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Glimpses of Folk-Lore and Oral-Traditions of Himachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT :

Located in the lap of the Himalayas, Himachal Pradesh is the state that is not only famous for its alluring landscapes but also for its rich cultural heritage. Out of a number of rich cultural heritages of this northern state of India, the Himachali folk tradition occupies a special position. These folk traditions speak of the history, and the existence of common people who inhabit the place. Folklore and oral traditions are integral components of cultural identity. In Himachal Pradesh, diverse ethnic communities contribute to the vibrant tapestry of narratives that have been passed down through generations. The following article takes one to the land of enchanting melodies and implores a look at the different forms and significance of Himachal folk music tradition. This study aims to explore the themes, forms, and functions of these traditions, emphasizing their role in the social and cultural life of the region.

Key Words- Folklore, Myths, Ballads, Tradition, Folktales, Music, Dance, Rituals

Introduction :

Himachal Pradesh, located in the Western Himalayas, is often referred to as Dev Bhumi, or 'Land of the Gods and Demigods.' The state is primarily mountainous, with elevations ranging from 350 to 7,000 meters above sea level. During the Colonial Rule, Shimla served as the summer capital of India, later becoming the capital of Punjab, and eventually the capital of Himachal Pradesh after the state achieved statehood. According to the latest census, approximately 95% of the population in Himachal Pradesh are Hindus, with Muslims making up about 2% and Christians less than 1%. In some regions, the Buddhist population is in the majority due to the state's proximity to Tibet. The main Hindu communities include Brahmins, Rajputs, Kannets, Rathis, and Kolis. Additionally, Himachal Pradesh has a tribal population that includes Gaddis, Kinnauris, Gujjars, Pangawals, Lahaulis etc. The primary means of livelihood for the people are agriculture and horticulture. The state's culture is reflected in the languages spoken, with Hindi being the state language and various Pahari dialects being widely spoken. Hinduism is the dominant religion in the state, and music and dance play an important role in its art and culture. Fairs and festivals are also significant aspects of Himachal Pradesh's cultural traditions.

Folk-Lore and Oral Traditions :

Folklore is the study of survivals of primitive customs, old beliefs, traditions and art still practised and found among the races of antiquity and the backward, uneducated, semi-educated people living in today's modern and civilized world. Synonym of 'folklore' in Hindi is 'Lok Sanskriti'. Word 'lok' has been derived from Sanskrit meaning 'observe' or 'see'. The word has been frequently mentioned in the Rig Veda. The grammarian, Panini, has usually used lok and sarv-lok in his Ashata-dhayi.

Oral tradition, or oral lore, is a form of human communication in which knowledge, art, ideas and culture are received, preserved, and transmitted orally from one generation to another. Oral tradition in folk music is the process of passing down folk songs and other cultural material from one generation to the next through speech or song the transmission is through speech or song and may include folktales, ballads, chants, prose or poetry.

Himachali Folk-Lore and Oral-Traditions :

Himachal folklore which embraces folk-songs, dances, drama, ballet and opera, besides being a source of enjoyment, provides an unending stream of glittering phantasma from which painters, sculptors and writers derive inspiration. In addition to the mythological legends, which have been woven around gods and the mysterious dwellers of the mountains, it is rich in references to history, social life and political conditions of the times.

This oral art can be conveniently divided into legends of ancient heroes, fairytales, demon tales, mythological tales, folk-dances, folk-songs, folk-drama, hill ballet and opera. While the legends and tales are more important to specialized compilers and scholars who can use them for the study of philology, archaeology, anthropology, and religion, the folk-dances, songs, dramas and ballets are a matter of everyday enjoyment not only for the participants but also for the locals and the outsiders. Here are some key aspects of the folk lore and oral traditions in Himachal Pradesh

Folk-Dances

There are both solo and group dances. The most important is Natrambha or Nati. It is danced to the accompaniment of drums, clapping and singing. Ran Singha, Karnal and Shehnai provide the musical notes in between. Nati can alternate as a solo or a group dance. When it is a group dance scores of people can perform it in a circle or in a chain which in movement can be circular or serpentine. Mala, Rasa and Chhari are the other favourite folkdances. In the sword dances of Kulu, men dancers, dressed in the traditional tight white trousers and tunics, with bright bordered shawls and black plumed caps lavishly decorated with blue primulas and yellow jasmine, begin the performance. The women dancers wrapped in woollen shawls wearing their colourful headgear (Dhatu) enter the arena. Forming a circle and holding a handkerchief in the right hand, men and women wave it as they move round and round in a movement of eight beats. Sometimes there is a slight change and there are four steps taken with a pause in the fifth, and three more steps with the flat of the foot. Then suddenly, as the group pauses, two or three dancers come into the centre of the circle and commence dancing with brandishing swords; then they circle these weapons very fast, round and round in the air, with great skill. The dance is accompanied by dholak, Ran Singha, Karnal and small clarionets. As the musicians sing, they recall the old days of chivalry and romance and also praise the deities. Moving from the rather slow and measured dance at the start, the entrance of the sword dancers raises the tempo of the performance till it reaches the crescendo.

