



From Thrones To Herds: The Role Of Gaddi Tribes In The Formation Of Cultural And Literary Landscape In Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

It becomes a matter of great concern for a research aspirant to decide and begin with the title of a paper. The inventive consciousness and insightful outlook of a researcher compel them to explore those vistas which have not yet been touched by anyone else. The topic of this research itself reflects the upheavals, hardships, and fluctuations that an individual, an organization, a group of ethnic people, a state, a country, or even the entire world faces during its process of expansion and growth. The paper begins with the origin and evolution of the Gaddi tribe, primarily residing in the Bharmour region of Himachal Pradesh, as well as in other parts of the country and even abroad.

Keywords: Gaddi tribe; Cultural integration; Literary landscape; Folk literature; Himachal Pradesh; Literature and culture

1. Introduction

The term Gaddi has both etymological and literary meanings that are absolutely linked to the historical and cultural context of the community. The word Gaddi is derived from (Pahari) Himachali and the Sanskrit roots "Gadd" and "Gabdika," which mean a pious and prestigious seat, throne, or platform respectfully and elegantly offered to a competent personality. The word competent classifies the capabilities and exhilarating virtues of a person bearing moral and ethical conduct, behavior, and a sacrificial temperament for the well-being and betterment of his family, village, and community. In its etymological sense, "Gaddi" likely refers to a seat of authority or power, which aligns with the community's historical role as the custodians of the royal flocks and shepherds of the Chamba Kingdom. The connotation of Gaddi symbolizes the traditional responsibility of the "Head" to take care of the valuable sheep herds, and the role which the Head played over time brought him close to the ruling elite and lent him a status of respect within the local society. In the literary context, "Gaddi" has evolved to denote the tribal community traditionally associated with the Bharmour region in Himachal Pradesh. The Gaddi people are primarily known for their pastoral lifestyle

and transhumance (seasonal migration with their herds). In folklore and historical narratives, the term Gaddi also represents the nomadic shepherds and mountain dwellers who are deeply connected with the geographical and spiritual landscape of the region.

Additionally, Indian literature, particularly folk traditions, gives Gaddi a special place. In different literary works related to the Gaddi tribes, they are often portrayed as hardworking, resilient, and skilled in their craft of herding and animal husbandry. Their lives are depicted as closely intertwined with the rhythm of nature, and the seasonal migrations are often used as metaphors for transience and the cyclic nature of life. The introductory part of the present research paper encompasses the historical roots of the Gaddi tribes, who were the dwellers of the Himalayan mountain ranges of India, especially known for their cultural richness and diversity. The traditional and cultural diversity adds vibrant colours to the enchanting spirit of this hilly state, Himachal Pradesh. The historical complexity in the origin and evolution of the Gaddi tribes automatically raises the interest of scholars to find the roots of their origin and evolution from the early Hindus who took shelter in the western Himalayan mountain ranges to protect themselves from external invasions during the pre-Mughal period. The horrible possibilities of war and religious persecutions in the plains (particularly in Punjab) paved the way for Hindus to take shelter in the Himalayan mountain ranges, significantly throwing light on the migration of the Gaddi community from Central Asia, Gujarat, Rajasthan, western Punjab, and several other parts of the nation to the remote mountains. Once they left their native places, the migration brought them golden opportunities to rule, capture the land (kshetras), and establish monasteries (goshasthas) in the hilly terrain of the state. But the utmost purpose of the Gaddi community was to get rid of the bigotry practiced by the Mughal rulers. In search of peace, stability, environmental, cultural, religious, and social sustainability, harmony, and existence, they became the permanent inhabitants of specific regions of Himachal Pradesh. The identity of the Gaddi tribes begins with their semi-pastoral lifestyle, who became a tribe by some unconditional circumstance and not due to any particular natural calamity. They are notified as tribes only for the sake of their social and economic upliftment, which was hampered and obstructed due to the high magnitude of difficulties in their living conditions. The Gaddi community is generic and personified through various castes such as Brahmins, Rajputs, Thakurs, Khatris, and many more.

