

Space and Identity A Study on the Tradition and Change of the Gujars of Himachal Pradesh.

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Abstract: *The unique life-ways of the 'Gujar' pastoral community of India have evoked significant interest in recent time as they are struggling hard to retain their cultural identity against the increasing pressure of different forces of change. The 'Gujars' are wedded to herding buffaloes since long past and nurturing a distinct socio-symbolic mosaic of their own. The contemporary observation on the community, which is in growing contact with the 'modern' neighbors and agencies, finds out the spatial orientation of the identity as much meaningful. Such space-oriented identity invokes significant intra-cultural concern in different contexts and processes of their lives. The paper, thus, explores the indigenous perception of the uses of space among the 'Gujar' of Himachal Pradesh and the meanings attributed to specific space/s by the people of different age groups. The primary construct of space, the extension of the construct to social relations and to the strategies of livelihood have become the contexts to discuss the sedentarization, which is partly enforced by the agencies. The resultant changes in lifestyles are seen to accompany transformation in self-perception and certain shifts of identity.*

Key Words: Gujar, Identity, Space, Tradition and Change.

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Introduction

The discipline whose central rite of passage is fieldwork, whose romance has rested on its exploration of the remote, whose critical function is seen to lie in its juxtaposition of radically different ways of being (located ‘elsewhere’) with that of the anthropologists’ own, the awareness about the issue of space in anthropological studies has appeared less and late (Gupta & Ferguson 1992). The nineties of the twentieth century demonstrated renewed interest in issues of ‘space’ and ‘place’ across the social sciences (Soja 1989), not the least of which has been in discipline- anthropology. The perception of spatial distinctiveness of societies, nations and cultures forms the starting point from which we can theorize contact, conflict and identity. Anthropologists would do well to follow geographers’ renewed interest (Agnew and Duncan 1989) in reunifying *location*, *sense of place*, and *locale* to yield a more rounded understanding of places as culturally and socially constructed in practice. Cupers (2005) conceptualized ‘space’ as something that is actively produced and reproduced to sustain or alter socio-economic and cultural differences. Such differences in spatial configuration can bring about a fundamental constituent of ethnic identity. The ontological moorings of social and personal identities rest in the minutiae of day-to-day life, embodied practices, material forms, and routines through which we find and see ourselves in relation to others, places and landscapes (Tilley 2006). Thus “Identity” may be defined as the distinctive character belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or a group. Identity is thus best be construed as being both relational and contextual, while the act of identification is best viewed as inherently processual (Rummens 1993) even in terms of space. The present work is a refreshing quest of the contexts and the processes by which the different generations of Gujar of Himachal Pradesh sustain their identity in terms of ‘space’ and in the face of changes taking place in their lives.

In Indian context, most of the anthropological studies label the identity vis-à-vis cultural diversity of a group/s in terms of ethnic origin, religion, and language (Das 2006). Apart from that, the people of India identify themselves through various markers that include dress, shawl, turban, headgear, ornaments, body marking, tattooing, flag and emblem, even differentiable in terms of gender. Every second community identifies itself as such. The case of the Gujars is of no exception as far as their identity is concerned. The Gujar has been mentioned in several articles and books as the homogenous pastoral group, having distinct language, (and) practice vertical transhumance (Rawat 1993; Bhardwaj 1994; Verma 1999; Das 2000) in the Himalayan landscape. Whatsoever, some significant studies (Appadurai 1988; Jolly 1990; Bird 2002; Gray 2003; Levinson and Sparkes 2004) have been carried out so far in favor of establishing cultural identity in terms of the spatial orientations of the nomads. Nomadic livelihood of the ‘Gujar’ is not merely a distinguishing characteristic but it is central to a sense of identity. ‘Gujar’ sense nomadism as superior over sedentarism. On the other hand the recent generations are observed to give more emphasis on the so-called ‘positive’ aspects of sedentarism, such as less hardship, permanent shelter, and easy access to ‘modern’ facilities are often acknowledged. The changes in transhumance life strategies of the Gujar have been strongly engaging their distinct value system in the encounter between their earlier and changing attitudes to ‘space’ as a sense of their identity. Cohen (1982) subscribed the view that the ethnography of ‘locality’ is “an account of how people experience and express their difference from

