

The Cultural Heritage of Kashmir: Past and Present

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Abstract

This article explores the multifaceted cultural heritage of Kashmir, emphasising its role in shaping collective identity amidst unique geographical and historical influences. Cultural heritage is presented as an amalgamation of minor identities that coalesce into a unified whole, reflecting the interplay of tangible actions and intangible thoughts. Kashmir's distinct landscape of snow-clad mountains and gushing streams has fostered diverse cultural microcosms, historically isolated yet interconnected through shared emotional and spiritual landmarks like Dudh Ganga and Khanqah-e-Ghousia. These sites, woven into the region's civilisational fabric, underscore the continuity of Kashmiri identity, resilient against historical scrutiny or modern transformations. The article contrasts Kashmir's steadfast attachment to traditional identities—evident in unchanged surnames like 'Darzi' or 'Hajjam'—with the fluidity of identity reinvention in northern India, where economic mobility prompts new appellations. Kashmir's culinary traditions, notably Wazwan, and its hospitality, marked by warmth and abundance, are highlighted as cultural cornerstones shaped by geography. However, modernity's influence, such as incongruous practices like standing dinners, threatens this heritage's coherence. Beyond material expressions, Kashmir's intellectual and spiritual legacy, rooted in peace and coexistence, is celebrated, drawing from Buddhist monks' non-violence and Sufi saints' humanistic teachings. The article concludes by affirming the intellectual brilliance of Kashmiris as the bedrock of their civilization, advocating for the preservation of this heritage under the metaphorical shade of its spiritual Chinar.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Kashmiri Identity, Geographical Influence, Spiritual Continuity, Intellectual Brilliance.

1. Introduction: A Humble Address

For a newcomer, an outsider to Kashmir, to open his mouth and speak on the cultural heritage of this land before its own people is akin to narrating the art of

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graceful movement to a gathering of gazelles. Yet, what choice do I have, when the organizers of this seminar—most notably, Professor Marghoob Baanihali and Hamid Anwar Dar—have insisted that I share my thoughts on this occasion? If, therefore, you consider my words as merely a courteous response to their gracious insistence, perhaps you will find less cause for disappointment.¹

2. Defining Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage, in essence, serves as a vital means of shaping national identity. While humanity shares a fundamental unity and all individuals possess an intrinsic common identity, the passage of time and the dynamics of space gradually give rise to distinct identities among various groups and nations. This evolving distinctiveness, shaped by historical and environmental influences, is what we recognize as cultural heritage. Cultural heritage, in reality, constitutes an assemblage of numerous minor identities, which collectively coalesce into a unified whole. If one were to undertake a microscopic analysis of this unified entity, one would discern numerous elements that, in isolation, do not necessarily serve as exclusive markers of identity for any particular group or individual. Rather, these elements are commonly found across diverse communities and individuals. However, when these disparate components merge in a cohesive and harmonious manner, they transform into a singular entity, which then becomes emblematic of a specific collective identity. The disappearance of such an identity places the very existence of an individual or community in jeopardy. It is for this reason that every community persistently strives to preserve its cultural identity, recognizing it as indispensable to its survival. The gathering we witness today, convened to deliberate upon the cultural heritage of Kashmir, is similarly driven by this very impulse—the imperative to recognize, understand, and safeguard our collective identity.

Civilization is not the name of a singular act; rather, it is an intricate amalgamation of diverse actions and thoughts that evolve over centuries. Actions, as is widely acknowledged, manifest externally and are thus subject to direct observation. In contrast, thoughts do not lend themselves to immediate visual perception; their influence can only be felt, for the human eye remains incapable of discerning them in a tangible, external form. However, since thoughts and actions exert a subtle yet profound influence upon one another, it may be asserted that a meticulous study of a nation's outward modes of living enables us, to a considerable extent, to comprehend its underlying patterns of thought. *This interplay between the seen and the unseen, between tangible expressions and intangible ideas, is what ultimately shapes the civilizational ethos of a people.*²

3. Historical and Cultural Landmarks

Every region of the world is shaped by its geographical conditions, and over time, its inhabitants absorb these influences, gradually adopting distinct modes of thought and perception that eventually crystallize into their cultural identity. Kashmir, however, is not defined by the vast desert plains of Rajasthan or the expansive riverine landscapes of Punjab and northern India. Rather, it is a land of towering, pristine, snow-clad mountains and swift, gushing streams. These very mountains and streams, while forming a unified geographical entity, paradoxically divide Kashmir into multiple cultural and social microcosms.

