

## REVISITING KASHMIR AND ITS FOLK TALES: ITS PRESENT-DAY RELEVANCE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO 'THE LEGEND OF HIMAL AND NAGRAI'

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### Abstract

Kashmir has been in the limelight for varied reasons for a long time now. While mainstream media and literati have been focusing on the conflict and struggle surrounding the valley, my aim through this paper is to focus on its folk culture and its relevance now. With changing times, one often questions and tries to understand what meaning these stories hold for us and if at all they have any relevance. Folk tales have been a part of our culture for a very long time and have been passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth. The existence of these tales in the form of written works has proven to be an asset especially for the new generation who can't go to their ancestral land or experience their culture first hand. The reminiscences of the past continue to haunt us, and it is through folklore that we can feel connected to our roots.

Key Words: Kashmiri folk, Legend of Himal and Nagrai, Folk belief

### INTRODUCTION

Folk Tales have been a part of the Indian Culture and many cultures abroad for as long as there has been the existence of humans. Folk culture is representative of where we come from and how far we have come. The stories that were once discussed in the families at the dinner table, between the people of the same region and community, are now available in print, making it possible for people all over the world to read them and understand the culture without really having to go to the place or knowing someone from the area. However, we can't fail to realize that while doing so there are chances of the folktale being altered and its meaning getting lost in the process.

Kashmiri culture is very rich and full of life. As a language, it does not have a script, yet the writers and folklorists have tried to safeguard their culture in the form of literature. Kashmiri literature mainly exists in three scripts: Sanskrit, Devanagari, and English. There has also been evidence of Kashmiri literature existing in Urdu script. For a very long time, there has been no written evidence of their folklore. It is in Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* published in 1150 AD that we can trace the first Kashmiri literature to exist. Historians have found evidence of

various Kashmiri words used in the book. However, it is in *Brihat Katha* published in the 6th century, that there have been clear stories of kings, warriors, birds, beasts of fairies, and monsters. It is in this book that we have found certain stories that can now be referred to as folk tales.

Folk tales and Folk beliefs often go hand in hand. However, it is important to note that these terms cannot be used interchangeably. The authenticity of the folktale has no connection with folk belief. While some people believe every tale they hear, others go in search of meaning. A meaning that is beyond what the story holds. They try to find logic and often get so lost in finding it that they lose the whole essence of the folktale and what it is trying to put forward.

### **THE LEGEND OF HIMAL AND NAGRAI**

Out of all the Kashmiri folk tales I read, this is the one that left me yearning for more. The story begins with the introduction of a man named Saddaram, who owned thousands of cows, servants, stores, and horses yet he wasn't happy. He longed for the thing money couldn't buy, a child. One day he finds himself in a position of being a pauper. Consequently, his relations with his wife also got tainted. It was no later than that; he was being called a 'Shikaslad', a man who brings misfortune. It was during one of those unfruitful days when we sat by a 'naag' and ate his dried bread with the sweet spring water. While eating, he threw a few leftovers into the 'naag' and went to sleep. Upon waking up he finds a serpent in his bag and plotting for it to be a way he can kill his wife, he closes the bag and takes it home. On arriving, he gives his wife the bag telling her to open it when she is alone. Shocked but equally thrilled about receiving a gift from her husband, she goes to the room to open it. Saddaram now sits waiting for his wife to scream, but instead is surprised by his wife calling out for him in joy. Therein the bag lies a beautiful baby boy old enough to speak. The boy was 'Nagrai' - the king of serpents, who had taken human form to be united with a woman he fell in love with, 'Himal' the daughter of King Balveer. Ever since 'Nagrai' came into their lives, their fates changed. A household that was once grim now had their livestock back.

Nagrai, in his human form, goes in front of Himal, who instantly grows a liking towards the boy. Nagrai and Himal then urge their parents to get them married. Since Saddaram and the king belonged to different strata of the society, it was a difficult match. But, love has its way. The young couple finally got the blessings of

their parents and got married. 'Himal' was soon informed by her husband that theirs will be a difficult marriage if she doesn't place her trust in him. She is informed that there will be evildoers who come to her, filling her ears with malice giving her ideas to ask 'Nagrai' to prove his tribe. She is informed that the evildoers will first come with flowers, followed by utensils of clay, then a pair of shoes or even gold. And just as he had warned, these women came to convince Himal of how her husband cannot be trusted. Fearing the worst, when Himal comes back home, she demands that he enter a tub of water and come out of the milk tub on the other side. Even after constant pleading, Himal doesn't budge, but just as she sees Nagrai getting submerged completely that she comes out of her trance trying to save him.

