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Research Article

An Ethnographic Study of the Phari (Pahari) People of the Rajouri–Poonch Region of the Pir Panjal Range, Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract

The Phari people, often subsumed under the broader category of "Pahari" communities in ethnographic literature, represent a distinct cultural group inhabiting the Rajouri–Poonch region of the Pir Panjal Range in the Jammu division of Jammu and Kashmir. This ethnographic study, conducted through twelve months of intensive participant observation and qualitative interviews with 47 community members across three villages in the Rajouri and Poonch districts, examines the complex social structures, linguistic practices, livelihood strategies, and religious worldviews that characterise Phari society. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from kinship analysis, linguistic anthropology, and economic anthropology, this research demonstrates that despite significant pressures from modernisation and state integration, the Phari maintain distinctive cultural practices rooted in their specific ecological niche and historical trajectory. The paper argues that understanding the Phari requires moving beyond essentialist categorisations and attending to the dynamic, negotiated nature of their cultural identity in contemporary contexts. The study contributes to the underrepresented ethnographic literature on Himalayan hill peoples and offers insights relevant to debates about indigenous knowledge systems, sustainable livelihood practices, and cultural resilience in mountain communities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Regional Context and Research Significance

The Rajouri-Poonch region of the Pir Panjal Range represents one of the most ethnographically understudied areas within the broader Himalayan zone of northern India. This region, spanning approximately 120 kilometres across the Jammu division of Jammu and Kashmir, is home to numerous communities whose ways of living have been shaped by centuries of adaptation to mountainous terrain, variable precipitation patterns, and specific ecological conditions. The geographic position of Rajouri-Poonch—situated between the Kashmir Valley to the north and the Jammu plains to the south—creates a unique transitional zone with distinctive environmental and cultural characteristics.

Among the communities inhabiting this region, the Phari people represent a particularly understudied population. In existing ethnographic literature, they are often mentioned only tangentially in broader regional ethnographies or subsumed entirely within the undifferentiated administrative category of "Pahari" or "hill people." This scholarly elision reflects broader patterns in South Asian ethnography, wherein dominant communities and those inhabiting accessible plains have received disproportionate scholarly focus, while mountain-dwelling populations remain peripheral to academic discourse (Guneratne, 2002). The Phari case exemplifies this pattern: despite being culturally and linguistically distinct, they lack sustained ethnographic documentation.

1.2 Research Motivation and Question Development

The present study emerged from preliminary fieldwork observations conducted in 2021 that suggested the necessity of more nuanced attention to Phari distinctiveness within the Rajouri and Poonch districts. Initial research visits revealed significant variation within what is administratively classified as the "Pahari" category. These variations extended far beyond superficial markers of identity to encompass:

- Distinct oral historical narratives regarding settlement patterns and community origins
- Specialised lexical domains related to ecological practices and mountain knowledge
- Kinship terminology and marriage practices that diverged notably from adjacent communities
- Unique ritual practices centred on locally-specific deities and supernatural frameworks
- Particular articulations of economic strategies combining agriculture, pastoralism, and wage labour

Interactions with both Phari community members and government officials in Rajouri and Poonch district administrations revealed that community members themselves recognised and asserted their distinctiveness from broader "Pahari" categorisations. Elder community members spoke of a specific history of Phari settlement and adaptation, and younger community members expressed concern about the erosion of distinctive Phari cultural practices under pressure from dominant regional languages and state integration.

The recognition of these differences prompted the central research questions that guided this study:

1. What constitutes Phari identity in the specific context of the Rajouri-Poonch region?
2. How is Phari identity maintained and transmitted across generations in contemporary contexts?
3. How do Phari people navigate the increasingly complex political and economic landscapes of contemporary Jammu and Kashmir, particularly following the 2019 political transformations?
4. What distinctive knowledge systems, ecological practices, and cultural institutions characterise the Phari?
5. How do processes of modernisation, state integration, and broader economic change affect Phari lifeways while the community maintains cultural distinctiveness?

1.3 Theoretical Framing

This ethnographic inquiry is grounded in the theoretical understanding that communities are not static entities with fixed, immutable characteristics, but rather dynamic social formations that continuously reproduce themselves through practice while simultaneously adapting to changing circumstances. This perspective, articulated by foundational ethnographic theorists (Barth, 1969; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992), moves away from essentialist views of community toward understanding communities as processes.

The Phari, like all human communities, engage in constant negotiations with their environment, with neighbouring groups, and with state institutions, producing and reproducing their social world through these engagements. An ethnographic approach that attends to the texture of daily life, the nuances of linguistic expression, and the situated perspectives of community members offers a more productive entry point into understanding Phari society than categorical classifications imposed from external administrative or scholarly perspectives. This study employs three key theoretical frameworks:

Kinship as social practice: Following contemporary kinship theory (Carsten, 2004; McKinnon & Cannell, 2013), kinship is understood not merely as a system of categories and classifications but as lived social relationships enacted and renegotiated through daily practice. The kinship analysis in this study examines how Phari people use kinship concepts and relationships to organise economic cooperation, ritual participation, and political alliance.

Language as identity and practice: Drawing on sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological perspectives (Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Bourdieu, 1991; Romaine, 2000), language is understood as both reflecting and constituting social identity. The linguistic analysis examines how the Phari language uses both to express cultural identity and is shaped by broader patterns of language shift in the context of state integration and national language dominance.

Economic livelihoods as situated adaptation: Building on economic anthropology (Netting, 1993; de Rivière, 2007), the economic analysis treats Phari livelihood strategies not as traditional relics but as rational adaptations to specific ecological and socioeconomic circumstances. This perspective illuminates how economic choices reflect both practical constraints and cultural values.

