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## Sacred landscapes and the Gaddi Tribe: An anthropological exploration of religion and ecology

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### Abstract

The Gaddi tribe of Himachal Pradesh intricately weaves religious beliefs with their natural surroundings, viewing landscapes as sacred entities vital to their cultural identity and ecological stewardship. This paper explores how sacred geography shapes their pastoral practices, social organization and cosmology. Through ethnographic-sociological methods, the paper examines rituals, pilgrimage traditions, ecological ethics embedded in their everyday life. It also analyses contemporary challenges, including environmental degradation and socio-economic change, impacting the Gaddis' sacred ecological worldview. This Anthro-Sociological inquiry highlights the resilience and adaptability of indigenous knowledge systems in maintaining the balance between spiritual reverence and ecological sustainability.

**Keywords:** Gaddi tribe, sacred landscapes, religion and ecology, indigenous knowledge

### Introduction

The Gaddi tribe, primarily inhabiting the upper reaches of Himachal Pradesh in regions such as Chamba and Bharmaur, exemplifies a rich confluence of pastoralism, spirituality, and ecological adaptation. Traditionally engaged in transhumance the seasonal migration of livestock between alpine summer pastures and lower winter settlements the Gaddis have developed a unique way of life that is deeply intertwined with the Himalayan landscape (Sharma, 2001) <sup>[24]</sup>. This relationship extends beyond utilitarian engagement with the environment; for the Gaddis, the land itself is sacred. Mountains, forests, rivers, and meadows are not merely natural resources but living entities imbued with divine presence and spiritual significance. Sacred landscapes a concept explored extensively in anthropological and religious studies refer to those physical spaces that communities imbue with spiritual meaning, serving as arenas where cosmology, ritual, and ecological knowledge converge (Basso, 1996; Feld & Basso, 1999) <sup>[2, 8]</sup>. In this context, the Gaddi worldview challenges dominant paradigms of environmental exploitation by presenting a model of sacred ecology one in which reverence for nature informs daily practices and sustains both biodiversity and cultural identity. This paper seeks to examine how sacred geography is embedded in the religious beliefs, social organization, and ecological ethics of the Gaddi tribe. It explores how spiritual narratives and pilgrimage traditions shape land use patterns, how cosmological concepts are tied to seasonal pastoral rhythms, and how rituals maintain ecological balance. The analysis is grounded in an anthro-sociological framework that draws upon field observations, oral traditions, and secondary literature to unravel the complex interplay between belief systems and ecological stewardship (Gadgil & Guha, 1992) <sup>[9]</sup>. Through this inquiry, the paper not only aims to document indigenous knowledge but also to highlight its resilience in the face of contemporary environmental and socio-economic challenges. In doing so, it contributes to broader academic discourses on religion, ecology, and indigenous rights, emphasizing the urgent need to reimagine development and conservation paradigms in ways that respect and incorporate indigenous cosmologies.

### The Gaddis: People, Place, and Pastoral Life

The Gaddi tribe, one of the prominent pastoral communities of Himachal Pradesh, has historically occupied the high-altitude regions of Chamba, Bharmaur, Kangra, and parts of Lahaul-Spiti.

