

Religion, Beliefs and Customs of Gujar Tribe of Himachal Pradesh

Dr. Ajay Kumar¹ Seema Kumari²

¹assistant Professor Public Administration, Govt. College Dharamshala, Hp, India,

²assistant Professor English, Govt College Nagrota Bagwan, Hp, India.

Abstract

The Gujars of Himachal Pradesh religion fall in both Hindus and Muslim communities but majority of the Gujars are Muslims. Gujars are mostly permanent settlers of Chamba, Mandi, Bilaspur and Sirmaur and follow the religious rites of the area where they settled down. Himachali Muslim Gujars, converts from Hinduism, exhibit a few of the beliefs, rituals and customs which they undoubtedly have inherited from their earlier faith and cultural mosaic. There is no doubt that the Gujars started as Hindus. Today by far the majority of them are Mohammedans. Even this majority, down to the present times, remembers its gotras. The gotra is purely a Hindu concept and the gotras they profess make interesting reading. The Hindu Gujars mostly found in the Mandi and Bilaspur Districts, Poanta Tehsil of Sirmaur district and Kangra district, follow the Hindu religion. Himachali Muslim Gujars, converts from Hinduism, exhibit a few of the beliefs, rituals and customs which they undoubtedly have inherited from their earlier faith and cultural mosaic. One such belief amongst the nomadic Gujars is in the cult of Nag Devta, one of the oldest, possibly, in part at least, of aboriginal origin. It has a strong hold over their minds and the Nagini Devi of Nurpur (Kangra district) is universally venerated by the Gujars of Chamba and Kangra. To propitiate her, every family offers a bandha, usually of Rs. 1/25 every year, which collection is expended on the annual feast (bhandara). Whenever a buffalo or cow is bitten by snake, they promptly pray to the devi, offer a little money which they put in a lota full of water along with a few blades of drubh grass. The principal phases in the life of a Gujar are celebrated by a number of ceremonies and rituals. These commence from the time anterior to his birth, when the mother first indulges in the hope of an offspring and attend almost every important incident of his life until his soul is supposed to wing its flight to another world the most important relate to birth, marriage and death.

Keywords: Gujar, Hindu, Muslim, Nomadic, Chamba Religion, Beliefs And Customs Of Gujar Tribe Of Chamba District Of Himachal Pradesh

INTRODUCTION

The Gujars of Himachal Pradesh religion fall in both Hindus and Muslim communities but majority of the Gujars are Muslims. Gujars are mostly permanent settlers of Chamba, Mandi, Bilaspur and Sirmaur and follow the religious rites of the area where they settled down. The Muslim Gujars are mostly nomadic and follow Islam.¹

The majority of the Gujars of Himachal regions are Muslims who live a nomadic life. It is believed that in early times all Gujars were Hindus but they were apparently converted to Islam at various times. It

can be judged by this fact that presently Muslim Gujars remember their Gotras which is purely a Hindu concept. They are mostly Sunnis and follow all Islamic customs in their social and religious life.²

The Gujars are orthodox Muslims and mostly keep holy Quran in their Deras. Calendars depicting the photos of Macca and Madina are hanged on the walls of their Deras.³ As devote Muslims they offer Namaz five times a day but due to passage of time many are not careful about this practice. The morning Namaz is the first Namaz called Fajar. They offer second Namaz in the afternoon and is called Zohar. The third Namaz called Asar is offered before sunset. The fourth Namaz called Magrib is offered after sunset and fifth and final Namaz offered before going to bed and is called Isha. The aged Gujars follow this practice very strictly.⁴

Religion plays an important role in the life of Gujars. They believe in Jannat (Heaven) and Dozekh (Hell). They believe that a human being should act a moral based life as on dooms day Allah will reward or punish them according to their past deeds and will reward or punish them accordingly be sent to Jannat or Dozekh. They believe in Allah or Khuda,⁵ who is the creator of this world. They are also staunch believes in Pirs and religious leaders relating to Islam.

The Gujars celebrate Bakar-Id, Id-ul-Zuha and other festivals according to Islamic traditions. They observe Rozas (fasts) on these festivals and offer Namaz. The Maulvi performs the religious aspects and his advice is necessary in religious ceremonies. There is an interesting feature related to the religious beliefs of Muslim Gujars that animal sacrifice can only be performed by a person who is not in indebt. Moreover Islam does not permit an in indebted person to perform this ritual and as the Gujars are mostly indebted. Very few of them perform the ritual of animal sacrifice.⁶

Review of Literature

Sanjog Bhushan⁷ in his study made an attempt to have an idea of the history and customs of the five most dominant tribes of Himachal Pradesh - the Gaddis, Gujars, Kinners, Lahaulas and Pangwals. It is a study of the tribes inhabiting the inaccessible areas of the modern State of Himachal Pradesh. The main purpose of the study is to ascertain as to how these tribes lived in the remote region, what is their past history where from they migrated and to what extent they have improved their standard of living.

