

Birth Rituals

Rituals related to childbirth are deeply embedded in customs and traditions within the Gujjar community, retaining much of its cultural significance over the generations. Despite societal changes, it continues to be a celebratory occasion, though, within Gujjar families, there exists a notable preference for male offspring. This preference is evident in practices such as doubling the rations for mothers and paying higher tributes to *daji* (midwives and nurses) on the birth of a male child. Although contemporary values increasingly challenge such gendered biases, particularly in urban areas, traditional rural Gujjar families often cling to the belief that male children are superior.

The lifecycle ritual surrounding childbirth begins during pregnancy, a period traditionally kept discreet within the family. In Gujjar households, it is common for pregnant women (*bimar*) to remain largely secluded, dressed in loose garments to ensure their modesty. Great care is taken to provide expectant mothers with a nourishing diet, reinforcing the community's emphasis on maternal health, which is seen as pivotal to ensuring the well-being of both mother and child.

A prevailing custom among the Gujjars is for childbirth to take place at the home of the woman's parents, a practice rooted in longstanding cultural norms. However, in rare instances, the birth may occur at the husband's residence, although this is less common. Historically, *daji*, facilitated the birthing process within the home environment, using traditional methods. In more recent times, the community has seen a shift, with many families opting for deliveries in government hospitals, reflecting a gradual integration of modern medical practices. The preference for natural births remains strong, with caesarean sections (C-section) viewed with suspicion. Among the Gujjars, the necessity of a C-section is often linked to perceived weaknesses in the health of the mother or child, and there is a certain stigma attached to it, as it is seen as a deviation from the norm.

The gender of the newborn significantly shapes the emotional response of the family. If the infant is a girl, the joy expressed is often subdued in comparison to the birth of a boy, which is met with heightened enthusiasm and celebration. This distinction in gender-based reactions underscores the persistent patriarchal underpinnings within Gujjar society.

Upon birth, the infant is immediately introduced to the Islamic faith through the recitation of the *Azan* (call to prayer) in the right ear and *Iqamah* (call to commence prayer) in the left ear which is usually done by a *Maulvi* (Islamic cleric) or any pious

individual, marking the beginning of their spiritual journey and invoking divine protection. This ritual not only reflects the tribe's Islamic identity but also serves to symbolise the child's integration into the wider religious community.

Breastfeeding, particularly with the mother's first milk, is believed to provide crucial health benefits and is considered an important aspect of postnatal care. The mother, referred to as *lous* during the postpartum period, is provided with a diet rich in wild herbs, dry fruits, and other nutrient-dense foods, designed to promote recovery and strength. This postpartum care typically lasts for forty days, during which the mother remains in a state of confinement, receiving special attention from family members.

The birth of a child, especially a son, is a cause for extended family celebration, with the maternal grandmother traditionally bringing gifts to honour the occasion. These gifts often include money, clothing, fruits, bakery items, and sweets, further reinforcing the communal and familial bonds that are central to Gujjar social life.

- *Pani kaela* (Purification Rituals Postpartum)

The postpartum period among the Gujjar tribe is marked by a series of purification rituals, deeply rooted in both religious and cultural practices. One of the most significant of these is the *Pani Kaela* (literally "water purification ceremony"), which takes place on the seventh day after childbirth, known as the *Saetmo*. This ritual involves the bathing of both the mother and the newborn, symbolising their physical and spiritual purification after the birthing process. The *Saetmo* purification bath is prepared with water boiled with a mixture of wild herbs, known locally as *lousgass*, believed to have healing properties. While the mother bathes herself, the infant is traditionally bathed by elder women in the family, often led by the maternal grandmother. This custom is only observed after the umbilical cord stump has fallen off, as it marks the infant's readiness for the ritual. The involvement of elder women in this process highlights their role as custodians of cultural knowledge and nurturers of the next generation. The bathing of the newborn under their guidance symbolises the transmission of cultural values and practices from one generation to the next, ensuring the continuity of the tribe's traditions.

A similar purification bath takes place on the fortieth day after childbirth, known as *Chanlisvo*, which marks the formal end of the postpartum confinement period. This second ritual bath holds even greater symbolic importance, as it not only signifies the mother's physical recovery but also restores her ritual purity, allowing her to resume religious and social duties. It is only after this forty-day period that the husband is permitted to engage in intimate relations with his wife, reflecting the tribe's cultural emphasis on maintaining both physical and spiritual hygiene during this delicate period. During these forty days, the new mother is relieved from all

household responsibilities, particularly those related to cooking. Traditionally, she uses separate utensils to avoid contamination and maintain her ritual purity, although this practice is becoming increasingly rare. The postpartum period is also marked by the mother's stay at her natal home, where she typically stays for up to six months. This extended stay not only allows for physical recovery but also reinforces the support network provided by the maternal family, which is a crucial aspect of postpartum care.

