

Understanding the Socio-cultural Experiences of Pahari Folk: The Jagar Gathas of Kumaon and Garhwal

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Abstract: Most generalisations about North Indian society and culture are in reality generalisations about the Indo-Gangetic plains. The Central Himalayan region comprising Kumaon and Garhwal (now known as Uttarakhand) has largely been neglected or ignored due to lack of information or indifference on the part of scholars towards this region. From early times, geographical factors have played a key role in shaping the history and culture of this region. Another factor which contributed towards the culture of Uttarakhand is the waves of migration to this region from the Gangetic plains, Punjab and Rajasthan particularly in the medieval period. The impact of these migrations can be seen in the religious and socio-cultural practices of the people of Kumaon and Garhwal. This is particularly evident in the rich folklore of Uttarakhand, which throws a vivid light on the social and cultural conditions of this region.

Introduction

The central Himalayan region comprising Kumaon and Garhwal has largely been neglected or ignored either due to lack of information or indifference on the part of the academic fraternity towards this region. No doubt, this region is more popular as the abode of saints and divinities, as the source of India's holy rivers, as the destination of pilgrims and tourists who wish to visit the shrines of Badrinath and Kedarnath, and above all the home to many exotic plants and herbs of medicinal value. But a closer look into the history and culture of Kumaon and Garhwal, or what is known today as Uttarakhand only reveal the distinctiveness of this region. While studying the culture of Uttarakhand, one often tends to draw comparisons

Indian Folklore Research Journal, Vol.3, No.6, 2006: 93–102
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VOLUME 3 NUMBER 6 DECEMBER 2006

with that of the plains because the culture of both the regions, that is of the hills and the plains are closely associated. However, it is important to remember that the plains should not become the yardstick by which the culture of Uttaranchal can be measured.

No doubt there has been considerable influence from the plains but this does not mean that the culture of Uttaranchal is merely an assimilation of other cultures. One is struck not only by the traits which bear similarity to those found in the plains and other areas, or those that have been borrowed from them or derived from a common origin but one is also fascinated by the distinctive traits of the pahari culture which range from topography, agricultural techniques, customs and traditions folklore and religious beliefs and practices.

Socio-Cultural Conditions: The Ecological and Migration Factor

Two factors have played important roles in shaping the history and culture of Uttaranchal. Geographical factors coupled with migration of people to this region, particularly in the medieval period, have largely influenced the socio-cultural conditions in Uttaranchal. While the northern part, which is higher in altitude and elevation, is extremely cold and covered with snow most of the year, the southern part of the region is very hot during the summer. Lying between these two zones of extreme climatic variations are the numerous terraces and valleys, which have the potential for rich agricultural production. It is these terraces and valleys, which attracted the early settlers and, in course of time, the larger settlements became the center of politico-cultural activities¹. Such a mountainous region consisting of terraces and valleys along with a network of perennial rivers and rivulets lends itself to the development of small distinct communities, each of these having the potential to support distinct social groups and even exhibiting local variations². Moreover, the nature of the terrain also contributed towards different social groups exhibiting cultural variations because of mutual isolation between different localities, which are relatively inaccessible to one another³. Extreme cases of this ecological factors can be seen affecting the lives of the various tribal groups of this region such as Tharus, Rajis, Saukas, Bhotias and Bhoxas⁴.

Other than geographical factors literary and archaeological sources coupled with local traditions prove that the society and culture in Uttaranchal further developed as a result of the waves of migrations and movements of people particularly during the medieval period. Since long, this region has attracted people from different parts of the country both as an ideal place of pilgrimage as well as refuge. It is quite natural that these factors contributed considerably to the development of caste/status structure in this region. This is a region which is home to more than one thousand jatis or sub-castes yet there is fluidity in the caste structure. Caste is not merely viewed

in terms of ritual criteria but as a system, which owes much of its character to the distribution of power. Kumaon and Garhwal is perhaps the only example in the country of a local system in which caste groups have emerged on the basis of politico-legal distinctions⁵. Interplay of the 'great tradition' and little tradition is very pronounced among all sections of society⁶. He who claimed to be a migrant from the plains was considered superior and hence many claimed descent from some migrant or other. This is amply clear from the traditional jati lists of Kumaon and Garhwal⁷.

