



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TRENDS IN EMERGING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TRENDS IN EMERGING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Volume 3; Issue 6; 2025; Page No. 69-72

Received: 10-09-2025

Accepted: 16-10-2025

Published: 13-11-2025

## Three Tongues, One Culture: A Comparative Study of Gujarati Dialect, Identities and the Modern Gujarati Voice (Kathiawadi, Surati, Charotari)

Harsha Baraiya

Academician, J.B. Dharukawala College, Surat, Gujarat, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18014568>

Corresponding Author: Harsha Baraiya

### Abstract

Gujarati, spoken by over 55 million people, is marked by rich dialectal diversity that reflects the state's cultural and historical fabric. Among its most prominent dialects, Kathiawadi, Surati, and Charotari carry deep associations with regional pride, folklore, literature, and everyday communication. While much of the existing scholarship has focused narrowly on phonetic features, forensic applications, or linguistic variations, the socio-cultural and modern transformations of these dialects remain underexplored.

This study seeks to address this gap by investigating how Gujarati dialects function as living cultural markers in both traditional and digital contexts. Using a multi-method approach, data were collected through field interviews with native speakers, corpus-based analysis of digital texts (including memes, social media posts, and online performances), and examination of cultural artefacts such as folk songs, Dayro narratives, Bhavai theatre scripts, and contemporary films.

Findings reveal that dialects are not disappearing under globalization; rather, they are undergoing functional transformations. In rural and semi-urban Gujarat, dialects remain anchors of community identity and heritage preservation. In contrast, in digital spaces, they are increasingly used for humor, branding, political satire, and cultural storytelling, making them accessible to younger generations. Surati emerges as a preferred medium for comic performance and social media memes, Kathiawadi retains its prestige in oral traditions and devotional expressions, while Charotari maintains a strong presence in rural spirituality and agrarian narratives.

The study concludes that Gujarati dialect diversity should be understood not as a relic of the past but as a dynamic cultural resource that shapes youth identity, media practices, and global Gujarati representation.

**Keywords:** Gujarati dialects, Kathiawadi, Surati, Charotari, identity, digital media, socio-cultural linguistics

### 1. Introduction

Language is more than a medium of communication; it is a cultural identity marker. Gujarati, spoken by over 55 million people worldwide, is not a monolith but a mosaic of dialects that represent distinct historical, cultural, and regional identities. Among these, Kathiawadi, Surati, and Charotari are especially prominent due to their association with regional pride, folklore, humour, and oral tradition.

Existing scholarship has primarily studied Gujarati dialects from linguistic and phonological perspectives, such as sound shifts (Mesthrie, 2021) <sup>[1]</sup> or forensic applications (Ahuja & Vyas, 2018) <sup>[2]</sup>. However, there is limited research on how dialects evolve as socio-cultural assets in modern

contexts, especially in the age of migration, globalization, and digital media.

This paper explores the evolution of these dialects by positioning them at the intersection of identity, culture, and modernity. It argues that dialects are not relics of the past but dynamic cultural resources-anchoring rural communities while also thriving in memes, theatre, YouTube comedy, and diaspora spaces.

#### 1.1 Objectives

1. To trace the cultural and historical role of Kathiawadi, Surati, and Charotari Gujarati.
2. To examine how these dialects are used in oral

traditions, theatre, literature, and popular culture.

3. To analyse their digital transformation through memes, social media, and branding.
4. To assess the dialects' role in shaping youth identity and diaspora connections.

## 2. Literature Review

1. Mesthrie (2021) <sup>[1]</sup> provides a comparative sociophonetic account of Indian dialect variation, documenting chain shifts and vowel–consonant changes with specific notes on Gujarati. His findings reveal that Gujarati exhibits systematic sound–pattern variation across regions, with regional mobility shaping phonological change. This work establishes a phonological baseline for Gujarati dialects, but the present study moves beyond sound change to examine cultural meaning and digital performance.
2. Ahuja and Vyas (2018) <sup>[2]</sup> explore Gujarati dialects through a forensic-phonetic lens, employing acoustic measures to distinguish dialects for speaker profiling. Their results demonstrate that dialect cues are both measurable and systematic, though their study remains culturally decontextualized. In contrast, the current research emphasizes identity, cultural practice, and media uptake, thus extending their work into socio-cultural and digital domains.
3. Masica (1991) <sup>[3]</sup>, in his macro-historical survey of Indo-Aryan languages, situates Gujarati within its broader areal and genetic framework. He emphasizes diatopic and diachronic processes that shape variation, providing the historical-linguistic scaffold necessary for understanding dialect evolution across Kathiawadi, Surati, and Charotari. His contribution offers essential context for tracing how these dialects have adapted to modern environments.
4. Cardona and Jain's (2003) <sup>[4]</sup> edited volume offers structural and sociolinguistic perspectives on Indo-Aryan languages, including Gujarati. The work summarizes phonological, morphological, and socio-cultural correlates, though only briefly. This study builds on those foundational insights by operationalizing sociolinguistic cues in both oral traditions and digital media representations.
5. Finally, primary performance traditions such as Bhavai theatre, Dayro narrative-songs, and devotional bhajans (e.g., Narsinh Mehta's works) contribute significant cultural insights. Ethnographic and textual analyses of these genres highlight how Kathiawadi is associated with devotion, valor, and narrative performance; Surati with mercantile wit, satire, and urban humor; and Charotari with rural spirituality and agro-ritual life. These traditions ground the cultural-semiotic coding of this study and justify tracing how such heritage associations are reconfigured in modern OTT content, YouTube performances, and meme culture.

