

Research article

Ethnographic Insights into Bead Jewellery Traditions of the Women of the Van Gujjar Community of Uttarakhand

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Abstract

Van Gujjars are a nomadic community of herders in Uttarakhand. This ethnographic study examines the tradition of bead jewellery among Van Gujjar women to build an understanding of gendered identity in the Van Gujjar community. Our primary focus is to analyze the beliefs, ideas, and communal perspectives that influence the lives of these craftswomen, ultimately providing a nuanced understanding of how gender roles manifest, negotiate, and perpetuate within the unique socio-cultural context of the Van Gujjar community. Employing ethnographic methods and observation techniques, we engaged with a group of itinerant Van Gujjars near Byulyaad, in Uttarkashi district. Immersive interview techniques were employed to collect data, shedding light on the lived experiences, subjectivity, and sense-making processes of Van Gujjar women engaged in bead crafts. By analyzing the beliefs, ideas, and communal views that underpin the lives of these craftswomen, we aim to provide a nuanced understanding of how gender roles are manifested, negotiated, and reproduced within the unique context of the Van Gujjar community.

Keywords: Van Gujjars, Ethnography, Bead Jewellery, Himalayan Communities.



I. INTRODUCTION

Van Gujjars, a nomadic community of herders in Uttarakhand, once inhabited the forests of Uttarakhand. They did not own land or have settlements, living with an unequivocal reliance on forest resources for sustenance. During the winter season, they camped along monsoon rivers within the Himalayan Sal forest foothills, where their livestock could be fed on the nearby foliage (Gooch, 1998; Gooch, 2013). Conversely, in the summer months, they went deep into the higher altitude spruce and fir forest, exploiting alpine meadows for grazing their animals at elevations reaching the tree limit. Their primary livelihood revolved around the production of buffalo milk, a commodity subsequently marketed in urban centres beyond the

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forest confines. Van Gujjars of Uttarakhand constitute a unique ethnic group characterized by a nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoral lifestyle. With historical roots extending across northern India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, the Van Gujjar community has seasonal settlement sites in Uttarakhand, including the village of *Byulaad* situated near the Hanol Temple in the Jaunsar Bawar region. Historically renowned for their proficiency in animal husbandry, Van Gujjars in Uttarakhand play a pivotal role in the local economy by supplying milk to neighbouring villages. The Van Gujjar community in *Byulaad* village serves as a testament to the preservation of their traditional way of life, emphasizing livestock rearing as an integral component.

Creating any enduring artefacts or artefact-making traditions is difficult with an itinerant life. However, jewellery is one cultural artefact that has been historically linked with the human race, despite mobilities. The Van Gujjar community in *Byulaad* has brought forward their cultural tradition of intricate beadwork jewellery. This traditional craft holds great significance, especially among the women who adeptly craft these intricate pieces with techniques passed down generations. The meticulous process of selecting designs and patterns involves a harmonious blending of various coloured beads, typically procured from nearby markets. This paper explores the cultural and artistic dimensions of the Van Gujjar community in *Byulaad*, reflecting on manifestation of gendered identity.

The paper begins with an introduction that outlines the purpose of the study, defines the research questions, and provides context for the significance of investigating bead jewellery traditions within the Van Gujjar community. Subsequently, a comprehensive literature review establishes the existing knowledge on the subject, placing the research within the broader academic discourse on ethnography, women's studies, and cultural practices. The methodology section delineates the research design, including the use of observational and interview-based ethnographic methods, and justifies the selection of the Van Gujjar community in Uttarakhand as the study's focus. The findings section presents the ethnographic insights derived from the fieldwork, delving into the intricacies of bead jewellery traditions and contextualizing them within the socio-cultural dynamics of the Van Gujjar community. The discussion section critically analyzes the findings, drawing connections to relevant theories and prior research, while also addressing the implications and contributions of the study. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes key findings, underscores their significance, and suggests avenues for future research. This structured approach ensures a rigorous exploration of bead jewellery traditions, providing a comprehensive understanding of the cultural practices among the women of the Van Gujjar community in Uttarakhand.

