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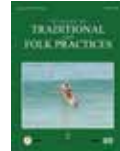
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Folk customs and traditions prevalent in the Trans-Giri region of Himachal Pradesh: a case study

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Abstract

Trans-Giri region is a hilly area in Sirmour district of Himachal Pradesh. This region is unique in their culture because of inaccessibility with the outer world. This is the only area in this region that has maintained their customs and traditions. Folk people here still follow their own customs and traditions that are unique and have their own beliefs. The people of Trans-Giri region are superstitious in nature. Customs and traditions prevalent in the area are followed by the folk people generation after generation. The area has interesting customs relating to various occasions and various *sanskaras*. In the life of folk people, customs and traditions starts from birth and continues till the end of life. All these customs followed by the people in Trans-Giri region have been mentioned in the present paper.

Keywords: Customs, Traditions, Beliefs, Folk people, Ancestors

1. Introduction

A custom is a pattern of behavior that is followed by members of a particular culture. Customs and traditions are the base of a folk life in the villages. Folk people that reside in a community or group follow the same customs, beliefs and traditions. They start with the birth of child. The study region has its own culture that differs from the surrounding areas. Some scholars like Bakshi (2011) and Parmar (1975) have worked over the customs and traditions of Himachal Pradesh.

1.1. Location of the study area

Himachal Pradesh is located between 30° 22' north to 33° 12' north latitudes and 75° 47' east to 79° 4' east longitudes. To the east it forms India's border with Tibet, to the north lies the state of Jammu & Kashmir, Uttaranchal lies in the south-east, Haryana in the south and Punjab in the west. The entire territory of Himachal Pradesh is

mountainous with an altitude varying from 350 to 7000 meters above the mean sea level.

It lies among the outer Himalayan ranges between 77° 01' 12" and 77° 49' 40" east longitudes and 30° 22' 30" and 31° 01' 20" north latitudes. The total area of Sirmour district is 2528 sq. kms. Trans-Giri region is lying between 77° 10' 00" east to 77° 50' 00" east longitudes and 30° 30' 00" north to 31° 0' 00" north latitudes with an area of 1179 sq. kms (Fig. 1).

1.2. Selection of the study area

The Trans-Giri region in Sirmour district of Himachal Pradesh is selected to study the different aspects of folk culture. The main reason to select this area for the study is based on the nature of population who lives wholly in the rural areas, having imprinted their traditional culture on the landscape (Table 1).

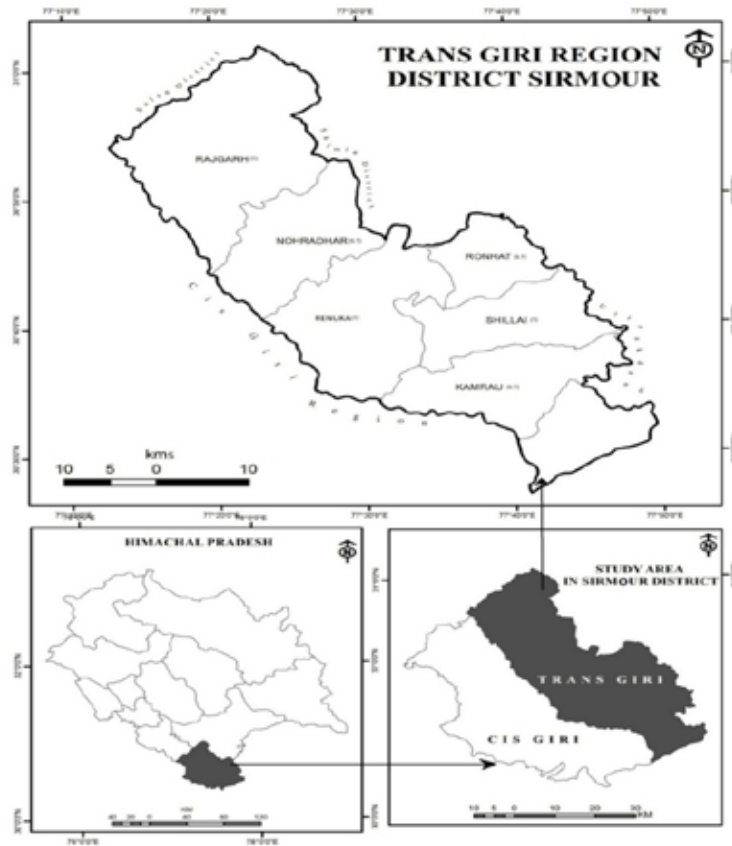


Fig. 1. Study area

Moreover, the first researcher is the resident of this area and the continuous interaction with the region say that different physical factors are affecting the folk life. This also helped the researcher to select the Trans-Girdi region.

