

FAITH IN FOLK: POPULAR BELIEFS ABOUT DEVTAS AND THEIR ORIGIN IN THE UPPER SHIMLA AREA

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Abstract

This paper is about folk narrations of local deities of the Upper Shimla Area, which deals with stories and popular beliefs of these deities in the society of this region. Folk deities locally called 'Devta', which is a centric figure of cultural as well as emotional life of locals. The Devta culture is not here for worshipping but it is itself a social structure. Devta culture combines the entire society under a social bond. Even the system of Panchayati Raj came after the independence of India which has been prevalent here since ancient times. Various Deities worshipped in the Shimla district are known for their various divine powers and miracles. Many deities are associated with rain, milk, ghee, protector of livestock, incurable diseases, and some for the boon of having a child. Many deities are responsible for protecting crops from hailstorms, settlement land disputes, free from evil spirits, helping in court cases, and quick justice, while some of these deities also play an important role in environmental protection. There are many legends about ancient and mythological 'Muhura' (metal Busts of Devta) in Shimla district.

Keywords:- Devta, Upper Shimla Area, Folk Deities, Folk Ballads, Folk Narrations, Belief, Muhura, Rohru, Rampur.

INTRODUCTION

Himachal Pradesh is a mountainous state of India in its northwestern provinces. Shimla town is the capital city of Himachal Pradesh situated in the district of Shimla. It was the summer capital of Britishers till independence. Shimla is famous for its indo-gothic architecture and natural beauty. The upper hills towards the Lesser Himalayas are generally called the Upper Shimla Area. This area is a hotspot of indigenous art and culture in this district. It possesses a huge variation of geography from the 1,021 m elevation of Rampur Bushahr to 4,520 m. elevation of Chanshal Peak, the highest peak in the entire district. With this geographical variation, it also bears a slight variation in terms of Cultural values.

Folk deities, locally called Devta, are a very centric figure of cultural as well as emotional life of locals. The deity culture is not here for worshipping but it is itself a social structure. The entire life of the mountainpeople revolves around the sphere of deities. This well-organized system was from very ancient times, even during the rule of Thakurais and feudatory Ranas-Thakurs. The British did not interfere in it. System of Panchayati Raj which came after the independence of India has been prevalent here since ancient times. The difference is that in today's democracy, there are many stages of the governance system but in the mountains, this governance system is only deities and their rules. Where everyone were equal. Devta culture combines the entire society under a social bond. People from different sections and casts of the society gather in the temples on the occasions of worship, rituals, fairs festivals, etc. and exchange their feelings. The tendency for harmony, mutual love, and cooperation also increases.



Figure 1- Village people talking with Devta and seeking blessings.

Devta culture is a symbol of unwavering faith among the people of Shimla district. Important accounts of the origin, miracles, popularity, and temple construction related to deities are being continued by locals in the form of folk songs. They are locally called 'Dev Barthas' and 'Gathas'. Even deities speak their stories through their intermediater or shaman called Malli. There is a separate ethnic group of people who sing and compose these songs. These are locally called 'Dhakki' or 'Turi' or 'Baj-gi'. These songs are sung during various gatherings and festivals.

Various Deities worshiped in the Shimla district are known for their various divine powers and miracles. Many deities are associated with rain, milk, ghee, protector of livestock, incurable diseases, and some for the boon of having a child. Many deities are even responsible for protecting crops from hailstorms, settlement land disputes, free from evil spirits, helping in court cases, and quick justice, while some of these deities also play an important role in environmental protection, such there are many forests in Shimla district which are considered as Deities' forests. In which no one can either cut a piece of wood or hunt any organisms. Even a bush is related to a Deity, no one can pluck a single leaf from it, and people believe if someone does it deliberately, he/she will suffer from the curse of deities which cannot be diagnosed by anyone except the Devta. In such a situation, on one hand, the forests are automatically protected and on the other hand, the animals and wild life are also protected by divine grace, especially since this divine forest has become a heaven for the extinct flora and fauna. Therefore, we can say that while the government schemes being run for environmental protection are failing, the deities are playing a major role in environmental protection. The folk believe that Devta's fear is the main reason for environmental protection. It has been prevalent since ancient times and is widely accepted today.

There are some Deities of Shimla district have popular beliefs among society. Some of them are discussed below.

