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Kinnaur: A Site of Global Confluence

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Abstract: Kinnaur, a significant region in Western Himalayas boasts of a vibrant and diverse culture. This paper tries to bring to the forefront the region by focusing on the socio-political and cultural aspects that sets this region apart. This paper by tracing the evolution of the space down history engages largely with the contexts of globalisation and its impact on the identity of Kinnaur. The larger aim of the research is to foreground the unique oral and folk tradition that is intrinsic to the region.

Keywords: Kinnaur, Indo-Tibetan Trade Relations, Syncretism, Folklore and Oral Tradition.

Introduction

Kinnaur -- the land of deities -- situated in Himachal Pradesh, in Western Himalayas, is a land which is characterised by a unique culture and sensibility. It has certain geographical specificities -- a landlocked region with the river Sutlej flowing through it -- which has gone into determining the culture, customs and traditions indigenous to Kinnaur. This is among a few regions in India where polyandry is still practised and which also boasts of a matriarchal social system. Moreover, this region has shared a space where there is a simultaneous existence of two religions- Hinduism and Buddhism, which is described by the terms such as "syncretism" or "religious Dualism" (Raha, 1978). Moreover, historical narratives and archaeological evidences point to the role of Kinnaur in the mythical history of India as it is believed that the Pandavas along with Draupadi spent a year of their exile in Kinnaur. By taking into account the many implications of these aspects this paper proposes to explore the modes and mores of this region and analyse their relationship, and among other aspects, to the tribal literature endemic to this region.

The role of religion, history, and geography in creating the oral tradition of this region is the



main crux of the ongoing research by focusing on the tribal literature which consists largely of folklores, folk tales and folk songs which is a part of the everyday existence of Kinnauri people and if/ how it has been influenced by the changes that have come to the region and how it has reached the present stage of its evolution. This engagement also takes into account the geopolitics of Kinnaur and how it's location is at a strategic point in the Indian subcontinent opening up movements within and outside the scope of the nation state thereby alluding to the possibility of a global transaction, which is the immediate concern of the paper.

As part of the study, the narratives regarding the historical background and those alluding to the geographical areas are taken up for study with special focus on the prominent matriarchal system inherent to the region. Even while considering these factors another aspect of the position of the tribal women within the society and their influence on the creation and propagation of the Kinnauri literature is also a major point of interest.

This paper engages largely with the contexts of globalisation and its impact on the identity of Kinnaur. Towards that end, this paper will be engaging with sites of interactions such as the language, the Indo - Tibet relations through Kinnaur, the unique trade routes and rules, the tourism sector that is a high contributor to the cosmopolitan nature of Kinnaur, political intervention from Gorkhas, the unique natural resources present there and its equally scintillating religious legacy. The paper engages with how all these have in a way contributed to the making of Kinnaur as a site of global and local confluences.

Kinnauri Language: A Motley

Kinnauri is heterogeneous in nature, and has a set of many dialects and depends to a great extent on its variations in accent and the vocabulary list. Due to the lack of script and because of a unique indigenous grammar it was not possible to preserve Kinnauri in written form. There are some Tankri inscriptions on temples and wooden works which provides information regarding vocabulary list that gives a general picture of linguistic situation in Kinnaur. This research was undertaken as part of a series of research travel to Kinnaur and other parts of Himachal and there were many interesting findings regarding language and Script.

Tankri script in Kinnaur has been used by Kinnauri people for purposes of business /trade



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and recording, official-agreements. On linguistic grounds, Kinnaur is divided into two blocks: Upper- Kinnaur and Lower- Kinnaur, and even within the variants in these blocks there are several differences in its accent and vocabulary, so standard Kinnauri is the medium that connects Upper- Kinnaur with Lower- Kinnaur. Apart from that, a form of Indo-Aryan language is spoken in Kinnaur. An interesting aspect regarding the cross border influences in the realm of linguistics can be found in Rahul Sanskritiyan's book KinnerDesh Mein. He has given the name "Homskad" to this and interestingly why it is called "hom" is not mentioned but in kinnauriHom means our/s and Khad means language/ dialect. One can also find the influence of Sanskrit, and Bhoti in Kinnauri language. The geographical boundaries of Kinnaur which is adjacent to Tibet and Shimla helps to understand that Kinnauri is an amalgamation of Indo - Aryan and Tibet - Burma. The use of Tibetan language in upper Kinnaur area is more visible because of the borders and further dissemination of cultural and religious influences which is strongly felt in upper Kinnaur.

