



КУЛЬТУРОЛОГИЯ CULTUROLOGY

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INCREDIBLE TRADITIONS AND AMAZING CULTURAL PRACTICES OF KINNAURAS

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Himalayan region has long been known for its mysterious ritualistic performances and traditions. The cultural ritualistic practices can be linked with religion and spirituality, healthcare, childcare, artistic expression, dietary preferences and gastronomic traditions, social institutions, natural resource management, architecture, governance, or it can be practices linked with “*Everyday life*.” The rituals and festive occasions often take place at particular time and place and are closely linked to a community’s insight of its history and reminiscence. Some villages in Kinnaur have legendary cultural history, which has been passed on from one generation in a form of oral traditions. An institution of a local deity is one of the significant components of socio-cultural life of Kinnaur. The local deity is not a statue but is a supreme authority, who behaves like common human beings with sentiments and sense of pride. An institution of a local deity is not a matter of chance, but there has been a legend behind each one of these deities and this practice has its roots in the midst of primeval time. Thus, a deity is the main monarch and symbol of indigenous culture in Kinnaur, one of the most archaic regions of the Indian Hymalayas.

Keywords: Himalayan region, Kinnaur, tradition, indigenous culture, ritualistic practices, local deity.

БОГАТЕЙШИЕ ТРАДИЦИИ И УДИВИТЕЛЬНЫЕ КУЛЬТУРНЫЕ ПРАКТИКИ КИННАУРА

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Гималайский регион известен своими мистическими ритуальными практиками и традициями. Культурные ритуальные практики могут быть связаны с религией, медициной, воспитанием детей, искусством, гастрономическими традициями, социальными институтами, охраной природных ресурсов, архитектурой, управлением или тем, что может быть названо «повседневной жизнью». Ритуалы и праздники чаще всего приурочены к конкретному времени месту и тесно связаны с историей общины и ее памятью. Многие деревни Киннаура имеют свои легендарные истории, которые передаются из поколения в поколение через устную традицию. Важную роль в ритуалах имеют локальные божества, являясь важнейшим компонентом социокультурной жизни Киннаура. Локальное божество – это не статуя, а верховный авторитет, который ведет себя как человеческое существо, наделенное переживаниями и чувством собственного достоинства. Институт локальных божеств – не плод случайного появления, но за каждым из них стоит своя легенда, а их ритуальное почитание уходит во тьму веков. Таким образом, локальное божество является правителем и символом традиционной культуры Киннаура – одного из самых архаичных регионов индийских Гималаев.

Ключевые слова: Гималайский регион, Киннаур, традиция, традиционное общество, ритуальные практики, локальное божество.

Himalayan region has long been known for its mysterious ritualistic performances and traditions. Those who are simply view the region may believe these customs to be taboo. But those who actually have concern to understand the connotation of these beliefs will value them, despite their oddness. Cultural practices usually refer to the expression of a culture or sub-culture, particularly with regard to the customary practices of a particular ethnic community or any cultural group. Broadly speaking, this term can be related to any person revealing any feature of culture at any given point of time. However, practically it refers to the traditional customs, rituals and belief systems, which got evolved in any ethnic cultures, particularly those facets of culture that have been practiced since times immemorial. In the contemporary scenario, when we are talking about the changing cultures, cultural practices have become the subject of discussion in questions of cultural survival. If an ethnic group upholds its ethnic identity but loses its core cultural elements, practices or knowledge, or ability to continue them, questions arise as to whether the culture will be able to survive in future. The cultural practices can be linked with religion and spirituality, healthcare, childcare, artistic expression, dietary preferences and gastronomic traditions, social institutions, natural resource management, architecture, governance, or it can be practices linked with “*Everyday life*”.

Culture is a term that has different and diverse meanings and can be appreciated in many ways, for instance it may be social behavior for many. According to Edward Taylor (1983):

“...culture is used to designate not merely something to which one belongs but something that one possesses, and along with that proprietary process, culture also designates a boundary by which the concept of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to the culture comes into forceful play...”

The term ‘*culture*’ has been described from various angles by different scholars, for example, “culture may also be defined as the socially and historically situated process of production of meanings” (Barrett *et al.* 1979). The social practices and rituals are the representations of cultures. In the words of Sperber (1996):

“...those representations which are repeatedly communicated and minimally transformed in the process will end up belonging to the culture...”