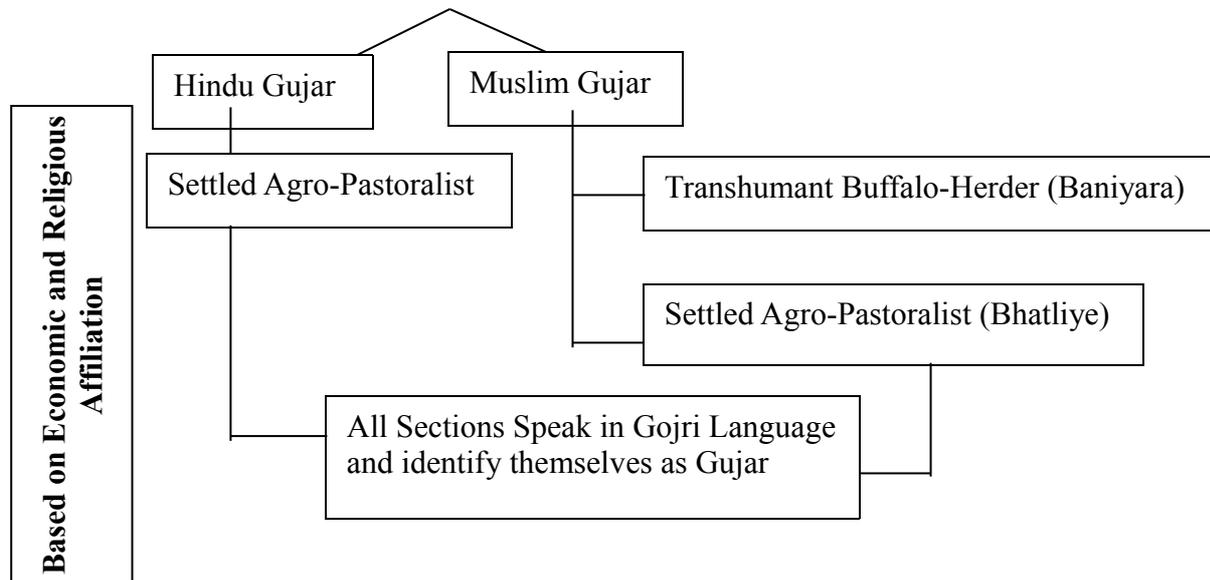
others” and “the ways people express their attachment to a locality”. In contention to Cohen’s view, the present article is an attempt to formulate an approach to understand the identity of a community considering the perceptual variability in terms of the utilitarian classification of space/s, especially coming in terms with the changes. It is important to mention that the ‘Gujar’ nomadism is not necessarily a fixed way of life rather a successful combination of movement and settlement. Such pattern of livelihood is shaped by a variety of socio-political forces that changes lifestyles over time and lead to contradiction and dissonance among ‘Gujar’ views since cultural meaning is not any absolutely shared framework or paradigm (Barth 1996). The distinctive spatial orientations of the pastoral nomads have been noted in the past (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Bhasin 1988; Negi 1998; Das 2000; Chatterjee and Das 2005; Rawat 2006). However, the venture to (re)conceptualize ethnic identity of the Gujar in terms of spatial dimension has still remained insufficient. This article explores the indigenous perception with reference to the uses of space among the ‘Gujar’ of Himachal Pradesh and the meanings attributed to specific space/s by the people of different age groups with distinct routines of daily life.

Community, Context and Methods

The Gujar group is described as the India’s largest Pastoral community (Tams-Lyche 1997), who practices vertical transhumance and mostly confined to the states of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and the newly created state of Uttaranchal. The term Gujar is derived from the Sanskrit term ‘Gurjara’ which first come about in the Sanskrit literature *Sribarsbharita*. History suggests that the Gujar were once a dominant group in western India and they probably either gave their name to the territory of ‘Gujarat’ or might derive their own name from the territory itself. As one of the most interesting communities with distinct way of life, they almost remain unreported in literature. The argument regarding the origin of the Gujar is still shrouded in mystery. Some believe that the Gujar came into India together with the *Hunas* during 5th or 6th century A.D. from central Asia while others trying to prove that they are of Indian origin. It is noteworthy that according to both views the Gujars are pastoralists. Following Grierson (1916) the language of the Gujars may be classed under ‘Pahari languages and Gujuri’ in central group of the Indo-Aryan language families.