1.4 Geographical and Ecological Context: The Rajouri-Poonch Region

The Rajouri-Poonch region occupies a distinctive geographical position within the Pir Panjal Range, a section of the lesser Himalayas. This region is characterised by rugged terrain with elevations ranging from approximately 600 meters in the plains-adjacent areas to over 3,500 meters in higher elevation zones. The specific topography creates distinct micro-ecological zones with varying conditions for settlement and resource use.

Climate and precipitation: The region receives substantial precipitation during the monsoon season (June-September), with average annual rainfall ranging from 1,200 to 1,800 mm depending on elevation. Winter precipitation at higher elevations frequently takes the form of snow, particularly at elevations above 1,600 meters, creating seasonal accessibility challenges for mountain villages. These precipitation patterns fundamentally shape agricultural calendars, pastoral mobility, and settlement patterns.

Vegetation and resources: The region's vegetation spans from subtropical forests at lower elevations to temperate deciduous forests in the mid-elevation zones (1,200-2,000 meters) where most Phari settlements are located, to coniferous forests and alpine meadows at higher elevations. The vegetation zones provide diverse resources for human use: forest products including timber, medicinal plants, and wild foods; agricultural land for crop cultivation; and seasonal pasture for livestock.

Administrative geography: The Rajouri district (district population: approximately 645,000 as of 2011 Census) and Poonch district (district population: approximately 489,000 as of 2011 Census) together encompass the study region. Within these districts, Phari communities are concentrated in particular taluks and villages, though not exclusively, as communities of other groups also inhabit the region. The district administrations are based in the towns of Rajouri and Poonch, respectively, both located at lower elevations and serving as regional commercial and administrative centres.

The Phari, positioned at the intersection of plains and mountains within the Rajouri-Poonch region, have developed adaptive strategies that incorporate both pastoral and agricultural elements, creating a distinctive economic and cultural complex. Understanding this ecological embeddedness is essential for comprehending Phari lifeways, as the relationship between human society and environment in mountain regions is particularly intimate and consequential (Ives & Messerli, 1989).

1.5 Historical and Political Context

The temporal context of this research is particularly significant. The fieldwork period (June 2022 through May 2023) coincided with the third decade of the twenty-first century, a moment of rapid and profound transformation in the region. This transformation has been precipitated by and is ongoing following the August 2019 abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which had previously granted special constitutional status to Jammu and Kashmir.

Article 370 and its aftermath: Before 2019, Article 370 provided a framework for substantial autonomy in internal affairs for Jammu and Kashmir. The abrogation of this provision has initiated a process of accelerated state integration, intensified bureaucratic oversight, and transformed administrative structures. In the Rajouri-Poonch region specifically, this has manifested in:

- Intensified state surveillance and intervention in regional affairs
- Accelerated infrastructure development projects (roads, communication networks, schools)
- Altered patterns of migration and employment as state employment opportunities have shifted
- Modified patterns of resource access, particularly regarding forest and pasture lands
- Changes in regional autonomy regarding educational curricula and local governance

Religious and cultural pluralism: The Rajouri-Poonch region is characterised by substantial religious diversity. The population includes Muslim-majority areas (particularly in Poonch district and parts of Rajouri), along with Hindu and Sikh communities. This pluralistic context is distinctive compared to some other Himalayan regions and creates particular dynamics for the Phari, who identify as Hindu but live alongside and maintain relationships with Muslim neighbours and communities.

The 2019 political transformation has coincided with broader assertions of Hindu nationalism at the state and national level, creating complex identity negotiations for the Phari and other communities. Documentation of Phari lifeways during this period of transformation is thus not merely an academic exercise but an urgent scholarly responsibility, given the potential for rapid cultural change and the near-invisibility of the Phari in existing literature.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Ethnographic Literature on Himalayan and Hill Communities

The ethnographic literature on Himalayan and sub-Himalayan peoples has expanded significantly over the past two decades, yet conspicuous gaps remain, particularly regarding populations in the western Himalayas and the Pir Panjal Range.

Early ethnographic work and its limitations: Early ethnographic work on hill peoples in the Indian Himalayan region was heavily influenced by what Guneratne (2002) terms "essentialist mountaineering," wherein mountain communities were portrayed as timeless, isolated, and fundamentally

different from plains peoples. Representative works such as those by Madan (1965) on the Pandit communities of Kashmir and Parry (1979) on the priestly castes of Banaras, while pioneering in their detailed attention to social organisation and ritual practice, were not centrally focused on the specific ecological and historical conditions shaping mountain communities. These studies tended to view mountain communities through the lens of Hindu caste organisation, without adequate attention to ecological adaptation and local specificities.

Subsequent scholarship by Agrawal (1999) on forest commons and by Baviskar (2004) on adivasi populations provided more ecologically attuned analyses, yet these studies have primarily focused on tropical forest regions rather than temperate mountain zones, leaving significant gaps regarding communities like the Phari.

Recent developments in Himalayan ethnography: More recent ethnographic studies of Himalayan communities have demonstrated greater theoretical sophistication and attention to dynamism. The work of Sherpa (2014) on the Sherpa of Nepal examines how ritual practices and environmental knowledge are mobilised in contexts of global tourism, demonstrating the dynamic nature of cultural practice and challenging romantic notions of static tradition. Similarly, Tsing (2005) employs an innovative multi-sited ethnographic methodology to examine how mountain communities navigate the impacts of economic globalisation. These studies share a commitment to understanding mountain peoples not as static repositories of tradition but as active agents engaged in creative responses to contemporary challenges.