Understanding culture as an exemplary part of cultural history, where we establish its parameters by theorizing some concepts and ideas. When communities practice their customs and rituals, they create a cultural network and share ‘*clusters of common concepts, emotions and practices*’.

Cultural practices, rituals and festive events are customary events that shape the lives of communities and organizations and can be of relevance to the members of that particular society. These practices are significant because they endorse the individuality of those who practice them as a group or a society. Social, ritual and festive occasions may be linked with the seasons, agricultural calendar or the phases of an individual’s life. These may vary from small congregations to big social celebrations. The rituals and festive occasions often take place at particular time and place and are closely linked to a community’s insight of its history and reminiscence. In some cases, access to rituals may be restricted to particular groups or individuals of a community. Social practices, rituals and festive events include a variety of forms, for instance:

- Worship sacraments.
- Birth, marriage and funeral rites.
- Conventional legal systems.
- Customary games and sports.
- Kinship ceremonies.
- Settlement patterns.
- Gastronomic traditions.
- Seasonal occasions.
- Hunting, fishing and gathering practices.

These include a variety of expressions and physical components, like unusual gestures, recitals, dance and music, folklore, special costumes, processions, animal sacrifice, special food, etc. an effort has been made to enlist a few rare and exceptional practices and rituals of indigenous people of Kinnaur.

Of the many villages in Kinnaur, some have legendary cultural history, which has been passed on from one generation in form oral traditions, for example, while talking about Kanam, people narrated:

“Once village Kanam was thickly populated and there was a gate at the entrance of the village. Everybody had to put-off their shoes outside the main gate. A ghost, residing nearby used to visit the village and count the number of shoes. In case of any

additional pair of shoes, he used to kill the outsider. Disturbed by the actions of ghost, the villagers prayed to Dabala, the local deity of the village. The deity later proposed to marry his sister with the ghost. It is believed that after their marriage, the ghost never killed anybody and the village was re-established.”

Institution of a local deity is one of the significant components of socio-cultural life of Kinnaur. The local deity is not a statue but is a supreme authority, who behaves like common human beings with sentiments and sense of pride. The institution of local deity is not a matter of chance, but there has been legend behind each one of these deities and this practice has its roots in the midst of primeval time. The deity not only has control over the village administration but also direct the social and religious customs (BOSH). The people cannot afford to disobey the deity at any cost and in case it happens so, its wrath manifests in form of disease or any other mishap. There are incidences to elaborate this, as:

“...Once, few outsiders working near the place marked for the serpent deity polluted the site. As a result respondent’s son, who was an allopathic doctor in Delhi, suffered from acute backache. When lama was asked to know about the cause, he revealed that the pollution of sacred site was responsible for the wrath of deity. The lama suggested appeasing of serpent deity through ritual worship, which was carried out and helped the victim in getting rid of pain...”

Thus, deity is the main monarch and symbol of indigenous culture. Almost all the festivals are linked with the deity, who presides over the festive occasions. During the festive occasion, the deity is invoked, who later make announcements and foretells the future. The oracle of the deity in trance reveals the will of the deity, which everyone is bound to follow. The women folk welcome a deity with local wine, which they carry in bottles. In addition to this, there are saints, whistling spirits, serpent deity and other mystic & sacred benign forms, revered for their supreme powers. People have faith that these supreme unseen powers meditate on Himalayan Mountains and legendary heaven, the land of ancestors and land of Yama, the god of death are located in the midst of Himalay. In some areas, certain week days or months of year and few sacred sites are spotted for making special offerings. In upper Kinnaur, people believe in

the existence of fairies, locally named as *Vandevior Saauni*, who are supposed to reside in the forests and lonely places especially at a very high altitude. Fairies are unseen powers, which are believed to control the life of indigenous communities. In order to propitiate these fairies, people celebrate *Lamoth*, a festival which comes in the month of February. Local wine, *chiltu* (an ethnic food) and curd are offered to appease them. It is thought that during this festival, *Vandevior Saauni* takes a trip to entire district, which lasts for five days. Hence, the worship is made for two days each at the beginning and ending of their voyage. Starting the journey is considered auspicious while the return is considered ominous. People consider that on their way back, they take away the living beings with them; hence to stay away from such circumstances, people remain inside their houses and also keep the livestock in the sheds. To put in the picture, the existence of fairies, people have narratives. There are stories narrating the role played by fairies in the life of indigenous society:

“...Once a shepherd was moving with the flock of sheep. On his way he noticed that some of the sheep were missing. He was worried so he prayed to the fairy for helping him out in the situation. In the night, he got a dream, in which he was directed to move in a particular direction, which he did the next day and successfully located his sheep...”