The Gujars of Himachal Pradesh can now also be identified on the basis of religious affiliation apart from their economic specialization. In Himachal Pradesh the Hindu Gujars are settled in a village and practice agro-pastoralism, whereas Muslim Gujars are transhumant buffalo-herders. The present study is focused on the cognitive aspects of the Muslim Gujars only. The Muslim Gujars speak in *Gujri* languages with some local variation under different regional influences.

Classification of the Gujars of Himachal Pradesh



This article is based on data generated from a fieldwork of three months on the Gujar Community of Himachal Pradesh to understand the process of ‘Cultural hybridization’ (Abu-Lughod 1999) as well as to apprehend the significant aspects of their identity. The previous studies (Rawat 1993; Bhardwaj 1994; Tambs-Lyche 1997; Das 2000; Verma 2004) on Gujar community focus on the differences between the determination of identity from external perception and the voices within Gujar community. Bauman (1996) draws a distinction between ‘modernist’ and ‘Post-modernist’ strategies for identity construction. The former tries to fix and ground identities in the past whereas latter attempt to resist all fixations, remain open, and embrace perpetual change. Regarding spatial orientations, the salience of two issues became apparent during the present study that encompasses both ‘modernist’ and ‘post-modernist’ strategies. The first revolved around what might be termed as *nomadic mind-set*, and the second concerning the context specific discernment of space use including the effects of immediate circumstances.

The research has been carried out in two phases incorporating both *Baniyara* and *Bhatliye* Gujar that necessitates the visit to remote *Bhatliye gra* (village) and roaming with *Baniyara*. Initial period of research proved to be difficult because of hilly terrain and suspicious attitude of the respondents that gives the impression of a culture whose members constitute what Adler and Adler (2002) described as reluctant respondents who are not only hard to find but even harder to secure for permission to study. However employing a ‘local boy’ as field guide negotiates this predicament. The ‘local boy’ plays a role of passive translator rather engaging directly in the interview process. The authors being long participants in the Gujar community choose to authenticate their observation by self-reflexion and subsequent cross-checking of their observation to minimize the error of understanding.

The observations and discussions are confined to the two groups of Gujar. One is *Bhatliye* i.e. the settled agro-pastoralist section of the Gujar living in the Maingal village, which comes under the jurisdiction of Sillaghrat gram panchayat of Chamba District, Himachal Pradesh and the other section was *Baniyara* groups, who use Sillaghrat as base camp *en route* to the highland pasture. We encountered the sedentary section of the Gujar at Maingal, a multi-ethnic highly dispersed hilly village is about 31 km from Chamba, the district headquarter that can be approached up to Sillaghrat (25 Km.) by bus/jeep. The remaining journey includes dusty bridal path crisscrossing narrow watercourse with a gradual ascent right up to the village. The area within the village boundaries is known as Maingal *mohal*. The reasons for selecting this village are the Gujars numerical dominance, communicability and the retention of their original tradition because of the geographical isolation from the outer influences. Thirty adults (eighteen men and twelve women) and fifteen children were interviewed in different contexts of space, usually in *dera* (household), *joth* (highland pasture), *bugyals* (Grazing land), *padai* (transit), *vidyalaya* (School). Almost without exception the Gujar informants expressed some uneasiness to record conversations, but all participants permitted to take field notes during the interview. The analysis of the collected data reveals that the livelihood strategies of both sections are entirely synchronized with their spatial orientations for the optimum utilization of *bugyals* (Grazing land) and *Khumma* (cultivable land). However, it opens up the significant aspect of their sense of belongingness to the same group.

The following discussion intends to interpret (i) the concept of their space first. It draws on De Certeau's (1984) explication of space as a practiced place where historically and culturally situated people create a locality of familiar *heres* and *theres* in the same way that speakers act out language systems in the creation of vernacular meanings. However, in slight contrast with the linearity of the above the study also finds the viability of Sontheimer's (1996) interpretation of space as uneven, diverse and discontinuous. The movement of the Gujar has assigned specific nature to space (Sarkar and Sarkar 2000). Next it takes up (ii) the extension of 'space' to the functional domain of social relations, examined in connection to earlier ethnographic studies as well (Negi 1998; Verma 1999; Das 2000; Chatterjee and Das 2005; Rawat, 2006). The study then revisits (iii) context of the specific transhumance strategies on the basis of spatial embeddedness. Charles Winnick's (1958) definition of transhumance needed attention to derive the specificity of the Gujar (Bhasin 1996; Das 2000). Finally (iv) the emerging inter-generational differences of responses and perceptions of the present Gujars regarding the changes in spatial orientation was represented by a few representative cultural commentaries.