- *Zaer kaesin* (Head Shaving Ceremony)

The *zaer kaesin*, or head-shaving ceremony, is an important lifecycle ritual among the Gujjar tribe, typically performed on the seventh day after birth. While this tradition is rooted in religious practice, it is sometimes delayed until the fortieth day to coincide with other purification rites. The ceremony is believed to have significant spiritual and health-related benefits, with the shaving of the infant's head symbolising the enhancement of the child's physical strength and sensory faculties. This belief reflects the community's perception of the ritual as a means to purify and strengthen the child, preparing them for their journey through life. Despite its simplicity, the *zaer kaesin* holds considerable symbolic value within the Gujjar community. It is a marker of the child's entry into society and a means of fulfilling religious obligations. According to Islamic teachings, the newborn should be named and their head shaved on the seventh day in accordance with prophetic tradition (Al-Tirmidhi, 1522). This religious aspect infuses the ceremony with a spiritual significance that transcends its physical act, linking the child's early life stages to broader communal and religious identities. In most cases, *na'yi* (a local barber) is engaged to carry out the ceremony. The knife used for the shaving, known as *khuer*, is specifically designated for this purpose, adding an additional layer of ritual meaning to the ceremony. The simplicity of the event, often devoid of lavish celebrations or monetary offerings, underscores its intrinsic spiritual and cultural value, highlighting that the importance of the ritual lies not in material expression but in its symbolic role in the child's life and the family's religious observance. It serves as a rite of passage for the newborn, signifying their introduction to the family and the wider community while fulfilling important religious obligations.

- *Naa kaera* (Naming Ceremony)

The naming ceremony, or *Naa Kaera*, holds profound cultural and religious significance among the Gujjar tribe, functioning as both a social event and a ritual aligned with Islamic beliefs. Traditionally, this ceremony is presided over by a *Maulvi*, *Peer*, or another religious figure, who suggests names based on Quranic references or other Islamic sources. These names are believed to carry

spiritual weight, with the expectation that they will positively influence the child's future. However, in contemporary times, parents increasingly exercise autonomy in selecting names, a shift that reflects modern sensibilities while still aligning with religious frameworks. Gujjar naming conventions are shaped by a fusion of linguistic, cultural, and religious influences. Male names are typically derived from Quranic principles, reflecting the strong Islamic identity of the community. Female names, while also grounded in Islamic tradition, tend to incorporate popular choices with meaningful connotations. A distinctive feature of Gujjar female names is the frequent use of the suffixes "*Bano*" or "*Jan*," which substitute for traditional surnames. In contrast, male names follow a clear genealogical pattern, whereby the child's name is followed by the father's name and then the clan name. For example, a typical male name structure is *child's name* > *father's name* > *clan name*, whereas for females, the structure is *child's name* > *Jan/Bano*. Although females do not adopt clan names directly, their lineage can still be inferred from their parentage.

In conjunction with the naming ceremony, the *Aqiqah*—a sacrificial offering made on behalf of the newborn—also takes place. According to Islamic tradition, this offering is performed on the seventh day after birth, symbolising the family's gratitude and seeking divine protection for the child. The sacrifice for a male child involves two sheep, while for a female child, one sheep is considered sufficient. This practice is based on the *hadith*: "Every child is held in pledge for his '*Aqiqah*', which should be slaughtered on his behalf on the seventh day, and he should be shaved and given his name" (Abu Dawood, 2838). The gender-based difference in the number of sheep is justified by the belief that male children are more vulnerable to satanic influence due to their broader societal roles and therefore require an additional sacrifice for protection (Al Balagah International, Vol.24, No. 01, pp. 33-35). Although the *Aqiqah* is ideally performed on the seventh day, there is flexibility in its observance. Families who cannot afford the sacrifice may delay the ritual without incurring any religious guilt, performing it when their financial situation permits. The type of livestock used for the sacrifice is also subject to religious guidelines: sheep, lambs, and goats are acceptable, while larger animals such as camels, cows, and buffaloes are not considered suitable (Sharh Muntaha al-Iraadaat, 1/614). During the fieldwork it was observed that very few Gujjar families were carrying forward the tradition of *Aqiqah* due to economic constraints. However, families with surplus livestock often uphold this tradition. In such cases, the family typically sacrifices a sheep, and the meat is distributed among the community through personal visits, reinforcing communal bonds and fulfilling religious obligations.

- *Naal kaera / khata naal* (Circumcision Ceremony)

Circumcision, the removal of the foreskin from the penis, is a significant rite of passage in the life of a Gujjar male child. Typically performed when the child is between the ages of three and four, the ceremony carries both cultural and religious importance within the Gujjar community. It is considered a crucial step in ensuring the child's physical and spiritual purity, with Islamic teachings highlighting its role in maintaining cleanliness. Circumcision prevents the accumulation of urine under the foreskin, which can lead to infections and impurities, making it a religious obligation for men (Al-Sharh al-Mumti, 1/133-134).

Traditionally, circumcision ceremonies are celebrated with considerable festivity. Relatives, neighbours, and friends are invited to participate, and the event becomes a symbol of familial cohesion and social solidarity. For the Gujjars, this ritual represents not just a physical procedure but a moment of communal bonding.

In the past, the circumcision was typically performed by a local barber using a traditional *khuer* (blade known). Both male and female relatives, including young girls, would witness the procedure, reflecting a communal acceptance of the event as a natural part of life. The ceremony could be observed by both women and men. The participation of women and the girl child was not observed in many other communities following Islam. In her work Zaman (2016) had spoken about when as a child she was not allowed to meet her cousin who had undergone circumcision, thus, bringing to light that women are not a part of the circumcision process.

