

Constructing Dogra Femininities: Negotiating Caste, Gender, and Belonging in Jammu & Kashmir

Simran¹, Sejal Yadav²

¹Independent Researcher, Jammu & Kashmir, India

²Former Assistant Professor at Amity University, Noida

Abstract

This paper examines the construction of Dogra femininities in Jammu and Kashmir through the intersecting frameworks of gender, caste, patriarchy, and regional belonging. While scholarship on women in Jammu and Kashmir has largely centred the Kashmir Valley through the lenses of conflict and nationalism, the gendered experiences of women in Jammu, particularly within Dogra society, remain comparatively underexplored. This paper argues that Dogra femininity is not a natural or fixed identity but a socially constructed category shaped through kinship structures, caste hierarchies, ritual practices, and regional identity formation. Drawing upon Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, the paper analyses how the "ideal Dogra woman" is repeatedly produced through expectations surrounding modesty, sacrifice, caregiving, marriage, motherhood, and loyalty to family honour. Within Dogra society, women function as symbolic carriers of cultural continuity through domestic labour, ritual participation, folk traditions, and caste endogamy. The paper further situates Dogra femininity within the historical evolution of Duggar identity shaped by acculturation, Rajput political structures, cultural exchange, and regional heritage formations. Through an analysis of Dogri folk songs, ceremonial practices, and familial expectations, the study demonstrates how patriarchal authority is normalised within everyday life and emotional structures of belonging. Using Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, the paper also interrogates the internal hierarchies within Dogra society, arguing that dominant representations of Dogra culture frequently privilege upper caste narratives while marginalising the experiences of Scheduled Caste Dogra women. Engaging with the works of Sylvia Walby, Simone de Beauvoir, and Pierre Bourdieu, the study explores how patriarchy and cultural capital operate through family structures, respectability politics, education, and social surveillance, while also examining how urbanisation, education, reservation policies, and social media are reshaping gender expectations among younger generations in Jammu. By foregrounding Dogra women as sites of negotiation between caste, gender, tradition, and modernity, the paper contributes to a more nuanced feminist understanding of Jammu beyond Kashmir centric frameworks.

Keywords: Dogra Femininities, Gender Performativity, Jammu, Caste, Patriarchy

Introduction

Scholarship on Jammu and Kashmir has overwhelmingly centred questions of conflict, nationalism, militarisation, and the politics of the Kashmir Valley. While these concerns have generated a substantial

body of literature, they have also contributed to the relative invisibility of Jammu as a site of sociological inquiry. Consequently, the everyday social worlds, cultural practices, and gendered experiences of communities inhabiting the Jammu region remain comparatively underexplored (Bhatia 2020, 3-4). Within this broader silence, the construction of femininity within Dogra society has received limited scholarly attention despite the central role women play in the preservation, reproduction, and transformation of regional identity.

Dogra's constitute a culturally diverse regional community primarily concentrated in Jammu. Contrary to popular assumptions that equate Dogra identity exclusively with Hindu Rajput's, Dogra society encompasses multiple caste groups and religious communities, including Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and Buddhists. The collective Dogra identity is sustained through a shared cultural universe comprising kinship networks, hereditary deities, ritual obligations, oral traditions, community gatherings, seasonal festivals, and local forms of belonging. These practices generate a strong sense of collective identity and regional solidarity that continues to shape social life even amidst processes of urbanisation, migration, and modernisation.

However, the preservation of Dogra identity is deeply gendered. Women occupy a central position in maintaining kinship ties, transmitting oral traditions, preparing ritual foods, organising domestic religious practices, and socialising younger generations into community values. Men, by contrast, are more likely to occupy formal positions of authority within community and ritual structures (Participant observation 2026). This unequal distribution of cultural labour highlights the extent to which gender functions as a key mechanism through which social norms, collective memory, and regional identity are reproduced across generations. Dogra culture survives not merely through institutions, but through everyday practices performed within households and communities, many of which are sustained by women.

