



# Negotiating Ethnic Boundaries: The Quest for an Identity for the Kalbelia of Rajasthan in India

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to explore how the Kalbelia of Rajasthan in India negotiate their ethnic identity. The Kalbelia is a tribal community who are well known for their traditional dance form and snake charming practices. In recent times, their identity is one of the most complex issues since there are lots of confusion and debate in connection with their ethnic identity. Their identity varies at the local level due to different societal and cultural effects, geographical affiliation, perception of the community, misunderstanding and so on. This paper aims at portraying how the community encounters the phenomena of their identity under variable socio-economic contexts in the state. Religious beliefs of the community also play an important role in shaping their identity. The article further questions the outlook of the administration of Rajasthan towards the Kalbelia identity.

**Keywords:** Geographical affiliation, Identity, Kalbelia, Religious belief, Societal and cultural effects.

**Received:** 20 September 2025

**Revised:** 22 October 2025

**Accepted:** 30 October 2025

**Published:** 29 December 2025

## **TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Sen, S., & Midya, D.K. (2025). Negotiating Ethnic Boundaries: The Quest for an Identity for the Kalbelia of Rajasthan in India, *Indian Journal of Anthropological Research*, 4: 1-2, pp. 109-127.

## **Introduction**

The concept of identity is dynamic, varied and ever-evolving. According to Larka (1989), identity, in general, is considered a set of exterior qualities and interior traits that identify an individual, or group of individuals, from others and render uniqueness. Unlike the earlier approach to treat identity as an aggregate of cultural traits or as a primordial inheritance, the modern approach considers ethnic identity, Phinney (1991) argues, as a multidimensional self-identification, affective attachment, cultural practice,

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and external ascription. The concept of ethnicity was not widely used in anthropological discourse before 1960. Fredrik Barth's book, entitled *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), stands to be the first pivotal work in the domain of ethnicity. Barth's initial premise posits that an actor holds beliefs regarding ascription and self-ascription. His primary emphasis was not on the cultural attributes of ethnic groups, but rather on the dynamics of cultural differentiation and interaction between different social groupings, which served to distinguish the ingroup from the outgroup. The assertion posits that the construction, establishment, or alteration of identity occurs within the process of contact (Jenkins, 1997). Cultural identity distinguishes a community from others in a specific social context. Where members regularly practice, and it gets entrenched, the social and cultural process becomes more significant. In recent years, scholars in anthropology have given community identity more attention, with a particular emphasis on the contents of identities (Barth, 1969; Cohen, 1985; Epstein, 1987). Constructed and mobilised by shared experiences, the community identity grows within the social environment in which people live. Postmes, Haslam and Swaab (2005) expounded in their scholarly article that human society has an inherent desire to belong to a particular community, which subsequently influences and moulds their identity. Thomson (2011) shed light on the phenomenon of attachment to a group, which can result in the formation of a group-based identity. Consequently, this phenomenon stimulates a sense of affiliation within the cohort. In a similar vein, individuals who do not belong to any particular group may be ostracised as a result of the prejudicial attitudes directed towards them. There are several theoretical frameworks that underpin this phenomenon. Sumner (2008) introduced the notion of in-group and out-group dynamics, which pertain to an individual's sense of affiliation with a particular group. Diverse forms of group formation exist within society, encompassing categories such as gender, socioeconomic status, race, caste, and even ethnic category.

Identity is usually defined as a person's or group's unique traits, as a label and, thereby, relational and contextual. In contrast, identification, a classifying act, is a processual mechanism. However, one's identity is formed by identifying with significant others (mainly parents and other individuals) during one's biographical experiences, and also with 'groups'

as they are viewed (Maersk, 2021). Identity refers to the manner in which people and collectives are distinguished in their social relations with other persons. Van den Berghe (1975) described an ethnic group in terms of cultural modalities. For him, ethnic groupings are defined both by the objective cultural modalities of their behaviour (including, most notably, their language behaviour) and by their subjective conceptions of themselves and each other (Van den Berghe, 1987). An ethnic group, Smith (1996) stated, is a unit of population that is conscious of its collective identity from a past of shared memories and myths through the presence of shared experiences to a future of shared destiny.

