

# TRADITIONS IN TRANSFORMATION: EXPLORING ART, CRAFT AND CULTURE OF DODRA AND KAWAR

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## ABSTRACT

*Preservation of traditional arts, crafts, cultural activities, and indigenous knowledge systems is essential to preserve the cultural history and distinctive character of remote communities, who, represent a complex balance between human existence and nature and serve as outstanding guardians of varied socio-cultural traditions in the face of challenges from migration, urbanization, and socioeconomic changes. In this context, this paper explores the cultural landscapes of Dodra and Kawar, probably the remotest and one of the most backward areas of Himachal Pradesh. The ecological knowledge, folklore, and traditional crafts that have been passed down through the years in Dodra and Kawar (villages) are treasure troves that demonstrate the community's profound regard for its natural surroundings and cultural legacy. However, opening of the area and modernisation pose a danger to traditional customs, questioning their ability to endure. The findings of this paper suggest that merging cultural revitalization efforts with sustainable tourism could strengthen social cohesion and promote economic empowerment, offering pathways for community-driven sustainable development. Highlighting the necessity of policy interventions and adaptable frameworks to support heritage conservation, this paper contributes to broader discussions on heritage preservation, sustainable cultural tourism, and the role of indigenous knowledge in building resilient, culturally vibrant communities, showcasing Dodra and Kawar's cultural and economic potential within the Himalayan region.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Heritage; Ecological Wisdom; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; Sustainable Cultural Tourism; Traditions.

## Introduction

Dodra and Kawar regions of Himachal Pradesh are in the rugged Ruppun valley of Shimla district and were isolated from the main land till 2009. They are home to unique cultural practices and traditional art forms shaped by centuries of isolation and environmental adaptation. Known for their distinct heritage, these areas embody an intricate interplay of folklore, rituals, and artisanal crafts, marking them as culturally rich landscapes within the Western Himalayas (Negi, 2020). The indigenous crafts of Dodra and Kawar, such as metalworking, weaving, and woodcarving, are more than just means of subsistence; they have deep symbolic significance that are connected to the community's social and spiritual identity (Thakur, 2018). However, local communities are gradually seeing a change from traditional to contemporary lifestyles due to the rise of tourism, contemporary media and some adjustments made to meet the expectations of young generation and visitors (Sharma, 2021).

This paper explores these shifts, looking at how outside cultural influences and financial incentives are changing the customs and festivals of the area while igniting discussions about commercialization and authenticity. It also contributes to the broader discourse on preserving intangible cultural heritage in the face of modernization, aligning with UNESCO's efforts to safeguard traditional arts and cultures worldwide (UNESCO, 2003).

## Review of Literature

The transformation of traditional cultural practices in remote areas like Dodra and Kawar is part of a broader phenomenon observed in indigenous communities around the world. Recent research explores the pressures and adaptations experienced by these regions as they interact with modern economic, social, and environmental changes. Appadurai (1996) introduced the concept of "cultural flows," highlighting how global interactions can lead to the reshaping of local identities. Studies by Roy and Sharma (2017) and Thakur (2018) emphasize that their crafts are not only a means of livelihood but also embody local values and narratives. In the face of modernization, however, there is an observable decline in the number of artisans as younger generations pursue different careers, leading to a risk of these skills becoming obsolete (Singh and Sood, 2020; Mehta, 2018). Similarly, Sharma (2021) highlights that tourism-driven adaptations can dilute the authenticity of local festivals and crafts, transforming them into performances rather than genuine cultural expressions. Youth migration is another significant factor influencing the preservation of traditional culture. Research by Chopra (2016) and Verma (2020) reveals that

young people migrating from rural to urban areas often do not return, creating gaps in the transmission of knowledge and practices crucial for cultural continuity. In Dodra and Kawar, this issue is particularly pressing as older generations struggle to pass on artisanal skills to the youth, who frequently leave for education and employment opportunities (Kumar & Singh, 2022). According to Bhattacharya (2015), adapting cultural practices to contemporary contexts can help sustain them, although this often involves reinterpreting traditional meanings. UNESCO's (2003) framework on intangible heritage encourages communities to adapt as a strategy for preserving relevance in a changing world, a perspective supported by recent studies in Himachal Pradesh (Sah, 2021). In Dodra and Kawar, cultural documentation initiatives help capture and retain oral histories, traditional rituals, and artisanal techniques. Such efforts not only contribute to the local community's sense of identity but also serve as resources for future generations and scholars studying cultural change (Thakur, 2018).