Drawing upon Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, this paper argues that Dogra femininity is not a natural or pre-existing identity but a socially constructed and continuously reproduced set of expectations, behaviours, and cultural performances (Butler 1990, 25–34). The figure of the "ideal Dogra woman" is often associated with modesty, sacrifice, caregiving, emotional endurance, respect for elders, commitment to family honour, and adherence to community norms surrounding marriage and kinship. These expectations are reinforced through everyday socialisation, ritual participation, folklore, and familial structures, producing femininity as a culturally valued and socially regulated identity.

At the same time, Dogra femininity cannot be understood as a singular experience. Using Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, this paper argues that caste significantly shapes women's experiences of gender, respectability, mobility, and belonging within Dogra society (Crenshaw 1991, 1242–1245). As a result, the lives of Scheduled Caste Dogra women remain marginal within both regional discourse and academic scholarship. Examining Dogra femininity through the lens of caste therefore enables a more nuanced understanding of the hierarchies and exclusions operating within the broader regional identity (Bhatia 2014, 954).

This paper seeks to examine how Dogra femininities are socially constructed, reproduced, and negotiated within contemporary Jammu. It explores the role of rituals, kinship structures, folk traditions, marriage practices, and caste relations in shaping gendered expectations, while also analysing how education, urbanisation, migration, social media, and changing aspirations are transforming conventional notions of womanhood. By moving beyond Kashmir centric frameworks and foregrounding the experiences of Dogra women, the study contributes to broader debates on gender, caste, regional identity, and belonging in contemporary India.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Jammu and Kashmir has historically been dominated by questions of conflict, insurgency, nationalism, militarisation, and politics of Kashmir, often overlooking the distinct Jammu Dogra and Pahari culture. As a consequence, the Kashmir Valley has emerged as the principal site of academic interest, while the social and cultural worlds of Jammu have remained comparatively peripheral within scholarly discourse. This imbalance is particularly visible within gender studies, where women's experiences have largely been examined through the lenses of conflict, political participation, development, and empowerment (Ahmed 2025, 164–166; Suri 2013, 154–160; Devi and Yadav 2024, 207–210). Such approaches have generated important insights into women's agency and vulnerability in conflict zones, yet they frequently treat women in Jammu and Kashmir as a homogeneous category, obscuring regional, cultural, and caste-based differences.

Historical scholarship on the Dogra region has primarily focused on state formation, dynastic rule, social reform, and cultural heritage. Studies examining nineteenth century Dogra society document the prevalence of practices such as female infanticide, sati, restrictions on women's education, and highly gendered marriage arrangements. These works also examine attempts by Dogra rulers, particularly Maharaja Gulab Singh and his successors, to regulate certain social practices and introduce limited reforms (Sharma and Rana 2015, 10). However, women largely appear within these narratives as subjects of reform rather than as agents situated within complex systems of gendered power. Consequently, these studies offer limited insight into how femininity itself was produced, regulated, and experienced within Dogra society.

Among the relatively few scholars who have explicitly engaged with gender in the Jammu region, Mohita Bhatia's work provides an important intervention. In her analysis of women's mobilisation during the 2008 Jammu agitation, Bhatia demonstrates that participation in public protest did not necessarily translate into a challenge to patriarchal structures. Rather, women's entry into political spaces remained mediated through culturally sanctioned notions of sacrifice, modesty, family honour, and community duty. Her work is particularly significant because it highlights how gender cannot be understood independently of caste and community identities. The study reveals that women occupied unequal social positions even within the same movement, exposing tensions between upper caste and Scheduled Caste women that complicate homogeneous representations of female political participation (Bhatia 2009, 447–453).

Bhatia's work on Scheduled Castes in Jammu further expands this discussion by demonstrating that caste remains a crucial axis of inequality despite being overshadowed by dominant regional and conflict centred narratives. Her analysis illustrates how access to land, education, religious institutions, social mobility, and political representation continues to be shaped by caste hierarchies. Importantly, the study shows that regional narratives of Dogra unity often conceal internal social inequalities (Bhatia 2020, 23–66, 104–159).

A separate body of literature has focused on women's empowerment, literacy, education, employment, political representation, and participation in self-help groups. These studies have documented important improvements in women's educational attainment and public visibility, while also highlighting the persistence of patriarchal constraints within domestic and community life. However, such scholarship is frequently framed through developmental indicators that measure empowerment in terms of literacy rates, labour force participation, or political representation.

