

Literature and Customs of Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

This paper looks at the folk literature and customs of Himachal Pradesh. The ballads were composed chiefly by unlettered men and were meant for popular audiences. Passing down only orally and from generation to generation, they essentially underwent numerous alterations on account of slips of memory, personal taste local adaptations and prejudices, additions, omissions and patches. They existed more or less like the songs of the birds and the music of the running streams. The folk songs of Himachal Pradesh besides being melodious are also rhythmic. These songs trace their origin to a rich folk tradition. Their themes are love, chivalry, village gossip, sacrifices, prayers and seasons. The folk literature of Himachal is also rich in folk tales. Folk proverbs and riddles. Despite all this, no literature, particularly written in the old Pahari. A very useful manuscript related to the history of Kullu and Shangri Rajas has been discovered. It must be of the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. Some writers have referred to some records available with the descendants of the former rulers and in the Bhuri Singh Museum Chamba. In recent times, however, quite substantial work has been done on the Pahari literature and more books are likely to come out In addition some scholars have made useful studies in the Pahari literature. *Studies in Northern Himalayan Dialects* by T. Graham Bailey, *Grammar and Dictionary of Pahari Dialects* by Tika Ram Joshi, *Kangrai Shabad Sangrah of Pahari Dialects* by Tika Ram Joshi, *Kangri Shabad Sangrah* by Punjab Language Department. Birth ceremonies in Himachal are very picturesque with a quite quaint local touch. In Himachal, the husband refrains from killing an animal with his own hands during his wife's pregnancy. A pregnant woman must not go to a place on fire or stream. She is not to see the face of a dead person. At the time of the birth of her baby, she is kept in the lower storey of the house to prevent her from the cold and high wind of the hills. In Himachal Pradesh, the wife is not only a man's better half but is a power incarnate (Shakti). It is especially so on the occasion of a religious celebration, such as a

marriage or a pilgrimage, as on such occasions she occupies the foremost place. Polygamy is ridiculed even in Hillman's saying "Two marriages make the life of a man as wretched as that of the dog". "Without a woman" a proverbial saying says, "everything is in the darkness" and "He who has no wife has no baby in the world".

Key Words: Pahari language, folklore, literature, poetry, tradition, Birth ceremonies, marriage.

The richness of the Pahari language is to be found in its folklore and literature. In the folklore of Himachal Pradesh, the ballads are of special note. These stand out most prominently on account of their harmony and beauty. They reflect the natural and humane surroundings in which they were composed. The history of these ballads, if it could be traced, would supply a missing link in the history of folk poetry of Himachal Pradesh. But such a link cannot be traced since the origin and continuation of the ballads were always vocal in form. The ballads were composed chiefly of unlettered men and were meant for popular audiences. Passing down only orally and from generation to generation, they essentially underwent numerous alterations on account of slips of memory, personal taste local adaptations and prejudices, additions, omissions and patches. They existed more or less like the songs of the birds and the music of the running streams. The charm of these ballads lies in the stories they tell. This is of two kinds-one is mythological and the other historical. The most popular ballads are of Bharatrihari, Guga, Asa Hinduan Hari Hinduan, Sadhratta, Ramayan and Pandmayan.

The folk songs of Himachal Pradesh besides being melodious are also rhythmic. These songs trace their origin to a rich folk tradition. Their themes are love, chivalry, village gossip, sacrifices, prayers and seasons. Most of the songs are solos, duets, and choruses sung in different styles in different areas.

In Chamba, the folk songs are linked with moods that spring up with varying seasons. 'Suhi' is sung in praise of Rani Naina Devi of Chamba who sacrificed herself and was instrumental in bringing water to Chamba town. Another song 'Kunjadi' depicts the flying of swans symbolizing the approaching rainy season, besides scores of love songs are also current.

Most of the Kangra love songs have love as their theme. In Mandi the folk songs called 'Chhinj' and 'Chhaanjoti' enjoy prominence. 'Panj-Pantra' and 'Devku' are important

examples of the Chhinj songs of Mandi. 'Gangi' and 'Mohna' are the popular songs of Bilaspur.

'Laman', 'Jhuri', 'Naati' and 'Har' are very exciting and hilarious songs of Kullu, Shimla Hills and Sirmur. Against the backdrop of high hills, 'Laman' is sung at the highest pitch of one's voice. The 'Jhuris' are couplets with love or social satire as their themes. 'Nat'i and 'Har' have all sorts of themes: like the seasons, chivalry, war and warship.

Besides, numerous marriage songs are sung throughout Himachal Pradesh in different tunes, but the thought remains the same. The prayer songs of Himachal Pradesh like 'Bhartas' and 'Bhets' are frequently picked up and sung by the devout people everywhere.

The folk literature of Himachal is also rich in folk tales, folk proverbs and riddles. Despite all this, no literature, particularly written in the old Pahari, has come to light so far. But, it cannot be said that there has been no literature on Pahari before the formation of Himachal Pradesh, this region formed the territories of several hill states. The rulers of these states had their own courtiers and civil servants. They used to issue orders and make policies about the administration of their principalities. The records of those princely states must contain certain useful writings. Furthermore, every Raja has his own Raj Guru, Raj Purohit, or Raj Kavi. They wrote poems and composed other literary pieces for the entertainment of their patrons. Himachal Lok Sanskriti Sansthan of Mandi have some Takrimanu scripts in their collection. These are mostly tantric treatises of religious works.

