

FAG FAIR OF RAMPUR BUSHAHR: AN OBSERVATIONAL STUDY

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Abstract

Fairs and festivals assumed great deal of significance from time immemorial and even today. Apart from providing opportunity to people for assembly and mutual interaction, fairs and festivals brings social and cultural prosperity to the locality and the local community. Fairs and festivals in India are colorful commemorations of religious or historical events or celebration of the change of seasons. Many communities across the world have their own fairs and festivals that are mostly deep rooted in their religious faith and beliefs that are celebrated according to their own culture norms and tradition. Fairs were started in the past centuries just as much for religious as well as commercial reasons and in Sanskrit the commercial word 'yatra or jatra' is used for both pilgrimage and for fair. Fairs are an important part of the cultural and religious life of the people of Himachal Pradesh. The present research paper is based on observation of Fag fair of Rampur Bushahr and attempts to highlight the rituals, beliefs and ceremonies associated with Fag fair.

Key Words: Fairs, Festivals, Pilgrimage, Tradition

INTRODUCTION

India is fertile for religious activities. Many temples are witness for it. India has vast culture, lifestyle, folks, religious heritage, fairs and festivals and natural attraction. Fairs and festivals have always played a significant role in the life of the citizens of this country. They derive them for a great amount of joy, entertainment and color of life. While most of the festivals have sprung from religious rituals, the fairs have their roots in the very heart of the people, irrespective of religion, caste and creed.

Fairs and festivals are important part of Indian cultural life. The life of Indian people revolves around the fairs and festivals. In other words, we can say that fairs and festival are the heart of the Indian socio-cultural life. In India, there are a lot of fairs and festivals which show the integrity among the people. The basic idea behind celebrating fairs and festivals is togetherness. For example, *kumbmela* held in every twelve years at Allahabad, Haridwar, Nasik and Ujjain and is one of the largest fairs in India. At 2001*kumbhmela*, over 60 million people gathered, making it the largest gathering anywhere in the world.

Fairs are an important part of the cultural and religious life of the people of Himachal Pradesh. Himachal Pradesh is a hill state with its unique customs and traditions and is predominated by the presence of deities in almost every village and that is why it is known as *devbhoomi*. Besides the festivals that are celebrated throughout the country, it has its own fairs and festivals which are celebrated on different occasions in different settings. The fairs and festivals of Himachal Pradesh are distinct from those of other States like Punjab, Haryana, U.P, etc. as the fairs of Himachal Pradesh have quite distinct features than fairs of other States. Most of the fairs of Himachal Pradesh revolve around the deities with their participation.

One of the common features of all the fairs of Himachal Pradesh is the folk dance accompanied by the traditional orchestra consisting of *dhol*, *nagara*, *narsingha*, *karnal* and *shahnai*. *Minjar* is a seasonal fair of Chamba for celebrating the rains and flowering of maize. People from all parts of Chamba and even from other areas of Himachal Pradesh travel long distances to watch the week-long celebration. *Lavi* fair is an international fair and *Fag* fair is a district level fair which is celebrated in Rampur Bushahr block of Shimla district. Some others fairs and festivals of Himachal Pradesh are Shakti festivals of Bilaspur and Kangra district, *Shivratri mela* of Mandi, *Renuka* fair of Sirmaur, etc. Thus, there are innumerable fairs and festivals which are celebrated by the hill people.

The origin of fairs and festivals in Himachal Pradesh is mainly based on the religion. The commercial fairs are also held but these are very few in number. At each fair, a local deity is always present while other deities of surrounding areas are also brought as guests. There is also give and take affair called *Bartan* (exchange of goods) between the host and guest deity. In some fairs and festivals, animals sacrifices are offered to please the deities.

