



The Banished Spring: Basant in Gujranwala

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ABSTRACT

Basant, a festival that is grounded in the tradition of kite flying, represents a rich and important cultural tradition in Gujranwala, Punjab. This paper explores the socio-cultural importance of Basant, its current status, and the key factors that have led to its downfall. Basant, traced back to its roots in the subcontinent, with Gujranwala being an important hub, is marked by its social and communal nature, traditional clothes, music, and food. Using a mixed-methods approach, which includes the use of primary survey data, the results show that a large number of people in Gujranwala consider Basant to be an important cultural event, and there is a general consensus on its rapid decline. The key factor that has led to this decline is identified to be the ban imposed by the government due to safety concerns over dangerous materials and accidents, followed by religious myths that have distorted the origins of the festival. This paper argues that these two factors combined have led to the suppression of an important cultural tradition that is non-sectarian in nature. The paper ends with recommendations for policy intervention, which include banning dangerous materials and creating safe zones, along with public awareness campaigns to separate the cultural significance of the festival from religious disputes, which could lead to a possible regulated revival.



Introduction

Gujranwala, located in the Punjab province of Pakistan on the Grand Trunk Road, shows a history that dates back to the early periods of the Indian subcontinent. The Grand Trunk Road has always been a route that has seen large movements of armies and travellers. During the time of Sher Shah Suri, Gujranwala was a prominent town on this route (Ali, Javed-ur-Rehman, & Shabbir, 2021). As cited by Abdul Malik (1939), the toponym “Gujranwala” could have originated from the presence of Gujjars in the region. According to one theory, the name of the well belonging to Chaudhry Gujjar, who had a large cattle population, was given to the grazing area, which came to be known

as Gujranwala. Likewise, Mufti Ghulam Sarwar (1877) writes that about three centuries before the region was first settled by Khan Jutt Sansi, who gave it the name Khanpur Sansi. Later, Gujjars invaded the region and finally named it Gujranwala. According to the Gazetteer of Gujranwala District (1895), the region is very old and it bordered an ancient kingdom whose capital was Sakala or Sagala, although the Gazetteer does not confirm the antiquity of Gujranwala (Ali, Javedur-Rehman, & Shabbir, 2021). The Chinese Buddhist monk Hiuen Tsang passed through the Indian subcontinent between 630 and 644 A.D., recording the existence of a kingdom called Tsekhia with its capital near the modern Sialkot; some historians have argued that this might have been near Gujranwala itself (Douie, 1916). During the Mughal era, Gujranwala was an important link for roads to Kashmir and Afghanistan. The early settlements in the area were four villages around Sarai Katchi: Thatha, Sarai Kambohan, and Sarai Gujran (Qurashi, 1958). In the Punjab, Charat Singh, the grandfather of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, is known as the key player in the establishment of the Sikh Empire. His father, Naudh Singh, who was referred to as a bandit by Latif, was part of the Fazalpuria misl, which was led by Nawab Kapoor Singh. Naudh Singh died in 1752, while Charat Singh was born in 1721 (Latif, 1994). After the death of his father, Charat Singh took over the reins of power, eventually parting ways with the Fazalpuria misl and gaining control over a number of villages in Gujranwala, with Khiyali as his headquarters (Latif, 1994). The annexation of Punjab in 1849 brought Gujranwala under the control of the British, marking the beginning of a new era in the history of Gujranwala. Gujranwala was first governed by the Rachna Doab Administrative Board. Later, it was included in the newly formed Sialkot District in 1851-52, before being declared a separate district headquarters. In 1856, Gujranwala was further divided into four tehsils: Hafizabad, Sheikhpura, Ram Nagar, and Gujranwala. (Gujranwala Gazetteer, 1895).

Cultural Continuity and Socio-Economic Significance of Basant

The Basant celebration in Gujranwala was not just another cultural event but was linked to the cyclical pattern of agriculture. The spring season represented rebirth, prosperity, and hope. Flying kites was an expression of this metaphor of life through visual imagery. The mass support for Basant is indicative of the role of season-related festivities in aiding communities to measure time. Urban Basant festivals also bring to light how cultural traditions transform to suit new settings and contexts. For example, in Gujranwala, instead of celebrating in open fields, they began to do so on rooftops, but nothing much else seemed to change. Basant in Gujranwala can thus be contextualized in the global tradition of kite flying that has existed across the world from ancient times. The historical study of kite flying has uncovered its beginnings in ritualistic, military, and leisure practices of China, Egypt, and the Pacific Islands in which kite flying represented renewal and community ecstatic in relation to elements like the wind (Yolen, 1976).