In contemporary times, however, this traditional practice is slowly ebbing away. Instead of relying on a local barber, most Gujjar families now engage a trained medical professional, such as a compounder or pharmacist, to perform the circumcision, either at home or at a nearby hospital. Despite the change, the circumcision ceremony continues to hold deep cultural and religious meaning among the Gujjars. It remains a momentous occasion, blending Islamic tradition with communal celebration, and serving as a key marker in the life cycle of a Gujjar male child.

Marriage Ritual

Marriage, as a critical social institution, serves as a formalised union or legal contract that establishes kinship ties and facilitates the social, economic, and cultural organisation of society. Anthropologically, marriage helps regulate the sexual division of labour by delineating roles and responsibilities between men and women, ensuring the continuity of exchange in goods, services, and care necessary for a society's survival. It also provides a structural framework for the upbringing of children, addressing their material,

emotional, and educational needs over an extended period. Wedding ceremonies vary significantly based on cultural, ethnic, and social factors, yet they commonly include the exchange of vows, gifts, and rings, as well as a public proclamation of the marriage by an authority figure. Additionally, special wedding attire, music, poetry, prayers, and readings from scripture or literature are typical, followed by celebratory receptions.

Within the Gujjar community of the Kashmir Valley, marriage practices reflect the intersection of Islamic religious customs and the tribe's socio-cultural norms. Gujjars, who adhere to patrilineal descent, predominantly practice patrilocal marriage arrangements, where the bride relocates to the groom's residence after marriage. This pattern reinforces the patriarchal structure of the community, which places a significant emphasis on male lineage and inheritance.

Although Islam permits polygamous unions under specific conditions, such as the equitable treatment of multiple wives, this practice has significantly diminished within the Gujjar community. Economic constraints, particularly the limited availability of agricultural land and the financial costs associated with maintaining multiple households, have rendered polygamy less viable. As a result, monogamy is now the prevalent form of marriage, with polygamous unions becoming increasingly rare, and typically only undertaken in cases of infertility, conflict, or incompatibility between spouses. Gujjar marriage customs are also marked by a strong preference for endogamy, where marriages occur within the same family, clan, caste, or community. This practice reinforces social cohesion and continuity within the tribe, ensuring that familial and property ties remain intact. Consanguineous marriages, particularly preferential cousin marriages, are common, with both parallel cousin (marriage between children of two brothers) and cross-cousin (marriage between children of a brother and a sister) marriages frequently arranged. This tradition aligns with the Gujjars' tribal ethos, which places high value on maintaining alliances within the family and preserving social capital across generations. Although patrilocality remains the norm, there are instances of hypergamous and hypogamous marriages, where individuals marry into higher or lower caste groups. These marriages often occur within the broader framework of Gujjar society, which includes allied groups like the Bakarwals and Paharis. Such unions may be motivated by social mobility, economic advantages, or familial agreements, though they remain less common than endogamous marriages within the same caste or clan.

The rituals and traditions associated with the Gujjar marriage are outlined as follows:

- *Bhaado Sut`fu* (Fixing up the marriage)

The process of *Bhaado Sut`fu* marks the initial formalisation of a prospective marriage between two individuals within the Gujjar community. This is the very first step in the marriage process, where a meeting is arranged between the couple,

often facilitated by a middleman who is typically a trusted family member or community elder. This intermediary plays a crucial role in orchestrating the event, ensuring the smooth progression of the meeting and the subsequent steps towards engagement and marriage. The meeting itself is commonly held at the residence of a *mohalla* (neighbourhood) leader, a respected figure who oversees such important social interactions. The *Bhaado Sut`fu* process not only reflects the importance of mutual consent in marriage but also demonstrates the Gujjar community's emphasis on maintaining social propriety and family involvement in these life-altering decisions. It ensures that marriage, while often arranged by families, is ultimately based on the mutual acceptance and willingness of the individuals involved.

- *Mungnov* (Engagement)

The engagement ritual, known as *mungnov* among the Gujjars, marks the formal arrangement of marriage and serves as an important prelude to the actual wedding. This event involves the families of both the bride and groom, symbolising the beginning of an alliance between the two households. The ritual traditionally begins with the groom's family declaring their intent and agreement to the union. They are invited to the bride's home for a special gathering, which typically includes a meal featuring traditional Kashmiri cuisine known as *wazwan*. The *wazwan*, a hallmark of Kashmiri culture, consists of a variety of dishes, most of which are non-vegetarian, highlighting the hospitality and festivity of the occasion.

- *Sedan tfaliga* (Invitation)

The *Sedan Tfaliga* ceremony is an integral part of the Gujjar marriage process, symbolising the formal invitation to the wedding through personal visits rather than modern methods like printed invitation cards. This traditional custom underscores the importance of direct, face-to-face communication and the value of personal relationships within the community. The process begins with close relatives and neighbours being visited in their homes, where the hosts are personally invited to the wedding festivities. The personal touch of this invitation process is deeply rooted in the Gujjar cultural ethos, reflecting the community's emphasis on maintaining strong interpersonal bonds and reinforcing social ties. Each household that receives the invitation reciprocates by offering a small packet of almonds as a gesture of congratulations and good fortune. This act is considered auspicious and symbolises the household's blessings and well-wishes for the couple's upcoming marriage.

