

Traditions and Folk Belief of the Supernatural: A Case Study of Western Himalayas in Shimla Hill

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Abstract

This paper intends to highlight the belief in the existence of superhuman or supernatural power in the area of study, which has a rich stock of myths, legends, traditions and the sacred occasion which are explained by some myth or the other, having some mythology behind them. Shimla hills as a part of Western Himalayas has plenty of folk beliefs and legends associated with deities' heroes and cults, and these play an important role in the customary practice and behaviour of the masses. The region has several great deities drawn from historical traditions. 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. These folk beliefs, traditions of the supernatural are the mirror of the cultural life of this area which can be described as animistic.

Keywords: belief, traditions, sacred occasion and places, supernatural

1. Introduction

The religious beliefs, institutions, practices and the spiritual life of the folk is a legendary tradition in Shimla Hills. It's not; merely the reflection of the cultural but it exists in everyday life as a means of creating culture. Here folk beliefs constitute the traditions, legends, rituals, myths and customs of its society. They do not exist solely in the abstract but they actual exist as folk knowledge and are practiced as customary behavior, which is visible in their

rites and rituals performed during the religious festivals and day today life. Folk beliefs as narratives, customs, rituals, and rhymes gives detail that how these genres of folklore share the traditional elements with the religious and the heroic legend, which have given birth to a complex cultural practices followed in this remote corners of Western Himalayas.

The vast mountainous territory of the Indian union spread on both sides of the Greater Himalaya range between the Indus in the

extreme west and Yamuna on the east by usage has been defined as the Western Himalaya region. Toward north and northeast, the spiny ridge and the snowy crest of the Trans Himalayan Karakoram range separates it from the highland of central Asia and Tibet. On the south, the undulating foothills of the Siwalik define its natural boundary with the Indo-Gangetic plains in Punjab and Haryana. Thus, the entire Western Himalayan region is approximately situated between 75 degree to 80 degree due east and 30 degree and 36 degree due north. Shimla Hills as a part of Himachal Pradesh is situated in the heart of the Western Himalayas, which is specifically known with the term 'Dev Bhoomi' ('The Land of Gods').

Its divinity has also been elaborated in ancient Sanskrit literature. The whole of the region is full of mystic vibrations and it has been mythologically painted as the land of divine spirits. It is the tract of the country lying between the rivers Satluj and Yamuna 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 one. These institutions have history behind them rooted in the mist of the past remembered in the form of oral narratives, traditions, religious beliefs and performances; perhaps this is the reason which makes this a richest region in Himachal in terms of cultural diversity. There is scarcely a spot in all of area where one cannot hear elaborate legendary tales which are the core of the cultural heritage of this region.

Historically the primitive inhabitants of the Western Himalayan region, the Austric (Nishad) and the Dravidian (Dasyu) have undeniably bequeathed a very rich religious- cultural tradition and self-sustainable symbiotic socio-economic system to the people, who followed them in the region. Nevertheless, those primitive people were subjected to repeated suppression and degradation by their dominating successors, and under those conditions, they formed the substratum of the multi-racial and multi-cultural Pahari society losing their separate identity. The major bulk of population in the 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

was supposed to belong to the clan god and nothing could happen in the community without his indulgence and approval prevails.

2. Religious Beliefs and Practices

There is no country in the world in which religion exercise more influence on social and political life than in India. Religion gives the keynote to most of the great changes that have occurred in the history of the race inhabiting this country from the earliest ages to the present day. In discussing the religion in this region of Himalayan, we find a curious blending of pre Brahmanical, Brahmanical and Buddhist practices. No doubt the prevailing religion is a form of Hinduism but to 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.

Shimla Hills have plenty of folk beliefs and legends associated to it, in which local deities play an important role in the customary practice and behaviour of the masses. This region has several great deities which includes protective spirits, benevolent spirits, evil or malevolent spirits and ancestral spirits. Beside these the Brahmanical gods and goddesses, sages etc. are also worshiped. This galaxy of gods dwells in water bodies, in valleys and mountains, in stones and rocks, in fields and forests. They live every where and shrines and places are dedicated to them. Others who have no shrines or visible symbols are assigned special locality or habitat. The folklores associated to them which are also infinite, are the guardians of traditional value system, which is governing the life of the people in this area. This unique amalgamation of good and evil spirits as gods has tremendous effect on social and religious sentiments of the people residing in the region. The ceremonies associated with them confirm strong roots of collective lifestyles and team spirit of the people and these beliefs and traditions of the supernatural are the mirror of their cultural life.

The supernatural is almost as pervasive in the minds of hill people as is the nature. They have established a kind of close relationship between themselves and the power by adjusting themselves to it in two ways, first by magic and secondly, by offering puja or worship. Nature of beliefs in supernatural powers in this part can be described as: Animism, Naturalism, Totemism,

Magic, Demonism and Ancestor worship. 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.

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.

3. 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 (the oracle or shaman) is the intermediary between the devotee and the villager god. He conducts a short puja (ceremony), and to the beat of a drum he sings mantras and then meditates in honour of the god to whom he is a devoted. Gradually the god takes possession of him and he goes into trance. The medium while in trance, been possessed by the spirit, turns to be an oracle, or a god himself. Whatever he utters in the state of trance, is believed to be the assertion of god himself. Thus, anything spoken by the oracle, is taken to be the direction of the supernatural spirit possessed by the energy of the deity. His words are listened to by the attending devotees and are obeyed being the prophecy or an order of the benevolent spirit, known as Gram Devta or village god. 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/she has had and what the cause is, that is what super natural being has been tormenting him, and what should be done to alleviate the trouble. The treatment recommended by the Sharman 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 parts of the belief systems in the hilly terrains.

