



Historical evolution of Pahari identity in Jammu and Kashmir: Ethnicity, language, and geography

Fiyaz Ahmad

Department of History, IGNOU, Delhi, India

Abstract

Pahari people of Jammu and Kashmir is a multifaceted socio-cultural group, which was conditioned by the migration in the past and the linguistic pluralism as well as the geomorphology of the area of the western Himalayas. Although they have a great demographic presence in the areas of Rajouri, Poonch, Baramulla, and Kupwara, the historical development of Pahari identity has been under-researched in academic literature. This research paper examines the role of ethnicity, language, and geographical conditions in the creation and change of Pahari identity, as it has taken place over the years. The study explores the development of Pahari identity between early hill community and Dogra and colonial eras to the modern political situations using historical analysis, archival sources, linguistic studies, and ethnographic observations of the literature on the matter. These results indicate that the idea of Pahari identity has long been dynamic and accommodating, that is, it includes a variety of ethnic and religious communities whose major links were the common language, cultural code, and mountainous settlement. Another important issue that is noted in the paper is the modern politicization of identity, especially under the condition of recognition demands and socioeconomic rights. Finally, the paper shows that Pahari identity is not a predetermined ethnic group, but a socio-cultural phenomenon that is historically developing and under the influence of linguistic affiliation and geographical belonging.

Keywords: Pahari, Rajouri, Poonch, Baramulla, socio-economic rights

Introduction

The Jammu and Kashmir region of South Asia holds a special place in terms of the Himalayan culture and politics. Since the region was used as a contact point between the Central Asia region, the Indian subcontinent, and the Tibetan plateau historically, it has evolved into a complicated mixture of ethnic groups, languages and cultural traditions. The Pahari community is one of the diverse socio-cultural groups that lived in this mountainous land, though the little studied part of the historical and cultural landscape of this land. The name Pahari was created using the word pahar, which is the Indo-Aryan term meaning hill or mountain and is a general term used to refer to the people living in the hilly and mountainous areas of the western Himalayas (Ahmad & Ahmad, 2025) ^[1]. The Pahari-speaking population of Jammu and Kashmir is mainly located in the districts of Poonch, Rajouri, Baramulla, Kupwara and some parts of Uri and Karnah and therefore historically had their own linguistic and cultural traditions influenced by the geographical context. Pahari identity is directly connected with ecological and social situation of the mountainous populations. Pahari identity, unlike identities that were developed based on strict ethnic or religious lines, was historically an adaptive socio-cultural identity that encompassed various religious and ethnic groups. The Pahari-speaking population is also represented by Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, which implies that the determining factors of this identity are rather the common language and cultural activities and place of residence than a unique ethnic origin. The rugged nature of the western Himalayan area has in the past promoted the settlement, livelihood, and social interaction patterns that led to the creation of a unique hill culture (Nazir, 2024) ^[2]. Settlement made up of communities in these mountainous regions shared common ways of life that were characterized by agriculture, pastoralism, exchange of products through

mountain passes as well as oral cultural practices that included folk songs, story-telling, and seasonal festivals.

Although the Pahari communities constitute a great number in Jammu and Kashmir, there is a little scholarly research only on their historical identity. To a larger extent, much of what has been written on the subject has been of a linguistic categorization or the current political processes that involve identity recognition. The linguistic surveys of the colonies included colonial linguistic surveys, especially in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century that placed Pahari languages under Indo-Aryan linguistic family but did not reflect the greater socio-cultural aspects of the Pahari identity. In the same line, contemporary works which cover Pahari problems often focus on political representation, socio-economic status or administrative acknowledgment without fully investigating the underlying historical mechanisms of identity making (Ridwan *et al.*, 2023) ^[3]. This absence of a thorough study of the history poses a significant gap in research. To interpret the development of Pahari identity, the history of Pahari in the context of ethnicity, language, geography, and political history intertwines with each other. Jammu and Kashmir because of its mountainous terrain is a region that has historically been influenced by the nature of migration, settlement and cultural exchange between the hill communities. The changes in the political aspects between medieval hill chiefdoms, the Dogra rule and then the modern administrative order have also contributed to the ways in which communities thought of identifying themselves as a collective and expression of the same. In addition, linguistic diversity among Pahari speaking people has been instrumental in uniting people as well as separating them into diverse groups in the region (Sharma, 2018) ^[4]. This paper aims to fill this gap by considering historical development of Pahari identity in Jammu and Kashmir using a multidimensional perspective. The paper has

attempted to answer this question by placing Pahari identity in a wider historical and socio-cultural context instead of analyzing it through the prism of modern politics.