This review underscores the complexity of cultural transformation in various remote areas, where modernization, tourism, migration, and the need for economic viability intersect with heritage preservation. The literature reflects a nuanced understanding of how these factors influence cultural practices, with both positive and negative impacts on traditional arts, crafts, and rituals. As Dodra and Kawar navigate these changes, research can play a pivotal role in supporting the documentation and adaptation of local traditions, contributing to a broader understanding of cultural sustainability within Himalayan communities.

## Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques such as immersive field visits and direct engagement with community members to capture the authenticity of local traditions and their on-going transformation. The research comprises several stages, including preliminary desk research, fieldwork, participant observations, and interviews with artisans, cultural custodians, and residents. The methodology aims to balance ethnographic depth with analytical rigor, enabling a holistic portrayal of Dodra and Kawar's cultural landscape.

## Discussions

India's diverse landscape holds many remote and culturally rich regions that captivate both visitors and researchers due to their historical, cultural, and geographic uniqueness. Himachal Pradesh, a northern state known for its vibrant traditions and natural beauty, is home to one of the most isolated and culturally distinctive areas, Dodra and Kawar. Despite its remoteness, these villages in Ruppin valley have preserved a way of life that offers insight into traditional Himalayan culture. Key observations are listed as below:

- **Topography and Access:** These villages' falls directly on the traditional Sangla – Ruppin Pass – Naitwar trail that links the Baspa Valley of Himachal to Tons Valley of Uttaranchal. The primary route to Dodra and Kawar involves a journey from Shimla to Rohru and onward through the Chanshal Pass and onwards. It can also be accessed via trek from Uttaranchal side. Chanshal pass, reaching an elevation of approximately 4,520 meters, remains snow-covered and is accessible only during specific months of the year (Mehta, 2019). The valley got connected to the mainland only in 2009. Travel still is severely restricted during winter due to heavy snowfall and the risk of avalanches (Verma & Chauhan, 2022). It is a rugged valley with Rupi River as its lifeline and fertile enough for agriculture being the main profession of the people.
- **Historical Contexts:** It is said that Dodra-Kawar was given as a dowry to Raja of Bushar by the Raja of Tehri; but when and to whom is not known or recorded. In the medieval ages the nomads with sheep used to venture into this valley from Uttarakhand side during summers for want of good fodder – leaves of *Mohru* trees. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, area came into prominence because of Gurkha conflict with hilly areas and probably attracted settlers from the main lands, but remained isolated. Hardly any historical records for this area are found or maybe ever written (Bhatt, 2019). The British administration's reports from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century noted the region's isolation and described it as an area that maintained its indigenous practices largely untouched by modern influences (Jones, 1898, as cited in Kumar, 2023). During the post-independence era, Dodra and Kawar saw gradual integration into the broader socio-political framework of

India. The introduction of roads and subsequent communication systems marked a significant turning point in the region's history, altering its economy and lifestyle (Verma & Thakur, 2022).

