

Material Culture of the Gaddis: Costumes, Ornaments and Culinary Utensils

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Abstract

This paper deals with the material culture of the Gaddis of Himachal Pradesh in three related domains of everyday life – costumes, ornaments and culinary utensils. Historically, the material culture of the Gaddis has been closely associated with their pastoral way of life and seasonal migration across Himalayan landscape, shaped by climatic conditions, mobility, livestock-based livelihoods, and the practical needs of the household. Simultaneously, material objects have acquired cultural significance linked to gender distinctions, social status, ceremonial events, and cultural belonging. The Gaddi costumes, ornaments, handicrafts, kitchen traditions have been described in the existing literature but these have only been discussed in isolation. This paper brings them together, viewing material culture as integral to the everyday social landscape of Gaddi households. It suggests that the material culture can be interpreted not only as a social response to the Himalayan ecology but also as the ways in which cultural practices are preserved, modified and redefined in the face of shifts in pastoralism, markets, household economies.

Keywords: Gaddi, material culture, costume, ornaments, culinary utensils, pastoralism.

Introduction

The Gaddis are a pastoral community of the western Himalaya, mainly inhabiting the mountainous regions of Chamba and Kangra in the state of Himachal Pradesh. Their social and economic organization has been fundamentally linked to shepherding, farming activities, and seasonal migration between distinct ecological regions. This mobility is of great historical importance in understanding Gaddi culture, as it linked high altitude grazing areas with lower valleys and allowed households to come into regular contact with different landscapes and communities. The ethnographic study done by Newell (1961) during the Census of India in Himachal Pradesh, provides an important historical account of Gaddi villages, caste relations, land use, transhumance, kinship, rites of passage, religious specialists and cultural evolution. The connection between pastoralism and Gaddi identity maintains relevance despite significant change in transhumant pastoral practices. As pastoralism declines, the

historical connections between Gaddis and shepherding continue to influence current perceptions of Gaddi identity as highlighted in the ethnographic and historical literature on the Gaddis. The contemporary scholarship on Gaddis, Christopher and Phillimore (2023) and Goswami (2026a) further stresses that Gaddi society should not be approached as culturally or socially undifferentiated. Distinctions arising from caste position, local ecology, folk-Sanskritic traditions, gender dynamics, and pastoral economy have generated heterogeneous experiences of Gaddi identity throughout western Himachal Pradesh.

Recognition of this internal hierarchy is essential when studying material culture of Gaddis. Gaddi is a community which refers to caste groups having varying socio-economic status and occupational history in various geographies (Chamba, Kangra & Jammu). Therefore, one cannot assume that the same meaning or uses existed for the material culture of Gaddi life in all the regions.

Religious frameworks constitute an additional significant dimension for interpreting Gaddi material culture. Goswami (2026b) noted that Gaddi pastoral mobility is closely interwoven within religious practice, as migratory routes intersect with sacred sites and connect pastoral movement with ritual practices across the Himalayan landscape. The material culture of the Gaddis has consequently developed at the intersection of ecology, livelihood, pastoral production, and folklore.

The present paper therefore tries to examine material culture in the context of objects that are very close to everyday Gaddi life, such as traditional costumes, personal ornaments, and culinary utensils. The paper does not simply focus on objects as illustrations of a lost tradition, but on how these objects have been employed, interpreted and modified in a changing social context. It is based on ethnographic information gathered in Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh from 2023 to 2025. The study is based on the field observation, and interactions with Gaddis on their daily materialities including clothing, ornaments, and culinary utensils. These ethnographic findings constitute the essential framework for analysing how material objects are utilized, perceived, and woven into the social and cultural dimensions of the Gaddi community.