Kite flying, as an event of festivity and celebrations, could be seen around the world. It depicts the emotions of kite flyers who control its flight with the help of a strong string, through its different colour patterns and designs. The festival of Basant provides a lot of Happiness among the people of Punjab. It is considered the mother of all the festivals in Punjab. It is celebrated on the first day of spring. It is Kite Flying event. Almost half a month ago, different types and shapes of kites have been brought to market for selling. The attractive kites include: flat kites (square and round), box kites (rectangular, hexagonal and tetrahedral) and three-Dimensional cells. The local as well as imported 'Pinnahs', 'Manjhaa' and 'Dor' are also available in the market. It is proven by the history; The Gujranwala is the main centre of Basant. The shouting of 'Booo Kata, Booo Kata' were boomed in the atmosphere of Gujranwala in the season of Basant. The young boys and girls come on the rooftop with their kites, they playing with these kites. Actually, this event is converted into a competition. Everyone wants to cut the kite of his rival. The chemicals and glasses were

used during the manufacturing of Manjhaa or string. This Manjhaa helps a lot in the swift cutting of opponent string. After cutting the opponent's string, the music and charming sound of Bo-Kata has been boomed in the air of Gujranwala. It is a festival of happiness and brings harmony, bliss and cheer among the people of Gujranwala (Akbar, 2020).

It is a long history of kite flying. According to the statement of a Japanese legend, the history of kite flying was started in 12th century when a warrior named by Minamoto along with his son was exiled away to the island of Oshima. He along with his son ran away to the mainland by using a big kite. There is another opinion of a narrator; a big was used to elevate the tiles in the roof of Zojo-Ji temple in 1689. There were implausible varieties and forms of kites in Japan. The different kites were symbolized with achievement, success, long life and good fortune in Japan. However, it was stated that the kite has been invented by Chinese in 200 BC. Kite flying in China is very old, as a visitor Marco Polo stayed in China. He saw Kite flying there and he also recorded about kite flying. In contemporary world, the festival of Kite flying is celebrated in the month of September every year in China. There is also a great enjoyment during this festival. There is a common belief; the festival of Kite Flying is shifted to Europe through the Sub-Continent of India (Chaudhry 2001).

In the Indian Subcontinent, the festival of Basant became deeply intertwined with local culture and Sufi traditions, as illustrated by this popular legend originating from Delhi. It is not confirmed about the exact date of starting the festival of Kite Flying or Basant in the city of Gujranwala but this wonderful activity has been celebrated enthusiastically during the last decades of 19th century. The city of Gujranwala remained the Centre of Kite Flying or Basant. In the season of Basant, there were certain serious injuries and deaths have been reported. Therefore, the Government has banned this festival now days. One can memorize his childhood memories when he/she hear the name of kite (Siddiqui 2005).

Kite flying can be traced in ancient Greek culture where it is considered a ritual to avoid the anger of gods and goddesses and to get their pleasure. In the same way, in the archaic culture of Japan and China, the designs of kites are a depiction of different methodologies that are mostly associated with the images of dragons. Kite flying has been a popular sport among all age groups, especially the children, of air-bounded and coastal areas of Southeast Asian and Asian countries. Within this rich tapestry of kite-flying history, the Subcontinent developed its own unique spiritual narrative for Basant. There was very famous and great Sufi Saint of the Sub-Continent of India, Hazrat Khawaja Nizamuddin Auliya. He was born in 1233 and died in 1325. He belonged to a Sufi Order (Chishti). He did not have children from his own wife. He adopted a boy named by Khawaja Taquiuddin (Akbar, 2020). He was his nephew (child of his sister). He was loved and cared by Khawaja Nizamuddin Auliya. Khawaja sahib considered him as his own son. This boy was died in his early teen age. The death of his adopted son brought sadness, misery and intense grief in his life. Therefore, the Sufi Saint cut off from all the affairs of life. These affairs included the meeting with his disciples and pupils. He completely cut off all the meetings. He became alone. In this loneliness, he spent his time on the grave of his nephew and his meditation room (Chilla Sharif). The followers of Hazrat Khawaja Nizamuddin Auliya were also affected by the state of their Master (teacher). They always tried to brought Happiness and amusement in the life of Hazrat Khawaja Nizamuddin Auliya, but remained always in vain. Hazrat Amir Khusro (founder of sufi Qawali) was among the best and close disciples. He also wanted to bring back the humour, reason, recreation, diversion and beseeching in the life Khawaja Nizamuddin Auliya, but remained unsuccessful (Rehmani, 1998).

