



## Exploring Kalbeliya culture: A comprehensive review of its historical and contemporary aspects

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### Abstract

The Kalbeliya society of Rajasthan is a unique cultural community with their identity historically determined by nomadic living, by a specialisation of a particular occupation, and religious affiliation. The community's practices are traditionally linked to the practice of snake charming, and to the Nath Sampradaya, and are considered an intricate mix of ritual belief systems, embodied knowledge and socio-economic adaptation. But legal pressures (Wildlife Protection Act 1972) and wider changes in socio-economic structures have changed a lot in the way of the community's traditional life. This paper will aim to explore the historical development of Kalbeliya culture, trace its evolution over time, analyse the socio-economic influences that have formed communities identity and to look at the effect of modernisation and tourism. The study is based on a high level of secondary sources which are critically drawn from the embodied nature of practices is an aspect that is underlined in the engagement with earlier anthropological interpretations that fall short in their understanding of embodied practices. It also explores how Kalbeliya cultural practices have been changed, with emphasis on the new opportunities for livelihoods provided by dance and music and the issues of commodification, authenticity and unequal access. In conclusion, the author argues that Kalbeliya culture is a process of continuity and change – affected by structure and culture agency.

**Keywords:** Kalbeliya culture, snake charmers, Nath Sampradaya, cultural transformation, tourism, intangible cultural heritage, marginalisation, Rajasthan

### Introduction

The Kalbeliya community in Rajasthan is a culturally different but historically marginalised group of people, whose identity has been shaped due to their mobility, specialisation in occupation and religion. They are traditionally nomadic and are part of a larger spectrum of itinerant artisan communities (Snodgrass, 2016 as cited in Dadhich, 2018) <sup>[2, 16]</sup>. Their culture is based on the Nath Sampradaya (Nath Yog) which is a Shaivite tradition focusing on the devotion to Lord Shiva and symbolically connecting the community with snakes revered in Shaivite beliefs (Mallinson, 2011, as cited in Dadhich, 2018) <sup>[2, 10]</sup>.

In the past, the Kalbeliya practiced snake charming by men, which included both technical and ritual aspects, with the help of a *pungi* or *been* (Robertson 1998 as cited in Dadhich 2018) <sup>[2, 15]</sup>. Women were the ones who passed on the culture through songs, dances and oral stories focusing on experiential knowledge and collective memory (higgins, 2010, as cited in dadhich, 2018) <sup>[2, 7]</sup>. But past anthropological work tended to discount embodied and technical aspects of these, until now.

The socio-economic and legal reforms, especially Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, impacted on the traditional way of livelihood and necessitated cultural adaptations (DownToEarth, 2015; Dutt, 2004) <sup>[4, 5]</sup>. The community, in turn, moved into performance-based modes like dance and music and became nationally and internationally known. In this paper an integrated approach is followed to investigate the historical evolution, socio-economic influences and impacts of the study will fill gaps in the literature, where modernisation and tourism are seen separately and are a matter of concern in relation to Kalbeliya culture.

### Historical Development of Kalbeliya Culture

#### 1. Nomadic Origins, Mobility, and Religious Foundations

The Kalbeliya community has never been alone, but has always been part of a wider whole of:

Groups of people who have a lifestyle characterised by nomadism or other forms of itinerancy, specialisation in an occupation and adaptive survival strategies. Based on the reading of a number of scholarly accounts it can be identified that the community is similar to other itinerant artisan groups and that it is part and parcel of a historical continuity of migratory communities in South Asia (Snodgrass, 2016 as cited in Dadhich, 2018) <sup>[2, 16]</sup>. Mobility was not only geographical, however, but also socio-cultural – the community was able to learn and take flexible adaptation strategies to help sustain itself through local businesses.

One of the main tenets of Kalbeliya identity is its ties with the Nath Sampradaya, an ascetic tradition of Shaivite religious tradition with a focus on asceticism, renunciation and devotion towards Lord Shiva (Mallinson 2011 as cited in Dadhich 2018) <sup>[2, 10]</sup>. The combination of different traditions of nath under the guidance of Gorakhnath in the 12th and 13th century had an impact on forming different groups of ascetics into more organised socio-religious groups (White, 1996<sup>[17]</sup>, pp. 90–95). Contextually, in the context of Nāth Jogī Samperas has been the symbol of both from a religious point of view and from the point of specializing in a craft (Robertson, 1998<sup>[15]</sup>, pp. 12–13).