Interpreting Space

In the realm of Gujar community all spaces are not suitable for encampment; some are more effective than others. The effectiveness of a place depends on its association with green pasturages, water sources, and proximity to the market, quality and quantity of milk produced by their cattle etc. As far as the concept of space is concerned, the Gujar categorize two types of spaces viz. Space for movement (*Rasta*) and Space for settlement (*Dera*). Even within the space for settlement there are 'Purity space' and 'Protection space' each endowed with efficient quality but functionally different from one another. The Gujars have almost fixed routes of migration

from their winter camps to summer camps as also a fixed schedule according to which they move. In due course of migration they always use previously earmarked places for transit camp *en route*. Sometimes they pass through the motorable road along with their herds at night in order to avoid traffic and to cover a long distance. So the proper knowledge of space for movement helps them reaching the destination in time. Thus the cognition of space is inextricably bound together with their nomadic form of livelihood.

The Gujar concept of space for settlement can be defined at various levels. It begins at the level of living space. The *z̤honpri* (hut) is followed by the *kotha* (homestead). Linked to it is a group of *deras* (*gra*), the seasonal encampment areas in different zones. In Himachal Pradesh, the winter encampment area constituted by the Gujar *deras* is semi-permanent in nature. Gujar *deras* are invariably located at the perennial water holes on the hill slopes or at the seepage springs along the courses of small streams or rivulets. Such locations facilitate the availability of water for humans and for watering and laving the animals. The Gujars cognize their *kotha* (homestead) as ‘protection space’, because it protects them and their herd from predator, like wild elephants. *Nikkichhan* is another example of protection space as it protects the calves from the rain and other climatic disaster. The Gujar considers *Baithak* as ‘purity space’. This is a small structure than the *z̤honpri* but similar in shape. The walls of the *baithak* do not reach the roof and are only about 5ft – 6ft high. The *baithak* is used to receive guests and also for socio-religious occasion. In the high altitude pastures the Gujar homestead has only two compartments, the *z̤honpri* for humans and the *Nikkichhan* for calves. It is worth mentioning that the concept of purity space exists only when the Gujar is in their permanent *dera*.

Space and Social Relations

The previous section explained the generalized views on distinctive spatial orientations of the studied community. There are the possible relations between spatial specification and the sociological elements of the community. In some compliance with the earlier studies mentioned above, the present work has observed that the village (*gra*), transit camp (*padai*) and household (*dera*) are the most significant elements through which marriage and kinship are formally regulated and the individual acquires key statuses in the community. The ‘other people’ of the locality can easily distinguish between *Bhatliye* and *Baniyara* sections, particularly based on the composition of transhuming group (*Kafila*) and its material possessions. Social conditions in Transit camp (*padai*) and Highland pasture (*joth*) are influenced by a number of factors over which the individuals have little control. Due to governmental constrictions, *Kafilas* are often uncertain about getting permission to move through the non-traditional routes. Selection of transit camp entirely depends on the *kafila* headman (*badda*), who is virtually romanticized by the ancestral legacy. So the choice of the individual to select *padai* is circumscribed by the Gujar ‘themselves’ and the ‘others’.

In the ‘Gujar’ community, womanhood is associated with rearing of child, nurturing buffaloes, cooking, and cleaning. Manhood means the ability of providing for and protecting the family as well as representing the household in public sphere. Both man and woman can graze their buffaloes but the selling of milk products in the market is an exclusive affair of the adult male members of the family/ *kafila*. Especially females and children are prohibited to leave *kafila* in the darkness because of the fear of deadly animals and risks of the hilly terrain.

