

Lost Culture of the Jaunsari Tribe of Uttarakhand: The Vanishing Voices

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Abstract:

Culture provides a specific identity to those who live together and share a common lifestyle. So, to understand some groups of people, one must look into their culture and how they live. This paper highlights the lost culture of the Jaunsari tribe of Uttarakhand, who, on one hand, are one of the most culturally rich tribes of the state, and on the other hand, are losing some traditions, rituals, and festivals, which were once there in the tribe. The methodology applied for the study was qualitative and relied on three primary sources: semi-structured interviews, site-based museum observation and textual analysis. The findings suggest that the loss of culture is bringing humanity towards a lost identity. Traditions like *Krishi Mangal*, *Tumdi Chalana*, festivals like *Chatriyadi*, instruments like *Bimu* and death music in the tribe have vanished into thin air due to socio-cultural changes and modern technological advances. It has become quintessential to preserve the existing culture, and it's important to recognize this before it becomes too late for regional people, as it provides cultural identity and fulfilment in society.

Keywords: Lost Culture, Jaunsari tribe, Cultural identity, Bimu, Krishi Mangal, Death music

Introduction:

Culture is made by a group of people, tribe, community or society, in which their ideologies, beliefs, traditions, folklore, language, cuisine and appearance come. Culture provides a specific identity to those who live together and share a common lifestyle. So, to understand some groups of people, one must look into their culture and how they live. One must preserve and transfer the culture in books, vlogs, folktales, and folksongs for their upcoming generations and to preserve it, so their cultural identity never gets lost in chaos. Somehow, in this urbanisation, modernisation and globalisation, people are aware of and understand the importance of their culture and language. That is why we see many regional influencers on social media creating content on their culture, folklore, and language, to bring

awareness as well as introduce their cultural identity to global platforms. However, on one hand, we are preserving, but at the same time, due to modernisation, we are mixing the other culture with our own culture, thus creating a new culture. And in this process, we somehow lose some important customs, traditions, and festivals.

This paper highlights the lost culture of the Jaunsari tribe of Uttarakhand, who, on the one hand, are among the most culturally rich tribes in the state, and, on the other hand, are losing some traditions, rituals, and festivals that were once part of the tribe. These traditions, once part of their culture, have been lost due to migration, a lack of economic opportunities, and failure to pass them on to the next generation.

Whatever the reasons, the loss of culture is bringing humanity towards a lost identity. These traditions, festivals, and customs were once part of the society in which their ancestors lived, so the loss of their culture is like losing their identity in thin air. As this culture has vanished, it has left humanity in a state of risk, anxiety, and fear.

“The Jaunsar-Bawar is famous for its different culture and living style” (Bihan 26.2), located in the northern part of the Dehradun district of Uttarakhand, existing in three tehsils: Kalsi, Chakrata, and Tyuni. The tribe is most famous for its unique practice of Polyandry, which is in state of nonexistent now. But it has attracted many scholars in the past to this community and was an important part of their culture. The tribe used to follow fraternal polyandry, where a woman was married to brothers of the same family. However, “in today’s world, the integration of numerous technologies and cultures makes polyandrous marriage incomprehensible. Modern lifestyle and monogamy are appealing to younger generations as a result of modernity” (Sharma 120). The practise of polyandry, though, dropped in some places of the Jaunsar but continues in other backward and deep regional places in the tribe.

Methodology

The methodology applied for the study was qualitative, as it allows a better and in-depth understanding of the lost culture. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with a regional poet, Rinkudas Bharti, about the festival *Chatriyadi* and regional folk singers Sitaram Chauhan and Shanti Verma through phone calls and WhatsApp messages about the instrument *Bimu*, and in person with the folk singer and writer Bhajandas Verma about the regional music of death. The researcher visited the museum in Maindrath village, where Dr Surendra Kumar Aryan has preserved all the ancient artefacts that are now not in use and lost in culture. The researcher also analysed the historical, cultural, and relevant works by the *Jaunsari* authors. Hence, everything is carried out with ethical standards of research.

Krishi Mangal

Mangal, known as an auspicious hymn or song, is used to sing during auspicious events, festivals, rituals, etc. There are various kinds of *Mangal* in *Pahadi* culture, such as *Dev Mangal*, *Byah Mangal*, etc. One of them is *Krishi Mangal*, which is related to agriculture. “Agriculture was Jaunsari’s main occupation, which [they] supplemented by

breeding buffalo, cattle, goats and sheep...Rice and potatoes are the principal crops, although they also grow a variety of other vegetables” (Sharma 117).