1.3. Objectives of the study

The main objectives of the present study are:

1. To study the folk customs and traditions followed by the folk people in Trans-Girdi region.
2. To study the beliefs and superstitions prevalent in the Trans-Girdi region.

2. Materials and Methods

The present study utilizes mainly primary data, which were collected through extensive field survey. Observation method were used to collect the information. A set of interview schedules was prepared and canvassed to collect the data regarding folk customs and rituals in the Trans-Girdi. The secondary data were collected

from Census Administrative Maps (village and tehsil levels) and from various published and unpublished literatures related to the study.

Table 1. Rural and urban population in the Trans-Girdi

Tehsil/Sub Tehsil	Total Population	Rural Population	Urban Population
Nohra	23022	23022	-
Kamrao	37066	37066	-
Renuka	47388	47388	-
Ronhat	23324	23324	-
Shillai	36905	36905	-
Rajgarh	48999	45916	3083

Source: Directorate of Census, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, 2011, compiled and calculated by author

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Customs and traditions prevalent in the Trans-Giri region

Customs are the norms of voluntary action which have developed in a region or communities. Customs reflect the true picture of moral consciousness of folk groups. The people of Trans-Giri region represent typical folk traditions and customs. The area has interesting customs relating to various occasions and various *sanskaras*. Some of the *sanskaras* right from the birth up to the death of an individual, are followed in the region are discussed as follows:

3.1.1. Birth custom

Birth of a child in a house is considered to be the happiest moment. There are certain beliefs and practices which are associated with pregnancy leading to the birth of a child. For instance, a pregnant woman is not permitted to go near the cremation ground, climb a tree or cross a stream. She is not supposed to carry heavy loads. During the last stage of pregnancy, she is not allowed to go to the jungle to bring fodder or fuel. All these precautions are taken to avoid a miscarriage.

(a) *Diet during pregnancy*: There is no diet restriction for a pregnant lady except hot food items like chilly, *sunth* (dried ginger), *kulath* (local pulse), decoction of *ajwain* (carom seed) and *bathu* (*Chenopodium album* L.) which may lead to abortion. Consumption of green chillies is restricted because it is believed by the folk people that it turns the eyes of child green. Sometimes the consumption of non-vegetarian food is also restricted as it affects the 'stars' of the child. Fruits and leafy vegetables are preferred for pregnant woman. A rich diet like meat, *halwa*, and *kheer* is given. Some women relish soft clay known as *shakra*.

(b) *Delivery*: There will be *Dai* in the village who carries out delivery at home. Birth of the child can take place in any part of the house. Some families use the ground floor for delivery. The rooms are white washed and well broomed. In some families, when the first son is born, the village *Dhaki* (a caste that falls under the category of schedule caste), congratulates the family by playing music and beating the drums. A period of ten to thirteen days is considered impure (*sutak*) depending on the caste in which the baby is born.

In Brahmin families, this period lasts for eleven days while in Rajput and schedule caste it is of thirteen and twenty two days respectively. Time of birth of the baby is noted and horoscope is prepared by the *pandit*.

(c) *Mother's Diet*: After delivery, the woman is given jaggery boiled in water known as *gudwani* (Sweet water of jaggery) and ghee (clarified butter). *Ajwain* is also given. For twenty-four days, *ghinda* (made of jaggery and rice flour) and plenty of ghee are served as much as she could digest. Over cooked rice is also served at intervals.

(d) *Naamkaran*: On the eleventh day, a name is given to the child by his *bua* (father's sister) or a family priest. According to custom, on this very day the maternal uncle comes to the house with wheat flour, rice, jaggery, sugar, ghee and pulses. These food items are believed to be the *banda* (share) of that new born baby. After the naming ceremony by the *bua* or *pandit*, the child is taken outside on any auspicious day after 11 days. During the *Naamkaran* ceremony (when the newly born baby is blessed with a suitable name) the following lines are usually repeated by the *bua* taking her nephew or niece near the threshold of the house, keeping the face of the child towards the sun and calling him/her with the chosen name:

"*Urje - surje jhad li jhaon, tisre bete ro falana (name) oso naao*"

(Meaning: With falling rays of rising sun, his son's (father's name) name is *falana* (child's name).

