

Exploring the Spiritual Practices of the Jogi Community in Darjeeling: An Anthropological Study

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Abstract

The Jogi community is a small, marginalized group of people in Darjeeling, who have faced historical discrimination due to their social status and religious beliefs. Through ethnographic research, the paper explores the Jogi community's religious practices, with a focus on their spiritual beliefs in deities, pilgrimage sites, and ritual offerings. The Jogis follow a unique spiritual path that blends elements of Hinduism, Sufism, and Tantra, and this paper provides an in-depth analysis of their customs and rituals, including their celebrations and rites. Additionally, the study examines the Jogi community's history, which has been largely ignored in mainstream narratives, and their ongoing struggle to preserve their cultural heritage. The Jogis use rituals and festivals to create and reinforce social solidarity and to maintain a balance between the human and spirit worlds. Through ethnographic research and an analysis of historical and literary sources, the paper offers insights into the diverse practices of the Jogis, including their use of music, dance, and meditation in their religious observances. The paper underscores the importance of recognizing and respecting the religious practices of marginalized communities in promoting cultural diversity and social justice.

Keywords: Jogi; Religion; Festivals; Ancestral worship; Rituals; Social Solidarity.

INTRODUCTION

Religious belief systems and practices are integral to the lives of indigenous communities in India,

serving as a means of social control, solidarity, and conformity. These belief systems encompass various key elements, including the belief in a superhuman universe, human relationships with it, and the use of rituals to build relationships. Researchers have identified these elements as constituting a religious belief system, a value system that underpins religious life, and religious activity that varies by order. The theological worldview of ethnic communities encompasses several key elements, including the belief in a superhuman universe, the relationship between humans and this universe, and the use of rituals to establish and maintain these relationships.

Indigenous communities' religion is expressed in everyday language and experienced in daily life,

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with religious myth, belief, value, and religious activity being inseparable from other types of belief and behavior in social, economic, and political contexts. However, to outsiders, the meaning of their religious beliefs and practices may remain a mystery. Scholars have taken various approaches to understanding the origins of religion. One of the earliest works on tribal religion is "The Golden Bough" (1890) by Sir James George Frazer. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the religious beliefs and practices of various tribes around the world. Frazer examines the similarities and differences between these religions, with a particular focus on the role of ritual and magic in tribal life. He also posited that religion served as a means of explaining events by attributing them to divine interpretation. Another seminal work in the field of anthropology is "Primitive Culture" (1871) by Edward Tylor. This book explores the religious beliefs and practices of tribal communities, including their belief in animism, ancestor worship, and magic. Tylor argues that these beliefs reflect the primitive stages of human development and are gradually replaced by more advanced forms of religion as societies evolve. As Tylor noted, ancestral veneration is a fundamental aspect of primitive culture, and it continues to play a vital role in many indigenous communities today. Max Muller (1889) believed that religion arose from the emotional responses of primitive societies to natural phenomena that elicited awe and dread. On the other hand, E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1940) provides a detailed analysis of the religious beliefs and practices of the Nuer tribe in South Sudan. He examines the role of divination, sacrifice, and other rituals in Nuer religious life and demonstrates how these practices are intertwined with the tribe's political and economic institutions. Roy Ellen (1996) examines the role of hunting and sacrifice in the religious practices of the Wola people of Papua New Guinea. He demonstrates how these practices are intertwined with the tribe's beliefs in the spiritual power of animals and the need to maintain a balance between humans and nature. Fiona Bowie (2006) in his study provides a comprehensive overview of the field of religious anthropology including the nature of religion, ritual, myth, symbolism, and magic. Bowie also explores the ways in which religion intersects with other aspects of social life, such as gender, politics, and economics. K.S. Singh and R. S. Mann (2006), provide an in-depth analysis of the religious beliefs and practices of the Kumaon region in rural India. The study covers a wide range of topics, including Hinduism, Buddhism, animism, and shamanism.

The contributors also explore the ways in which religion and ritual are intertwined with the social, economic, and political life of the community.