Ethnic identity is, thus, a kind of concept or perception about the categorisation of social members based on certain attachments, beliefs and values, commitment to a particular ethnic group or community. The portion of identification that emphasises the individual's subjective experience of belonging to a particular group or culture is referred to as ethnic identity (Phinney, 1991). On the other hand, one's identity or sense of self as a member of a certain group is described as "a dynamic, multidimensional construct" (Phinney et al., 2001). Ethnic identity, according to many researchers, is defined as the shared lineage and origin that gives a group its ethnic identity (Ibrahim & Heuer, 2016).

In the context of an ethnic group, it is important to acknowledge that there may be variance among its members due to differences in levels of ethnic identity. Ethnic identification encompasses the experience of ethnic pride, active engagement in ethnic practices, and a cultural dedication to one's ethnic group (Phinney, 1991). The element of ethnic identity that holds utmost significance is the commitment or sense of belongingness. Ashmore et al. (2004) posited that attachment or affective commitment is a crucial element of group identification. The concept of commitment has been employed in the fields of social psychology (Ellemers et al., 2002) and developmental psychology (Roberts et al., 1999) to denote a profound emotional connection and individual dedication to a collective entity. In colloquial discourse, the term "ethnic identity" typically refers to the concept of commitment, which represents one of the several interpretations associated with this construct. It is important to acknowledge that the level of commitment is not inherently linked to the substance of one's

identity, more specifically, the particular attitudes or worldviews held by an individual (Cokley, 2005).

Socio-psychological frameworks of identity can show how social and self-categorisation, social comparison, self-esteem based on group identification, uniqueness, prototypical characteristics of group membership, principles of continuity, and belongingness operate. This gives us a glimpse of intragroup and intergroup dynamics that are important for identity work (Kharshiing, 2016). According to Appadurai (1986) the churning pot of social and collective identities can be disturbed by technological advancements, by novel cultural influences, by shifting economic fortunes, or by ideological purges. Such cultural and social upheaval had been going on in India long before independence, with the result that different ethnic groups had begun to organise themselves politically and socially during the colonial era. Since India's independence, the trend has spread throughout the country. Given this context, we have tried to identify how the Kalbelia, a tribal community residing across Rajasthan (formerly known as Rajputana) in India, negotiates its ethnic identity in various situations. The Kalbelia show the treasure of many social layers with regard to their identity. Though the community is distributed all over the state, they are mostly found in those districts that are famous for the tourism industry, viz., Jaisalmer, Jaipur, Udaipur, Jodhpur and Ajmer. Moreover, nowadays, the Kalbelia is a much-acclaimed community for exhibiting a typical form of folk dance that is globally known as the Kalbelia dance. This dance form was recognised as a 'heritage' dance form by UNESCO in 2010. Unfortunately, in spite of having such fame on the cultural map of the world, the Kalbelia community still suffers a lot in their everyday lives due to the uncertainty or misrecognition about their societal as well as Constitutional identity. Under these circumstances, it is necessary to understand how they negotiate their identity in their day-to-day lives.

### **Earlier Works and Research Gap**

The Kalbelia is characterised by its semi-nomadic lifestyle. Their identity is enigmatic and exhibits variations across different districts within the region. To date, there is a dearth of scholarly literature which could adequately address the complexities surrounding the identity concerns

of this community. The entire Kalbelia population is subdivided into three primary divisions based on their territorial affiliations. Within each division, numerous bands effectively operate as independent economic units (Danda, 1983).

The issues of ethnic identity have emerged as a significant concern in contemporary society, which is changing fast with the technological revolution. The complexities of ethnic identity in present-day India can be traced back to historical legacies, population variety, political mobilisation, economic inequities, and the intricate interplay of diverse social, cultural and political variables. In order to effectively address these problems, it is imperative to possess a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics associated with ethnic identity. This may be particularly relevant in relation to de-notified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic communities in present-day India, as it is imperative to confront past inequities, foster social and economic integration, safeguard cultural plurality, and ensure equitable access to opportunities and rights for these communities.