In the modern era, the advancement of transportation and communication networks has significantly compressed the distances between regions, making the world feel much smaller. However, in the past, when such conveniences were absent, even the smallest of natural barriers could pose insurmountable distances. If a single boulder could serve as an effective screen, then a towering mountain separating two households would render their isolation even more profound. Yet, human existence is not solely sustained by food and clothing; the nourishment of emotions and the fulfilment of spiritual aspirations are equally indispensable. It is in this pursuit that landmarks such as Dudh Ganga, Sangam, Takht-e-Sulaiman, Koh-e-Mahadeo, Khanqah-e-Ghousia, Ziyaratgah Musa wa Isa and Dargah Moi-e-Mubarak serve as outward manifestations of deep-seated cultural and emotional continuity.

4. Identity and Social Mobility

To question the historical legitimacy of these sacred and cultural sites would be both futile and irrelevant. Anthropologists argue that just as human existence cannot unfold in a geographical vacuum, intellectual and cultural existence cannot persist in a historical void. Therefore, any attempt to scrutinize the historical origins of these landmarks is an exercise in redundancy. They have, over time, been woven into the very fabric of Kashmir's civilizational heritage and must be acknowledged as such. The cultural essence of Kashmir has remained remarkably consistent across generations; what existed yesterday persists today and, by all indications, will continue into the future. The transformation of Kashmiri Pandit Vasudev over time—from 'Tuls' to 'Munds,' then 'Khors,' and finally 'Tangs,' yet none of these names defined his caste or profession. They did not alter their fundamental identity or profession. They were Pandits before and they remained Pandits thereafter. There was never a moment of hesitation or shame in embracing their inherited identity, nor did they ever seek to alter it.

In contrast, a satirical anecdote often circulates regarding the Brahmins of the plains, suggesting that with economic and social mobility, they also aspire to modify their identity. This is humorously captured in a well-known Hindi proverb:

ChobeygayeChhabey hone, Doobeyhokaraaye.

(The Chobe left as Chhabbe but returned as Do-Be)

Before unpacking the full implication of this phrase, it is necessary to understand the distinctions among ‘Dube,’ ‘Chobe,’ and ‘Chhabey.’ It is said that the progeny of Brahmins proficient in two Vedas were called ‘Dube,’ those well-versed in four Vedas were designated ‘Chobe,’ while those who mastered six Vedas came to be known as ‘Chhabey’. According to folklore, a ‘Chobe Brahmin’ from a certain village, having attained significant financial prosperity, aspired to elevate not just his economic standing but also his social identity. However, remaining in his native village meant he would always be recognized as a ‘Chobe.’ Consequently, he decided to leave his homeland in search of a place where he could redefine himself with a more distinguished title, for he had heard:

عزت اسے ملی جو وطن سے نکل گیا

وہ پھول سر چڑھا جو چمن سے نکل گیا

(Honour is bestowed upon those who leave their homeland;

The flower that departs the garden is the one that adorns the crown.)

Thus, with this aspiration in mind, he set out for distant lands. After traveling some distance, he arrived in a village where a ‘Dube’ Brahmin community resided. Upon seeing a fellow Brahmin approaching, the villagers greeted him, saying, ‘Welcome, Dubeji, welcome!’

Hearing this, Panditji was deeply vexed. He had left home with the ambition of elevating his status from ‘Chobe’ to ‘Chhabey,’ yet here he was, being demoted to the rank of a ‘Dube.’ Frustrated and disillusioned, he retraced his steps and returned to his native village, lamenting:

Chobe set out to become a Chhabey,

But returned as a mere Dube.

(Thus, he remained a ‘Chobe,’ just as he had been before.)

However, this anecdote does not establish an immutable principle—that a ‘Chobe’ must forever remain a ‘Chobe.’ If ambition and determination burn within, transformation is indeed possible. After all, as a Persian poet wryly remarked:

اولینڈاف بودم، بعدہ گشتیم شیخ
غلہ چوں ارزانشود امسال سید می شدم

(At first, I was but a cotton-carder, then I became a Sheikh.