Importantly, this association was strengthened by the symbolic association of snakes in the Shaivite belief systems. Snakes are sacred and powerful place in Hindu Cosmology and Kalbeliya occupation is related to Lord Shiva, thus giving it a validity and sanctity. The religious

dimension is used to illustrate that Kalbeliya culture cannot be understood without reference to economic and that it can only be understood in the context of the integrated system of belief, practice and identity.

## 2. Occupational Practices, Embodied Knowledge, and Oral Traditions

The traditional activities of the Kalbeliya involve trapping snakes, extracting venom and sharing the venom with others. Actions of performing and performance are not simply ritual, but are complex, embodied actions of knowledge. (Robertson, 1998<sup>[15]</sup>, pp. 60-65). Instruments like been or pungu were used by the Kalbeliya men to stop and show the snakes, particularly cobras and they were very skillful and experienced in doing so. Such practices were part of a broader culture where there was a combination of ritual and livelihood meaning, as well as narrative traditions. Such practices, however, have been readily accounted for in past anthropological interpretations as beliefs or acts of magic. Ritual activities were often misunderstood as being an effort to produce immediate material effects (e.g. Douglas 1966<sup>[3]</sup>, p. 58). An ignoring of practical, experiential knowledge of culture, which is something Ray criticize (1986<sup>[14]</sup>, pp. 48-50, 129-143). In the case of Kalbeliyas, these translations are disguising the sophisticated skills of snake handling and performance.

In addition, these occupations had a strong connection with the religious symbolism and story-telling. Ray (1986<sup>[14]</sup>, pp. 147-153) Practices also show an intimate relationship with livelihood and spirituality and have been further reinforced by the importance of serpent related deities and beliefs that formed part of the shaping of the practices (147-153). The Kalbeliyas' connection with the Nath traditions also placed them in relation with the learning of yoga and in this way they were endowed with supernatural powers or siddhis. (White, 2001<sup>[18]</sup>, pp. 140-142).

The role played by women was also important; they upheld the cultural life of the community by singing, dancing and telling stories. It was emphasised that these were disseminated orally over generations and that the importance of collective memories and learning through experience in the transmission of cultural heritage should be emphasised (Higgins, 2010 quoted by Dadhich, 2018)<sup>[2, 7]</sup>. Thus, Kalbeliya culture the result is an all-embracing system of life, which incorporates the knowledge of the working class, and religious imagery, as well as oral tradition.

## Evolution of Kalbeliya Culture over Time

### 1. Legal Interventions and Structural Transformations

Changes in Kalbeliya culture need to be seen in the context of wider legal and socio-economic changes, which led to a breakdown of traditional livelihoods. The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 was an important milestone which forbids the trapping and utilisation of wildlife including snakes (DownToEarth, 2015; Dutt, 2004<sup>[4, 5]</sup>, pp. 12-14). The immediate effect of this law was to jeopardise the sustainability of snake charming, which was one of the main elements of the identity and economy of Kalbeliya.

This then posed a serious livelihood problem which is the need for change of the status quo, and for the community. Changes of the same nature have been noticed among other snake-charming communities like the Sapua kela and this suggests that the changes were part of an overall structural change in the nature of the itinerant occupational

community (Mohanty, 1982<sup>[11]</sup>, pp. 151-152). In addition, these changes gradually contributed to a decrease in nomadic and relatively stalled ways of life for various reasons: regulation and the changing economic situation.

## 2. Transformation into Performance-Based Cultural Practices

However, the Kalbeliya community demonstrated a certain flexibility in this disruption, transforming the traditional knowledge into a form of cultural practice - that of performance. Once dance and music were connected to ritual and social performances as well as being important methods of subsistence (Higgins, 2010, pp. 119-128; Ranwa, 2021)<sup>[7, 12]</sup>.

The Kalbeliya dance, became very expressive and fluid, with snake-like movements and a rhythmic co-ordination, combined with acrobatic flexibility is a highly stylised dance. It became professionalised since the 80s with it being used in a number of staged performances for festivals, cultural events or holidays, programs and tourism setting (Ranwa, 2021)<sup>[12]</sup>. In fact, those changes also involved stylistic adjustments for more pleasing and appropriate look to the eye and meeting the expectation of the audience.

