

Revisiting the Timeless Folklore of Chamba

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Abstract

Folklore reflects human experiences by and large through folk songs and dances, art and architecture, legends, paintings, poetry, riddles and children's songs etc. The permanence of the Folklore of any country, community or tribe can be analyzed in its universal themes of love, hate, revenge, morality, ethics, sacrifice and honesty with respect to conditioning of time and space. Folklore of District Chamba, Himachal Pradesh, is a phenomenal amalgamation of the vernaculars: Pangwali, Gaddi, Dogri, Pahari and Churahi that weave human experiences to form a phenomenally different fabric of culture and history in the country.

The paper discusses the intensity of passionate love, cult of human sacrifice, gender, environmental concerns and other social and cultural dimensions in the selected legends and folk songs of Chamba accentuating its timelessness. The famous legends and perennial folksongs and ballads, particularly Kunju Chanchlo, Sunni Bhunku, Queen Sunaina, and Fulmo Ranjho would be the centre of deliberation. The paper on the one hand brings out the permanence and universality of Chambiali folklore in shaping and protecting the history and cultural identity of the natives and the need of its exploration and maintenance in globalised world on the other.

Chamba is hemmed in by Jammu and Kashmir, including Ladakh, on the North West, by district Kangra of Himachal Pradesh on the southeast, and by Gurdaspur district of Punjab on the south. Because of its altitude, ranging from 2,000 to 21,000 feet above sea level and physical inaccessibility with difficult terrain, the territory remained largely insulated from the socio-political life of the country. Consequently, fewer studies were carried on the region that was nurtured by the Ravi and its tributaries and ruled by many monarchs and feudal since centuries. Not much was known about the land and the people except what was written in the diaries of some British explorers or in the reports of some enterprising divisional commissioners of the then British Raj. It was the western gaze that made a way of carrying out the studies to explore its past in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The region has a pre-Aryan history of settlement. It is believed that Kolis, Halis, Dums, and Chanals inhabited the western Himalayas, who later were dominated by either some branches of

Aryans or people from the Gangetic plains who entered the hills during the mediaeval period. The monarchical history of the Chamba state possesses a remarkable series of inscriptions, mostly in copper plates, from which its chronicles have been completed and authenticated. Founded probably in the sixth century by Marut, a Suryabansi Rajput, who built Brahm-pura, the modern Bharmour town, Chamba was extended by Meru Verma in 680 and the town of Chamba built by Sahil Verma about 920. As mentioned in Imperial Gazetteer of India, "The state maintains its independence, acknowledging at times a nominal submission to Kashmir until the Mughals conquest of India. Under the Mughals it became tributary to the empire, but its internal administration was not interfered with...The state first came under British influence in 1846" (130).

The social, political and cultural history of Chamba is found in the insight of stories, legends, songs and drama or customs which reflect conditions of life in that particular time in which they were formulated. The historical treasure of the folklore of Chamba state came into lime light when it captured the gaze of western historian: archeologist and scholar of Sanskrit, Dr. Sir Jean Phillip Vogel, a Dutchman who later became Indian, when his book *The Antiquities of Chamba State Parts I and II* was published in 1911. The historical Bhuri Singh Museum of district Chamba was founded by Sir Phillip and Raja Bhuri Singh in 1908. When the first seminar titled, *History and Culture of Chamba State* was organized by Himachal Pradesh government in Bhuri Singh Museum on 26th September, 1983, the key note speaker Karl J. Khandalavala, a famous historian, had a wonderful reason to explain the history of Chamba through its folklore. He states, "The history of Chamba state abounds in legends and there are two sorrowful tales with this town" (10). The first tale belongs to the Sahil Varman's daughter Champavati who was taken away by divine spirit for ever as retribution because the king suspects the chastity of a pure minded maiden. But the paper details the second tale that belongs to the historical figure and the legendary heroine of Chamba state queen Sunaina.