II. BACKGROUND

Van Gujjars of Uttarakhand

Researchers estimate that the initial migration of Van Gujjars to the Shivalik region, purportedly originating from Kashmir, occurred approximately 1500 years ago. The precise chronology and motivations behind this migration remain elusive (Sharma, 2010). However, within the tribe, oral tradition suggests that their presence in the hills was the result of an invitation extended by a local *raja*. The story goes that the local *raja*, enamoured by the Van Gujjars, their buffalo herds, and the superior quality of their milk during a visit to Kashmir, entreated them to settle in his kingdom. Some members of the Van Gujjar community assert their royal lineage, recounting a tale wherein a prince, captivated by a buffalo herder in Punjab, proposed marriage. The woman, accompanied by her herd, relocated to the prince's kingdom. To escape the oppressive heat during summer, the princess led her buffalo herd into the high mountains, thereby establishing the lineage of one of the largest Van Gujjar clans.

Presently, the Van Gujjar tribe, estimated at around 30,000 individuals, maintains its distinct identity and heritage (Sharma et.al., 2012). The preservation of their native dialect, *Gujjari*, characterized by linguistic amalgamation of *Dogri* (a Kashmiri tongue) and Punjabi, attests to the endurance of their cultural roots.

Van Gujjars follow Islam now but many Hindu traditions like the *gotra* system are also seen. Cultural amalgamation over the years has developed a unique socio-cultural identity for them (Kasana, 2021). Although external influences are gradually permeating their secluded forest habitat, inducing ramifications in certain areas, the fundamental aspects of their traditional herding lifestyle have endured through the centuries (Nusrat, 2011; Nusrat et.al., 2011; Gooch, 2016).

The post-colonial state has devised various schemes to relocate pastoralists, often without considering their willingness to embrace these ambiguous strategies of settlement impacting their lives and livelihoods (Menon, 2021, 2022). Nevertheless, the Forest Department routinely employs legal instruments and court directives to dispossess pastoralists, in the name of forest conservation and wildlife protection (Garhwal Post, 2020). As a result of this, and several other factors, many Van Gujjars are now choosing to settle down permanently, bringing change to the centuries of culture and traditions they have followed (Gooch, 2019).

Women in the Van Gujjar Community

Centuries of cross-cultural influences have led to a unique social dynamic of gender among the Van Gujjars. Researchers believe that the community once followed its own rich nomadic cultural traditions, unique in their social structure. A few centuries ago, they adopted Islam, which brought about a loose implementation of Islamic social norms, tempered by their older traditions. The role of women in the community is thus unique in this region, shaped by multiple religious traditions and norms (Dyson, 2015; Gooch, 2016).

Women are primarily responsible for domestic duties and serve as the primary caretakers for young children. Researchers have seen that even though the society is patriarchal, women exhibit assertiveness in expressing their opinions and communicating their thoughts to men (Dangwal, 2009). In several significant aspects, the gender dynamics within the Van Gujjar communities challenge conventional stereotypes associated with Muslim cultures, showcasing a more liberal approach compared to numerous non-Muslim Indian communities (Singh, 2003; Broome, 2023). Notably, women in these communities have the autonomy to initiate divorce without incurring shame upon themselves or their families, and without facing stigma or social ostracization from the community (Times of India, 2021). Women within the Van Gujjar households typically oversee financial matters, which some believe has contributed to the relative absence of drinking or gambling within their culture.

Craft Practices

The Van Gujjar community, deeply rooted in their cultural heritage, has embraced various traditional craft practices, contributing to the preservation and conservation of their ancestral knowledge of arts and crafts (Agrawal, 2004; Srivastava, 2022). The community's traditional houses were once adorned with hand-painted designs and motifs, predominantly executed by women. While these designs were originally brought to life using natural pigments, the passage of time has seen a transition to colours sourced from the market, mirroring the community's adaptability to changing circumstances. One of the notable craft practices within the Van Gujjar community is the art of house thatching, an essential skill for creating sturdy and weather-resistant dwellings. Thatching, often performed collectively, involves using locally sourced materials such as grass, leaves, and bamboo. This traditional technique has been passed down through generations, highlighting the community's commitment to preserving their architectural heritage.