Thus the manhood is portrayed as the controller of darkness and ‘public space’. It also seems that in the ‘Gujar’ family, there is a natural division of labor so that the role expectations of both genders are clearly defined and complementary to one another. Living in *padai* and moving with *kafila* generates a spatial environment, where girls learn to equate their femininity with domesticity. However, deviation is also observed due to the absence of male members in a family, where a powerful mother-figure enjoys great autonomy. The female enjoys autonomy in terms of decision making restricted to the family affairs but she has to depend on the other near relatives for the marketing of products. The female enjoys such autonomy while stayed in the village but not during the migration or while staying at highland pasture. A more careful look at the ‘Gujar’ community reveals the association between space and economic standard of the Gujar family in terms of frequency of the guests, their relation with family members and the distance traversed by them. In the poorer families, frequency of the guest is low in comparison with wealthier families and visits of the kin are often restricted to closer ones, who are supposed to share the living room without any hesitation. The household of a wealthier family is comprised of *Nikkichan*, *Zhonpri* and *Mehmankhana* (Guest room), which is used to receive honored guest coming from long distance, otherwise living rooms (*Zhonpri*) are offered to the near kin from the nearby area. Such spatial arrangements for the guests can be interpreted as a mechanism to maintain the propinquity with the kin. Therefore, the relative proximity with the kin is actually embedded in economic condition of the Gujar family. The Gujar perceives guest as honored outsider and relatives as insider, thus the sharing of space with the relatives implicitly consolidate the identity of the self and differentiates from other.

Space and Life support strategy

The Gujar subsistence pattern is characterized by the ‘Transhumance’, which is here a nearly total dependence on buffaloes and their seasonal movement between different altitudes. In the Himalayan region, the practice of transhumant pastoralism involves cyclical movement of herds between highlands and lowlands in order to take the full advantage of seasonally available pastures at different elevation in the Himalayas. As it is already mentioned that the *Bhatliyes* livelihood mainly depends on buffalo pastoralism, which demands extensive utilization of highland pastures to graze their buffalos. The studied village Moingal is actually a summer camp for the *bhatliyes*, where every family possesses a certain amount of cultivable land. It is interesting to note that the *bhatliyes* have struck a fine balance between their agricultural operation and pastoral compulsions of grazing their herds through intelligent allocation of time perceived in terms of changes in the composition of hilly landscapes and manpower available with concerned families. The cycle of *bhatliye* migrations, both upward and downward, shows distinct regularity of time and routes. Even the timing of migrations is finely synchronized with the major ecological and socio-economic happening of the regions involved in the process. The melting away of snow and appearance of verdant pastures in high Himalayas initiate their upper migration in the permanent summer camps in early May. For about four months starting in May-June that is after sowing of maize, till September-October, that is when maize is ready to harvest, usually one male member from each family stays at its *dhar* (traditional pasture) to graze their buffaloes. Generally the *dhar* used by them are not too far from their villages. For instance, the Gujars of *Moingal* village uses *chandi dhar*, *chal dhar*, *sakri dhar*, *nadeen dhar* etc. all located within two to three

days trekking from their hamlets. By the end of September or early October the buffaloes are driven back to the villages and all the families along with their possession started migration towards winter camps in the lower plains due to onset of winter, which is generally caused by inclement weather in surrounding ridges. The timings of *bhatliyes* downward migration is so skillfully tuned that their arrival in low altitude villages occurs when the harvesting is complete and their buffaloes have enough place to camping on the fields. In fact the lure of having buffalo dung, valuable manure for agricultural land, free of cost, prompts the farmers to extend free camping ground to the Gujar and their herds. Thus the life support strategy of the Gujar exclusively depends on the proper perception of time that displaces space, which controls their rhythmic life of movement and settlement.

Inter-Generational Perception of Change

The ‘Gujar’ individuals of older generation often associate recent livelihood strategies with the imposition of new governmental restrictions. Apart from changing economic landscape of the area, freedom of earlier times to pursue life on move has been destabilized by:

- 1) the loss of traditional stopping places (*padai*),
- 2) wind of modernization,
- 3) process of sedentarization,
- 4) deforestation leading to the dearth of verdant pasture.

Despite all, especially *Baniyara* still lead fully nomadic life, as they don't have any permanent abode to settle, though they are the registered voters of a local political body (*panchayat*) but the *Bhatliye* movement is restricted between villages to *dhar*. Transformation in the way of life can be perceived from the similar and contrasting narratives of some Gujar individuals given below. These are only a few typical excerpts of their narration.