Gopal Singh and Kamal Manohar⁸ in their paper on social transformation of Gujar tribe of Himachal Pradesh points out the extent of socio-economic and political integration of Gujar tribe of Himachal Pradesh with the main stream of Indian Society.

S.S. Sashi⁹ in his book the author made an attempt to analyze and depict the tribal life of nomadic people, particularly the Gujars, the Bhotias, the Gaddis and other sheep or cattle rearing tribes. He also referred the nomadic tribes of the world, like Romas (Gypsies) of central Europe and USSR who have migrated from India long ago.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To document the indigenous governance structure of Gujar community/ tribe.
2. To interface between traditional and modern governance structures.
3. To document the Religion, Beliefs and Customs of Gujar Tribe

Methodology:

Both secondary as well as primary sources of data have been used. The primary data for the present study have been collected from 200 households on predesigned questionnaire following the personal interview technique. The information collected from the both sources, was suitably tabulated and

presented. The secondary as well as primary data collected and tabulated, has been calculated in terms of percentages. The nomadic/settled Gujars families have been covered under this study.

Area of the study:

Data on the Gujars was collected from three tehsils namely Chamba tehsil, Churah tehsil and Bhatiyat tehsil of Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh. The reasons for selecting these subdivisions are the Gujars numerical dominance, communicability and the retention of their original tradition because of the geographical isolation from the outer influences.

Sampling

For the purpose of data collection during the study a sample of 200 respondents from the Chamba tehsil, Churah tehsil and Bhatiyat tehsil of Chamba District were prepared. From Chamba tehsil, four Panchayats (Local Self Government), from Churah tehsil three Panchayats and from Bhatiyat tehsil one panchayat was selected for research purpose on purposive sampling basis. Thus, it was consisting of eight Panchayats from all the blocks. From each Panchayat/village, 25 sample household respondents were selected on random basis. Thus, total numbers of sample household from all tehsils were 200 respondents.

Fairs and Festivals

Gujars have no fairs of their own. It is, however, a matter of joy and pleasure for them to visit local fairs and heartily participate in them. Chamba Gujars do not lag behind any other Chambialy in joining the festivities connected with the famous Minjar fair. Like Sunni Muslim, the Gujars, in Himachal Pradesh observe and celebrate the festivals, which their faith ordains. Muharram, New Year and spring festivals, Ramzan, the Id-ul-fitr, the Baqar-Id, Id-Mala-du-Nabi and Id-ul-Zuha are the most solemnly observed. The festival of Bakar-Id is celebrated for two months and ten days after the Id. On the day of Id-ul-Zuha Gujars take bath and wear clean and fresh clothes. After that they perform 'Namaz' (prayer) which is followed by the ritual of animal sacrifice of either goats or sheep. Animal sacrifice can only be performed by Muslim Gujars who is not in debt. Moreover, Islam does not permit an indebted person to perform this ritual and as the Gujars are mostly in debt. Very few Gujars perform the ritual of animal sacrifice. Of course, all Gujars do celebrate Id-ul-Zuha with great enthusiasm.

Maulvi

Maulvi, their religious leader and preceptor, is not of their community, but lives and moves with Gujar families, with whom he attaches himself. His principal duty is to cater to their faith and perform all religious ceremonies and rituals. In addition he is the teacher of their children, whom he imparts elementary knowledge of Urdu and some times of Arabic to make them capable of learning Koran; his main emphasis is focused on traditional religious education. As he has no other means of livelihood, he is totally dependent on the Gujars to feed and clothe him. By way of income he receives usual fees for officiating at ceremonies connected with birth, marriage, death and the like. He is also the recipient of the alms they give on occasions of various festivals. His service as an astrologer and writer of charms and amulets to ward off evil spirits is always in demand. Superstitious by nature, the Gujars must consult him whenever they have to take important decision, be it the concern of family or business. His position in the community is of great prestige and his stranglehold on their social, religious, educational and family life is total, if

not absolute.

Mythology

‘The myth is a narrative of events, the socially sanctioned narratives of these events, the traces which they left behind as part of their super-natural powers.’¹⁰ A myth is the ‘dream thinking’ of the people just as the dream is the myth of an individual. Myths are those sacred tales with which men seek to invest their lives with cosmic grandeur. A myth frequently seeks to postulate a ‘time before time, a kind of sacred pre-history, a drowsy surrealistic world in which the coordinates of time and space are suspended and shifting, and nothing is impossible’ says I.M. Lewis, anthropologist. But myths do not end merely in the telling of a tale. On the contrary they have various sociological and psychological nuances and are, even considered as the soul stuff of social anthropology. Verrier Elwin defined it aptly when he said the myths make everything contemporary, for they give vitality to customs, institutions and obligations. In the institutional life of Gujars, myths have been observed to impress their social customs and practices. The Gujars of the Khatana clan believe that a child born out of wed-lock was left by his mother in a lonely jungle, where he was brought up by a peahen. A hunter, who one day killed the peahen took the child home and reared him as his own son. When Kasam, the name hunter gave him, grew up, he married a daughter of Raja Anand Pal. Khatanas claim descent from him, and as a tribute to the peahen, members of this clan hold the peacock in high esteem equal to what the cow is to Hindus. They even swear by peacock. Another legend associated with the same clan is that one day Mor and Mohang, sons of Raja Bhans, came back from hunting and ate food while sitting on a Khat. For this breach of social etiquette the Brahmans out casted them and they adopted Islam. Ever since, they have been nick-named Khatanas from the term Khat.¹¹

