

Cultural Traditions of the Dard Tribe in Kashmir: Attire and Marriage Practices

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Abstract

In the Dard tribe, marriage constitutes a permanent socio-legal connection between a man and a woman, intricately linked to religion and tradition. This study delves into the intricate nuances of marriage within the Dard tribe of Kashmir, shedding light on their unique social structures and cultural practices. The Dard tribe, residing in the remote region of the Kashmir Valley, has long fascinated historians and sociologists due to its distinct customs and traditions, particularly regarding attire and marriage. The attire of the Dards is predominantly woollen, with the wealthier opting for cotton garments during summer; the outfit includes pyjamas, a Choga (or gown-coat), a belt for securing it, and a cap and chasseur, both of distinctive design. The attire of the Dard tribe has undergone significant transformation due to the effects of modernisation. The Dard (Shin) wedding institution possesses several distinguishing qualities that set it apart from others in Kashmir. The Dard (Shin) tribe engages in both endogamous and exogamous unions. The negotiation for marriage is commenced by the parents of the bridegroom through a mediator, locally referred to as “Dachoo,” who is typically a close cousin or friend, expected to be unbiased and adept at facilitating an agreement between the two parties. The bridegroom’s parents request a marriage date from the bride’s parents via a mediator (Dachoo), who also negotiates the Maher (bride price) with the bride’s parents. Ultimately, a religious leader is consulted to determine an appropriate date and day for the marriage in accordance with Islamic customs. Divorce is exceedingly uncommon, as it is deemed abhorrent within their community. The study offers valuable insights on the marriage customs and attire of the Dard tribe, while also pinpointing the societal factors and trends influencing changes in the institution of marriage and wearing patterns among the Dards.

Keywords: Shina, Marriage, Customs and Traditions, Mahar, Divorce, Dard tribe, Mediator.

Introduction

Herodotus was the first author to document the Dards. The Dard is an ethnic group primarily located in the northern regions and North West Frontier Province of Pakistan, as well as in the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir. The term Dard possesses a lengthy historical background, and those who carry the name are of considerable antiquity, referred to as Darada in Sanskrit literature. The Greeks and Romans designated the entire hilly region between the Hindukush and the Indian border as Dard land. Kalhana in “Raj-Tarangini” refers to the Dard as Darads residing in the region currently known as Shin. W.G. Leitner referred to the Shina-

speaking tribes of the Gilgit, Chilas, and Astor regions along the Indus River from Ladakh as Dards. The Dard is an Aryan ethnic group residing in several regions of the state; despite interactions with other ethnicities, they have successfully preserved their traditional identity. The Himalayas are the ancestral homeland of numerous ancient tribes, akin to other tribes. The Dards migrated to the inner and outer Himalayas from multiple entry points, spanning from prehistory to the early Christian era. During the initial phase, they migrated to the western Himalayas and established themselves in the lush Indus Valley. Subsequently, some relocated to the Ladakh region, while others established themselves in the Gurez and Tulail areas of Kashmir, and some settled in the Chanderkote area of Ramban district in the Jammu region. Dardistan was a district inhabited by the Dards, encompassing the entirety of Chitral, Gilgit, Hunza, Nagar, Punyal, Yasin, Koh, Gazar, Ashkoman, Chilas, Astor, Iskardu, Gurez, and Kargil, as well as the Indus Valley from Bunji to Batera, and the Kohistan-Malazai, which refers to the upper reaches of the Panjkora River and the Kohistan region of Swat. Their primary area of concentration, or homeland, is Dardistan, currently located in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. For Greek and Roman authors, the term encompassed a broader scope, referring not only to the ancestors of Shin/Dard but also to the entire mountainous region between the Hindukush and the borders of India. According to Litener, the Dards are of Aryan descent; he visited Dardistan in 1866 and enhanced his enquiries from that period by examining Dard dialects and customs through individuals of the race whom he assembled in Lahore. Ray supports this assertion by stating that the Dardic Aryans separated from the Aryan collective shortly after their arrival in India. The Dardic Aryans subsequently colonised the Pamir region, from where they disseminated to Chitral and Gilgit. Ptolemy, in his work "Almagest," employed the term Daradari to refer to the Dards, indicating their extensive historical presence in the Kashmir Valley. Currently, they are located in Dardistan (Dardesa), particularly in the catchment regions of Kishanganga north of Sardi, Gurez, and Tulail. The Dards status as a distinct ethnic group and aspects of their language has long been accessible to travellers; nonetheless, the material available about them has been notably scant. Dardistan was a frontier district of Kashmir, with its headquarters in Gilgit, located in the northern region of Kashmir. The majority of the region is currently under the direct jurisdiction of Pakistan, referred to as the Northern Areas. Shina is spoken across an extensive area of 12,352 square miles. Dardistan extends from Gurez in Bandipora to Drass in Kargil on the opposite side. The renowned Silk Route extends throughout Dardistan, with Gurez Valley being situated along its path.

