

Cultural Transformation and Oral Heritage among the Jaunsari Tribe of Uttarakhand

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Abstract

The Jaunsari tribe of Uttarakhand, which is mostly found in the Jaunsar–Bawar area of the districts of Dehradun and Uttarkashi, represents an impressive collection of cultural traditions and oral history. Songs, myths, and proverbs are examples of oral traditions that encode collective history, spirituality, and environmental knowledge. These traditions are in danger of deteriorating and becoming distorted in the modern era of migration, modernization, and digital communication. The study examines how Jaunsari oral heritage has changed, what influences cultural shifts, and methods for long-term preservation. It draws attention to the relationship between modernization and cultural continuity using secondary data, ethnographic literature, and policy documents. There are suggestions made for community-based preservation projects and policy integration.

Introduction

With over 104 million members (Census of India 2011), India's tribal population is a remarkable mosaic of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity. Among these, the Jaunsari tribe of Uttarakhand holds a unique place in northern India's ethnographic landscape. The Jaunsaris, who are primarily found in the Jaunsar–Bawar area of the Dehradun and Uttarkashi districts, have Khas Aryan ancestry and differ from both the Hindus of the plains and the high-altitude Bhotia communities in terms of their sociocultural characteristics (Berreman 1963; Majumdar 1944).

Oral communication is a fundamental part of the Jaunsari social world; their myths, songs, proverbs, and folklore serve as both historical and moral documentation and sources of entertainment. In Himalayan societies, oral traditions serve as "living libraries of human experience," conserving ecological and cultural knowledge that is not preserved in written texts, as Abbi (2009) highlights. The oral histories of the Jaunsaris, especially the Jagar and Mangal songs, depict the community's interactions with the natural environment, heavenly powers, and ancestor spirits.

The tribe has historically engaged in terrace cultivation, pastoralism, and polyandry, cleverly adjusting to the mountain environment (Majumdar 1944; Pande 1996). Oral genres that strengthen social cohesion and collective memory are performed at social events, agricultural ceremonies, and seasonal celebrations like Bissu and Magh Mela. But as Negi (2017) notes, these cultural continuities have been broken by modernization, urban migration, and formal education. Digital media consumption is replacing oral storytelling, and younger generations are becoming more and more estranged from traditional customs.

In order to better understand how oral traditions are preserved, altered, or endangered in the face of modernity, this study investigates the sociocultural transformation of the Jaunsari tribe. The implications of local initiatives and cultural policies for preserving Jaunsari intangible heritage are also covered in the paper.

Socio-Cultural Context of the Jaunsari Tribe

Between the Yamuna and Tons rivers lies a remote but culturally thriving area that is home to the Jaunsari tribe. Their economy has historically been based on agriculture, with seasonal migration, animal husbandry, and forest products serving as supplements. In addition to caste-like divisions among blacksmiths, carpenters, and cultivators, the community still maintains a hierarchical social structure (Berreman 1963).

The focal point of religious life is Mahasu Devta, whose worship blends more general Hindu customs with regional animistic beliefs. Celebrations like Budhi Diwali, Bissu, and Magh Mela provide opportunities for group singing and the recitation of oral traditions that impart spiritual devotion, agricultural knowledge, and social ethics.

Oral transmission has a strong hold on kinship and marriage customs, including the now-declining practice of fraternal polyandry. In order to strengthen the group's sense of identity and common heritage, elders recite genealogies, ritual myths, and moral tales. Although it offers linguistic uniqueness, the Jaunsari dialect, a Western Pahari variation, is under pressure from Hindi's hegemony (Negi 2017).

Review of Literature

D. N. Majumdar (1944) – Majumdar provided one of the first ethnographic descriptions of the Jaunsari tribe in Himalayan Polyandry. He looked at their unusual family structure and connected ecological and economic factors to the practice of fraternal polyandry. Although he pays little attention to oral traditions or folklore, his work offers insightful information about Jaunsari social organization.

Gerald D. Berreman (1963) – Berreman examined caste, kinship, and social change among Himalayan tribes, including the Jaunsaris, in his book *Hindus of the Himalayas*. He documented the ways in which their environment and isolation influenced their rituals and customs. He did not, however, examine the linguistic or oral aspects of culture; instead, his research stayed mostly structural-functional.

The folk songs, myths, and stories of mountain tribes were studied in Pande, **R. C. (1996) in his book Tribes and Folklore of Uttarakhand**. He underlined that moral instruction, agricultural methods, and social values are all reflected in Jaunsari folklore. Pande has made a substantial contribution to the link between oral traditions, collective identity, and intergenerational education.

J. S. Negi (2017) examined the evolving cultural customs of tribes such as the Tharu and Jaunsari in his book *Cultural Heritage of Uttarakhand Tribes*. He noted that traditional oral transmission systems have been undermined by modernization, migration, and education. His study made clear how urgently community-based preservation tactics are needed.