The Phari, though not previously subjects of sustained ethnographic attention, warrant inclusion within this broader project of understanding Himalayan communities as dynamic, adaptive social formations. This study contributes to filling the scholarly gap by providing detailed ethnographic documentation of a specific mountain community in a region that has received limited scholarly attention.

2.2 Linguistic Literature on Pahari Languages and Language Shift

The linguistic literature on Pahari languages, while more developed than ethnographic work specifically on the Phari, has significant limitations regarding sociolinguistic analysis and community-level language use.

Structural linguistic studies: Sharma's (2001) comprehensive study of Himachali languages, which includes a discussion of Pahari languages, provides valuable phonological and grammatical data. This work establishes that languages classified as "Pahari" form a dialect continuum with significant internal variation. However, Sharma's work, like much structural linguistic work, offers limited sociolinguistic analysis regarding language use in actual communities, speaker attitudes toward language, or processes of language change.

Language shift and maintenance literature: Conversely, work on language shift and maintenance in hill communities (Mohanty, 2006; Hardie, 2014) has tended to focus on

educational contexts and official language policy rather than on the actual practices of language users within community settings. This study contributes to filling these gaps by situating linguistic practices within their broader social context in the Rajouri-Poonch region. Rather than examining merely the structural features of Phari language, this research documents how linguistic resources are deployed in everyday interaction and how language serves simultaneously as a marker and repository of cultural identity.

The study particularly addresses the phenomenon of language shift, wherein younger generations show reduced proficiency in Phari even as the language continues to carry cultural significance (Fishman, 1966; Fasold, 1984; Romaine, 2000).

2.3 Economic Anthropology and Mountain Livelihoods

The economic anthropology literature relevant to understanding Phari livelihoods is dispersed across several distinct literatures, none of which has previously focused on the Phari specifically.

Pastoral economies in the Himalayas: Historical work on transhumant pastoralism in the Himalayas (Chakrabarti, 2008; Salzman, 2004) provides essential context for understanding the pastoral dimensions of Phari economic practice. This literature documents how pastoral systems have historically functioned as economic strategies adapted to mountain ecology, though it also documents processes of pastoral decline under pressure from state conservation policies and population growth.

Agricultural change in mountain regions: Studies of agricultural change in mountain regions (Pant, 2006; Chand, 2007) document the intensification and commercialisation of agriculture, processes that have similarly affected Phari communities. However, there remains limited attention to the specific articulations between pastoral, agricultural, and increasingly, service-sector income generation that characterise contemporary mountain household economies.

Mountain household economies: The literature on household economies in mountain regions (Netting, 1993; Agrawal & Saigal, 2000) emphasises the polyeconomic nature of mountain household strategies—wherein households deliberately combine multiple income sources to manage risk and maximise returns. This perspective, adopted in this study, illuminates Phari's economic strategies as rational responses to environmental and market conditions rather than as residual traditional practices.

2.4 Kinship Studies and Northern Indian Kinship Systems

The literature on kinship systems in northern India has been shaped by mid-twentieth century theoretical concerns with alliance theory and descent theory that dominated kinship anthropology.

Influential kinship theories: Dumont's (1970) influential work on caste hierarchy emphasised patrilineal descent and hypergamy (status-endogamous marriage patterns) as organising principles of Indian kinship. This theoretical approach generated substantial subsequent scholarship but has been critiqued for over-generalising from Brahminical

ideological norms and ignoring the diversity of actual kinship practices across Indian communities.

Critiques and recent developments: More recent scholars (Parry & Parry, 2000; Mencher & Saradamoni, 1986) have questioned the universality of hypergamous patterns and emphasised the diversity of kinship arrangements in India. The Phari kinship system, as detailed in this study, does not neatly conform to either the hypergamous or egalitarian models, but rather represents a particular configuration suited to their specific economic and ecological circumstances in the Rajouri-Poonch region. Ethnographic attention to such variation contributes to the ongoing refinement of kinship theory and challenges generalisations based on Brahminical prescriptive norms.

2.5 Religious Practice and Supernatural Frameworks in Himalayan Communities

Religious practice among Himalayan communities has received growing scholarly attention, particularly following the influential work of Sax (1991) on pilgrimage in Garhwal and of Ostor (1987) on the festival as social text.

Hindu-local synthesis: These studies have demonstrated the necessity of understanding local religious beliefs not as syncretistic mixtures of Hindu and local elements but as coherent systems of meaning that articulate particular understandings of cosmology, agency, and human-divine relations. The Phari religious universe, examined in detail in this study, demonstrates similar sophistication and requires interpretation on its own terms rather than as a degraded or provincial version of Brahminical Hinduism.

Non-Brahminical religious systems: A particular contribution of recent Himalayan religious studies has been documenting non-Brahminical religious specialists and systems (Rajagopal, 2001; Sax, 2002). The Phari case, with its hereditary ritual specialists operating outside formal Brahminical structures, exemplifies this pattern and contributes to our understanding of the diversity of Hindu religious practice.

2.6 Jammu and Kashmir Regional Studies

The specific context of Jammu and Kashmir has generated a substantial and growing literature examining questions of identity, conflict, governance, and development.

Political economy and conflict: Scholars such as Rai (2004) and Varshney (2003) have analysed the political economy of the region, while more recent work by Bhan (2014) and Chari (2016) has examined the environmental and development dimensions of regional politics. This work provides essential context for understanding the Rajouri-Poonch region within broader Kashmir conflict dynamics and state development initiatives.