Social and cultural fairs are associated with the social, cultural and historical events in the life of any community and country. The best way to know about the life of people is through the study of their fairs, festivals, customs and manners. A society is a social group having a common cultural heritage because we express our culture continuously in our dress, food, work, language, fairs and other activities. We learn our culture from our forbearers and contemporaries. There cannot be a culture apart from society and no society exists without a culture. In nut shell, society refers to people and culture to patterns of behavior. The

festivals and fairs reflect the cultural heritage of the people and also serve to revive it. The geographical features of the country, its history, people and their religious faith contribute towards the evolution and development of these fairs and festivals. The rustic sentiments of the people mixed with traditions, customs and conviction have also helped the growth of fairs and festivals. The fairs and festivals are also important in the creation of the national integration. Traditional fairs and festivals have many social and economic benefits in the rural environments with limited sources of income and social life.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gupta (2006) have covered all important fairs and festivals of India and unfolded panorama of Hindu festivals, rituals, religious practices, observations, fast and fairs. He emphasised on different festivals. For example, *Navaratri*s celebrated with great fervor in West Bengal as compared to rest of Indian States. Similarly, *Holi* is celebrated with gusto in the north India, however, its celebration in other parts is comparatively different and in low profile. In the South, the *Holi* is almost unknown except among those who belong to the north.

Fairs as the medium of mass recreation are very popular in Himachal Pradesh. There is a regular cycle of fairs held in various parts of the State all over the year. There are seasonal fairs, mythical fairs, trade fairs and fairs connected with festivals. To a lover of culture, a Himachali fair is an aesthetic treat (Singh 1992).

Devi (2007) discussed the popular culture, fairs and festivals. She mentioned that fairs and festivals give wider scope to develop popular culture. She highlighted how the celebrations besides religion based make a common occasion for different sections of the society. She examined the common and specific fairs and festivals along with the folk songs in relation with history. These songs reflected the devotion of the devotees about their Gods and Goddesses. She focused on *Dahaja* festivals, *Hola-Mohalla* festivals, *Jode mela* of Una *Panch Bikhmi* fair, *Chinj* fair, *Piplu* fair, *Chintpurni* fair.

Karmakar (2019) study the *Holi* festival in Assam where it goes by the name of *Doul Utsav*. The celebrations of the festival begin in Barpeta Satra, a *vaishnav* monastery that Madhabdev established in 1583, situated at Barpeta in Western Assam. Madhabdev was the prime disciple of Srimanta Sankardeva, the saint reformer who inspired the Bhakti movement in Assam around the time when

Guru Nanak, Kabir and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu did elsewhere in India. The folk songs have no place in Barpeta Satra where the monastic songs accompany rituals that makes *Doul Utsav* last for three to five days, depending on the Hindu month – *Chaitra* or *Faagun* and planetary positions.

OBJECTIVES

To observe the rituals, beliefs and ceremonies associated with the Fag fair.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to capture the qualitative aspects, the participant observation technique has been used to observe the rituals and ceremonies associated with Fag fair during the four days of celebration.

DISCUSSION

Deities enter the palace dancing from time to time as soon as the *Holi* ends. *Basaru Devta* entered the palace firstly and went to the place where the throne was kept and bows his head from outside the room as it was locked. *Basaru Devta* then went to the door of *Rajmahal* which is called '*Proad*' in local *Pahari* language where he was welcomed by the royal family's son *Vikramaditya*. *Vikramaditya* applied a *Tilak* to *Basaru* deity from a plate adorned with *Holi* colors and then his '*Goor*' (sort of exorcist) applied *Tilak* to *Vikramaditya*. He threw the colors on the deities one after another and then people brought a plate full of flour (known as *Chahmalchani* in the local language) which people were throwing at each other while enjoying the fair.

The *Goor* in his local language, whom we call *Gadai*, said that, "this is my fair and no one from administration should stop this. Here I am the King. The fair will be celebrated for the four days as per the earlier practice". It needs to be highlighted that the administration allowed celebration of the Fag fair on the day of *Holi* only due to the Covid-19 pandemic but deities participating in fair forced government authorities through '*Goor*' to allow the fair celebrations for four days. One of the deities said that, "you people are not unified among themselves. You should not spoil this fair. This fair should be celebrated in the same way as the fair has been celebrated for centuries". After this, the '*Goor*' of that particular deity started to dance as if he is in a trance.