The legend of queen Sunaina narrates the story of the shifting of the old capital of the state to the newly founded one i.e. from Bharmour to Chamba in the tenth century. The new capital, it is said to have dearth of water and the King, Sahil Verman, decreed to construct a water channel from a nearby stream. But the water refused to enter the newly built channel. The channel appeared in the dream of the king in form of a spirit prophesying that it needs human sacrifice from the royal family if the king wanted water in the capital. The story is deeply embedded in the folk songs of

the district. In fact, in the traditional folk song of Chamba, called Dholaru, which is usually sung in the month of March on the beginning of New Year, according to Indian calendar, by the local folk singers, the sacrifice of the queen is commemorated by and large by them moving house to house:

Kuhal supne ayi ho ranya jo

Kuhal supne ayi na!

Kuhal ke glandi oh bhayio

Badiyan baliyan mai leni na!

Kuhal appeared in the dream of king

Kuhal appeared in his dream!

Oh brothers! What the kuhal utters is

Human sacrifice!

The legend further describes that when the king woke up he immediately consulted the dream with Brahmins. The Brahmins uttered that there is no other alternate than to appease the divine power with a member from the royal family. After deep contemplation the daughter-in-law of the king was selected for the sacrifice. It is said that she was at her parents' home during the incident. The king immediately wrote a letter to his daughter-in-law, in form of a royal decree, expecting her immediate arrival at the royal palace. She reads the letter in the light of the stars and gets ready to go to her in-laws. When her parents appealed her to stay on, she replies:

Sasu da likhya hunda ta modi mai dindi

Soure da likhya mai kiyan modan!

I would ignore the call of mother-in-law

But how could I ignore the call of father-in-law?

When the queen reached the royal palace she was taken away with maidens to where the water course joined the main stream. A grave was dug for her and she was entombed alive. No sooner the grave was filled with earth then the water started flowing through the channel. After that this water, for the inhabitants of Chamba, never ceased to flow. The sacrifice of the queen is commemorated each year in form of 'Sui Fair'. The legend unravels the historical positioning of

women of the royal palace where feministic stance of the folklore cannot be side lined. The folk song subtly unearths the patriarchal structuring of woman where a king was considered next to God, but for as far as the concept of appeasing the spirit for public welfare it was woman whose life was supposed to be put on the stake. The king neither sacrificed himself nor his wife and son but the daughter-in-law who genetically didn't belong to his family. The folklore in form of the legend of queen Sunaina on the one hand exposes the experiences of individuals, particularly of women, and the dark phase of human sacrifice on the other. "Such sacrifices", says historian Khandalavala, were not unknown in those for off days when the divine powers were believed to speak through the mouths of priesthood leading in extreme cases even to sacrifice of human life"(10).

Besides the legend of queen Sunaina of tenth century B.C. the paper discusses how the kings of the Chamba state has been portrayed in the folklore emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries. These songs are Raja Tere Gorkhiyan ne Lutya Pahad , and Chhimbi Paniyan jo Challi. The first song is a kind of complaint against the Gorkha army of the king:

Raja tere Gorakheyan ne lutya pahad
Raja tere Gorakheyan ne lutya pahad
Lutya pahad te gori de mathe da shingar
Tisa lutya Berra lutya Bhandal Kihar
Sohani Sohani gadna lutiyan
Chanju de Churana lutiyan
Luti Pangi Dhar
Raja tere Gorakheyan ne lutya pahad

Raja, your Gorkhas have looted the hills
Raja, your Gorkhas have looted the hills
Hills are looted along with the charm of a blonds 'forehead
Tissa, Berra, Bhandal and Kihar have been looted
Beautiful Gaddhans (girls of Gaddi community) are looted
Churhens (girls of Churah region) are looted
And Pangi valley is also looted.

The folk song subtly exposes the corruption and sexual harassment of native women by the Gorkha army of Chamba state. Historically, it is fact that many Gorkhas had been employed in the royal army to protect state from external invasions. However, in the mainstream history Gorkhas have been entitled as fearless and robust warriors but the folklore portrays them otherwise.

The folk song Chhimbi Paniyen jo gayi is based on the legendary story of a lower caste maiden Chhimbi. The king fell in love with Chhimbi during one of his hunting tours and brought her to the royal palace where she was killed by other queens for her lower caste status.