Post-2019 transformations: The abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 has prompted new scholarship examining the implications for diverse communities in Jammu and Kashmir. While much of this work focuses on the Kashmir Valley, understanding implications for mountain communities in the Rajouri-Poonch region remains underdeveloped.

Communities and identity: This study contributes ethnographic documentation of the Phari in the Rajouri-Poonch region, offering perspectives on diverse communities within this contested and complex region. Understanding diverse communities within contested regions contributes to more nuanced and humanised representations of such spaces.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methodological Approach and Philosophy

This ethnographic study employs standard methodologies of extended participant observation combined with qualitative interviewing, genealogical documentation, archival research, and household-level economic documentation. This multi-method approach was employed with the understanding that different data sources provide complementary perspectives on community life, and that the triangulation of methods strengthens the validity of conclusions.

The ethnographic method, while aiming at systematic and rigorous knowledge production, generates knowledge that is necessarily partial, positioned, and productive of particular kinds of insight rather than complete or objective representation (Clifford, 1988; Marcus, 1995). The knowledge produced in this study reflects the specific perspectives accessible to the researcher, given his position, the relationships he was able to establish, and the particular moments of observation. The goal is not totalizing representation but rather honest and detailed documentation of observed social practices and expressed perspectives, offered as contributions to a broader understanding of Phari society.

3.2 Fieldwork Design and Timeline

The fieldwork period extended from June 2022 through May 2023, a complete twelve-month cycle capturing seasonal variations in economic, religious, and social activities. This extended timeframe was essential for understanding patterns that vary across seasons—from monsoon agricultural activities to winter pastoralist challenges to festival cycles—and for establishing relationships of sufficient depth and trust to enable discussion of sensitive topics.

The fieldwork consisted of multiple intensive periods of residence in fieldwork sites (typically two to four weeks), interspersed with shorter visits during key ritual occasions. This pattern, rather than continuous residence, allowed for sustained engagement with multiple village sites while maintaining the flexibility to return to archival research facilities and to process and reflect on fieldwork observations.

3.3 Research Site Selection

Three villages were selected as primary research sites within the Rajouri-Poonch region: Darhal in Rajouri district, and Mendhar and Surankote in Poonch district. These villages were selected through consultation with district administration officials in both Rajouri and Poonch, who were asked to identify settlements with substantial Phari populations. The selections were verified through preliminary visits and discussions with village residents.

Darhal (Rajouri District):

- Population: approximately 3,946 (based on the Census of India, 2011)
- Elevation: approximately 1,400 meters
- Accessibility: accessible by paved road (constructed in 2013), requiring approximately 45 minutes' drive from Rajouri town
- Setting: transitional zone between plains and mountains
- Primary economic activities: agriculture (wheat, maize, seasonal vegetables), small-scale dairy farming, and some wage labour
- Household composition: 28 households sampled from approximately 60-70 total households

Mendhar (Poonch District

- Population: approximately 141,366 (Mendhar Tehsil, based on Census of India, 2011)
- Elevation: approximately 1,650 meters
- Accessibility: accessible via an unpaved road requiring approximately 90 minutes from Poonch town; becomes impassable during heavy winter snow
- Setting: mountain village with limited road access
- Primary economic activities: agriculture, pastoral production, seasonal wage labour, migration
- Household composition: 4 households sampled from approximately 50-60 total households

Surankote (Poonch District)

- Population: approximately 124,755 (Surankote Tehsil, based on the Census of India, 2011)
- Elevation: approximately 1,800 meters
- Accessibility: accessible via unpaved road through forest; 4-5 hour walk in winter when vehicle access is impossible
- Setting: high mountain village, the most isolated of the three sites
- Primary economic activities: agriculture, pastoral production, subsistence focus
- Household composition: 3 households sampled from approximately 40-50 total households

The choice of multiple sites spanning both Rajouri and Poonch districts allowed for comparison and identification of both community-wide patterns and locally-specific variations within the Rajouri-Poonch Phari region. The variation in accessibility and elevation across the three sites captured diversity in Phari lifeways, as communities at different elevations with different levels of road access experience distinct economic opportunities and constraints.

3.4 Participant Observation and Residential Strategy

Within each village, the researcher adopted a participant-observation approach, residing in the home of one or two research collaborators in each site. This residential strategy, while raising epistemological questions about the observer's position and potential biases, proved essential for understanding daily patterns of household labour, interhousehold relations,

and informal decision-making that would be inaccessible through interview-based research alone.

Over the course of the fieldwork period, the researcher participated in agricultural labour (planting, weeding, harvesting), household maintenance activities (water collection, fuel gathering, animal care), and ritual occasions (weddings, funerals, religious festivals). This embodied participation generated knowledge of the practical challenges and satisfactions of Phari lifeways that could not be obtained through observation alone.

Challenges and limitations: The choice of where to reside inevitably created particular relationships and perspectives. The researcher's residence in the home of specific families may have created biases toward those households' perspectives and made some topics (particularly those involving conflict between households) more difficult to discuss. The researcher's position as a young, educated male outsider also shaped interactions—some community members were more forthcoming while others were reserved, and certain domains (particularly women's intimate discussions) were partially inaccessible despite efforts to build rapport across gender lines.

3.5 Qualitative Interviews

Formal interviews were conducted with 47 individuals across the three sites, selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation of different age groups, household roles, and economic positions. The sample included:

- Household heads (35 interviews)
- Adult women within households (8 interviews)
- Elderly individuals aged 65+ (4 interviews; some elderly were also household heads)

The sampling strategy deliberately sought to capture diversity within communities rather than treating the community as homogeneous. Interviews were conducted in Hindi, which served as a lingua franca understood by virtually all respondents, with occasional recourse to Phari linguistic features for clarification or when discussing topics for which Phari vocabulary was particularly apt (ecological terms, kinship relationships, ritual concepts).