By the 16th century A.D., these migrations contributed to the crystallisation of a three tiered stratification of society and a three tiered caste/status structure was firmly established: 1] The Asal or Thul Jath consisted of the Pachbiri and Chauthani brahmans, and the Thakur or Kshetri caste who exercised political and economic domination over the Khasis and Doms. This category primarily consisted of immigrants. 2] The Khasis consisted of the Pitali, Hali or Khasi brahmans who were the ritual servants of the Pachbiris, and the Khasi Jimdars who were mainly agriculturists and consisted of those who were not Thul jat and tribals such as Rajjis, Tharus and Bhotias. The khasis seemed to have accepted the status structure after coming into contact with the brahmans who migrated from the plain⁸. 3] The Doms who were the lower castes constituted the artisan class and are referred to as shilpakars. They consisted of blacksmiths, carpenters and musicians. Some fifteen to thirty castes belonging to the Doms category are found in various parts of Kumaon⁹. While some of them may be wholly or partly derived from equivalent castes of the plains, that have migrated to the hills, others are old indigenous groups derived from internal differentiation of the Doms.

A peculiar feature of the caste structure is that the Doms are not really treated with contempt, they were accorded many rights and privileges and interaction between them and the higher castes are reflected in many of the rituals and customs of the paharis. Other than the Khasas and the Doms there were tribes such as the Bhotias, Rajjis, Jaunsaris, Tharus and Koltas. who mainly resided in the Hill Zone (comprising Kumaon and Garhwal divisions including Pithoragarh, Chamoli and Uttarkashi) and Terai Bhabhar Zone. Many of these tribes claimed descent from the Rajputs. For example, some Bhoxas claim descent from the legendry Jagatedeo of Dharaganagar and Rajput nobles of Jaipur and Jodhpur while Bhoxas of Dehradun claim trace their origin to the Khushbani Rajputs. The rank of the Khasis were generally filled by marrying girls from these tribal groups while many khasi women were also married into the Thul Jat.

The impact of these migrations is also evident in the socio-cultural practices followed by the paharis. For example, the languages spoken in this region is not entirely distinct from the rest of north India but are divergent forms grounded in a common heritage¹⁰. In fact, one can find traces of

influence of the Rajasthani language with that of the pahari language. According to Grierson, the relationship between the pahari (central pahari language) and the Rajasthani language is attributable to the movement of the Gurjaras between these two areas¹¹. The Gurjaras mainly followed pastoral activities and identified with the Khasis. They migrated to this region in the 9th century A.D. and pursued pastoral activities and merged with the local khasi population. From the 13th century A.D. onwards, these were large-scale migrations from Gujarat owing to political turmoil. Some of the masons probably sought refuge in the Chand Kingdom¹². Gurjaras of the lower Himalayas who speak Rajasthani are in large measure of the same stock as many Rajput clans in Rajasthan, Punjab and United Provinces.... this probably explains the close connection between the pahari language and Rajasthani¹³.

The impact of these migrations, contacts, and assimilations is also reflected in the religious beliefs and practices, art architecture and folk legends of this region. For example, one can see a similarity between the pahari version of Chandravali ki gatha and that of the Malawi and Bundeli version of the same gatha. The observance of puranic festivals such as Holi, and Deepawali may be attributed to the influence of the immigrants from the plains. This influence was particularly pre-dominant in the immigrant areas as is evident amongst the Bhotias of mana in chamoli due to the proximity of Badrinath.

Ecological factors coupled with the migration of people from different parts of India including southern India, the Gangetic plains, Punjab and Rajasthan to Uttaranchal have contributed towards the composition of culture in this region. Despite common origins, contacts, assimilations and influences the socio-cultural practices of Kumaon and Garhwal exhibit many traits, which distinguish them from that of the plains. The paharis have had a more frequent and intensive contact with one another than with that of the plain due to topographical barriers, and have been subjected to different contacts and environments at different points of time. As a result the pahari culture exhibits a certain distinctiveness and this is reflected in its fluid caste structure, prevalence of polyandry, religious beliefs and practices, custom of bride price, oral traditions such as folk songs, legends, and proverbs. In fact the geographical conditions of Kumaon and Garhwal are not exactly similar to each other. While Kumaon had larger tracts of fertile valleys, Garhwal is characterised by rugged mountainous tracks. The impact of these variations are also reflected in some of their socio-cultural practices such as belief in deities, customs and traditions, festivals, folk songs and legends etc. Despite variations, both Kumaon and Garhwal are not distinct socio-cultural units because one can also see the underlying unity between them in terms of their beliefs and practices, folk legends, and relationship with nature.

