

# SHARED VALLEYS, DISTINCT IDENTITIES: EXPLORING THE CULTURAL DIVERSITY OF KASHMIR

Dr Kuldeep Raina<sup>1</sup>, Vishal Pandita<sup>2</sup>, Vishali Pandita<sup>3</sup>

1 Associate Professor, M.A.M College, Jammu, J&K

2 Ph.D. Scholar, University of Delhi

3 Flat No. 06, Block No. 98 Lane No. 18, Jagti Township Nagrota Jammu, J&K



## ABSTRACT

*Kashmir, often admired for its natural beauty, is equally notable for its deep-rooted cultural diversity. This paper explores the distinct yet intertwined cultural identities of two major communities in the region—Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims. Though they dwell in the same land and climate, but their customs, beliefs, and practices differ greatly. From food habits and clothing styles to religious rituals, marriage customs, and music, each community has developed its own unique cultural expression shaped by history, religion, and social dynamics. The study highlights how centuries of co-existence, along with historical influences from Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Persian and Central Asian traditions, have contributed to this diversity. Linguistic variations such as the use of Sanskrit-influenced Kashmiri by **Pandits** and Persian-influenced Kashmiri by **Muslims**, and different writing scripts, further illustrates the cultural division. The paper further examines marital customs, cuisine, attire, and musical forms that expresses the community's identity. This diversity, rooted in history and sustained by tradition, continues to define the soul of Kashmir.*

**Keywords:** Kashmir, Cultural Diversity, Traditions, Music, Richness, Beauty

## INTRODUCTION

Kashmir, often celebrated for its breathtaking natural beauty, holds an equally profound significance as a region of rich cultural diversity and historical complexity. This paper delves into the unique cultural identities of two predominant communities in Kashmir—the **Kashmiri Pandits** and **Kashmiri Muslims**—who, despite sharing the same valley, climate, and environment, have developed distinct traditions, customs, and social practices. Their cultural divergence is rooted in centuries of religious, historical, and social evolution, influenced by a tapestry of faiths including Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, as well as Persian and Central Asian traditions.

The Kashmiri Pandits, historically associated with Hindu Brahmin scholarly tradition and administration, contributed significantly to the development of Sanskrit literature, Kashmir Shaivism, and religious education in the region. Conversely, the advent of Islam in the 14<sup>th</sup> century introduced new religious and cultural elements that shaped the lives and identities of Kashmiri Muslims. Over time, these influences led to the formation of unique community customs reflected in language, cuisine, music, attire, and marital rituals.

Language itself exemplifies this cultural interplay—while both communities speak Kashmiri (Koshur), Pandits' speech retains strong Sanskritic influences, whereas Muslims' usage reflects Persian, Arabic, and Urdu elements, alongside distinct writing scripts. Similarly, food traditions differ markedly, with Kashmiri Pandits favoring vegetarian dishes free of garlic and onion, and Kashmiri Muslims known for their non-vegetarian fare such as the celebrated Wazwaan.

Music, a vital cultural expression, also highlights these differences. Clothing and ornamentation styles similarly reveal cultural markers influenced by religion, geography, and social identity. Marriage ceremonies further illustrate the rich diversity of customs, with Pandit weddings rooted in Vedic rituals and sacred fires, while Muslim weddings follow Islamic legal and religious practices. Despite these differences, both communities cherish family values, tradition, and their shared connection to Kashmir's land and heritage.

This paper aims to explore these layered cultural identities, illustrating how history, faith, and social dynamics have woven a complex yet vibrant cultural fabric in Kashmir. Understanding this diversity not only enriches our appreciation of Kashmir's heritage but also provides insight into the lives of its people, whose traditions continue to evolve while maintaining a profound link to their past.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach, drawing from historical texts, cultural research papers, and ethnographic accounts. Supplementary insights were gathered through informal interviews with cultural practitioners, scholars, and community elders. The methodology emphasizes understanding traditions through lived experiences, textual analysis, and comparative interpretation of cultural practices across both communities.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF KASHMIR: ROOTS OF A CULTURAL LEGACY

Kashmir's way of life has been beautifully shaped by centuries of interwoven traditions, beliefs, and customs. The Kashmiri Pandits, Kashmiri Muslims and few other groups played a vital role in shaping the valley's distinctive culture and religion. From 13<sup>th</sup> century and earlier, Hinduism and Buddhism were the main influences on the customs and traditions of Kashmir. Kashmiri Pandits, being part of the Brahmin group, contributed to the growth of religious spheres, literature and administration. They acted as pioneers in Sanskrit studies, carried out ritual ceremonies at temples and developed Kashmir Shaivism in the area. This period saw the introduction of religious buildings, schools and many activities where religion, philosophy and art worked together. Islam became widespread in Kashmir during the 14<sup>th</sup> century and this change started to influence the region's culture. Several factors influenced the change, such as changes in leadership, education, and the organization of society. Islamic scholars and spiritual leaders introduced changes to Kashmir's rituals, architecture, and different forms of artistic expression. Persian and Central Asian cultures greatly influenced the growth of the region's identity. Eventually, the integration of Islam with local customs created a unique regional culture for Kashmiri Muslims. Not everything about the transition stayed the same; some things did change. The language, food and way of life was majorly similar among different groups but there were some differences in culture, mainly visible through religious rituals and social customs. As the medieval era was coming to an end, the population of Muslims increased, making them the majority in the Valley.