Review of Literature: Material Culture and the Gaddis

The literature on Gaddi material culture is relatively sparse, with several ethnographic and regional works addressing traditional attire, ornaments, local

architecture, and dietary practices. There is a significant focus of scholarship in Chamba and Kangra region of western Himalayas. Pandey's (2015a) work offers one of the most direct investigations of Gaddi material culture. She draws on ethnographic research conducted with a transhumant group of Gaddis to consider clothing, adornment, household items, domestic activities, and everyday technologies. Traditional dress like chola, suthnu and luanchadi are mentioned, in addition to the changes in dress due to the growing availability of market-produced garments. The study also records household utilities and technologies, which show that Gaddi material culture was intricately linked to the daily needs and livelihood practices. The importance of her work lies in her ability to look at material culture as a dynamic part of social life, and not just a repository of traditional objects.

Pandey (2015b) subsequently explores the material composition of Gaddi household environments by examining conventional building practices. She talks about the layout of the houses, and about the spaces like the obra, madai/obri, bahod/bhor, and chappar. These architectural types are seen in relation to the mountainous context, climate, domestic structure and the needs of a nomadic lifestyle. This investigation proves significant in comprehending Gaddi material culture as an integrated system including habitation, nomadic lifestyle, and household activities. The other significant aspect of Gaddi's material life is food. Pandey (2015c) discusses food and food habits of the transhumant population and their relationship with

agriculture, animal husbandry, migration and environment. Her account also includes discussions of the rasulla (Gaddi kitchen) and practices related to cooking and food preparation. This examination establishes a crucial foundation for analysing culinary utensils within the broader context of household organization.

Kapor et al. (2008) is a more detailed description of the costume, ornaments, and handicrafts of Gaddi in relation to Bharmaur tehsil of Chamba district. Their descriptions of garments like topi, chola, dora, traditional ornaments, and woollen products shows the significance of textile and craft traditions in Gaddi material culture. Though not limited to the Gaddi people alone, Sharma and Sethi (1997) offer a wider regional description of costume and ornaments, which is useful for placing Gaddi costume and jewellery in the context of Chamba's wider material traditions. Thakur et al. (2025) have recently discussed Gaddi food culture in the context of transhumance, animal husbandry, sheep rearing, wool production, dairy activities, migration and evolving socio-cultural scenarios in Kangra. Their research offers a contemporary documentation of the survival and evolution of Gaddi culinary customs. Collectively, these investigations furnish important yet largely independent analyses of Gaddi material culture. This research synthesizes dress, ornaments, and kitchen implements to investigate how material practices integrate daily activities with livelihood, ecology, domestic organisation, and cultural continuity.

Gaddi Women Costume

1. Luanchari

In contemporary times, Gaddi women commonly wear salwar-kameez or kurti in their everyday lives. However, the launchari remains an important element of traditional dress and is particularly associated with marriages and major religious and festive occasions. It is traditionally worn by married women and is given by the groom's family as a marriage gift. The launchari consists of a long, pleated skirt attached to a bodice of a contrasting colour, creating a single, flowing garment. It is decorated with embroidered lace, which was traditionally made by hand and embellished with mirrors and shells. Cotton chintz is commonly used for the garment, requiring approximately 11 to 21 metres of fabric depending on the desired volume and fullness of the skirt. The launchari is worn over a regular salwar-kameez, while during winter it may be layered over a woollen salwar-kameez for additional warmth.

When worn by a bride, the launchari is known as Nuanchadi, a term derived from nooh, meaning a newlywed bride. Although similar in overall form to the regular launchari, the Nuanchadi is distinguished by its use of deep and vibrant shades of red or maroon. The skirt is paired with a corset made of contrasting velvet fabric. A long black dora (cord), measuring approximately 10–12 metres, is wrapped tightly around the waist to secure the garment. Besides its practical function, the dora also contributes to the visual appearance and ceremonial significance of the attire.

2. Suthan

The Suthan is a traditional form of cotton churidar pajama, loose around the thighs and gradually tapering towards the ankles. The fabric gathers into distinctive horizontal folds around the ankles, locally known as chooris, meaning “bangles,” giving the garment its characteristic bangle-like appearance. During winter, older Gaddi women often wear a woollen Suthan instead of the cotton version to provide greater warmth.