Currently, numerous communities in various regions of India continue to engage in semi-nomadism or nomadism. Among these communities, the Kalbelia community stands out as a prominent example of a semi-nomadic group. Limited studies have been conducted on the Kalbelia community so far. But most of the studies put their main focus on the socio-economic condition or the livelihood practices of the community, though some studies in the recent past have helped to enrich knowledge regarding the community identity. Robertson (1997) describes how a non-pastoral nomadic community (Kalbelia) of Western India adapt semi-sedentary life from nomadism. According to her, the transition of the Kalbelias from nomadism to semi-sedentarism and the auxiliary jobs they have taken up demonstrate their capacity for limitless adaptation to the environment they are in. Kalbelia people are snake charmers, folk dancers and musicians. Nomadism of Kalbelia has been shaped in recent years as a creative response to various major social upheavals in Indian and Rajasthani culture (Angelillo, 2013). She also pointed out that spatial mobility may not work for snake charming and begging, but it does for the caste's new professional identity (folk dancer and musician). The Kalbelia dance from Rajasthan is now considered an old Indian cultural tradition after UNESCO recognised it as

intangible cultural property in 2010. This so-called "Indian Gypsy" or "snake charmers'" folk dance appears to have emerged in the 1980s (Joncheere, 2017). But being a lower caste and a marginalised community, Kalbelia hardly enjoy any democratic rights, and they are one of the most oppressed people in the society (Singh, 2002). Indian civilisation has ostracised the nomadic Kalbelia tribe of snake charmers, musicians, and dancers. They have used their traditional song and dance to adapt to changing social and economic conditions in India (Shapiro, 2014). According to Danda (1983), Udaipur's Kalbelia economic ethics stress economic collective activity. Both men and women pay attention to economic activity. Nowadays, the Kalbelia realise that they must improve their economy as soon as possible. Kalbelia can be identified by their own rituals (rites of passage), livelihood strategies and economic pursuits (Trivedi, 2007). Such findings and information are so crucial for their study. But some important questions still arise which remain to be explored, viz., 'What is the actual identity of Kalbelia?' and 'What is the impact of ethnic identity on their lives?' In a diverse state like Rajasthan, ecology should be taken into consideration (which is hardly found in earlier research) while studying identity.

Currently, there is a dearth of academic literature that examines the challenges related to identity experienced by the Kalbelia community, resulting in a notable gap in our comprehension of this particular topic. In order to delve into the aforementioned inquiries, this paper aims to enhance comprehension regarding the matter of ethnic identity and the factors that have influenced the formation of the identity of the Kalbelia community residing in various regions of Rajasthan, India. This paper additionally recorded the perspectives expressed by governmental organisations in relation to this matter. The paper also focuses on the identity of the Kalbelia community, taking into consideration their community size, cultural uniqueness and nomadic lifestyle.

## **Objectives**

This study aims at analysing and comprehending the experiences and perceptions of individuals belonging to the Kalbelia community with regard to their ethnic ethnicity, within the framework of the present-day setting. There are some critical issues which are needed to be explored: (i) What is

the actual identity of Kalbelia? (ii) What is the impact of ethnic identity on their life? (iii) What are the reasons behind the identity of Kalbelia varying in different regions of Rajasthan? Moreover, while examining identity in a culturally varied region such as Rajasthan, it is imperative to incorporate ecological factors into the analysis. A significant portion of the community consisted of squatters, a phenomenon that occurred relatively recently.

## **Methodology**

### ***Area and Community***

The prime focus of this study was on the Kalbelia community of Rajasthan, irrespective of their age group and gender, in three districts, i.e., Jaipur, Jaisalmer, and Udaipur. These districts were selected purposively for two reasons: firstly, these are the areas of Rajasthan which are tourist hotspots. And, secondly, these districts hold ecologically distinct features: Jaipur is the capital of Rajasthan, Jaisalmer is the westernmost district of India and share international border with Pakistan, and also witnesses extreme weather conditions due to the Thar desert; and Udaipur is located in the southern part of Rajasthan and shares a border with Gujarat. In these districts, eight locales were selected purposively, both from rural and urban spheres, to comprehend the ground-level scenario of the identity phenomenon. These were Kalakar Colony (Municipal area), Gulab Nagar (Municipal area), Mann Sarovar (Municipal area) of Jaipur district, Totaram ki Dhani (Municipal area), Mool Sagar (Panchayat area), Kanoi (Panchayat area) of Jaisalmer district, Khekron ki Bagal (Panchayat area), Math Madri (Municipal area) of Udaipur district of Rajasthan.