Likewise the Gujars of Lodhe clan claim to be genealogical descendants of Raja Luddar Singh of Jammu. The story¹² is that their ancestress was a beautiful Gujari, who, while going along with a water-pot on her head, stopped a run-away buffalo by pressing her foot on the rope tied to its neck, and did so without spilling even a drop of water. This feat of strength so pleased Raja Luddar Singh, who was looking on, that he immediately placed her in his zanana and changed his religion and name to Luddar Hussain. Thus a new gotra or family sprang up. As the progeny of a king the Lodhas claim superiority over other Gujar clans.

The Kasana Gujars, who claim their descent from Raja Kans, the maternal uncle of lord Krishna, swear by lightening and do not keep any bronze utensil in their households. This legend relates to the creation of the world. It is said that when God created earth, it was just a vast flat expanse of land, circular in shape like the bottom of a dish. Lest the oceans spill over, he placed mountains all around. As the mountains were nearer to the Sun, they used to get fiercely scorched. Responding to their entreaties to save them from the hellish fire, the God made them cooler than plains notwithstanding their proximity to the Sun.

Customs

It is generally asserted¹³ that the real (asli) or original Gujars are the 2-1/2 sections namely, Kasana, Gursi and the half tribe of Burgat, so called as descended from a slave mother. Next to these rank the Khatanas, who for a long period held sway in Gujrat, in which tract,

however, the 2-1/2 sections were the original settlers, the other sections having become affiliated to them in course of time, though not necessarily Gujar by origin.

The Gujurs are often said to have 84 clans and in Ludhiana their mirasis address them as 'chaurasi got da diwa, i.e., 'light of 84 clans' but other accounts assign them 101, 170 or even 388 sections. Of the numerous clans none has any definite superiority over the rest. Some Gujars who do not allow their women to go into the towns with milk regard themselves as superior to those who allow this practice and refuse their daughters in marriage.

The Gujars are divided into two endogamous religious groups: the Muslims and the Hindus. The Muslims have two sections, i.e., Bhatariye and Bhanariye, who normally do not intermarry. They are further segmented into exogamous gotras viz., Bhatti, Chandel, Chauhan, Banja, Lodha, Kasana, Bhensi, Chopra, Chechi, Khatana, Padha and many more, which no doubt, are their past Hindu clans.¹⁴ Though believing in the reality of blood ties on the patrilineal lines, they neither have any localized clans nor possess any tendency towards local exogamy or endogamy. In this sense, they can be called agamous as per G.P. Murdock's definition (The World Ethnographic Sample). The prohibition against clan endogamy, a special feature of clan custom, is missing these days mostly because of their Islamization. Among the Gujars of Himachal Pradesh marriage may be contracted among near relatives but the gotra is invariably taken into account, for their belief in gotra exogamy surpasses all religious injunctions.

Rites and Rituals

The principal phases in the life of a Gujar are celebrated by a number of ceremonies and rituals. These commence from the time anterior to his birth, when the mother first indulges in the hope of an offspring and attend almost every important incident of his life until his soul is supposed to wing its flight to another world the most important relate to birth, marriage and death.

Birth-Customs

Though the desire for male offspring does not influence the Gujars to the same extent as is the longing of Hindus, his neighbours, they still have an intense craving for a male heir. They therefore employ many devices to relieve barrenness in their women as also to ensure birth of a son rather than a daughter. When conception is announced, the expectant mother is subjected to various taboos and she takes various precautions to avoid attack of evil spirits. She is barred from entering a shed used at marriage or other festivities; from viewing the face of a dead person or visiting haunted places such as graveyard. She is not given anything to eat during eclipse. During pregnancy she avoids wearing new clothes or ornaments nor does she apply kajal to the eyes or hena to hands or feet. These things, the people believe, tempt the evil eye. Many of the taboos, it has been observed, have been borrowed from the Hindus.