Context A: (Sillaghrat *padai*)

Case 1 (Gulabdin, age 70): Life on move is good for health. I am 70 years old now but still I have the ability to walk continuously for three to four days. In my younger days, the situation was good, buses and cars were few on the road, the quality of the halting places provided by the *zamindars* was excellent, even in the *dhar* wild animals and birds were abundant. That was nice old days to move with all the family members, playing with cousins, singing and dancing round an open fire, meeting old friends in the road, hunting wild animals in a group.... really thrilling! You won't believe that... once I was attacked by a leopard (*chitra*) but my friends saved my life. You tell these kids, they don't believe you. It was a hard life but better than today. Some of us settle in a village, but by and by losing their older customs, norms and values, even they dare marrying within clan.

Case 2 (Latif, age 40): Living in this way is hard and risky but we don't have other choice. If government provides us with some land, we will settle and open a dairy business like our other counterparts. Life on move hampers the educations of our children, moving through the hilly terrain often causes a problem for children, women and buffaloes. Last year we have lost two buffaloes that fell into a canyon *en route* to highland pasture. In case of any serious health problem you won't get the service of a doctor. I prefer being settled. The older life has no future for kids.

Context B: (*Maingal* village)

Case 1 (Rukumdin, age 66): I am missing our old glory of livelihood. After settling in the village, my life became sluggish. There is nothing much to do once you settled in a village. I am suffering from a kind of inferiority, because of the adoption of agriculture as a life strategy. A Gujar can claim his Gujarhood only through the possession of buffaloes and hardship of life. Due to the sedentarization, extended families broken down, father and son live in separate *deras*; grand children loose attachment with their grandparents; intra-familial conflict increases; group solidarity decreases. I would be glad of being nomad again.

Case 2 (Nurbanu, 30): Settled life is better than nomadism. At least we have a permanent land for living, separate room for sleeping, water facilities, and electricity is no more a dream. There is a school for children in a village; primary health centers and shops are close to the village, marketing of milk products and other goods became easier due to frequent bus services. Being a female I understand the problem encountered by a female during movement. But still we are moving.... moving towards the better future for our children.

In such narratives, certain opinions recur: the older generations equate nomadic lifestyle with hardship. Though people were healthier, happier, enjoying intimacy with the relatives and friends, there were clear distinctions in life strategy between Gujar and Non-Gujar. These comments also reflect the disruption of knowledge in younger generation concerning biological species on spatial basis. However, the feelings of changing patterns of life are reflected in a different way in younger generation. The younger people distance themselves from the attitudes of the older generations and endeavour to articulate their different values to the changing patterns.

During last few years Gujar community has witnessed considerable amount of flux in the forms of sedentarization, modernization, development and other forces of change. The complete or partial loss of traditional lifestyle, among which nomadism is central, has led to disruption in customary spatial orientations and formation of new hierarchies both between and within families. The sense is evident that the past is more ordered. It confirms the view that nomadism is entailed by more than a lifestyle. Providing a sense of ethnic boundaries and separate identity, it was linked to a social hierarchy in which roles were clearly defined.

Conclusion

In this study discrepant voices come forward, and in particular these appeared to operate on the age lines. The older generations seems to be redolent about past traditions and associate nomadism with a w/healthy lifestyle whereas their younger counterparts equate nomadism particularly in relation to the hardships of “life on move”. In Pan-Indian context nomadic lifestyle has been intimidated during the last few decades by increasing constrictions, imposed by governmental and other ‘modern’ agencies. The process of sedentarization and increasing socio-economic pressures on traditional ‘Gujar’ way of life plays an important role toward the perceptual shift between generation from “w/healthy to hardship” concerning nomadic lifestyle. It is not simply the act of traveling that is significant rather many informants reiterate past events about the places of traditional migration routes that are intimately connected with specific events. Such verdict conforms to the view regarding the importance of place to a sense of cultural identity. Again nomadism seems to provide rhythm and structure

to the community that is connected with social hierarchy and role differentiation of the family members. This entails cultural adaptations at a group level, and both physical and psychological repositioning at an individual level. Finally, nomadic lifestyle appears to serve the purpose to maintain group boundary. Many informants associate sedentarism with the incorporation of 'foreign element' that might 'impure' their tradition. It has been noted that many minority groups evolve new hybrid forms rather than disappearance or assimilation. However, in this instance it seems to emerge that the endeavour to assess the Gujar identity in terms of spatial orientations necessitates understanding the consequences of changing lifestyles.

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