Similarly, studies of women's political rights and citizenship in Jammu and Kashmir have examined legal discrimination, electoral participation, and the relationship between gender and state policy (Ahmed 2025,

164–166). Research on the Permanent Residents (Disqualification) Bill and women's political representation has demonstrated how citizenship, belonging, and legal rights remain deeply gendered. Other scholars have analysed women as victims and survivors of conflict, exploring the consequences of militarisation, violence, and displacement. While these studies illuminate important dimensions of women's lives, they remain primarily concerned with the state, law, and conflict, rather than with the everyday cultural production of femininity.

Taken together, the existing literature reveals three important gaps. First, although Jammu occupies a distinct historical, linguistic, and cultural position within Jammu and Kashmir, the gendered experiences of Dogra women remain comparatively understudied. Second, existing scholarship has tended to examine women through the frameworks of development, empowerment, conflict, or political participation, leaving the social construction of Dogra femininity largely unexplored. Third, and most significantly, little attention has been paid to the ways in which caste, gender, and regional belonging intersect within Dogra society. Dominant representations of Dogra identity often appear culturally unified, yet they obscure significant differences in how femininity is experienced across caste locations, particularly among Scheduled Caste women.

This paper addresses these gaps by examining how Dogra femininities are socially constructed, culturally reproduced, and negotiated within contemporary Jammu. Drawing upon theories of gender performativity, intersectionality, patriarchy, and cultural capital (Butler 1990; Crenshaw 1991; Bourdieu 1984). It investigates how kinship structures, rituals, marriage practices, caste relations, and regional identity shape women's experiences of belonging, respectability, and social mobility. In doing so, the paper seeks to move beyond Kashmir centric approaches and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender, caste, and regional identity in Jammu and Kashmir.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship on Jammu and Kashmir has been overwhelmingly dominated by questions of conflict, insurgency, nationalism, militarisation, and statehood, with the Kashmir Valley emerging as the primary site of academic inquiry. Consequently, Jammu has often remained peripheral within both regional and gender scholarship. Even when women in Jammu and Kashmir are studied, analyses tend to focus on conflict affected women, political participation, security, or development indicators, leaving the everyday social construction of gender identities within specific cultural communities largely unexplored.

This absence is particularly evident in relation to Dogra society. Despite a substantial body of literature on Dogra history, cultural traditions, folklore, painting, heritage, and regional identity, remarkably little attention has been paid to how gender operates within these social and cultural formations. Existing studies frequently treat Dogra culture as a homogeneous regional identity, while overlooking the role of women in reproducing kinship structures, caste boundaries, cultural traditions, and notions of collective belonging. As a result, Dogra femininity remains largely undertheorized within contemporary scholarship.

Furthermore, dominant representations of Dogra identity often draw implicitly upon upper caste and Rajput centred cultural narratives, resulting in limited engagement with the differentiated experiences of women across caste locations (Bhatia 2014, 954). The intersections of caste, gender, and regional belonging, particularly among Scheduled Caste Dogra women, remain insufficiently examined. This omission is significant because it obscures the internal hierarchies, exclusions, and negotiations that shape women's everyday experiences within Dogra society. By bringing together feminist theories of gender performativity and intersectionality, this paper seeks to address these gaps by examining how Dogra

femininities are socially constructed, culturally reproduced, and differently experienced across caste locations in contemporary Jammu .

Research Questions

Addressing this gap requires moving beyond frameworks that view women primarily through the lenses of conflict, development, or political participation, and instead examining femininity itself as a site through which power, identity, and social relations are organised. This study therefore asks:

How does Dogra femininity function as a cultural institution through which caste, gender, and regional belonging are reproduced and negotiated in contemporary Jammu?

To answer this broader question, the paper explores the following subsidiary questions:

1. How is the ideal Dogra woman socially constructed through kinship structures, ritual practices, folklore, and marriage norms?
2. How do caste hierarchies shape women's experiences of femininity, respectability, mobility, and belonging within Dogra society?
3. In what ways are education, urbanisation, migration, and changing aspirations reshaping dominant ideals of Dogra femininity in contemporary Jammu?

