

Balancing Tradition And Modernity In Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract:

The tribal regions of Himachal Pradesh in India are characterized by a rich cultural and aesthetic heritage, particularly among the Kinnaura tribe. The inhabitants of Kinnaur are popularly known as the Kinnauras or Kinnaurese. Kinnaur is representative of the "traditional" way of life. At the same time it has its own specificity, linked to the geographical situation. Kinnaur is at the cross-road between Tibet and India, on a cultural point of view, as on environmental views. They have their own cultural pattern which is quite distinct from other areas of Himachal Pradesh. Kinnaura tribe does not form a homogeneous community. It is a heterogeneous society with respect to race, caste, religion and dialects. The aesthetic values of this community are expressed through various events such as fairs, festivals, cultural programs, rituals, and traditions, which are celebrated year-round across different parts of Kinnaur. However, the advent of large-scale developmental projects, along with the expansion of transportation and infrastructure under the banner of modernization and mass media has significantly influenced the socio-cultural fabric of the Kinnaura tribe. It has further posed challenges to the preservation of local culture and identity. This underscores the necessity of comprehensively examining the cultural transformations occurred in the region. Consequently, a study was undertaken to document the traditional cultural practices of the Kinnaur tribe along with subsequent changes occurred in the community. Many local inhabitants acknowledge that traditional cultural practices are increasingly giving way to modern influences.

Keywords: *Tradition, culture, Modernity, Kinnaura tribe and, changes*

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I. Introduction

Modernization represents a significant cultural response marked by universalistic, evolutionary and non-ideological attributes, as described by Yogendra Singh (1973). It denotes a process of cultural transformation within indigenous cultures, observable at both individual and societal levels. At the individual level, modernization entails changes in values, attitudes, and behaviors, often referred to as "social mobilization." At the societal level, it is characterized by structural differentiation, increased specialization, and the diversification of institutional structures and individual activities.

In contrast, tradition refers to the transmission of customs, beliefs, and practices across generations, often through oral means. Edward Shils (1981) emphasized that tradition serves as a stabilizing force in the face of the rapid and sometimes disorienting changes induced by modernity. Rather than being static remnants of the past, traditions are dynamic and adaptable, capable of evolving to address contemporary challenges. Shils highlighted that traditions provide societies and individuals with continuity, identity, and meaning amidst the uncertainties of modern life. Importantly, he argued that tradition and modernity are not necessarily oppositional forces; rather, they frequently coexist and adapt within modern contexts (Shils, 1981).

The tribal regions of Himachal Pradesh in India, particularly those inhabited by the Kinnaura community, are notable for their rich cultural heritage and aesthetic practices. Kinnaura people actively preserve their traditions through year-round festivals, rituals, fairs, and cultural events held across various parts of Kinnaur. These gatherings often involve the consumption of indigenous alcoholic beverages, such as Ghanti or Chuli, crafted from locally available fruits like apples, apricots, and grapes. Traditional dances, characterized by participants forming a circle and moving rhythmically, are a central feature of these events (Verma, 2002).

Prominent festivals celebrated by the Kinnaura tribe include Sazo Lohri, Phagul (or Suskar), Baisakhi (or Beesh), Dakhraini, Phulaich, Losar, and the Kinnaur Lavi fair. Their distinct cultural identity is also evident in their woolen attire, culinary customs, and way of life. The community's diet primarily relies on staple crops such as wheat, opla, phafra, and barley, complemented by the practice of drinking salted tea as a morning ritual. The use of alcohol during social occasions, including festivals and weddings, is also widely accepted within the community (Bajpai, 1991).

Despite their strong cultural foundations, the Kinnaura people face challenges posed by large-scale developmental initiatives in the name of Modernization. At Beginning the influx of migrant laborers,

particularly for construction projects, has introduced cultural influences from other parts of India and Nepal, which threaten the integrity of the local cultural landscape. The social media and mass media in contemporary times are greatly influencing the culture and tradition of the Kinnaura community. These changes have disrupted the social and cultural cohesion of the Kinnaura community, placing their unique linguistic and cultural identity at significant risk. Therefore an effort to document the effect of modernization on tradition of Kinnaura community has been made.

II. Objective Of The Study:

The study aims to examine the evolving traditions of the Kinnaura tribe in the context of modernization.

III. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing data gathered through interviews and focus group discussions conducted in the field. To align with the study's objectives, key individuals from the selected village were identified and engaged to gain insights into the interplay between tradition and modernity in the community. A focus group discussion involving young men and women was conducted to collect contemporary perspectives. Additionally, primary data pertaining to the villages under study Nathpa Khas, Chagaon Khas, Pangi Khas, and Moorang of District Kinnaur was obtained through village surveys. District gazetteers, books, and unpublished reports were also analyzed to construct a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and traditional practices of the Kinnaura society.

IV. Result And Discussion

Socio-economic background:

The Kinnaura community, a Scheduled Tribe in the state of Himachal Pradesh, India, had a total population of approximately 84,121 according to the 2011 Census. The community resides entirely in rural areas, and its members primarily follow Hinduism, Buddhism, with a small proportion adhering to Christianity. The Kinnaura people speak the Kinnauri dialect, while Himachali serves as the common language for intergroup communication. This community is noted for its distinct cultural practices, including traditional woolen attire, such as a cap in grey or brown, featuring a green velvet band along the outer fold. This unique garment helps differentiate them from other local communities in the region. The Kinnaura are socially divided into two main groups: the Khosia (the upper caste), who are primarily cultivators, and the Beru (the lower caste), who possess specialized skills and work in various trades such as carpentry, masonry, blacksmithing, weaving, drumming, tailoring, and leatherworking. Agriculture in the region is predominantly practiced through settled farming, with crops grown mainly during the summer and monsoon months (May to October). The main crops include buckwheat, barley, wheat, peas, potatoes, kidney beans and mustard. Additionally, apple-based horticulture, which began around four decades ago, now occupies approximately half of the total cultivated land (Verma, 2002).

Focus Group Discussion of Men and women

A focus group discussion was conducted with 15 men and 15 women aged 25 to 75 years. This age group was selected to capture the perspectives of both younger and older generations. The primary objective of the discussion was to explore contemporary cultural changes in the region. According to the participants, the area's culture was initially influenced by the introduction of developmental projects, followed by modernization. While developmental initiatives are considered a part of modernization, the impact of these projects was particularly notable in the 1990s when Kinnaur's interactions were mainly limited to workers and project officials involved in hydroelectric projects. These areas, in particular, experienced significant cultural changes.

In recent years, however, the influence of modernization, including technology and social media, has had an even greater impact on the region's culture and traditions, even in areas without hydroelectric power projects or other development activities. Over the past 5 to 10 years, this shift has become increasingly pronounced. Historically, Kinnaur was characterized by the prevalence of polyandrous families, governed by a joint family system. Respondents indicated that the old joint family system had several benefits, including fostering intergenerational relationships and teaching values such as respect and care. Additionally, the shared economic responsibilities within the joint family helped ease financial burdens. However, in contemporary times, the prevalence of nuclear families has risen, and polyandrous families are now in decline. The tradition still persists in the upper regions of Kinnaur, but it is now practiced by fewer families.

Kinnaur is a region rich in culture and aesthetics, deeply rooted in its traditions. The aesthetic values of the Kinnaura tribe are enriched through various events such as fairs, festivals, cultural programs, rituals, and traditions. These celebrations occur throughout the year across different parts of Kinnaur. A unique aspect of these events is the consumption of locally produced alcohol, known as *Ghanti* or *Chuli*, made from fruits like

apples, apricots, and grapes. The tribal culture of Kinnaur is highly diverse, reflected in their traditional woolen clothing, food habits, and distinct way of life. The Kinnaura people celebrate numerous fairs and festivals, such as Baisakhi (Beesh), Sazo, Lohri, Phagul (Suskar), Dakhraini, Phulaich (the festival of flowers), Losar, and Kinnaur Lavi. Dance plays a central role in their festivities, with participants holding hands and moving in circles with joy and enthusiasm. Staple foods like wheat, opla, phafra, barley, and salted tea are integral to their diet, highlighting their unique culinary identity. Consuming alcoholic beverages during festivals and weddings is a common and culturally accepted practice among the Kinnaura people, adding a distinct flavor to their vibrant traditions.

The development initiatives undertaken in the name of modernization have brought significant changes to the traditional way of life of the Kinnaura people. These changes have posed a threat to their local culture and identity. The distinct language, culture, and identity of the Kinnaura tribe have been significantly impacted. The influx of individuals from other parts of the country has disrupted the cultural fabric of the local population. Traditional marriage rituals have undergone considerable changes. Influenced by Hindu marriage customs, many Kinnaura people now incorporate these practices into their own weddings. Social media has further influenced marriage rituals in the region. When asked about the marriage preferences of the younger generation, a 26-year-old female respondent shared:

"Today in Kinnaur, we are following some of the marriage rituals of other cultures. While we adopt some aspects of these rituals, we ensure that the rest align with our cultural traditions. For instance, in my marriage, I plan to wear a lehenga for only an hour before changing into my traditional attire. I want my wedding to blend both conventional and modern elements".