The Van Gujjars have been known to engage in the production of forest products, employing traditional techniques handed down by their forefathers. This approach not only sustains their traditional lifestyle but also aligns with the principles of sustainable resource utilization. Forest-derived products such as honey, *gojji* milk, alpine *ghee*, *paneer*, *mawa*, and cheese are crafted using time-honoured methods, ensuring the continuation of cultural practices deeply intertwined with their environment.

Another significant craft practiced by the Van Gujjars is bead jewellery-making. The establishment of tribal handicraft centres has provided a platform for the production of a variety of products, including jewellery, *paranda* (traditional head ornaments plaited into hair), prayer caps, *khent* (rope for cattle), and even in the handles of grass brooms. Each of these items is a testament to the embedded tradition of craftsmanship and artistic sensibilities inherent in the Van Gujjar culture, where even items of routine use are treated as crafted artefacts.

An integral initiative in this direction has been the establishment of five Van Gujjar community tribal handicraft centres in Uttarakhand. These centres aim not only to sustain the rich tradition of artisanal skills but also to serve as focal points for the transmission of traditional knowledge from one generation to the next. The tribal handicraft centres play a crucial role in fostering community cohesion and identity while also providing economic opportunities. As these endeavours continue, the Van Gujjars exemplify a harmonious blend of heritage preservation, sustainable practices, and economic resilience through their craft traditions. The tribal handicraft initiatives undertaken by the Van Gujjar community not only symbolize their dedication to cultural preservation but also showcase a harmonious fusion of heritage, sustainability, and economic resilience within their traditional crafts. The commitment to safeguarding their cultural integrity reverberates through these initiatives, reinforcing the significance of such practices in shaping the identity and cohesion of the Van Gujjar community.

With this understanding, the subsequent exploration of the Van Gujjar community in *Byulaad* village employs a combination of observational and interview-based ethnographic methods to further unravel the intricacies of their cultural practices. This comprehensive approach, integrating both observation and personal narratives, aims to provide a profound insight into the daily activities, rituals, and craftsmanship that define the essence of the Van Gujjar way of life in this particular village.

III. METHODS

The study on the Van Gujjar community in *Byulaad* village employed a combination of observational and interview-based ethnographic methods to comprehensively understand their cultural practices. Observation played a pivotal role in capturing the daily activities and rituals of the community, providing insights into the nuances of their lives. By immersing researchers in the natural setting of the village, unobtrusive observations were made to document behaviours, interactions, and the crafting processes associated with Kaintha and other traditional practices.

In the exploration of bead jewellery traditions among the women of the Van Gujjar community in Uttarakhand, adopting a feminist theoretical framework provides a nuanced and empowering lens through which to analyze and understand the cultural practices and roles of these women. By employing feminist perspectives, the research seeks to unveil the often-overlooked contributions of women in sustaining and shaping bead jewellery traditions within the Van Gujjar community. This framework allows for an examination of the intricate interplay between gender dynamics, cultural practices, and socio-economic structures, shedding light on how these women navigate and negotiate their roles within the broader context of their community. Additionally, a feminist lens encourages an exploration of the potential for empowerment and agency within bead jewellery traditions, as women engage in artistic expression and cultural preservation. The ethnographic insights gleaned from this approach promise to offer a comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the rich tapestry of Van Gujjar women's lives, emphasizing their agency, resilience, and contributions to the preservation of their cultural heritage.

Interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights into the cultural significance and perceptions surrounding the community's practices. Semi-structured interviews allowed for open-ended discussions with community members, particularly Van Gujjar women and elders, shedding light on their perspectives

on beadwork, cautionary traditions, and the evolution of artistic practices. The interviews facilitated a deeper understanding of the cultural context, values, and the intergenerational transmission of traditions within the community. This combined approach of observation and interviews ensures a holistic exploration of the Van Gujjar community's cultural dynamics, offering a nuanced and contextually rich portrayal of their traditions, while also acknowledging the importance of participant perspectives in shaping the narrative.