The barber of the region trims the hair of the child after a year or two, at the temple of their *isht deota* (main deity). But in some villages, people keep the hair of their elder son in the name of *Shirgul deota* and have the hair cut only when he will visit the Churdhar temple.

(e) *Dashuthan*: The birth ceremony is known as the *Duston* in the local dialect. A *pandit* is invited for the house purification. His entry to the home is thought to be the end of the mother's pollution. Until the tenth day dawns, the family members and the people of the same caste are prohibited from entering the temple. After entry to the house the *pandit* lits a fire (*havan kunda*) and recites some mantras for the purification of the home. At the same time, a man from the *Dhaki*

caste is given the task of beating the *Dumenu* (local instrument). It is the announcement of the purification of the house and then the people of the caste in which that particular baby took birth can visit the temples. The beating of the *Dumenu* by the *Dhaki* (local caste that used to beat the instrument) is the announcement of the enjoyment of the birth ceremony. It is known as *Badhava* (congratulate). The practice of the house purification is uniformly followed in the entire region of the tehsil. The *Pandit* sprinkles the *gomutra* (urine of the cow) around the house. The *pandit* suggests the name of the baby according to the astrological calculations. After that according to the family status, feast is served to the community people and relatives took place. Both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food are served. Non vegetarian food is more popular among people who are economically well off.

3.1.2. Marriage Custom

Marriage is a pious and important social relationship which not only connects two people but also connects two families in a beautiful relationship. In the Trans-Giri region, the rituals related to marriage is very simple. The word *Jajda/jajra* is used in the region for marriage. In the area, marriage is classified into four types: *Fera-vivaah*, *Jajda*, *Reet* marriage and *Haar* marriage. In the area, widow marriage is known as *Reet* marriage and *Haar* marriage is considered as love marriage.

(a) *Jajra/Jajda-Marriage*: In this type of marriage, the initiative is taken from the boy's side. The relatives of the boy play a significant part in bringing the two parties together. Preference is given to a girl of a nearby village. When both parties agree for the marriage, an auspicious day is decided for the betrothal. On that particular day the father of the groom or the groom himself gives a nose ring and a suit with a rupee coin to the girl. After a few days the father of the groom and the *purohit* arrive at the bride's house and fix the marriage date. The *Dhaki* of the village who is also called *Bajgi* gives the invitations to all the relatives and friends. On the fixed day, the groom, some of his friends and relatives, go to the bride's house. They bring with them for the bride a *chaak* (ornament for head), *mangalsutra*, a nose ring (*fulli*), some dresses and ornaments as per choice. The people accompanying the groom are called "*jajdu*" in the local language.

Some *dhakis* (a caste that comes under scheduled tribe) or the groom's side sings at the entrance to entertain the people accompanying the groom.

Next morning the *pandit* recites mantras at an auspicious time and places the ornaments (nose ring, *mangalsutra*, *chak*, *fuldi*) for the bride as the symbol of *suhag*. After that *gur* or *shakkar* is distributed among the people in the gathering present at that time. The father of the bride gives some necessary utensils like glasses, *lota*, *paraat*, *banta* (local kitchen appliances) to the girl. The maternal uncle of the bride also gives a '*paraat*' which is a necessary ritual in the Trans-Giri. These things are given in the form of *daan* or gift to the girl. During the *vidaai-rasam* of the bride, girls and the women of the village sing songs. Through the songs, blessings are bestowed on the girl and an invitation for the return is also given. Then the bride, wearing a red dress, with some of her relatives, follows the groom and the accompanying people.

At an auspicious time, the bride enters her husband's house. In the house a pitcher of water is placed and on its walls quaint figures are painted, with an earthen lamp put near them. In front of these the bride and the bride groom are seated. Incense is then burnt, and the *pandit* or *purohit* recites some mantras (locally called *seenj*) and *gur* is given to the bridegroom, which he places on the bride's hand and she eats it. She then gives him the *gur* which he eats in the same manner. This completes the marriage. This ceremony is called *Girasani* (Negi, 1969).