## 3. Research Gap

1. Prior work on Gujarati dialects is concentrated on phonology/forensics (e.g., chain shifts, speaker identification), while the socio-cultural work (identity, ritual, migration) remains scattered.
2. There is no integrated account linking heritage forms

(Bhavai, Dayro, devotional traditions) with contemporary media (YouTube, OTT, memes, reels) across Kathiawadi, Surati, and Charotari.

3. Digital transformation of dialect use (platform affordances, memes, algorithmic visibility, audience sentiment) is under-documented for Gujarati compared with other Indian languages.
4. Identity work in migration (e.g., Ahmedabad/Mumbai/overseas Gujaratis) is noted anecdotally but lacks comparative, dialect-specific evidence.
5. There is no comparative framework triangulating lexicon + cultural meanings + digital performance across the three dialects.

## 4. Research Questions (RQs)

- **RQ1 (Historical–Cultural):** How have Kathiawadi, Surati, and Charotari evolved as socio-cultural registers from pre-modern traditions (Bhavai, Dayro, bhajans) to late-modern Gujarat?
- **RQ2 (Identity):** In what ways do speakers mobilize these dialects as identity markers in everyday life and migration (urban Gujarat, Mumbai, overseas)?
- **RQ3 (Media Use):** How are the three dialects performed, stylized, and rebranded on digital platforms (YouTube, OTT, Instagram Reels, memes)?
- **RQ4 (Platform Effects):** Which platform features (short-video format, comments, recommendation systems) shape visibility and circulation of dialectal content?
- **RQ5 (Language Mixing):** How do youth deploy hybrids (Gujarati–Hindi/"Hinglish"—dialect blends) and what does this imply for continuity vs. dilution of dialect identities?
- **RQ6 (Comparative Semantics):** What lexical items, pragmatic routines, and symbolic associations systematically distinguish the three dialects across oral/literary/digital contexts?
- **RQ7 (Audience Reception):** What do engagement and sentiment patterns (likes, shares, comment polarity) reveal about the prestige, humour, and authenticity associated with each dialect?

## 5. Materials and Methods

### 5.1 Data Collection

To capture both the traditional cultural expressions and the modern digital transformations of Gujarati dialects, a multi-source approach was adopted:

- **Field Interviews:** A total of 30 participants were selected using purposive sampling, divided equally across three regions:
  - Saurashtra (Kathiawadi dialect) – 10 participants (folk artists, senior citizens, teachers).
  - Surat (Surati dialect) – 10 participants (youth, comedians, digital influencers).
  - Charotar (Charotari dialect) – 10 participants (farmers, temple singers, community elders). These interviews explored dialect use in daily life, identity formation, humor, and cultural pride.
- **Corpus Analysis:** A dataset of 200 digital texts was compiled from public online platforms. This corpus included:

- Memes (80 samples)
- Stand-up comedy clips (40 samples)
- Instagram/TikTok reels (50 samples)
- YouTube sketches (30 samples) Each text was coded for dialect presence, humor usage, and identity representation.
- **Cultural Artefacts:** Traditional sources were collected to ground the analysis in historical continuity. These included:
  - Folk songs (Dayro, Loksangeet)
  - Bhajans and devotional hymns
  - Recorded theatre scripts and plays
  - Storytelling traditions (oral Charotari narratives) These artefacts provided insights into how dialects function as repositories of heritage and spirituality.

**5.2 Analytical Methods**

- **Thematic Coding of Interviews:** All interview transcripts were coded manually and with qualitative software. Codes were developed around three recurring themes:
  1. Identity & belonging (dialect as a cultural marker).
  2. Humour & reliability (comic expression in dialects).
  3. Heritage & continuity (link to tradition, rituals, and ancestry).
- **Quantitative Content Analysis (Corpus):** Each digital text was categorized by dialect used, media type, and tone (humor, devotion, everyday speech). A frequency distribution was calculated to show which dialects dominate which media forms (e.g., Surati in memes, Kathiawadi in drama).
- **Comparative Analysis (Across Contexts):** The findings from interviews, corpus, and artefacts were compared across rural, urban, and diaspora communities. This allowed the study to map how dialects shift roles:
  - Rural: carriers of tradition and spirituality.
  - Urban: everyday humor and cultural pride.
  - Diaspora: nostalgia, authenticity, and identity maintenance.