Fortunately, one day Hazrat Amir Khusro saw a group of young ladies. These ladies wore a special dress: blouse and long skirt. The Indian names of these dresses are yellow *ghaagra* and *cholis*. The young ladies were also carried marigold. They were playing drums (*dhool*) and singing songs. They were walking on road: which was a side from the Chilla Sharif of Hazrat Khawaja Nizamuddin Auliya. He interpreted the ladies and inquired about their journey. They turned and told that, they had to wear new dresses for their divinity and moved to the Temple to sing, dance and perform in the form a band. All these things (performances) made them happy and also all these things had been done after the period of fasting. The thing enchanted Amir Khusro and decided to oblige his master by doing the same. He wore the women dressing the *chaagra* and choli, by wearing these costumes he changed his identity from man to women as he covered his head with a white and yellow chunni (large scarf). He also joined other hundreds of disciples, pupils and followers of Hazrat Khawaja Nizamuddin Auliya and marched towards the Chilla Sharif of his Master. This group sang a song (written and composed by Amir Khusro) on the beat of Dhooland danced for this special occasion (Rehmani, 1998).

The song and performance of dance did not attract to Khawaja Nizamuddin Auliya. When Amir Khusro uncovered his concealed identity then He smiled and became happy at the end of the celebrations. The depression and misery of Saint are vanished away; the annual celebrations of the festival of Basant were started on that day. The songs, dance, dress and other ceremonial events had been performed. It was created as a festival in the city of Delhi (India) (Chishti 2004).

Types of Kites

This long-standing tradition in Punjab eventually transformed into ‘Basant,’ a social cultural practice. This helped enhance social bonding as it promoted active participation from all classes of society irrespective of religions. The kites are made in different designs, colours, shapes, and patterns according to the aesthetics of natives (Parvez, 2018).

Similarly, there are many designs, shapes and colour patterns that are used in Pakistan. The following diagrams show us a variety of these shapes across the globe and in Pakistan.

In Punjab, especially in Gujranwala, the Rhombus shapes kites are made and these are very popular among native of the region. These are locally known as “*Gudda*” or “*Guddi*”. The design is very simple and elegant. It can be made by a school going boy with the help of just 2 sticks, one paper and a small amount of gum. In Punjab, Including Gujranwala, there is another shape that is very popular among natives is the curvilinear shape. It is locally known with a different name such as “*Tukal*”, “*Patang*”, “*Pari*”, “*Dowli*”, “*Tifli kup*” (Parvez, 2018).

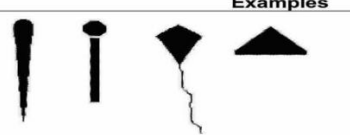

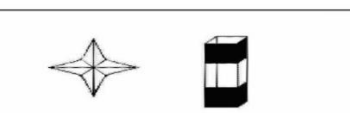
Kite Style	Examples	
<i>Flat</i>		<i>Snake, Hexagonal, Diamond, Delta</i>
<i>Bowed</i>		<i>Eddy, Edo, Rokkaku</i>
<i>Cellular</i>		<i>Star, Box Kite</i>

Fig. 1 Different Types of Kites from the World (Parvez, 2018)






Multi-line		Dual-line Stunt Kite, Quad-line Stunt Kite
Fighters & Flexible		Hata, Indian Fighter, Korean Fighter
Figure		Bird, Bat
Soft		Soft Airfoil, Parafoil, Flowform
Stacks and Trains		Single-line train of Kites, Dual-line stack of kites

Fig. 2 Different Types of Kites from the World (Parvez, 2018)