A 65-year-old respondent stated, *"In the past, marriages and other family functions were decorated very simply. Weddings used to be modest affairs, regardless of a family's socio-economic status. However, nowadays, influenced by other cultures, as well as television, movies, and YouTube, people prefer extravagant decorations. This trend places a financial burden on low-income families. Today, weddings in Kinnaur have become a symbol of social status, and everyone, regardless of their economic standing, strives to display that status. These high-profile weddings are eroding our traditional culture."*

The influence of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube has significantly impacted dress patterns. Young people today no longer wish to wear traditional attire during festivals and functions. A 70-year-old female respondent shared, *"I have always worn clothes made from sheep wool, which are incredibly warm in winter and do not irritate the skin. Unfortunately, young people today refuse to wear woolen clothes, opting instead for modern clothing, which often leaves them vulnerable to illness during the winter. Woolen garments are especially beneficial for newborns, yet new mothers now avoid dressing their babies in wool. It is disheartening to see the younger generation abandoning our traditional culture and embracing external influences."*

Similarly, food habits have undergone a significant shift. Social media platforms offer recipes for all kinds of dishes, leading people to move away from consuming their traditional foods.

A 75-year-old female respondent shared, *"Throughout my life, I have never eaten rice or any food from outside. I have always consumed our traditional foods, such as barley, wheat, corn flour, and everything we grow on our land. This dietary practice has kept me healthy; I have never fallen ill or needed allopathic medicine. However, my children consume rice and other foods from outside and frequently fall sick. My grandchildren, too, eat snacks like chips, biscuits, and Kurkure, which often make them unwell. The rise in diseases in Kinnaur today is largely due to the consumption of outside food. It is essential to promote the value of our traditional local foods to maintain the health and well-being of our community."*

The local dialect has been significantly affected due to the growing emphasis on learning languages like English, Hindi, and others. A 45-year-old male respondent stated, *"I studied up to matriculation and cannot speak English. In today's fast-paced world, being proficient in English is essential. Therefore, I want my children to learn English fluently. They are enrolled in convent schools, and I discourage them from speaking our local dialect at home. My priority is for them to excel in English, as I believe they can learn the local dialect naturally at any point in the future."*

In contemporary times, the social and cultural fabric of Kinnaur is undergoing substantial changes. It is crucial to strike a balance between preserving tradition and embracing modernity.

Balancing Tradition and Modernity: Contemporary Scenario

Kinnaur is renowned for its unique and rich cultural heritage, reflecting a blend of Hinduism and Buddhism. The region's harsh climatic conditions isolate it from the rest of the world during winter, with heavy snowfall making life challenging. Despite these difficulties, the people of Kinnaur live peacefully, celebrating every festival with enthusiasm, which is central to their cultural identity. The mountains, springs, rivers, and forests hold religious significance and form a strong cultural bond in Kinnaur. Although modernization has introduced cultural changes, the people of Kinnaur are making significant efforts to preserve their traditions. To

strike a balance between tradition and modernity, various initiatives have been undertaken. For instance, some villages have banned modern marriage practices that incorporate Hindu rituals. Additionally, many villages have prohibited the consumption of English liquor during weddings and social ceremonies. One elderly woman shared her perspective, saying:

"In Kinnaur, liquor has traditionally been an integral part of social and religious gatherings. In our region, offering liquor to deities has been a practice passed down through generations. Even in marriage proposals, the groom's family brings local liquor as a gesture. If the bride's family accepts the proposal, they also accept the liquor, symbolizing their consent to the engagement. Conversely, declining the liquor signifies a rejection of the proposal. For us, liquor is not viewed negatively; it holds cultural significance in our rituals and ceremonies. We have always brewed our own liquor at home, but recently, an alarming trend has emerged where English liquor is being served at social gatherings, marriages, and special events. This practice places an undue financial burden on less affluent families. To address this issue, our women's association launched an initiative to ban the use of English liquor at all community events and weddings. A penalty of ₹50,000 has been imposed to ensure compliance and promote social harmony."