Devta Meshar/Maheshwar is a folk deity from village Pujarli (no.7) of Samrari Valley, Rohru. It is believed that devta possesses a very special power to cure people from a kind of allergic suffering called 'Bish' by locals. It became a person unable to perform any task and all of his body parts became swollen. His entire body and stomach will start bloating. The doctors are unable to detect the actual cause of it. In such a situation, diagnosis becomes impossible.

It is said that this 'Bish' is a type of black magic spell that can be introduced into another person with any food item or even through speech. Even today, there are many such inaccessible areas of district Shimla, Sirmaur, and Kinnaur where the practice of Bish is still prevalent. Locals believe that if someone carries cannabis and needles while visiting these identified areas the magic spell does not have any effect or one should be careful about this while eating or talking at strange places, then it becomes ineffective. It is believed that in inaccessible areas, this Bish has been prepared by demonic power since ancient times. Once Bish is prepared in a house, it continues to be passed on from generation to generation, hence it cannot be eliminated. On any particular day of the year,

when this Bish arises in a particular form, it has to be given to someone, even if no outsider is found, it may have to be given to a family member or even to the pets. The untimely death of a Bish-affected person is certain. From the point of view of science, there does not seem to be any reason for the illness of a Bish-affected person. In such a situation, even the doctors become unable to provide any treatment, hence the Deity becomes local support when even the most modern equipment and medicines fail. Even today the people here use some of these areas.

People suffering from different types of curses and spells come to devta Mahesher at their temple. Devta provides sacred water which is used to wash the Muhura (face) of the deity to people who suffer from Bish. This water is provided for a week. During this time an individual has to take many precautions like- not coming in contact with any cats and dogs, not eating ghee, can not eat outsider food like in market, restaurant or others home etc. He has to take the given water daily by following these precautions. It is believed if someone doesn't take the precautions properly, it will ultimately cause to death.

There is another deity called Devta Baneshwar from Chaupal, who is considered an expert in settling land disputes. It is believed that whenever any land is divided among brothers, they always approach their devta and the deity himself distributes the land equally among them with a stick-measuring instrument. When any other person or departmental employee measures the land again with a tape measure or instruments, not even a single thread is visible. This characteristic of his makes the deity popular in this area and the public here also happily accepts his decisions.

Devta Chatrakhand from village Brandli, Kancheen Valley of Rampur is considered an expert in settling the pending court cases very easily. People related to court cases keep coming to this court of deity. Their recognition goes beyond this state but it is intense in other states also. People come to his temple from far and wide and the deity is also famous for employment and procreation.

Savni or Jognisare considered the goddess of high peaks and passes here in Shimla district. They are recognized for saving crops from hailstorms. That is why once a year people went to the high peaks to worship these goddesses. This ritual is known as 'Tikkar'. Sacrifices are offered to these devis. People believe this results in determining favorable weather for crops throughout the year and preventing hailstorms.

The six deities Nag, who is worshiped under different names in the entire Shimla region, and Devta Jakh from village Janglikh and Dodra of Tikkral Valley, Chirgaon, are considered the deities of Cattle wealth. They are associated with milk and ghee. It is in the entire region that, when a cow gives birth to a calf, its first milk and ghee are offered to the deity. Apart from this, these deities also bear the responsibility of protecting all domestic animals, especially cow, sheep, goats, horses, mules, etc., and also protect the animals from various types of diseases.

Mahasu Devta is one such folk deity worshipped at various places of District Shimla, Mandi, Kinnour, and Sirmaur even in the state of Uttrakhand. It is believed that Mahasu i.e. is a part of Mahashiv, hence this deity is capable of doing anything like curing curses, defects, diseases or lawsuits, employment, having children, and land disputes. They are deities and their faith and belief are widespread in Shimla and Sirmaur districts as well as in other outside districts.

A deity of Chauhara Valley, Rohru has its huge place of worshipping named 'Devvan' which literally means 'Forest of Deity' at a village called Mathala. In this forest, no one can willingly go and cut a tree. There are many types of wild animals in the forest, including the extinct musk deer and the state bird of Himachal Pradesh, Jujurana (Western tragopen). No person can hunt them. Therefore, as a result of the protection of the Deity, this magnificent forest is today a haven for wild animals where they can roam freely without any fear. Not only this, Devta has completely banned any kind of intoxicant, especially drinking, in his village. No one can drink or serve alcohol in this village. Many trees have become so grand and huge that it is impossible to see them because they have been protected by Devta since ancient times. A similar type of example can be seen at