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The analysis draws upon academic literature, historical accounts, policy documents, folklore, media narratives, and existing scholarship on gender, caste, and regional identity in Jammu and Kashmir. Critical Discourse Analysis is used to examine how dominant narratives, cultural practices, kinship structures, ritual traditions, and social institutions contribute to the construction, regulation, and reproduction of Dogra femininities. A reflexive awareness further informs the study of the author's positionality as a Scheduled Caste Dogra woman from Jammu. While personal experience does not constitute evidence in itself, it shaped the identification of the research problem and informed a critical engagement with the silences and exclusions within existing scholarship. The relative absence of Dogra women, particularly Scheduled Caste Dogra women, from dominant academic narratives motivated the present inquiry into the intersections of caste, gender, and regional belonging.

1. Family, Caste, Sub Caste and Sacred Lineage in Dogra Society

Dogra society cannot be understood only through the language of a region, culture, or family. Its social organisation is structured through a sacred kinship order in which caste, sub caste, lineage, hereditary deities, ritual obligations, and marriage rules are closely connected. Existing scholarship on Dogra history, folk traditions, art, and regional identity has already demonstrated that Dogra culture has been shaped through layered historical processes, including dynastic rule, regional interaction, ritual practice, and cultural continuity (Sharma and Rana 2015, 10). Building upon this scholarship, this section argues that Dogra identity is not reproduced only through formal institutions or public cultural symbols, but through everyday kinship structures that organise belonging at the level of family, caste, biradari, and sacred ancestry.

The hierarchy of belonging in Dogra society may be understood through a layered structure. At the broadest level is Dogra regional identity. Within this are caste communities, and within caste communities are sub castes or biradaris. Each biradari is often connected to a specific sacred lineage, hereditary deity, and ritual site. The Deri functions as the ritual centre of this lineage, while the Kuldevta or Kuldevi

represents the sacred authority through which the community understands protection, obligation, morality, and continuity. Thus, caste and kinship in Dogra society are not merely social categories. They are also ritual categories through which individuals locate themselves within an inherited moral and sacred order. Family is the first institution through which this order is reproduced and maintained. In Dogra society, family is not only a biological unit made up of parents and children but a primary institute of socialisation where important cultural values are transmitted through generations. Although nuclear families have become more common due to urbanisation, migration, modernisation, education, and occupational mobility, the symbolic authority of the extended family remains powerful.

This sacred kinship order is deeply patrilineal. Lineage, surname, property, caste location, sub caste identity, and Deri affiliation are generally transmitted through the male line. Sons are understood as carriers of the lineage, family names, property rights, ancestry are passed from fathers to sons, while daughters are often imagined as temporary members of the natal household. The preference for sons must therefore be understood not simply as a personal bias but as part of a wider patrilineal system because the succession and ownership rights give highly importance to male children.

In the household, senior male members usually occupy decision making positions in matters relating to property, marriage, finance, ritual obligations, and community relations. However, elderly women, particularly grandmothers and mothers in law, often lead, especially in the absence of senior men. Yet their authority usually operates within, rather than against, the patriarchal order with enforcing expectations of modesty, obedience, domestic discipline, ritual conduct, and respectability upon other women. This shows that Patriarchy survives not only through the men but also women, who once were victims.

The example of the Megh community further complicates any simple understanding of caste hierarchy in Dogra society, traditionally weavers and recognised as a Scheduled Caste, are found in Jammu and some parts of Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. In the Ghagwal region of Kathua district, megh's served as priests at the Narsingh Temple, where devotees from different caste backgrounds visit, especially with newborn children (Participant observation 2026). It reveals a more complex regional caste order where ritual roles can be locally specific, historically shaped, and socially negotiated and may not follow conventional pattern.

Another striking feature is that Members of the Megh community, may use surnames such as Bhagat, while sub caste surnames such as Chouhan, Bhardwaj, Tharthra, and Dogra may also be used. Some of these surnames are also found among upper caste Dogra groups, which complicates any easy reading of caste status through surnames alone. Which indicates Dogra caste identity is not always immediately visible through surnames, yet caste continues to operate through marriage, ritual affiliation, lineage memory, and social recognition within the community.