An additional component of this ritual involves the burning of *Peganum harmala* (locally known as *Isband*), a practice believed to ward off the evil eye and protect against negative influences. *Isband* is burned either in a traditional copper burner

or in a *kangdi* (a Kashmiri fire pot), filling the room with its fragrant smoke. This smoke is thought to purify the space and safeguard the couple and their families from any malevolent forces. The practice of burning *Isband* adds a layer of spiritual protection and invokes blessings from the divine for a harmonious and prosperous marriage. The invitation process is spread over an extended period, often lasting up to a month, allowing ample time for the groom's family to reach out to everyone they wish to invite. By personally visiting each household, the family strengthens community connections, honouring the collective spirit of Gujjar society. This extended and personalised approach to wedding invitations reflects not only cultural traditions but also the deep social cohesion that is characteristic of Gujjar life.

- *Laekdi kaeran tfaliga* (Collecting firewood for the feast)

The *Laekdi Kaeran Tfaliga* ceremony is a significant pre-wedding activity that reflects the communal spirit and collective effort within the Gujjar tribe. Friends, relatives, and neighbours come together to gather firewood from the nearby forests, which will be used to fuel the hearth during the communal cooking for the wedding feast. This practice is not only practical but also serves as a symbolic gesture of unity and support for the family of the bride or groom. This task is typically undertaken by a mixed group that includes women, young girls, and elder members of the family.

The *Laekdi kaeran tfaliga* is not just about gathering resources; it embodies the collective labour and mutual cooperation that are central to Gujjar social life. By involving multiple generations in this task, the ceremony reinforces intergenerational bonds and the shared responsibility of upholding cultural traditions. The act of gathering firewood thus becomes a meaningful ritual that reflects the communal values of the Gujjar tribe, where every individual, regardless of age or gender, plays a role in ensuring the success of the marriage celebration.

- *Mehndiraat* (The night of Henna)

The *Mehndiraat* is a joyful and culturally rich ceremony observed the night before the wedding, marking one of the most festive pre-wedding rituals among the Gujjar community. Henna (*Lawsonia inermis*), a natural dye with deep cultural and symbolic significance, is central to this event. The ceremony begins with the bride's close female relatives and friends gathering at her home, bringing along baskets filled with henna, dry fruits, and other symbolic offerings. The application of henna to the bride's hands and feet signifies not only beauty but also blessings for fertility, prosperity, and happiness in her married life.

It is not just the bride who is adorned with henna during *Mehndiraat*; the groom

too participates in this ceremony, albeit in a more symbolic manner. A small amount of henna is applied to his right little finger, often by a female relative. This is followed by tying a few currency notes around his finger, a symbolic act wishing him wealth and success in his married life. This part of the ritual underscores the gender roles within the ceremony, where the groom's involvement is brief and symbolic compared to the bride's elaborate adornment.

During the *Mehndiraat*, both the bride's and the groom's families host gatherings in their respective homes, filled with music and song. The singing of traditional *Gojri* songs, led by older women, forms an essential part of this event. These songs, often composed in poetic form, are celebratory, expressing joy, blessings, and admiration for the bride and groom. The lyrics, passed down orally through generations, encapsulate the emotions and hopes of the families for the soon-to-be-married couple. As I noted in my fieldwork diary, the songs are in the poetic *Gojri* dialect, making them difficult to summarise or translate directly. However, a few lyrics from one such song recorded during my research capture the vibrant energy of the occasion:

Uthyoo dasyoo mehndi rahan nachly

ra wad gayoo mehndi rangly

Hichi wad bali rangraar mehndi rangly

uthyoo dasyoo mehndi gudan nachly

The word by word translation of the song is not possible as the *Gojri* language is not in use among the Gujjars. However, from interactions with the elders the researcher could gather that the verses were speaking about the “about the night of *Mehendi* when all are being urged to paint their hands with the rich colour of henna, which symbolises blessings”

The celebration during *Mehndiraat* is often accompanied by traditional *Gojri* drumming, adding rhythm and depth to the songs. The night continues with laughter, singing, and the exchange of stories and blessings, creating a close-knit environment where familial and social ties are reinforced. The *Mehndiraat* is more than just a pre-wedding ritual; it is a communal event that brings together family and friends in celebration of cultural continuity. By applying henna and singing traditional songs, the community participates in a collective expression of joy, ensuring that the union of the bride and groom is not just a personal affair, but a communal one that reflects the values and social fabric of the Gujjar tribe.

- *Aab sereun* (Ceremonial bath)

The *Aab Sereun*, or ceremonial bath, marks the beginning of the wedding day for the bride and serves as a rite of purification and spiritual preparation. This bath is not merely a cleansing ritual; it holds deep symbolic meaning within the Gujjar

community, reflecting both physical and spiritual purity as the bride transitions into her new role as a wife. On the morning of the wedding, the bride is accompanied by her female relatives to a private area where the ritual bath is performed. The water used in the bath may be infused with fragrant herbs and flowers, symbolising freshness and vitality, while signifying the bride's readiness for a new chapter in life. This ritual aligns with Islamic principles of cleanliness, emphasising purity before important religious and social ceremonies. The bride, after taking this sacred bath, dons new clothes, often in bright colours that signify joy, fertility, and prosperity. During this time, female relatives and friends gather around the bride, creating a communal environment of support and celebration. They sing traditional *Gojri* folk songs, a key feature of this event, praising the bride and expressing wishes for her happiness, fertility, and long-lasting marriage. These folk songs are passed down through generations, and their poetic verses often recount the beauty of marriage, the responsibilities of the bride, and the hope for a harmonious future.