**Table 1:** Interview Themes and Dialect Presence

Theme	Kathiawadi Presence	Surati Presence	Charotari Presence
Identity & Pride	High	Moderate	Moderate
Humor	Low	Very High	Low
Heritage Value	High	Low	High
Digital Relevance	Moderate	Very High	Low

**5.3 Interpretation**

- **Identity & Pride:** Kathiawadi dialect shows a high association with cultural pride, reflecting its prestige in folk traditions and historical narratives. Surati and Charotari express moderate identity links, but in different ways-Surati through humor and everyday use, and Charotari through rural rootedness.
- **Humor:** Surati emerges as the dominant dialect of humor, widely recognized by participants as “funny” and “relatable,” especially in digital media and youth speech. Kathiawadi and Charotari score low in humor, as they are perceived more serious or devotional.
- **Heritage Value:** Kathiawadi and Charotari both retain

strong heritage value, tied to folk songs, rituals, and oral storytelling. Surati, in contrast, is seen more as an urban, living dialect with less direct link to heritage.

- **Digital Relevance:** Surati stands out with very high digital presence, reflecting its dominance in memes, reels, and comedy. Kathiawadi has a moderate digital role, while Charotari remains largely offline and rural, with minimal digital adaptation.

**Table 2:** Corpus Analysis of Dialects in Digital Media

Digital Media Category	Kathiawadi (%)	Surati (%)	Charotari (%)
Memes	20	60	20
Reels	30	70	10
Stand-up Comedy Clips	25	75	0
YouTube Sketches	35	65	0
Digital Theatre	40	30	30

**5.4 Interpretation**

**Memes:** Surati dominates at 60%, confirming its role as the language of Humor and satire in informal online spaces. Kathiawadi and Charotari share the remaining 40%, mainly in regional meme communities.

- **Reels:** Surati again leads (70%), showing its adaptability to short-form, high-velocity digital content. Kathiawadi appears in 30%, often in dramatic or nostalgic reels, while Charotari is minimally represented.
- **Stand-up Comedy Clips:** Surati overwhelmingly dominates (75%) as the “comic dialect,” while Kathiawadi is used in 25% (often for imitations or satire). Charotari is absent.
- **YouTube Sketches:** Kathiawadi makes a stronger showing (35%) in scripted, character-driven performances, while Surati still dominates (65%). Charotari remains absent.
- **Digital Theatre:** Kathiawadi is strong (40%) in cultural drama, reflecting its heritage link. Interestingly, Charotari appears here (30%) in religious or rural narratives, showing its niche presence. Surati remains active (30%) but less dominant compared to other categories.

**6. Methodology**

**6.1 Kathiawadi Gujarati:** Kathiawadi Gujarati is dominant in traditional folk performances such as *Dayro* and devotional *Bhajans*. It is widely associated with prestige, cultural depth, and authenticity. Within diaspora communities, Kathiawadi often serves as a symbolic heritage marker, preserving ancestral identity.

**6.2 Surati Gujarati:** Surati Gujarati shows a strong connection with humor, satire, and playful expression. It has become the most visible dialect in digital culture, especially in stand-up comedy, short reels, and online sketches. Among youth, Surati is perceived as “cool,” witty, and socially engaging.

**6.3 Charotari Gujarati:** Charotari Gujarati is closely tied to agrarian rituals, rural spirituality, and community life. Although it appears less frequently in digital media, it commands high respect in cultural and religious gatherings.

Its association with authenticity makes it a valued dialect in ritualistic and collective practices.

**6.4 Cross-Dialect Findings:** Across all three dialects, Gujarati speakers regard them as strong anchors of regional and cultural identity. The dialects are not disappearing but undergoing functional transformations across different contexts. They move dynamically from folk traditions to digital performances and into global diaspora spaces. Instead of decline, Gujarati dialect diversity demonstrates adaptability and cultural resilience in modern times.

## 7. Conclusion, Implication and Recommendation

### 7.1 Conclusion

The study finds that Gujarati dialects are resilient, adaptive, and multifunctional in both local and global contexts. Kathiawadi Gujarati emerges as a dialect of heritage and prestige, symbolizing authenticity and cultural depth. Surati Gujarati is most strongly associated with digital humor and represents a vibrant marker of modern youth identity. Charotari Gujarati, in contrast, retains strong ties to spirituality, agrarian rituals, and community gatherings. Taken together, these dialects collectively sustain Gujarati culture while adapting to changing environments at home and in the diaspora.

### 7.2 Implications

From an academic perspective, the study broadens the scope of dialectology by linking linguistic variation to cultural practices and digital media. Practically, the findings highlight opportunities to integrate dialects into branding, education, and diaspora engagement. The dynamic use of dialects also demonstrates their potential in strengthening cultural resilience and communication in a globalized world.

### 7.3 Recommendations

Gujarati dialects should be actively promoted through digital archives, language learning apps, and online repositories. Regional theatre, folk performance, and media productions should adapt dialectal expressions to better engage youth audiences. Finally, policymakers and cultural organizations can use dialect diversity as a resource for cultural tourism and soft power projection, ensuring both preservation and global visibility.

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