Although common masses do not understand this language much, but among monks (lamas) and nuns (jomos) the learning of this language is mandatory as it is linked to their practices in their religious life. Interestingly, although infrastructure development is taking place in Kinnaur with modern education and globalisation, culturally it has negative implications on the language front as it becomes the major contributor to the language extinctions because Kinnauri is being replaced by linking words of Hindi and English. Except for the older generation very less people speak pure Kinnauri language, even in folk songs, music and dance there is mixture of pop music and songs, this way purity is tainted, leading its way to extinction. This can be understood as the other side of the confluence of cultures and practices.

Indo- Tibet Trade and its Historical Relevance

Early relation between Kinnaur and Tibet is not clear, it leaves us with a lot of questions regarding transnational relations. Linda LaMacchia points out in her work Songs and Lives of the Jomos "Did Tibet colonize Kinnaur/Bushahr and did all, just the upper part, or none of Kinnaur belong to western Tibet?" (9) If yes, then to what extent can we see the influence of Tibet over Kinnaur? The historical background of the Bushahr-state takes back to the time when many battles have been fought among hill chiefs of Shimla, but Kinnaur (was once a part of Bushahr -state)



remain in complete isolation from rest of the India. Rulers of Bushahr state were also in complete peace and harmony like the virtuous king Chatter Singh, and his successor Kheri Singh who has earned the title of the “Chatrapati” (Bajpai,1991) from Aurangzeb. Kheri Singh was a skilled warrior and known more for his relation with Tibet’s King. It is believed that when Tibet-Ladakh-Mughal War (1681-1683) took place and Tibet was supported by Kheri Singh. All of upper Kinnaur which Tibet occupied during the war was bestowed to Kheri Singh and this friendship had resulted in a commercial treaty that also benefited Kinnauras. There were certain privileges enjoyed by Kinnaura- traders such as: exemption from paying tax, free movement across borders. Hence Bushahr state (Rampur) was a hub of Indo- Tibet trade.

Exchanges of goods such as wool, pashmina wool, woollen clothes, crockery, carpet, kala-jira, salt,- sheep, yak, horses with other plain areas of India and in exchange — sugar, iron-tools, brass utensils and indigo were supplied to Tibet. So, this trade brought economic prosperity and development to Kinnaur. Unfortunately, trade remained standstill after the occupation of Tibet by China, but still illegal trade practice is being observed in these boundaries. In order to revive this trade the Internationally recognised Lavi -Fair is held every year in the month of November in Rampur, the town has been hosting this International Lavi fair for more than three hundred years, Now district Kinnaur (after separation from Rampur) also celebrates same fair which starts a few days before Rampur’s Lavi- fair. Thus, Rampur was the gate towards Kinnaur, Tibet and Afghanistan. Therefore, the Lavi- fair is renowned for its excellence in bringing to the forefront the ancient Indian culture. At present cash crops such as apples, peanuts, dry-fruits, handloom are exported from Kinnaur to countries outside.

Efforts are also made by government to foreground the art and craft of Kinnauri culture with the aim to preserve the unique culture and to attract tourists across globe.

Trade Practices

M.K Raha and Mahato, in their work *The Kinnaurese of The Himalayas* highlights various trade practices and identified two practices such as Moshe and Dopchak. Moshe is a system of trade based on the relationship developed between individual traders on either side of the border. In this regard they say, “Each individual trader from Kinnaur had one or a few traders at Tibet and other



places with whom only the Kinnaur trader should trade. So his counterpart/ counterparts in Tibet were called Moshe, the traders from Indian side could not trade with any trader other than his Moshe. He was free to trade with others when his Tibetan Moshe was not present. According to this system the contract was made and signed by Kinnaurese trader and his Moshe in Tibet. The Moshe used to keep this contract duly signed under a sealed covered” (114).

Dopchak/Ngonshe is the other system that they identified, which refers to a system of mutual cooperation and agreement among traders of the various countries. “This system, trader of both the sides used to make an agreement that trade commodities would be sold to the traders under contract, through middle man called Ngonshe. Traders outside this contract could not get things; only the excess goods and goods not under contract could be sold to the other traders. Also through the Ngonshe provided traders under contract refuse to buy those and Ngonshe in exchange of his service used to charge commission from the parties. If any party break the rule of Dopchack that party would have to pay fine worth the weight of half of the pebble of gold” (115).

Gurkha Occupation and 19th Century Invasion

The great tussle between Gurkhas and hill chiefs were either as a result of border disputes and expansions of belligerent parties. “The Gurkhas of Nepal conquered the Shimla Hills state and the state of Bushahr except Kinnaur. The raja of Bushahr and his mother, refuge in Kinnaur, and the kinnaures held the Gurkhas off by burning the first bridge into Kinnaur (Wangtoo)” (Linda, 2008).