According to *Census of India (1961)* the population of the Kalbelia community was 11813 in Rajasthan, and the highest number of Kalbelias resided in the Pali district (2036) (Danda, 1983).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Barth's seminal intervention shifted analytical attention away from cultural content per se to the maintenance of boundaries, arguing that ethnic groups persist not because of immutable cultural traits but because of ongoing processes of inclusion and exclusion. While this approach remains foundational, it requires contextual elaboration when applied to

communities such as the Kalbelia, whose identities have been historically shaped by mobility, stigma, state classification, and market-driven cultural visibility.

For these communities, identity is not merely a matter of self-perception but is profoundly shaped by administrative recognition and misrecognition. Scholars have shown how colonial and postcolonial regimes in South Asia classified nomadic and semi-nomadic populations through shifting labels — “criminal tribes,” “denotified tribes,” “nomadic tribes,” “Scheduled Castes,” and “Other Backward Classes” — often without ethnographic consistency (Radhakrishna, 2001; D’Souza, 2008). Such classificatory practices fragmented communities that otherwise shared cultural, occupational, and ritual continuities. The Kalbelia case exemplifies this process: sections of the same ethnic group are variously identified as Kalbelia, Sapera, Jogi, Nath, or even excluded from Scheduled Caste status altogether. This fragmentation has direct material consequences, particularly regarding access to reservation benefits, welfare schemes, and political representation.

### *Methods and Approach*

Data were obtained through intensive fieldwork during the study that took place in the aforementioned areas of three districts of Rajasthan over the course of more than five months. The three districts were chosen because of their varying eco-cultural zones, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of the effects of society and livelihood practices. The data collection process took a top-down, or macro-level, perspective. Primary and secondary data were compiled for the aforesaid investigation. Primary data was gathered from interviews with respondents and observations of their everyday lives and surroundings. To get insight into the issues facing Kalbelia, interviews were conducted with local political leaders, government officials, regional political elites, and other neighbouring community members. Community members (Kalbelia) were also invited to participate in focus groups.

### *Tools and Techniques*

The Kabelias' social and cultural practices were studied through the observation method. Data collection and empirical findings from social or group interaction were conducted through the use of an interview

schedule. In order to collect data on basic demographics and other relevant information, a schedule or interview guide was developed. The respondents were selected through random sampling. In addition, focus groups were held in the three districts to better understand respondents' attitudes toward their ethnic identity and gain insight into locals' perceptions of the identity's evolving social landscape. The narratives of the respondents were also collected through audio-visual documentation. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to examine the data. Quasi-participatory observation and the use of secondary sources, like personal and public documents, bolstered the primary sources used.

## **Findings**

### ***The Variation of Identity and the Way it Exists***

On the very first day of interactions with several government officials in Jaipur and with some co-citizens from all walks of life in the city, it was confirmed that Kalbelia is not a lesser-known community, but rather they are widely distributed in Rajasthan, as Bhil and Mina are. Antarnath, one of the key informants of Jaipur, threw sufficient light on the ethnic identification of the Kalbelia. According to his knowledge, there are two types of Kalbelia, i.e., Mewara Kalbelia and Marwara Kalbelia. Apart from that, another group of Kalbelia was found later, i.e., Delhiwal Kalbelia.

Delhiwal Kalbelia is one of the three major sections of the Kalbelia. Two others are Marwara Kalbelia and Mewara Kalbelia. All three sub-groups/divisions are purely made on ancestral territory/geographic affiliations. It is believed that the ancestors of the Delhiwal Kalbelia were affiliated with medieval Delhi and its neighbouring areas, with extension to present days' Jaipur. Marwara Kalbelia belongs to the Marwar region, and Mewara Kalbelia is affiliated with the Mewara region of Rajasthan, respectively. The princely states of these three areas are believed to be the ancient native places of the Kalbelia since time immemorial. During the course of our study in three different districts of Rajasthan, it was realised that, akin to other castes and tribal communities of Rajasthan, the Kalbelia also feel proud of the historical context of the glorious past of their own region, which is no less than a degree of micro-national identity. Nowadays, they hardly refer to such territorial/geographic affiliations in day-to-day life or in the process