It is a general custom that the first child should be born at the house of the mother's parents. A separate room or mostly a corner in the house is arranged, cleaned and made fit for the purpose. Fire is kept burning in order to defend the mother and the child from evil spirits. Many charms are used to aid delivery. In labour she is assisted by a mid-wife or old lady of the community. Immediately after delivery she is given some herbal concoction to induce expulsion of placenta;

which when cut with a pair of scissors or any other sharp instrument, is buried in the ground near the house. The drink commonly given to the mother for a fortnight or so is Achwani, so called because it is water boiled with ajwain (*Igusticum ajowan*). She is given sonihaura, made of dry ginger (sonth) fried in ghi along with sugar and dry fruits. Her diet mostly consists of rice boiled in milk with plenty of ghi added. For about a fortnight or even more the family would insist on her drinking good amount of milk two to three times a day. This to ensure that the child is not in want of mother's milk, she breast feeds the child for two to three years. The woman is looked after by the mid-wife for ten to fifteen days depending on the mother's situation. It is only when she is stronger in body that she takes over the care of the child and the house-hold chores. It would really be a crisis situation for the mother, the new-born and the family where the delivery to take place while the dera is on the move; perforce the mother would not be allowed much rest.

Soon after birth the mid-wife gives the baby ghutti, a cleansing medicine. The glad tidings are communicated to relatives and friends and gur and batashas are distributed to express joy and happiness. On the birth of the first child and more so of a son, the girls of the dera join and sing appropriate congratulatory songs. The mid-wife is given a present normally of one rupee and a shirt-piece. After the child is washed and swaddled, he is presented to the relatives and friends. The azan is whispered thrice in his right ear and the kalima in the left. This is generally done by the Maulvi, or by an elderly person.

The naming of the child is often done on the day of birth itself or on that day next week; generally the former is chosen. In almost all cases, the parents are agreed on the name in advance. It is their discretion or of the family elders; advice of Maulvi is not essential. The impurity of the mother lasts for 40 days. During this period she is not allowed to pray, to touch Koran, and enter a mosque or milk cows or buffaloes. These taboos originally lasted as long as any issue of blood continued. Cooking and other house-hold work, though, she takes up after the ritual bath on the seventh day.

Most of the Gujars combine birth sacrifice with the first shaving of the hair. The traditions allow aqqa to be performed at any time in the life time of a man or even after his death by his son. One or two goats or sheep are sacrificed in the name of God; an offering in the stead of son, life for life, blood for blood, head for head, bone for bone, hair for hair and skin for skin.¹⁵ It has been noticed that as Islam does not permit person in debt to perform this ritual, animal sacrifice among Ban-Gujars is a rare sight; most of the Gujars are most of the time in debt. The Gujar feast given to all the relations and the biradari usually consists of rice, mutton and tea, in addition to a few other preparations. Hair for the first time is cut on an auspicious day normally after the child is six months old either by the mother or the mid-wife. The ritualistic shaving accompanied by giving of alms may follow any time later.

No married Gujar would be seen without numerous ear and nose rings. By way of advance action, any time when a girl is of three to nine years old, a barber, or any woman or goldsmith would prick her ears and nose. Usually this is done with a sewing needle during the winter months when there is little risk of infection. Except for mustard oil no ointment or medicine is applied to hasten the healing process. Lest the holes heal completely thread rings are passed through the bores. By degrees many more holes are bored till she has 13 holes in the right and 12 in the left ear.

The rite of initiation, Bismillah, ‘pronouncing the name of God’, is observed when the son or the daughter has reached the age of four years, four months and four days. The first sentence of the Koran, considered to be of high value, is taught to the child. This is done by the child’s tutor or the Maulvi; to whom some presents are given.

Circumcision (khatna, sunnat), is performed upto the age of twelve or fourteen years though it is lawful to do it seven days after birth. Among Gujars, it is usually done soon after the boy is two years’ old on an auspicious day forecast by the Maulvi. The boy is seated on a new large earthen pot inverted or on a stool with a red handkerchief spread over it. Usually the boy is dosed with the electuary known as majun, an hour or so before the operation. Some friends hold the boy firmly and the barber performs the operation with a sharp razor. He applies a dressing of some ointment or warm ash of cow-dung and the wound heals in the course of a week or so. While the rite is going on, some rice and other gifts are laid close by, which are later given to the barber. Normally a boy would not be circumcised alone but always with another to make the number equal. They think it favourable if the boy during the operation makes water, as this clears the urethra. Care is taken of the severed foreskin lest a witch may work evil magic by means of it. After operation they guard the boy against contact with dogs or cats and from other defilements. After a week or so, when the wound has completely healed, the boy is given the ritual bath and given new clothes to wear. On this day all such relatives who have not already done so on the day of circumcision give the boy the customary present of some money, any amount between two to five rupees. In some families, a young girl from another family, applies hena to the boy and thus becomes her god-sister. With the reciting of Koran, the ceremony comes to an end. The feast given on this occasion mostly comprises of rice, milk and sugar. The barber is given some present, in cash or in kind.