The *Aab Sereun* ceremony, though intimate and personal, reflects the broader social and religious values of the Gujjars. It symbolises the importance of purity, not just in the physical sense, but also in terms of spiritual readiness for the responsibilities of marriage. The collective participation of female relatives, the prayers, and the singing of folk songs further underline the communal nature of marriage, reinforcing the social ties that are central to Gujjar life.

- *keta`yi* (Hair trimming)

The *Keta`yi*, or hair trimming ceremony, is a festive and symbolic prelude to the groom's wedding day. This ritual holds cultural significance for the Gujjar community, as it marks the groom's preparation for entering married life, embodying notions of cleanliness, vitality, and transformation. On the day of the ceremony, the groom's hair is trimmed in the presence of close family members, friends, and relatives. This act of grooming is not only practical but also deeply symbolic, representing the groom's readiness to take on new responsibilities as a husband. Traditionally, when the barber trims the groom's hair, female relatives actively participate in the ceremony by singing *Gojri* songs, which celebrate the groom's transition into manhood and the upcoming marriage.

In addition to the singing, women throw almonds, coins, and candies over the groom. These items carry symbolic meanings: almonds represent abundance and good fortune, while the coins are a gesture of prosperity, and candies symbolise sweetness and happiness in the groom's future life. The scattering of these items also serves to ward off evil spirits and bring good luck, connecting the ceremony to broader Gujjar beliefs in safeguarding important life events from negative influences. The *Keta`yi* ceremony, like many other pre-wedding rituals, strengthens

the communal bonds that are central to Gujjar society. It brings together relatives and friends, who not only celebrate the groom but also reaffirm their support and shared joy. The blend of music, ritual, and community participation reflects the deep cultural heritage of the Gujjars, where such ceremonies serve as public affirmations of social unity and continuity.

- *Nikkah* (Marriage contract)

This is the formal wedding ceremony overseen by a *Maulvi* or scholar. It includes the recitation of the marriage sermon (*khutba-nikkah*) and the mutual consent of the bride and groom, along with the exchange of bride wealth, all witnessed by close family members. This has been mentioned in detail in the previous section.

In most Gujjar engagements, the *Nikkah* ceremony—a formal Islamic contract of marriage—also takes place on this day. The *Nikkah* is performed in an outdoor tent, away from the house, and is a central religious component of the engagement. A *Maulvi* (Islamic cleric) presides over the ceremony, delivering a sermon on the sanctity and responsibilities of marriage. The *Maulvi* emphasises the spiritual and moral dimensions of the marital bond, advising on the importance of patience and mutual understanding to navigate any social or familial issues that may arise after marriage. The actual *Nikkah* is conducted in the presence of witnesses from both families. The *Maulvi* asks for the consent (*qabool hai*) of the bride and groom, which is confirmed three times by their respective representatives (known as *Wali* and *Shahid*). Once the witnesses give their assent, the *Nikkah* is finalised, and the families formally congratulate each other. A written record of the event is made in a document called the *Nikkah Nama* or *Nikkah Kakud*, which serves as the official and religious proof of marriage and bride wealth between the bride and groom is paid.

The *Nikkah* ceremony is typically attended only by the men of the community. While the men participate in the religious rituals, the women remain at home, preparing traditional Kashmiri beverages like *Kahwa*, a spiced tea made by boiling water with saffron, cinnamon, cardamom, and other aromatic spices. *Kahwa* is served alongside *Culcha*, a traditional bakery item, as part of the celebrations. Once the *Nikkah* ceremony is completed, the *Maulvi* and male family members return to the house to partake in the *Kahwa* and *Culcha*, symbolising the conclusion of the engagement festivities. The day ends with the families and relatives congratulating each other and reaffirming their bonds, as the couple's journey toward marriage is officially set in motion. This engagement process not only formalises the union but also strengthens the relationships between extended family networks, maintaining the Gujjar emphasis on social cohesion and familial ties.

- *Ve`ah* (Wedding day)

The culmination of the wedding process in the Gujjar community is a grand and festive occasion, marked by elaborate rituals and traditions. The wedding day, much anticipated by both families, signifies the formal union of the bride and groom and is celebrated with great fervour. This event reflects not only the joining of two individuals but also the strengthening of familial and communal ties, which are pivotal in Gujjar society. The day is characterised by lavish feasting, gift-giving, and the symbolic departure of the bride to her new home.

The central feature of the day is the grand feast, known as *Wazwan*, a traditional Kashmiri banquet renowned for its extensive variety of dishes, primarily featuring meat-based cuisine. Guests arrive at the groom's or bride's home dressed in new clothes, carrying gifts for the couple, typically presented in colourful bags or containers. The gifts are usually symbolic items, ranging from kitchen utensils like pressure cookers, pans, and rice cookers to ornate but affordable jewellery for the bride. A unique practice involves the gifting of currency notes stapled onto decorative paper pendants, which are then hung around the groom's neck as a form of blessing and good fortune.