Dalpat dalpat ho chhimbi paani jo gayi

Terede so Chhimbi Paani Jo gayi

Through pedestrian Chhimbi went to fetch water

O really Chhimbi went to fetch water

The song narrates the dialogues exchanged between Chhimbi and the king. In the entire song the king praises the each part of her body and she in the entire episode urges that she belongs to the unacceptable Chhimbi caste.

Raja: Paira sohane issa Chhimbi de ho

Jian sunne di khadwan

(Chhimbi has beautiful feet

Like golden foot wares)

Chhimbi: Paira heri mat bhule raja

Mai ta jatti ri Chhimbi

(O king please don't praise my feet

I belong to lower caste Chhimbi)...

Chhimbi jo babru khawaye bhaiyo

Chhimbi maari mukayi ho

(O brothers! Chhimbi was given poisonous babru

And she was killed).

The folk song of Chhimbi expresses the khawayis, amorous nature, of the kings. The Khawaas is a typical chambiyaali word which is used for a woman who was considered as an object to be consumed by the king. There are myriad of anecdotes portraying how the king along with his Wajirs (ministers) used to visit Tissa, Churah, Bairagarh, and Bhandal regions for hunting trips. These royal trips have been written in the history of Chamba as the saga of the adventures of

Maharaja. But the folklore records these trips with entirely separate perspectives. In these regions of king's choice the small royal colonies were constructed and on the royal decree and the beautiful maidens of nearby villages were brought before the kings and other ministers to be selected as Khwaas for them. In this way, the word Khwaas came into the domain of society for those selected maidens who were supposed to spend nights with the king and his courtiers. The folk song Chhimbi Paaniyan Ki Geyi is based on the concept of Khawaas. But the song portrays the terrible story of a maiden who unfortunately belongs to the lower caste called Chhimbi.

The folklore of Chamba is rich and extensive with variegated songs and dances where distinctive life style of people is reflected by and large. It presents the kaleidoscope of mesmerizing love songs, hymns dedicated to god Shiva, Gaddhi, Churahi, and Pangwali Natti and distinctive music which fascinates the visitors and tourists to dance and sing. A large variety of musical instruments is used in the countryside. Their charismatically rich music has a phenomenal individuality, tradition, and exotic flavor that attract attention of scholars and tourists. The devotion for God Shiva is deeply rooted in the culture of the district. These hymns are sung during Manimehesh Yatra (Pilgrimage to Manimahesh Lake). The lines from the main hymn "Shiv kailason ke vaasi dhoul dharon ke raja..." invigorates new energy among the devotees while they climb the hills to reach the lake:

Shiv Kailashon ke baasi dhaoli dharon ke Raja
Shankar shankat harna
Mere sami Shankar shankat harna!

Dweller of Kailash and King of Dhauri Range
Shankar, wear the troubles away
My Lord Shankar, wear the troubles away!

Love songs, elegies, melancholy, passion and sacrifices in love are the fundamental features of the folk songs of the region. Folksongs of Chamba are the living sources to understand the mind and heart of the people. There are songs full of the narratives of the individual's longings for their lovers and beloved and of their separation many a times due to dissimilar caste and class. These songs unravels the socio-cultural perspectives of the existing system where marriages and love makings outside the socially permitted domains were not acceptable. Many folk songs have been

evolved out of the unsuccessful love stories where social and cultural taboos of the society appear as one of the chief reasons. Two famous folk songs of the regions Kunju-Chanchlo, and Fulmu-Ranjhu have been evolved out of the complexity of the relations between the individual and society. These love stories generally deals with the passionate love of two pairs whose love is impeded by the social norms of the time. In both the legendary stories Kunju and Ranjhu were the sons of upper castes prosperous landowners. But the heroines of these stories belonged to very poor background so as per the social norms these girls were not suitable matches for Kunju and Ranjhu.