Historically, the attire worn by the Dards of Gurez differs from that worn in the plains of Kashmir. Gurez was formerly well-known for its woolen garments and handicrafts, but these industries have lost significance as a result of contemporary textile mills and a lack of assistance from the state's administrative apparatus. Gurez was a major hub for the production of woolen goods. Gurez's clothing is unlike anything else in the nation, despite its similarities to the Kashmir Valley. It stands out from the rest of the nation due to its diverse, varied, and unique cultural blend, which forms a unique spectrum of diversions and sets it apart from cultural forms and heritage as well as from geographical, ethical, and social entities. So far as the dress is concerned, earlier people used to wear local dresses made of sheep wool, especially during winter. There were no machine-made clothes, only traditional clothes locally known as pattu (rough clothes). To protect their body from cold, people used to wear chuloo (pheran). This is still worn in some villages of Tulail. To protect their feet from the cold, people wore socks made up of pattu, and now ready-made socks are also in use. Shoes were made up of paddy grass (Koreyee), but now readymade shoes are preferred by the people. In summer, cotton-based western clothing is preferred, but in winter, Pattu Pheran, Hand Gloves, Socks, and Skull caps made out of wool are preferred. It is pertinent to mention that apart from Pattu

Pheran, nowadays, the rest of the wool-based products are rare. These people typically wear long overcoats known as “Pheran” (Chuluu). The only thing that separates men and women who wear it is the stitching. It is used to shield the body from the cold, particularly in the winter. Although its cloth was previously obtained from their animals (domesticated sheep), it is now readily available in the market.

In the past, they would wear a “choga,” which is a type of coat, with a belt known as a cummerbund fastened at the centre. Their pajamas are baggy and reach mid-calf. While the people of Kashmir have historically worn turbans, similar to the rest of northern India, the Dards have a unique custom of wearing unusual hats. In terms of attire and accessories, people in the past would commonly wear local garments crafted from sheep wool, particularly during the winter season. Machine-made garments were non-existent, with only locally produced traditional attire referred to as “pattu” available. In order to shield their bodies from the cold, individuals would traditionally use chuloo (pheran) garments. Some villages in Tulail still continue to wear this. In order to shield their feet from the chilly weather, individuals used pattu socks, and presently, pre-made socks are likewise being used. During the summer season, people tend to favour western clothing made from cotton. However, in winter, they prefer wearing Pattu- Pheran, along with woolen hand gloves, socks, and skull caps. It is important to note that, currently, wool-based items other than Pattu Pheran are scarce. The attire of the Dards is predominantly woollen, with the exception of the affluent, who dress cotton garments during the summer. The ensemble comprises pyjamas, a Choga (or gown-coat), a waistband (camerband) for securing the outfit, and a cap (khoii) along with a chasseur, both of distinctive design. The cap is a half-yard long bag made of woollen fabric. This is rolled upwards at the edges until it reaches a size that fits comfortably on the head. Strips and scraps of leather are placed beneath the foot, and a long, narrow strip is looped around to secure them in position. The headdress is distinctly emblematic of the Dards. The modernisation has significantly altered the attire of the Dard tribe; the youth now dress trousers and shirts, while older and middle-aged individuals typically wear kameez and pyjama. Women also wear shalwar and kameez (Pherak-chalanii). They wear their traditional attire during significant cultural events and occasions.

The Dard (Shin) people converse in the Shina language within their community and utilise Urdu, Balti, Kashmiri, and Dogri for communication with others. The residents of Chilas and Gilgit have increasingly adopted Urdu, as their region is more accessible from the plains of Pakistan compared to the Gurez Valley’s isolation from the rest of India. The language and its associated culture are relatively better preserved in Gurez and have thrived most prominently in Kargil (Ladakh). Dard habitats are relatively isolated from broader cultural influences, exhibit cultural homogeneity, utilise basic technologies, and typically inhabit common geographical regions. The primary sources of their livelihood are agriculture, government employment, and commerce. In the Dard tribe, marriage constitutes a permanent socio-legal partnership between a man and a woman, intricately linked to religious and cultural practices. The Dard/Shin wedding ritual possesses some specific traits that set it apart from the broader community. The Dard/Shin tribes engage in both endogamous and exogamous marriages. Marriage typically occurs upon reaching maturity. Typically, it occurs post-harvest when individuals are unoccupied with agricultural duties. Before the marriage, the bride is invited by her relatives for a gathering. The Nikkah ceremony is conducted by a religious leader (Molvi), during which two representatives from the bride’s side obtain her approval, while the bridegroom’s consent is solicited at the same time. A formal agreement, known as “Nikah Nama,” is documented by a religious authority (Molvi), which includes the stipulated Mehar. The passages of the Holy

Quran, appropriate for marriage, would be recited and translated by the Molvi. The ceremony will conclude following the couple's blessing.