Meenakshi Nautiyal (2020) Nautiyal examined how urban migration and globalization have affected folktales and songs in *Voices of the Hills: Folk Traditions of Uttarakhand*. She maintained that oral heritage is both threatened and revitalized by digital media. Her research emphasizes how crucial it is to preserve regional performance customs in contemporary formats.

Anvita Abbi (2009) The linguistic and ecological significance of oral traditions was highlighted in Abbi's *Endangered Languages of the Himalayas*. She illustrated how environmental ethics and indigenous

knowledge systems are preserved through oral heritage. Her framework encourages viewing Jaunsari folklore as more than just entertainment; it is a living form of knowledge.

Objectives

1. To document the main oral forms and traditions of the Jaunsari tribe.
2. To analyze the impact of modernization and migration on these oral traditions.
3. To assess existing preservation measures and policy interventions.
4. To suggest strategies for sustainable cultural conservation and intergenerational transmission.

Methodology

This qualitative study is supported by secondary data from government cultural policy reports, ethnographic research, and existing documentation of folklore. Tribal Research Institute reports, census data, the archives of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, and published studies on Himalayan oral traditions are some of the data sources. To decipher patterns and meanings in recorded oral materials and previous research, the paper uses content analysis. The interpretation is complemented by field data from open-access ethnographic archives.

Discussion and Analysis

1. Forms of Oral Heritage

Myths, proverbs, and ritual songs that are essential to communal life are all part of the Jaunsari oral tradition. Jagar, Basanti, and Mangal are examples of folk songs that honor fertility, love, and divine protection. Mahasu Devta myths serve both spiritual and educational purposes by combining mainstream and local religious narratives.

2. Gender and Oral Transmission

Despite being underrepresented in ethnographic literature, women serve as the keepers of lullabies, agricultural songs, and festival narratives. Gendered spaces of cultural continuity are maintained through oral storytelling during seasonal gatherings and household chores.

3. Youth, Modernization, and Media

Oral communication has been undermined by urban migration and digital exposure. Traditional songs that have been recorded or commercialized are preferred by younger Jaunsaris. However, new methods of cultural preservation through digital revival are also provided by initiatives on YouTube and regional platforms.

4. Religion and Ecology

Religion and ecology continue to be closely intertwined in Jaunsari identity. Rituals honor crops, rivers, and forests, demonstrating the ecological ethics ingrained in oral forms. These customs support Abbi's (2009) claim that ecological literacy in oral languages is a type of indigenous environmentalism.

Policy Framework

Through organizations like the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) and the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the Indian government acknowledges intangible cultural heritage as a component of its cultural policy framework. Programs for documentation and protection have been influenced by the UNESCO 2003 Convention. The Department of Culture in Uttarakhand has started community-based initiatives to document the Tharu and Jaunsari tribes' oral traditions.

These initiatives are constrained, though, by a lack of funding, community involvement, and linguistic documentation. Enhancing awareness and transmission can be achieved by incorporating Jaunsari oral heritage into digital repositories, cultural tourism, and educational curricula. Heritage preservation can be further institutionalized through cooperation between regional NGOs and governmental entities.

Future Prospects

Maintaining a balance between tradition and modernity is essential to the future of Jaunsari oral heritage. Continuity can be promoted through school-level folklore clubs, digitization initiatives, and audio-visual documentation. Preservation would be institutionalized through the creation of a Jaunsari Cultural Archive and the inclusion of folklore studies in Uttarakhand's universities. State grants can help close the generational divide through community-led digital storytelling.

Oral traditions can develop dynamically rather than deteriorate if policies embrace participatory models that empower local custodians, particularly women and elders. These customs would be further legitimized and safeguarded by international recognition under UNESCO's intangible heritage framework.

Recommendations

1. Develop a community-based digital archive of Jaunsari oral materials.
2. Introduce folklore studies and Jaunsari language modules in regional schools.
3. Support women-led folklore collectives for intergenerational learning.
4. Encourage local festivals and tourism to include authentic oral performances.
5. Establish partnerships between cultural institutions and digital media platforms.

Research Gap

There is still a lack of systematic field documentation of Jaunsari oral traditions, despite increased interest. There isn't an extensive multimedia archive or linguistic dictionary. Studies evaluating government initiatives for intangible heritage in the Himalayan context are also lacking in policy evaluation studies.

Conclusion

Centuries of accumulated wisdom, ecological awareness, and social ethics are embodied in the Jaunsari tribe's oral traditions. Their decline represents the loss of a community- and nature-based worldview in addition to the loss of folklore. Collaborative frameworks that empower local custodians and incorporate traditional knowledge into formal and digital education are necessary for sustainable preservation. Thus, the preservation of Jaunsari oral heritage affirms the vitality of India's indigenous voices while also supporting international efforts to preserve cultural diversity.

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