In certain villages of Kinnaur, the wearing of modern attire during festivals and marriages has been prohibited to preserve the region's cultural identity. Efforts to safeguard the local dialect are also underway, with an eminent scholar actively working on developing a script for the Kinnauri language. This initiative aims to ensure the survival and revival of the local linguistic heritage. Educated volunteers dedicated to cultural preservation are conducting programs in schools to teach children about local traditions and practices. Additionally, many young, educated couples are consciously adopting traditional rituals and attire to promote and uphold the area's cultural values. The Government of India has also extended its support to this cause by emphasizing local tourism, which plays a crucial role in sustaining and promoting Kinnaur's rich heritage. Local residents are increasingly constructing their homes in traditional architectural styles to attract tourists. Tourism has emerged as a significant source of employment, enabling locals to market their traditional handloom and handicraft products. These include the renowned Kinnauri shawls, caps, *patoo*, mufflers, and tweed (used for making close-neck coats, jackets, and pants). Women-led self-help groups in various villages have been pivotal in preserving the region's culture. These groups engage in cultivating and selling local food items and traditional handloom and handicraft products, often collaborating with government initiatives to expand their reach.

India's New Education Policy has prioritized the promotion of regional and local languages, contributing to the preservation of local traditions. Several local products, including *Kala Zeera* (black cumin seeds), apricot oil, and the celebrated Kinnaur apples known globally for their exceptional taste and organic quality have been granted Geographical Indication (GI) tags, boosting their market demand and ensuring economic benefits for the region. Efforts to document and showcase Kinnaur's unique culture are also gaining momentum. The Government of India and the state government have produced numerous documentaries, while local residents use social media platforms to share and promote their cultural heritage. These multifaceted initiatives collectively aim to strike a balance between tradition and modernity, ensuring that Kinnaur's distinct identity thrives in the contemporary era. Currently, numerous social media bloggers are emerging, many of whom produce quality content. Some of these bloggers focus on connecting Kinnaur's unique culture with a global audience. They also shed light on the challenges and issues faced by the region. The educated youth of Kinnaur have formed associations in every village and are working collaboratively to safeguard the area's culture and environment. These associations organize workshops and seminars in schools, colleges, and communities to raise awareness about cultural preservation and environmental conservation. They employ modern approaches to protect and promote the region's heritage and ecology. The educated youth of Kinnaur are playing a pivotal role in bridging the gap between tradition and modernity. They are educating the local population on modern strategies and techniques in agriculture, horticulture, and daily living while emphasizing the importance of preserving traditional practices. Their efforts aim to encourage the adoption of modernity in a constructive and culturally sensitive manner. One educated elderly man remarked,

"Today in Kinnaur, the youth are working tirelessly to safeguard our culture and environment. While modernization is undeniably essential for the region's development, it is crucial to ensure that it does not erode our unique culture. Instead, we must adopt strategies that use modernity to preserve our traditions. The educated youth understand the nuances of modernization and are committed to maintaining a balance between tradition and modernity."

Although modernization has brought several challenges to Kinnaur, the local population is actively working to minimize its negative impacts while maximizing its benefits. The tribal society of Kinnaur is witnessing the modernization of traditions rather than the transformation of traditions into modernity. Old norms and practices are being redefined with new values, blending the best of both worlds. These ongoing initiatives reflect a collective effort to achieve a harmonious balance between tradition and modernity in Kinnaur.

V. Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the local population of Kinnaur believes that the construction of developmental projects in the name of modernization has posed a significant threat to the socio-cultural fabric of the region. The people of Kinnaur have expressed their dissatisfaction with these developmental projects, accusing them of disrupting their way of life. According to the local community, the environmental impact of developmental projects is detrimental wherever they are implemented. This finding aligns with Cernea's (1996) assertion that developmental projects directly affect the socio-cultural environment of the host population. In addition to this, factors such as advancements in technology, the internet, and social media have also contributed to changes in the culture of the Kinnaur tribe. To preserve the local culture and environment, many initiatives have been undertaken by the residents of Kinnaur. Several outside cultural rituals, which had been observed occasionally, have been banned in many villages. The educated youth of Kinnaur are working diligently to strengthen and preserve the local culture, traditions, and environment. The government is also actively involved in safeguarding and promoting the indigenous culture through various initiatives. The need of the hour is to assess the potential impact of any developmental project on the indigenous culture and environment before its implementation. The perspectives of the local community should be considered in the planning stages of any development project. Preserving the traditional culture and environment of the area is essential, as it represents the unity and diversity of the country.

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