Literature Review

The subject of scholarship of Pahari identity in Jammu and Kashmir overlaps with larger works of the Himalayan societies, linguistic diversity, and regional politics. In the field of linguistic classification of hill languages, early colonial ethnographers like George Grierson gave some initial studies in the Linguistic Survey of India. Grierson classified Pahari languages in the Indo-Aryan language family, with focus on their relation to Punjabi and Dogri. Nevertheless, the colonial records dealt mostly with Pahari as a language group but not a socio-cultural identity (Sharma, 2018) ^[4]. Later researchers developed the knowledge of Himalayan communities by studying the interface between the geography and culture. Based on an anthropological study of hill communities, it was observed that mountainous landscapes were able to promote unique settlement and social patterns as well as the establishment of economic activities. According to these studies, the identity in these areas is frequently determined by the similarities in ecological conditions and not strict ethnic boundaries. Chitrallekha Zutshi and Mridu Rai are scholars who have studied Jammu and Kashmir and its historical shifts in identity and regional politics. Their work is not dedicated to the Pahari people exclusively; however, it offers a great insight into how the political organization and colonial administrative policies shaped the identity formation in this area. Increasing interest in the political aspects of Pahari identity has also been observed in the recent research especially in connection to social recognition and representation seek demands (Singh, 2023) ^[5]. The research about the language movement of Pahari is characterized by the attempts to preserve linguistic memory and get institutional confirmation. However, most modern literature is inclined to dwell on political events, but not on the more significant historical events that created the identity as such. In general, the current literature shows that there are several essential themes, such as the linguistic foundation of Pahari identity, the role of mountain-like geography, and the effect of political changes. Nevertheless, it is still necessary to perform a full historical analysis, which would combine these dimensions. The paper seeks to fill this gap by looking at how ethnicity, language, and geography have interacted to make Pahari what it is today (Younas, 2025) ^[6].

Methodology

The research methodology of this study is the qualitative historical research that incorporates both the archival analysis and the textual interpretation as well as the secondary ethnographic information. Materials on the social make up and cultural lifestyle of communities in Jammu and Kashmir highland will be taken as the main sources of this study, such as historical documents, colonial administrative accounts, language surveys and local historical texts. The Pahari communities and their linguistic attributes can be shed some light on archival sources of colonial ethnographic surveys and linguistic studies. These sources can be complemented by the contemporary academic literature in

the history, anthropology and sociolinguistics, which interpret the socio-cultural dynamics of the area. The application of textual analysis is used to understand the historical accounts and distinguish the recurrent themes that connect to ethnicity, language, and regional identities. As well, there are ethnographic observations carried out by existing anthropological research aimed at comprehending the daily cultural activity of Pahari.

Historical Background: The Era of Pahari Identity

Pahari identity in Jammu and Kashmir can be said to have started with the patterns of settlement of the hill- people who settled the western region of the Himalaya. Traditionally, these mountainous regions were migration and cultural nexuses between the plains of Punjab, Kashmir Valley, and even the west of the country even now Pakistan and Afghanistan. In the medieval times, local chieftains governed the hills of Poonch and Rajouri where they enjoyed some levels of autonomy under the larger imperial authorities like the Mughal Empire. These mountain states formed unique cultural practices conditioned by their comparative isolation and the nature of the ecology of the mountainous landscape. The development of the Pahari identity was strongly associated with the common patterns of livelihood, such as pastoralism, small-scale agriculture, and the trade across the mountain passes (Younas, 2025) ^[6]. The societies residing in such areas slowly built a cultural rapport slowly on shared language expressions, folklore and social norms. There was a major shift in the nineteenth century with the Dogra rule in Jammu and Kashmir. The hill regions fell under the administration of the Dogra, but this brought them to a centralized political system that brought with it new administrative boundaries and taxation systems. These shifts affected the trends in mobility and economic participation, which further determined the identity of the hill communities as a community. The term Pahari eventually came to mean not just a geographical category but a larger sociocultural identity of a loose grouping of people sharing similar linguistic and cultural characteristics (Singh, 2016) ^[7].