Anthropological studies on tribal religion, religious practices, and festivals have provided valuable insights into the cultural and spiritual beliefs of these communities. These studies have demonstrated the close relationship between humans and nature and the significance of ritual and magic in tribal life. They have also shown how religious practices are intertwined with the political, economic, and social institutions of the community. Overall, these studies provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse and complex nature of tribal religions around the world. Despite these varying perspectives, it is clear that religion is a dynamic concept that is subject to change and continuity over time and space. Religious syncretism is one way in which this dynamic aspect is manifested, as it reflects both change and continuity in religious practices. This term refers to the blending of different religious traditions and beliefs, which is believed to have taken place over time. Although scholars have taken various approaches to understanding the origins of religion, it is clear that religion is a dynamic concept that is subject to change and continuity over time and space. The phenomenon of religious syncretism is one way in which this dynamic aspect is manifested, reflecting both change and continuity in religious practices.

While indigenous people have a deep understanding of natural treatments for certain ailments, they attribute many illnesses and accidents to super natural forces. Thus, the cure of these conditions is often sought through religious ceremonies, which are integral to the community's religious festivals. These events serve as a means of honoring their ancestors, while also seeking guidance and protection from the unseen forces that shape their lives.

In essence, these religious festivals offer a means of connecting with the past, while also addressing the present and future. They serve as a reminder of the interconnectedness of all things and the significance of ancestral ties in shaping the course of one's life.

The Jogis are a little known community residing in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, India. They are known for their unique customs, practices, and festivals that are closely tied to their spiritual beliefs. Despite their distinct culture, there is a lack of scholarly attention and research on the Jogis, and their way of life remains largely unexplored.

Therefore, this article aims to shed light on the intriguing customs of the Jogis, by delving into their celebrations and rituals.

Singh's (1998) captivating account illuminates the fascinating world of the Jogi or Jugi community in West Bengal, affectionately known as Nath. The origins of their namesake, Jugi or Jogi, can be traced back to their role as spiritual mentors to monarchs, epitomizing their profound knowledge and wisdom. The Jogi or Jugi community, as expounded by Risley's (1981) research, is a dynamic and diverse group, with several subgroups that exhibit unique cultural and social practices.

Majumdar and Rao's (1960) anthropometric analysis revealed that the Jugi people are typically of average height, with medium sized heads and noses, lending a distinctive physical appearance to the community. The Jugi community also has a distinct approach to marriage. According to Singh (1998), adult marriage is customary, and the community predominantly employs negotiation skills to acquire a mate, signifying their excellent interpersonal skills.

The rich cultural nuances of the Jogi community's history and traditions are fascinating subject to explore. From their spiritual guidance of monarchs to their unique cultural practices, the Jugi community's rich heritage is a testament to the diversity and richness of Indian culture. Singh's (1998) work is a valuable contribution to our understanding of this unique community, shedding light on their way of life and the complexities of their social and cultural fabric.

The Jogi community is a mysterious and captivating group residing in all three subdivisions of the Darjeeling district in West Bengal. Despite their ubiquitous presence, anthropological documentation of their socio-cultural identity remains scarce. Census and surveys have failed to capture demographic and socio-economic data on this group, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of the Jogi community's ethnic history, culture, rituals, and traditions. In-depth academic research on this community is crucial to gain a comprehensive understanding of their history, lifestyle, and customs. The dearth of anthropological documentation on the Jogi community has created a gap in our knowledge of their socio-cultural identity, leaving much to be explored. A comprehensive study of their customs, traditions, and beliefs will shed light on their rich cultural heritage, providing us with a more nuanced understanding of this enigmatic group. Thus, it is imperative to undertake rigorous

academic research to unravel the mysteries of the Jogi community and understand their unique identity and way of life.