- **Architecture:** The architectural styles of Dodra and Kavar are a testament to the creativity and resilience of their communities, which is characterized by their harmonious integration with nature and the use of local materials (Thakur, 2018). It is notable for its traditional wooden structures, known as 'Kathkuni style' for their carvings and construction style. The buildings, often temples and homes, feature timber frames, stone bases, and slate roofs, exemplifying the indigenous craftsmanship adapted to the harsh Himalayan climate (Rana & Sharma, 2021). Prominent examples are the temples dedicated to local deities, which display wooden carvings that depict mythological scenes and floral motifs, though not as elaborate as in other parts of Himachal. The temples, such as the ones dedicated to Jhak Devta at Pujarli highlights the artisans' skill in blending functionality with artistry (Mehta, 2020). In the homes the ground floor is reserved for animals and stocking of wood and top floors for humans. This keeps the entire house warm during winters. They are constructed close to each other giving a sense of security.
- **Art and Craft:** The art and crafts in Dodra and Kwar are simple in designs totally merging with the surroundings. The most notable crafts is traditional weaving, which includes the creation of woollen tweed, shawls and blankets. The weaving designs are simple with no flower motifs as is the case in Kullu and Kinnaur. The wool is from the local sheep and blended locally and is quite warm to suit the climate where warm clothing is essential (Sharma & Singh, 2022). Wood carving is another prominent craft of Dodra and Kavar. Artisans use locally sourced deodar and pine wood to create intricately carved household items, religious artifacts, and decorative pieces. These carvings often feature traditional Himalayan motifs such as geometric patterns, floral designs, and depictions of local deities (Rana, 2020). Metalwork, although less widespread, also holds a place in the craft heritage of the region. Bells are popular along with Trishuls in metal crafts. The craft of basket weaving, using locally available bamboo and willow, is practiced for creating storage containers and functional household items. These baskets are woven with precision and are known for their durability and aesthetic simplicity (Thakur, 2017). This craft exemplifies the community's sustainable use of natural resources and their connection to the environment (Rao, 2019). However, the art and craft also showcase the limited resources and prosperity of the region in its simplicity.
- **Dresses and Ornaments:** The traditional dresses and ornaments worn by the local population is designed to cater to the cold climate and rugged terrain, while simultaneously showcasing their artistic heritage (Mehta, 2019). Both men and women typically wear woollen garment known as *Jhudki and Lakhauti* with pyjamas paired with caps known *pahari caps*, (Thakur, 2021). Women use *Dori* on their waist to give shape and support to the body and dress. The garment is weaved by the locals themselves including the *Dori*. The traditional dress is simple compared to other parts of Himachal clearly indicating the geographical isolation and limited resources. The use of natural dyes derived from plants and minerals is a common practice in fabric decoration reflects the community's deep connection with their natural surroundings (Sharma & Verma, 2022). With changing times modern dresses are in vogue for younger generations and traditional dresses are more for elderly and festive times.

Ornaments are worn in Dodra and Kavar and they serve not only as decorative items but also carry symbolic meanings related to marital status, cultural beliefs and regional prosperity (Singh, 2021). Unlike Chamba, Kullu or Kinnaur the jewellery in Dodra and Kavar is neither locally crafted nor heavy or with distinct features. It is mostly bought from neighbouring areas. The men, although less adorned, may wear simple silver rings or chains, particularly during festivals or important social gatherings (Rao, 2017). Women wear simple gold and silver ornaments.

- **Religion, Culture, and Rituals:** Dodra and Kavar exhibit a rich tapestry of religious beliefs, cultural practices, and rituals with predominant influence of Hinduism intertwined with local traditions and tantric practises (Rana, 2020). Cultural practices are deeply intertwined with the pastoral and agrarian way of life.

The region's folk songs and oral traditions often reflect themes of agriculture, seasonal changes, and pastoral life, preserving the collective memory and experiences of the community (Mehta, 2023, Singh, 2021).

Seasonal festivals and rituals play a significant role in reinforcing community bonds. The *Mela Shirgul*, held annually, is one such festival that showcases the region's devotion and cultural vibrancy. Ritualistic dances, often accompanied by instruments like the *dhol* and *nagara*, are integral to these events and carry symbolic meanings related to agricultural cycles and deities (Singh & Verma, 2022). The religious customs observed are often passed down orally, preserving their essence despite minimal external influences.

- **Pastoral and Agrarian Lifestyle:** The lifestyle in this area is steeped in primitive customs, rituals and superstitions – and folklores are held in awe. There is a definite way of doing everything and life is in total sync with nature and its rules and that is the uniqueness. Marriage customs are also semi primitive with forced marriages – *Dhaada* marriage – still in vogue. High-altitude terrain of Dodra and Kawar lends itself to practices that rely heavily on both livestock rearing and agriculture. Pastoralism forms a significant aspect of the livelihoods here. Sheep and goat rearing are especially prevalent, providing wool, milk, and meat, which are essential for both subsistence and economic activities (Sharma, 2019). The practice of transhumance, where herders migrate with their livestock to higher pastures during summer and return to lower altitudes in winter, is a traditional way of managing resources sustainably and maintaining herd health (Thakur & Chauhan, 2020).

Agriculture in Dodra and Kawar is characterized by subsistence farming, with locals cultivating crops suited to the mountainous terrain. Magical millets are most prevalent with Amarnath (chollai) being a staple crop and diet along with rajma, buckwheat, barley, peas, bathu, mandwa, opla, chavra, local rice and maize, and phapra -used for distilling local liquor (Verma, 2022). Meat (especially dried meat) is a delicacy though many in the valley are becoming vegetarians now due to the influence of Beas Dera (religious organisation) in Punjab.