of inter-group social mobility, until or unless ethnicity on the backdrop of regional supremacy occurs to establish some pseudo interests. Otherwise, they only refer to themselves in a generic identity- Kalbelia. They only affix native place if they would enquire about the eco-cultural affiliation of remote pasts. Apart from such territorial/geographic affiliation, they refer common traditional occupation, i.e., snake charming, which is no longer in existence in search of livelihood. Since snake catching, extraction of poison and charming are the age-old occupations of the community, they are also referred to as Sapera. However, Sapera is a blanket term, as it refers only to the specific occupation related to snake charming. In other words, a Sapera doesn't need to always be ethnically identical to Kalbelia, whereas a Kalbelia, irrespective of his/her territorial/geographic affiliation, must have an ancestral occupation of snake catching and snake charming at some point in time in the remote past.

Kesarnath Sapera (changed name), another informant and a resident of Pani Pech, Kalakar Colony, Jaipur, said that Kalbelia and serpent are synonymous. In nomenclature, Kalbelia refers to a person or group of persons who triumphs (*belia*) on death (*kal*). Venomous snake, particularly *kala-naag* (black cobra), is symbolised as death or destruction and the messenger of Bhairava or Lord Siva (the Lord of destruction). Kalbelia is the only community in Rajasthan who live in a symbiotic relationship with snakes. Snakes are always treated as affectionately as other family members in a Kalbelia family. Unanimously, all of them referred to Kanipa/Kanipao as their *guru* (religious teacher). Their traditional occupation as snake charmers and the mythological origin of the Kalbelia, elsewhere in Rajasthan, are enriched with folk narratives of Kanipa/Kanipao. In personal naming pattern, a Kalbelia male must suffix 'nath' with his name (for instances Shramannath, Rupnath, Mallinath, etc.). Here, 'nath' refers follower of one of the twelve Nath Panths (sects) such as Gorakhnath, Girinath, Agamnath, Kanipa/Kanipao (disciple of Jalandharnath) and so on, which emerged during the *tantrik* movement patronised by nine *naths* (*tantrik guru* and their disciples) (Robertson, 2004, p. 52). In this context, I came across three sets of naming patterns which are identifiable with Kalbelia individuals- (i) 'XX' Nath Kalbelia, (ii) 'XX' Nath Sapera and (iii) 'XX' Nath Panwar (here Panwar is one of the *gotras* of the Kalbelia,

here which refers *kul* or lineage as surname. Using of own *gotra* name is common in use).

Notwithstanding personal name or territorial/geographic affiliation of a Kalbelia individual, each section of the Kalbelia referred that snake charming was a traditional occupation of their forefathers, which gradually ceased with the enforcement of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. Although the Kalbelia is a snake charmer (*sapera*) community, it is socially established to the neighbouring castes/tribal communities so far as their identity is concerned, as Jogi and Nath are homologous to the Kalbelia sect (followers of Kanipa/Kanipao). Mohannath, an informant from Moolsagar village, Jaisalmer, said being a Jogi/Nath, the Kalbelia has the divine fortune of Lord Shiva (believed to be the father of Kanipa/Kanipao) to sustain on begging alms in red-ochre-coloured attires, with a back-cobra and playing *phungi/bin* in places.

Despite rudimentary differences among the three territorial/geographical groups of Kalbelia (Delhiwal, Marwara and Mewara), none of the Kalbelia denied the historical fact that in the remote past their ancestors emerged through a common cultural reformation within the Nath Panth movements, which was led by their *guru* Kanipa/Kanipao. In the social realm of the Rajputana (here this term is mentioned to stress upon the temporal complexity of Hindu caste structure rather than the politico-geographical identity of the state), a thick sectarian line between Yogi (follower of Gorakhnath) and Jogi Nath Kalbelia (follower of Kanipa/Kanipao) is prominent in practising doctrine. That is distinctive to social hierarchy, perceptibly marked with a 'Yogi' (a saint, who is entitled to enter into a temple of greater tradition) and a 'Jogi' (a man, who is not entitled to enter into a temple of greater tradition and offering *puja*).