The story of Kunju and Chanchlo reveals the selfless nature of love. With her poor family background Chanchlo is a dark complexioned girl and the entire social system was against the lovers. It is said that in order to prevent the couple's regular meeting Kunju's mother sent him to his maternal uncle's home from where he joined the army. When he came back Chanchlo was forcibly married to someone else by her parents to avoid the social criticism. When Kunju knew this he became heartbroken and left home for ever. Their legendary love story is embedded in the cultural history of the region and the folk song is sung in the entire state of Himachal and equally famous in some parts of Punjab and Haryana. It is a narrative song where broken heart lovers exchange dialogs:

Chanchlo: Kapde dhoan chham chham roan Kunjua
Witch button nishani ho haye meriye jinde
Witch button nishani ho

Kunju: Buttona ra gam na tu kare Chanchlo
Chambe Chandi bahutera ho
O meriye jinde Chambe chandi bahuteta ho

Chanchlo: Washing clothes, I burst into tears Kunju
Here a button is found as symbol of love
O my love! a button is found as a symbol of love.

Kunju: Don't care about button there is a lot silver in Chamba
O my love! There is a lot of silver in Chamba

Chanchlo: Rati o brati mat inda Kunjua

Verry bhariyan bandukan ho
Verryan dag gam na tu kare Chanchlo
Kunju kallah butera ho

Kunju: Don't visit me at night Kunju
The enemies have loaded their guns
Don't care of the enemies
Kunju alone is enough for them

The song itself delineates that how people were against their love affair because it was against norms of the existing norms of the society.

The folk song of Fulmu Ranjhu narrates the similar tragic love story of the Fulmu and Ranjhu. Fulmu and Ranjhu belonged to the same village. Their hidden meetings and love affair could not be digested by the society and Ranjhu's prosperous upper class father forcibly arranged the marriage of his son with the girl of his equal status. But the heartbroken Fulmo died, of the grief of separation, on the same day of the marriage of Ranjhu. When the procession of marriage is on its way, Ranjhu saw that a group of people going to cremate a dead body. Being informed about Fulmo's death, he immediately stopped the procession and went to the spot of cremation and wept a lot on not taking the stand against the social norms. The song is a beautifully woven where the painful condition of a maiden has been portrayed:

Baaduye ssubaduye tu kajo jhankadi
Jhak kajo mardi
Do hath butane de layan Fulmo
Gallan hoyi bitiyani

Why are you watching towards fields and farms?
Don't be puzzled
Just offer him two fists of Butna,
Things are over now.

The lines indicate the perplexity and emotional situation of a girl whose lover is being made ready to marry other girl. Similarly, the position of people is visible how they are spreading salt on

wounds, saying that she should go to offer her lover Butana a substance which is rubbed on the face and body of one who is going to be ready for getting married.

Kuni ta prohote tera viya padeya

Kuni ta kiti kudmai Ranjho

Gala kiyan bitiyan

Which priest decided your marriage?

Ranjhu, who has decided your marriage?

Who made it finalized?

How things are over?

The questions posed by Fulmo are in fact is the voice of those who were considered to be silent against the set rules of society. She protests against the society and chooses death, making a new path for the coming generation. In this sense, the essence of folklore could be understood as Dr. Kishore Jadav opines, "...folklore arises from the people, the folk, is the expression of protests and outrage against the exploiting nobles and landowners"(28-29).

The folklore of Chamba involves nature in human activities that not only conjuncts the public with nature but also offers a step towards sustainable development keeping ecological balance ahead. The folklore of Chamba in this way ensures the concept of sustainable development involving all the components from human beings and animals to vegetation and other non-living things by and large. Vulnerable issues of present worlds like the involvement of nature in human affairs, environment conservation and animal protection are sensibly visible in folk songs of Chamba viz. Gudke chamke ho bhaua megha, Sur-Surangani nawan dam baneya, and Mere Chakru jo tole mat landa ho respectively.

Gudke chamke ho bhaua megha ho

Ho bare Chambiyala re dessa ho

Kiyan chamka kiyan gudkan ho!

Ho Ambar bharora ghane tare ho.

Chhoti Surangani te bara dam banya

Kahuri Kuhari ra maidan banya.

With lightening and thundering

O! Brother cloud
Shower on the land of Chambiyals!
How can I shower and lighten
Oh! the sky is clear and full of stars!