Nagrai had been pulled down into 'Tal pataal', his land of the serpents. It was revealed that the women trying to sway Himal were his former wives who had come to take him home. Now when he was stuck in the underworld, he would come to the Earth at midnight and leave a small bowl of food in the name of his love, Himal. Meanwhile, Himal kept looking for Nagrai on Earth. She comes to know about Nagrai's bowl of food and decides to find it out for herself. She hid and when she saw Nagrai come out of the spring, she was overjoyed. She refused to be separated from her love again and begged him to not leave her. He gave in to her demands, turned her into a pebble, and took her to 'tal pataal'.

The serpent wives however sensed her presence and Himal revealed herself. There was just one condition; Himal shouldn't be any trouble to anyone. Her downfall came when she fed warm milk to the serpent babies, killing them instantly. In a fit of rage, she was bit by serpent wives. Nagrai on realizing what went wrong took her to Earth in the pretense of cremating her, instead, he embalmed her and waited for the ascetic to help him get back to Himal. The ascetic, adorned by her beautiful corpse, gives her the boon of life. Days after when Nagrai came to Earth, looking for Himal, he was led to the man's hut where he curled up in a corner waiting for Himal to wake up. To any human, he was merely a snake. A passerby saw him and killed him, instead of protecting the young girl. When Himal wakes up and finds her dead husband, she cremates him and jumps into the fire wanting to be reunited with her lover. The ascetic pained by their cruel love story asks the gods for help. Two birds talking of love informed him that if their ashes were to be thrown into the spring where they first met, they would take human forms again and love together forever. And so

does the ascetic. This 'Naag of Himal and Nagrai' is now known to be filled with mystical green waters.

The present-day relevance of folk tales like that of Himal and Nagrai can be derived by how it is a documentation of the culture and history of Kashmir. For the ones who are not alive to tell these stories, some books help us peek through and find out what it was that our ancestors held dear. Their ideals and beliefs can be found between the lines of the folk tale.

Set in the city of Shopian, a region in South Kashmir, it provides a past and present contrast. The Shopian we know of now is very different from what we read about in the story. Kashmir as we see through the tale of 'Himal' and 'Nagrai' is peaceful and beautiful. Filled with 'sweet water of the spring', 'tall chinars' and 'copper dishes'. It gives us hope that maybe we are not wrong to imagine a Kashmir that is peaceful and calm. The place where Himal and Nagrai fell in love. A place that was as divine as it was surreal. The problems differ, and it is easier said than done, but in present times, it is in these folk tales that we see a land that does not exist the same. It shows us how with time things change and for us to be receptive towards it, acceptance of the past is important.

The characters of these folk tales are more well known than the stories themselves. People might not know the whole story, however, they would know about the 'Naag of Himal Nagrai'. These folk tales are embedded in the daily life activities of Kashmiris in such a way that they cannot be separated. Drawing superstitions, rituals, and certain traditions from them are how these folk tales have found relevance in present times.

This folk tale of Himal and Nagrai leaves us with a strong message on the importance of trust and faith in any relationship. Just like most tragic love stories, this one too leaves a mark on us. With Onaiza Drabu retelling this folktale, we can see the Kashmiri way of storytelling. The patterns that we see even know. The use of the word "Dapaan" is the most important of it all. Not just in stories, but in daily life too, we often see Kashmiris use this word. Kashmiri as a language might get lost with fewer people talking in it, but these stories are embodiments of a language that might not have its script but still represents a land misunderstood.



## **CONCLUSION**

Kashmiri folk tales literature has now become a document preserving the essence of Kashmir that doesn't exist anymore. It takes us to the land of beauty where conflict has no place. Love and peace prevail overall. The folk tale of 'Himal and Nagrai' also shows us the storytelling tone of Kashmiris. By word of mouth, folk tales have been passed on for generations and it is now acting as possible historical dialogues. With Himal and Nagrai's love, we traced the spring that still stands in all of its glory. We cannot shred ourselves away from the past and it is these folk tales that keep us grounded and connected to our roots.

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