2. Ritual, Sacred Authority and the Gendered Reproduction of Dogra Society

Every year, members of the Tharthra Biradari gather at their ancestral Deri, built in Salehar Village of Jammu, to participate in the Mel, community/briadhari gathering held two times in a year. Wheat following the Rabi harvest and rice following the Kharif harvest are symbolically returned to the deity, acknowledging that prosperity belongs first to the lineage before it belongs to the individual household. Such practices reinforce an understanding that economic life, agricultural production, and family wellbeing remain inseparable from sacred obligation. Ritual therefore organises not only religious practice but also the moral relationship between labour, land, ancestry, and community.

Families arrive from different villages and cities carrying offerings of freshly harvested wheat, which are first presented to the Kuldevi before being consumed within their own households. The ritual is simultaneously an act of gratitude, remembrance, and collective reaffirmation of belonging. Individuals who may have spent most of the year separated by education, employment, or migration return to participate in a ceremony that reconnects them with their lineage, ancestors, and biradari. What appears as a religious gathering therefore performs a much wider social function. It reconstitutes the community itself.

This section argues that ritual institutions occupy a central position in the reproduction of Dogra society. Rituals do not only show community's sacred belief rather continuously recreating the moral, social, and cultural order which keep lineage, kinship, caste identity, and regional belongingness intact together. It extends the participation in Deri rituals from being mere a "religious devotion" to one's role in inherited and ascribed kinship order

Émile Durkheim's concept of "Social Solidarity" argued that religious ceremonies generate a sense of "collective consciousness" by bringing individuals of community together which further consolidates "we feeling" among its members social solidarity is what holds society together. It's like glue that connects people, making us feel united and sharing common goals (Durkheim 1995, 217–241). The Mel, community gathering of the Dogra community, illustrates this vividly. The ritual does not simply unite individuals through worship; it transforms a dispersed collection of families into a moral community bound by common ancestry where participation produces an emotional affirmation of belongingness. Whereas Collective participation does not merely create social cohesion; it also reproduces hierarchy, those who exercise authority from those who provide service, and those who speak on behalf of the community from those whose labour remains largely invisible.

2.1 Sacred Authority, Ritual Labour and Gendered Hierarchies

The gendered organisation of ritual life becomes particularly evident when examining who performs ritual labour and who exercises institutional authority. Although women occupy a central position in sustaining the everyday functioning of religious life, their participation remains concentrated within forms of labour that are culturally valued but institutionally unrecognised. Men, in contrast, largely occupy positions associated with formal authority, including key members committees, financial administration, public decision making, and the overall organisation of community rituals.

Field observations from the Tharthra Biradari Mel (Participant observation and informal interview 2026) reveal this distinction with particular clarity. During the preparation of the community meal, women collectively prepared bread which was crucial offering to deity. Their labour was indispensable to the successful completion of the ceremony, yet the responsibility for supervising arrangements, managing finances, coordinating volunteers, and addressing the gathering rested almost entirely with male committee members. Ritual functions not only as a site of worship but also as a pedagogical institution where children learn what constitutes appropriate masculine and feminine participation within the community.

The experience of Oma Devi, affectionately addressed by members of the community as *Bua*, illustrates the complexity of women's ritual authority. For several decades, she has been recognised as the individual through whom the Kuldevi manifests during the annual Mel. When she gets "*Chonki*", members believe that the deity possesses and communicates through her body, offering blessings and guidance to the community. Her words hold significant spiritual value during that state, heard with reverence instead of mere personal opinion. she is supreme authority and most respected figure within biradhari. Yet, despite

occupying this position, she neither challenges nor explicitly reinforce the exclusion of women from formal decision-making. The issue is not that she lacks influence; rather, gender equality is simply not articulated as a concern within the ritual context.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence provides an important framework for understanding this apparent contradiction. Symbolic violence refers not to overt coercion but to forms of domination that become accepted as natural, legitimate, and self-evident by those who participate within them (Bourdieu 2001, 1–2). The gendered organisation of ritual authority in Dogra society rarely appears as an explicit act of exclusion. Rather, it is reproduced through everyday practices that assign different forms of responsibility to men and women while presenting these distinctions as culturally appropriate and morally desirable.