Ethnicity and Pahari Identity

The ethnic structure of the Pahari community is marked with a high degree of diversity. Pahari identity is not based on a single ethnic or religious background like many other ethnic groups because it is made up of different ethnic groups and religious affiliations. The Pahari people are representative of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs and therefore the pluralistic historical development of the region (Grierson, 1903 ^[9]-1928). The issues of kinship relations and clan identifications are significant to the social organization of the Pahari communities. Heredity patterns, marriage alliances and social commitments are regularly controlled by traditional clan organizations. Such kinship networks enhance the solidarity of the local societies and at the same time flexibilities on assimilation of various ethnic groups. Occupation, land ownership, and access to resources have historically been some of the factors that determine the social hierarchies in the Pahari society (Pandita *et al.*, 2003) ^[10]. But the rugged landscape frequently restrained a strict caste organization which was frequently prevalent in the

plains. Rather, social relations were influenced by interdependence of households that practiced agriculture, pastoral and trade.

Language as the Identity of Pahari

Language is one of the most important Pahari identities. The Pahari language is also a part of the Indo-Aryan subdivision of the Indo-European language family and is linguistically related to Punjabi, Dogri, and Kashmiri. But it has its own unique phonetic and grammatical peculiarities which indicate the historical relations of hill communities. In Jammu and Kashmir Pahari is not a standardized language, instead, it is a group of related dialects that are spoken in various areas. These dialects have differences in vocabularies and pronunciation depending on geographical isolation and interaction with other friends in speech. Although this is diverse, the fact that the language that was used was Pahari is a cultural factor that has brought communities living in the mountainous areas together. Oral traditions (folk songs, storytelling and poetry) are significant to maintaining the linguistic heritage and passing the cultural values to the next generations (Zutshi, 2004) [11]. It has been in the past decades that the Pahari language has been aggressively promoted as recognition and to be preserved. Such activities encompass the release of literature and cultural festivals and institutional pressure to support the educational of language (Fig 1).

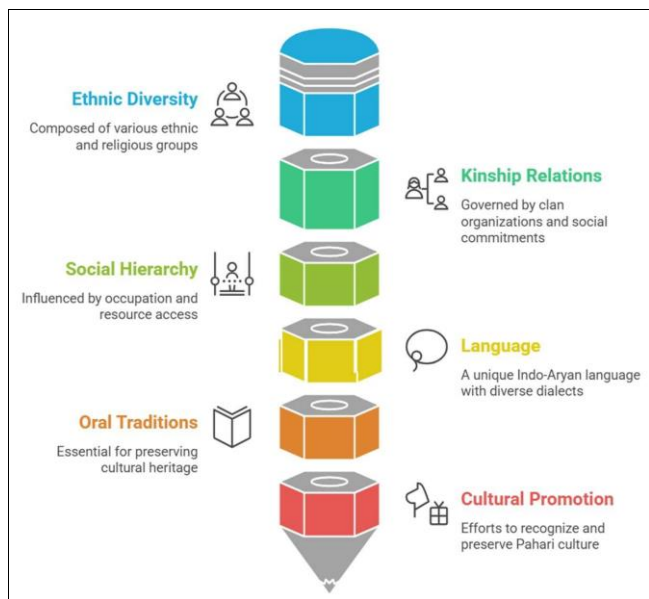


Fig 1: Understanding Pahari Identity

Region and Pahari Identity

The cultural practices and identity of Pahari community have been majorly influenced by geography. The topography of the western Himalayas, the mountainous area with steep slopes, small valleys, and thick forests, has traditionally defined the settlement and economic activity patterns in the past. Settlement that lived in these areas usually depended on terrac farming and animal rearing and seasonal migration as a means of livelihood. The mountainous landscape also promoted good community collaboration since families relied on the communal collaboration to share resources and deal with environmental hardships. Many hill villages were relatively isolated and this led to conservation of unique cultural

practices such as unique architecture, dressing and food. Simultaneously, mountain passes allowed trade and cultural exchange with other regions leading to an active interdependence between internal and external forces. Therefore, on the one hand, regional geography was the force that formed the economic life of Pahari people and on the other hand supported a sense of belonging that was based on the mountainous terrain (Rai, 2004) [12] (Fig 2).