The original migration of the Gaddi tribes from various parts of the country to the hilly terrain was really a challenging task. The geographical and topographical settings of the hilly regions were not suitable for agriculture, horticulture, or other occupations and businesses, so they began the meticulous occupation of rearing sheep and goats in the surrounding green wild pastures. After opting for an occupation of prestige and dignity, the main challenge came in their path. It became very difficult for them to rear flocks during the winter season. Thus, heavy snowfall and the lack of adequate fodder for the herds in winter resulted in the majority of these people migrating with their flocks of sheep and goats to other districts of Himachal Pradesh such as Kangra, Mandi, Bilaspur, and Hamirpur. Some of the shepherds even migrated to other places such as Pathankot, Gurdaspur, and Hoshiarpur of Punjab state merely in search of green pastures for their flocks. As the occupation of rearing herds flourished with the passage of time, some Gaddis were even able to purchase land and engage in cultivation, which allowed them to become a permanent part of the communities to which they migrated. Apart from Himachal Pradesh and Punjab, this community can also be found in Uttarakhand state, especially in the Garhwal region, and in Jammu & Kashmir, especially in the Doda and Kathua districts. The beautiful thing is that they still preserve their cultural heritage and occupy a specific place in the good books of other native people of those particular regions for their devotion and dedication to their occupation even in harsh conditions. From their self-contented and semi-pastoral lifestyle, the community is striving to cope with the fast-changing realities of the present socio-economic environment.

2. Literature Review: Scholarly Perspectives on Gaddi Community Studies

Contemporary scholarship on the Gaddi people has evolved substantially across multiple disciplinary approaches, encompassing ecological, anthropological, and cultural-literary analyses. Bhasin's foundational work, *Himalayan Ecology, Transhumance and Social Organization: Gaddis of Himachal Pradesh* (1988), established the critical nexus between ecological adaptation and social organization among the Gaddis. The environmental constraints of the Himalayan terrain—particularly severe winter conditions and limited arable land—catalyzed the Gaddis' adoption of transhumance pastoralism, a seasonal migration pattern that became the defining feature of their economic and social life. More recently, Sharma and colleagues have documented the contemporary destabilization of these traditional patterns, noting that Gaddis are increasingly "moving away from transhumance" due to land-use restrictions, infrastructure development, and changing economic opportunities, representing a fundamental restructuring of Gaddi society with implications for cultural continuity and identity formation.

Gaddi society exhibits sophisticated institutional frameworks governing kinship, marriage, death rituals, and religious life. The practice of Ghar-Juantri—wherein male members perform domestic labor in the bride's household prior to marriage—represents an unconventional marriage institution that challenges monolithic conceptualizations of patriarchal societies. Death rituals reveal complex theological understandings, with the Shog ceremony conducted on the thirteenth day following death involving ritual sacrifice and collective mourning. The extended commemoration cycle encompasses Trimehni (three months), Chhemahini (six months), Vari (one year), and Chavarkhi (four years) rituals, reflecting a cosmology in which the living and deceased remain in perpetual relation. Lord Shiva occupies the supreme position in Gaddi theology, worshipped through distinctive liturgical practices including the Nuala ceremony—Involving nine ritualists with specialized roles—that originated historically as a vow made to Shiva for safe passage during transhumance migrations. Festival observance constitutes a primary mechanism through which Gaddi cultural identity is enacted, with celebrations encompassing pan-Hindu occasions and community-specific events such as Baishakhi- Basoa.

The Gaddi literary landscape exists predominantly in oral register, with the Gaddiyali dialect reflecting centuries of linguistic contact with Hindi, Gurmukhi-Punjabi, Sanskrit, Arabic, and Urdu influences. Folk narratives, termed Kathas, constitute the primary literary genre, transmitted orally and encoding moral-theological instruction. Scholars such as Narayan have demonstrated how Himalayan folk traditions encode gendered labor, kinship anxieties, and aesthetic sophistication, suggesting comparable literary richness within Gaddi oral culture. Contemporary Gaddis face unprecedented pressures from environmental regulation, land-use policy, and socio-economic transformation; Saini emphasizes that the Gaddi tribe is "struggling to preserve its identity" in an epoch of rapid institutional change. Wagner's ethnographic analysis demonstrates how Gaddis are strategically "making place" through adaptive cultural practices that maintain spiritual and social distinctiveness while incorporating new economic modalities. Singh's historical analysis situates Gaddis within broader Himalayan political economy, examining the "strategy of interdependence" through which pastoral communities negotiated relationships with state authority and peasant neighbors, illuminating strategic calculus underlying Gaddi cultural and economic persistence.