Jagar Gathas: Interplay of the Great Tradition and Little Tradition

The medieval period in Uttaranchal witnessed important developments which are reflected in the socio-cultural experiences of the people, particularly in its folklore. Factors such as migrations, crystallisation of three tiered stratification of society, consolidation of power by the Chand Dynasty in Kumaon and the Pamvaras in Garhwal, impact of bhakti movement, impact of the Mughal and Gorkha invasions and influence of tantrism are all reflected in the huge genre of folk literature. This vast corpus of folk literature which can be termed as oral tradition has been documented by scholars such as Govind Chatak¹⁴, N.D., Paliwal¹⁵, E.S. Oakley¹⁶, P.D. Gairola¹⁷, Trilochan Pande¹⁸, and G.D. Upreti¹⁹. The efforts of these scholars have enabled us to understand the experiences of the pahari folk in various aspects of life through their folk songs, ballads, proverbs and legends. The word of mouth was a very powerful medium in the medieval period and it was empowered to transmit many of the folk traditions from generation to generation²⁰. While some of the folklore reflects influences from the plains, others are mainly of local origin referring to the peculiar features of mountain life, social environment, and embodying local beliefs and customs.

Popular worship in Kumaon and Garhwal extended both to the brahmanical deities and local deities. Though contact with the plains had a marked influence on the religious beliefs of the paharis, still the belief in demons and spirits, village and household deities seemed to have had a firm hold on the people. This is probably because the paharis shared a more spontaneous relationship with local deities who emerged from the local environment mostly as spirits of mortals who were later deified. These beliefs and sentiments are particularly reflected in the jagar gathas which form an important aspect of the folklore of Kumaon and Garhwal. The reverence towards brahmanical deities such as Krishna and Siva, the influence of bhakti saints such as Gorakhnath and Nathpanthis and belief in local deities make the study of these gathas quite fascinating.

Gathas are essentially religious legends which are either narrated or sung during a ceremony called the jagar. Jagar is a spirit possession ceremony in which a designated deity or a group of deities is induced by ritual drumming and singing of traditional devata legends to possess a pre-arranged oracle/medium²¹. A jagar is commonly arranged to cure disease or illness, particularly when the illness is believed to have been caused by ghostly possession. In this ceremony the most important role is played by the Jagariya who is regarded as the priest of the ceremony²². He is the one who narrates the legend and leads the ceremony. The success of a jagariya depends on the quality of his skills and the number of gathas that he can narrate. The underlying theme in these gatha is the description of the accounts and deeds of the deity to be invoked. There are no specific caste roles in the jagar ceremony. The jagariya could be a khasa or a dom while the syonkar or

sponsor could also be a khasa or dom. Sometimes, a Brahmin priest is included to recite hymns in Sanskrit. Both the Bith and the dom take an active part in the jagar ceremony and dance together. During possession, the dangariaya is pierced with a hot iron ladle which cannot injure him. This fire test is symbolic of extreme hardship for the devotee and his faith in the power of God. The welfare of the village is related to such religious performances. It is a cause and effect relationship, if there are good rains in the village, then the villagers associate it with such performances.

The influence of Vaishnavism and Saivism is reflected in the gathas associated with Rama, Krishna, Siva, Sakti, and Pandavas. The popularity of Parvati is evident in Nanda ki Gatha which depicts the relationship between two sisters Nanda and Balanfa, the daughter of the king of Chandpurgardh. This gatha is particularly popular in Rupkand. Rani Chandravali ki gatha reflects the glorification of Siva while Jagdev Pawar and Sadei reflect the glorification of Devi or the Sakti tradition²³. As is apparent from the contents of these gathas, Ram did not seem to have achieved the kind of popularity that Krishna achieved. This is probably because the characteristics of Krishna as a cowherd and as an amorous figure seemed to have attracted the paharis whose subsistence was mainly based on agriculture and cattle rearing. They found affinities with Krishna who himself belonged to the society of cowherds.

There are a number of gathas which follow the Puranic traditions such as Kundak lila, Kaliya Daman, Cheer Haran, and Govardhan Dharan. The gathas related to the Pandavas such as Pandav gatha from the Rawai area, the gatha of Arjun and Vasudunta are very popular because the Pandavas and Draupadi are particularly popular in Garhwal.