As Joncheere (2017)<sup>[9]</sup> suggests, snake charming has been emphasised in the modern version of Kalbeliya dance to make narratives of authenticity, which is how it has been given its form. This means that there is nothing traditional which remains in that sense, but always re-configured with the socio-cultural changes.

Similarly the significance of Kalbeliya folk songs as the medium of the culture has been upheld expression. The songs are mostly women's songs about everyday life, interactions with others and the environment, are improvised and are orally transmitted (Robertson, 1998; Higgins, 2010)<sup>[7, 15]</sup>.

## Socio-Economic Influences on Kalbeliya Identity

### 1. Marginalisation, Caste Hierarchy, and Economic Adaptation

Both the socio-economic setting of the Kalbeliya community and the community's own attitudes have been influenced greatly by marginalisation and limited access to formal jobs on the basis of caste. Traditionally, the community occupied the lower levels of the social pyramid, and was dependent upon informal activities like snake charmers, beggars and street entertainers and traditional healers (Robertson, 1998, pp. 119-120, 140-146; Dadhich, 2018)<sup>[2, 15]</sup>. Economically, socially, and in terms of stigmatisation, these practices contributed to the marginalisation of these groups.

It is important to remember, however, that these practices not only indicate marginality but are also forms of adaptive strategies. According to ethnographic studies Kalbeliyas are incredibly active in negotiating socio-economic limitations and are capable of applying their cultural knowledge in new contexts, important examples being urban and/or tourism economies (higgins, 2010<sup>[7]</sup>, pp. 119-128). This suggests that Kalbeliya identity is created in a phenomenon of structure and agency.

### 2. Gender Roles, Inequality, and Intergenerational Dynamics

The gender factor is a crucial factor in the production of culture of Kalbeliya. The men used to handle snakes, play

instruments while the women used to sing and dance as the major keepers of the oral tradition (Dadhich, 2018) <sup>[2]</sup>. Playing the leading role, which is usually that of a woman, entails facing social stigma and public performance is seen as transgressive (Ranwa, 2021) <sup>[12]</sup>.

But, there are inequalities in the economy that further aggravates the situation. Often, there are only a few people with great connections, such as at the national as well as international level, who get these performance opportunities. Most of the artists uses the agents to obtain jobs and this shows that there is lack of equality in incomes and its financial independence (Ranwa, 2021) <sup>[12]</sup>.

Moreover, there is growing intergenerational divide in the population. With the increasing choice of mainstream work younger members less engage with traditional practices and the continuity of the culture is a concern (Dadhich, 2018) <sup>[2]</sup>.

## **Impact of Modernization and Tourism**

### **1. Global Recognition and Cultural Transformation**

However Kalbeliya culture has been greatly affected by modernisation, which has provided them with new ways of expressing their culture, and new ways of interacting with the economy. Since the listing of Kalbeliya dance in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Programme (ICH) in 2010<sup>[7]</sup>, the international cultural legitimacy and visibility of the dance has gained since then, as pointed out by Joncheere (2015) and Ranwa (2021) <sup>[8, 12]</sup>.

In this, tourism has been a big factor as it creates the demand for culture. As per Henderson & Weisgrau (2007<sup>[6]</sup>, pp. xvii - xix), exhibits which feature ideas of heritage and authenticity. This has enabled the Kalbeliyas to engage in a global cultural economy, and to use their own systems of traditional knowledge.

### **2. Commodification, Representation, and Unequal Outcomes**

However, at the same time Kalbeliya has been commercialised as a result of its inclusion in the context of tourism culture. Sometimes, the traditional meaning may not be considered and performances may be selectively shown and altered (Ranwa, 2022) <sup>[13]</sup> to meet the audiences' expectations. It is a problem – authenticity and the Culture dilution.

Furthermore, the benefits of the tourism are inequitably experienced in the society. It comes with some advantages such as recognition and monetary gains for others who are part of the market, but it also marginalises other people, and knowledge about cultural rights is not high enough (Henderson & Weisgrau, 2007; Ranwa, 2022) <sup>[6, 13]</sup>.

## **Discussion**

The research on Kalbeliya culture shows that it is a far more complex tale – one of continuity and of adapting transformation – and one that includes socio-economic, legal and cultural elements. Such cultural configurations as Kalbeliya are not necessarily frozen and static and on the verge of disappearing, but flexible reconfiguration of the cultural elements that happens because of constraints and opportunities from the outside.