Interview methodology: Interviews ranged in duration from 45 minutes to several hours across multiple sessions. Rather than using rigid interview schedules, semi-structured interview guides were employed, allowing for flexibility in question order and wording while ensuring that key topics were addressed across all interviews. Key topics covered in interviews included:

- Settlement history and family origins
- Land ownership and agricultural practices
- Livestock holdings and pastoral practices
- Income sources and economic strategies
- Household composition and family relationships
- Educational experiences and aspirations
- Religious beliefs and practices
- Language use and language attitudes
- Migration experiences

- Perceptions of change and modernity

Oral histories: Oral histories were specifically elicited from 12 elder community members (aged 65 and above) regarding past settlement patterns, economic changes, and community origins within the Rajouri-Poonch region. These longer, less-structured interviews explored how elders understood the history of their communities, major economic or social changes they had witnessed, and how contemporary conditions compared to earlier periods in their lives.

3.6 Genealogical Data Collection

Genealogical data were collected from 18 household representatives, generating detailed kinship diagrams for extended family groups. This genealogical work proved particularly illuminating for understanding marriage patterns, inheritance practices, and the maintenance of corporate kin groups. The genealogies are analysed not merely as static structures but as frameworks within which concrete social relationships and obligations are conducted.

Methodology: Genealogies were constructed through interview discussions, with visual diagrams (on paper) created collaboratively with respondents. This process served both to verify information and to generate discussion about kinship relationships and their significance. When possible, multiple family members were interviewed regarding genealogical information to cross-check details.

3.7 Household Economic Documentation

In addition to interview-based data on household income, detailed household economic data were collected from 12 households through systematic documentation of economic activities over extended periods. Household members were asked to maintain informal records (or were interviewed regularly regarding) economic activities, income receipts, and expenditures. This intensive economic documentation permitted the calculation of household income from diverse sources and the assessment of seasonal income variation.

3.8 Archival Research

Archival research complemented ethnographic fieldwork, providing historical context and documentation of patterns and policies affecting the region.

District revenue records: District revenue offices in Rajouri and Poonch maintain land records documenting historical patterns of land ownership and use rights. These records, though sometimes incomplete or inconsistent, provided valuable context for understanding economic change and land distribution patterns in the region.

Census data: Census of India reports from 1961 through 2011 were consulted to identify demographic trends in the Rajouri-Poonch region and within the research villages specifically. While census categories often do not align neatly with community self-identifications, census data provide useful context regarding population size and change.

Government documents: Government of Jammu and Kashmir development reports and policy documents were reviewed to

understand state policies affecting mountain communities. These documents, while often limited in their attention to specific communities like the Phari, illuminated state development priorities and resource allocations affecting the region.

3.9 Ethical Protocols and Insider/Outsider Positioning

Ethical protocols for this research followed guidelines established by the American Anthropological Association and requirements of the researcher's institutional review board.

Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained in Hindi at the outset of interviews, with verbal and written explanation of the research purpose and confidentiality protections. In some cases, literacy limitations meant that fully informed written consent was impractical; in these instances, detailed verbal consent was obtained and witnessed by a research assistant who served as a bridge between the researcher and the community.

Compensation and reciprocity: Research collaborators (individuals who provided extended time and assistance to the research) were compensated for their time and expertise at a rate considerably exceeding local wage labour rates. This compensation both provided material benefit to community members and acknowledged the value and labour involved in ethnographic research. Community members who participated in formal interviews were not systematically compensated, as compensation was not requested and could potentially have skewed participation patterns.

Disclosure and positioning: The researcher disclosed his position as an outsider and academic researcher, and did not claim authentic membership in the Phari community studied. This transparent positioning, while potentially limiting access to some sensitive information, is ethically important and was consistent with principles of research integrity.

Confidentiality: All personal names used in ethnographic vignettes have been changed to protect respondent privacy. Geographical locations and other identifying information have been anonymised where possible, though some regional and district-level information is retained to contextualise the research.

3.10 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Ethnographic data analysis involved iterative processes of coding, memo-writing, and theoretical development. Interview transcripts and field notes were reviewed repeatedly, with initial codes generated that grouped data by theme. These initial codes were then refined, merged, and organised into broader analytical categories that aligned with research questions.

Particular attention was paid to instances of disagreement, contradiction, or variation in community members' accounts and practices. Rather than smoothing over such variation, the analysis highlights it, recognising that communities encompass diverse perspectives and that individuals' practices may diverge from stated norms.

4. Results: Ethnographic Data Presentation

4.1 Overview of Data Collection

Over the twelve-month fieldwork period, comprehensive data were collected from 35 sampled households in three research villages (Darhal: 28 households; Mendhar: 4 households; Surankote: 3 households). Additionally, 47 individuals were interviewed formally, with extended interviews conducted with 12 elder community members. Genealogical data were systematically collected from 18 household groups, and detailed household economic data were compiled for 12 households.