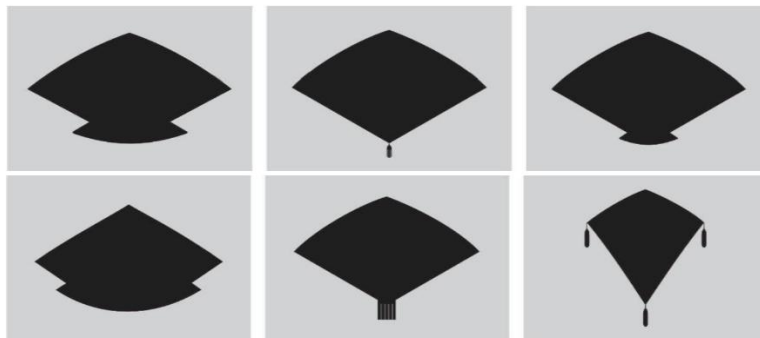


Fig. 3 Different Types of Kites from the World (Parvez, 2018)

Gujranwala and Basant

The urban characteristics of Gujranwala imparted a distinct flavour to the manner in which people celebrate Basant. Neighbourhoods in these urban settings have evolved a code of conduct to participate in and compete with each other in the activity of kite flying without any conflict among the residents.

The festive events further promoted interaction among different neighbourhoods since kite competitions took place across residential boundaries. This process enhanced the social network within urban areas, which boosted a sense of collective urban identity apart from family extensions (Akbar, 2020; Parvez, 2018).

Children and youth were key in maintaining Basant practices. Through observation and participation, children and youth were able to learn the art of making kite designs and flying them, and proper behaviour while competing, thus ensuring the transfer of cultural knowledge. The

unorganized sector related to Basant was based on temporary but intensive production and consumption cycles. Workshops, mostly home-based, were manufacturing kites and string in a massive scale a number of weeks before the festival. This act of preparation shows that cultural happenings trigger anticipation with regards to economic activities. Vendors of food products, transport services providers, and entertainers also got to enjoy the positive impact of the demand that came along with the Basant season. Many low-income families got to supplement their incomes through Basant. The sociocultural significance of Basant was most apparent in the city of Gujranwala through kite manufacturing, thread preparation, food delivery, and music show that helped in creating off-season job opportunities (Akbar, 2020).

The people of Gujranwala have been deeply associated with the profession of agriculture and harvesting. Vaisakhi, sometimes called Besakhi, is a popular harvesting festival of Gujranwala most of the time it is celebrated with kite flying. This festival is also very important for Sikh religion as their tenth Guru Gobind Nath organized their Khalsa order. It falls on Punjabi month Vaisakh. The celebrations of the mentioned month are now associated with Basant. The Basant is basically a Sanskrit word *Vasant* which means spring season. With the passage of time, *vasant* itself become a very popular event and kite flying is an essential activity to celebrate this colourful event. Before partition, this event is very popular among natives of Punjab and they had been celebrating this event without considering their religious beliefs (Akbar, 2020). The following painting of kite flying during the Mughal period is strong evidence of this statement:



Fig. 4: A Woman |Flying a Kite (1700-1800) (Vinod, 2019)

On the other hand, there are few myths associated with Basant Festival as some religious scholars spread false belief that it is a Hindu festival and it is against Islam. The story of Hindu boy Haqeeqat Rai is often told to the Muslims of the subcontinent to spread hate among natives of Pakistan and India. The truth is very clear and simple as Haqeeqat Rai was born in first half of 18th century in a Hindu family of Sialkot, a famous town of Punjab. He was the only son of his father. One day he made some disrespectful statements against the daughter of Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) in front of his classmates. The boy was taken to the court and he was sentenced to death by a Muslim judge. Incidentally, his death sentence was carried out on the same day when the celebrations of Basant was conducted in Lahore. The Hindu natives built a tomb in the memory of Haqeeqat Rai and they started gathering at the place annually. Now a false connection has been established by some authors between these two events (Ali, 2022; Hindi,1990).

At the dawn of the 20th century, three writers of Bengal came forward and established a thesis that the Basant festival is celebrated to commemorate the sacrifice of the Hindu boy. However, they have been failed to mention a very strong fact that Basant had been celebrated almost two hundred

years ago. There are many references in history like poetry, literature and paintings of Basant which are the strong antithesis of their statement. The celebration of basant has been conducted in Punjab especially Lahore and Gujranwala many years before the death of Hindu boy Haqeeqat Rai.