Cultural Context and Research Design

The present research aims to investigate the cultural and religious practices of the Jogi community, an enigmatic and intriguing group classified as Other Backward Classes in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, India. The primary objective of this study is to document and describe the various customs and traditions of the Jogis, a nomadic community known for their unique way of life and religious practices. By exploring the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of the Jogis, the study aims to examine how their beliefs and practices shape their daily routines, social interactions, and cultural identity. Furthermore, the research seeks to investigate the cultural significance of the Jogis' celebrations and rites, and to examine how these events reflect the community's values, beliefs, and worldview. An additional objective of the study is to analyze the ways in which the Jogis' customs and practices are influenced by historical, social, and economic factors, and to examine the impact of modernization and globalization on their way of life. The study also aims to provide a nuanced and insightful portrayal of the Jogis and their customs, thereby contributing to the broader field of anthropology by shedding light on the diversity and complexity of human culture. Overall, the study aims to deepen our understanding of the Jogi community's ethnic history, culture, rituals, and traditions, while offering new insights into the diversity and complexity of human cultural practices.

This research study utilized a range of methods to gather data on the religious practices and cultural traditions of the Jogis, a nomadic community in India. To gather primary data, structured schedules were used that included both open ended and closed ended questions. Interviews and group discussions were also conducted to gather data on the Jogis' traditional knowledge and beliefs. Additionally, a major part of the research was based on participant observation, with villages selected based on remoteness and proximity to identify and interpret changes within the Jogi religion using diachronic approaches.

The lead author conducted ethnographic fieldwork, living among the Jogis for six months and participating in their daily activities and cultural events. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Hindi with various members of

the Jogi community, and historical and archival sources such as government records, religious texts, and scholarly literature were consulted to understand the context in which the Jogis have developed their cultural practices and rituals. The study explored the nature and changes in religious practices among the Jogi community residing in the selected villages. The research approach included observation, interviews, and archival research to gain a comprehensive understanding of the community's religious practices, their beliefs, and how they adapt to the evolving socio-cultural and environmental dynamics in the region.

The research also employed photography and video documentation to provide a visual representation of the Jogis' way of life, which supplemented the written and interview data. The combination of these methods allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the Jogis' cultural practices and rituals, as well as their social organization and relationship with the larger society. This study contributes to the field of anthropology by shedding light on the diversity and complexity of human culture, and by providing insight into the impact of modernization and globalization on traditional communities.

Examining the Community and its Locale

This study aimed to explore the religious practices and changes among the Jogi community, a lesser known group in the West Bengal state of India. To accomplish this goal, the research was conducted in several blocks across the Darjeeling district, including Darjeeling Sadar, Kalimpong-I, and Kurseong. Ten unique villages situated in various environments, such as urban, rural, and forest areas, were carefully selected for the study: Dhobikhola, Rangbhang Busty 1, 2, Sirubari, Dunga Busty, Pokhribhong Busty no 1, 2, 3 4, Thurby busty and Sindebong. These villages were purposively chosen due to the scarcity of the Jogi community in the region. A total of 95 families were covered during the study. The research was conducted through extensive fieldwork, and a range of data collection methods was employed to obtain comprehensive insights into the Jogi community's religious practices and beliefs.

The term "Jogi/Yogi" is derived from Jog or Yog, and it is a comprehensive term for various spiritual and religious designations. The term "Jogi" refers to a state of having nothing or being empty, while "Sadhu" or "Saint" represents a person who leads a life of meditation and has relinquished familial, sexual, and social ties. "Santa" denotes an

individual engaged in religious activities but not household affairs, while "Sanyasi" is someone who has abandoned both family and household matters. Due to their identical meanings, all priests, Temple Mahantas, Sadhus, Santas, and Babas who seek refuge in various temples, as well as all beggars who practice Tantrism, are commonly referred to as "Jogi." Nonetheless, the Jogi people differ significantly from this description and connotation.

This Jogi community is known as *Phenriwala* Jogi, as each family possesses a unique instrument called a *Phenri*. It is fashioned from the horn of a blackbuck and kept in their Kul or Ancestral worship place. The *Phenri* is a long and shallow instrument that produces a distinctive sound when blown on one side. The Jogi people use it during various ceremonies, such as marriages, births, and deaths, making it an integral part of their cultural practices. Such customs and artifacts offer a fascinating glimpse into the Jogi community's beliefs and traditions.