Marriage Customs

Marriage is enjoined on every Musalaman and celibacy was condemned by the Prophet. Himachali Muslim Gujars form no exception. What, however, sets them apart is that they consider marriage a sacrosanct union and not a contract as the Musalamans at large hold. Polyandry is abhorrent and polygamy a rare phenomenon although Muslim personal law allows them as many as four wives at a time.¹⁶ They provide another distinguishing feature in that, they do not exhibit any special tendency towards clan endogamy, a special feature of clan custom. They also do not show any Particular preference for the first or second cousin unions, Islam permits marriage between cousins of all shades and degree. The prohibited degrees of marriage are determined on grounds of consanguinity, affinity an., fosterage. The proscription laid down by their religion is against marriage of persons more nearly related. The gotra exogamy is the additional test Himachali Gujars are seriously concerned about.

According to the Muslim Law, a boy should be married at puberty, a girl at the age of twelve. Among the Mohammedans of North India however the practice is to marry youths when eighteen and girls after fourteen Years of age. Gajars more or less adhere to it; application of law of averages shows that they many sons between the age of 16-18 and daughters When they are 15-17 Years old. Isolated cases of early marriage are exception to the rule. Their morality is highly commendable; they are remarkably free from any pre-marital relationship.

Family Planning in Gujar families is an Unknown practice. They are reluctant to own it for the

simple reason that it has no religious sanction. In fact their religious preceptors frown upon it and often declare it un-Islamic in concept. Moreover every family needs more Working hands. They, however, do follow the traditional taboos or proscriptions laid for the couples.

Forms of Marriage

Marriage by dower: Marriage is usually by dower or settlement (mahr) which is ‘not the exchange or consideration given by the man to the woman for entering into the contract, but imposed by law on the husband as a token of respect for its subject, the woman’. It is the most respectable form of marriage, arranged with the consent of the parties.

Marriage by purchase: Marriage by purchase, however, is more common among the Gujars. The father of the bridegroom pays the price to the father of the bride. It may range between 2,500 to 10,000 rupees. The biradari disapproves it and has taken steps to eliminate what they consider an evil practice; the crusade seems to be gaining acceptability as, of late, there has ‘been substantial decline in the amount of bride price. Indebtedness of the family and lack of harmony between the partners are its two obvious ill-effects.

Marriage by exchange: Popularly called sata-bata (barter), a boy gets a wife in exchange for a girl married to the brother of the wife. Real or a cousin sister is usually given in exchange. Unilateral marriages are the general rule; multi-lateral connexions too are fairly common. For example if boy A is married to B’s sister, B in exchange, receives in wedlock a sister of A: again, A marries a sister of B, who marries a sister of C, who, in turn, becomes the husband of a sister of A. This system is widely prevalent and, in totality, it accounts for more marriages than by all other methods combined. Sadly it often results in wide age difference between the two. Moreover because of its dominant prevalence many a poor young men remain un-married because of inability to offer a sister in exchange or raise the bride money.

Marriage by Service: It is a typical type of marriage in vogue in the community. In order to earn the hand of a girl, a boy, of times of a poorer family, serves the prospective in-laws for a number of years - 5 to 10 years - though the common term is 7 years. During this period the would-be-bridegroom stays with the in-laws and works whole-time as an unpaid domestic worker. But if he works seasonally or on part-time basis, the period of service is extended. After marriage, however, he is not bound to serve the in-laws or stay at their place.

Marriage by Ghar-Jawantru: This is an interesting marriage institution in vogue amongst the Gujars. With the passage of time its incidence is on the decline. Mostly a family which has a large number of daughters but no son invites the boy to work and live in the house. He is adopted by the parents of the girl and inherits the estate on the death of his father-in-law. There have also been cases when a father rich enough to part with a part of his herd, has found a life partner for one of his daughters without formally adopting him.

Marriage by Elopement: Elopement, which is generally frowned upon by the community and casts social stigma on the woman, is a feature not unknown to the tribe. It eventually ends in marriage, of course, with the consent of the couple and approval of the biradari, which is accorded only after the offending Youngman, has adequately compensated the father of the bride, or the former husband. The amount decreed by the panchayat varies according to the economic position and social status of the parties. In this type of marriage the woman forfeits her claim to the dowry or the mehr of her earlier marriage.

Marriage by Capture: Marriage by capture is a marriage by the use of deception and force.¹⁷ But in Gujar society the term is rather loosely applied to those cases when a real or pretended opposition is made by the friends of the bride when the bridegroom comes to fetch her home. The custom seems to be based upon the belief that a mock fight is a means of repelling evil spirits. Instance of this practice is found among resident Gujars of Chamba, where marriage is a virtual test of valour. Before gaining entry into the bride's village, the groom's marriage party, which comes fore-prepared armed with muzzle-loading guns and sharp shooters, is asked to shoot the target (taman) put up at the top of a tall tree, and then to lift a mugdar, an enormous club. It is probably a relic of the age-old tradition aimed at ensuring that the bridegroom had the will and the might to protect the bride under all circumstances.