Gujranwala: A Centre of Basant Festival

Gujranwala is reckoned as one of the main centres in Punjab that is associated with Basant festival for ages. This is not sure when first time Basant festival was celebrated in Gujranwala. However, the natives of the district have been celebrating this event since many years and the spring season is welcomed every year with this festival. The festival is celebrated with equal participation of poor and rich, urban and rural & girls and boys. All age groups and genders celebrate this event with great passion and zeal. The Basant has been a great cause of togetherness among people of the regions by dint of its secular nature.

The event became more illustrious in Gujranwala owing to the cuisine and event loving nature of its people. They wear special dresses, cook different foods, sing beautiful songs, and perform charismatic traditional dances during the event. The traditional dress contains eye-catching yellow and white colours. The men wear yellow and white *Kurta and Shalwar* (Shirt and Lose Pants). Some of them wear *Pagri* (Turban) which is very famous among Punjabi people of Gujranwala and sometimes they also wear silk or cotton scarf around their neck. On the other hand, women also wear special traditional dresses in white and yellow colours along with *Dupatta or Chunni* (a long scarf) (M. Afzal, personal communication, November 21, 2019).

The people of Gujranwala are famous across the country for their food loving nature. The traditional foods of Gujranwala is part and parcel of their all events and Basant is not an exception. There is long list of foods that are cooked during the event like barbecued red meat, *Baryani*, *haleem*, *Kashmiri Chaye* (Pink tea), *Lassi* (Yogurt Drink), Custer and *Sooji ka halwa* (Semolina Desert).

The event is started in earlier weeks of spring and celebrations begin after evening prayer. The natives start the event with the sound of their traditional music instrument *Dhol* and conventional music. The kites are flown at low altitude during the night for visibility purpose while at high altitude during day time. The females are not behind the men in the celebrations of Basant and they celebrate the event with same passion and zeal as men do. They organize Basant parties and fly kites. The music instruments are booked before many weeks of event day and bands are also booked for the big day. Some people, who cannot afford these expensive bands, borrow boom boxes to add colours of music in their celebrations.

The kites and their size and colours are chosen very carefully according to aesthetics of individuals. The procurement of kites and strings (*dors*) is started many weeks before the event. There are many wholesale and retail markets in the central city where all shades, designs and size of kites are available for sale. Some serious kite flyer prepares their strings and kites by their own for matches - locally known as *paicha*.

The celebrations of Basant gala can be divided into two major categories. One is the daytime celebrations and other is late night parties. The late-night part trend is not very old but it's a new trend and people fly kites, eat *Nan-Kabab*, play traditional music, and perform *bhangras* throughout the night. Kite flying during night is becoming more and more popular among people of Gujranwala for last two decades. It is very expensive but people spend their money to celebrate the colourful event in light of the moon. Big houses, plazas and grounds are decorated with lights and famous people of cities are invited as a guest. This people of Gujranwala are following this

tradition with the same spirit. They took it as a great source of entertainment and barbecue parties are integral part of night flying matches.

Present Situation of Kite Flying in Gujranwala

Regulation, Safety, and Global Perspectives on Kite Festivals

In the discussion about the ban on Basant, there is an important nexus of cultural practice and regulative power. Cultural practice has been perceived as threatening or unruly, although Basant is an event that has long been governed by society. Thus, there is marginalization of cultural practice in urban governance.