Sacred Rites and Esoteric Customs

The Jogi community's religion is rooted in animism, shamanism, and tantrism, with an emphasis on ancestral worship and Guru Goroknath veneration. The community believes in the existence of a spirit world, where spirits and ancestors co-exist. They also believe in the power of mantras and tantric rituals to ward off evil spirits and bring good luck and prosperity. They have their own shamans and traditional ritual specialists to cater to their religious needs.

Ancestral worship is an essential aspect of the Jogi community's religion. Every Jogi household has a sacred space called *Kul*, where they keep their traditional ancestors. They believe that their ancestors' spirits can bring blessings and prosperity to their families and seek their guidance and protection through various rituals and offerings. The *Kul Puja* or *Bhairung Puja* is one of the most important religious practices of the Jogi community. During this ritual, they venerate their ancestors and seek their blessings. This festival is typically held once a year, either during *Doshera* or *Baishaki Purnima*, in each of the Jogi households. The old male kin member acted as a priest who is known as *Jhakri*. Only Jogikin members are invited to participate in the said worship. During the rite, the family's safety and prosperity are the main focus, and a cock and a red hen are sacrificed. *Roxi*, *Jhand*, rice, egg, ginger, *Titapati* (a sort of sacred leaf), and fruits are offered to the ancestors. Additionally, during the *Bhairung Puja*, they also worship *Phenri*,

and blow *Phenri* to maintain its effectiveness in warding off evil spirits. Females are not permitted to enter the worshipping room during the ritual, as only male members are responsible for conducting it. Women, however, can take part in other ritual acts, and they should clean the entire house on that day.

Furthermore, during the *Bhairung* Puja, the Jogis pay homage to their Guru, Goroknath, and *Phenri* is blown five times by his name. A bottle of roxi, uncooked rice, two one sided baked rice flour breads (cooked in fire and ash), a bread (Babar) of rice flour cooked in mustard oil, fried soya bean, some cow ghee, and some plants are required for the *Bhairung* Puja. Outsiders are not permitted to even approach the *Bhairung* Puja. In times of crisis, Jogi elders quickly worship *Bhairung/Kul* and *Pheri*, begging for the healing of a sick family member. During the *Phenri* rite, the Jogi elders employ several mantras (spells) that differ according to location, age group, generation, and language spoken. The elders are better knowledgeable about mantras, whereas young people are often unaware of them and cannot even pronounce them correctly. The *Phenri* ritual employs tantra to praise and pray to the Almighty for the protection of humans, using the unusual superpower of *Bhairung*, through mantras and the blowing of the *Phenri*.

Guru Goroknath, the founder of tantrism and *Phenri* culture, plays a significant role in the Jogi community's religious practices. They believe that he had attained enlightenment and had the power to guide and protect his followers. The community venerates him through Guru Goroknath Puja, where they offer prayers and offerings to seek his blessings and protection.

They have a rich tradition of ethnic rituals and practices that reflect their unique cultural identity. Saon Sankranti is one such ritual that marks the beginning of the agricultural season. During this ritual, the Jogi community offers prayers to their ancestors and seeks their blessings for a bountiful harvest. The Bhai Tika ritual is another important ritual where sisters put tikas on their brothers' foreheads and pray for their long life and prosperity.

Another significant religious ritual among the Jogi community is the Dhan Puja, which is performed in the agricultural field and the ancestral place or *Kul* during paddy cultivation and when paddy is ripe. During this ritual, the head of the family offers Roxi, Jhand, rice, and other foods made from newly cultivated paddy to the Earth God and their own *Bhairung*.