Neoda Rasam: The ritual of the *Neoda* is followed by the people of Trans-Giri. It is the main ritual of the marriage, and is completed by the guests or relatives. In the *Neoda* custom, guests, relatives or the maternal uncle of the groom give gifts, locally called *shagun* to the newly married couple. It is both in the form of money and clothes.

Geru Fernu/Poltoj: On the third day of the marriage, the bride and groom along with some relatives and villagers reach at the bride's house. In the local dialect of Trans-Giri it is called *poltoj*. Parents and relatives of the bride welcome them and serve *gulti* (flesh of the goat) and traditional foods. After two or three days, the couple leaves for the in-laws house. In some regions the custom of *shashong* is prevalent. As per this, the in-laws

of the boy give him the *dangra* (sharped curved weapon) or sword.

(b) *Reet-Kheet*: It's a form of remarriage common in Trans-Giri. Field interviews revealed that a change of a wife or husband is common in this custom. When there is a dispute or incompatibility between the husband and wife later goes back to her parent's house and does not return. Meanwhile, she may fall in love and decide to marry someone else. The new husband pays some money to the former husband. This amount is known as *reet*. As far as the consent of the first husband in releasing his wife is concerned, it is never refused by him. By granting permission he can also get married. Besides money, the father of the woman also gives some amount as a form of 'chidd' (penalty) to her first husband. This is done by father to save his daughter from any type of bad curse from the side of her husband.

Widow re-marriage is permitted among certain castes. A woman is free to marry again after the payment of *reet*. Because of polyandry system in the area, if the husband of a woman dies then the living brother of her husband takes the payment of *reet*. It is believed that *reet* custom is the symbol of the freedom of women in the area.

(c) *Haar-Marriage*: It is a form of *Gandharv* marriage. It is a marriage by elopement known as *haar ki shadi*. The girl and the boy fall in love and marry secretly without the parents' consent. The boy's friends help in eloping.

(d) *Different systems of marriage*

Polyandry system: In Trans-Giri region, polyandry system is very old. This system is followed by the people of all castes. Normally three to four brothers have only one wife. This system is especially followed by the Rajputs and Brahmins, while the schedule castes do so in a lesser number (Parmar, 1975). Field interviews revealed that in such marriages, the eldest brother is the representative of all brothers in the matters of marriage and conjugal life. He first marries the wife and the other brothers have access to the wife later on. According to the people of Trans-Giri polyandry is necessary for the security of family property. They believe that this keeps the family closely knit and prevents divisions. It is favored because people have small holdings for which joint living is necessary. This is secured by polyandrous marriage where brothers co-

operate and the number of family members does not increase so rapidly.

Jodidaar system: The people of Trans-Giri like to live in joint families, as agriculture is their main occupation. *Jodidaar* system is followed by the people since polyandry is in existence. When the number of wives is more than one, the brothers make a group. In the joint family when the number of brothers is even, then it is easy to make a group for them. But when the number is in odd, then it creates a problem. In the odd, a brother who has left by his choice can join any of the *Jodi*. Many a time, the left out brother marries again and brings a single wife.

Polygamy system: When a man keeps more than one wife then it is called Polygamy (Sharma, 1994). Polygamy is common both in Cis-Giri and Trans-Giri region. The main objective is to obtain the help of women in cultivation as they do much of the field work, besides bringing home grass and fuel. Besides, there are other reasons, such as a childless man or one who has only girl, children and no male child will often marry more than one wife. The males of well to do families marry more than one just for their own comfort.

3.1.3. Death Rites

No elaborate death rites are performed by the people. When a death has occurred in the family a *Kaazu* (a messenger sent at the time of death called *Kaazu* belongs to lower caste) is sent out to inform all the relatives. The body is laid with its feet towards the east. If the death takes place in the evening, the body is not cremated on the same day. Before the cremation, the body is bathed with luke warm water and bound in shroud or *kaffan*. A bier- *arathi* of bamboos is prepared and the dead body laid on it and carried to the cremation ground with feet pointing towards the exit of the house. The funeral procession is headed by the village musicians, the *Dhakis*, who keep on playing sad tunes *mokri* throughout the way.