- **Dietary Habits:** The staple diet primarily consists of locally grown millets that can withstand the harsh climatic conditions (Sharma, 2021). Potatoes are a significant part of the diet due to their adaptability to cooler temperatures and ease of cultivation in the region (Rana, 2020). Dairy products play an essential role in the daily diet, stemming from the region's pastoral lifestyle. Milk, butter, and ghee are commonly consumed and used in various traditional dishes and rituals (Thakur & Chauhan, 2022).
- Seasonal foraging for wild edibles such as nettles, ferns, and various herbs adds nutritional diversity to the local diet (Kumar, 2021). These wild greens are incorporated into traditional recipes and valued for their medicinal properties as well (Rao, 2020). Traditional cooking methods typically involve slow cooking over wood fires, which enhances the flavours and preserves the nutritional content of the food (Singh, 2020). Special dishes are prepared during occasions such as harvest celebrations and religious ceremonies, reflecting the community's deep connection to their agrarian and pastoral roots (Chauhan, 2023). These dishes often include sweet preparations made from jiggery, honey and barley or wheat flour, symbolizing prosperity and gratitude (Rana, 2020).
- **Economy and profession:** Agriculture, sheep rearing, government jobs and potential Tourism are the main professions. The area is not designated a tribal area; only has backward status, hence does not get special grant from the government - so is less developed. Limited resources and minimal prosperity are evident in every aspect of life and society.

### Socio-economic Transitions: Opportunities and Challenges

The socio-economic lifestyle of the people in Dodra and Kawar has undergone significant transformation over the past two decades, driven by both internal developments and external influences. Traditionally, the region's economy was primarily subsistence-based, relying on agriculture and pastoralism as the main sources of livelihood (Sharma, 2021). The rugged terrain and harsh climatic conditions limited agricultural output, necessitating practices such as terrace farming and the cultivation of hardy crops like barley and potatoes (Rana, 2020).

Livestock rearing, including sheep and goats, provided supplementary income and essential products like wool and meat (Thakur, 2022).

The past two decades have seen a gradual shift in economic activities, influenced by improved infrastructure and connectivity. Road development has enhanced access to nearby towns, facilitating trade and allowing residents to diversify their sources of income (Kumar, 2023). This transition has enabled the growth of small-scale businesses, including local crafts and tourism-related services, which have become increasingly significant to the region's economy (Chauhan & Verma, 2021). Education and awareness have also played a crucial role in transforming the socio-economic landscape. Access to educational institutions has empowered the younger generation, leading to an outflow of youth seeking employment opportunities in urban centres (Rao, 2020). This migration has had a dual impact—while it has increased the financial inflow through remittances, it has also led to challenges in sustaining traditional practices and maintaining the agrarian economy (Mehta, 2022). Cultural practices have also adapted some responses to economic shifts. Traditional communal activities, such as collective farming and local fairs, have seen a decline as people pursue individual economic interests (Singh, 2021). However, festivals and rituals continue to be significant, serving as cultural anchors amidst change (Thakur, 2022). Tourism still is minimal - but if focused on cultural and ecological aspect showcasing organic living - can help Dodra and Kawar achieve economic growth without compromising their cultural identity. By engaging local community members in tourism activities, Dodra and Kawar can manage tourism's impact while providing a genuine cultural experience.

Despite the modernization and economic diversification, challenges persist. Seasonal migration, limited arable land, and climate variability contribute to economic instability (Verma, 2023). The government and non-governmental organizations have been working to introduce sustainable agricultural practices and promote eco-tourism to support local livelihoods in these areas (Sharma, 2021).

## Conclusions

Dodra and Kawar serve as an example of how traditional cultures can coexist with modernization if preservation efforts are community-driven and culturally respectful. The area is remote but the satisfaction quotient is high. Totally coordinated with nature; particular about their traditions and respect their relationships. The younger generation, despite venturing out for jobs and livelihood, relate to their roots and traditional ways of living. This region's unique heritage and strong connection to its environment offer a model for cultural preservation that prioritizes traditional values amidst change. Continued research and government support will be essential in fostering sustainable practices that allow Dodra and Kawar to navigate the balance between development and cultural continuity. Through these initiatives, the traditions of Dodra and Kawar can be preserved and celebrated for generations to come.

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