Some of the popular gathas associated with Krishna and his amorousness are Rukmini ki gatha, Kusuma Kolin ki gatha, Suju ki Sunari ki gatha, Brahmakunwar ki gatha, Moti Mala Pathar Mala ki gatha and Chandravali. These gathas reflect the socio-cultural beliefs and practices, and the values and ideas of the paharis which must have prevailed at the time these gathas were composed. In Rukmini ki gatha²⁴, Rukmini refers to Krishna as brother-in-law while in Chandravali ki gatha²⁵, Krishna is referred to as 'jijaji' or brother-in-law by Chandravali. This probably reflects the polyandrous nature of society, where it is not uncommon for a woman to be married to her husband and his brother in 'Kumaon and Garhwal'. Walton attributes fraternal polyandry to the desire to maintain family lands²⁶. D.N. Majumdar mentions the expense of a woman's jewellery as contributing to polyandry²⁷. The main reason for the practice of polyandry is the low female population in the hill area-high mortality rate and decline in reproductive age. In Chandravali ki gatha Krishna's attempts to win Chandravali (Rukmini's sister) on the advice of Rukmini and his consequent marriage with her reflects the custom of polygyny prevalent in the hills

where a husband and his brothers usually had two wives, if not one. R.P. Bahadur attributes this to the indispensability of wives as agricultural labourers²⁸.

The gathas relating to Krishna and Rukmini, Chandravali, Suju, Kusuma, Moti Mala and Pathar Mala are associated with the romantic escapades of Krishna. Though they are inspired by the puranic tradition, they also contain a local hue thus giving them their own individuality. For instance 1) in the Puranic version, Krishna's struggle to acquire Rukmini is completely absent in the pahari version which mainly focuses on the romantic escapades and intelligence of Krishna²⁹. The heroines of Suju ki Sunari ki gatha and Kusuma Kolin ki gatha, Suju and Kusuma belong to the Sunar and Koli caste. These castes belong to the Dom category and were generally considered as untouchables in Uttaranchal³⁰. In Kusuma Kolin, there are undertones of caste consciousness which is apparent when Kusuma tells Krishna not to enter her house as she belongs to the Koli caste while Krishna refers to her husband as Kol 'bhai'. These two gathas also depict the illicit relationship between Krishna and Kusuma and Suju who were already married; the helplessness of the husbands despite their knowledge of their wives relationships with Krishna. This is probably because Krishna legitimises the relationship with Suju and Kusuma by referring to their husbands as 'bhai' keeping in mind the polyandrous nature of society.

Chandravali ki gatha also does not strictly follow the Puranic tradition. The Malwi, Braj and Bundeli also have their own versions of Chandravali³¹. In the Malwi version, Chandravali is referred to as a Gujjar³². A connection can be made here between the pahari and the Malwi version due to the migration of the Gujaras to this region³³. The migration of Gujjar Rajputs from Rajasthan and neighbouring parts of India was further enhanced where there was political turmoil in the plains during the Mughal rule and many people sought refuge in the hills³⁴. Though the basic theme running between all the three versions are similar, the pahari version has certain distinct features; the kidnapping of Chandravali is inspired by Rukmini and not Krishna falling in love with her while she was selling curds; the attempts of Chandravali to protect herself from Krishna by assuming the form of a fish are absent in the Malwi, Braj and Bundeli versions. This gatha was probably brought by the Gurjara Rajputs to the hills but were later altered by the paharis which is reflected in the use of magic, superhuman elements and the attempt of the heroine to protect herself. These characteristics give the pahari version of the gathas a certain distinctiveness.

In the gatha Moti and Pattar Mala, Krishna's association with the Nagas is reflected and he is referred to as the husband of the Nag princes. This gatha must have been composed at a time when Krishna became popular as Nagraja, but later on it was altered to include the Nath and Siddh tradition because this gatha also contains references to Gorakhnath, Satyanath,

Maniknath and Sidhua³⁵. In *Suju ki Sunari* the image of Krishna can be compared to that of the feudal chiefs of the medieval period who were known to levy oppressive taxes on the people. Here Krishna is referred to as collecting gold from the people for constructing a Gujarati *Hindola* or swing. In this *gatha* Kabir, Kamal and Dadu are prevalent in Krishna's court when Krishna gives the order to collect gold from the people. These ballads reflect the way Krishna was perceived by the *paharis*. The exploits and deeds of Krishna seemed to have appealed to the people. The nature of portrayal of Krishna shows that he was not very distinct from the *pahari* folk and their way of life. The personality of Krishna is created accordingly and in his amorousness, the amorousness of the people is reflected. Krishna is looked upon as both divine, as possessing divine qualities and at the same time possessing human attributes.