The Kalbelia, irrespective of their faded territorial/geographical identity, represents homology in ethnic characteristics, thus founded either on sectarian practice (as followers of Kanipa/Kanipao) or traditional livelihood practice (as snake charmers and begging alms). Accordingly, they have perceived and accepted that begging alms is a ritualistic livelihood behaviour to sustain life, and the society envelops them, never reluctant in extending support towards the Kalbelia. In the process of social symbiosis between Kalbelia and other castes, while Kalbelia feels an

urge to maintain identity and selfhood (Robertson, 1997) through snake charming and begging; the rest of the society finds a meaningful religious act (Gupta, 1979, p. 193), in order to establish socio-cultural supremacy over Kalbelia through offering hand-full alms, without seeking any service from them in return.

Nath and Jogi are the other names that they refer to themselves by. Other than the identity in referring to the affiliation of eco-cultural boundary, they are also referred to with some artisan identities- (i) "Gattiwala" (who makes grinding stones) Kalbelia; (ii) "Banshphore" (who manufactures bamboo baskets) Kalbelia. However, both classificatory nomenclatures are purely associated with very specific artisan skills to earn a livelihood.

However, Kalbelias' current story was something different in the eras before their dance form was recognised internationally. A true social narrative about them in every nook and corner of the Rajasthani society is that the Kalbelia is a caste community that is subjugated to the lowest rank of the Hindu caste hierarchy. They are *sapera* (who charm snakes for a livelihood)- traditionally a snake charmer community, who were engaged in catching venomous snakes, extracting poisons, taming and earning or seeking alms through snake charming as the only means of livelihood. Their lifestyle has transformed with the rapid socio-economic transformation in the state of Rajasthan. The aged members of the community are more intended in sedentary lifestyle and more responsive to current development initiatives.

### ***Identity – a Passage between Confusion and Confirmation***

The discussion on discourses of identity of the Kalbelia of Rajasthan deals with two important aspects of the society, i.e., cultural and social, in understanding how the dimension of both is finally transformed from spatial to temporal during the course of time, in pointing out the Constitutional status of the community.

Kalbelia are distributed in almost every district of Rajasthan. During the course of this study, I came across sixteen *gots/gotras* (descent groups) and in an earlier study, Robertson (2004, p. 301) reported thirty-nine *gots/gotras*. None of the studies could make an exhaustive list of existing lineages because of the huge population of the Kalbelia. So, on a general plane, very

pertaining question is- is the Kalbelia a single community with common cultural traits, despite geo-spatial distribution? Primarily, the identity of the community immensely signifies, while the community members have been passing through the social stigma of 'untouchability', in addition to bearing various fluid states of nomenclatures like 'Jogi', 'Nath', 'Kalbelia' and 'Sapera', as referred by the greater part of the society. Simultaneously, their current state of Constitutional status puts them in confusion in establishing a voice for the right to social justice.

At every hamlet, the identity issue was discussed at length with the senior members of the Kalbelia. Everywhere, it was unanimously specified that the sole identity of the community is the Kalbelia. All practice the doctrine of Kanipa. Since Kanipa was a follower of Lord Shiva and considered Lord Shiva as the 'Nath' (supreme lord), and accordingly naming pattern of his followers was fixed with 'nath' (for instances Ambarnath, Kesharnath, Antarnath, etc.), indicating their affiliation to the Nath Panth. Snake charming was their ancestral livelihood practice. So, in the folk society of Rajasthan, they were referred to as 'Sapera'. Any person, not necessarily a Kalbelia, if he could engage himself in snake charming, would be called 'Sapera', as addressing a person referring to his occupation is quite a common practice in folk societies. They also referred to Rajasthan, where there is another group of people, who are also called 'Sapera'. Those 'Sapera' are not Kalbelia, they are Muslims. 'Gattiwala' Kalbelia (who makes grinding stones) and 'Banshpore' Kalbelia (who manufactures bamboo baskets) are also classificatory nomenclatures that are purely associated with very specific artisan skills of two sub-groups. 'Jogi' Kalbelia is someone who lives with minimal belongings and earns a livelihood through begging alms, carrying a snake in a basket or displaying a snake around the neck. So, the Kalbelia is 'Nath' and 'Jogi' simultaneously. The difference among the 'Delhiwal' Kalbelia, 'Mewara' Kalbelia and 'Marwara' Kalbelia is only defined by the origin or native area of the community.