Had grain been cheaper this year, I would have become a Sayyid!)

We do not know the author of this couplet, nor can we ascertain whether its origins lie in India or Iran. However, it is an undeniable reality that in contemporary northern India, the rising economic mobility among Hindu and Muslim professional communities has fostered a pronounced consciousness regarding the reinvention of their traditional identities through modern appellations. Within this context, the aforementioned couplet serves as a profound satire. In the new India, 'Pasi' has become 'Paswan,' 'Chamar' now identifies as 'Raidas,' 'Ahir' as 'Yadav,' 'Julaha' has transformed into 'Ansari,' 'Qasai' into 'Qureshi,' 'Darzi' into 'Idrisi,' and 'Hajjam' into 'Suleimāni.' This shift reflects a reaction to the erstwhile 'aristocratic' worldview, which rigidly classified social hierarchy based on occupations. Interestingly, Kashmiri cultural identity has largely remained immune to this phenomenon. In Kashmir, one who was a 'Darzi' yesterday takes pride in being called a 'Darzi' today, and a 'Hajjam' does not feel any shame in identifying as such. Perhaps one reason for this steadfast attachment to historical identities lies in the collective memory of the decree of Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab, which declared the alteration of one's traditional name a punishable offense.

That being said, the transformation of certain Kashmiri surnames has, at times, been an unintended consequence of scriptural inconsistencies in English and Urdu orthography. As a result, 'Khur (donkey)' became 'Kheer,' 'Razdan' turned into 'Rozdon,' and 'Koul' morphed into 'Kola.' In the words of Kashmiri socio-political figure 'KashyapBandhu':

رازدان روز ڈون ہو گیا کول، کولا ہو گیا
بھٹ بے چارہ کیا کرے بھٹ تو بھٹ ہی رہ گیا

(Razdan became Rozdon, Koul turned into Kola,

What could poor Bhatt do? Bhatt remained Bhatt!)

The responsibility for altering 'Razdan' to 'Rozdon' and 'Koul' to 'Kola' does not lie solely with orthographic shifts. Rather, this transformation is indicative of a deeper intellectual servitude—one in which every aspect of indigenous culture is viewed as inferior when juxtaposed against the dominant civilization of the ruling class. One is reminded here of the renowned Urdu writer Maulana Abdul Majid

Daryabadi's incisive and satirical essay on the comparative study of the novel, written in an era when British imperial authority was at its zenith and discourse was permissible only within circumscribed limits.

Maulana wryly observed:

Tell me, sir! 'Kalua' is merely your domestic servant, destined for social indignity and humiliation, is he not? And therefore, the very word 'Kalua' carries a derogatory undertone. But what of Mr. Black, your district's esteemed Deputy Commissioner? Should you find yourself in another city, lodging in a public inn, you would be ashamed, hiding from acquaintances lest they discover your humble accommodations. Yet, should you stay at a 'hotel' (or an 'Inn'), you would eagerly broadcast the news, inviting visitors with pride. If, for leisure, you attend a 'Nautanki' performance, you do so clandestinely, lest society frowns upon your indulgence. But if you frequent the cinema, you proudly secure a reserved seat and announce your presence with confidence. Similarly, visiting a barber's shop is an act of disgrace, yet stepping into a 'Hairdresser's Salon' is an unmistakable badge of honour!

Through such sharp insights, Maulana Daryabadi laid bare the psychology of cultural inferiority, wherein linguistic and social perceptions are dictated not by intrinsic merit but by the prestige associated with foreign nomenclature. This phenomenon, observable even today, underscores the enduring struggle between 'self-identity' and the 'allure of imposed modernity'.³

You might be wondering about the significance of names in shaping cultural identity—an assertion that is indeed irrefutable. However, one must also exercise restraint lest the discussion become interminable, stretching on like the proverbial '*Shaitankiaant*' (devil's intestine). Hence, let us conclude this deliberation with the acknowledgment that while a name in itself may hold little intrinsic value, the role it plays in the preservation of identity remains undeniably profound.