The feast is served in a large tent, typically set up outside the house to accommodate the large number of guests, often between 200 and 300 people. A team of traditional cooks, known as *Wazas*, prepares the food in an outdoor kitchen adjacent to the tent, ensuring that the dishes are served fresh and piping hot. The meal is served in a customary manner, with the women being served first, followed by the men. The primary dish, rice, is presented on a large shared plate, known as a *Trami*, from which four people eat together. This communal eating reflects the values of unity and equality in the Gujjar social fabric, where sharing food reinforces social bonds. Throughout the meal, the *Wazas* continue to serve multiple courses, pouring new varieties of meat dishes onto the plates every few minutes, heightening the sense of abundance and hospitality. It is common for guests to carry bags specifically provided by the host family to take home any extra portions of meat, which is then consumed in the following days. This custom, where guests are encouraged to take food home, reflects the importance of reciprocity and generosity within the community, as well as the practical need to make full use of the resources prepared for the event.

One significant aspect of the wedding day is the ritualistic practice of recording the gifts presented to the couple. A designated family member takes responsibility for meticulously documenting the gifts in a tradition known as *Das-Bosa*. Each guest or family offers their gift to the couple, and the details—such as the type of gift and the donor's family name—are carefully noted. This record-keeping serves not only as a token of gratitude but also as a reciprocal social obligation. In future events,

the recipient family will be expected to return a gift of similar or greater value to the donor, thus maintaining the social equilibrium and mutual support system among Gujjar kinship networks.

- *Ruksaet li`jo* (Bidding farewell)

The *Ruksaet Li`jo*, or bidding farewell ceremony, is a deeply emotional and culturally significant ritual in Gujjar weddings, symbolising the bride's final departure from her natal home as she transitions into her new life within her husband's family. This moment, marked by both joy and sorrow, encapsulates the culmination of the wedding festivities and highlights the strong emphasis placed on kinship, patrilocal residence, and familial bonds within the Gujjar community. Traditionally, the bride leaves her parents' house in a *doli*—a ceremonial palanquin—accompanied by close relatives, including a female chaperone from her family, known as *Dued Mo`je*. This chaperone, often a maternal figure such as an aunt or elder sister, stays with the bride in her new home for seven days. The presence of the *Dued Mo`je* serves as emotional support for the bride, helping her adjust to her new surroundings and navigate the social expectations within her husband's household.

Upon her arrival at the groom's house, the bride is greeted with great ceremony and festivity. Her new in-laws welcome her with Gojri folk songs, flowers, and a celebratory scattering of coins and sweets, symbolising prosperity, abundance, and goodwill. The act of welcoming the bride with songs and gifts reflects the community's emphasis on ensuring the bride feels valued and accepted as she enters a new phase of life. It also marks the beginning of her role within her husband's household, where she will contribute to the family's social and economic well-being. The *Ruksaet Li`jo* not only symbolises the bride's physical relocation but also represents her integration into the social fabric of her husband's family. It reinforces the importance of family alliances, as marriage in Gujjar society is not only the union of two individuals but also the strengthening of ties between two kinship groups.

- *Muu kholan* (Removing bride's veil)

The *Muu kholan* ceremony, or the unveiling of the bride's face, marks a significant ritual in Gujjar weddings as it symbolises the bride's formal acceptance into her husband's household. Upon her arrival at the groom's house, the bride's veil, which she wears throughout the journey from her natal home, is ceremonially removed by either her mother-in-law or sister-in-law. Traditional Gojri songs are sung by the women of the groom's family, celebrating the arrival of the bride and invoking blessings for a happy and prosperous married life. The singing adds a festive and welcoming atmosphere to the unveiling process. The actual act of removing the veil is highly symbolic. The mother-in-law or sister-in-law performs this gesture in the

presence of close female relatives, signifying the bride's introduction into the inner circle of the family. This ritual serves as a gesture of acceptance, where the bride, through the unveiling, is not only physically revealed but is also acknowledged as an integral part of the family's domestic and social structure. The moment also signifies the transition from her public identity as a veiled, unattached woman to her private identity as a wife within a patriarchal and patrilocal system. The unveiling is accompanied by the exchange of gifts between the bride and her new family. The bride, traditionally, is presented with symbolic items such as jewellery, clothes, or other household items by her mother-in-law or sister-in-law. These gifts serve multiple purposes: they are a sign of welcome and goodwill, and they also mark the beginning of the bride's role in managing the household and contributing to its economic and social well-being. The exchange of gifts during *Muu Kholan* highlights the importance of reciprocity in marital alliances within Gujjar society, reinforcing bonds between families through the sharing of material wealth and resources. The removal of the veil not only marks a significant point in the wedding rituals but also serves as an important moment in the bride's journey toward integrating into the social hierarchy of her new home. By performing this ceremony, the groom's family acknowledges the bride's new status and role, laying the foundation for her to begin contributing to family life.

In anthropological terms, the *Muu kholan* ceremony encapsulates several key elements of Gujjar social structure, including patrilocal residence, the importance of kinship ties, and the gendered nature of domestic roles. The unveiling is more than a simple act of removing the bride's veil—it is a public recognition of her incorporation into the patrilineal family unit and a reaffirmation of the family's role in sustaining broader social and cultural norms. The exchange of gifts further underscores the significance of social reciprocity, a key aspect of marriage in many traditional societies, where the union of a couple represents not only the coming together of two individuals but also the strengthening of ties between kinship groups.

- *Sa`ti mooh`* (The seven days)

The week following the wedding is celebrated with traditional customs, during which the bride is treated with special respect and care at her in-laws' home. These days are marked by festivities, social gatherings, and meals. On the seventh day, the bride's family visits, bringing gifts and blessings, marking a reunion and reinforcing the bonds between the two families. This day involves inviting the bride and groom to the bride's family home (*f`ir saal*), where gifts are exchanged, and the bride receives new clothes and accessories before returning to her husband's home.