Saon Sankranti is a festival celebrated on the first day of the Saon month (August-September) by the Jogi community. During this festival, the community invites married daughters, sisters, daughter, sons, grand children, and other close relatives for a sumptuous lunch and dinner (Roxi, rice, veggies, curry, beef, etc.). They clean their houses, worship at their ancestral place or *Kul*, and blow *Phenri* in the morning and evening on that day.

The Jogi community's religious practices reflect their close relationship with their ancestors, spirits, and nature. Their beliefs and practices provide a glimpse into their worldview and cultural identity. Their religious practices are also significant in promoting social cohesion and community building. The Jogi community's religious practices are deeply inter twined with their everyday life and reflect their unique cultural identity.

Metaphysical and Transcendental Acts

The Magico religious practices of the Jogi community are deeply ingrained in their cultural and spiritual identity. The Jogi's serve as traditional ethno-spiritual faith healers, offering healing remedies and services to those in need. Their ojha, priest, and shaman, known as Jhakri, perform various rituals and spells, injecting their tremendous power over the people, rescuing them from misery, illness, crisis, starvation, and other problems.

The Jogi's use their powerful *Phenri* ritual to deliver people from the clutches of bad and black spirits that constantly push them into turmoil, suffering, problems, and unhappiness. The *Phenriwala* Jogi people get special requests from people late at night for treating their sick family members, and they heal them instantly using the methods described above. They want power from *Bhairung* and the *Phenri* during healing, as well as certain specific alms with individuals in the name of offering sacrifice to the *Phenri*.

In addition to their powerful *Phenri* ritual, the Jogi's also offer spelt water (Jal) to drink so that people can feel pain free in their bodies. They also offer spelt ash, known as Bibhuti, which is to be marked on the forehead to make people feel free of the disease's anguish. While healing, the Jogi's also offer rudrakshya to the people because it is thought to protect them from evil spirits and other negative beings.

The Jogi's healing practices are not limited to

the spiritual realm. They also provide practical remedies for physical ailments. For example, they offer people spells to relieve headaches, body aches, and stomach issues. They also use herbs and other natural remedies to cure various ailments. These remedies are passed down from generation to generation and are an integral part of Jogi healing practices.

When people seek the Jogi's help, they provide special daan as requested by the Jogi's. These offerings include black goat or cock/hen, black garments, metal, money, etc. During the day, many healing procedures take place while collecting alms/daan. The next day, the sick person's relatives provide these special daan to the Jogi's. This exchange of offerings and healing services is an essential part of Jogi culture and is believed to bring good luck and prosperity to both the Jogi's and the people seeking their help.

The mystical practices of the Jogi community are deeply rooted in their spiritual and cultural identity. Their powerful *Phenri* ritual and healing practices provide people with relief from physical and spiritual ailments. The exchange of offerings and healing services is an essential part of Jogi culture, and it is believed to bring good luck and prosperity to both the Jogi's and the people seeking their help. The Jogi's are not only spiritual healers but also practical healers who provide people with natural remedies for various ailments. Their knowledge and expertise have been passed down from generation to generation, making them an invaluable part of the Jogi community.

Significance of Jogi Spiritual Practices

The Jogi community has a rich ethnic history that is believed to date back many years. However, due to the lack of extensive anthropological research on this community, the origin and history of this group remain largely unknown. Most of what is known about the Jogi community has been passed down orally from generation to generation.

According to elderly Jogi men, the origins of the Jogi community are primarily Nepalese. About two hundred years ago, a group of Jogi people left Nepal and settled in the Northern hilly areas of West Bengal. These Jogis are known for their devotion to Guru Goroknath and for blowing *Phenri*, a blackbuck horn. Guru Goroknath is a saint and devotee of God who has a long and illustrious past. However, the mystery surrounding his origin

persists to this day. One historical point suggests that he was a disciple of Guru Machindranath, but he left Machindranath a few years later to establish his own community and religious devotees. According to mythology, Gorakhnath (also known as Gorakshanath) existed between the 8th and 12th centuries BC. Folklore suggests that Guru Gorakshanath, the "everlasting sage" associated with Yoga, spent most of his time meditating and watching over humanity's wellbeing for thousands of years.