In Gurez, marriage is deeply embedded in cultural traditions and social practices, reinforcing kinship ties and a strong sense of community. These connections provide essential social support, particularly during significant life events such as weddings and funerals. While marriage ceremonies in Gurez have long been shaped by Islamic customs and principles, they also incorporate distinct local traditions. Historically, marriages were conducted strictly in accordance with Islamic laws, with the groom's family selecting a suitable bride and arranging the union. The Nikkah was solemnized following Shariah guidelines, and dowry was not traditionally practiced, though minor variations in customs have emerged over time. In recent years, modernization and evolving social dynamics have influenced marriage practices. Economic status now plays a crucial role in selecting a spouse, and wedding expenses have significantly increased. Although marrying within the tribe remains a cultural preference, migration to non-Dardi areas has introduced external influences, leading to a growing acceptance of exogamous marriages in certain communities. These shifts reflect broader societal changes while maintaining the essence of traditional kinship structures in Gurez.

The marriage customs in Gurez have evolved over time, blending traditional practices with external influences, particularly from Kashmiri culture. In earlier times, weddings were simple affairs where guests were served local staples such as ghee and bread. However, as migration and interactions with the dominant Kashmiri identity increased, the Dards of Gurez began incorporating Kashmiri wedding customs into their ceremonies. Historically, a groom would travel to the bride's home on horseback, accompanied by relatives, while a palanquin was sent for the bride. Guests would gather at the bride's residence to partake in a celebratory feast. Today, modern transportation has replaced these customs, with cars now being used instead of horses and palanquins.

Arranged marriages remain the predominant practice in Gurez, with families playing a central role in selecting a spouse. Factors such as family background, social status, and compatibility are carefully considered, and parental involvement is highly valued in ensuring a successful match. While arranged marriages continue to be the norm, love marriages are also becoming more accepted, particularly when they receive family approval. When a match is agreed upon, a mediator is often appointed to negotiate between families, and a token amount, traditionally starting from Rs. 1111, is exchanged as a formal gesture of acceptance. Historically, endogamous marriages within the same clan were widely practiced, but there is now a growing trend toward exogamous unions due to migration and increased social interactions beyond the community. The preferred age for marriage has also shifted, with women typically marrying after the age of 25 and men after 30, reflecting broader societal changes and the influence of education and career aspirations.

In Gurez, the concept of Mahar (dower) remains an integral part of marriage, with amounts sometimes reaching up to ₹1 lakh. While dowry is not a customary requirement, families often provide their daughters with gifts such as copper utensils, refrigerators, clothes, and furniture, based on their financial capacity. Divorce is relatively uncommon in Gurez, as marriages are regarded as lifelong commitments, and strong social and cultural values emphasize the preservation of marital bonds. However, when separation becomes inevitable, traditional customs govern the process. Men hold the primary right to initiate divorce (Talaq), but doing so comes with financial consequences-typically a penalty of ₹4-5 lakhs. Disputes related to divorce are usually settled within the village, as each settlement has its own

customary laws. Although a Munsiff Court exists in Dawar, it remains largely unused, as most conflicts are resolved at the community level. Despite the predominant role of men in divorce proceedings, women also have the right to seek separation through Khula, a provision that allows them to dissolve the marriage by returning the Mahar or seeking mutual consent. This practice grants women a degree of autonomy, ensuring that they are not entirely dependent on male-initiated divorce. While divorce remains a last resort, the evolving social landscape continues to shape marriage dynamics in Gurez.

Marriage in Gurez is deeply rooted in tradition, yet it continues to evolve with changing societal norms. While arranged marriages remain prevalent, choice-based unions are increasingly gaining acceptance. Traditionally, families, particularly elders, played a decisive role in selecting a spouse, ensuring compatibility based on lineage, social standing, and community ties. However, the younger generation, influenced by education and exposure to broader perspectives, views personal choice in marriage as an assertion of individual rights rather than a deviation from cultural values. This shift is often debated, with some elders perceiving it as a result of Western influence, while younger individuals associate it with growing awareness and literacy. Historically, an important wedding custom in Gurez was the practice of Daape, where the groom's family would offer the bride a gift consisting of 12 to 18 sheep and a cow. This tradition was seen as a mark of financial stability and readiness for marriage. However, over time, it was discontinued due to religious teachings, as it was not recognized within Islamic jurisprudence. Presently, Mahar (dower) is the customary offering, with amounts sometimes reaching ₹1 lakh, depending on the financial status of the groom's family.