Although, Gurkhas could not harm the king and his mother, king’s treasuries and historical records were wiped out by them. Since Kinnaur was a part of Bushahr state, so this destruction may partly have affected Kinnaura’s historical documents. Later on under the leadership of Colonel Ochterlony with the alliance of some local chiefs, Gurkhas were completely defeated and Amar Singh Thapa was expelled. However, Gurkhas (Nepalis) are still coming to Kinnaur, Rampur, and Shimla to find jobs and settling down across Himachal Pradesh. Therefore, migration has been taking place over a long period of time and as a result of it socio- cultural assimilations among Kinnauras -Nepalis and other regions of Himachal by contact and communication.

Religious Legacy

The existing religions Buddhism and Hinduism have contributed significantly amount to the



creation of Kinnauri identity and literature. This gains prominence in relation to the stories that circulated as part of the presence of numerous deities endemic to this region. Besides these, the possession of human beings by deities is a crucial part of the rituals and cultural ceremonies and the act of storytelling takes on a new level here. Moreover, studies have been done on the Jomo (nuns) of this region highlighting their stories and songs. Clearly, religion plays a crucial role in the narratives.

In many areas of Himachal Pradesh, religion decides the culture and Kinnaur, one among them, is considered as a religiously mixed area with the amalgamation of religion and culture. The upper part of Kinnaur is more influenced by Tibetan culture and Buddhism than lower part of Kinnaur, this is because of Indo -Tibet trade that played a crucial role where as the lower part was geographically close to Rampur Bushahr. Despite different religions Kinnaura pay respect to each others religious views which is quite evident from the deities's temples adjacent to buddhist temples and involvement of both religious practices in their life.

Narrative Accounts in Festivals

Many festivals are celebrated in Kinnaur and each festival has its own story. For instance Ukkayang (festival of flowers), Sazo (new-year), Ormigh (festival of Pandavas), Bishu (welcoming of new years), and Loser, upper Kinnaur festival (new-year). These festivals are celebrated with traditional songs which are passed down to generations with the aim of preserving the native culture. Since Kinnaur does not have any script so its history is shown through oral narratives, fair, festivals, folk songs and folk tales. Therefore, socio-culture amalgamations and its historical relation between Kinnaur -Tibet is preserved in the narrative form of festivals.

Exploration of Natural Resources

The Hydroelectric power Projects in Kinnaur district (H.P) is meeting the demand for electric power in India and is able to provide rural India with electricity and has other benefits such as generating employment and boosting the Indian economy. However, it has increasingly come to impact environment in a negative way. The large part of shaky Himalayan regions have been exploited for various socio-economic purposes.

Kinnuars' livelihood is closely linked to the eco-system and the development of projects are



affecting their livelihood. Severe consequences such as: climate change, lack of agriculture and horticulture productivity, deforestation, drying up of agriculture land, landsliding, and the drying up of river Satluj have been felt because of these projects. This leads to a threat of water crisis, which might end up in a possible third world war. Air pollution and lack of moisture in soil leads to less production of apples. Many villages in Kinnaur district (Pangi-Kashang-Projects, Moorang- Tiding, Chagaon, Urni-Wangto) have been affected by the projects. So, loss of biodiversity can not be supplemented with hydro-power projects.

Although some concern and unrest have been shown by the local inhabitants of Kinnaur, government needs to take serious action so that power projects must be eco-friendly and sustainable in nature.

Conclusion

This research apart from highlighting the unique and diverse culture of Kinnauri people, also presents how the inhabitants of such region shows close proximity towards their own culture and geography. Their conscious effort to save the culture is reflecting through folklores and oral narratives. However, major steps needs to taken by the next generation to preserve their unique culture, which is passed down the generations and continued the legacy. Unfortunately, under the influence of modernisation and globalisation they are disconnecting from their socio- cultural and historical identity.

Moreover, there is the need to understand the contribution of the unique specificities of the region to its literature also envisages the need to promote and preserve the age old cultural tradition of Kinnaur. Other major steps to be taken on environmental front. Also need to be more focused on the realm of the environment-in preserving the remaining ecosystems and revamping it as it forms an integral part of the religion, culture and local tradition has an impact on the narratives which are part of the tribal literature.

Thus, this paper deals with the context of globalisation and engages with the sites of interaction such as language, trade routes/ rules, tourism and religion which plays a vital role in the formation of the identity of Kinnaur at global and local level.



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