The ethnographic evidence thus demonstrates that ritual performs a dual function within Dogra society. On one hand it manifests “collective solidarity” by reaffirming shared ancestry, sacred lineage, and regional belonging, while simultaneously reproducing gendered hierarchies of authority.

3. Constructing Dogra Femininities: Marriage, Honour and the Performance of Womanhood

There is a complex interplay of kinship, lineage, caste, and ritual institutions that collectively reproduce regional belonging and social continuity. However, these institutions do not operate independently of gender. Rather, they rely upon culturally sanctioned expectations of womanhood.

Dogra womanhood is neither innate nor culturally static. It is socially produced through repeated performances of care, sacrifice, modesty, emotional restraint, domestic labour, ritual participation, and familial responsibility that together constitute normative femininity. These performances are not merely individual acts but socially recognised practices through which women become intelligible as respectable daughters, wives, daughters in law, and mothers within the Dogra social order. Consequently, femininity emerges not as a fixed identity but as an ongoing social accomplishment that requires continual performance and recognition.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity provides an important analytical framework for understanding this process. Butler argues that gender is not an inherent characteristic but an effect of repeated social performances through which culturally sanctioned identities acquire the appearance of naturalness (Butler 1990, 25–34). Applying this framework to Dogra society shifts attention away from asking what women are towards examining how particular forms of womanhood are produced, embodied, and normalised through everyday practices. Acts such as observing ritual propriety, maintaining kinship relations, prioritising family over individual aspirations, performing domestic labour, or embodying ideals of modesty and respectability are not isolated cultural customs. Collectively, they constitute repeated performances through which normative Dogra femininity is continuously reproduced.

Importantly, these performances should not be understood solely through the language of oppression or coercion. Many women actively value and take pride in these practices as expressions of cultural identity, familial commitment, and moral responsibility. At the same time, these very practices become the principal mechanisms through which expectations surrounding honour, respectability, caregiving, marriage, and domestic responsibility are normalised and transmitted across generations.

3.1 Marriage as the Institutional Production of Dogra Femininity

Marriage occupies a central position within the social organisation of Dogra society because it functions as the principal institution through which kinship, lineage, caste continuity, and gendered expectations are simultaneously reproduced. In Dogra society, it extends far beyond the union of two individuals. It

represents the incorporation of women into a new kinship order governed by distinct ritual obligations, lineage affiliations, and moral expectations. Marriage therefore marks the point at which normative ideals of Dogra femininity acquire institutional legitimacy and everyday expression.

Across interviews (Informal conversations 2026), respondents consistently described marriage as a transformative moment in a woman's life. Rather than merely changing her marital status, marriage was understood to require the adoption of new familial responsibilities, behavioural expectations, and emotional dispositions. Women were expected to adjust to unfamiliar households, establish harmonious relationships with their in-laws, participate in the ritual practices of the marital family, and gradually assume responsibility for preserving domestic stability. The ability to adapt, compromise, and place collective wellbeing above personal preference was repeatedly presented as an indicator of respectable womanhood rather than an individual choice.

This transition is deeply embedded within the patrilineal organisation of Dogra society (Bingley 1999, 69) discussed in the previous section. Upon marriage, women become members of their husband's lineage and assume responsibility for sustaining its ritual, cultural, and familial continuity. The narratives collected during fieldwork further indicate that marriage is accompanied by a carefully regulated moral vocabulary through which culturally sanctioned femininity is defined. Respondents (Field notes 2026) repeatedly associated a "good" wife with patience, emotional resilience, modesty, obedience, caregiving, and an ability to preserve harmony within the household. Significantly, these expectations were rarely articulated as explicit social rules. Rather, they were described as qualities naturally expected of women, illustrating the extent to which gendered norms become internalised through everyday socialisation.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity provides an important analytical lens through which these observations may be understood. Butler argues that gender is constituted through repeated social performances rather than biological essence (Butler 1990, 25–34). The ethnographic material demonstrates that respectable Dogra womanhood is similarly produced through the continuous repetition of culturally recognised practices. Adjusting to the marital household, observing ritual propriety, covering the head before senior relatives, prioritising family responsibilities, caring for children and elders, and maintaining emotional composure during moments of conflict are not isolated cultural customs. Collectively, these embodied practices constitute repeated performances through which normative femininity is produced, recognised, and socially validated.