Modern-day weddings in Gurez are typically two-day affairs, featuring a grand feast known as Wazwaan, an integral part of Kashmiri celebrations. The wedding procession (Hilaleeh) arrives at the bride's home, and after the ceremony, the bride is escorted to the groom's house. Another notable pre-wedding tradition is Myzarat, a gathering where relatives and friends come together to celebrate the impending union. Age considerations continue to play a role in marriage decisions. It is generally expected that the bride should be younger than the groom. However, economic and educational factors increasingly influence marital timelines. Many young men delay marriage due to unemployment and financial instability, while women cite reasons such as pursuing higher education, difficulties in finding a suitable match, and concerns about dowry expectations. Although dowry is not an established practice in Gurez, families often provide their daughters with household essentials like utensils, furniture, and appliances as part of the marriage arrangement. Despite societal changes, the institution of marriage in Gurez remains a cornerstone of community life, balancing traditional values with emerging personal choices. The low divorce rate reflects the strong emphasis placed on preserving marital bonds, but when separations do occur, they are typically resolved at the village level, guided by customary laws.

Conclusion

The Dard is an ethnic group primarily located in the northern regions and the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan, as well as in the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir. The Himalayas are the ancestral homeland of numerous ancient tribes, including the Dard, who moved to the inner and outer Himalayas from various entry points from prehistory until the early Christian era. In the initial phase, they migrated to the western Himalayas and established themselves in the lush Indus Valley. Subsequently, some relocated to the Ladakh region, while others established themselves in the Gurez and Tulail areas of Kashmir, and a portion settled in

the Chanderkote area of Ramban district in Jammu. In the Dard tribe, marriage constitutes a permanent socio-legal partnership between a man and a woman, intricately linked to religious and cultural practices. The Dard/Shin wedding tradition possesses various aspects that render it distinctly different from other societal customs. The Dard/Shin tribes engage in both endogamous and exogamous marriages. Marriage typically occurs upon reaching maturity. Typically, it is conducted post-harvest when individuals are unoccupied with agricultural activities. The bride's age should not exceed that of the bridegroom. The negotiation for marriage is commenced by the bridegroom's parents through a mediator, locally referred to as "Dachoo," who is a close cousin or friend, expected to be unbiased and adept at facilitating an agreement between the two parties. Negotiation typically persists for several weeks or months. Upon obtaining the approval of both parties, a suitable date is established for a formal announcement, locally referred to as "Saale." After several months or a year, the groom's parents request a marriage date from the bride's parents through a mediator (Dachoo), who also negotiates the Maher (bride price) with the bride's parents. Ultimately, a religious leader is consulted to determine an appropriate date and day for the marriage in accordance with Islamic customs. The group favours early marriage, as younger couples are deemed more adept at managing matrimonial obligations than their older counterparts, and it is also mandated by their faith to marry young. The Maher (dower) is a monetary sum disbursed by the groom to the bride during their Nikkah, commensurate with his financial capacity. The "Mehtar" is considered a crucial requirement and religious obligation for the validation of a marriage in the Dard/Shin community. They also allocate portions of their property (movable or immovable) to their daughters or sisters, signifying the enhanced status of women in the Dard/Shin community concerning property rights. Divorce is highly stigmatised as it is deemed inappropriate within their group. In the event of a divorce, numerous factors are considered, including a lack of understanding between spouses, adjustment difficulties encountered by the daughter-in-law, communication gaps, financial problems, unmet expectations, divergent priorities and interests, and an inability to resolve conflicts. The traditional attire of the Dard tribe of Kashmir serves as a vivid tapestry of their cultural heritage, reflecting the confluence of historical influences, environmental adaptations, and social dynamics. This analysis has illuminated the distinctive elements of Dard clothing, from the materials and techniques used in their creation to the symbolic meanings embedded in their designs. The attire not only represents a practical response to the region's climate but also acts as a crucial marker of identity and social status within the tribe. As modernity and globalization exert pressure on traditional practices, the preservation of Dard attire becomes increasingly significant. Efforts to document and sustain these sartorial traditions are essential for maintaining cultural continuity and fostering a sense of pride and identity among the Dard people.

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