3. Thrones to Herds: A Great Unstoppable Journey Towards Unexplored Destination

The introduction of the research paper highlighted the etymological and literary meanings of "Gaddi" living in the groves and dense forests along with their herds, but the journey towards unexplored destinations starts from their hardships and incomparable, struggle-filled lives. The "throne" personifies several meanings and even identifies an element of socio-cultural, religious, and occupational/professional independence, where

the "Gaddi" performs their utmost duties with full confidence, without any sort of internal or external interference and dominance on the part of the elite society and authoritative class. Their keenness and adorability towards their occupation do not require certification from any superior class, and they never get bothered by the authoritative attitude of the so-called elite and civilized society.

The Gaddi tribes, on the basis of their financial strength, cultural integration, occupational stability, and religious harmony, have always led the life of a king, ascending to the throne. Gaddi or throne as a symbol of authority, power, and determinism also reflects the sense of responsibility which brings happiness, prosperity, courteousness, curiosity, self-respect, self-determination, and dignity to the lives of the whole community. The ambition to attain that high place depends on the number of flocks, which is a symbol of power and existence for the Gaddi tribes.

The occupation of herding highlights the dedication of the community towards their work. The synergy and integrity of the Gaddis with their herds provide a rich source of financial prosperity. The existence of a Gaddi without herds is a void. They always make seasonal migrations from one place to another as per the requirement of fodder and pasture for their cattle. The journey they begin starts from home and hearth and ends in unexplored areas where they encounter many terrible and dangerous challenges that threaten their lives. During their journeys, they have to face many difficulties on the road and must protect their herds from traffic and rash driving. During the night, whether on the way or at night halts, they encounter similar problems in the form of theft and attacks by wild animals. The Gaddis are so engaged in their occupation that they spend almost sleepless nights throughout their lives.

Although the Government of Himachal Pradesh has issued them permits for specific places to graze their herds, nowadays grazing fields are fewer, and most of the land is utilized for roads, connectivity, infrastructure, and agriculture. The forests are even reserved by the Forest Department, and all these factors are making their lives more harsh and complicated.

4. Cultural Fabric Knitted in Different Colours Making an Associative Linkage Within the Society

As far as the cultural landscape of the Gaddi community is concerned, they have a rich cultural heritage which is manifested in their folklore, costumes, jewellery, and unique lifestyle. The cultural diversity with other communities often represents the richness of the Gaddi culture. The inculcation of culture in every sphere of life promotes their belongingness and growth, as the folklore and folk songs signify the meaning of life. The various institutions of marriage, death, love, isolative alienation, separation, and happiness develop the thematic and practical aspects of the Gaddi tribes. The involvement of culture in the panoramic growth of the Gaddi community indicates various reasonable and logical parameters to make marriage a success. Most of the decisions regarding the fixing of marriages have been taken by the head of the family and his subordinates such as spouse, younger brother, sister, or the eldest son. There was a crystal-clear reflection of patriarchal society within the community, but practically the female members of the household also possessed a unique place in the societal setup.

The ancestors of the Gaddi community were men of good reason. They were very promising and trustworthy. During the time of fixing marriages with other people, they never testified to the destiny of the bride and bridegroom through horoscopes. The involvement of the Brahmin and Brahminical philosophy was negated, and their promises were kept always superior to all those kinds of formalities and malpractices involved in society. The Gaddi community never supported or nurtured evils prevalent in society such as the dowry system and domestic violence. The disparity of the sex ratio in the community allowed male members to perform various odd jobs in the house of the bride to make a marriage. The job performed by

the male in the household of the female before marriage was called Ghar-Juantri. The positive part of the discussion is that the practice of serving the bride was a really unique practice which differentiated the cultural aspects from the rest of social civilization.

In the last rites of the mortal, the Gaddi tribes uphold a primitive tradition which is somehow similar to the Hindu religion and culture but, to some extent, is different from the rest of the communities. On the last day of the rites of the mortal, all people of the same clan are served with meat. A sheep or goat has to be sacrificed in the household of the dead and the bereaved family by the people of the same tribe but of a different clan. This practice is called Shog and is observed on the thirteenth day after death. The Gaddi word Shog denotes the Hindi meaning of grief over the death of a person, which is denoted as shok, and they pay their tribute to the departed soul with grief and intolerable sorrow. They pay condolences to the family of the bereaved by expressing their emotions and feelings. After the observance of the Shog practice within the community, they become free to do all kinds of work, entertainments, celebrations of festivals, attending marriage ceremonies, and participating in religious, social, and cultural activities.

