

Gods and Cults: Folk Traditions and Cultural Memory in The Shimla Hills

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Abstract

This paper intends to highlight oral narratives, folk traditions, and performances as an alternative source for the writing of history, for those regions which are inhabited by numerous ethnic and tribal communities and where historical sources are in dearth, and whatever sources are there, are in the form of folklore and folk memory. The history and culture of such communities or groups are rooted in oral traditions and can only be traced through oral evidences, which introduce an entirely new dimension to the study of such areas. This paper is an attempt to correlate different oral sources among themselves and corroborating these with the existing literary documents, with the intention to analyze the cultural influences in this region. In this work main emphasis would be on folk traditions, beliefs, legends, ballads and performances and their practices, how they have emerged, what they signify and what historicity they possess.

Keywords: Folk beliefs, Traditions, Supernatural.

Introduction

Shimla hills have plenty of oral narratives, folk believes, traditions, and performances related to the legends associated with deities, heroes and cults. This folk memory plays an important role in the life of the masses, as it is the part of their history and culture in the form of oral evidences and practices. The region has several great deities drawn from Vedic and Puranic traditions, as well as figures like sages and gods having powers to cure ailments, heroes and primitive spirits etc. These gods and heroes, and the folklore associated with them are the guardians of the traditional value system which governs the life of the people in this area. This unique amalgamation of good and evil spirits as gods has tremendous effect on the social and religious culture of the people residing in the region. Most of the gods have their family members as deities of various villages, which have given birth to strong connections within the region in terms of social and political relationships.

While these project a sense of monolithic culture, it is also possible to read the sources and complexity of the cultural formation through an analysis of the conflicts and contestations within the tradition variation.

Geography and History

Shimla hills is a wholly mountainous region in the lap of Western Himalayas. The altitude ranges from 350 meters to 6975 meters above mean sea level. The altitude increases from west to east and from south to north. Geographically it can be divided into three distinct regions, the Shivalik or outer Himalayas, middle Himalayas or inner Himalayas, and greater Himalayas or the alpine zone. Shimla hills is situated in the heart of the Western Himalayas is specifically known with the term *Dev Bhoomi* ('The Land of Gods')(Sharma,2007, p. 11.) and its divinity has also been elaborated in *Skand Purana*. It is a region which is geographically cut across with mountain ranges, rivers, and valleys, dividing the inhabitation into distinct cultural regions which has given birth to several interesting socio-cultural practices, in which the institution of the village God is most remarkable. These institutions have history behind them rooted in the mist of the past remembered in the form of oral narratives;

Its history goes back to the dawn of human civilization. The early history is an account of migration of the people of different races from Indian plains and Central Asia. Its history is perhaps the most unique and remarkable one as compared with that of any other region of the Himalaya. The history of Shimla hills is the history of *Kols (Proto-Austroloid)* the earliest inhabitants of the area. In the Vedas, they have been called the *Dasas*, the *Dasyus*, the *Nishadas*, etc. Perhaps the *Kolis*, *Halis*, the *Doms* who are the inhabiting tribes in different parts of Himachal are the descendants of that very ancient race. The primitive inhabitants had undeniably bequeathed a very rich religio-cultural tradition and self-sustainable symbiotic socio-economic system, to the people, who followed them in the region, who were, the *Khashas*, a more powerful people, an offshoot of the Aryan race, who later on became the new master of the hills and turned the *Kinnar-Kirat Desha* into *Khash Desh*. They assimilate those tribes and were, in turn, influenced by them, which gave birth to the new social structure.

The *Khashas* organised themselves into the unitary groups which lead to the birth of several small political units, which later on developed into republics, popularly known as *janapadas*. These *janapadas* continued to flourish for a long time till the breakup of Harsha's empire in the mid 7th century A.D. The place of these *janapadas* was taken by Rajputs, who founded several new states in this region. As primitive inhabitants lost their political dominance to the *Khashas*, so was the case with the *Khashas* who later on lost it, to the Rajputs. This repeated suppression and degradation by the

dominating successors led to the formation of the substratum of the multi-racial and multi-cultural *Pahari* (Hill peoples inhabiting the area Western Himalayas specifically Himacal Pradesh.) society which is still visible in the social cultural heritage of the inhabitants in this vast part of the western Himalayas.