5. Kashmiri Hospitality: A Cultural Hallmark

Now, let us turn our attention to Kashmir's distinctive culinary traditions, its vibrant textiles, exquisitely crafted utensils and the refined customs of hospitality—all of which constitute essential markers of cultural identity. It is a universal trait among nations to take pride in their hospitality, each striving to extend the warmest possible welcome to guests. Yet, the hospitality embedded in Kashmiri culture stands apart. It is markedly different from the ostentatious yet hollow hospitality portrayed by Deputy Nazir Ahmad in his novel '*Taubat-un-Nasuh*', where

MirzaZahir Dar Beg extends an invitation to a close friend who arrives at his home hungry and exhausted. Instead of offering proper accommodation, Mirza directs his guest to the dark, dilapidated mosque of the neighbourhood. Later, when it comes to food, he presents him with a meagre portion of roasted chickpeas, extolling their supposed virtues with exaggerated enthusiasm. In the name of hospitality, he himself begins tossing the chickpeas into his mouth with theatrical relish, while the guest remained hungry, while Mirza Sahib stood up saying, *Alhamdulillah*.

Now contrast this with the hospitality of Kashmir, as vividly described by Shehzad Aziz in her book '*Aashiyan se AasmanTak*' (from the earthly home to the heaven). She recounts that should a guest arrive even at eight o'clock at night, the host does not scramble to prepare an elaborate meal. Instead, the '*Samovar*' (a small and handy urn used for making tea and keeping it hot) is swiftly kindled, glowing embers are placed within, and '*Qahwa*' (Kashmiri green tea) is brewed without delay. If the guest partakes of a little tea before the meal, there is no harm in it. However, the Qahwa is accompanied by a generously filled array of trays bearing 'cakes,' 'pastries,' '*Baqarkhani*,' (kind of crisp bread made of flour milk. Sugar and butter) 'lentils,' and various other delicacies. The poor guest, who initially arrived with the intent of having a proper meal, now finds himself reluctantly nibbling on a pastry or a little lentil soup. But as the host insists, he must also do justice to the '*Baqarkhani*'—a delicacy too tempting to refuse.

She further narrates:

Now it is nine o'clock at night. The guest, after indulging in such an array of treats, wishes to rest. His eyes are heavy with sleep. At that moment, the sound of clinking dishes is heard. This signals the arrival of the main meal—an extravagant spread: a heaped platter of rice, four varieties of meat dishes, one or two vegetable curries, and a richly prepared paneer dish with either tomatoes or peas. A new custom has now emerged: should a guest arrive at four o'clock in the evening—ordinarily the time for tea—the host considers their hospitality incomplete until they procure a 'rooster' or a 'chicken' from the market, slaughter it on the spot, fry it hurriedly, and present it to the guest. And if the guest displays the slightest reluctance in eating, the host goes to the extent of carefully separating each morsel and placing it into the guest's mouth, ensuring that no act of hospitality remains unfulfilled.

Such is the art of Kashmiri hospitality—an exquisite balance of warmth, abundance and an unwavering commitment to the well-being of one's guests, distinguishing it from superficial ceremonial gestures found elsewhere.⁴

We have previously asserted that no region's culture remains uninfluenced by its geographical conditions. Kashmir, too, is no exception to this principle. Earlier, in the context of hospitality, we briefly alluded to the region's culinary practices. At this juncture, how could we possibly overlook *Wazwan*? *Wazwan* is not merely a distinctive style of cuisine where meat is prepared in a variety of ways and presented before guests; rather, it embodies an entire cultural ethos. The preparation of *Wazwan* and its meticulously structured mode of presentation constitute a subject worthy of scholarly study in their own right. The cultural heritage of Kashmir is deeply embedded in its material and social expressions. From '*namkeenchai*' (salted tea), '*saffron-infused Qahwa*' and '*sheermal*,' to the '*pheran*' (a woollen, sleeveless overcoat worn by people in snowy region) and '*kangri*' (portable coal brazier) from the '*gabba*' (rug-made by plant) and '*namdah*' (carpet-made by wool with added colours) to '*wonhwun*' (folklore-sung on the occasion of marriage, married and unmarried women both participate) and '*ruff*' (folklore-sung on the occasion of marriage, only married women participate, they sing in praise of Prophet, companions, etc.), from the '*samovar*' to the '*tashnaari*' (water flask—that is used for washing hand)—each of these elements, upon analytical scrutiny, reveals a distinct underlying rationale shaped by the region's climate and geography. These artefacts and traditions are not arbitrary; rather, they emerge from and respond to specific social needs and environmental conditions.