Marriage Ceremonies

A marriage is a set of ceremonies conducted at the respective homes of the bride and the groom. Betrothal or engagement is the ceremony which eventually leads to solemnization of marriage. Gujars believe in early betrothal; 5-7 years old sons are often betrothed to girls of 2-4 years in age. 'In the hills it is the father of the boy that sends an envoy to search for a bride for his son' says Lyall in the Kangra District Land Revenue Settlement Report. Gujars form no exception to this rule. The negotiations are invariably initiated by the parents of the boy. To select a suitable match is not difficult as among the Hindus. The bride-to-be is most of the time under the very nose of the family, one among many cousin sisters or daughters of near relations. A beautiful, obedient, modest, submissive and an industrious girl, well-versed in household chores undoubtedly is considered an asset. After the family connections, pedigree, gotra and customs are found to match, the boy's parents take steps to ascertain informally the willingness of the girl's parents to the union. Both parties indicating their consent, the actual ritual is observed ceremoniously. A few elders visit the girl's house to seek formal consent of her parents and to fix a day for the ceremony, which is held at the bride's place and to which the elders of the community are invited. On the day fixed for the purpose the boy's father accompanied by three elderly relations pays the visit carrying with him certain article of dress, one or two ornaments for the girl and some quantity of gur, shakar and ghi. In the presence of the assembly, the boy's father formally asks the girl's father the hand of his daughter for his son and enquires whether the union (rishta) is acceptable to him. The father of the girl then replies: 'I assent' or 'I accept this rishta'. Sometimes, the question and the answer are repeated three times. Prayer of good will is then recited and is followed with the distribution of gur and shakar and the community feast. Shagun is exchanged by the parties (Rs. 11 to the girl and Rs. 1 to the boy). The date of marriage as also haq-i-mahr is decided on that occasion. Back at his home, the boy's father invites his kith and kin (nata) to a feast in order to apprise them of the engagement and to seek the customary approval. Before they disperse, each one of them is made a present of cash generally of Rs. 1. They are the ones who then extend invitation to other relatives to join the marriage ceremony.

Marriage/Nikah: Marriage or Nikah is usually solemnized four to eight years after the betrothal. The various ceremonies connected with it start with mehndi or hennabandi; both the boy and the girl are anointed with henna (*Lawsonia Alba*). With this is usually combined the rubbing with haldi or turmeric. The application of henna, saffron and turmeric seems to be, partly a form of initiation, partly protective and stimulating or fertilizing. It is a general

custom, perhaps borrowed from the Hindus that the condiments used in the anointing are exchanged between the bride and the bridegroom, a magical device to promote the union of the pair. The girl's hands and the feet are stained with henna, her lips with walnut bark, her cheeks rubbed with rouge and her eyes painted with kajal (lamp-black). Her hair are washed, oiled with fresh butter and woven into beautiful plaits of the braid. The groom, at his place, is shaved and given the ritual bath. While these rites are being performed, the young girls and ladies sing appropriate marriage songs to the accompaniment of musical instruments and clapping of hands. After the ritual bath both are decked in their wedding dress of pink or yellow colour; the groom by the maulvi, who ties the sehra (chaplet) also. Of a Gujar groom a stick with a brass handle is an essential part of his dress.

The general name of the marriage service is nikah; and no marriage, of whatever form, is considered lawful without this service. According to the Koran and the Traditions marriage depends on three facts: the assent of the parties, the evidence of two witnesses and the marriage settlement. If any of these are wanting, the marriage is considered void. As the auspicious hour approaches, the Maulvi, appoints two men of full age as witnesses (vakil) on the part of the bridegroom; asks them to go to the bride's relations and ask for permission for the nikah as also to ascertain the amount of mehr or marriage settlement. A vakil or an agent of the bride then comes forward to negotiate. At this point there is some mock haggling. According to the Law, the mehr consists of two parts: muajjal, demandable on entering into the contract and muwajjal; which is payable on dissolution of the contract. The former though not claimed at marriage acts as a guarantee of good conduct of the bridegroom, and prevents rash divorce. The mehr includes pieces of jewellery and any other moveable or immovable property. Amongst Gujars one or more buffaloes or cows besides cash and jewellery are generally pledged as settlement.

The mother-in-law receives the new bride at the door of her home, places a pot full of milk on her head and details what she has received as mehr. The return of the barat is followed by a big feast to the kith and kin and neighbours. Whosoever comes to the feast gives one or two rupees to the bride. By way of bartan married sisters of the groom give her as much as one hundred rupees, and in return each one receives a buffalo as tamol. This marks the culmination of main festivities as also the formal acceptance of the bride into the family fold. If minor, the bride would go back to her parents and return for consummation of marriage only after she has come of age. Her dowry¹⁸ (daz) usually consists of a couple of ornaments, one or two complete sets of clothes, a light bedding and about half-a-dozen cooking utensils. Some quantity of rice and sugar tied in a piece of coloured cloth is the traditional dowry. In addition a rich father may give her one or two buffaloes. To the groom his in-laws give nothing more than a shirt, a pair of trousers, a jacket and a turban; no ornaments or any other item of value is presented.