The general perception of categorisation of the entire community into several Constitutional segments (**Table 1**) is simply being manoeuvred by higher caste people with the motivation to defuse their mass strength in the state.

**Table 1: Constitutional/ Administrative Status of Kalbelia Community in Rajasthan**

<i>Agency/ Institute</i>	<i>Community</i>	<i>Constitutional Status</i>
Directorate of Social Welfare, Govt. of Rajasthan (O.O No. F.1(F (2SW/63, Dated 24.02.1964)	Jogi Kalbelia Jogi Kanphata	Nomadic Tribe
	Jogis (other than those included in nomadic tribes)	Semi Nomadic Tribe
Dept. Social Justice and Empowerment, Govt. of Rajasthan	Sapera (non-Hindu Caste)	OBC
Govt. of India, 151 The Gazette of India, Extraordinary- Part 2, (dated 20.09.1976), Part XV- Rajasthan (w.e.f. 27.07.1977)	Kalbelia, Sapera	Schedule Caste
Idate Commission	Daliwal Kalbelia	1C (NONE)

### ***Globalisation and the Politics of Cultural Visibility***

One of the most striking transformations in the Kalbelia community's recent history is the global recognition of Kalbelia dance, particularly after its inscription on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2010. This recognition has repositioned the community as a symbol of "Rajasthani folk culture" within the global tourism economy. However, anthropological studies caution against equating cultural commodification with empowerment (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009). The Kalbelia experience reflects this paradox sharply. While select performers, often young women, gain international exposure, the broader community continues to face:

- caste-based discrimination
- residential segregation
- precarious livelihoods
- bureaucratic ambiguity regarding identity

Tourism has reconfigured social relationships between the Kalbelia and dominant caste groups. Earlier relations were largely structured through ritualised asymmetry, where Kalbelias performed snake charming or begged alms, reinforcing hierarchical dependence. In the contemporary period, these relations are mediated through market logics, contracts, cultural festivals, and NGO interventions. Yet, this shift has not dismantled caste hierarchies. Instead, it has often produced a new form of inequality: cultural

extraction without social integration. Kalbelia culture is celebrated, while Kalbelia people remain marginalised. Globalisation and state intervention have also reshaped internal differentiation within the Kalbelia community. Access to tourism circuits, urban spaces, NGOs, and documentation has created uneven opportunities. Some families acquire visibility and mobility, while others—especially those still identified as Jogi or Sapera—remain excluded from official recognition. This has intensified debates within the community regarding:

- “authentic” Kalbelia identity
- rightful claims to Scheduled Caste status
- the legitimacy of territorial labels such as Delhiwal, Marwara, and Mewara

Rather than indicating fragmentation, these debates reflect an ongoing struggle for collective recognition under a unified ethnic identity.

### ***Kalbelia, Tourism, and Changing Caste Relations in Rajasthan***

The rise of cultural tourism in Rajasthan has transformed the symbolic economy of caste and ethnicity. Kalbelia dance performances—once embedded in ritual, seasonal movement, and subsistence—are now staged in hotels, festivals, and international platforms. This has altered how the community is perceived by outsiders, but not necessarily how they are treated in everyday social life.

The Kalbelia experience resonates with other similarly positioned communities, such as the Banjara, Nat, and Gadulia Lohar, whose identities have undergone reconfiguration due to sedentarisation, occupational shifts, and uneven incorporation into state welfare frameworks. Like these groups, the Kalbelia were historically identified through their traditional occupation (snake charming) and itinerant lifestyle, which later became the basis for stigma, criminalisation, and marginalisation. The field evidence from Jaipur, Jaisalmer, and Udaipur indicates that while Kalbelia performers are applauded on stage, they continue to face restrictions in housing, temple entry, and social interaction offstage. This disjuncture underscores the persistence of caste boundaries despite the global circulation of cultural forms.