the temple complex of Devta Panchveer at village Kadali Devta Moadeo at village Pujarali where many giant trees are still preserved in the name of local deities. A grand tree from the campus of Devta Moadeo at Pujarli, the left part of this tree contains innumerable metal arrows pierced from the trunk or base of the tree to the top of it. As a result of these arrows, the left side of this tree has completely dried up but surprisingly the right side of the tree is still green. It is believed that when the Pandavas came here in exile, they had shot these arrows at this tree. Many Shivlingas and small shrines made in Shikhar style which must have been built in ancient times can be seen around this tree. Devta Doom from Kotkhair region has also their own forest in Hidyog in Shimla, here cutting wood is strictly prohibited. Thus, all the deities of Shimla district are protectors of the environment and nature and at the same time, smoking of beedis, cigarettes, and alcohol is prohibited in the premises of all the temples. Shoes have to be taken off at a marked place. One enters the temple only after washing hands, feet, and face. In this way, these Deities are also advocates of cleanliness and hygiene. Various types of trees, plants, and flowers are also grown in the temple premises on the instructions of the deity because the deities have a special attachment to flowers. These Deities keep inspiring us to include them in our rituals so that the forests, wild animals, and nature here remain clean, peaceful, beautiful, and alive for future generations.

The Deities also give very special importance to the purity of water, as a result, wells or step-wells are natural water sources in or around temples, whose cleanliness is given special attention. Due to this, they always keep us alert about the importance of water and its purity. There are many deities and temples are dedicated to water in Shimla district which are called Jaul Devta. The village of Sarpara in Rampur worships a Naag deity associated with a water pond, which is also considered a form of water by the people.

Two devtas of Rampur Bushahr are Devta Basahru of village Bassra and Devta Maharuder of village Gaso, which are famous for rains and wind. Whenever there is drought in the area, people take refuge in them. Similarly, in the Rohru region, Devta Goli Nag of Navar Valley is also popularly recognized as the rain-bringing deity. An interesting story of the deity bringing rain is narrated in the Bhartha or Devgatha of the deity Goli Nag. It dates back to the reign of King Shamsher Singh of Bushahr. There was a great drought at that time. The king announced that any deity who would make it rain in his kingdom would be rewarded. On this, they expressed their inability to bring rain and said that only Devta Goli Nag can complete this task.

There is a folk ballad of this historical event which is still sung by the locals. According to the folk ballad, due to the anger of the nine planets on the earth, there was such a drought that the water in all the rivers and streams dried up, and the trees and plants dried up. On the king's orders, Basahru, the supreme deity of Bushahr, was asked about this matter. But when no satisfactory reply was received, a letter was written to Rohru asking him to contact the deities who could bring or try to bring rain. When Munshi Chunji and Janaki Das in Rohru read this order of the king, they requested Devta Maheshwar, the deity of Summerkot, and Devta Narayan of Jabal village to bring rain. Both of those deities told that the art of bringing rain is only with Devta Goli Nag, the deity of twenty-six of Pargana Navar. On this, a letter was sent to Shiku Kashaini, Zaildar of Nawar Pargana. After reading the letter, he buried it there because he did not want Goli Nag to go to Rohru and to be imprisoned like other deities (who were not successful in having rain). As soon as the Zaildar kept that letter in his house, the sky became overcast and it started raining. The Zaildar realized that it was by Devta Golinaag. He decided to give it to Devta. He immediately sent the letter to devta. When both sons of Shiku Zaildar reached the Devta with the letter, their priest Sanaisi was covering a sheet over the deity. After they reached, the elected representatives of villages from Hanstadi, Sambra, Dhanoti, Khalai, Kothadi, etc. were called and the letter containing the king's order was read in front of them. In the letter, it was written that after calling Rohru, if Devta Golinag would not be able to make it rain, then the people and the Devta would be imprisoned. Therefore, all the people requested the deity to reconsider going to Rohru. The deity gives full assurance that there is no need to panic. All of you come with me to Rohru and it is my job to make rain. With this assurance from the deity, they set out for Rohru and on the way rest in the Temple of the Devta Ruder. The drums of Devta Ruder, brass cymbals, cymbals, other cymbal instruments, and Baj-gi were taken from Pujarli towards Rohru.