Widow Re-marriage

Among Gujars both junior and senior levitate is in vogue. In essence it is identical with the Jewish levitate. On the death of a man, his younger brother has first claim to marry the widow, failing him, his elder brother. The marriage, however, cannot be performed without the widow's consent. The custom has the double advantage of perpetuating the deceased's name; is economical and saves the family property from division. A Gujar widow with two or more living children normally does not enter into a second wedlock and prefers to retain her rights and to look after

and bring up her children. A widow marrying out of family loses all her rights with the sole exception to her dowry. According to the Koran a period of probation (iddat) must be observed by a divorced wife or a widow before marrying again—three months after divorce and four months and ten days after death of her husband. This form of marriage is performed very simply without any fanfare. The husband throws a wrap (chadar) over woman's head and puts bangles on her arms in the presence of the male and female members of his brotherhood.

Divorce

According to the Muslim personal law there are three forms of divorce: revocable within three menstrual periods, the husband saying only once to his wife, 'I have divorced you;' irrevocable unless a second marriage between the parties is performed, the husband repeating the same words twice; and absolute (talaq-i-mutlaq), with three similar repetitions. In any event, a divorce to be valid must be granted by a husband willingly, in full senses and of his free will. In the Gujar community it is the absolute form, which is commonly practiced. Usually a man would divorce his wife if she be barren, mentally ill or physically incapacitated or is suspected of extra-marital relationship. A wife may seek it on grounds of incompatibility and the like or if she has eloped with or intends to marry another man.

Death Customs

When the approach of death is imminent, the Maulvi or in his absence a learned reader of the Koran, recites in a loud voice the Yasin chapter of the Koran. The moment the spirit has fled, the mouth is shut; the eyes are closed and the two great toes are fastened together with a thin strip of cloth. If death occurs late in the night, the shrouding and the burial is done early next morning. The popular belief is that if a good man, he be buried quickly so that he reaches the paradise that sooner, and if a bad man, he should be buried speedily lest his unhappy lot casts a shadow over others. Before shrouding, the corpse is given a bath by someone from amongst the relatives or friends; the parents, wife or husband do not do this duty. The shroud (kafan) consists of three pieces of cloth for a man, five for a woman. The biggest or the chief cloth is called the shroud. A shawl or some such covering is thrown over the upper sheet. A Koran is placed at the head of the bier and the body is then ready for interment. The corpse is carefully laid on the shroud cloths, which are invariably white. It is, however, permissible to spread a coloured cloth over the bier (janaza or tabut) or the coffin (sandug), a square wooden box the length of the corpse, generally manufactured for a haji. With the recital of fatiha with Qul texts, the body is placed on a bed or bier, or if the family could afford it, in a coffin. Two friends or relatives carry the bier on their shoulders with few others touching it with their hands all the while repeating the creed. Others follow on foot, which is considered a meritorious act. The funeral procession moves at a rapid pace. On arrival at the cemetery the bier is laid down and the service is recited. The service consists of the Takbir, the supplication and the prayer for forgiveness. After the service all persons except for relatives and close friends are free to depart. The fatiha for the dead is then recited before the bier is raised and taken to the grave-side and body is laid to rest in the pit with head to the north, feet to the south and face towards Mecca. Each person present takes up a little earth and reciting mentally the appropriate Koranic verses, places it on the corpse. The grave is then filled, leveled and a headstone placed. The grave,

which is dug before hand, is large enough to take in the body and four to five feet deep. Sometimes a side chamber (lahd) on the east side of the grave is made to receive the corpse. After the burial fatiha is recited in the name of the dead and then repeated in the joint names of all the dead buried in the cemetery when about 40 paces away from the grave. Those last few who accompany the chief mourner back home are generally offered something to drink or eat. It is decreed that the relatives should not weep over-much or go without food; nor is sijda (prostration or bowing of head) to the corpse permissible. The women do not join the funeral party nor wail or beat their breasts in mourning.

Among the Gujars the rites known as tija, viz., visit to and the flower offering at the grave called ziyarat is not performed. This they observe on the seventh day and call it sata. On the morning of this day the grave is visited and flowers are placed on it. There is recitation from the Koran and alms are given to the poor and the faqirs. In the evening a feast is hosted and those invited come along with some grains, ghi for the family and also give some money to the heir or the widow. She also receives a few pieces of utensils from the very close relations. Fatiha is recited before the food is partaken, a part of which is distributed among the poor. All these days recitation from the Koran continues and some people are known to light every evening a lamp at the grave.

On the morning of the fortieth day, ziyarat is made to the grave and friends and relatives are given a feast. This day a goat is slaughtered and meat is served for the first time after the death. Among Gujars of Chamba, ladoos made of maize Ata is a delicacy served with rice and meat, the latter two, a common menu everywhere else. With the chaliya the mourning for the departed soul comes to an end; though for three subsequent years on the day of death, alms are given and prayers said in the name of the deceased.