Kashmir was ruled during this time by the Mughal, Afghan, Sikh and Dogra governors who influenced administration, culture and the lives of the Kashmiris differently. The changes affected the two groups differently, based on their relation with the leaders of that period.

Nevertheless, the cultures of Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims diverged as time passed, even though they lived in the same area and had shared language, climate and geographical conditions, both communities formed particular customs, beliefs, rituals, and lifestyle. Even though they have similarities, but the differences in religious traditions, history and perspectives shaped them into two different cultures. Because of this, the two groups living in the same area, express their traditions in their own distinct ways.

## DIALECTICAL AND LINGUISTIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN KASHMIRI PANDITS AND KASHMIRI MUSLIMS

Kashmiri, called Koshur by its native speakers, is a Dardic language that falls under the Indo-Aryan group within the larger Indo-European language family. It is mainly spoken in the Kashmir Valley and is the first language for both Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits (Hindus). Despite sharing the Kashmiri (Koshur) language, the divergent religious and historical backgrounds of Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims have given rise to numerous differences. Kashmiri Pandits speak Kashmiri that is influenced from Sanskrit, they retain many words, expressions and pronunciations from their Hindu and Shaivite cultures. But Kashmiri spoken by Muslims is greatly influenced from Persian, Arabic and Urdu because of their history with Islam and Sufism. One can easily notice these influences in their words, the way they say them and in normal everyday sayings. As an illustration, the word for **Water** differs between the two: Kashmiri Pandits commonly say "*Poenyii*", while Kashmiri Muslims use the word "*Aaab*". Other than that, while the Pandits write their scripts in Sharada or Devanagari, Muslims made use of the Perso-Arabic (Nasta'liq) script.

## A TASTE OF IDENTITY: FOOD TRADITIONS OF KASHMIRI PANDITS AND KASHMIRI MUSLIMS

Kashmiri food reflects a rich mix of cultures, with clear differences between what Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims traditionally eat. Kashmiri Muslim cuisine is predominantly non-vegetarian, featuring famous delicacies like **Wazwan**—a lavish feast centered around dishes made from lamb, chicken, and a blend of aromatic spices. In contrast, Kashmiri Pandit cuisine primarily emphasizes vegetables, pulses, and dairy products. Known for its subtle flavors and unique culinary customs, Pandit food notably avoids the use of garlic and onions. Their meals often combine a wide variety of vegetarian dishes complemented by some refined array of non-vegetarian delicacies using ingredients such as yogurt, dried fruits, and mild spices like fennel and asafoetida to create subtle and flavorful preparations. Signature dishes of Pandits include Haakh (collard greens), Tschaman (paneer cooked with dry fruits), Rogan Josh and Macxh etc. Because of their culture and religion, the two groups in Kashmir use different ingredients and have different food habits, creating two distinct cooking traditions.

## THE DIVERGENT MUSICAL HERITAGE OF THE PANDITS AND MUSLIMS OF KASHMIR

In Kashmir, music is more than just an art form—it's a living tradition that captures the essence of its multifaceted cultural heritage. The region's folk theatre and singing style comes from a blend of cultural and religious influences. One such celebrated tradition is **Baand Paether**—a lively folk theatre that weaves together music, dance, and drama. Historically, this art form was embraced by both Kashmiri Hindus and Muslims, symbolizing a shared cultural heritage. However, over the years, the repeated challenges and displacement faced by the Kashmiri Pandit (Hindu) community led to a decline in their participation in these performances. As a result, while Muslim artists continued the **Baand Paether** tradition, the Hindu community's role in this folk expression has considerably diminished. Although they share some similarities, the musical traditions of Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims differ greatly in style and themes. Kashmiri Pandit music is profoundly influenced by devotional and classical traditions derived from Shaivism and Hinduism. In contrast, Kashmiri Muslim music is deeply influenced by Sufi and Persian traditions, including Sufi poetry, qawwalis, and folk tunes. One notable form of Kashmiri Pandit music is "**Henzey**" a ritualistic and ceremonial singing primarily performed by women during religious festivals and special occasions. This style is characterized by its devotional nature and strong ties to Hindu customs, resembling **Sāma Gāna**—the ancient Vedic chanting tradition where sacred Sanskrit verses are recited with musical notes. Conversely, Kashmiri Muslims perform "**Wanvun**" a choral singing style, mainly performed by women, during weddings and other important rituals, reflecting the distinct cultural and spiritual heritage of their community.