The analysis in this study employs a multifaceted approach grounded in ethnographic methodologies. Initially, data is systematically gathered through immersive fieldwork, utilizing participant observation techniques to closely engage with Van Gujjar women crafting bead jewellery near *Byulaad* in Uttarkashi district. In-depth, open-ended interviews serve as a pivotal method, enabling the collection of rich narratives that illuminate the lived experiences, perspectives, and sense-making processes of these craftswomen. Further, a thematic analysis is applied to the gathered data, focusing on identifying recurring patterns, cultural nuances, and gender dynamics within the Van Gujjar community. By closely examining the beliefs, ideas, and communal views that underpin the lives of the women involved in bead crafts, the analysis aims to unearth the subtle manifestations of gender roles and their negotiation within this unique socio-cultural context. The methodological framework adopted in this study ensures a comprehensive exploration and nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between bead jewellery traditions and gendered identity among the Van Gujjar community in Uttarakhand.

The ethnographic methods employed in this study of the Gujjar community in *Byulaad* village prioritized ethical considerations, with explicit attention given to obtaining informed consent from the participants. Before initiating any observational or interview-based interactions, researchers sought consent from community members, emphasizing the voluntary nature of their participation. This ethical foundation ensured that individuals were aware of the study's purpose, the potential implications of their involvement, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Respect for the autonomy of the community members and their right to withdraw from the study at any point underscored the commitment to ethical research practices, fostering a collaborative and transparent relationship between researchers and the Gujjar community. This adherence to principles of informed consent not only upholds ethical standards but also contributes to the reliability and validity of the research findings by ensuring that participants are willing partners in the documentation of their cultural practices.

IV. FINDINGS & REFLECTIONS

We approached the Van Gujjars through some locals from the nearby town of *Tyuni*. The camp, referred to as a *dera*, occupied a small clearing nestled within a modest floodplain at the base of a hill. The Van Gujjars were not very forthcoming and remained reserved at first. However, longer interaction with them led them to open up a little more. The women were more forthcoming in the interaction. It was also interesting that the topic of jewellery and beads caused a stir and many others joined the conversation as well. The dwellings of the settlement were low huts without doors in most cases, with expansive apertures for windows, without glass (Figure 1).

The absence of physical barriers rendered their abode permeable to the ambient sounds, fragrances, gentle breezes, and occasional wildlife from the surrounding forest, engendering an immersive connection with nature. Fashioned entirely from natural forest materials, the hut seamlessly blended into its green surroundings, evoking a sense of unity with the environment.



Figure 1: Mud houses of the Van Gujjar community at Byulaad (Source: Authors)

Jewellery of the Van Gujjars

Jewellery and adornment have age-old origins. In the context of the itinerant Van Gujjars, the inclination towards limited and lightweight crafts, exemplified by jewellery, becomes further evident. The compact nature of jewellery aligns seamlessly with the philosophy of streamlined travel, enabling individuals to carry and adorn themselves with practical and aesthetically pleasing items, preserving a sense of lightness and simplicity throughout their journey.

Women of the community are seen adorned with silver and bead jewellery primarily. Some believe the jewellery is pre-Islamic in its origin and tradition. Beadwork was also seen on the caps worn by males earlier but very rarely seen now. Traditionally, the community's jewellery was crafted from precious metals like gold and silver. However, economic challenges and changing times have led them to opt for more affordable alternatives, highlighting the adaptability of their artistic practices. Interestingly, *kainthas* are not limited to women's adornment; men also participate in this tradition by wearing them as bracelets during festive occasions, emphasizing the cultural inclusivity of this practice. Within the male population of the tribe, silver jewellery holds cultural significance, with buttons on the kurta, studs named *Mogla* functioning as cufflinks, silver anklets termed *Jhanjra*, and the *Anguthra*—a substantial silver ring worn on the big toe. The research contextualizes the role of jewellery within the broader cultural practices of the Van Gujjars, emphasizing its importance in expressing identity, status, and cultural heritage.

The practice of nose piercing emerged as a common thread among tribal girls and women, with distinct nose pins such as *Nali*, *Murki*, *Teera*, and *Loung*, each carrying its own cultural significance based on age and marital status. Earrings, bangles, and rings, primarily made of silver, further adorn the women's attire, with the weight of *Bali*, *Jhumka*, and *Kara* contributing to the aesthetic richness of the tribal women. Van Gujjar brides, in particular, undergo an elaborate adornment process during their wedding ceremony, donning chains, *Dolara*, *Sargast*, *Mahail*, *Gani*, earrings, bangles, and rings—all meticulously crafted from silver. The paper explores the symbolic meanings associated with each of these ornaments, providing insights into the cultural and social dimensions of Van Gujjar weddings.