Regarding utilization of services of a Maulvi in these ceremonies, a definite attitudinal change has, of late, been noticed. It is remarkable to note that failure to utilize the services of Maulvi has been attributed solely to economic reasons. The trend shows that for reason of poverty, the Gujars are drifting away from their socio-religious mores. It also portends that as the time passes this tendency is likely to spread at a wider scale, and not always for want of money.

Table 7.1 Opinion of respondents on the utilization of the services of the ‘Maulvi’ on different occasions

Sr. no.	Particulars	response	Respondents	Percentage
1	At Birth	Yes	144	72.00
		No	26	30.00
		No response	30	15.00
Total			200	100.00
2	At Circumcision	Yes	180	90.00
		No	20	10.00
		No response	00	--
Total			200	100.00
3	At engagement or marriage	Yes	194	97.00
		No	06	03.00
		No response	00	--

Total			200	100.00
4	At death	Yes	200	100.00
		No	00	--
		No response	00	--
Total			200	100.00

Almost all the respondents responded that on the death rituals they do utilize the services of a ‘Maulvi’. Whereas 194 (97.00 percent) avail the services of a ‘Maulvi’ at the time of engagement or marriage and 180 (90.00 percent) at the time of circumcision ceremony. It is clear from the above table that majority of the sample respondents were of the opinion that on the various rituals and occasions they utilize the services of a ‘Maulvi’. It is remarkable to note that, when the respondents, who do not avail the services of a ‘Maulvi’ at the birth, circumcision and engagement/marriage ceremonies, were put a quarry that what are the reasons behind their different attitudes, they responded that these days due to high economic pressure and economic problems, they have started performing these rituals without the help of the ‘Maulvi’. This trend shows that due to economic problems Gujars are drifting away from their socio-religious customs. It also shows that though the number of these respondents is very small but the trend has been set by them which may further influence the other members of the Gujar tribe.

Culture plays a key role in building up the society and further strengthening its capacity and capability. But on the other side, sometimes it also becomes a hurdle in the way of development. That is the situation here, which demands to be given a wider thought. Gujar community is in the grip of age-old culture, which affects the community in many ways. Many of the traditional social evils are prevalent among them. Many among the youth and awakened people from the community wish to get out of it and some of them have even initiated the process. But the Government’s efforts in this concern are yet to come out, the effect of which may give a pace and power to any law and rule.

Reference

1. H.A. Rose, A Glossary of Tribes and Castes of the North West Frontiers Provinces and the protected territories of the North West Frontier Province, Lahore, 1919, p. 310.
2. W. Crooke, The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Province and Oudh, Vol. II, Calcutta, 1896, p. 449.
3. Census of India, 1961, Vol. XX, Part-IV, No. 27, Village Survey Monograph of Maingal, A Village in Chamba District of Himachal Pradesh, p. 9.
4. This practice is not followed by young Gujars and even some young person’s do not offer Namaz even once.
5. The people always remember the name of Allah before taking their meals.
6. Himachal Pradesh District Gazetteer, Sirmaur, Aligarh, 1969, p. 84
7. Census of India, 1961, Vol. XX, Part-IV, No. 27, Village Survey Monograph of Maingal, A Village in Chamba District of Himachal Pradesh, p. 9.
8. Census of India, 1961, opcit., p. 9.
9. W. Crooke, opcit., p. 449.
10. Malinowski, B., Argonauts of the Western Pacific (cited by Nag D.S. in Tribal Economy), Delhi, 1958.

11. Rose, H.A., A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab & North-West Frontier Province, Vol. III; 1883 Reprint, New Delhi, 1982.
12. Bingley, A.H., History, Caste and Culture of Jats and Gujars; 1899, Reprint New Delhi, 1978.
13. Rose, H.A., A Glossary of the Tribes & Castes, op cit.
14. Singh, K.S. (Ed.), People of India: Himachal Pradesh, Vol. XXII; New Delhi, 1996.
15. Crooke, William, Islam in India, op cit.
16. Musalmans are allowed by the Koran and the Traditions to have four wives. 'One quarrels with you, two are sure to involve you in their quarrels; when you have three factions are formed against her you love best; but four find society and occupation among themselves, leaving the husband in peace.' (Crooke William: Islam in India).
17. Handa O.C., 'Where marriage is a test of valour' The Tribune, 14th Jan, 1968. Also see. Singh, R.C. (Ed), Maingal: a Village Survey, Census of India, 1961, Vol. XX, Part VI No. 27, New Delhi, 1964.
18. The dowry remains the property of the bride so long as she lives. If she dies childless her nearest relatives can reclaim it, but if she leaves children they take it. It must be distinguished from the settlement (mehr) made by husband on his wife.