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Believed to be of Rajput origin, the Gaddis migrated to these Himalayan tracts during medieval times, primarily to escape persecution or to find new grazing grounds, gradually evolving a unique socio-cultural identity centered on pastoralism and mountain ecology (Bhasin, 1996) <sup>[6]</sup>. Their livelihood and mobility revolve around the practice of transhumance a seasonal migratory pattern involving the upward movement to alpine pastures (known as *dhars*) during the summer months and descent to the lower valleys in winter. This cyclical movement is not just an economic necessity but a cultural institution deeply embedded in their cosmology, kinship practices, and environmental ethics (Negi, 1994) <sup>[22]</sup>. The Gaddis rear sheep, goats, and sometimes cattle, depending on communal management and intricate knowledge of the terrain, weather patterns, and forest ecology. Their economic system is closely linked to the forest commons and grazing lands, often governed by unwritten customary laws that ensure sustainable usage and intergenerational continuity of resources. The Himalayan ecosystem, particularly the Dhauladhar and Pir Panjal ranges, is more than a backdrop to their activities it constitutes a living, breathing presence that shapes Gaddi spirituality, ritual life, and ecological consciousness. Sacred peaks, glacial springs, and meadows are integrated into local myths and worship practices, underscoring the spiritual-ecological synergy of their worldview (Kapila, 2003) <sup>[13]</sup>. This intricate web of ecological knowledge, cultural traditions, and spiritual values reflects an adaptive strategy that has allowed the Gaddis to survive in a rugged, often unpredictable terrain. However, modern pressures ranging from state-imposed forest regulations to climate variability are increasingly challenging the sustainability of their traditional pastoral economy. Nonetheless, the Gaddis continue to exemplify a resilient model of highland adaptation where ecological prudence is inseparable from spiritual belief and social organization.

### **Sacred Geography: Cosmology and Place-making**

Among the Gaddi tribe of Himachal Pradesh, the natural environment is not merely a backdrop for subsistence but a living manifestation of the sacred a concept deeply rooted in the anthropological understanding of 'sacred geography'. Mountains, rivers, forests, and meadows are imbued with divine presence, forming a spiritually charged landscape that defines both the material and metaphysical dimensions of Gaddi life (Feld & Basso, 1999) <sup>[8]</sup>. Sacred landscapes among the Gaddis are constituted not only through religious belief but also through repeated ritual practices and mythic associations. Prominent peaks such as Mount Kailash, which holds immense religious significance in broader Hindu cosmology as the abode of Lord Shiva, also resonate powerfully within Gaddi belief systems. In fact, several local peaks in the Dhauladhar range are venerated as earthly dwellings of deities and ancestral spirits, where Gaddi shepherds perform seasonal rituals before leading their flocks into alpine meadows, seeking both protection and ecological harmony (Kapila, 2009) <sup>[14]</sup>. These acts of spiritual devotion are not limited to grand or widely known landmarks but extend to smaller shrines built near springs, rocks, and trees each imbued with its own story and divine agency. This localized sacred geography is mapped through oral narratives passed down generations folk songs, legends, and epics that recount divine interventions, moral lessons, and ancestral migrations (Berreman, 1972) <sup>[5]</sup>. Such stories

do not merely entertain; they serve as a moral compass and ecological code, regulating human interaction with nature and asserting boundaries of sacred and profane spaces. The Gaddi cosmology integrates this spatial sacredness with a cyclical view of life and nature. Their religious worldview aligns with seasonal rhythms, such as the flowering of alpine herbs, the melting of glaciers, or the migration of animals each interpreted as signs from the divine or expressions of cosmic balance. This cosmology reinforces practices of conservation, as violating the sanctity of certain places by overgrazing, cutting sacred trees, or polluting streams is believed to invoke divine retribution or misfortune (Gooch, 1998) <sup>[11]</sup>. Such beliefs function as informal ecological regulations that maintain biodiversity and protect fragile ecosystems. Furthermore, the very act of migration, central to Gaddi transhumance, becomes a spiritual journey where movement through sacred sites, prayer offerings, and seasonal festivals map out an invisible geography of reverence. These routes, often undocumented in official cartography, exist in the Gaddi imagination and oral tradition, shaping a mental map where every hill, pass, and meadow has symbolic meaning. This anthro-spiritual relationship between place and practice resists the utilitarian reduction of nature to resource and challenges mainstream conservation paradigms that exclude indigenous ways of knowing. By treating nature as sacred, the Gaddis embed ecological ethics within cultural performance, ensuring that environmental care is not external to society but integral to their spiritual life. Thus, Gaddi sacred geography reflects a complex epistemology where cosmology, identity, and environment converge a living tradition that affirms the deep entanglement of religion and ecology in highland India.