Another similar incidence narrates:

“...A Shepherd use to take his sheep for grazing to a grazing land, and after leaving them in the grazing land, he uses to take a nap. The fairies of that area use to take him to the fairyland, where he was fed with sumptuous food. The awesome beauty and delicious food captivated him and he decided that he will take away with him, the food and serve it to his family. He did as desired and packed the food in a cloth bag. When he woke-up he found that his bag was full of cow-dung...”

Like all world religions, beliefs and customs are integral part of Himalayan culture. On one hand, the belief systems enrich religious ceremonies, which commemorate specific events with deep religious connotation and on the other, they reinforce sacred beliefs which console and support the unity of its followers. The world of spirits is central where good spirits provide protection against damage, bad luck, and sickness, cure illness, give rain for crops, and

safeguard cattle. Failure to follow the behavioral procedures often results in the wrath of spirits. In Himalayan societies, the ancestors, though not regarded as Gods, but are given reverence like living elders. Just as there are good spirits, there are also horrific or devil spirits, responsible for misfortune. Moreover, the indigenous communities living in Himachal believe in spirits that reside in nature. For getting relief from ancestral wrath and fulfill the wishes of departed soul, special feasts are organized, for instance, in Batseri, *fulaich* or 'the festival of flowers' is celebrated in the month of August-September. On this occasion, the people bring *dongro* (brahamkamal flower) from high peaks. A local deity comes out from a temple and fair of *Singan-Nagin* (serpent deity) is organized. In Sunnam, on the occasion of *Fulaich*, the lineage deity is worshipped and people visit pastures and pay homage to demised souls. People bring *loskar* flower from heights and exchange flowers. While coming back, worship is performed at different sites. People host flag in the name of ancestors at pastures.

Chaitral of Pangni is celebrated in the month of February-March. During this festival, people release air of fountain gun in each other's ears. Burning embers are brought out from kitchen hearth on a piece of broken earthenware and family members take a handful of common salt, swivel over their head and throw it on burning embers. The earthenware is taken out and kept at cross road along with an earthen lamp. Viewing of each other's earthen lamp is considered ominous. The festival helps in evading the negative planetary influences. In Sunnam, during *Chaitral*, the palanquin of local deity is made to dance. *Pranjan*, a ritual barley cake is kept on the roof of temple and the same is thrown next day to conciliate the evil-spirit and ghost. Likewise, *losar* or New Year is celebrated in the last week of December. In Sunnam, Lippa and Kanam *Brangyas ormisto* (ritual cake) is prepared using barley flour and festooned with ethnic food, fresh and dry fruits, garlands of pine nuts, sun, moon and stars made of butter. *Misto* is kept decorated for two days and its viewing is considered auspicious.

Homang is an annual ritual performed at community level in Pangni in the month of March. On this occasion, the oracle performs *homang*, or the sacrificial fire. The purpose is to protect the entire village community from witches. People inhale garlic

for entire day. A knife is kept in a pocket of a child. The oracles, capable of recognizing the presence of witches, try to save people from the fury of witches.

Festival of *Budhhi Diwali* in Sangla is celebrated after main Diwali festival. A legend is associated with this festival, which states:

"Once there was a demon named Banna, who came all the way from Nirmand to Sangla. During his journey, he defeated many local deities and wanted to conquer Bairang Nag. But, when he reached Sangla, Bairang Nag killed him. In order to express the joy of assassinating the demon, people started celebrating *Budhhi Diwali*. The festival starts in the midnight and continues till early morning. The wooden poles are collected from the forests, which are twisted and shaped to a serpent. The wooden serpent is soaked in water and brought near temple premises. After this, people drink *tifasur*, a local wine, and the deity selects two people for chopping-off the wooden serpent. The serpent is chopped-off with a sickle. The anterior end of serpent is kept in the temple for one year and the posterior end is thrown away."