Krishna's association with Garhwal is also reflected in these *gathas* and it is believed that during the last few days of his life he went to a place called *Sem Mukhem* in Garhwal. In this context a very popular *gatha* '*Sidhua Bidhua*', which is quite popular in both Kumaon and Garhwal, Krishna is believed to tame the unreligious *Gangu Ramola* (the leader of the *Ramolas*) who had two sons called *Sidhu* and *Bidhua*. It seems that *Gangu* gave his daughter in marriage to Krishna because the latter is referred to as the brother-in-law of *Sidhu Bidhua*³⁶. There is no doubt about Krishna's migration to *Badarikashram* because it is referred to as in the *Harivanshpuran* and the *Mahabharata* but to trace *Gangu Ramola* as a historical figure is doubtful. But this *gatha* is extremely popular in this region and it is probable that it must have assumed a new form when it assimilated two traditions – the *Vaishnava* tradition and the *Nath-Sidh* tradition. *Siddhu* is referred to as the disciple of *Gorakhnath* who also practises *tantrism*³⁷. It seems that *gathas*, in which Krishna is associated with the *Nath* tradition, must have been composed by the *Nathpanthis* who included Krishna to give legitimacy to their compositions.

A study of these *gathas* show that they must have been composed at different periods and influenced by the developments of that period. The *gathas* of *Suju ki Sunari* and *Kusuma Kolin* must have been composed or altered by the people of the *Kol* caste and the inclusion of *Gorakhnath*, *Kabir*, *Kamal* and *Dadu* prove this. In *Suju ki Sunari ki gatha*, *Kabir*, *Kamal* and *Dadu* are mentioned as gatherings at the court of Krishna in *Dwarka*. Two underlying ideas are represented in this ballad – the *brahmanical* tradition represented by Krishna and the other is that of the *Bhakti* tradition represented by *Kabir*, *Kamal* and *Dadu* who were popular amongst the lower castes. Such *gathas* where Krishna is associated with *Kabir* and *Kamal* were probably the composition of the lower castes. A number of *gathas* may have been composed or the existing ones could have been altered during the medieval period when the impact of *Bhakti* movement was sweeping north India, and Kumaon and Garhwal were no exception.

The gathas related to Nirankar are influenced by the Kabir and the Nirguna tradition. Nirankar was particularly popular among the lower castes. These legends exhibit intense anger and sarcasm towards orthodox Brahmanism. The legend of Raidas³⁸ expresses ignorance towards the knowledge of the Vedas and Brahman is depicted as the one who reads the Vedas in the morning and forgets them in the evening. He is represented as the symbol of an intolerant upper caste while Ganga is represented as the symbol of humanity who is much beyond social barriers. She not only visits Raidas's house but also gives him a gift of a gold bracelet. These legends also reflect the underlying unity between the Nath and Kabirpanthis as they contain references to Kabir, Kamal and Gorakhnath revealing the assimilation of the Kabirpanthis and Nathpanthis in one legend. The most profound influence among the Bhakti saints on pahari society was that of Gorakhnath and his disciples, who feature quite often in the local legends. The influence of Gorakhnath was particularly pronounced in Garhwal. In many of the legends, the nath impact is quite evident where Gorakhnath and other Nath saints such as Batuknath are mentioned. These gathas also reflect the importance of the 'guru' who constitutes an important aspect of worship particularly by the lower castes. So strong was the cult of the guru that, in one of the jagar songs, the disciple first propitiates Vishnu and Parwati and then pleads to Guru Gorakhnath for prosperity for coveting the sun and moon.

A study of these gathas reveal the fact that they may have been composed or altered by the different social groups in order to give legitimacy to their beliefs and sentiments. A number of gathas may have been composed or existing ones altered at a time when the influence of Bhakti was being strongly felt. Apart from expressing the belief and sentiments of different classes of society, gathas also show how different social groups alter the contents of the standard myths in these gathas and include their own versions. So we have two versions of the same myth—the standard brahmanical version and the pahari version. Both the versions co-exist. For example, in Narasingh gatha, Narasingh apart from being addressed to as the man-lion incarnation of Lord Vishnu is also identified as the devotee of Debi or Shakti and that of Gorakhnath. This gatha thus assimilates Vaishnavism, Saktism and Nath tradition into one single legend.

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² Raymond & Bridget Alchin. 1993. *The Birth of Indian Civilization*. (reprint), p.33.

³ For instance while the people of Jaunsar Bawar (Dehradun) practised polyandry, the Tharus and Bhojas of Tehri Garhwal practised polygamy.

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- ²² The other participants are the priest or the Syonkar, the oracle or Dangariya and instrumentalists or vocalists.
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