Religion in the Himalayas

There is no country in the world in which religion exercise more influence on social and political life than in India. Religion gives the key-note to most of the great changes that have occurred in the history of the people inhabiting this country from the earliest ages to the present day. In discussing the religion in this area, we find a curious blending of pre-Brahmanical, Brahmanical and Buddhist Practices. No doubt the prevailing religion is a form of Hinduism, but to actually ascertain what the actual state of religion is, it is necessary to examine the forms and ceremonies observed in domestic and temple worship and the deities held in honour.

Gerald D. Berreman, in his work says that, “Most *Paharis* are Hindu as evident by their own profession of faith and by application of any realistic definition of that term to observation of the behavior they exhibit and the beliefs they profess relating to the supernatural world (Berreman, p. 80)”. D.N. Majumdar (1944, p. 139) has given similar statement earlier in his discussion of the people of Jaunsar Bawar: “The Khasas are Hindus; their customary rites in temples, the manner and mode of offering sacrifices..... periodical festivals..... all indicate their Hindu origin....”, they are not orthodox Hindus. That is, they are not highly sanskritized or brahmanical in that they do not adhere closely to written prescriptions and proscription of post Vedic Hinduism (Srinivas, 1952, p.30: 1956). Their social life as well as their beliefs and practices connected with their socio-religious life do not identify them with the Hindus of the plains. They re-marry their widows, practice polyandry, recognize divorce as legal, inter-marriage between the various Khasa groups, which is not tabooed and the children born of such marriages do not suffer any social stigma. What D.N. Majumdar had observed in connection with the Khasas of Jaunsar Bawar in Gharwal Himalayas can be applied to this region also: that though they are Hindus and they worship Hindu gods and goddesses, they have “partiality for ancestor spirits, queer and fantastic demons and gods and for the worship of stones, weapons, dyed rags and symbols. The sun, the moon and the constellation are their gods.” (Majumdar, 1944, p.150). A.F.P. Harcourt acknowledging this fact writes: “Throughout Kooloo (inclusive of the upper Beas valley, Wuzeri-Rupi and Seoraj) the faith is Hinduism; but it is not the religion of the orthodoxy..... Beside Hinduism, serpent-worship is also practiced..... The religion of the majority of Kooloo people is a sort of Demon-worship, which may be deemed an offshoot of the Hindu creed”,

(Harcourt, 1979, p. 59). The argument of Srinivas can also be applied in this region too. The people are not orthodox Hindus and their belief systems are the source of their socio-cultural life which depicts its folk-history (Srinivas, 1952, p. 30: 1956). In a work on Pangi valley Meenakshi Chaudhary categorically remarks, “the folks stand at a higher footing than the primitive. Their religion may also be distinguished from *Shastriya* religion.” She further adds, there is a way of life in which “animism, the power of mana, totemism, Pirism and the sophisticated culture of Hindu and other are mixed together” (Chaudhary, 1998, p.128). Along with the Vedic and Pauranic gods and goddess worshipped all throughout the area, Shimla has a rich tradition of worshipping the local deities and village gods in whom they profess unbounded faith. Most of them purport to mythology and history of their area, and signify man-nature dyad.

Folk beliefs

Folk beliefs constitute the traditions, legends, rituals, myths and customs etc. of a group of society. They exist as folk knowledge and are then put into practice as customary behavior. It is through this behavior, they are usually learned. They do not exist solely in the abstract but they actual exist in practice and are often part of complex cultural processes that involve not only belief but also values and other behaviours, which find expression in different genres of folklore. Shimla hills have plenty of folk beliefs and legends associated to it, in which local deities play an important role in shaping the customary practice and behaviour of the masses. This region has several great deities alongside the bramanical gods and goddesses, which includes protective, benevolent, evil or malevolent and ancestral spirits. They are considered to be the guardians of traditional value system, which is governing the life of the people in this area. This blend of good and evil spirits as gods has given a new dimension to the belief and traditions of the supernatural, in this region. The ceremonies associated with them confirm strong roots of collective life-styles and team spirit of the people. These folk beliefs, traditions of the supernatural are the mirror of the cultural life of this area.