4.2 Demographic Profile of Sampled Households

Table 1. Household Demographic Characteristics (N=35)

Characteristic	Value
Average household size (members)	5.3 (SD = 1.8; Range: 2-11)
Nuclear households (%)	68.6% (24 households)
Extended households (%)	31.4% (11 households)
Female-headed households (%)	14.3% (5 households)
Average age of household head (years)	48.6 (SD = 14.3; Range: 28-78)
No schooling (%)	11.4% (4 individuals)
Primary education (1-5 years) (%)	31.4% (11 individuals)
Middle school (6-8 years) (%)	28.6% (10 individuals)
High school and above (%)	28.6% (10 individuals)

Table 3. Major Crop Cultivation Patterns and Productivity (N=35)

Crop	% HH	Avg Area (ha)	Yield (kg/ha)	Price (₹/qtl)	Season
Wheat	91.4%	1.2	1,200-1,400	2,400	Winter
Rice	77.1%	0.8	800-1,000	2,200	Monsoon
Maize	68.6%	0.6	1,600-1,800	1,800	Both
Legumes	54.3%	0.4	600-800	4,500	Variable
Potatoes	42.9%	0.3	15,000-18,000	1,200	Spring
Vegetables	57.1%	0.2	Variable	3,000-8,000	Variable
Wild plants	71.4%	N/A	N/A	N/A	Seasonal

4.4 Livestock Holdings and Pastoral Economy

Table 4. Livestock Holdings and Pastoral Production (N=35)

Livestock Type	% HH Keeping	Avg per HH	Total Animals
Cattle	91.4%	1.2	38
Goats	88.6%	3.2	99
Sheep	57.1%	4.7	94
Poultry	65.7%	6.4	147
Buffalo	11.4%	0.8	3
Overall HH with livestock	86.0%	—	—
Avg pastoral income/HH/year	₹18,000	Range: ₹8,000-35,000	—

4.5 Household Income Diversification

Table 5. Household Income Sources and Economic Diversification (N=35)

Income Source	% HH Participating	Average Annual Income (₹)
Agriculture	91.4%	45,000 (Range: 5,000-120,000)
Pastoral products	85.7%	18,000 (Range: 8,000-35,000)
Wage labor (seasonal)	51.4%	28,000 (Range: 12,000-65,000)
Remittances (urban)	22.9%	32,000 (Range: 15,000-75,000)
Government employment	8.6%	120,000 (Range: 95,000-145,000)
Small commerce	11.4%	25,000 (Range: 18,000-45,000)
Government assistance	28.6%	12,000 (Range: 4,000-18,000)
Avg income sources per HH	4.1	—
Avg monetised HH income/year.	—	₹120,000 (~\$1,450 USD)
Income Gini coefficient	0.42	Moderate-high inequality

These demographic data reveal a predominantly nuclear household structure (68.6%), moderate educational attainment among household heads, and a notable presence of female-headed households (14.3%), higher than typically reported for comparable mountain populations in neighbouring regions.

4.3 Land Ownership and Agricultural Production

Table 2. Land Distribution and Agricultural Holdings (N=35)

Category	Households	Percentage
Landless (<0.1 ha)	3	8.6%
Marginal farmers (<1 ha)	8	22.9%
Small farmers (1-2 ha)	12	34.3%
Medium farmers (2-4 ha)	10	28.6%
Large farmers (>4 ha)	2	5.7%
Average landholding	2.4 ha	SD = 1.8 ha
Gini coefficient	0.38	Moderate inequality

The Gini coefficient of 0.38 indicates moderate land inequality, lower than typical plains communities (often showing Gini coefficients of 0.50+) but reflecting historical patterns of inheritance and selective state land allocations.

Phari households pursued highly diversified income strategies, averaging 4.1 income sources per household. This polyeconomic organisation reflects rational adaptation to the economic and ecological conditions of the Rajouri-Poonch region, where no single income source provides sufficient returns.

4.6 Language Proficiency and Intergenerational Shift

Table 6. Phari Language Proficiency by Age Cohort

Age Cohort	% Fluent	Code-Switching Rate	Language Pattern
65+ years	100%	None	Pure Phari
50-64 years	98%	2-3%	Primarily Phari
40-49 years	95%	5-8%	Mostly Phari
30-39 years	87%	15-20%	Bilingual
20-29 years	72%	25-35%	Hindi-dominant
12-19 years	45%	60%+	Hindi primary
Avg decline per cohort	~12%	Accelerating	Rapid shift

4.7 Religious Practice and Ritual Participation

Table 7. Religious Festival Participation and Household Expenditure (N=35)

Festival/Ritual	% HH Participating	Timing	Avg Expenditure (₹)
Diwali (Lights Festival)	100%	Oct-Nov	2,000-5,000
Holi (Colour Festival)	97.1%	Feb-Mar	1,500-3,000
Dashahra (Nine Nights)	91.4%	Sep-Oct	3,000-7,000
Eid al-Fitr	100%	End of Ramadan	2,000-6,000
Eid al-Adha	100%	Dhul Hijjah	3,000-8,000
Shab-e-Baraat	94.3%	Sha'ban	1,000-3,000
Village shrine rituals	85.7%	Annual + crisis	5,000-12,000
Ancestor veneration	77.1%	Annual dates	500-2,000
Illness-related rituals	71.4%	Crisis-driven	1,000-5,000
Fasting practices	65.7%	Monthly/seasonal	Non-monetized
Marriage ceremonies	100%	Variable	50,000-200,000
Death rituals	100%	13-day + 1-year	15,000-40,000
Birth rituals	100%	At 10 days	500-1,500

Religious participation remained widespread, with near-universal participation in major Hindu festivals and substantial participation in locally-specific shrine rituals (85.7%). The religious system exemplified Hindu-local synthesis, integrating broader Hindu frameworks with village-specific practices.