3. Dora:

The Dora, also known as Dori or Gatri, is an integral part of the traditional Launchari. Hand-woven from sheep’s wool, it is distinctive both in its form and practical use. Traditionally, the Dora worn by women measured approximately 120–150 feet in length and could weigh up to 1.5 kilograms, although contemporary versions are generally shorter, averaging around 100 feet. It is wrapped several times around the waist and often requires assistance to fasten securely. Beyond holding the garment in place, the Dora also serves a practical purpose, as women traditionally tuck small money pouches, agricultural tools such as a sickle or flint, and other everyday items into it. In Gaddi cultural belief, the Dora also carries religious significance and is regarded as Shivari-Seli, a motif associated with Shiva. This religious association gives the Dora an auspicious and revered place within women’s traditional attire.

4. Kurti

The kurti is a short cotton shirt traditionally worn underneath the Launchari. It

generally extends to the thighs and is usually designed with a front pocket. The collar and cuffs are decorated with gotas, lace, and buttons, some of which remain visible beneath the Launchari. Silver chain buttons are commonly used to fasten the front placket and, in some cases, the cuffs, adding both practical utility and decorative detail to the garment.

5. Ghundu

The Ghundu, also known as Chadru, is a traditional headscarf worn by Gaddi women to cover the head and shoulders, similar in function to a dupatta. It is generally made of brightly coloured muslin and has neatly finished edges, often decorated with frills and lacework. During ceremonial occasions, particularly weddings, women may wear the gottia wala ghundu, which is distinguished by intricate gota or zari embroidery. Another variation, the gothni wala ghundu, features borders made from contrasting fabrics, adding to the garment’s visual appeal and ceremonial significance.

6. Shawl

Gaddi women’s shawls are traditionally woven from sheep’s wool and are distinguished by borders featuring multicoloured patterns. They are generally lighter in weight than men’s shawls. A typical shawl measures approximately 2.5×1 metres and is draped around the shoulders during the winter months, serving both a practical purpose by providing warmth and a decorative function through its patterned borders.

7. Chola

The Chola is traditionally worn by Gaddi women during the winter months as an alternative to the Launchari. Made from white woollen patti, it is shorter than the version worn by men and is generally worn over a kurti. In earlier times, women commonly wore the Chola in their everyday lives and while accompanying men on seasonal migration. Its thick woollen fabric provided protection from the cold, particularly in the high-altitude areas encountered along the migratory routes.

Gaddi women ornaments

1.Chak

The Chak is a conical-shaped silver ornament traditionally worn at the centre of the head. It is secured by silver chains attached to two small, equally sized silver spheres known as chakdis. Once the chak is placed at the centre of the head, the chakdis are fastened at the back on either side, helping to hold the ornament securely in place. The Chak is closely associated with marital status and is regarded as an important symbol of marriage among Gaddi women.

2. Beni Chak

This circular jewellery piece is worn over the braid and secured in place with a single loop and two strings. It can be made from various metals, including silver, and brass depending on the type and style of the ornament.

3. Chiri

The mangtika is a traditional forehead ornament featuring a large, round silver pendant decorated with colourful enamel

work. Small silver beads hang from its edge, while a sturdy silver chain helps secure the ornament to the forehead. Traditionally, it was commonly worn by married women during festivals and other ceremonial occasions. In contemporary times, mangtikas may also be made of gold and are particularly associated with weddings and other important celebrations.

4.Jhumkas

These are bell-shaped earrings worn as ear ornaments and secured with studs. Among the Gaddi community, they are known by different names, including Boonde, Bali, and Janjroo. Their size, shape, design, and metal composition vary according to the style of the ornament and individual preference.

5.Fulli

The Fulli is a large, circular nose ornament featuring a red stone set within gold clasps and is traditionally worn by married women. In addition to the Fulli, Gaddi women traditionally keep an extra set of Tili, a smaller version of the Fulli. The Tili may be worn in place of the Fulli depending on the occasion or preference.