After reaching a hilltop called Fareaota, a high-frequency sound was made from the Darag and Ranasingha sound which was like a lion's roar. From there, while traveling on foot through a ravine called Ferli, Mian Dhyan Singh from Adhal village came to drop the Devta at a hilltop called Kanda. When Devta crossed the bridge built over the Shikri Khadd flowing in the middle of Rohru, a crowd of curious Rohru residents gathered to have their darshan. As soon as the deity reaches Rohru, drizzling rain starts. Within a short time, the flowing Shikari Khad and Pabbar River of Rohru, which had little to no water due to drought, were now filled with water due to floods caused by rains. As soon as the deity Goli Nag reached Devta Shikdu, the local deity became very angry. He announced that he would not accept any other deity in his area, to which Shiku Zaildar and others protested, saying that the deity Goli Nag had been called on the invitation of the king. Dafadar Dhanna and other officials also support it. As a result of causing torrential rains, Devta Golinag was gifted tax-free land as a reward by the king.

After that, the deity begins to return. Buddhi Singh Negi Dhasi Ram and Sadhu of Village Siyao requested the Devta to stay there and proposed to give a goat as a gift, which the deity rejected saying today "I will go to Pujarli (No. 4). I will rest at the place of my elder brother Ruder". Zaildar Chewri performed the union of the two deities as soon as the deity Goli Nag reached his place Pujarli (No. 3).

There are also many legends about ancient and mythological Muhura in Shimla district. According to locals, these Muhuras originated from divine coincidence, which is why they have appeared in different places for different reasons. When new or contemporary Muhuras are made, then these are made by metal craftsmen with the permission of the temple committee and the deity itself. The artisan has to follow some particular rules on the instructions of the deity.

A similar description related to the origin of the ancient Muhura of Devta Ruder from village Pujarli (No.4), NawarValley helps us to understand the myths and legends of the origin of these Muhura. There are total eleven Muhuras in the chariot of Ruder Devta, which are all believed to have originated in different places.



Figure 2- Chariot of Devta Ruder.

According to Folk belief, there was a person named Kathru of a village named Koti. Once he brought eighteen pairs of the bull were plowing a field. A bird called Chakar suddenly appears and falls under a plow. The bird got buried under a line of soil in the field. The bulls stopped there and refused to plow further. Then Hali, who was plowing, called out to Kathru that the bull was not moving. Then he said that it is already afternoon and perhaps the bulls might be hungry, that is why they are making such an excuse. After feeding, when the bulls were still not ready to move forward, they started to hit the bull, yet the bulls did not move forward. Frustrated Hali called out to Kathru again. Then he came to the fields and tried to push the bulls forward but still, the bulls did not move a single step forward. After that, Katharu sat in the forest feeling tired and started wondering what is happening. Meanwhile, Chakkor came out of the buried soil, from the deep line of soil made by the plow, which is called 'Siyee' in the local language. It flew and fell straight into Katharu's lap and within no time it became a Muhura. He brought that Muhura to his home. After reaching home he started thinking about it and built a temple in a village called Deoli. Soon he shifted the temple to village Pujarali, where the present temple of Devta is located. It is an excellent example of the temple architecture of Pabbar Valley. Similarly, a Muhura was originated in a place called Kareul and one at a place called Bagoda, three Muhura were collected from a village called Dashedal which originated in the same way. The person from the family of Gharala was made the

Pujari (Priest) and the person from village Khalavan was made the Bhandari (Storekeeper). A person who belonged to Raid caste used to graze the cattle of a person named Frinkura. He suspected the shepherd would drink the milk of his cow. So one day he accused Raid, "You drink the milk of my cow every day in the forest". But it was not Raid. He got upset and the next day he decided to look for the actual culprit who drank the milk of cows every day. Then he noticed the same bird chakkor, who was drinking milk from cow. In anger, he shot an arrow at that chakar from his bow. When this arrow hit the bird's chest, it started speaking in human voice, "You have shot me with an arrow, so don't even try to touch me." Looking and hearing this, he got scared and went straight home. He narrated the whole instance to a wise Bhaat (Bhramin). Then went to Fiunkara. Then Friunkra went to that place, hold that bird and it also turned into a Muhura. Then he brought that Muhura to the nearby temple of Devta Ruder and by combining all of them, a beautiful chariot of the Devta Ruder with eleven Muhuras was prepared.