Every member of the procession brings a log of wood with him and helps to prepare the pyre. The dead body is laid on the pyre and by its side are also placed rice, barley, milk, ghee, tobacco and a *huqqa*. These things are supposed to accompany the dead on his long journey onwards, although in actual practice these are taken by a person belonging to a group *koli* (a local caste of the

region) who gives final touches to the pyre. The pyre is then set on fire by the chief mourners, who go round it. When it is fully lit, the chief mourners give three taps to the skull with a long bamboo. This is called *kapal kriya*. The bamboo stick is thrown far away. The ashes of the dead is collected on the same day or the next day and then carried to Haridwar for immersion in the Ganges. The village *pandit* also comes along in the journey to Haridwar. The 'shoak' (time of sorrow for the family) period is observed for 5 or 13 days. During this period the chief mourner takes his meals only one time a day. No spice like onion and turmeric are used in the meal. On the 5th or 13th day all the relatives gather and food is cooked in the house in proper manner. The first meal is given to the cow, family *pandit* and then food is served to all the family members and relatives.

The end of the mourning period is marked with sprinkling of *Gangajal* (pious water). The tenth day of the death is observed as *dashi* when all the members of the household take bath and wash their clothes. On the eleventh day a *maha* *pandit* known as *charaj* perform a *puja* for the peace of the man who died and the family members give all necessary articles or favorite things of the man who died in *daan* for the *charaj*. It is believed by the folk people that the *daan* given to the *charaj* on the eleventh day reaches the person who died.

On the 13th day, a *shudhi kriya* (purification) is performed. A *havan* is conducted by the family priest and a simple feast of rice and daal is given to the *Biradri* (relatives and people of that particular village). All the relatives attending the *kriya* bring with them half a *seer* of ghee (clarified butter) and *urad* (black gram).

The first death anniversary is observed as *barsi*. A feast to the *biradri* is given and some brahmins are also given feast and each one is paid a *daikshina* mainly in the form of money and sometimes some articles. The fourth year of death is observed as *chaubarsi* and rites performed on the first *barsi* are repeated. Thereafter, the dead person is remembered during *shraddhas* and one or more *brahmins* are offered feast on the day of his death.

In this region, the people of all castes carry their dead to the nearby river, *khad* or to the *Gharat ka- Khala* and cremate them there. Children below the age of ten years and, persons dying of leprosy are buried, while the others are normally cremated.

3.1.4. Settlement of Dispute

The people of Trans - Giri Sirmour have their own system of settling disputes and imparting justice, known as *Niaon* (Justice). Whenever there is any dispute of any nature, the disputing parties firstly prefer to settle it between themselves and if it is not possible, a *Khumli* or *Mayel*, (a panchayat of the respectable elders) is called to settle the dispute. The *Khumli* or *Mayel* can be called only after giving *Nalsana* (a formal invitation for meeting) of Rupees (fixed by the villagers) to the *Dhemedar* (a respected person of the village who invites the people for meeting). *Siana* (Village Headman) plays a significant role during the *Khumli/Mayel*. The decision of the *Siana* is binding on the whole village and the *Khat* (a group of villages under the influence of the *Siana*). A *Bishtala* (the processing fee fixed by the villagers) has to be paid by the deputing parties for solving their dispute and in addition to *Bishatala*, the defaulting party would also pay *Dand/Horzana* (Penalty) in the form of *Bhoj/Theela* (a community feast). Animal sacrifice, generally male goat, is an essential part in such community feasts. Where a person has been charged of an offense and if he refuses to confess his guilt, *Dhunti-Neem*, *Mondir-Neem*, *Shoun* or *Lotte-Neem* system is resorted to and in case a person would not obey the decision of the *khumli*, he is penalized with *Chhinga* (Ostracize from the community) or *Thaik* (the social boycott). Reporting to police or court, even in the case of a murder, is exceptional. *Neem* is a kind of psychological test to find out the defaulters. *Lotta-Neem* is also a kind of psychological test in which a person/people is/are bounded with the majority of the people. Generally, such type of test is done with the person of doubtful integrity. In case of petty offenses the *Dand/Horzana* in minimized proportionately.

3.2. Beliefs and superstitions prevalent in the Trans-Giri Region

Beliefs and superstitions prevalent in the study area are discussed in the following sub-headings.