Death Rituals

Funeral rites exhibit significant diversity across cultures and religious denominations. Serving as a commemorative event following a person's demise, funerary practices reflect the beliefs and traditions inherent within a society. These rituals typically involve a formal service, prayers, and specific ceremonies conducted in honour of the deceased. For instance, among the Muslim Gujjar community, burial is a customary practice, characterised by several key steps that would be explained below. These rituals are executed promptly following death, embodying the cultural and religious significance attributed to the transition from life to death within the Muslim Gujjar community.

- *Pani ti kaed`jo* (Bathing ritual)

In Gojri culture, the ritual cleansing of the deceased (*maet*) is an integral part of mortuary practices, deeply rooted in Islamic religious traditions. This funerary rite, known as *ghusl al-mayyit*, is conducted in accordance with the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and symbolises the purification of the deceased before burial. The ritual is usually performed soon after death and involves a structured process to ensure the sanctity and dignity of the body.

The body is carefully wrapped in a cloth to maintain modesty during the procedure, reflecting cultural norms of privacy and respect for the deceased. The washers, typically immediate family members of the same gender, carry out the ritual, though in some cases, designated members of the community may assist. Water is poured over the body in a specific sequence, signifying spiritual purification and the soul's preparation for the afterlife. This communal activity not only fulfils religious obligations but also reinforces kinship ties and collective responsibility within the community during times of bereavement.

- *Kaefan pe`nana* (Enshrouding the deceased)

After the ritual bath, the deceased is enshrouded in a plain white cloth known as *kaefan*, symbolising purity, dignity, and the return to simplicity in death. This practice aligns with Islamic mortuary customs, where modesty and humility are paramount. The cloth, usually made of cotton, adheres to the broader cultural values of simplicity, but variations in material may occur depending on regional customs and the availability of resources.

The *kaefan* consists of three pieces for men and five pieces for women, reflecting the gender-specific elements of the ritual. These shrouds are wrapped around the body in a prescribed manner, ensuring full coverage and preserving the deceased's privacy. The white colour, representing purity and spiritual cleansing, is a significant aspect of the ritual, embodying the transition from the physical world to the spiritual realm.

Once enshrouded, the deceased is placed in a coffin (*tabut*) and carried on a bier to the graveyard. This moment allows for a communal expression of grief and respect, with family, friends, and community members gathering to offer condolences. The shrouding ritual not only prepares the body for burial but also reinforces the collective cultural and religious obligations that accompany death, serving as a final act of care by the living for the deceased.

- *Ji`naz* (Funeral prayer)

The funeral prayer, or *ji`naz*, is a pivotal aspect of the Islamic death rites observed by the Gujjar community. It is performed in congregation, with the primary purpose of seeking forgiveness for the deceased and praying for their soul's peace. Unlike regular prayers, the *ji`naz* does not involve bowing (*ruku*) or prostration (*sujood*); instead, it features multiple *takbirs* (the declaration of "Allahu-Akbar") in a structure reminiscent of the Eid prayer. The prayer is usually held in a mosque or, at times, in open spaces near the graveyard, allowing the community to come together to offer their respects. Led by an *Imaam*, the congregation—comprising male relatives, friends, and community members—recite supplications behind him, asking for the deceased's forgiveness and for their shortcomings to be overlooked in the afterlife. Women are not a part of the funeral procession or the burial, in keeping with local and religious customs. Instead, they remain at home, engaging in prayer and reflection.

While female attendance at the gravesite is rare, it is not forbidden within the Gujjar tradition, though the Hanafi school of thought, followed by most in the community, recommends limiting women's visits to the graveyard. If women do visit, it is often a private or small-scale affair, taking place after the male-led funeral rites are concluded. These visits, though infrequent, are respected as part of the grieving process and underscore the emotional connection to the departed.

- *Dae`fen* (Burial ritual)

The burial ritual, or *daefen*, marks the final stage of the funeral process among the Gujjars. In keeping with Islamic tradition, the deceased is laid to rest in a grave oriented perpendicularly towards Mecca, signifying the spiritual importance of facing the *Qibla*. Without the use of a casket, the body is carefully placed on its right side, directly in contact with the earth, a practice that symbolises humility and the return to the ground from which all life originates. The simplicity of the burial is a key feature, with the grave typically left unadorned or minimally marked, reflecting the values of modesty and equality in death. It is common for graves to be devoid of elaborate headstones or decorations, emphasizing the transient nature of life. Family members and close relatives actively participate in the burial process,

reinforcing the communal bonds and shared responsibilities in mourning. As the body is lowered into the grave, prayers for forgiveness are recited, and selected verses from the Quran are chanted. The act of covering the body with soil is often carried out by family members, symbolizing the final act of care for the deceased.

The burial concludes with a collective supplication, asking for the mercy and forgiveness of Allah upon the soul of the departed, while the community prays for their peaceful transition to the afterlife.