## Conclusion

Based on the provided information regarding societal contexts and accounts from respondents, it becomes evident that diverse Kalbelia identities have been observed across various regions within the Indian state of Rajasthan. Due to the mobile nature of their occupations and the varied methods by which they sustain themselves, individuals with diverse identities and appearances can be encountered in roughly any region of Rajasthan. Despite their caste affiliation, individuals who identify as Kalbelia frequently refer to themselves using this specific designation. A significant number of individuals encounter difficulties in ascertaining their authentic racial heritage due to the multitude of names and social identities associated with it. In the context of Kalbelia's traditional culture, it is considered a cultural norm for individuals residing within the same household to refrain from physical contact with one another. In the hamlet, it is strictly prohibited for individuals belonging to a lower caste to engage in intentional cohabitation with individuals from a higher caste. Violators of this rule will be promptly expelled from the community. In order to mitigate their deficiency in qualifications for more advanced administrative positions, individuals resort to assuming fabricated identities. In addition, it is noteworthy that the Kalbelia community has established a significant presence in the area for a duration of nearly one year, thereby introducing their distinct ethnic, regional, and geographical characteristics.

Despite residing in various locations, the Kalbelia exhibit uniformity in their cosmology, worldview, social structure, traditional livelihood practices, and initiation ceremonies. Individuals residing in the region of Rajasthan are known to designate members of this particular social group as Jogi or Nath, owing to their affiliation with Guru Kanipa, the esteemed leader of the Nath Panth. Furthermore, alternative appellations such as Sapera (indicating their involvement in the art of snake charming), Gattiwala (referring to their expertise in the craft of grinding stone), and Banshpore (highlighting their skill in the art of basketry) are also employed, alongside the more prevalent designation of Kalbelia. The affiliation of Jogi and Nath with the school of spiritual instruction is the primary factor that establishes their connection to it for the purpose of sustenance. However, it is worth noting that the structure of individuals' surnames, which exhibits variation

based on geographic location, serves as a reflection of the widespread prevalence and substantial importance attributed to these rituals and beliefs.

Contemporary societies are reliant on the pervasive and essential establishment of identity and solidarity formations in order to effectively operate. One of the notable consequences of modernisation and growth is the emergence of various identities within communities, such as the Kalbelia community. All of these shifts can be attributed to the aforementioned two causes. The association of individuals with their ethnic background possesses the capacity to give rise to political movements that may subsequently infringe upon these individuals' rights under the guise of promoting broader solidarities, identities, and progress. Nevertheless, the association of ethnic identification with politics can complicate the safeguarding of its rights to existence, rendering such protection unattainable in its absence. A robust ethnic identification is not only imperative for safeguarding fundamental human rights but also plays a crucial role in cultivating a sense of affiliation and enhancing the probability of embracing the cultural values and perspectives of one's community (Phinney, 1996). The preservation of an individual's right to life is contingent upon their ethnic background.

The establishment and development of a community, as well as the well-being of its members, are contingent upon engaging in a sincere dialogue regarding their ethnic identity and the current condition of their society. This discourse should take place within the framework of administrative procedures for classification. In pursuit of the overarching objectives of social justice and empowerment, it is imperative to actively pursue a legal avenue for individuals in similar circumstances. The current anthropological study of the demographic and sociocultural status of the Kalbelia community in three different eco-cultural regions in Rajasthan found that the whole community, regardless of its eco-cultural or occupational divisions, should be officially recognised or seen as a single ethnic group in Rajasthan called "The Kalbelia." This conclusion can be derived from the ongoing anthropological investigations.

### ***Acknowledgements***

I am thankful to the Anthropological Survey of India, Government of India, for permitting me (vide office order no. 4-FP/PMC/129-2019, dated 19/02/2020) to conduct fieldwork and publish this article on the Kalbelia community of Rajasthan. I express

my deep sense of gratitude to every Kalbelia member of my study area for their kind cooperation during the study. I also acknowledge the District Welfare Officer of Jaisalmer, Jaipur and Udaipur for providing me with all sorts of cooperation to carry on this fieldwork.

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