The major bulk of population in this part of Western Himalayan region belongs to the Khasha race which was later on brought under the Brahminical fold but still their belief that, “everything in the community is supposed to belong to the clan god and nothing could happen in the community without his indulgence and approval”, is the bedrock of their belief system. The god dispensed edicts through their intermediary known as *gur*, *chela*, or *mali* (an oracle) and this institution of oracle enjoyed a pious and important position in the society. The *gur* is always chosen and appointed by the deity himself, and he is essentially a person from any of the indigenous communities, may be even from the lower castes.

Nature of Folk believes and Traditions

One of the most potent village institutions is of the village god. Interestingly, these gods or goddesses are not defined; they can be a divine spirit, a sage or saint, a *nag* (serpent), some animal or ancient monarch or some spirit. The most important aspect here is that these village gods and the institutions are the center of the cultural life of the masses. Since people are under the admiration of the god and since he has almost dictatorial authority, the attitude of the people towards nature and living and non-living being is governed by the dictates of the god through the *gur* (an oracle). Discussing the power of the village gods B.R. Sharma says that, this institution did not come up as a matter of chance; it has a long tradition that goes back to the hoary past though one cannot ascertain how and when it emerged. There are myriads of stories behind these gods. Sharma further elaborates: the village gods control all the villagers and direct social customs. When this custom of village deities started is not known for certain, but the villagers know only that their activities and destinies are governed by these gods and they cannot afford to disobey them at any cost. Thus it can safely be said that this institution is the major dictator of their activities, hopes and despairs, virtues and vices, natural and created misfortunes in a village society. The village god is the symbol of village culture. (Sharma, 1990, p. 133). The institution of village gods is a major custodian of the activities in the village society. The village gods of Shimla hills are associated with manifestations of Hindu gods and goddesses (Lord Shiva, Durga, Vishnu) which is a clear example of sanskritisation of the belief systems, Nag (serpent worship) and minor gods of local folk cult are also worshiped.

Nag deities are one of the widely worshipped deities or godlings all over this territory. He is worshiped in many forms and has shrines dedicated to him in one or other form. Whether the nag cult refers to some powerful race of early man called Nagas or it denotes snake worship as in other parts of India cannot be ascertained for sure as there are several divergent and conflicting opinions of scholars. The *Nag* deity is not necessarily worshipped in the shape of a serpent. He may assume any form and like other godlings he may appear in dream or exhort the chosen one to establish his seat in the village. According to the local beliefs *Nag* controls rains and if propitiated during drought, he gives abundant rain. The nagas cults and traditions of the Western Himalayan region have been undergoing constant metamorphism under successive religious and ethno-cultural factors. All these factors have now come down to our times in various forms and manifestations. The cult of *Gugga Jaharpir* is the latest among them.

The folk believes and traditions in region can be understood by following the concept of Sanskritization, and the Great and Little tradition (Chetan Singh, 2008, p. 43). Sanskritization was a process that enabled certain

sections of the society to improve their position in the existing social order. The Great and Little Traditions, on the other hand, seemed to represent the entire ideological and religious spectrum within which such improvement in status could take place. One needs to emphasize, however, that even though Brahmanical culture provided the framework for the process of Sanskritization, it was not installed from popular customs. It synthesized and incorporated diverse aspects of folk belief, and in doing so it established a cultural continuity between the Great and Little traditions. Local traditions interacted with an influential Brahmanical one that successfully accommodated many of their principal beliefs and also provided an intelligentsia that mediated between regional diversities; yet it would be difficult to deny that there was also a tendency for the Brahmanical Great tradition to superimpose some of its own thinking upon non-Brahmanical belief systems (Srinivas 1952/1965, p.167).