### **Rituals, Festivals, and Pilgrimage Traditions**

Among the Gaddis of Himachal Pradesh, religious rituals and festivals are intricately aligned with ecological rhythms and pastoral cycles, reinforcing the interconnectedness between nature, spirituality, and cultural continuity. Their key religious observances are not randomly placed in the calendar but are synchronized with the seasonal movements of their flocks and the natural transformations in their environment. For instance, rituals conducted at the onset of summer before ascending to alpine pastures are meant to invoke divine protection for livestock and herders during transhumance, while autumnal offerings express gratitude for the safe return and successful grazing season (Negi, 1994) <sup>[22]</sup>. These seasonal rites often occur at sacred groves, meadows, and springs, reaffirming the sanctity of landscape features and establishing a spiritual cartography that governs their movements and decisions. Major festivals like Shivratri and the Minjar fair also hold significant cultural and ecological importance. Shivratri, which venerates Lord Shiva—widely regarded as the presiding deity of the mountains coincides with late winter and involves both domestic and communal rituals that symbolize cosmic renewal and ecological balance. The Minjar fair, celebrated in the Chamba region, marks the agricultural bounty and connects the cyclical abundance of nature with divine grace, embodying the Gaddis' gratitude to both deities and the land. Pilgrimages form another integral aspect of the Gaddi religious life, involving journeys to both local shrines (such as the Bharmani Mata temple above Bharmaur) and pan-Himalayan sacred sites like Mani Mahesh, believed to be an

abode of Lord Shiva. These pilgrimages are not only acts of devotion but are deeply physical engagements with the sacred landscape, offering opportunities to traverse mythic geographies while reaffirming collective identity and environmental reverence (Kapila, 2003) <sup>[13]</sup>. Crucially, these rituals and journeys also function as educational tools. Through active participation, younger generations learn sacred songs, stories, and ritual protocols, ensuring the transmission of ecological ethics and spiritual knowledge through embodied practice rather than formal instruction. The intergenerational dimension is vital to the continuity of Gaddi cultural traditions, where elders serve as custodians of oral history and ritual performance, teaching the meanings of sacred symbols and the taboos associated with particular sites. Thus, rituals, festivals, and pilgrimages among the Gaddis form a dynamic system that fuses environmental awareness with spiritual expression, ensuring that each act of worship is also an act of ecological stewardship. In a rapidly changing world, these practices offer resilience—not by resisting change, but by rooting transformation in a framework of reverence and continuity.

### Ecological Ethics and Indigenous Conservation

The ecological worldview of the Gaddi tribe is deeply embedded in Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), which encompasses time-tested practices and beliefs that ensure sustainable interaction with the fragile Himalayan ecosystem. Unlike formal scientific approaches to conservation, TEK among the Gaddis is holistic integrating ecological understanding with spiritual reverence and communal responsibility. Their knowledge of seasonal variations, animal behavior, and plant cycles is not only empirical but also sacralized, guiding decisions on grazing, foraging, and migration in a way that minimizes environmental degradation (Berkes, 1999) <sup>[3]</sup>. For instance, the practice of rotational grazing, where different pastures are used at specific times of the year, prevents overgrazing and allows natural regeneration of alpine flora. Certain high-altitude meadows and forested patches are designated as sacred groves or taboo zones, where human intrusion is restricted due to their association with deities or ancestral spirits. Such spaces act as informal conservation zones, protecting biodiversity through spiritual regulation rather than legal enforcement (Gadgil & Vartak, 1975) <sup>[10]</sup>. Moreover, the Gaddis hold a profound respect for non-human life forms—animals, birds, plants, and even elements like rivers and stones are considered sentient and sacred, forming part of a larger cosmological system. Killing or harming animals unnecessarily is frowned upon, and many rituals involve offerings to spirits believed to inhabit local fauna and flora, further reinforcing the ethic of coexistence (Gooch, 2009) <sup>[12]</sup>. Environmental ethics among the Gaddis are not individualistic but collective. Community-level decision-making, often mediated through traditional councils or *panchs*, establishes rules regarding pasture usage, tree-felling, and pilgrimage routes. These customary laws, although unwritten, are widely respected and socially enforced, contributing to the regulation of resource use in a decentralized yet effective manner (Kapila, 2003) <sup>[13]</sup>. Violations are often addressed through fines or ritual atonements, ensuring accountability while maintaining social cohesion. Such systems have enabled the Gaddis to manage commons like forests and grazing lands with remarkable sustainability, a lesson increasingly relevant in