Bhairung is the name of Guru Goroknath's first follower. Although no true legendary truth has been discovered among the Jogi community, the presence of *Bhairung* is highly prominent among them. According to Jogi legend, *Bhairung* is essential throughout rites of passage and various rituals. *Bhairung* appears to have the characteristics of a clan and acts like one, yet it's fascinating because Jogis have several clan names with diverse meanings. Different clans exist among Jogis, such as Kashima, Bhawadwaj, and Koushalya, which are distinct from *Bhairung*. Community is endogamy, while clan is exogamy.

The Jogi community is also known as *Phenriwala* Jogi because each family owns a *Phenri* crafted from blackbuck horn and keeps it in their *Kul* or ancestral worship place. A *Phenri* appears to be long and shallow, and when blown on one side, it produces a familiar sound on the other. They blast it for any family rituals or ceremonies, such as weddings, births, and funerals. The original vocation of this Jogi community, according to some old Jogi men, was begging from door to door or collecting alms from family to family. In the middle of the night, the Jogi men stripped off their clothes and went door to door, holding a Trishul in one hand and blowing *Phenri* into the other. They returned the next day, demanding offerings or begging daan in the same residence. They made their living from this daan. However, in the investigated areas, no one is now associated with such a profession.

Darjeeling has long been home to the Jogi community, and according to an elder Jogi, they are the permanent residents of this region. However, locals and other literature sources indicate that they most likely arrived from Nepal over 200 years ago. In the communities surveyed, it was discovered that a part of married relationships inside their own community took place in Nepal. The Jogi community also serves as traditional ethno-spiritual faith healers in addition to their traditional

Phenri rituals. Jhakri is the name given to their ojha, priest, and shaman.

CONCLUSION

The Jogi community of the Darjeeling district, who were once known for their traditional occupation of begging and conducting the *Phenri* ceremony, have now embraced modern occupations. Despite this, they continue to hold on to their strong belief in the existence of various spirits and deities that reside in nature. These spirits are said to have the power to cause harm to humans if they are not appeased through rituals and sacrifices. The community relies on diviners, exorcists, and magicians to determine which deity or spirit has been insulted and how to placate it.

The studied people views black magic as the cause of their misfortunes, but they also believe in the power of white magic to combat it. They have their own unique ways of worshipping these spirits, and the role of the priests is highly respected in their community. All ceremonies require the presence of a priest, who plays a crucial role in ensuring that the deities are appeased. The Jogi community has been heavily influenced by Hinduism, and they now attend Hindu temples and participate in Hindu religious festivities. However, they still hold on to their traditional practices and continue to conduct the *Phenri* ceremony, which is an important ethno-religious spiritual feature in their community. The community's belief in the existence of spirits and deities has shaped their worldview and way of life. Their deep connection to nature and their rituals that honour these spirits reflect their respect for the natural world. The Jogi community's religious beliefs and practices provide a unique insight into the rich cultural diversity of the studied area, and their continued practice of traditional customs demonstrates their commitment to preserving their cultural heritage.

In conclusion, the Jogi community of Darjeeling district has a rich and fascinating cultural history that has been passed down orally from generation to generation. The origins and history of this community are still shrouded in mystery due to the lack of extensive anthropological research. The *Phenri* ritual, which is an important ethno-religious spiritual feature of the community, has been practiced for centuries and is a symbol of their

identity.

The community's belief in spirits and their connection to nature is also an essential part of their culture. The priests hold a significant position in the community, and the people enjoy making annual sacrifices to worship their gods. Due to cultural contact with different religions, the community has also embraced Hindu Gods and Goddesses and participates in their religious festivities.

Despite the changes in their religious practices and occupations, the Jogi community has managed to maintain its unique cultural identity. Their history and beliefs continue to fascinate and intrigue outsiders, and it is crucial to preserve and document their cultural heritage for future generations. As the world continues to modernize and change, it is essential to remember the importance of cultural diversity and the need to respect and value different cultures.

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