The study of cultural heritage has today attained the status of a scientific discipline. It serves as a crucial and engaging tool for comprehending the psychology of nations. Through such an inquiry, we can discern the intricate interconnections among cultural elements—connections that often elude ordinary perception. For instance, upon closer examination, one finds a profound coherence between Kashmir's traditional loose-fitting attire and the ceremonial grandeur of *Wazwan*. Yet, the organic relationship between these cultural practices is gradually eroding under the influence of modernity. The incongruity becomes particularly evident when one observes individuals clad in '*junaiz*' (jeans and trousers) partaking in *Wazwan*—an aesthetic and experiential dissonance that neither does justice to the meal nor upholds the integrity of the cultural tradition it represents.

6. The Clash of Tradition and Modernity

Similarly, there exists a fundamental incompatibility between '*TabakhMaaz*' (rib meat—it is a popular product of *Wazwan* made from rib portion of sheep meat), *Rista*, and *Gushtabah* (it is a popular mutton-based delicacy prepared with mutton minced with spices shaped into balls and cooked in flavourful and delicious yogurt gravy)—the quintessential dishes of *Wazwan*—and the contemporary practice of standing dinners. This juxtaposition of the traditional and the modern, in its most

unrefined form, presents an incongruous and discordant cultural synthesis. To describe such a hybridization, one is reminded of the Kashmiri adage: “*Maa Teni, Baap Kalang, Inke Bachay Rang Barang*”—a metaphorical expression that aptly encapsulates the paradox of a heritage simultaneously upheld and undermined by modernity.

The observations presented thus far should not be misconstrued as an assertion that Kashmir’s cultural heritage is solely confined to its delectable cuisine, vibrant attire, graceful dance forms, and mellifluous music. These are merely the external manifestations of its rich civilization. Beyond this visible façade, Kashmiri culture possesses a profound intellectual and spiritual dimension, one that reflects its deeply rooted philosophical and ideological ethos.

At the time of Partition, when the Indian subcontinent was engulfed in the darkness of communal violence, Mahatma Gandhi made a significant remark, stating that if he could see a ray of communal harmony and human fraternity anywhere in the region, it was in Kashmir. This seemingly simple statement was, in reality, an acknowledgment of Kashmir’s deeply ingrained tradition of peace and coexistence. This defining characteristic of Kashmiri civilization must be preserved at all costs, for without it, Kashmir would cease to be what it truly is.

In the distant past, Buddhist monks from Kashmir travelled to China, Central Asia, Iran, Japan, and the islands of Java and Sumatra, spreading the principles of ‘ahimsa’ (non-violence). Their teachings would not have carried such profound influence had they not themselves exemplified these ideals through their conduct. Similarly, the propagation of Islam in Kashmir was not a result of conquest but was nurtured through the spiritual and humanistic efforts of great Sufi saints such as Hazrat Bulbul Shah Turkistani and Hazrat Shah Hamdani. Their message of compassion and universal brotherhood left an indelible mark on Kashmiri culture, shaping its ethos for centuries to come. It is precisely these influences that, in an abstract sense, constitute the ‘true cultural heritage of Kashmir.

7. Conclusion: A Living Heritage

Over the past two and a half years, I have had the unique opportunity to closely observe and engage with Kashmir’s cultural legacy and the intellectual disposition of its people. Even within this relatively short period, one realization stands out with unmistakable clarity—the intellectual acumen and perceptive brilliance of the Kashmiri people form the cornerstone of their civilizational greatness. Despite the ever-evolving external influences, Kashmir has steadfastly remained the custodian of the lofty cultural values bequeathed to it by its revered elders over the centuries. It is my earnest prayer that Kashmiri culture, while preserving its unique essence,

continues to thrive under the metaphysical shade of its unseen spiritual Chinar, ever flourishing and progressing with time.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES:

¹This article is an English translation of '*Kashmir ka Tehzibi Virasat: Maaziaur Haal*', originally delivered by Professor Mushirul Haq on 20th November 1989. It was the Inaugural Address at a seminar organized by the Department of Kashmiri, University of Kashmir, in collaboration with the Dean of Students' Welfare. I have translated and slightly expanded the article by adding an abstract, keywords, headings and some additional content.

² Italics are mine.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