During farming, especially during planting seeds and harvesting, Krishi Mangal used to be sung by the farmers to bring blessings to them and to their crops. A special worship is done on dry land for rain to Shingul Maharaj, or in some places their principal deity or Ishht. Krishi Mangal as written in Janpad Dehradun ka Itihaas aur Samaaj:

Bani gwa boyiri jeth- ashaad
Hyunpat padigawa pani ka kaar
Dewa Silguru tu munya nu aankhe
Te dewa aamun kokya joge rakhe (Baluni 263-64).

(Hey, Silgur Maharaj! This summer's heat is behaving like an enemy to us. The seeds we sowed have burned due to excessive heat. You are the God of rain; please fulfil our Parched land and pour your blessing on us).

Farmers during harvest or before harvest used to work by tying the rope around their waist and a sickle in their hand to cut the crops. In rain, hard sunshine and sand around them, their skin colour turned dusty and tanned. As Dineshchandra Baluni wrote: *Jau latkaani dathuli saathi bai Koteni baal pinger / Mundaya Chaaya padi aeje ande chailu ke haal* (264) After the hard day of work. Young farmers request a delicious and fulfilling meal from their mother, while also complaining that the next day they have to go to another farm for the paddy milled, as they say: *Aacho pakaya khano li maaiye, aacho pakaye khaano le / Dotiya ratiye payile sarido saathi mandedi jaano le* (Baluni 264)

In fact, to make their deity happy, young girls used to cook food, taking some grains from each house of the village, on top of the hill, to shower rain as a blessing from their deity. However, these *Krishi mangal* or *geet* have vanished due to new technology and a lack of union between people. Earlier, all the villagers came together and one by one, they harvested each farm, but now they rarely come together. With new technology used on farms, old traditions have been lost. And somehow, all the traditions and folksongs have vanished into thin air.

Chatriyadi

In Jaunsar, there was a beautiful festival that celebrated nature. The charming traditions of the tribal people, who honoured every aspect of nature with love and care, have been lost due to migration. This festival is known as *Chatriyadi*.

During the *Ghee-Sakranti* festival, a special tradition was celebrated by the women (*Dhyan*) of each village in Jaunsar. On the day of *Sakranti*, women used to gather together and sat in a *Khumdi* (Panchayat) and decided to go for collecting wild fruit called *Chatroi*

(also called *Berberis Aristata* or *Kilmora* in Garhwal and Kumaun). The tradition has disappeared, but is beautifully remembered by the regional author Rinkudas Bharti 'Pathee', in his poem *Chatroi Chatriyadi Tharon*:

Ghee Mai ke Sangrandi Bichde
Chatriyadi Bethaun thi Khumdi
Kandti Shungti- Bunaai baanski
Jethe Chatroik jaun thi Daudi (5-8)

(Yesterday, there was a Ghee Honey Sakranti. The Chatriyadi, women of the village who collect Chatroi, held a meeting. They make baskets of bamboo to collect Chatroi (fruit) in the month of May.)

The author's tone is melancholy on behalf of Chatroi, who mourn and last for those women who used to come during summer for it.

Koike harchi kandki?
Koike chatriyadi goi?
Tharde tharde khejaki
Rijhi laagi Chatroi (Bharti 9-12)
(Where have those baskets lost?
Where have those women gone?
Anxious or worried while waiting
Chatroi eventually dropped and withered)

The festival was truly special, celebrated exclusively by women. Even the married women used return to their maternal homes to participate in this event. They gathered together, both married and unmarried, to decide on a date once a month to collect a particular wild fruit. Each woman crafted her own bamboo basket, and early in the morning, they prepared a sweet dish called Chilra before heading out to find the fruit. While in the fields, they used to perform the Taandi dance and sang traditional Jangu folk songs.

But now, due to migration, people have forgotten their villages; they hardly come back. The festival has vanished. The poet describes the feeling of Chatroi in the following stanza:

Shuni padi daandi-kaandi
meri, chatroi ki seri
kasi nati mulkandi
mukhe, peeth deni feri
paachi boudi aai jaaya
Tum, dhau suni meri

buni leya kandti seji

bini neya Chatroi (Bharti 37-44)

(My hills are empty now, the field full of Chatroi is empty now, everybody has turned their back on me. I call you back to me, listen to my call. Make and decorate a bamboo basket for me, collect your wild fruit Chatroi)

Sancha Vidya

Another ancient body of knowledge and wisdom that has been used in the Jaunsar-Bawar region for many years is *Sancha Vidya*. *Sancha Vidya* is a kind of knowledge that only *Brahmins* knew. A special kind of calculation is used in this region to decide auspicious dates such as marriage, birth, agriculture and other divine/holy decisions.