today's context of ecological crisis. The combination of spiritual taboos, practical experience, and communal governance underscores a sophisticated indigenous conservation model that challenges the binary between culture and nature, showing instead how belief systems can generate resilient, adaptive ecological practices. In this way, the Gaddi example illustrates that indigenous environmental ethics are not relics of the past but living frameworks capable of addressing contemporary ecological challenges through culturally embedded, ecologically sound principles.

### Contemporary Challenges and Transformations

The traditional lifeways of the Gaddi tribe, rooted in transhumant pastoralism and sacred ecological practices, are increasingly under pressure from a host of contemporary challenges that threaten both their cultural continuity and environmental stewardship. One of the most significant disruptions comes from climate change, which has led to unpredictable weather patterns, early melting of snow, and shifting vegetation zones in the high Himalayas. These environmental changes have disrupted the seasonal migratory routes and altered the availability of grazing resources, compelling the Gaddis to either reduce livestock or modify their transhumance cycles, often with economic and cultural repercussions (Xu *et al.*, 2009) <sup>[28]</sup>. Additionally, deforestation—driven by developmental projects, road construction, and logging has led to the degradation of forest commons, further shrinking the already limited pastures the Gaddis depend on. Compounding these ecological threats is the growing intrusion of tourism and commercialization into traditionally sacred landscapes. Sites that were once secluded spaces of ritual and reverence are now being transformed into tourist attractions, diminishing their sanctity and exposing them to pollution, crowding, and cultural commodification. Encroachments by outsiders and infrastructure development have also disrupted pilgrimage routes and desecrated sacred groves, creating friction between local communities and state or commercial actors. Meanwhile, socio-economic transformations are reshaping the internal dynamics of Gaddi society. Improved access to education and increased exposure to urban lifestyles have led to a growing trend of youth migration to cities in search of jobs, weakening intergenerational knowledge transmission and diluting community cohesion (Bhasin, 2012) <sup>[7]</sup>. The younger generation is often less interested in pursuing pastoralism, viewing it as economically insecure and physically demanding. This shift poses a threat to the continuation of traditional ecological knowledge and ritual practices that depend on lived interaction with the land. Additionally, tensions have intensified between the Gaddis and state-led conservation efforts, such as the creation of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, which often criminalize traditional grazing practices and restrict access to ancestral lands in the name of biodiversity protection. These policies, while ecologically motivated, frequently ignore the role of indigenous communities as long-standing stewards of these ecosystems and have led to legal disputes, forced evictions, and erosion of customary rights (Agrawal & Redford, 2009) <sup>[1]</sup>. Such top-down conservation measures reflect a broader epistemological clash between bureaucratic environmental governance and localized, culturally embedded forms of ecological management. In response, the Gaddis are not merely passive victims but have shown resilience engaging



in negotiations, forming collectives, and asserting their cultural rights. Yet, without systemic policy changes that recognize and integrate indigenous perspectives, the delicate balance between sacred ecology and survival may become increasingly untenable. Thus, the contemporary transformations facing the Gaddis are not merely environmental or economic they are deeply cultural and political, requiring a rethinking of development and conservation paradigms that honors indigenous agency and ecological knowledge.

