Winding Ways and Hilly Tracts: Mapping the Identity and Cultural Patterns of the Gaddi Tribes of Himachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract
The words 'culture' and 'identity' have a deep emotional bond with one's homeland or territories. The modern society, like any other society in the world, is inseparable from its culture and identity, for its history is recorded and embedded in its culture. With increasing globalization, tribes around the world are being exploited and are almost at the verge of losing their identity. Gaddis, a Scheduled Tribe of Himachal Pradesh, are found mostly concentrated in Bharmauri of Chamba district, a place popularly known as 'Gaderon' meaning 'the home of the Gaddis'. They are semi-nomadic, semi-agricultural and a semi-pastoral tribe. They have a distinct culture, expressed through language, dress, food, marriage, song, and religious celebrations. Less than 6% of Gaddi households continue with traditional occupation of cattle-rearing. The Gaddis trace their origin to the plains from where they fled to the remote inaccessible hills to escape persecution at the hands of the Muslim invaders. But the Gaddis have their glorious history rooted in their indigenous culture. They believe in the joint extended family system, and their economy chiefly revolves around agriculture and pastoralism. In order to uphold their cultural heritage, they take pride in their culture and maintain cultural continuity from generation to generation. All these experiences which shaped contemporary life, as basic indigenous beliefs and values became the basis of their cultural identity today. This paper explores the unique cultural patterns which contributed to their identity, thus traces the sense of pride with which they created a culture of their own.

Key words: Identity, Culture, Patterns, Gaddi, Tribe, Mapping, Hilly

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, the notions of culture and identity have become a favourite topic for discussion. Questions that often engage our minds about the relationship between cultural and identity, the difference between culture and ethnic identity etc. are relevant. Are both the notions 'cultural identity' and 'culture which denotes one's identity' really the same or should they be conceptually distinguished? These are the questions which make us think that there are diverging views on the role of culture in defining one's identity and the uniqueness of identity in each cultural milieu (Dorais, 1994).

The term 'culture' was first used in this way by the English Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in his book, *Primitive Culture,* published in 1871. He said that culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1920). This collective complex whole may be roughly understood as the specific way a group of human beings perceive and define their own place in the world. As far as the Gaddis, a Scheduled Tribe of Himachal Pradesh are concerned, it gives them their identity (Dorais, 1994). The present paper will examine how the unique cultural patterns contributed to the identity of Gaddis and the sense of pride with which they created a culture of their own.

Culture and its counterpart, are significant concepts because they identify a basic set of ideas about the human social behaviour. It can be explained in the context of the social groups into which people are born and within which they live their lives. They represent a distinctive 'way of life' and encompass a range of ideas and meanings relating to roles, values and norms as well as institutional structures. It implies that culture is a collectively held set of attributes, which is dynamic and changing over time from one generation to the next. The word 'cultural' refers to people's attitudes and practices. The cultural identity is universal, because all people in the world are conscious of some sort of specificity that sets them apart from others. By contrast, cultural components which provide them an identity seems to be functional to divide people into categories based upon something other than gender, age or occupation. It provides them their unique identity (Tylor, 1920).

The culture of India is one of the oldest and unique. In India, there is amazing cultural diversity throughout the country. The South, North, and Northeast have their own unique cultural patterns and almost every state has established a culture of its own. Indian culture is a composite mixture of varying styles and influences. The survival of tribal communities has a vital stake on land and forest resources. For historical reasons, most of the tribal people inhabit in the forest and hilly regions of Himachal Pradesh. The social structure and day to day living of tribal people reflect their intimate relationship with land and forest surrounding their habitat. Right to use land in conformity with the decisions of community leader was in practice.