6.Balu and Balak

The Balu is a large gold nose ring, typically measuring 3–4 inches in diameter, and is intricately designed with delicate filigree work embellished with semi-precious stones. A smaller variant of this ornament is known as the Balak. The nose ring is worn on the left nostril and supported by a decorative chain that extends to the hair, securing it in

place. Traditionally, it is worn by brides and married women during weddings and festive occasions. In contemporary times, this ornament is more commonly referred to as the Nath.

7. Clip

These silver hair clips, often crafted with fine detailing, are traditionally worn as part of Gaddi women's accessories. They are connected with a silver string that delicately falls over the braid, not only serving as a decorative element but also providing structural support to the hairstyle. The clips equally divide hairs from both sides of the head to keep the hair firmly in place.

8. Gojru

Gojru are lightweight silver bracelets, characterized by their narrow width and worn in matching pairs on the wrists. By resting on the wrist, they expose an active part of the body.

9. Toke

Toke are broad, flat-surfaced silver bracelets traditionally worn in pairs on the wrists. Unlike the slender and lightweight Gojru, Toke are heavier and more substantial in form, giving them a distinctive appearance as part of traditional Gaddi jewellery.

10. Nagband

Nagband are modified versions of the Gojru and Toke, distinguished by their serpent-like imagery. Crafted in silver and traditionally worn in pairs on the wrists, these bracelets are striking both for their form and

for the symbolic associations they carry. Unlike the more common and widely used Gojru or Toke, Nagband are not prevalent in contemporary times, which itself reflects the shifting material culture of Gaddis.

11. Chanderhar

Chanderhar is a heavy silver necklace. It features intricate mina work. This neckwear consists of multiple chains. These chains connect to triangular pieces at each end. Then, two or three rectangular pieces join them. These are spaced evenly on both sides. Finally, everything attaches to a large central triangle. This centrepiece is richly decorated with meena work. It also has dangling silver beads. People wear chanderhar for celebrations. This includes festivals, weddings, and local fairs. Grooms also wear this ornament on their wedding day (Sood & Gupta, 2021).

12. Singi

Singi is a lightweight, small-sized necklace that closely clings to the neck. Its design consists of a tubular-shaped silver pendant adorned with a cluster of trinkets, attached to delicate strings of golden-coloured beads.

13. Gobi Chain

The Gobi Chain are heavy, finely carved silver anklets (pyjabe), distinguished by their elaborate design with multiple chains and trinkets attached. These ornaments, worn around the ankles.

15. Pari

These are silver anklets (pyjabe) as well, but they are lighter than the gobi chain. They are typically worn by newlywed bride.

16. Angoothre

Angoothre, known more broadly in Hindi as Bichua, are silver ornaments worn on the toes, primarily by women. In their traditional form, they are crafted out of a single silver wire that is spiralled multiple times, creating a coiled design that is both simple and durable. This toe-rings like Angoothre are deeply associated with marital status of women.

Gaddi Men Costume

1. Chola or cholo

It is a lengthy and loose-fitting woollen gown featuring full sleeves, a deep collar, and a closure that crosses over the chest. This garment is crafted from self-woven whitish woollen fabric (taani) and gradually takes on a greyish-brown hue over time. It is secured around the waist with multiple loops of a long black woollen rope known as dora. Consequently, the chola remains loose above the dora, creating a pouch referred to as Kokh. The Gaddis utilize this pouch to carry various belongings, including newborn lambs. In this costume, a Gaddi can carry loads of up to fifty kilograms. When a Gaddi dances, the chola opens and unfurls from below, resembling a fully bloomed flower.

2. Suthni

It is typically a white woollen lower garment (pajama) that is loose around the thighs and fitted at the ankle. This garment is

crafted from tightly woven woollen fabric (taani) and is commonly worn by Gaddi men and women, especially by Gaddi shepherds and the elderly. It provides warmth to the legs during the harsh winter months, particularly in snowy conditions. Additionally, it holds religious significance, as most Gaddi Chela wear this attire as their spiritual dress, prominently displayed during jatara and various festivals.