Importantly, these performances extend beyond the domestic sphere to encompass the moral economy of honour. Marriage positions women as custodians of familial respectability, where individual behaviour is frequently interpreted as reflecting the reputation of both the natal and marital families. Decisions relating to dress, friendships, mobility, education, employment, and public conduct therefore become subject to broader expectations concerning dignity, modesty, and family honour. The regulation of femininity consequently operates less through overt coercion than through the continual negotiation of social respectability within everyday life.

Dogri folk traditions further illuminate the cultural production of these expectations. Marriage songs do not merely accompany ritual ceremonies but function as repositories of collective memory through which ideals of womanhood are transmitted across generations. One frequently sung *bidai* song poignantly captures the emotional and moral significance attached to a daughter's departure from her natal home:

Babul taram karandeya, migi rakhi le aj di raat ve.

Kiyan rakha dhe meriye, mera taram heen oyi jan da (Dogri folk song 2026)

The dialogue between father and daughter is particularly revealing. The daughter's request to remain one final night is met with the father's response that delaying her departure would prevent him from fulfilling his religious duty. The song therefore frames marriage not simply as an emotional transition but as a moral obligation embedded within patriarchal kinship structures. Equally significant is the recurring absence of female decision-makers within Dogri marriage songs. Appeals concerning marriage are almost invariably directed towards fathers or other senior male relatives, reflecting the location of marital authority within patriarchal family structures. These songs therefore function as cultural archives through which normative ideals of femininity, duty, obedience, and familial responsibility are preserved and transmitted.

Many Dogri folk songs use sarcasm and humour to portray a tussle within the marital household, of the bride with the mother-in-law and sister-in-law. Although presented playfully, such songs often reveal the emotional negotiations, power dynamics and expected behaviour of loyalty that accompany marriage.

Yet the ethnographic material also reveals that these ideals are undergoing important transformations. Respondents across generations acknowledged that education, salaried employment, urbanisation, and economic independence have significantly altered expectations surrounding marriage. Increasingly, families encourage daughters to complete higher education and secure stable employment before marriage, particularly in government service. Rather than rejecting marriage as an institution, many women seek to renegotiate its terms by balancing professional aspirations with familial responsibilities. Contemporary Dogra femininities therefore emerge not through the abandonment of tradition but through the continuous negotiation of inherited gender norms within changing social and economic contexts.

Marriage should therefore be understood not merely as a cultural institution but as the principal mechanism through which Dogra society reproduces lineage, kinship, caste continuity, and normative femininity. It is within marriage that women are expected to embody the moral values, ritual obligations, and cultural responsibilities associated with respectable womanhood. At the same time, the experiences of contemporary women demonstrate that these expectations remain dynamic rather than static, creating new spaces through which femininity is continually negotiated without necessarily abandoning the cultural frameworks within which it is situated.

4. Beyond a Singular Dogra Womanhood: Caste, Belonging and Intersectionality.

Furthermore, treating Dogra women as a homogeneous social category risks obscuring the unequal ways in which caste, class, education, geography, and community belonging shape women lived experiences. Dogra society itself is socially and culturally heterogeneous; consequently, there is no singular or universal experience of Dogra womanhood.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality provides an important analytical framework for understanding these differentiated experiences. Rather than viewing gender as an isolated category, intersectionality demonstrates how multiple structures of power simultaneously shape women's identities and opportunities. Within the Dogra context, gender is experienced through its intersections with caste, class, education, region, and community belonging, producing multiple and often unequal forms of femininity.

The findings reveal that caste continues to influence ritual participation, marriage practices, kinship obligations, social mobility, and access to opportunities. Respondent narratives further suggest that the lived experiences of Dogra women vary considerably across caste locations and geographical settings. Differences between rural and urban areas, as well as between the plains and mountainous regions of Jammu, highlight how geography mediates access to education, employment, infrastructure, and social

mobility. Communities residing in remote mountainous areas often demonstrate greater adherence to traditional customs and gender norms, shaped not only by cultural continuity but also by limited connectivity, restricted institutional access, and fewer socio-economic opportunities.