## COSTUMES AND ORNAMENTS: REFLECTING KASHMIR'S DIVERSITY

The combination of fashion and ornaments in Kashmir shows how much the area values its culture and deals with its extreme cold weather conditions. Material like wool, silk and cotton are preferably used in the making of clothes, decorated with beautiful embroidery. **Pheran** is a Kashmiri traditional outfit which comes in two layers, underlayer is known as **Potcsh** (made of white cotton). Both men and women can wear the pheran which keeps the body warm and is suitable for the extreme cold weather conditions of the valley. Typically Kashmiri Pandit women wear pherans which are ankle-length with narrow sleeves, tied at the waist with a **lungi** and for their wedding day, they use a scarf called the **Taranga**. They add jewellery such as **Kan-door** (earring), **Kaer** (bangles) and **Deji-hor** (long chain like earring) which signifies of them being married. The jewellery like Dejhori, Athhori etc. are not just a piece of ornament for Kashmiri Pandit women but also has a religious symbolism and significance to it. On the other hand, Muslim women wear pherans with short length and wide sleeves, usually adorned with embroidery, along with thick red scarves such as the **kasaba**.

**Kashmiri Pandit men** usually wear a plain pheran featuring narrow sleeves. It is usually paired with pajamas and is worn for both daily use and special occasions. Traditionally, Pandit men did not wear a skullcap, though older generations and priests wore turbans known as **Safa**. Kashmiri Pandits typically wear footwear called **Khraaw**. In contrast, the pherans worn by **Kashmiri Muslim men** have wider sleeves and simpler necklines. They are commonly worn with loose-fitting shalwars. Muslim men often wear skullcaps, and the footwear they use is known

as *Pullhour*. While both styles serve the same functional purpose of warmth, they differ in design details, accessories, and cultural symbolism which make the valley's clothing diverse.

## MARITAL TRADITIONS IN KASHMIR: A CONTRAST BETWEEN PANDITS AND MUSLIMS

Kashmiri marriages are deeply rooted in tradition, but the customs vary notably between the two major communities—**Kashmiri Pandits** and **Kashmiri Muslims**. While both celebrate weddings as sacred and joyous occasions, the rituals, attire, and cultural symbols differ, reflecting their distinct religious and social identities.

**Kashmiri Pandit weddings** are rich in Vedic rituals. The ceremonies often last several days, beginning with *livun* (house cleaning), *Krool khaarun* (decoration of the entrance of the house), followed by rituals like *devgon*, *maenziraat* (*mehendirat*), and *lagan*. Pandit weddings are conducted around a sacred fire (*havan*), with mantras and offerings, emphasizing spiritual union.

**Kashmiri Muslim weddings**, on the other hand, follow Islamic traditions. Key ceremonies include *Nishayn* (engagement), *Malmaenz* (starting of the main celebration of the wedding), *nikah* (marriage contract), *mehndiraat*, *Walima* (Feast). The *nikah* is officiated by a *Qazi* and includes recitation from the Quran. In Islam, marriage is recognized as a legal agreement between two individuals. A religiously legitimate Islamic marriage requires a formal, binding contract, which might be verbal or written.

Despite these differences, both communities share a deep respect for family, tradition, and the sanctity of marriage—making Kashmiri weddings unique and culturally rich in their own ways.

## CONCLUSION

Kashmir is not just a beautiful land of mountains and rivers—it is also a land of rich cultural diversity. For centuries, Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims have shared the valley's language, climate, and land while expressing their identities via distinct traditions, beliefs, and practices. From cuisine to dress, music to marriage, and language to customs, each group has established its own distinct way of life. These distinctions are not indications of separation, but rather reflections of a culture that has evolved through layers of history and faith.

Despite differences in customs, both cultures place a high emphasis on family, respect for traditions, and a strong attachment to their birthplace. What genuinely distinguishes Kashmir is not merely the grandeur of its environment, but also the harmony in which various cultures have survived and thrived together. This cultural richness is a living history, visible in everyday life, audible in music, palpable in cuisine, and felt in the rituals that highlights every step of existence. These enduring traditions give the people of Kashmir a deep sense of identity and connection to their roots. As time moves forward, it is this deep connection to heritage that keeps the spirit of Kashmir alive and meaningful, reminding future generations of where they come from and who they are.

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