There are four kinds of script found in the Jaunsari, like *Pabuchi*, *Chandvani*, *Pandvachi*, and *Bhatakshri* (Shah 278), which are used through special calculations by throwing a dice, which is made up of an eagle's wing bone and has four sides, namely *Bachan* (one dot), *Duha* (two dots), *Tririk* (three dots), and *Chowk* (Four dots) (Shah 278-79).

It is believed that this knowledge originated in Kashmir and has been passed down from generation to generation through oral traditions and preserved in the *Sancha* treatise. However, as previously mentioned, this knowledge is limited to the *Brahmin* caste, so one of the reasons for its decline is its limitations to a certain part of the community only. Another reason for this decline may be that the younger generation of a certain part of the tribe is less inclined to learn these calculations due to modernization, technological advances, and increased literacy. If this knowledge could be shared with a broader community, it might be preserved more effectively.

Another factor contributing to the decline is that many people are now more educated and have left their villages in search of work, education, and a better lifestyle. They typically return only for festivals, events, or religious practices, and do not engage deeply with these calculations during their visits. They come to enjoy, then return to their lives.

Regardless of the reasons, *Sancha Vidya* represents a unique traditional astrological knowledge that is part of the Jaunsari tribal cultural heritage. It is currently at risk of disappearing and could be lost very soon if action is not taken seriously.

Tumdi Chalana and Mashan Jagana

In *Beyond Polandry*, Dr K.R. Nautiyal has mentioned the process of *Mashan Jagana* and *Tumdi Chalana*, which has disappeared or is almost in a state of disappearing. *Mashan Jagana* is waking the soul of the dead, whereas *Tumdi Chalana* is a magic bottle made up of a hollow Bottle Gourd, used for a special kind of ritual.

Mashan Jagana is a process when “someone died an accidental death or untimely death [death of a young person], the family of such person resorted to *Mashan Jagana*, to satisfy themselves of the exact cause of the death of such person” (Nautiyal 152). However,

one who has achieved the *Sidhi*, the ultimate achievement or accomplishment, can perform such traditional methods, but also has to face some consequences once he or she has learned such knowledge. The person who performs such a ritual is called *Mashanua*, who talks to the dead person's soul and asks: "about the reason for the death and other related issues about post-death events" (Nautiyal 153).

Tumdi Chalana again is the process of superstition "that remained unique to the area of Jaunsar-Bawar" (Nautiyal 155). This was a special kind of knowledge again restricted to the *Brahmin* caste of the community. This ritual is used "to establish the facts for items lost due to suspected theft or someone having buried certain items in the proximity of the house to bring bad luck to the house" (Nautiyal 155).

Tumdi is made from the *Pahadi* Bottle Gourd, which is round in shape. At first, it is hollowed from inside, then dried in the sunlight. When it is completely dry, it becomes hard and is usually used by our ancestors as a water bottle or to carry curd, milk, buttermilk, etc. This dried Bottle Gourd, called *Tumdi*, is tied in the hand of a person by a *Brahmin*. Then he recites some *mantras*, and the *Tumdi* starts "to jump all by itself and starts pulling the person on whose hand it is tied to a specific direction" (Nautiyal 155). The *Pandit* continues reciting the *mantras* until the dried *Tumdi* is broken; it usually breaks "where all the ill intentions were buried or where the items of theft were kept" (Nautiyal 156).

Due to "socio-cultural change and more educated people in the area" (Nautiyal 154), a very small number of people are opting for such rituals. Hence, makes them a vanishing tradition in the list of lost cultures.

Bimu

The Jaunsari tribe has a wealthy cultural heritage; one can see their beautiful culture in their folk songs, folk dances, unique traditions and customs. Folk music is also a part of culture. In folk music, there was an instrument which was present in the region but is now lost, called *Bimu*.

Bimu was a traditional or folk musical instrument of Jaunsar-Bawar. It was a small instrument made up of either iron, silver, gold or brass and had a very thin wire called *Kanda*, through which vibrations were generated, and music develops. *Bimu* was a wind instrument which was played by blowing air through the mouth. It was like a local variant of a mouth harp. It was played by placing it between the teeth and using fingers (Uniyal 118).