A reference is found in the history of Kangra that when Delhi's sultan Firoz Shah Tughlaq visited Kangra in 1361 A.D., he saw in Jwalamukhi temple a fine library of Hindu books numbering 1300 volumes, He ordered one each of the books in philosophy, astrology and divination, to be translated by Fiz-ud-din Khalid Feroz Shahi. During the reign of Raja Dharam Chand Natak in 1562 A.D. Kanhaya Lal Sharma, the court poet of Bilaspur, wrote Shashi Vansh Vinod which was published in 1892 A.D. And Kanhaya Lal Sharma the court poet of Rana Padam Chand of Jubbal, wrote Lalit Kavyam in 1895 A.D.

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rulers and in the Bhuri Singh Museum Chamba. During the heyday of Pahari painting, several manuscripts were written and illustrated for the hill rulers, scholars and temples. These include mostly *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Geeta* and *Durga Saptshati*. Some of them are on astrology and medicine. Sometimes back, an old manuscript of Karyala, a form of folk drama, was found in Mandi.

In recent times, however, quite substantial work has been done on the Pahari literature and more books are likely to come out. In addition, some scholars have made useful studies in the Pahari literature. *Studies in Northern Himalayan Dialects* by T. Graham Bailey, *Grammar and Dictionary of Pahari Dialects* by Tika Ram Joshi, *Kangrai Shabad Sangrah of Pahari Dialects* by Tika Ram Joshi, *Kangri Shabad Sangrah* by Punjab Language Department.

Customs are the truthful picture of the moral consciousness of the community as are an individual's habits and expression of his character. Thus, a custom is a norm of voluntary action which has developed in a national or tribal community. The main features of the customs of Himachal Pradesh are their comparative rigidity and immutability. Cut off and lacking direct connection with the plains, inhabited by a very conservative population, removed from the influence of foreign infiltrations and lacking adequate means of communication this tract is one in which all the conditions favour the retention of ancient usages.

Birth ceremonies in Himachal are very picturesque with a quite quaint local touch. In Himachal, the husband refrains from killing an animal with his own hands during his wife's pregnancy. A pregnant woman must not go to a place on fire or stream. She is not to see the face of a dead person. At the time of the birth of her baby, she is kept in the lower storey of the house to prevent her from the cold and high wind of the hills. There are no professional midwives, but any of the old experienced women of the village may assist at birth. The birth of a son is announced by distributing 'mura' made of sugar lumps and parched grains among friends and relatives on the day of the birth. At the birth of a son, in eastern Himachal Pradesh, the temple musicians, locally called 'Dhakis' or 'Turis', play the music called 'shabad' at the door of the family, a nominal fee for which service is one rupee.

In Himachal Pradesh, the wife is not only a man's better half but is a power incarnate (*Shakti*). It is especially so on the occasion of a religious celebration, such as a marriage or a pilgrimage, as on such occasions she occupies the foremost place.

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The first step in the marriage ceremony is in the betrothal. In Himachal Pradesh, the initiative is usually taken by the boy's male relatives. The father or the elder brother of the marriageable boy normally takes the initial step for settling the marriage. This procedure is opposite to the one prevalent in the plains, where it is the responsibility of the family of the girl to make the initial contact. This difference in approach may have some connection with the financial obligations of either party. In the plains, it is the girl's family that must give a gift (dowry) to the family of the boy but here its reverse is practised. Here the boy's father pays the girl's father to defray the expenses of the marriage. This payment is nominal and is called 'dheri'. Two kinds of betrothals are in practice. The orthodox form which accords with Hindu rituals is called 'barni'. This system is generally observed in the upper classes. The other form called *Sagai* or *Sotha* is adopted by the folks of the middle class and the lower castes. When the prospective bride is found, her father is consulted on behalf of the boy's father a priest or a relative takes a few ornaments and a rupee or two to the girl's parents. This offering is called '*Sotha*'.

The other system of betrothal is called 'bata-sata' or 'atta-satta ka nata' or marriage by inter-familial exchange. In this system marriages are arranged between the marriageable girls and the boys of the two parties by inter-exchange and no money in cash is involved. In a three-family link-up, a father promises his daughter's hand to a boy whose father is put under the condition that the latter would give his daughter's hand to the son of a third man who in turn promises his daughter's hand to the first man's son.

If once a betrothal has been settled, it is hardly possible to cancel it and if one of the parties backs out, it must pay to the other all the expenses incurred in connection with the ceremony. Marriage rules in the hills are not very definite. High-caste people marry within their caste but not within their gotra. They do not marry a girl related to the father's side up to the seventh generation.

Three kinds of marriage ceremonies are practised in Himachal Pradesh. First, 'Biah' or regular marriage in accordance with the shastras. The other forms, called '*Jhajra*' and

'Gaddar' or 'Paraina' designate informal marriages. *Jhajra* is not an orthodox Brahminical marriage.

In a traditional marriage, the father of the groom and a few male relatives visit the bride's home with a nath or balu and a few dresses as gifts for the bride in marriage. The bride's parents keep a feast ready for them. Serving wine and meals is a must. The priest reads a few mantras at an auspicious moment and the women sing some wedding songs. Then the priest bedecks the bride by inserting a nath through the perforation on the left nostril of the bride. After this ceremony, the gur (*jaggery*) is distributed. After spending a night at the bride's house the bride follows her husband wearing a red dress. The bridegroom gives a feast to all his relatives and people of each household of his village.

'Gaddar' form of marriage is similar to that of *Jhajra*. Without the worship of lord Ganesh. This type of marriage is popular among low-caste people. '*Jarar Phuki*' or '*Jhind Phuki*' is another type of marriage popular in Kangra and Chamba. This type of marriage is not arranged by the parents of the bride or bridegroom. The girl wears the nose ring and the boy and the girl set fire to some bush and take eight rounds around the fire. Another type of marriage is *run away* marriage which is popular among the Gaddis in Chamba. Hill woman is sociable and independent and carries the reputation of a family and social dignity. These qualities have given her the status of a better half in reality and she commands a place of honour and dignity in the hill society.

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