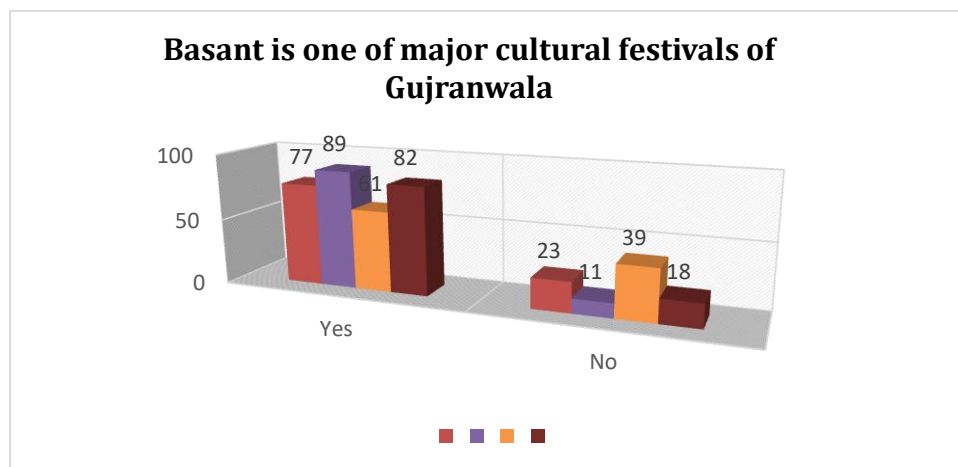
It’s been observed that festivals relating to the culture of a country are usually impacted by a ban, which in turn affects marginalized sections, including vendors and women, who earn a livelihood through such events. The fact that safety issues posed by strings with metallic and chemical coatings were valid might have made a complete ban proportionate to legitimate concerns; however, according to scholars, a more specific and proportionate regulation policy might have worked better (Ghafoor, 2021).

To assess the current situation of Basant festival, detailed primary research was conducted and by using the questionnaire, interviews and direct observation the following results were found:

Table 1: Basant: a prime cultural festival of Gujranwala

Do you think basant is one of major cultural festivals of Gujranwala?				
	Rural (Men)	Urban (Men)	Rural (Women)	Urban (Urban Women)
Yes	77	89	61	82
No	23	11	39	18

When the people were asked about their perception regarding Basant festival, the above-mentioned results are collected. The 77 percent rural men consider Basant as major cultural festival of Gujranwala while only 23 percent still does not believe so. On the other hand, 89 percent of urban men believe that Basant is major cultural festival while their 11 percent fellows do not regard Basant as the cultural festival of Gujranwala. Interestingly, 82 percent of urban and 69 percent rural women think that Basant is a festival of joy and celebrations. To look at the proportion of men and women more clearly, the following pie-chart is drawn:



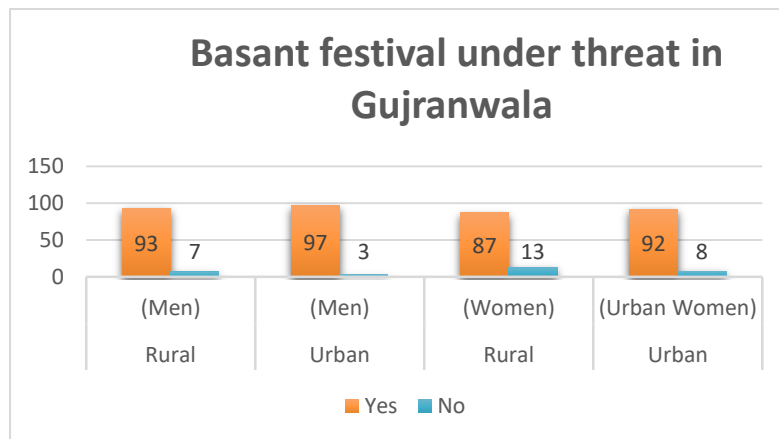
Undoubtedly, from above-mentioned results it can be concluded that the major portion of men and women consider Basant as major cultural festival of the region in both urban and rural settlements.

The other question during the survey was asked about the current position of this cultural festival and 100 men and 100 women were asked in urban and rural settlements to ascertain the present scenario. The results are as below:

Table 2:

Do you think the Basant festival is dying day by day in Gujranwala?				
	Rural (Men)	Urban (Men)	Rural (Women)	Urban (Urban Women)
Yes	93	97	87	92
No	7	3	13	8

Unfortunately, the results tell us very sorrow situation of the current scenario as 93 percent rural and 97 percent urban men replied to the question in the affirmation that this unique tradition of Punjabi culture is dying in the region rapidly. Similarly, major portion of women in the study area are also believe that the famous Basant festival is fading out in the region.