It is rather difficult to configure the exact meaning of the word 'gaddi'. Etymologically the term 'Gaddi' has a reference to shepherds but very few Gaddi are shepherds today. The term, as is known, refers to a territorial group of a special class of people wearing a characteristic and striking costume and forming an exogamous union of castes of Rajputs, Khatri, Rana and Thakur (Rose, 1911). Various theories

have been formulated and different explanations put forth about the root of the word 'gaddi'. The taxonomy, some say, is derived from the word 'gadar', a Hindi term for a shepherd or an ewe. Some anthropologists agree with the view commonly held among these people. Kailash is the throne (gadi) of the Lord Shiva. Therefore, the people who took refuge and settled in Brahmaur came to be called Gaddis. The generally accepted theory, however, is that this term has been evolved from the Sanskrit word 'gadar' meaning sheep. 'Gadharean' or 'Gadern', thus representing the sheep country, is the land of the 'gaddis' or Shivbhumi (Hutchinson &Vogel, 1933).

Bharmaruri Gadd is the language spoken within the community of Gaddis and Tankri is the script used by the old people. Other people spoke Hindi, whereas Devanagari is used as a script. The Gaddi man often wore the typical dress which consists of a chola and dora whereas the woman wore luanchiri. The women also wear gold earrings, which are also worn by men. Men wear white turban, which is a characteristic of the Gaddi dress. The community often followed non-vegetarian diet but they mostly take the meat of sheep, chicken and ghural. Families, who keep poultry, also take eggs. Their food consists of makki-ki-roti and occasionally wheat chapatti with mah and rongi (Pattanaik, 1992). Children take goat milk, whereas elders use milk in tea. Occasionally lassi is also taken. They also make moderate use of vegetables, including roots and tubers, and fruits. Mustard oil is mostly used for cooking. They also smoke tobacco in hukka, which forms a part of their daily sittings. They are devotees of Lord Shiva and have a strong faith in the shakti cult. They are skilled in weaving special types of mats (Pattanaik, 1992).

The Gaddi as such are divided into four intermarrying caste divisions such as Rajput, Thakur, Khatri and Rana and the Brahmin which makes up the upper caste division. The lower caste division is made of the Sipi and the Riara, Halli, Lohar and others. But intermarriage between the upper and lower castes is forbidden. If intermarriage happens the offspring takes the caste status of the father. However, things have begun to change and the feeling of community is weakening and caste is becoming more conservative.

The adaptation of new customs and conventions, specifically those relating to land ownership and inheritance, education and communications have all helped the non-Gaddi to become increasingly free from the economic domination of the Gaddi. There is provision to solve family disputes through traditional norms of the community following the traditional bhaichara Panchayat, which is headed by a set of people who act as the jury and who are elected by general mandate. The guilty are punished by social boycott, or fine in cash or kind, depending on the gravity of the crime. After independence there is change with the establishment of Gram Panchayat for social control, planning and implementing welfare and development activities (Rose, 1911).

The majority of the Gaddi Rajputs are landowners and they take agriculture as their primary means of livelihood. At the same time there are Gaddis who are pastorals and own large flocks of sheep and goats, as a subsidiary occupation. It gave them provision to use forest land which are Government owned. As time changed many of them are working as teachers and as unskilled labourers in public works Department and forest departments. But the traditional Gaddis mainly grow rice, wheat, maize and potato and make use of it for their livelihood.

The people live in villages and there is no urban life for Gadddis. There was clear demarcation between the low castes and the high castes as per the traditions. The villages are mostly small and built as per the hilly standard. As usual the small cluster of houses have been laid out without any proper design or order. The original settlers seems to have built their houses focusing the temple as the centre of their life. They often take the water sources, the fields and the pasture for the livestock for the selection of village site. Often the growth of the village is not planned or as per the well-wrought design. The walk ways and lanes are narrow and mostly paved with locally mined slabs of stones. (Rose, 1911).

The main occupation of the Gaddi community is sheep rearing and they are pastoral by profession. They take the herd for grazing from one district to another as per the change of climate and the nature of the landscape. Though mostly men take care of the household chores, women handle all household activities and also manage agriculture and livestock in the absence of male members. The children below 15 years assist their parents to take care of the house and the sheep in the field. At the same time they work as casual labourers for repair and maintenance of roads. While working as causal labourers in road maintenance they also receive wages in cash. It fetches these children cash in hand for the additional support of their families. Though the younger generation wants to be free of the bondage of cattle-rearing, Gaddi households continue with this traditional occupation. The newly married younger women do not want their husbands to herd sheep and goats and stay away from the family for long periods. It implies that the traditional occupation of the Gaddis is no more appreciated by the new generation (Jaglan & Thakur, 2006).