3. Dora

The dora is a long black woollen rope that is wrapped multiple times around the waist by both male and female Gaddis. This sturdy cord, also known as gatri, is made from sheep's wool and, in the case of men, can extend up to sixty meters in length. It is believed to provide support to the waist during daily activities and while ascending hills with the flock. The chola is secured with the dora, which also assists in retaining body heat. Among the Gaddis, there was a common belief that as long as the dora is worn around the waist, their wealth and flocks would be safeguarded by lord Shiva. Within its folds, various items of daily use were carried, such as the kulhari (axe), mandua (leather pouch), darat (iron sickle), bansuri (flute), runka (flint-iron), and chillum (smoking pipe).

4. Unala coat or Kurta

The unala coat is a custom-tailored woollen jacket traditionally worn over a kurta-pajama. It is a warm garment crafted from patti, a locally woven woollen fabric. The coat typically features pockets at the waist and another on the side of the chest, along with an

inner pocket positioned on the right side of the chest.

5. Kameez

The kameez is a collared shirt for men, traditionally worn beneath the chola and made from the woollen fabric known as patti. During the summer months, however, cotton shirts are preferred over wool. In earlier times, Gaddi men also wore kurta-pajama while working in the fields, as it offered greater comfort for physical labor.

6. Safa

The Safa, also known as pagadi (turban), is a cotton cloth headwear used to be worn by Gaddi men in their daily lives. This headgear is created by folding a long, coloured cotton sheet, normally around five meters long, into several layers. Now it only appears, during weddings and fairs, they adorn their turbans with flowers. The Safa serves as a representation of respect and dignity.

7. Topi

The topi or topa (peak-cap) is a woollen cap that serves as a headpiece. It is distinctly different from other caps due to its flaps on either side and a peak-like extension that symbolizes the 'Kailash Parvat' of Lord Shiva. Normally, the two flaps are kept folded upwards; however, during cold winter months or periods of mourning, these flaps are lowered to cover the ears and neck. Gaddis often decorate their peak-caps with kalgis (feathers) from the 'monal' bird. Additionally, they adorn their woollen topas with wild dry flowers or beads as decorative accents. In the

course of folk dances, a red handkerchief is secured to the top of the cap, which billows in the air as participants swing during the dance. The top is particularly worn during festivals, folk dances, and various other ceremonies. Sometimes Kangra Gaddis also wear the Bushahri topi or Pahari topi, which is not considered their traditional headgear (Sood & Gupta, 2021).

8. Jadula or Jerabe

Earlier, Gaddi shepherds used to make jerabe (socks) out of goat hair. Although this practice is no longer prevalent in contemporary times, it has largely been replaced by the use of ready-made socks available in the market. Traditionally, goat hair was twisted with konkadi and thread to weave socks. Goat hair had multiple utilitarian purposes; Gaddis also used it to make mats and ropes.

9. Shawls

It is crafted from a single piece of wool and is used by shepherds to wrap around the shoulders, providing warmth and protection to the upper body during winter. The wool may be of a single color—grey, white, or black. To make it more aesthetic, Gaddis often incorporate designs in black-and-white checks. Usually, the shawls measure up to 3 x 1.5 meters in size. In the context of weddings, these shawls are wrapped over the shoulders to complete the ceremonial attire of the groom.

10. Kadd or Luancha

The Kadd or Luancha is a distinctive traditional outfit worn by Gaddi grooms. It is a

full-length garment consisting of a fitted bodice attached to a flared skirt and is generally made from 12–15 metres of red or maroon cotton fabric. The inner lining may either match or contrast with the outer fabric. Its double-layered sleeves are richly decorated, while the overlapping front is secured with strings. Frills, lace, gota (gold or silver decorative trim), and mirrors are incorporated into the garment, adding to its ornamental appearance. The edges are finished with bias binding, giving the outfit a neat and structured form.