Initially, this ritual was performed by Bairang Nag to kill Banasur, who assumed the shape of serpent.

Khepa festival of Sangla is linked with demonic powers and on this occasion people bring a thorny stem of Himalayan Cherry and cling at the entrance of house. Animal sacrifice is made and horns of goat/sheep are burnt in hearth for whole night to avert evil-spirit through its smoke.

Likewise, there are rare traditions which are linked with birth, marriage and funeral rites. In addition to arranged marriage, which is common in entire Kinnaur, some aboriginal forms of marriages were common among indigenous people of Kinnaur. These marriages either involved elopement or capturing. In some villages of Kinnaur, *bagyshis*, marriage by elopement, was common previously but, rare incidence of this marriage can be witnessed at present. This type of marriage was organized if the parents did not agree for marriage. The boy and girl elope to some other place without informing their parents. Afterwards, boy's close relatives use to visit girl's house to convince her parents for marriage. The law-breaker couple was later received back by parents and marriage was arranged formally. *Dubdub* or *khuchis*, connoting the abduction or capture of



Local deity on the occasion of ritualistic



Oracle of deity in trance

Brangyas ormisto (ritual cake)



People welcoming deity with local wine

Man carrying the masks of deity during a ritual

bride was another form of marriage that was common in villages of Kinnaur. This used to be one of the most popular forms of marriage but no longer in practice. In the marriage by capture, both boy and girl knew each other but marriage cannot be solemnized due to unwillingness of parents. Therefore, abduction was the only way out. Most of the time, the capture was pre-arranged and took place during fairs and festivals. *Dumtangshis* was a kind of love marriage, in which the boy used to take his beloved to his house and rest of customs were organized in the similar manner as for *dubdub* marriage. *Haari* was another form of marriage in which a married woman either ran away with another man or was abducted by another man. In such cases, the new husband had to refund the expenditure incurred by ex-husband. The re-payment of money was called *haari*. This marriage is no longer in use. Earlier, short marriage was performed during which the *khukhari* (dagger) was sent in place of groom and the marriage party used to come back with bride.

In the rituals linked with death, when pyre is set on fire in cremation ground, at household level, *thunyaang* or crow feeding is done at household level. Milk, clarified butter, curd and preferred food of demised person are fed to crow. It is believed that the food offered during *thunyaang* directly reaches the soul. Feeding of crow is continued for five days. People narrate:

Once upon a time, three people got stuck-up in a glacier and two of them died. Their relatives thought that all of them have died and performed *thunyaang*. To their surprise, the offerings, which were made during *thunyaang*, were taken by a crow to the location where the person was buried. The crow left the eatables near the person who ate them and survive. Afterwards, he narrated the entire incidence. Hence, the belief that the food offered during *thunyaang* goes to the person for whom it is offered is substantiated with this instance.

Chhotpa, a post-funeral ritual is performed after ninth or tenth day of death. On this occasion, the monk brings *khanta*, a locally available shrub which is burnt during this ritual. A day before *chhotpa*, the goats are slaughtered and *chhantothupka*, a ritual soup is prepared by boiling goats' head and barley flour. On this day, the Buddhist monks and nuns recite holy hymn and traditional bread is distributed among friends and relatives.

However, with the passage of time, the social practices, rituals and festive events have been strongly influenced by the transformations which are taking place in the contemporary societies. Migration, especially of young generation is driving them away from the intangible cultural heritage thus posing threats to some of the cultural practices. The influence of modern means of entertainment and lack of interest are some of the reasons responsible for present state of affairs.

The social practices, rituals and festivals serve as special occasions on which the people return their homes to rejoice with their family and community. This reaffirms their individuality and links them with their traditions. People are apprehensive that though the setting-up of power projects and building of roads has increased the process of development, but the negative impacts of development can always be seen in the organizing of rituals and festivals. Ever since, the outsiders have entered the area, the unique culture is witnessing a downfall. Though the primitive customs are still prevailing in Kinnaur, but some traditions are on the verge of extinction and people believe that there is need of preserving the legacy of indigenous culture for the generations to come. Ensuring the continuity of these practices and rituals requires the mobilization of individuals and social institutions. In some instances, legal and formal actions must be taken to ensure the rights of the community to access its sacred sites and natural resources essential for performing these.

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