It has been observed that the Gaddis have migrated from hilltops to the lower hills of the Kangra districts. They migrate because of lack of proper education facilities for their children. At different levels of education the drop-out rate is gradually decreasing as per the change in the education facilities. It was noticed that boys and girls, particularly those from the upper caste Gaddi community, are not only educated and they have awareness about the socio-economic problems. Children are ready to travel a long distance to secure high school education. But lack of technical education and the training facilities reduces the chance of proper employment to the younger generation. At the same time education and employment have brought them in contact with the wider world and helped them to overcome the caste barriers and move to urban centers (William, 1961).

The popular festivals of Gaddis are Dholru, Lohri, Holi, Janmasthami, Baisakhi /Basoa, Diwali and Shivratri. They sing folk songs and dance to amuse the people on such occasions. Traditionally the women confined themselves to their houses but on occasions like these they take part in dance at public places. The folksongs and dances are common to each region. Folklores and folktales often extol the heroic deeds of their ancestors and the beauty of the womenfolk (Clyne & Jupp, 2011). They often follow different formations of circles as they dance to the tune of music and drums. It continues to further heights as per the beat of the drum till they get tired.

As far as their marriage customs are concerned there is no restriction on anyone marrying within the village provided ‘gotra’ exogamy is maintained. Restrictions exist in marrying into the families in which a sister or a daughter has been married.

Hypergamy and consanguineous marriages are considered taboo as per their customs. Traditionally the adults' marriages are done at the age of 16 to 25 for girls and boys respectively. Among the various modes of acquiring mates, 'byah' is the most common. The other forms are batta-satta, ghar-javantri, bariana and jhind-phunk. Monogamy is the accepted pattern and polygene is resorted to in exceptional cases. The usual symbol for a married woman is a nose ring and a choora, but this is not being strictly observed now. Giving of at least 60 silver coins as Reet or lag was common, but today it has been given way to voluntary dowry given in kind depending upon the economic status of the family (Clyne & Jupp, 2011).

The Gaddis followed joint-family tradition which made possible the father, mother, unmarried and married sons and daughters and their children living in the same house. There exists a rather cordial love relationship with each member in a family. They follow a patriarchal structure having the eldest male member as the head of the family. His decision on all family matters is final and commands great respect. Mostly it didn't pave way for familial conflicts or confrontations in the family. At the same time there is resentment over the checking of freedom of youngsters and on property matters (Roosens, 1989).

Though they followed a patriarchal centred family structure, they are aware of the importance of empowerment of women for the development of their society. Women have no right to inheritance as per the traditional laws. But her social position is regarded as equal to that of the husband. She is equal with her husband in agricultural work. She is also responsible for home keeping with the support of their husbands and takes care of the running of the family with necessary precaution even in the wintry season. She keeps herself involving with the work inside the house but educated women have the provision to work outside in order to support the family with her income. This does not mean that she keeps totally aloof from all social, religious and ritual activities. Women's involvement in democratic process has been often limited to casting votes in elections. But an active involvement of women in governance seems to be developing in the light of the increase in education to women.

Though the participation in governance and the increase in education brought certain change in women's position in the Gaddi family, they do not have any decision making powers in family matters. The social empowerment of Gaddi women was quite encouraging even to the level of spending money as a part of social and familial affairs, that too without the permission of the male members. They are capable of taking care of themselves and the health of their children.

Conclusion

India has the second largest number of tribal people in the world. Of India's 84 million tribal, around 12 per cent live in northeast region of the country. They are unevenly distributed over the region and there is a wide diversity among them. They practice unique traditions, retain social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in the other parts of the state. To preserve their culture and identity, these tribes were allowed to have institution in accordance with their traditional customary law and practices. In the case of Gaddis, though the surrounding communities change, they find themselves struggling to hold on to its culture in order to keep their identity.

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