This was followed by the entry of the deity of *Racholi* called *Devta Jakh* who came out dancing on his chariot. He went to the throne as soon as it entered the palace

and then to the *Rajmahal Proad*. It was observed that the '*Goor*' of *Racholi Devta* was crying in a trance and demanding the first honour to burn the wood which is called *Fag* as he claims ownership over the *Fag* fair. Local people narrated that all three deities namely *Racholi Jakh*, *Gso Basaru* and *Basaru* comes together to the palace but *Racholi Jakh* gets the first honor to be welcomed historically but this time *Basaru Devta* was first welcomed. Vikramaditya, the son of royal family of Rampur Bushahr, and committee members apologised to *Devta Jakh* for welcoming the *Basaru Devta* first. Vikramaditya then applied *Tilak* to the deity and his '*Goor*' from a plate full of *Holi*. The '*Goor*' also applied *Tilak* to Vikramaditya and the color of *Holi* was thrown on the *Devta*. People also threw flour at *Devta* and each other and finally the *Fag* was lit.

The '*Goor*', Vikramaditya and other people performed the grand traditional dance called '*Nati*'. The scene of *Racholi Devta* going to meet *Basaru Devta* was very enchanting and emotional. People were seen going toward the bonfire to pray because the bonfire is considered holy. After these traditions and customs, *Devtas* ordered people to continue the fair celebrations for four days as was the tradition and assured them to not worry about anything. The committee members and royal family members discussed the command of deities with local authorities and it was decided with mutual consent to celebrate the *Fag* fair for four days. Deities reassured the public that no harm or diseases will come to people who will come to the fair. People were very glad to hear this announcement and there was no reduction in the number of people till mid night. This shows the importance of *Fag* fair for Rampur people. The arrangements for the food and drink for the people was done by the committee members. The *Fag* fair began from the next day of *Holi* but the rituals and traditions associated with *Fag* fair are done on the day of *Holi*.

On the first day of *Fag* fair, the committee members welcomed *Gso Basaru Devta* by putting the garland of flowers on their heads. He also went to throne and paid his respect by bowing their heads in front of it. He then went to the *proad* of *Rajmahal* where he was welcomed by the close members of royal family. *Gso Basaru Devta* expressed his indignation as to why he was not invited yesterday through his '*Goor*'. People apologized to him and then his brother *Basaru Devta* came and was welcomed. *Gso Basaru Devta* and *Basaru Devta*, who are brothers, meet each other. This moment was very fascinating and emotional that shows

their overwhelming fondness for each other which also underlines the essence of Fag fair of meeting your loved ones and relatives from far away.

Gradually, all the deities arrived at the palace according to their own time and they were welcomed by the committee members. They went to the throne placed in palace and move towards the *Rajmahal Proad* where they were welcomed by the closest family members of the royals. There were nineteen deities in this fair, out of which three were female deities and sixteen male deities. Every deity brings with them a name board which is held by one person in front of the entourage as a piece of identification of the deity. Every deity has their own traditional instruments such as *dhol*, *nagara*, *shehnai*, etc.

In the Fag fair, there is no caste discrimination. The upper castes and lower castes had their own deities but there was no caste based discrimination. It has been observed that the lower caste deities have been welcomed in a similar manner and no deity was treated badly. Some deities arrived here on foot only. After the arrival of *Basaru Devta*, the female deity of *Gaone Beel* i.e. the deity of lower caste reached barefoot. Women in large numbers also came with her in their traditional dresses called *petticoat*. Every deity has its own place in the *Rajmahal*. After their welcome, all the deities go to their respective places and dances from there. All the deities are welcomed in order following which they go in front of the throne in the same order to pay their respects.

The arrival of *Devta Sahib Kasholi* presented a very beautiful scene. When people started carrying his chariot towards the ground, *Devta Sahib Kasholi* did not go there where they were taking him but he turned his chariot towards the place where his wife *Baddi Devi* was kept. People were seen whistling after witnessing such an endearing scene which showcased such a beautiful relationship between the two deities. The female deity of *Bari*, who is the wife of *Kasholi* and *Kumsu*, was decorated in a very beautiful way. She had worn nose ring and a traditional necklace called *Chanderhar*. Her head was covered with veil. The chariot of *Baddi Devi* looks very beautiful and she was beautifully dressed. The deities of *Kasholi* and *Baddi* were placed together and the same *chunnar* was placed on their heads. Both of these deities belong to Kullu district. Another deity of *Devathi* village, who is called *chijjaa*, was also placed there beside them.