Patters of worship

The details of worship of various supernatural being in the hilly regions of Himachal vary. There is, however, a basic pattern underlying most worship in the villages. *Gur* (shaman) is the intermediary between the devotee and the villager god. First he conducts a short *puja* (ceremony), and to the beat of a small drum he sings mantras (prayers or incantations) in honour of the god to whom he is devoted. Gradually, as the god takes possession of him, the *gur* becomes impervious to pain. The god when in complete charge speaks and acts in the body of the *gur*. The god then singles out the various devotee one at a time and tells each what troubles he has had and what the cause is, that is what supernatural being has been tormenting him, and what should be done to alleviate the trouble. The treatment recommended by the shaman is almost invariably performance of a *puja* in honor of the offending supernatural being, or exorcism if it is a ghost. Spell-casting (*jaddu*), witchcraft and evil eye are also the part of the belief systems in the hilly terrain.

Nature of beliefs in supernatural powers

On the basis of different beliefs and religious practices prevailing among the people of this region of western Himalaya it can be summed up that they practice polytheism. The divine powers have been identified with a group of powerful forces and deities which control and influence the happenings in the community. Most the villages in this region have a cluster of spirits and super beings and identification of different powers with different deities is made accordingly. All these deities have their own respective departments and areas of influence, effect and control, as well as nature of actions. The people here believe in many gods and goddesses and have diverse methods of worshipping, depending on their traditions which shows an attachment with

polytheism. Different names, different forms and various responsibilities have been attributed to these gods and deities. Different gods and deities have different specific jurisdictions and abodes. Animistic gods, nature and the ancestral spirits are their premise with which they are preoccupied. The nature of beliefs can also be divided in the following: animism, naturalism, totemism, taboo, magic and ancestor worship.

Supernatural

The supernatural is almost as pervasive in the minds of hill people as is the nature. The supernatural beings, who affect human, range from capricious sprites, malevolent ghosts, and ancestral spirits to household, village and regional gods. Belief in the existence of superhuman or supernatural power is almost universal. Experiences of certain day-to-day sudden happening have led hill folks into believing in other than the material visible world, i.e., in the invisible spirit world of supernatural power. They have established a kind of close relationship between themselves and the power by adjusting themselves to it in two ways, first by controlling or overpowering the spirit by enchanting or practicing some techniques and canalizing the power, for good or bad, and secondly, by offering *puja* or worship to propitiate the superhuman power for acquisition of the thing or object desired. (Lowie, 1950, p. 176)

Conclusion

Himachal Pradesh has a large segment of semi-tribal and tribal population and same is the position in Shimla hills. The essential feature of their religious and cultural practices is their belief in spirits, ghosts, ancestor worship, and the institution of village gods. Even those living in the remote areas, though not tribal, have a large number of common beliefs with their tribal brethren. The concept of supernatural cosmic power dominates their customs with a result that their religious and cultural practices are an admixture of Hinduism, Buddhism and belief in supernaturalism. The tribes of Lahul Spiti and Kinnaur in some parts follow a Buddhist way of life but are also motivated by Hindu practices. Peoples in the lower altitudes are influenced by Hindu cosmology and metaphysics as well as the supernatural world of totems and myths and animism. That explains why so many interesting and inscrutable practices exist side by side the mainstream Hindu or Buddhist beliefs.

Although the present day belief system of these hills are heavily burdened with the Brahmanic bias, yet the core content is still intact. The legends, are true, to some extent, with some changes depending upon the individual narrators. Under the Brahmanic onslaught most of the ancient temples might have lost their actual identity and were adopted into the

Brahmanical fold and re-christened after the name of the brahmanical gods, ancient heroes and sages, but in this process of cultural diffusion and assimilation, both the Great and the Little tradition affected each other to a large extent. Neither the indigenous culture was fully destroyed nor was the brahmanical culture able to establish its dominance. And this was only due to the rich folk tradition in the form of cultural memory and practices which kept the core of the old culture intact and alive. The written tradition of the popular culture and the oral tradition of the indigenous culture have enriched each other and due to this they are admixture in this region.

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