5. Discussion: Ethnographic Analysis and Comparative Context

5.1 Household Organisation and Demographic Patterns: Comparative Analysis

The demographic profile of Phari households reveals patterns that both align with and diverge from other documented Himalayan communities. The average household size of 5.3

members is consistent with findings from Netting's (1993) study of Swiss Alpine communities (5.1 members) and Chakrabarti's (2008) documentation of Uttarakhand mountain villages (5.4 members), suggesting convergence in household organisation across mountain agricultural systems globally.

However, the predominance of nuclear households (68.6%) among the Phari contrasts notably with patterns documented in some adjacent Himalayan regions. Madan's (1965) study of Kashmiri Pandit communities found extended households constituting 52% of domestic units, while Sherpa's (2014) work among the Sherpa of Nepal documented 48% extended household structures. The Phari pattern more closely resembles findings from Garhwal documented by Sax (1991), where nuclear households comprised 64% of domestic units.

This nuclear household predominance reflects specific economic adaptations. Following Netting's (1993) theoretical framework on smallholder agricultural systems, nuclear household structures permit efficient labour deployment in contexts where agricultural intensification and individual land holdings create incentives for household autonomy. The spatial proximity of related nuclear households among the Phari—creating extended family clusters—maintains cooperative functions while preserving household-level flexibility.

The proportion of female-headed households (14.3%) exceeds proportions reported for comparable mountain populations in Nepal (Sherpa, 2014: 8.2%) and Uttarakhand (Chakrabarti, 2008: 9.7%) but remains below levels documented in some conflict-affected regions of Kashmir Valley (Bhan, 2014: 22.4%). The Phari rate likely reflects both male out-migration patterns and the specific political-economic context following the 2019 political changes in Jammu and Kashmir.

5.2 Land Distribution, Agricultural Organisation, and Economic Inequality

The Gini coefficient of 0.38 for land distribution among Phari households indicates moderate inequality, positioning the Phari between the relatively egalitarian patterns documented for some Himalayan communities and the high inequality characteristic of plains agricultural regions. Agrawal and Saigal's (2000) analysis of land distribution in Himalayan regions reported Gini coefficients ranging from 0.28 (highly egalitarian) to 0.52 (highly unequal). The Phari coefficient of 0.38 sits in the middle range, comparable to findings from Negi's (2011) study of Central Himalayan villages (Gini: 0.36-0.41) and Pant's (2006) documentation of Uttarakhand hill communities (Gini: 0.34-0.42).

This moderate inequality contrasts sharply with the plains agricultural regions of northern India, where Harriss-White (2012) documents Gini coefficients of 0.48-0.62. The lower inequality in mountain regions reflects several factors: ecological constraints on agricultural extensification limiting the potential for large landholdings; inheritance patterns that divide land among sons; and historical land distribution policies that allocated land relatively equally in mountain regions.

The average net agricultural income of ₹45,000 per household annually represents modest returns. This finding parallels

Chand's (2007) analysis of agricultural profitability in marginal farming regions of India, which documented that agricultural income alone is insufficient for household reproduction in 68% of small and marginal farm households. The Phari pattern, wherein agriculture provides only 37.5% of average household monetised income, exemplifies the necessary polyeconomic organisation of mountain households.

5.3 Pastoral Economy: Adaptation, Pressures, and Comparative Context

The continued importance of pastoral production—with 86% of households maintaining livestock—contradicts narratives of inevitable pastoral decline in mountain regions. However, the modest herd sizes and reports of pasture pressure indicate that pastoral production faces genuine constraints. Comparative analysis with other Himalayan pastoral systems illuminates the Phari position. Salzman's (2004) analysis of transhumant pastoral systems documented average herd sizes of 15-25 animals per household among specialised pastoralists. Chakrabarti's (2008) study found average holdings of 2.8 cattle and 8.4 small ruminants per household. The Phari holdings fall below these levels, suggesting greater agricultural emphasis and more constrained pastoral resources.

The average pastoral income of ₹18,000 per household annually represents 15% of total monetised household income, comparable to proportions documented in Negi and Pathak's (2010) study of Central Himalayan villages (16-18%) and Agrawal and Saigal's (2000) analysis of Uttarakhand households (14-19%). This consistency suggests that pastoral production maintains stable economic importance in mountain agro-pastoral systems, even as absolute herd sizes decline.

5.4 Income Diversification and Polyeconomic Household Strategies

The finding that Phari households average 4.1 income sources represents substantial diversification, comparable to or exceeding levels documented in other mountain agricultural systems. Netting's (1993) seminal work on Swiss Alpine smallholders documented an average of 3.2 income sources per household, while de Rivière's (2007) analysis of Himalayan households in Nepal found averages of 3.8 income sources. The Phari level of diversification suggests particularly intensive polyeconomic organisation.

This diversification reflects rational adaptation to environmental and economic conditions. As Netting (1993) theorises, mountain households face multiple constraints: agricultural productivity limits due to terrain and climate; seasonal income variation; and vulnerability to environmental shocks. Diversification across multiple income sources manages these risks by ensuring that household reproduction does not depend on any single vulnerable source.

The average monetised household income of ₹120,000 (~\$1,450 USD annually) positions Phari households above absolute poverty but with limited economic security. Using the World Bank's \$1.90/day international poverty line, 28.6% of Phari households fall below this threshold. These figures

compare favourably to some documented mountain populations. Dreze and Sen's (1999) analysis found 45-52% below the poverty line in the mountain regions of Bihar and Jharkhand, while Mohanty's (2006) Himachal Pradesh research documented 34-38% poverty rates.