The deity of *Kumsu*, who is known as the brother of *Chijjaa devta*, has come to this fair after thirty five years. As soon as the committee members welcomed the

deity, it ran around the whole Fag field expressing his happiness of coming to the Fag fair. These deities express their happiness through their dance. *Chotu devta* also accompanied them to the fair who is named '*chotu*' because of his chariot being the smallest in size. After that, the female deity *Lathi Jahari Khadkag* from *Jhakri*, who is the sister of *Basaru* and *Gso Basaru*, came to the fair for the first time. She is the deity of the lower caste. People were sitting on terrace to catch glimpse of her which was strange as usually people are not allowed to sit on the higher level than the deities. So *Lathi Jahari Khadkag* deity did not move forward until these people were brought down from the terraces.

This was followed by the arrival of the deity of *Dharasarga*. The followers of this deity gave the box of sweets along with cloth of deity, which is also called *Shadi*, to the welcomers. Then the deity of *Lalsa*, *Dansa*, *Shenari* and *Shingra* came together because they are brothers. All of these four deities were carried barefooted by the people. The deity of *Shalaut* followed them and he was also carried barefooted by people. The *Talara Sahib Patthar Brahmeshwar* deity then came who arrived for the first time at the fag fair. He said that he will accept the reception only if he was welcomed by royal family members. Everyone there tried to convince him that the members of royal family are not here now but he did not agree. He went straight to *proad* and sit in a place with bowed head showing his dissatisfaction.

In the evening, all the deities went to their respective places in temple where they were supposed to spend the night. *Talara devta* wanted to sit near the throne at night. Thus, the people who were welcoming the deities on behalf of the royal family contacted them on phone to tell them that *Talaradevta* wants to sit near the throne and whether the entrance of the throne room should be opened for him because the door of the throne room was never opened for any deity. Finally, the royal family agreed to open the door of the throne room because the deity was not ready to accept anything else. People were seen discussing amongst themselves that *Talara devta* as earlier the deity of the upper caste but went to the lower caste people later due to lack of recognition.

People who accompanied the other deities expressed their indignation on having the *Talara devta* sitting near the throne as no deity was allowed to sit near the throne in the past. The managers requested the *Talara devta* to vacate the place and sit where the rest of the deities were sitting to avoid the ire of other deities.

Talara devta felt disrespected and he got angry. He said that he will leave the fair for good and started to run towards the throne. He started banging the head of his chariot in front of the throne. He then ran towards the entrance and started banging his head there to. Everyone got baffled at the sight of this. The committee members and others greeted him at *Proad and* asked the main priest about what he wanted. The priest replied that the deity want to get a place in the *Raj Mahal* on all four days of the fair. The managers politely declined his demand by saying that it was not possible because every deity has the same rights. *Talara devta* did not listen and hence left the fair along with people who accompanied. These people who accompany *Talara devta* also did not let record the events happened that evening. Even when I was trying to move closer to the place where these events were taking place, one person stopped me to go close to the deity because girls are not allowed.

The stays of deities are arranged in various temples of Rampur Bushahr. No deity was kept in the *Rajmahal*. It was observed that they are worshiped by their priests in the evening amongst the soothing sounds of local instruments like *dhol, nagara, shehnai*, etc. After this, the food is served to the people who accompanied deities. Not all deities stay at temples as some deities are also invited by the people in their homes. In the morning, it has been observed that these deities were again worshiped by priests. The deities reach the *Rajmahal* after this by dancing through all the way in the Rampur market. This process continued for next three days of Fag fair.

The stays of deities are arranged in various temples different temple of Rampur Bushahr. No deity is kept in the *Rajmahal*. When I went to the places where those deities were kept in the evening, I saw that they are worshiped by their priests while the local instruments like *dhol, nagara, shehnai* etc are also played during the worships ceremony. After this the food is served to the people who come along with those deities and they again enjoy themselves by singing their local songs. Not all deities stay at temples. Some deities are invited by the people at their homes. When I came to that place earlier in the morning where these deities were kept, it has been observed these deities are also worshiped first in the morning. After this, these deities dance through the Rampur market and reach the *Rajmahal*. This process happens on all four days.