The death is again commemorated by observing specific days suggested by the Kul Purohit (the Brahmin of the family) from the same tribal community within the time span of three months, six months, one year, and four years. These times are known as Trimehni, Chhemahini, Vari (Death Anniversary), and Chavarkhi respectively.

Like the Hindu convention, the Gaddi tribes also perform the rite of immersion of the mortal remains of the dead body in the holy rivers such as the Ganga, Haridwar, Kurukshetra, and other religious places. Historical evidence and oral literature explore the reality that due to a lack of transportation facilities and money, the people used to keep those mortal remains on the wall of the house plastered with clay for a long time so that they might not get ruined. After several years, and with the advice of the Kul Purohit, they immersed those mortal remains in the pious river, the Ganga. During the immersion, they probably went barefoot and crossed long journeys. The community was stricken with a lack of resources and poverty, so a huge number of poor people from the community also immersed the mortal remains in the meeting point of the Ravi and Budhil (Kharamukh, Bharmour), which emerges from the feet of Lord Shiva, the Manimahesh. The relatives of the departed soul again brought water from the Ganga while returning from their journey and poured that water into the Dal Lake, known as Shiv Kund, situated in the holy pilgrimage Manimahesh on the special occasion of Radhaasthi or Krishnaasthi. There is a dire belief system within the Gaddi community that by performing such rites, the departed soul rests in peace and attains salvation under the altar of Lord Shiva. The last ritual for the commemoration of the predecessors is called Shradh, followed by the last day known as Lattha, in which they offer various delicious foods to all their dead ancestors.

As far as the celebration of festivals is concerned, the Gaddi community is acknowledged for their connectivity with festivals that are closely associated with culture and religion. Like the Hindu community, they also celebrate various festivals such as Lohri, Baishakhi (Basoa), Sair, Patroru, Diwali, etc. Each festival has its relevance in the integration of the community. Among all these festivals, Baishakhi/Basoa takes a special place, as it is connected with the emotion of siblings (brother and sister). During the celebration of this festival, the sister is invited from her in-laws to celebrate the festival by her brother. In the absence of it, the brother has to go to the in-laws of the sister to offer her all the edible items prepared and served during the festival. These festivals are knitted into the fabric of folklore and folk songs which appeal to the emotional attachment and belongingness of the community. Most of the festivals are linked with the occupation of the community, such as herding and agriculture.

The religious history of the Gaddi community also possesses panoramic significance. The people of this tribal ethnicity worship Lord Shiva and their local deities respectively. They believe that their local deities (Kul Devtas) are their forefathers and bear spiritual souls. These deities grant them positive energy in every difficult situation and protect them from bad omens and evils. The local deities are considered very powerful, and nobody can begin any festival, event, or programme without the permission and worship of the Kul Devta.

Lord Shiva is worshipped through a specific religious practice known as Nuala (involvement of nine people to furnish the task of worship). The Nuala has its historical relevance. It is said that when the Gaddi/shepherds migrated from Bharmour to the rest of Himachal Pradesh to graze their herds and cattle, they had to cross various tough tracks full of dangers. For the safe arrival and return from those places to their native villages, the Gaddi tribes promised Lord Shiva to worship in the form of Nuala.

In this religious practice, there is the involvement of nine persons who are considered as the nominative representatives of Lord Shiva. Among these nine persons, each has a specific role. Four persons are the singers and musicians. Their prime duty is to sing Shiv Stuti and the evolution of the universe with the mercy of Lord Shiva. In Gaddi etymology, they are called Bande. They sing religious songs with traditional musical instruments, especially Shiv Gaura Vivah, Ram Chandra Vivah, and hymns of local deities. Two persons are called Katwal and Batwal. Their prime function is to regulate the whole religious activity and to serve different offerings among the people assembled in the Nuala. One person is called Jogi/Yogi. His prime duty is to look after the Shiv Mala (garland) made of wool and flowers, as well as to protect the holy lamp throughout the night. That lamp is symbolic of the divine light produced by Lord Shiva. The eighth person is called Chela or the disciple (Gur) of Lord Shiva. He is personified as the real representative of Lord Shiva and blesses the gathering through the voice of Lord Shiva. The ninth one is the person of utmost importance. He is called Boti (cook). His prime duty is to prepare food for the gathering. These nine persons are nominated from within the community as per their capability and talent. A piece of saffron or multicoloured cloth is given to each of the nine as an identification mark; this piece of cloth is called Bandi.