Dances are performed during festivals before or after the sowing or harvesting seasons. These are, however, not restricted to festivals or fairs, but are performed spontaneously at all community functions or gatherings-marriage, childbirth or the worship of a god. Hard working hillmen forget their toil and compete in song and dance. For them every joyous happening is enough reason to be celebrated with a Mela (fair) which enables them to show off their finery, to exchange gossip, to buy petty Knick-knacks and above all to dance and sing.

Folk-Songs

It is no accident that we call music our heart beat. It is the heart's native language. We speak it in bliss and in grief. We speak it intuitively and unconsciously. Music and songs are valuable not only because these bring refinement of feeling and character, but also they preserve and restore social health. The folk-songs are known for their melody and charm. Broadly speaking, the tunes followed are those of the Pahari Rag, the Jhainjhoti, the Jhuri and the Lamien. The northern most areas of Kinnaur and Lahul and Spiti have, however, different music. The musical instruments also vary. The glamour of Shimla, the capital, features in many a folk-song since it attracts the young lovers of the surrounding hills. The songs describe the charm of the meadows, the mountains, the moonlight and the clear dawns. The musical instruments commonly used are RanSingha, Karnal, Nafiree, Manjira, Dhol, Nagara, Damama, Thali, Bhana, etc. It is customary to play Badhai, the welcome tune, at the beginning of all fairs, festivals, offerings or even at the arrival of important persons.

There are scores of love-lyrics that are current in Himachal areas. The famous among these are Phulmu-Ranjhu, Kunju-Chanchalo and Raja-Gaddan. These exquisitely rendered love-songs depict the joy and sorrows of young hearts. The Phulmu-Ranjhu lyric tells of a tragic episode. In Kunjhu-Chanchalo, the song takes the form of a conversation between the lover and his sweetheart. The Raja-Gaddan song records the wooing of gaddan Nokhu by Raja Sansar Chand of Kangra. The pretty Gaddan while reconciling to her fate to be the beloved of the prince, finds it difficult to forget altogether her former husband who was a tribal Gaddi. There are also songs which recall some important historical events like the sacrifice of Rani Suhi for public cause like bringing drinking water to Chamba town. The song called Sukrat is soulfully rendered and depicts the great story of the sacrifice of the Rani, famous for her feeling of love for the people and her deep human sympathy for them. Another tragic story telling the love of a brother, who takes upon himself the blame for the murder his brother committed and thereby goes to the gallows in Bilaspur, is depicted in one of the saddest song called Mohuna. Ceremonial lyrics such as Bhyayi, Suhag, Suhagare and Vidayi are sung on special occasions like birth, betrothal and marriage. Then there are seasonal songs like Chhinj which are sung in Chaitra (March) only. These unfold the love-lorn heart of a woman who languishes for her husband who has gone too far off lands.

The folk songs of Himachal Pradesh violate established orthodox institutions and retaliate, while striving for freedom and uninhibited love. Some of the examples, such as, Rupnu Puhai, Mian Manglotua, Mere Chanda, Suni Bhunku, etc. are noteworthy. Apart from these, many other song-types are also sung in different parts of Himachal Pradesh. The most important among them are Kunjri, Malhar, Chaita, Jhuri, Nati etc. The songs depict pain agbny and basic curiosities of the people. The concept of Vipralambha-Nayika (A woman whose husband is away which we come across in Chaita, Kunjri and Malhar is parallel to the concept which we find in Bhojpuri Rajasthan, Gujarati or any other folk music.

Folk-Drama

Folk-drama encompasses the entire personality of the hillmen. It seeks to meet all his intellectual, emotional and aesthetic needs. Unlike urban and modern drama, it freely uses songs, dances and instrumental music besides dialogues. The multiple approach results in a form that is self contained and is complete entertainment. Folk drama has survived the competition from cinema and other organized entertainments because of its capacity to adjust old themes to the idiom of contemporary audiences and reality. Various techniques are employed; comments by a player, didactic exhortations and appearances of characters from modern life in the earlier settings are its flexible devices.