The lines depict the direct conversation with cloud appealing it to shower on the land of Chamba. Here cloud expresses his inaccessibility of raining due to the unconditional environment of showering, stating that it cannot perform its duty with a starry sky.

Chhoti-Surangani badda dam baneya is a folk song of Salooni region where a dam was constructed in the 1970s on the rivers Baira –Siul, tributaries of Ravi. The song portrays the tension of natives regarding the imbalance of the environment when large numbers of Kahu (a native tree) forests were cut down during the construction of Surangani dam. The first two lines of the song remind the people about the environmental disturbance caused during the construction of the dam:

Chhoti-Surangani badda dam baneya
Kahuweri kuhadi ra maidan baniyan

Surangani is smaller and the dam is bigger
Forest of Kahu is converted into plain

Mere Chakru jo tole mat landa is a song on the partition of India. It reflects the situation of the people of hill who emerged during the partition. The narrative of the song is a sort of warning to those people who were breaking the centuries-old fraternity of Hindu and Muslim by killing Muslims, particularly Gujjars in the hills. In the song, it is clear indication to the fanatic people that don't disturb the Chakru, a regional bird, the symbolizing the peaceful ecology of hills.

Mere Chakru jo tole mat landa ho
Mi ta paali na katore tere so

Don't throw stones on my birds
We have nurtured them carefully

Apart from folk songs the living folklore in terms of painting has long and rich history in the region with variegated lifestyles of royal families, god and goddesses, natural panorama and

picaresque tales is another domain that needs to be focused. The sources say that the hill painting is the amalgamation of Rajput, Mughal, and Persian paintings by and large. M. S. Randhawa, one of the scholars of Pahari paintings, opines in his article "A Review of Studies in Pahari Paintings" that: "under the Patronage of Akbar there was a true cultural cross-fertilization between the Persian technique and Indian tradition, and a style of painting known as Mughal, which is truly Indian in spirit evolved. Mughal painting influenced Rajput painting, which developed under the patronage of the Rajput princes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From the middle of the seventeenth century to the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the Punjab Hill States nurtured the art of painting, marked by a lyrical style full of rhythm, grace and beauty"(35). Many scholars have meticulously studied the content and approach of Pahari paintings along with trends and periods of its progression. Presently Vijay Sharma, honored by the Government of India in 2012, with civilian award of Padma Shri, and director of Bhuri Singh museum has immensely contributed to the genre casting light on the historical evolution of Pahari paintings. His immense contribution to the genre establishes new attractions and scopes for the timeless folklore of the region. The unique folk art and crafts is the pillar of the culture heritage of the district that exposes the creativity level of a community or nation. The pictorial handicraft of Chamba rumal is a masterpiece with its charismatic embroidery that differentiates it from the different types of embroideries in India and abroad. Vijay Sharma in "Chamba Rumal: An Embroidered Vision" states "Chamba Kasidkari or the craft of 'do-rukha' embroidery popularly known as 'Chamba rumal' originated and developed in Chamba, an erstwhile princely hill state in the northwestern Himalayas."(81). Presently, the folk arts and crafts of Chamba are not the only a source of employment for the natives but also are the centre of attraction for worldwide tourists. The recipient of National Award Smt. Lalita Vakil and Kamla Nayar are the famous embroider who have contributed a lot to continue the legacy of embroidery in the district.

Folklore of Chamba represents the manifold layers of the journey of human experiences from monarchy and feudalism to democracy through folk songs, legends, dances, painting, riddles, art and architecture. It serves the historical record of the individuals as well as the collective action of the common people under the established instructions of caste, class and gender, declaring them real heroes and heroines of the community. The people of Chamba have nurtured a fascinating culture. It gives reverence for all life bringing us closer to the elemental forces that sustain life on the earth. The study of the folklore of Chamba has environmental, gender, and psychological concerns, and much needs to be done in this area through research. It has an essential function in changing society as it instills sensitivity, honesty and human values among the mass. In the present

world social anthropology, literary criticism, popular culture, and eco-criticism offer many analytical tools to analyze the oral narratives that could be applied to analyze and document the making of the folklore of Chamba, and to understand the historical and political process of social change in the hill community.

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