The Nuala begins with the evocation of Lord Shiva to protect the common masses and ends symbolically with the beginning of dawn on the next day.

5. Literary Perspective and Influence of Folk Literature: A Paradigm of Sustainable Literary Growth in the Gaddi Community

The word literary denotes the written, verbal, oral, and non-verbal evidence of the evolution of any civilization which throws glittering light on the socio-economic, cultural, religious, and political features of the community. Literary tradition is always acknowledged as pragmatic evidence of the growth of society. The literary landscape of the Gaddi community plays a vital role in the growth of its rich heritage. The dialect used by the Gaddi community is called "Gaddiyali," which means a language spoken and utilized by a particular tribal community of Himachal Pradesh. In the literary study and exploration of the scope of the said dialect, it is found that it influenced adjoining different communities to a large extent.

The origin and evolution of the Gaddiyali dialect refer back to the historic growth of Hindi,

Gurmukhi/Punjabi, and Sanskrit. In addition to it, a small influence of some other languages such as Arabic and Urdu can be experienced in this dialect. Thus, the multilingual aspect of this dialect automatically signifies the associative nature of the Gaddi tribes with other communities.

As far as the literary landscape of the Gaddi community is concerned, there is no evidence of written literature available, but to some extent, a small glimpse of the Devanagari script may be seen in the oral literature. The literary landscape of the Gaddi tribes is ambiguous and obscure. It is very difficult to understand and anticipate the core originality of oral texts. Historical evidence depicts that the ancient phase of the Gaddi community was very vulnerable and challenging. There was a lack of education and socio-political and economic awareness. They were satisfied with their respective occupations and never bothered about their educational concerns.

But the reality lies beyond historical evidence. They were very calculative and practical. The old generation of this community were good mathematicians who, without any assistance of tools, could calculate huge amounts on their fingertips. They knew about months, years, and days based on calculation. Their psychological insight determined the activism and authentication of day, time, and place.

The literature available about this community is based on folklore and folk songs. In the folklore, they contributed very melodious and wonderful literature which can be treated as a source of research and inspiration for others. There was a specific time to impart and share folk tales in the households of the tribal community. The folk tales were usually told by the eldest person or predecessors to the young generation while coming back from their occupation and usually after having dinner.

These folklores were called "Kathas" and were transmitted from one generation to another. These folklores and tales were based on socio-political and religious themes. Most of the "Kathas" were based on natural justice in which the stories of devils and demons, ghosts and whores were told to people. These Kathas were short stories based on crystal clear meaning and seriousness. Some folklores such as Raja Bikramjeet, Raja Harishchandra, Luna, Bhagat Prahlad, Woodcutter and Princess, Raja Gopi Chand, Sharwan Beta, and Raja Jarasandh hold a special place in the literary landscape.

These oral stories need to be published and translated into different languages. The richness of Gaddi culture also encompasses their metaphysical approach. These stories are characterized by the moral values and etiquettes of the society. The incorporation of religious features multiplies their significance. Like folklores/folk tales, the folk songs also depict the real picture of the Gaddi community. The folk songs are composed by the tribal people and sung by themselves. In these songs, one can come to know about the meaning of life. These songs are melodious and enriched with the virtue of socio-cultural integration.

6. Conclusion

An attempt has been made to uplift the unique culture and literature of the Gaddi community. This research endeavors to depict many socio-cultural, religious, and literary aspects for analysis among research scholars for their feedback and promotion. The cultural heritage is an indication of the origin and evolution of the tribal community. The historical perspective of the community is explained and presented for validation and approval by the scholarly community. The fairs and festivals, rituals and rites, religious significance with special reference to Lord Shiva, and the literary landscape in the form of folk literature have been depicted comprehensively. The utmost need of the time is to explore the possibilities and probabilities to expand this research so that it may be recognized globally. There is a dire urgency to translate and rewrite all available Gaddi literature into regional languages and English so that the tribal community living in this area may be identified and recognized throughout the world. This initiation serves as a pathway for scholars to provide inspirational extension and exposure to this marginalized but culturally rich community.

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