An intersectional perspective therefore challenges monolithic representations of Dogra womanhood by demonstrating that femininity is differently constituted across social locations. Rather than a singular cultural identity, Dogra femininity emerges as a plurality of negotiated experiences shaped by the intersecting structures of caste, gender, region, class, and belonging. Recognising these differences is essential to understanding both the persistence of patriarchal norms and the diverse ways in which women negotiate, reproduce, and transform them within contemporary Dogra society.

Critical Analysis and Research Findings

The study demonstrates that Dogra femininity is not a singular or fixed cultural identity but a socially constructed and continuously negotiated category shaped by the intersections of caste, kinship, ritual, marriage, education, class, and regional belonging. The findings reveal that patriarchal structures continue to influence women's lives; however, their manifestations differ across caste groups, geographical locations, and socio-economic contexts. Institutions such as family, marriage, ritual practices, and folk traditions reproduce normative ideals of respectable womanhood, while processes of urbanisation, migration, education, and employment have enabled women to renegotiate these expectations. Rather than revealing a transition from tradition to modernity, the study demonstrates the coexistence and continuous negotiation of inherited gender norms and contemporary aspirations. It therefore argues for understanding Dogra femininity as a plurality of intersectionally constituted femininities rather than a homogeneous category.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Dogra femininity is institutionally produced through the interconnected structures of kinship, ritual, marriage, and everyday practices of respectability. Drawing upon Butler's concept of gender performativity and Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, it demonstrates that there is no singular Dogra womanhood but multiple femininities shaped by caste, ritual status, regional location, and social belonging. While contemporary processes such as education, migration, and employment have expanded women's opportunities, they have primarily reshaped rather than displaced normative gender expectations. By foregrounding the experiences of Dogra women, particularly those from marginalised caste locations, the study contributes to the limited scholarship on gender in Jammu and Kashmir beyond the Kashmir Valley and offers a more nuanced understanding of how caste, gender, and regional belonging intersect to shape women's lived experiences.

Bibliography

1. Ahmed, Fareed. 2025. "Political Participation of Women in Jammu and Kashmir: A Research Perspective."
2. Bhatia, Mohita. 2009. "Women's Mobilisation in the Jammu Agitation: Religion, Caste, Community and Gender." *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, nos. 26–27: 447–453.
3. Bhatia, Mohita. 2014. "'Dalits' in Jammu and Kashmir: Resistance and Collaboration in a Conflict Situation." *Asian Survey* 54, no. 5: 941–965.
4. Bhatia, Mohita. 2020. *Rethinking Conflict at the Margins: Dalits and Borderland Hindus in Jammu and Kashmir*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

5. Bingley, A. H. 1999. *Handbook on the Dogras*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services. Originally published 1899.
6. Bourdieu, Pierre. 2001. *Masculine Domination*. Translated by Richard Nice. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
7. Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
8. Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6: 1241–1299.
9. Devi, Swarna, and Rachna Yadav. 2024. "Unveiling the Realities of Women's Empowerment in Jammu & Kashmir." *Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education*.
10. Durkheim, Émile. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press. Originally published 1912.
11. Saxena, Ashish, and Vijay Laxmi Saxena. 2016. "Changing Situations of Dalit Identities in Jammu & Kashmir State: Some Reflection." In *Social and Political Aspects of Community Consciousness*, edited by Amarnath Paswan and Manish Chandra. Delhi: Victorious Publishers (India).
12. Sharma, Deepika, and Anita Rana. 2015. "Social Evils among Women in Jammu and Kashmir during Dogra Period and Colonialism and Reforms (1846–1925)."
13. Suri, Kavita. 2013. "Empowering Women through Education: A Study of Rural Jammu and Kashmir."
14. Primary / Fieldwork Sources
15. Dogri folk song (oral tradition). 2026. Translated and interpreted by the researcher; collected during fieldwork, Jammu Region.
16. Field interviews with respondents from the Dogra community. 2026. Jammu Region.
17. Participant observation conducted at Tharthra Biradari Mel. 2026. Jammu Region.
18. Researcher's field notes, case studies, and oral narratives collected during ethnographic fieldwork. 2026. Jammu Region.