Karyala, Banthra or Sang are the commonest forms of rural drama, all of which show remarkable awareness of village people about their economic and social problems. The plot of these plays is generally loose and adjustable and, therefore, leaves much to the ingenuity and improvisation by the performers. It is usually built around certain character-types. Any available space in the middle of a field, marked by two or three feet high poles with

cords tied round them, provides the stage for the folk drama. The audience sits all around such a stage. There are a number of folk theatrical forms found in Himachal Pradesh. Typical forms of music and dances are prevalent in different parts of the state, such as Karyala belongs to the limited areas of Shimla, Solan and Sirmaur. Other notable forms are: Hiranatar or Haran of Chamba and Kullu, Horing-fo of Kinnaur, Dbaja of Solan, Bantbra of Mandi, Bhagat of Kangra, Raslila, Swang, Nati, Giddha, Chandrauli or Chandrauwal and Chanan Sbah of Bilaspur, Raslila of Chamba, Kangra and Bilaspur districts.

Folk Ballads

Folk songs are short in narration and in them the element of story is missing, whereas ballads are long songs entailing a story or historical account. Kunju-Chanchalo, Raja Rasalu, Guga Jaharpirpir are such ballads. The word Ballad (Lok Gathaen in Hindi) is connected with ballet that originally meant a song as accompaniment to dancing but later covered any song in which a group of people socially joined. With a passage of time, the practice of dancing declined and only mere singing of ballads continued.

Folk ballet and opera are also performed in certain areas. These are called Sih, Rawal and Boora, and are a sort of unwritten tales narrated like other stories through the medium of ballet or opera. Handed down from generation to generation, these have undergone modification but their essentials have remained unchanged. These are, however, exclusive arts for men. The dancers and audience assemble in a courtyard or a temple. The singers squat on the ground and to the accompaniment of tambourine commence singing the story in chorus. The dancers donning wooden masks sit on the sides. As the musicians start their song, dancers get ready and in a short while start going round and round dancing and interpreting the story by means of highly formalized gestures and movements. They swing and sway, intensify their footwork and get deeply involved in the performance.

The ballet and opera usually tell stories of love or tales of satire and irony. Sometimes a mythological story interspersed with incidents picked from daily life is enacted. The gods, the parties, the witches, the demons, the village loafers, imposters, jokers, the shopkeepers, the money-lenders and various other characters drawn from the hill people's life are woven into these dance-dramas.

Tribal Folk Traditions

The tribal dances of the Trans-Himalayan region are different in content and music. The old tradition of both song and dance in these areas has been zealously guarded against any urban influences. The districts of Kinnaur, Lahul and Spiti and the tehsils of Pangi and Bharmour of Chamba district constitute this zone. The inhabitants in these areas are known respectively as Kinnauras, Lahaulas, Spitians, Pangwals and Gaddis. Besides there are the Gujjars who are still the wandering nomads. All these tribes have their own distinct traditions of folk-dances and songs. They have also their distinct dresses and ornaments. Besides the popular dances like Kayang, Bakayang and Banyangchu, there are ritual dances, performed by Lamas on certain religious ceremonies or festive occasions. The dancers and musicians both wear embroidered and brocaded robes. The faces and heads are covered with quaint huge masks. One masked dance particularly features an important event in the history of Himalayan Buddhism when Lamas successfully carried out a plan of executing a cruel king, Langdarma, in the eighth century. A special occasion for masked dances is the celebration of the birth of Padama Sambhava (A.D. 750-800) who is held in high esteem by the Buddhists of Himalayas since it was he who carried the message of Buddhism to Tibet.

Conclusion :

Overall, the culture and folk tradition of Himachal Pradesh is very wide in nature. Every feeling and sentiment of folk life is described in it. The geography of Himachal is divided into mountainous and plain, i.e. tribal and plain life. Hence, the folk tradition of Lahaul Spiti, Pangi, Kinnaur etc. regions is influenced by Tibetan Lama Religion. Due to the same influence, the folk songs, stories, dramas, sagas differ from plain Himachal, which is curious in its nature. In short, the folk tradition of Himachal is divided into many forms and many styles. The principle of unity in diversity is alive and reflected in the folk lore and tradition of Himachal Pradesh. This quality gives Himachal a rich culture and tradition. Today, when modernity and liberalization are at their peak all around and everyone in the society is moving towards openness, Himachali folk literature, culture and other arts are preserving their mythological and glorious past. Most of the citizens of this beautiful state are proud of their folk lifestyle and its past and in some way or the other everyone is moving forward by handling this heritage.

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