Gaddi Men Ornaments

1. Angoothi

This silver finger ring is made by spiralling a single wire several times to create a distinctive coiled form. Traditionally, the ring serves not only as an ornament but also carries cultural significance, particularly in relation to identity and marital status.

2. Dur

This is a traditional earring worn by Gaddi men, originally crafted in silver but later also made in gold. While its prevalence has declined in contemporary times, elderly Gaddi shepherds can still be seen wearing it in their everyday lives. In the context of Gaddi marriages, it carries ritual significance, as the groom is required to wear the dur, symbolizing continuity with ancestral customs and the community's cultural identity.

3. Chanderhar

This ornament resembles the chanderhar traditionally worn by women, but

in the male version it is typically crafted from silver. It is a form of neckwear composed of multiple interlinked chains that converge at triangular plaques or terminals on each side. Among the Gaddis, it is primarily associated with marriage rituals, where the groom adorns it as part of his ceremonial attire.

4. Chatta

This is a unique ornament featuring a mirror adorned with colourful beads or tassels that hang downwards. It is typically worn by Gaddi men around their waist over the traditional attire known as 'Chola' usually in marriages and folk dances.

Culinary Utensils

1. Karad: It is a knife, used in cutting vegetables and fruits.
2. Hatdi: Box containing the spices used in cooking.
3. Pipa: Metal canister used to store cereals for later use, or fodder for cattle.
4. Kunaada: Made of Dayar wood; a round wooden vessel traditionally used for kneading flour/dough.
5. Chadola: Bamboo tray on which cooked rice is spread out to cool.
6. Changer: Large circular bamboo tray on which vegetables are spread, then combined with rice at serving.
7. Batti: Shallow brass pan, used at weddings and puja and said to be used for cutting vegetables.
8. Gaagar: Pot of clay, steel, or brass, used to store drinking water.
9. Dhoi and Handoo: Dhoi is a wooden stick (kalchi) used to stir curry; Hando is the pot the

stirring happens in, a general term for a cooking vessel.

10. Bandy: General term for utensils in the Gadiali dialect.

11. Chaj: Bamboo winnowing tray used to separate grain from chaff after harvest. Traditionally made by the Dumna caste and paid for customarily, in kind rather than cash.

12. Baltai or Baltai: Large brass vessel with a broad base and narrow mouth, used to cook Kangri Dham at weddings and other feasts. An old, heavy piece, generally one or two per household. It also known as by the name of Charoti, mainly in Kangra.

13. Tainta: Flat iron implement used to stir or mix gravy while cooking.

Conclusion

The material culture of the Gaddis helps to understand the organisation and experience of social life in the western Himalayan environment. Clothing, ornamental items, and culinary utensils operate within separate spheres of daily activity, yet all are fundamentally connected to the practical and social realities that have shaped Gaddi household life. Traditional clothing evolved in response to the climate and mobility associated with mountain pastoralism, while ornaments were worn as expressions of bodily adornment, marital status, social status, and cultural belonging. Culinary utensils, in turn, locate material culture within the household, where food preparation and consumption form an important part of everyday social life.

At the same time, Gaddi material culture should not be understood as a fixed

entity or a static culture. The restructuring of pastoral economies, intensified market engagement, introduction of new materials, educational advancement, wage-based employment, increase in aspirational level, and alterations in consumption behaviours have impacted both the production and deployment of conventional objects. There are objects that have disappeared out of regular use and others that are still used in some altered way or have grown in importance in the context of marriage, festival, ritual and cultural activities.

The importance of investigating these objects therefore extends beyond merely preserving traditions classified as “old” or “classical” culture. Material objects provide a means of tracing how cultural practices survive, adapt, and acquire new meanings. Material objects function as instruments for examining how cultural practices endure, transform, and acquire fresh interpretations. Therefore, in the case of the Gaddis, material culture creates an intersection between ecology, pastoral history, household life, social differentiation, and identity.

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