3.2.1. Belief related to *paap* or curse of the dead ancestor

As a rule, in the region when an old man is not cared for and dies aggrieved at the hands of his descendants, his curse is supposed to cling to the family. When there is subsequent illness in the family or any other calamity visits them, the family *pandit* is consulted and he declares the cause. If the cause is found to be the displeasure of the deceased, his image is put in the house and worshiped. It is believed that if the worship is discontinued, leprosy, violent death, an epidemic or other similar calamities overtake the family.

3.2.2. Beliefs related to oath taking

There are several ways of taking an oath and one of them is to drink the water of Renuka Lake. *Neem gharna* is the common oath, that is taken by the folk people in the region. It is used to bind a person, or restrain a person from doing a certain act. *Neem gharna* is the mutual decision taken by the people in the villages. This oath is held in the village temple. While taking this oath some salt is dropped in a bronze *lotta* full of water and some words are uttered, “*jaishike noon lago galdo pani da aao bi aisa chahiye jae aao apne vade da mukra*”. This oath is taken by the head of the family and carried out by his entire family. This type of oath taking can be seen or heard in the region at the time of election to combine the village people.

3.2.3. Superstitions related to days

The people of Trans-Giri region are superstitious in nature. On account of ignorance or irrationality of their beliefs a spectrum of rites and rituals have proceeded from the deep-rooted fears of supernatural agencies. People feel the need to pacify them and to protect themselves from misfortunes. There are lot of superstitions connected with a *yatra* (voyage). People are conscious in choosing the day of setting out from home. The prohibited unlucky days are first tuesday of the month and all sundays. In the villages of Rajgarh tehsil and among people of the villages of Haripurdhar and Nohradhar, it is believed that on sunday, people should never go to the house of the people for offering condolence because it is an inauspicious day for such a visit. According to them, if they go for offering condolence on a sunday, then something inauspicious may happen again. In

Kamrao, Paonta, Shillai and Ronhat tehsils, it is thursday when people avoid going for such visit. However, for some ceremonial or special *yatra*, they consult the astrologer to find out auspicious day and time.

In the region, an auspicious day is chosen for beginning to plough the fields and a tuesday or a wednesday is usually selected. It is also believed that sowing must begin on a tuesday under an auspicious phase of the moon (*nakshastra*).

There are certain foods and pulses which are eaten only on specific days of a week or month. This is mainly done as people believe that eating specific pulses on these days check the stars and controls their effect. *Mash dal* is cooked on festive occasions and even on *Sakranti*. These practices result in providing a variety in the routine food and also lead to a balanced diet.

3.2.4. Consideration of good and bad omens

Along with thought of the auspiciousness, the rural religion devotes and pays attention to considerations of good and bad omen. It is not considered good to sneeze at the outset of a journey and if anyone does sneeze, one must wait for few moments. Similarly, it is a bad omen if a cat crosses one's path if one is proceeding somewhere. If one looks into an empty pot, the success of a venture is jeopardized. It is believed that safer to look into it when it is full and it constitutes a good omen. Similarly, the sight of the washerman or a dead body is considered good omen towards the successful completion of work.

3.2.5. Superstitions related to human body part

Trembling in the left part of a female body and right part of a male body is considered auspicious and the reverse is considered ominous. The sensation of irritation in a man's right hand palm is believed to have monetary gain, but in case of left hand irritation is the sign of monetary loss. Falling down and breaking of a mirror is a bad sign. Both, loss and finding of gold ornaments are considered bad signs.

3.2.6. Superstition related to natural phenomena

The villagers attach all kinds of superstitions to natural phenomenon. For example, the solar and the lunar eclipses are believed to be the causes of the catastrophe of *Rahu* and *Ketu*. An earth

tremour is attributed to the undulations of the snake which bears the earth on its fangs, a hard job by any standards.

4. Conclusion

From the above discussion one can conclude that the traditional folk beliefs and customs has profound significance upon the social and religious life of the local people in region. Trans-Giri region is entirely a rural area and is separated by the Cis-Giri through natural boundary of river Giri that's why the area remains untouched with the outer world. Because of remoteness of the region customs, traditions and beliefs present here are still preserved. Trans-Giri region is totally based on agriculture, so people here chose an auspicious day for beginning to plough the fields. The region is popular because of its customs, traditions, and beliefs and superstitions

that is prevalent and maintained in the area. In this paper customs and traditions related to birth, marriages, death and traditions and beliefs related to their daily life were discussed. Moreover, they play an important role in the preservation of the culture.

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