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. 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 awe of the god and since he/she 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. Discussing the power of the village gods B.R. Sharma states 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, 1990:133).

The institution of village gods is not a matter of chance. There has been a history behind each one of the gods and this practice has its roots in the mist of past. Right from the origin or manifestation of a particular god or goddess, the gur (medium) or the interpreter of the Devta, relates the whole story with his supernatural power, miracles and capability of curses inflicted by him, from time to time. The god dispensed edicts through oracle and the institution of oracle enjoyed a pious and important position in the society. The gur has always been chosen and appointed by the deity himself, and he has essentially been a person from any of the indigenous communities, may be even from the lower castes.

According to the 2001 census there are more than 27,000 places of worship in nearly 20,000 villagers throughout Himachal Pradesh and similar is the ratio and proportion in Shimla Hills. Among several interesting social practices

prevalent in the hill society, especially in places of higher altitude, the institution of the village God is most remarkable. The Gods and Goddesses here are not sitting spectators but are expected to behave like common human beings with sentiments and pride. Most of the gods have their family members as deities of various villages which has given birth to strong relationship and understanding of the people in this region. The ceremonies associated with them confirm strong roots of collective lifestyles and team spirit of the people and they have preserved them in their memory and cultural practices.

The people here worship Hindu gods and goddesses, but they are not orthodox Hindus, they have leaning to their own beliefs, institutions and practices, which is also the source of their socio cultural life, visible in their oral narratives and belief system. They are not highly Sanskritized or Brahmanical and do not adhere closely to written prescription and proscription of the post-Vedic Hinduism. To understand the belief system of Shimla Hills we have to follow the concept of Sanskritization and the Great and Little tradition. Local traditions interacted with an influential Brahmanical one and successfully accommodated many of their principal beliefs and superimposed some of its own thinking upon the Brahmanical belief systems.

4. Nature of Folk Beliefs and Traditions

In Shimla Hills legendary tradition are contained in popular beliefs, institutions, practices, oral literature, arts and pastime of the mental and spiritual life of the folk, here folk beliefs are not merely a reflection of an abstract cultural but they exist in everyday life as a means of creating culture. What D.N. Majumdar had observed in connection with the Khasas of Jaunsar Bawar, Gharwal Himalayas, A.F.P. Harcourt in case of Kullu and Gerald D. Berreman regarding Sirkanda (Kumaon) can be applied to this region also. Majumdar has elaborated: The Khasas (Paharis the local inhabitants) 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. (Majumdar, 1944, p. 139).

“Their customary rites in temples, the manner and mode of offering sacrifices... periodical

festivals... all indicate their Hindu origin...”. 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. Their social life as well as their beliefs and practices connected with their religion do not identify them with the Hindus of the plains. They re-marry their widows, practice levirate, sororate and polyandry, recognize divorce as legal, while inter-marriage between the various Khasa groups is not tabooed and the children born of such marriages do not suffer any social stigma. While they worship Hindu gods and goddess, they have a partiality for ancestor’s spirits, queer and fantastic demons and gods and for the worship of stones, weapons, dyed rags and symbols. (Majumdar, 1944, 150), and it is clearly visible in the narratives and the belief system of this region.

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 sociocultural life which depicts its folk-history. They are not highly Sanskritized or Brahmanical, they do not adhere closely to written prescription and proscription of the post-Vedic Hinduism. (Srinivas, 1952, p. 30: 1956 Alan Dundes structural definition of folk beliefs can be related to this area to some extent) While Butler view regarding folk beliefs as, ‘narratives (memorates and legends), customs, rituals, and rhymes’ gives detail that how these genres of folklore share the traditional elements with the religious and the heroic legend, which gives birth to a complex cultural practices followed in the remote corners as Shimla Hills.

‘Folk beliefs are often part of complex cultural processes that involve not only belief but also values and other behaviours and that find expression in different genres of folklore’. To understand the religious belief system we can follow the approach of Chetan Singh, who has rightly argued that, “one of the most useful instruments for understanding myth, legends and folklore of this region should be the concept of Sanskritization, and rather broad but relevant twofold division that is usually made between the Great and Little tradition.”

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 with in 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.

5. Conclusion

Although the present-day cultural pattern of Shimla hills, is heavily burdened with the Brahmanic bias, yet the core content is still intact. Folklore of the legends, are true, to a large extent, with only 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 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, in this region they are in interface to each other, both of them are to be studied side by side to come to accurate conclusions.

What all these legends and narratives depict is a question to be answered, but one thing is crystal clear that all of them are part and parcel of a single belief system, which have nurtured them, some facts and figures disclose some history behind them, but proving it is a tedious task. Folklore and history here are in interface to each

other and to understand them both have to be studied side by side. All these legendary stories are the part of the culture of this region and all folk-believes and other legends are in one way or other related to this narratives and different temples, which is the pivotal point in the overall cultural heritage of this region. This folklore has given birth to the culture of this area and the culture has further enriched the folklore to a large extent.

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