### **Resilience and Continuity: Adapting Sacred Ecology**

Despite the mounting challenges posed by climate change, economic shifts, and cultural erosion, the Gaddi community of Himachal Pradesh continues to exhibit remarkable resilience in preserving their sacred ecological worldview. This resilience is not characterized by rigid traditionalism but by adaptive negotiation blending age-old spiritual beliefs with modern tools and frameworks to maintain their ecological balance and cultural continuity. For instance, many Gaddi pastoralists have begun using mobile phones and GPS systems to track livestock and navigate migration routes, while still performing the customary rituals that sanctify their seasonal movements (Singh & Mishra, 2019)<sup>[26]</sup>. This coexistence of technology and tradition reflects a dynamic, rather than static, approach to sacred ecology. Simultaneously, Gaddi youth—often seen as agents of cultural dilution—are emerging as key stakeholders in cultural preservation. Increasingly educated and mobile, they are using digital platforms to document oral traditions, environmental rituals, and sacred sites, thereby creating a new archive of indigenous knowledge for future generations (Negi, 2020)<sup>[21]</sup>. Furthermore, several NGOs and academic researchers have collaborated with Gaddi communities to develop participatory conservation models that respect traditional ecological knowledge while integrating contemporary environmental science. Initiatives like community-based ecotourism, participatory mapping of sacred groves, and heritage education programs in local schools have helped bridge generational gaps and revive respect for customary ecological ethics (Ramakrishnan, 2001)<sup>[23]</sup>. These efforts have also played a critical role in asserting indigenous rights over forest commons and in negotiating more inclusive conservation policies with state authorities. Rather than succumbing to cultural homogenization, the Gaddis are thus actively shaping a future in which sacred ecology is not only preserved but reimagined through creative engagement with modernity. Their story exemplifies how indigenous communities can function as both custodians of ancient wisdom and innovators in contemporary ecological discourse, offering valuable insights for global debates on sustainability and cultural survival.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this exploration of the Gaddi tribe's sacred ecological worldview reveals a complex, dynamic, and deeply rooted system of environmental knowledge and spiritual belief that has guided their interactions with the Himalayan landscape for generations. The Gaddis do not view nature as an external resource to be exploited, but as a sacred and sentient entity with which they are spiritually and ecologically entangled. Their practices from transhumant migration and ritual observances to the maintenance of

sacred groves and taboo zones demonstrate an integrated approach to ecology that blends cosmological reverence with sustainable resource use. Key findings indicate that their sacred geography is mapped through myths, rituals, and lived experiences that uphold ecological ethics and sustain biodiversity. In the face of contemporary pressures such as climate change, commercialization, deforestation, and socio-economic transformations the Gaddis have shown significant resilience by adapting hybrid strategies that combine traditional wisdom with modern tools, often facilitated by youth, NGOs, and academic collaborations. Theoretically, this study contributes to the anthropology of religion and ecology by underscoring the need to recognize indigenous cosmologies not as relics of the past but as living systems of knowledge and environmental governance. The Gaddi example illustrates how sacred landscapes function as moral and ecological frameworks that guide community behavior and decision-making, offering an alternative paradigm to dominant Western conservation models. This calls for a more inclusive approach to environmental policy one that acknowledges and respects indigenous rights, ritual practices, and land-use systems. Such recognition is critical not only for cultural justice but also for the ecological sustainability of mountain regions. Future research should focus on comparative studies across Himalayan and other indigenous communities to better understand the diversity and resilience of sacred ecologies. Policymakers and conservationists must also engage in participatory frameworks that include indigenous voices from the outset, ensuring that development does not come at the cost of cultural erasure. In valuing indigenous cosmologies like that of the Gaddis, we find not only pathways to environmental stewardship but also deeper understandings of the sacred interdependence between humans and nature.

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