One of the important results of this study is the role played by legal 'action' in restructuring traditional livelihoods. Laws that have been prohibiting snake charming will be reconsidered with respect to wildlife protection.

The changing of the occupational practices to other kinds of culture (especially dance and music) was neither automatic nor caused by the protection legislations, but it helped to accelerate the change. This shift in the rule is only one example of regulations allowing a counterproductive effect in re-inventing cultural practices, rather than destroying it (Dutt, 2004; Higgins, 2010) <sup>[5, 7]</sup>.

The shift from practice of the occupation to tradition of performance is a trend that is a reflection of the shift from subsistence to cultural economies. To define Kalbeliya dance in this context is not only to produce an artwork to express, but it is also for a survival. This resonates with the overall discussion about the cultural as capital, to be tapped in market-based processes (Chakrabarty, 2000) <sup>[1]</sup>. However, this change in the community is not even, as there are differential opportunities, depending on mobility, gender, and geographical position in the community (Ranwa, 2021) <sup>[12]</sup>.

These are all factors that allude to the role of tourism. On the one hand inclusion of Kalbeliya cultural practises in international heritage frameworks and on the other hand, wide visibility and global recognition of cultural practises by tourism. The other side of this is that there is a tendency towards overselective representation and stylisation in the desire for culturally 'authentic representation'. It is however, concerned about the "commodification" and "reinterpretation" of tradition; while successful for aesthetic value, performances may be more successful for aesthetic value than science (Henderson & Weisgrau, 2007; Ranwa, 2022) <sup>[6, 13]</sup>.

Transformation can also not be seen without gender. Dance and music are predominantly a women's art in Kalbeliya and the street performance by women is set up and stigmatised. This means a paradox – on the one hand women gain importance as actors of cultures and cultures of conservation, while on the other hand,

What it feels like to be 'outside the margins' of the community or other outside experiences (Ranwa, 2021) <sup>[12]</sup>. This means that the art form itself needs to be explored: the same goes for the cultural practice – and space for social negotiation and identity formation needs to be explored.

In addition, problems of authenticity and continuity arise when dealing with a new way of life as a result of performance. But rather than as evidence of cultural dilution, a process of reworking the tradition can be seen, to allow for more or less continuity of its symbols to be maintained, while at the same time providing relevance to the needs and expectations of the present. It takes issue with the notions of 'authentic' and 'invented' traditions, and draws attention to the process of negotiation and fluidity of cultural identity as discussed by Joncheire (2017) and Higgins (2010) <sup>[7]</sup>.

A binary system of preservation/loss (from the Kalbeliya culture perspective) would not seem to be feasible overall. Rather it is a system that is still in the making, a historically and institutionally formed, economically driven system. Rather it is a question of adaptation of culture and not continuity, which is a measure of the cultural resilience of the community.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, the Kalbeliya community is an expression of the complex meaning of continuity and change, influenced by tradition, socioeconomic conditions and today's influences.

Traditionally, their identity has been a blend of their profession, ritual expertise as well as their living knowledge, which has been connected to the tradition of snake charming and that of Nath sampradaya. Situation turned out to be bad from the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 onwards, with the decrease in traditional occupation, people began to look for changes (DownToEarth, 2015; Dutt 2004)<sup>[4, 5]</sup>.

The community has internalised their own culture knowledge and made it performative and dances, music, not only have become part and parcel of the community but is internationally recognised as an expression (Higgins, 2010; Ranwa, 2021; Joncheere, 2017)<sup>[7, 9, 12]</sup>. Caste marginalisation, in the case of gender inequalities, in their socio-economic realities, there is inequality and unequal opportunities culturally. Whilst the popularity and earning potential of tourism and cultural industries has lifted the profile and earning potential of the area since its designation as UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2010, they have also brought problems of commodification and authenticity, and inequities in benefits (Henderson & Weisgrau, 2007; Ranwa, 2022)<sup>[6, 13]</sup>.

Intergenerational differences also show that a gradual disassociation of the younger generation from the traditional scriptures and continuity of culture are also issues (Dadhich, 2018)<sup>[2]</sup>. This isn't the end of Kalbeliya culture, it's the refocusing of the culture by many in the world of change. This makes it important for integrated research approaches that take into account the intersections of history, livelihoods, identity and globalisation, to be able to better understand the resilience of marginalised communities.

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