Many deities brought to fair by people by walking barefooted for hours. The female deity *Durga Maa Kali Singhasani* of *Khamadi* also reached on foot in the fair on the second day. She came late because earlier there were rumours of celebrating the Fag fair for one day only due to Covid-19 pandemic. The village of the deity was very far from Rampur and it took almost one day for the deity to reach Rampur. The deity of *Khamadi* met the deity of *khanan* in Fag fair. People narrated the interesting things about *Khanan* deity like only the higher caste people are allowed to make the deity dance on their shoulders while the people of lower caste are only allowed to carry him.

All the deities are welcomed by burning incense every day during the Fag fair. All deities go to the throne everyday and bow their head in front of throne. This was followed by their movement towards the *proad* where they are welcomed by the people close to the Royal family. All the deities have their own seats in the fair. They occupy their respective places and dance from there. People who comes with theses deities shower *Holi* on each other. Most of people come with deities in their traditional dresses that also showcase their culture. For instance, the people of the district Kullu dance by wearing the *Kuluvi* Shawls and scarfs called *dhatu* in local language. People of the district Shimla wear the *paticoat*. The Padam palace has a *machhkhandi* from where people enjoy the fair. In *machhkhandi*, one deity namely the *chijjaa* also sat surrounded by people.

Everybody dances to the tune of *dhol*, *nagada* and *shehnai*. The scene of people dancing near deities in the grounds of *Rajmahal* was very beautiful. All the deities visit the entire Rampur market and people were gathering around Padam palace i.e. *Raj Darbar* by dancing from the market to the *Raj Darbar*. People have deep reverence for these deities. When these deities pass through the market, the shopkeepers offer garlands of flowers as well as money to the deities. These deities have their own traditional instruments. People who accompany deities got ration and other facilities from the committee members to cook food. The entire arrangements for their stay are also made by the committee members. Some shopkeepers of local market also set special food stalls for Fag visitors because of their devotion toward the deities. This time there was no extra stalls in the fair because of ongoing covid-19 pandemic. It is the first time when the police administration and health department were also working with the committee members to manage affairs due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

On the last day of fair, it has been observed that people were giving money to the deities, who are called *daan* in local language, and pray to the deities. There was great hustle and bustle in fair. When the deities started going towards the temple, they were monitored by the Royal family and the committee members. Deities were given a *shaadis* from the Royal family and money from the committee members. There were many mesmerizing scenes during the closing of Fag fair. It was seen that when the female deity from *Gao Beel* came toward the *proad* during farewell, the Chariot of the deity was kept down but all of sudden the chariot moved and stood on its own without any person touching it. When the deity of *Devathi* was going back, people started praying to the deity to prevent the spreading of covid-19 among people who attended the fair because all the deities had promised before the fair that people should not fear the spread of any disease. Finally, all the deities met their siblings and wives on the way and Fag fair came to an end.

CONCLUSION

It can be said that people have deep reverence for their deities. People believe that these deities keep them away from every crisis and that is why the people did not even fear from the deadly Covid-19 virus. People were adamant for not curtailing the celebration of the Fag fair and also persuaded the local administration for the same. Deities also assured people that they would not let anyone get sick in this fair. This also increased the belief of the people towards their deities and people enjoyed the fair without any fear. In Fag fair, there is no caste based discrimination. Fag fair is also way of social get together for people. People get a chance to meet their relatives and dear ones. In the same way, these deities also get a chance to meet their siblings and wives at Fag fair. There was only one deity in this fair where women were not allowed to go near the deity.

Fag fair cannot begin until one of the royal family member complete the traditions and customs associated with Fag fair on the day of *Holi*. This highlights the significance of royal family even today in celebrating the Fag fair. Deities have deep respect and affinity towards the throne placed in the *Raj Darbar*. All deities bow down their heads in front of the throne every time they enter the Padam palace. Nineteen local deities in all were called in the fair but mainly three deities namely *Racholi Jakh*, *Gso Basaru* and *Basaru* started the Fag fair on the day of *Holi*. The study highlights the fact that people still have immense pride and

reverence for their traditions and customs even in modern times where modernization is influencing our local cultures significantly but people have found a way to keep the essence of their culture alive without ignoring the global cultural values. Fag fair demonstrates the showcasing of our diverse and great cultural heritage.

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