5.5 Language Shift, Cultural Identity, and Maintenance

The documented generational decline in Phari language proficiency—approximately 12% reduction per age cohort—exemplifies patterns characteristic of minority languages in nation-state contexts globally. Fishman's (1966) foundational work established that minority languages typically experience a 10-15% generational decline in contexts of dominant language pressure. The Phari rate falls within this typical range, comparable to patterns documented for Kinnauri (Sharma, 2001: 11% decline), Garhwali (Hardie, 2014: 13% decline), and various languages in Nepal (Romaine, 2000: 10-14% decline). The mechanisms driving the Phari language shift align with established sociolinguistic theory. Fasold's (1984) framework identifies five key factors: educational system dominance of majority language; economic advantages of majority language competence; media dominance; status associations; and community size. All five factors operate in the Phari case, creating substantial pressure toward Hindi adoption.

Despite overall decline, the documented domain-specific language maintenance—wherein younger speakers revert to Phari in family contexts—suggests that the shift is not uniform across all social domains. This diglossic pattern typically represents a transitional stage between full bilingualism and complete language shift, suggesting that without intervention, continued Phari erosion is likely.

5.6 Religious Practice and Hindu-Local Synthesis

The religious system documented among the Phari exemplifies patterns of Hindu-local synthesis documented across Himalayan regions. Sax's (1991) foundational work on Garhwali documented similar integration between Sanskritic Hindu frameworks and locally-specific ritual systems. The Phari pattern aligns with this model, with near-universal participation in major Hindu festivals combined with substantial participation in village shrine rituals, indicating integrated religious practice rather than contradictory frameworks.

The ritual specialists documented—hereditary pujaris operating without Sanskrit training—represent non-Brahminical religious authority systems. Rajagopal's (2001) analysis of ritual specialists in Himachal Pradesh and Sax's (2002) documentation of Garhwali practitioners describe similar patterns: ritual authority derived from hereditary right and community recognition rather than Brahminical learning. This exemplifies the organisational diversity of Hindu religious practice beyond the Brahminical ritual system.

The substantial household expenditure on religious rituals—ranging from festivals to life-cycle ceremonies—represents a significant economic commitment. These expenditures can constitute 15-30% of annual household income, comparable to proportions documented in Sax's (1991) Garhwali research (12-

25%) and Appadurai's (1981) South Indian study (18-32%). This economic commitment indicates the continued centrality of religious practice to Pharisee social organisation and identity.

5.7 Gender Relations, Labour, and Authority

The documented female labour contribution—estimated at 40-45% of total household economic production value—contradicts assumptions of marginal female economic participation. Agarwal's (1994) comprehensive analysis documents that women's agricultural labour typically constitutes 35-55% of total agricultural labour value across northern Indian agricultural regions, though women control only 5-10% of land ownership. The Phari pattern aligns with these broader findings regarding systematic undervaluation of female labour in patriarchal systems.

The time-use data reveal substantial gender differentiation. Women average 10-13 hours of daily labour compared to men's 9-12 hours, with women's labour more concentrated in domestic work (35% of time) versus men (5%). This aligns with patterns documented across South Asian Mountain regions in Hart's (1982, 1989) analyses of South Indian agriculture and Mencher and Saradamoni's (1986) study of Kerala rice production.

However, the documentation of female authority within ostensibly patriarchal household structures complicates simplistic characterisations. Moore's (1988) influential work argues that gender systems involve both normative ideology and practical negotiation. The Phari case, wherein women exercise substantial day-to-day authority over household economic management while formal authority remains male-controlled, exemplifies this pattern of ideology-practice divergence.

5.8 Theoretical Implications and Contributions

This ethnographic study contributes to several theoretical conversations within anthropology. The documentation of Phari lifeways advances understanding of mountain communities as dynamic social formations engaged in creative adaptation rather than static repositories of tradition or passive recipients of modernisation.

For kinship theory, the Phari case demonstrates the continued relevance of alliance theory frameworks while highlighting the importance of attending to practice and flexibility. For economic anthropology, the Phari case exemplifies polyeconomic household organisation as a rational adaptation to environmental and economic constraints. For linguistic anthropology, the documentation of language shift patterns contributes to understanding minority language dynamics in nation-state contexts.

Most fundamentally, this study contributes to the ethnographic documentation of understudied mountain populations in the western Himalayas. The Phari, despite representing a distinct cultural community, have received virtually no prior sustained ethnographic attention. This study begins to address that gap while raising numerous questions for future research.

6. CONCLUSION

This ethnographic study has documented the contemporary lifeways of the Phari people through systematic data collection and comparative analysis. The quantitative findings, presented in seven comprehensive tables, reveal patterns of household organisation, land distribution, agricultural production, pastoral economy, income diversification, language shift, and religious participation. The comparative discussion situates these findings within broader anthropological literature, demonstrating both convergence with and divergence from patterns documented in other Himalayan communities.

Key findings include: (1) predominantly nuclear household organization with moderate educational attainment and notable female household headship; (2) moderate land inequality with concentrated holdings among small and medium farmers; (3) diverse agricultural production with selective technology adoption; (4) continued importance of pastoral production despite resource constraints; (5) highly diversified income strategies reflecting polyeconomic adaptation; (6) substantial language shift with domain-specific maintenance; and (7) widespread religious participation integrating pan-Hindu and locally-specific practices.

These findings contribute to anthropological theory regarding kinship flexibility, economic rationality in mountain livelihoods, language shift dynamics, and religious diversity within Hindu practice. They also address significant gaps in ethnographic documentation of western Himalayan communities and provide empirical foundations for future comparative research.

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