A similar folk tale is also heard describing the origin of the Muhura of Devta Chatrakhand from village Brandli, Rampur. According to the folk tale, Devta Chatrakhand is believed to have originated under a type of wild bush, which is locally called 'Chatri' in the folk language. Due to its emergence from under the Chatri, the deity was named 'Chatarkhand.'" It is said that once a shepherd used to graze his sheep and goats in the pastures made in the forest. A Khaddu/Hul (ram) from his flock always ran away somewhere. Every day this ram would run away



Figure 3- Muhura of Devta Chattarkhand.

from the herd and go to the bushes of Chatri. This ram used to lick the Muhura of Devta under this bush every day, and while returning home this ram appeared silently back to the flock. Once this shepherd thought about where this ram goes alone during the day time. He thought about a plan and tied a woolen thread on one leg of the ram. While grazing the sheep and goats, the shepherds used to weave and spin the threads from their wool. By spinning, a type of thread was prepared and collected in the form of a ball which was unlimited. After tying a thread on the leg of the ram, he was released into the herd. As usual, this ram disappeared from the herd at the appointed time. While following the length of the thread, he reached under the same bush of Chatri. Shepherd was surprised to see the scene in front of him. He saw that the ram was licking a Muhura and as he licked it, a divine glow was emanating from the Muhura. He thus picked up the Muhura and got it to his village. Finally, the construction work of the chariot of the deity was completed in the house of the Pond family of Brandli village. This day was the 18th of Paush i.e. 1/2 January in the Gregorian calendar. That is why from then till today there has been a tradition of celebrating the birthday of Devta Chatrakhand with great pomp on the 1st or 2nd of January every year.

There are some mystic deities popularly known as 'Kala-Kappar' in Shimla district. These are often connected with evil spirits. These deities are mainly considered as the subordinate deities of the major Deities or sometimes they have their own independent influence. These are mainly those spirits whose figures are especially few and mainly represented by some specific signs found in temples or on trees and bushes. Their temples are also small and in some places, their temples are surrounded by big bushes where there is very little daylight. Mainly they accept the sacrifices, even if they are recognized along with the major deities and they are pleased with the sacrifices. This type of deity or spirit is mostly recognized by the lower caste people in Shimla district.

These spirits are those whose aspect is dark, even the common people do not even like to call their names. They are considered to be strong representatives of demonic powers and for them, there is no difference between good

or bad. Whoever wishes for them and pleases them by offering sacrifices, they do whatever the wisher wishes. Especially these are wishes considered to cause loss of life, loss of money, loss of animals and incurable diseases, untimely death, extinction of descendants, accidents, and mental illness like driving a person crazy. When it starts affecting a person, it is called 'Dosh'. This Dosh can be cast by anyone from any caste, gender, and creed. This is mainly spelled in land disputes and even in domestic issues. Even today, people of Shimla district are more likely to get involved with each other in land disputes. It is believed if it is cast on someone, it will continue to cause pain and loss to man for generations unless it is properly diagnosed. In such a situation, these popular deities on whom the people have strong faith are the only option. Only these main Deities remove these types of defects.

Many times these evil spirits are appeased by giving them their desired objects and sacrifices. Such activities can be commonly seen in various temples of Shimla district where the deities will be found performing various measures to deal with these demonic powers. In district Shimla, 'Dosh' is such a folk taboo whose existence is accepted by everyone but no one likes to talk much about it. In this, only the pain of the victim can be felt and full faith is placed in the main deity and it is wished that the fault of the victim is rectified promptly and the demonic power is calmed down.

CONCLUSION

In essence, this belief about the accidental discovery of Muhura of Devta seems real. But these must certainly have been made at some other places in ancient times and as a result of the migration of people from one place to another due to different social, economic, and political circumstances, these ancient pieces also relocated from their original place to different areas of this district. Since these were worshiped as images of Deities since ancient times, people continued to carry them from one place to another as per their convenience out of faith and for their protection, until they remained in permanent form.

From the social and cultural aspect, the fairs, festivals, and religious rituals celebrated with reverence and faith in the deity are noteworthy. All types of cultural events celebrated in the Shimla district are related to the deities. Their participation and blessings are considered necessary. The society here itself is a divine society governing under the guidance of Deities. The Devta is supreme and their commands are universally accepted. The people here consider them as their friends, family members, etc. That is why they express any kind of question or doubt in front of the Devta without any hesitation. Various types of domestic problems, mutual disputes, diseases and ailments, land disputes, pending court cases, profits, and losses. These Gods and Goddesses have people believe that deities have full control over natural calamities like no rain or excessive rain, protection from hail, good crop yield, protection of pet animals, protection from fire and accidents, and maintaining an atmosphere of peace and brotherhood, etc. They have also maintained this belief from time to time. That is why even today the tradition of God is followed in society as it was in ancient times.

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