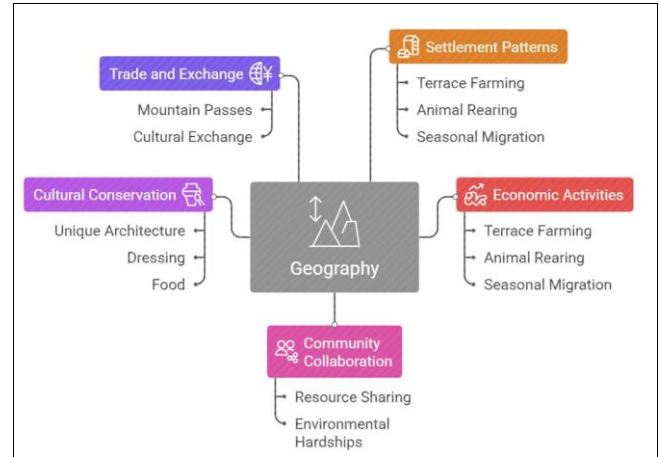


Fig 2: Influence of geography in Pahari Identity

Pahari in the Modern Jammu and Kashmir

Pahari identity has taken on new politics and social aspects in modern Jammu and Kashmir. There has been a strong movement by the community towards matters of cultural acknowledgment, language maintenance and socio economic advancement. The need to recognize and endorse affirmative policies to address socio-economic issues experienced by Pahari communities has been one of the greatest changes that have taken place in the recent years. These movements are part of larger tendencies in identity politics in South Asia, as cultural and linguistic communities are demanding more representation in state institutions (Evans & Malik, 2019) [13]. Meanwhile, the processes of modernization and migration have brought new relations to the social life of Pahari communities. Better transport and communication systems have seen more interaction with urban areas causing occupation pattern changes and cultural practices. In spite of these changes, a lot of old Pahari culture still persists especially in the rural regions where the community life is still strongly associated with the mountainous setting (Priest & Malik, 2019) [13].

Conclusion

Pahari identity in Jammu and Kashmir is a complicated matter that exhibits the interaction involving ethnicity, language, and geographical environment. The Pahari community is not just a homogeneous ethnic group, but is composed of different populations sharing the same linguistic traditions and united by the same attachment to a mountainous environment of western Himalayas. The identity has been developed over time by historical process which includes migration, political change, and economic adaptation. Language has been used as a major cultural identifiable as well as geographical environment has contributed to livelihood and social organization trends. Pahari identity nowadays is changing with the political trends as well as socio-economic changes. This identity can

only be understood with the realization that it is a fluid element with several factors leading to its creation. Thus the role of oral traditions, local histories and community narratives in the formation of the cultural memory of Pahari communities can be further considered in future research.

References

1. Ahmad W, Ahmad I. Marginalization and the politics of recognition: A comparative study of Gujjar and Pahari communities in Jammu and Kashmir. *Forum for Development Studies*, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2025.2546312>
2. Nazir SS. Pahari ethnicity and politics of reservation in Jammu and Kashmir. *Research Ethics Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*,2024;8:93-102.
3. Ridwan Q, *et al.* Indigenous knowledge and perception of local people toward biodiversity conservation in Rajouri district of Jammu and Kashmir. *Sustainability*,2023;15:3198. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15043198>
4. Sharma V. A case study of Pahari people in Jammu and Kashmir state. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Advanced Studies*,2018;5:73-78.
5. Singh A. A case study of the Pahari community in Jammu and Kashmir. *Galaxy International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*,2023;13:210-217.
6. Younas M. Linguistic practices and identity among Pahari migrant speakers: A case study. *Asian Social Science and Humanities Journal*,2025;12:45-60.
7. Singh K. Identity formation and assertion: A study of the Pahari speaking community of Jammu and Kashmir (Doctoral dissertation). *Shodhganga, INFLIBNET Centre*,2016.
8. Kaul PK. Pahāri and other tribal dialects of Jammu. *Eastern Book Linkers*, 2006.
9. Grierson GA. *Linguistic survey of India (Vols. 8-9)*. Government of India Press, 1903-1928.
10. Pandita KN, Charak SDS, Rizvi BR. *People of India: Jammu and Kashmir*. Anthropological Survey of India, 2003.
11. Zutshi C. *Languages of belonging: Islam, regional identity, and the making of Kashmir*. Permanent Black, 2004.
12. Rai M. *Hindu rulers, Muslim subjects: Islam, rights, and the history of Kashmir*. Princeton University Press, 2004.
13. Evans LP, Malik MGA. *Unicode proposal for ArLaam: A script for Punjabi and Pahari-Pothwari languages*. Punjabi Parchar, 2019.
14. Priest L, Malik MGA. *Writing systems and digital representation of Pahari-Pothwari language varieties*. Proceedings of the Unicode Consortium, 2019.