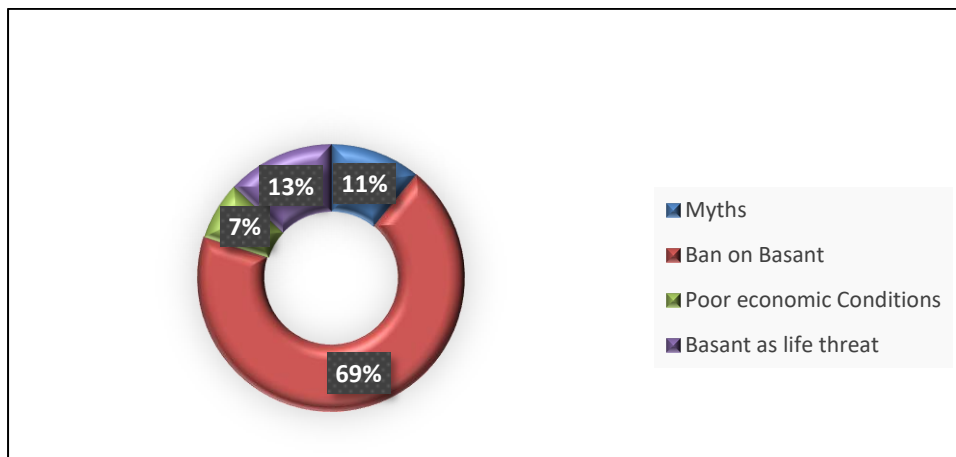


The bar graphs clearly depict that at present the famous mentioned tradition of Gujranwala is dying as the both gender in the area believe so. To know the reasons behind the dying basant festival of Gujranwala, some close-ended questions are asked to students, businessmen, teachers, house wives, shopkeepers, labours and all other natives of the study area. Their answers are presented in following table:

Table 3:

What are the main reasons behind dying Basant festival in Gujranwala?	
Myths	11
Ban on Basant	69
Poor economic Conditions	07
Basant as life threat	13

Reasons Behind Dying Basant Festival in Gujranwala



The above-collected results tell us that the foremost reason of this dying tradition is the ban on Basant Festival as 69 percent people of Gujranwala endorsed this reason. Apart from this, 11 percent believe that myths are the reasons and 07 percent consider poor economic conditions are main reasons.

Basant, the important event of Gujranwala culture, is on the edge of decline. Religious pressure groups, declining interest and court orders are some key reasons of decreasing popularity of this event. Most religious groups claimed it as a Hindu event and against the Islamic teaching, but association of this event with some religion could not be proved. According to historical contexts it is a cultural event which enjoyed by most of natives. Use of chemical door and casualties due to this also force law making bodies to pass the bill against this peaceful event. It is the responsibilities of Government to take preventive measures to stop illegal activities instead of banning this joyful game.

Conclusion

On the other hand, comparative cultural analysis reveals that kite festivals around the globe have adapted well to modern regulatory contexts. In some Asian and Western cultures, issues of public safety could be alleviated in terms of material regulation and public education. These examples imply that cultural sustainability is not necessarily related to the concept of suppression, but to the concept of adaptive governance. These models might be applied to the Pakistani context, which might lead to the return of Basant in the country in an appropriate way, which not only considers cultural heritage but also cultural safety, as defined by Suryani (2017), “a key cultural safety concept”

International practice shows that kite festivals can be managed for public safety, being integrated with the preservation of culture. Bali Kite Festival is a case in point, which clearly showcases a systematic approach toward the preservation of culture with a focus on public safety. This has been implemented with standardized materials, limited areas, as well as administrative management. The evidence presented underscores that Basant is not a recent or sectarian invention, but a profound cultural tradition of Gujranwala with deep historical roots, celebrated for its ability to unite communities across social and religious lines. Historical accounts and local narratives confirm its longstanding secular nature, while contemporary survey data reveals that a majority of Gujranwala’s residents still recognize it as a major cultural festival. Its decline is not due to a lack

of public interest, but primarily a consequence of the official ban, alongside safety concerns and misplaced religious objections.

Therefore, the solution lies not in perpetual prohibition, but in thoughtful regulation and public education. To preserve this unique heritage, authorities should consider lifting the blanket ban in favour of a managed revival. This would involve strictly enforcing the use of safe, non-metallic strings, designating specific, open areas for kite flying away from power lines and dense traffic, and launching public awareness campaigns that highlight the festival's authentic cultural history. Such a balanced approach would allow Gujranwala to safeguard its joyful spring tradition while ensuring public safety for all.

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