However, in the face of modernization, the younger generation is observed transitioning either to alternative trades or adopting machinery for jewellery manufacturing, marking a shift in traditional practices.

This research contributes to the understanding of the evolving dynamics of traditional jewellery practices within the Van Gujjar community and highlights the challenges posed by contemporary influences on these age-old customs.

Bead Jewellery of the Van Gujjars

Beadmaking and bead jewellery stretches back millennia. It holds cultural significance as an ancient form of artistic expression (Dubin, 2009, 2010). Originating at the Bizmoune cave in North Africa, where sea snail shells were threaded into beads, predating cave paintings. It marks the earliest spark of adornment. Beads represent one of the earliest forms of jewellery. Historically, Lothal in India served as a pivotal bead industry centre until 1900 BC. In the ancient Indus Valley and Harappan Culture, craftsmen demonstrated mastery in creating tiny beads for elaborate constructions (Dubin, 2009). Throughout history, beads have held symbolic meaning worldwide, serving in prayer, anti-tension devices, currency, and gaming. Originally used as money and talismans, beads later found expression in ornaments, handbags, and accessories, symbolizing hierarchy within tribes and societal stature for women based on their beadwork (Dubin, 2010). The craft has evolved from utilizing natural materials to contemporary substances like wood, plastic, glass, metal, and stone (Sciama & Eicher, 1998).

Examining the historical and contemporary links between bead crafts and women through a feminist lens reveals complex dynamics that extend beyond mere artistic expression. Beadwork has frequently served as a space where women negotiate their roles within cultural and economic spheres. Analyzing this phenomenon critically unveils a nuanced intersection of gender, creativity, and tradition. From an economic standpoint, bead crafts have often been a source of income for women, offering a means of financial independence. Moreover, the act of engaging with beadwork provides a platform for women to assert their creativity and contribute to the preservation of cultural identities. From a feminist perspective, this analysis highlights how bead crafts can be both a form of empowerment and a site of potential resistance to traditional gender roles. By examining the historical trajectory of women's involvement in bead crafts, we gain insight into how women have navigated and challenged societal expectations, shaping their identities within the broader socio-cultural context (Sciama & Eicher, 1998).

Within the feminist framework, it becomes evident that the economic and creative dimensions of bead crafts extend beyond individual empowerment, playing a pivotal role in reshaping societal attitudes toward women's roles. The sense of individual identity fostered by beadwork not only contributes to women's financial autonomy but also challenges conventional norms, positioning them as active agents in their communities. This economic agency, coupled with the creative expression facilitated by bead crafting, further underscores the transformative potential inherent in this traditional art form. From a feminist lens, this analysis emphasizes the nuanced ways in which bead crafts serve as a site of potential resistance against traditional gender roles. The historical trajectory of women's involvement in beadwork serves as a testament to their resilience and agency in navigating societal expectations. By unpacking these historical narratives, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how women, through their engagement with bead crafts, have not only shaped their identities but have also influenced and challenged broader socio-cultural constructs.

As we examine the feminist implications of beadwork within the Van Gujjar community, it prompts a broader reflection on the interconnectedness of economic empowerment, creative expression, and resistance to traditional gender roles. This feminist perspective extends an invitation for future research to delve deeper into the intricate dynamics of how traditional crafts, like beadwork, can serve as agents of change in challenging and redefining gender norms across diverse cultural contexts.