- *Ta`ji`et* (Mourning period)

The mourning period, or *tajiet*, is a significant practice observed among the Gujjars following the burial of a loved one. This period typically lasts for three days, during which the bereaved family refrains from wearing ornate attire, symbolizing their grief and solemnity. The days are marked by increased devotion, with family members spending time in prayer and reflection, seeking solace in their faith. During *tajiet*, relatives, neighbours, and members of the community visit the grieving family to offer their condolences and support. It is customary for neighbours and extended kin to provide sustenance, ensuring that the bereaved are relieved of the burden of preparing meals during this emotionally heavy time. This practice strengthens social bonds and reinforces the communal nature of mourning in the Gujjar society.

For widows, Islamic tradition mandates an extended mourning period known as *iddah*, lasting four months and ten days. During this time, widows are required to observe additional restrictions, such as refraining from remarriage and limiting certain social interactions, including avoiding gatherings and celebrations. This period of seclusion is seen as both a time of reflection and a way to honour the memory of the deceased spouse.

Beyond the three-day mourning period, the community continues to support the bereaved family through prayers and regular visits. Special prayers are often recited on the fortieth day (*chehlum*) and on other key occasions, such as festivals, to commemorate the deceased and reinforce communal solidarity. These practices reflect the enduring sense of responsibility and empathy that characterises the Gujjar approach to death and mourning.

In Gujjar funerary customs, women are traditionally prohibited from accompanying the funeral procession to the graveyard, a practice deeply rooted in cultural and religious beliefs. During the burial, women remain in their homes, engaging in private mourning. However, after a few days, they are permitted to visit the graves of their family members. On such occasions, it is not uncommon for women to clear thorns and long bushes from the graves, symbolically tending to their

ancestors. Despite this allowance, women's visits to gravesites remain rare but socially accepted within the community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research paper has endeavoured to delve into the intricate tapestry of rituals and traditions within the Gujjar tribe of the Kashmir Valley. The ethnographic account unveiled the multifaceted significance of these rituals, shedding light on their historical evolution, contemporary relevance, and profound symbolism. From birth to death, and every significant life event in between, rituals serve as the bedrock of Gujjar culture, shaping social interactions, reinforcing communal bonds, and preserving religious identity.

The rituals surrounding marriage, death, and childbirth are not merely ceremonial practices; they embody deeper symbolic meanings that reflect the community's values, kinship ties, and social hierarchies. In Gujjar marriage rituals, for instance, the exchange of goods and ceremonial acts symbolise the transfer of responsibility and the binding of two families, a practice that can be viewed through Ortner's (1973) lens as a key symbol of social cohesion and alliance-building. The death rituals, including the standing funeral prayer (*Salat al-Janazah*) and the burial in designated family grave plots, symbolise the continuity of lineage and the enduring presence of ancestors, reinforcing the Gujjars' emphasis on familial bonds even in the afterlife. Childbirth rituals, including the naming ceremony and circumcision, also carry symbolic weight. As Ortner's (1973) framework suggests, these rites can be seen as markers of identity formation, where the individual is integrated into the social and spiritual fabric of the community. The names given, often with religious or cultural significance, symbolise not just the child's individuality but also their connection to the broader Gujjar heritage. Ortner's (1973) analysis highlights that these rituals, beyond their functional roles, serve as potent symbols of the Gujjar community's core values—family, continuity, and identity. By situating these practices within a symbolic framework, we gain a deeper anthropological insight into how the Gujjars use rituals to structure and interpret their social world.

The Gujjar tribe's adherence to customs and rituals underscores their profound commitment to tradition and community cohesion. These practices, deeply rooted in the Islamic faith (but not always because some of these rituals clearly contradict the Islamic practices, that means those types of rituals have been borrowed from other religions and cultures) and cultural heritage, not only enrich our understanding of the Gujjar tribe's cultural legacy but also offer insights into the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity in the socio-cultural landscape of the Kashmir Valley.

As we navigate the complexities of the Gujjar tribe's rituals and traditions, it becomes evident that these practices are more than mere observances—they are conduits through

which the Gujjar community expresses its collective identity, navigates life's transitions, and finds solace in shared beliefs. By unravelling the lifecycle rituals of the Gujjar tribe, we gain a deeper appreciation for the richness and resilience of their cultural heritage and a greater understanding of the intricate dynamics that shape tribal societies in the Kashmir Valley.

In essence, this exploration of Gujjar rituals and traditions serves as a testament to the enduring power of culture to bind communities together, impart meaning to life's milestones, and preserve the collective memory of generations past. As we look towards the future, it is imperative that we continue to honour and preserve these cultural treasures, recognising their intrinsic value in shaping the social fabric of our world.

Fieldwork revealed that the motives behind performing rituals among the Gujjars fall into two primary categories: protection and obligation (in the case of religious rituals) and the perpetuation of cultural norms (in the case of customs). In conversations with participants who had experienced the loss of young family members, their responses often revolved around concepts of fate and destiny. Phrases such as "*Muqadar*" (destiny) and "*Taqdeer*" (fate) were frequently mentioned, indicating a resignation to divine will. When questioned about the protective aspect of their rituals, respondents clarified that these practices were not intended to prevent death but to guard against evils in this life and the hereafter. The term "evils" is deeply rooted in their religious understanding and encompasses a range of adversities, which warrants a detailed discussion beyond the scope of this paper. The personal narratives of the Gujjars who had lost family members varied in depth and intensity of their feelings, highlighting the individual emotional impact of these rituals. This final reflection underscores the complex interplay between religious mandates and cultural practices in their daily lives, providing a nuanced understanding of how rituals function within their community.

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