This traditional instrument was usually played when a person used to go cattle grazing. To pass the time, local people used to play it. *Bimu* was also used while reciting *Harul* (Ballad), during festivals and events. According to Tikaram Shah, *Bimu* was played by both men and women (323). One can understand the importance of this instrument, which is now lost, through the folksong sung by folk singer Sitaram Chauhan in a song called

Minike Bamote Laale Bimu re Audhe. The entire song is based on *Bimu*, and some lines that says:

Chandira bal Bimu jani
Sunera kanda
Sunera bhai kanda jani
Sunera Kanda

Aiso bojaya Bimu dhyani
Suni la Panda
Suni la bhai panda dhyani

Suni la panda (“Minike Bamote Laale Bimu Re Audhe- Harul” 4:05-48)

(*Bimu* is made of silver, and its wire is made of Gold. Wire is of gold, brother; wire is of gold.

Play the *Bimu* girl in such a way that it can be heard on the opposite hill also. Heard on the opposite hill, brother, heard on the opposite hill girl.)

As technology advances, people have started to have other means to pass the time and other instruments to play during events. Mobiles, social media, guitar, radio and other modern instruments are in vogue, and people spend more time there, whether in solitude or in groups. Gradually, without getting noticed, *Bimu* has disappeared. It can only be seen in museums or heard in folklore.

Death Music (*Mortoya ke Baaje*)

The Jaunsari tribe showcases unique traditions, rituals, and customs. One of the tribe's folk cultures was death music, which in the regional language is called *Mortoya ke Baaje*, which was unique but has now been discontinued. It was a kind of music which was played when someone died in the village, irrespective of their gender, whether it was male or female, except a child. Death music was used to provide peace to the deceased soul as well as to celebrate the meeting of the soul with God.

According to folklore, the death music felt like a wedding of the deceased when a person is free from the worldly desires and adversities of life, and eventually finds peace with God and approaches heaven. However, the sound of the beats brings chills and horror to the villagers. It also served as a messenger that announces the death of a person across villages. The *Bajgi* community of the tribe used to play the music with the help of instruments like *Dhol*, *Damau*, *Ransingha*, *Bherai*, etc.

In case of a woman's death, different *taal* (beats) were played. In fact, the *Bajgi* used to come from the maternal side's village. Both the maternal and in-law sides of *Bajgi* came together, bringing a larger number of *Bajgi* and instruments. Whereas, in case of a man's

death, the death music had a different *taal* (beats) which were more warrior-like and showcased *Veer rasa*.

According to Bhajandas Verma, there was a saying that death music was from the *Treta Yug*. When Shri Ram died, the death music was played, known as *Moyakri Taal*. And since then, death music had been in circulation in the Jaunsari tribe and became a part of the Jaunsari folk culture. On a person's death (except a child's death), there were two types of beats: *Moyakri* and *Dhoyakri taal*. In Jaunsar-Bawar, there are three stages of keeping the dead body on land; when it is on land, *Moyakri taal* was played, and while it was carried on the shoulder, *Dhoyakri taal* was played.

So, the question arises why it is discontinued. On one side, it was celebrated as a festival, the person who dies goes with dignity, but on the other side, it had another face. Due to the exploitation of the *Bajgi* community, the *Bajantri* (one who knows such music) ceases to continue this extraordinary culture, which could make this tribe unique. Discrimination against economically weaker sections and inferior castes, as well as a lack of respect in this profession, lead them to leave this tradition forever.

Conclusion

Culture defines a particular group of people; it gives identity to individuals from where he/she belongs, it gives a lifestyle which he/she follows, it creates an ideology which one transfers to the next generation. So, becoming culturally poor makes a society hollow. Jaunsar-Bawar, one of the most culturally rich tribes of the Himalayas, is also losing its ethnicity if not taken seriously.

The festivals like *Chatriyadi*, folksongs like *Krishi Mangal*, instruments like *Bimu*, music like *Mortoya ke Baaje*, etc., have already disappeared from the current society due to migration, new technology, exploitation and socio-cultural changes; only to be alive in folksongs and tales. However, on one side, people are pacing towards modernization, urbanization, and technological advancement, which is good for growth, development and a better lifestyle, but on the other hand, people are forgetting their roots, their culture, and their identity from where they have come.

Definitely, social media influencers are raising awareness, but social media follows trends, which come and go and never stay. So, to make it stay forever, one must learn it from their home, their environment, as well as preserve it for future generations, so it never gets lost. It's important to recognize this before it becomes too late for regional people to pursue their identity, sense of belonging, and connection to home.

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