The history of bead embroidery among the Van Gujjars in Uttarakhand is a tapestry woven with cultural significance and artistic legacy. Rooted in ancient traditions, bead embroidery has been a hallmark of the Van Gujjar community's craftsmanship for generations. Passed down through the ages, this intricate

art form reflects the rich cultural heritage of the region. The Van Gujjars, nomadic herders residing in the Himalayan state, have skilfully incorporated beadwork into their adornments, particularly in crafting vibrant jewellery like the *kaintha*. The use of beads is not merely decorative; it encapsulates stories, symbols, and a deep connection to their environment. Through bead embroidery, the Van Gujjars have sustained a meaningful link to their history, expressing their identity and creativity while contributing to the vibrant cultural mosaic of Uttarakhand. *Kaintha* holds a special place in the hearts of Van Gujjar women, who skilfully craft these intricate and detailed pieces. The women, especially the younger girls, take a keen interest in the art of making *kaintha*, revelling in the playful combination of beads and colours. The selection of designs and patterns is an art in itself, guided by the harmonious blending of different coloured beads.



Figure 2: Bead kainthas made by Van Gujjar women (Source: Authors)

Procuring beads from the nearby market, Tyuni, the women transform these raw materials into beautiful *kainthas*, worn as bracelets, anklets or neck pieces. Traditionally, this community's jewellery was crafted from gold and silver, but economic challenges and changing times have led them to opt for more affordable alternatives. Interestingly, *kainthas* are not confined to the realm of women's adornment; men also partake in this tradition by wearing them as bracelets during festive occasions. The women wear *parandas*, weaving beads with colourful beads, and braid them into their hair. All the women we encountered had *parandas* woven into their braids, even some of the younger girls. They were all shy to be photographed, however.

This study recognizes gender roles as a dynamic and influential aspect within the Van Gujjar community, particularly evident in the craft of bead jewellery. By delving into the intricate web of societal expectations and cultural norms that shape the roles of Van Gujjar women, the research aims to uncover opportunities for challenging and transforming existing gender dynamics. Through a detailed examination of the women's involvement in bead crafts, the paper explores how this traditional art form becomes a potent vehicle for breaking the status quo. Bead jewellery crafting, traditionally perceived as a female-centric activity, provides a unique lens through which the renegotiation of gender roles can be observed. As women actively participate in the creation of these intricate pieces, their roles extend beyond conventional boundaries, challenging stereotypes and offering a platform for self-expression and

empowerment. This analysis seeks to illuminate the transformative potential embedded in bead jewellery traditions, positioning them as a catalyst for reshaping gender norms within the Van Gujjar community, thereby contributing to broader discussions on social change and gender equity.

The ethnographic insights uncovered the profound significance of bead jewellery, not only as adornments but also as cultural symbols and expressions of identity. The meticulous craftsmanship passed down through generations reflects the community's resilience and commitment to preserving their unique heritage. From the symbolic use of beads in prayer and devotion to their historical role as currency, the beadwork encapsulates layers of meaning embedded in the community's social fabric.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of bead jewellery traditions within the Van Gujjar community of Uttarakhand reveals a captivating narrative that intertwines cultural heritage, craftsmanship, and adaptability. The Van Gujjars, deeply rooted in their forest environment, have preserved and evolved intricate beadwork practices over millennia, offering a glimpse into a dynamic interplay between tradition and the changing realities of their world. This study contributes to the broader discourse on the role of women in traditional crafts in Uttarakhand and offers insights into the socio-economic fabric of the Van Gujjar community. It explores the potential conflicts and synergies between individual aspirations and communal values, thereby contributing to the ongoing conversation about gender dynamics in the Himalayan region.

The study delved into the symbolic meaning of beads, the evolution of bead materials, and the diverse applications of beadwork within the Van Gujjar community. Furthermore, the role of beadwork in signifying hierarchy within tribes and the passing down of craft traditions from mothers to daughters underscore the multifaceted nature of this intricate art form. While the exploration focused on the Van Gujjars, it provides broader insights into the universality of beadwork as a global craft with historical roots spanning continents and cultures. The paper also emphasizes the need for trust-building and understanding when engaging with communities for ethnographic research, as evident in the Van Gujjar community's cautious yet warm reception.

As we continue to foster a relationship with the Van Gujjar community, there remains a promise of uncovering additional layers of their unique identity and the crafts that define it. The study contributes to the broader discourse on bead jewellery traditions, acknowledging their cultural significance, historical evolution, and the intricate interplay between tradition and adaptation within the context of the Van Gujjar community in Uttarakhand.

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