

An Introspection on the Folklore of Bharmani: The Patron Goddess of the Gaddi Tribe

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Abstract

This paper is an introspection on the folklore of Bharmani, the patron goddess of the Gaddi tribe. The article throws light on the nature of dichotomy of faith and belief of this tribe. The article is about the local deity Bharmani and her strife with Shiva, the trident bearer. Thus giving way to an entirely new dynamics of folklore where through compromise two different faiths flourished. The tales apart from being political and subversive suggest an alternative way to coexist in harmony. The present Manimahesh Yatra of Bharmour, Chamba suggest a synthesis of two opposing myths. It also offers a prolific example of a settlement and understanding. The article also brings to light the need to visit and question such existences of confluences. This is also an effort to study an otherwise religious debate from an academic perspective. The Gaddi folkloristic space is dynamic and has scopes of multiple readings.

Keywords: Gaddi, folklore, coexistence, compromise

The Gaddis are a semi nomadic tribe of Himachal Pradesh. They are the inhabitants of the upper basin of the Ravi River. Bharmour, a *Tehsil* under Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh, is the seat of Gaddi life. The historical, cultural and social scenario of Bharmaur presents a unique amalgamation of faiths, beliefs, rituals and practices of the people coming and settling in Bharmaur from different directions. The history of the place is also included in the folk stories of Gaddi people. Gaddi is an open term for the members of the tribal group,

which belongs to the Gaddheran area. There is a strictly knitted caste system among Gaddis based on the pan Indian Hindu caste system. The term Gaddi is applied to everyone who belongs to the tribe and not to a particular community, caste or clan.

Different theories are laid down about these wandering people coming and settling at Bharmaur. There is a popular saying among Gaddis about their arrival at Bharmaur, “*Ujdeya Lahore, te baseya Bharmaur*”, meaning Bharmaur was populated after Lahore was deserted. Scholars, of course have alternate interpretations. The emphasis of this paper is more on the rich folkloristic heritage of the Gaddis and not their historicity.

Gaddis have immense treasure of literature in terms of Orality. The oral universe of the Gaddi tribe can be understood through various forms of Orality and tale telling, which is the per-formative part of folklore. The mythology of the Gaddi folklore ranges into many categories. They have preserved and held on to their age-old methods of living life which is full of songs, stories, anecdotes, riddles, and intimate knowledge about the flora and fauna. This traditional knowledge which also serves as the collective cultural wisdom and knowledge of the Gaddi tribe are mainly passed on to generations through the medium of oral telling and retellings. In the Gaddi cultural space, elders whether male or female of the family would narrate stories to young children of the family or exchange riddles, making them familiar with the sensibilities and ethos of the social group.

The oral folkloric literature of the Gaddi people has a rich heritage which caters to varied sub genres. The general enquiries would, most of the times, be religious and ethical in purpose and have a good deal of didacticism at the end. The range of the subjects also varies from the socio-cultural to the metaphysical, where gods come and dance with the common folk. On a generic level the Gaddis folklore can be sub-divided as under

1. *Ainchali*, religious folk narratives of major pan narratives
2. Religious narratives and stories of various residing village deities.

3. Children's stories and songs, beast fables, forest stories and anecdotes related to childbirth.
4. Stories of magic and supernatural entities, of forest dwellers and strange animals.
5. Songs of women dealing with life and death --- celebratory, advisory and melancholic.
6. Songs on popular subjects, which range from the enquiries on daily life to philosophical ones.

The above division reveals that the religious folklore of the Gaddis have a dual nature of existence—Ainchali and the local narratives. Ainchali is made up of three different narratives. They are the *Sabeen*, *Pandaveen* and *Rameen* which are the Gaddi narratives of the *Shiv Puran*, *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*. The local narratives are many and varied but one stands out more than others – the narrative of goddess Bharmani. She is considered to be the guardian of the Gaddis and has lent her name to the most important place of Gaddi culture, Bharmour. The earliest reference of a great religious upheaval in this area has been dated back in the sixth and seventh century, when King Maru came to Bharmaur and established a pan Indian religious system, abolishing the pre-existing maze of local village and forest Gods and Goddesses.

This paper will explore the myths and narratives of local deities and throw light on the displacement that happened many years ago when a major religion takes up residence in an otherwise peripheral space. As Niel Phillip says:

A myth is first and foremost a story. But it is a story that encodes the values, beliefs and dreams of a people, so each myth arises from a particular cultural context. The sacred qualities of the myths are central to the meaning of each story. Often myths may be told by certain individuals, or at certain times of the

year, or during certain ceremonies. To re-tell or re-enact a myth is to step out of this world and into the myth world. (8-9)

By myth world I would like to refer to that world unseen but felt, the forces behind our every move, the reason behind the animation of our world. Myths are then the bridges that help us cross this vast universe of the unseen, they are the key to this negotiation between the two worlds.

Bharmaur, the land etched in the lofty Himalayas have a strong tradition of mythical folklores. The people have still not lost touch with their old beliefs passed down through generations. They have a story for all occasions and an explanation for every mystery of life. In Bharmaur there is a dichotomy of sorts so far as their folk legends are concerned. While they revere their patron Goddess Bharmani Mata and other minor native hill Gods and Goddesses, they equally worship their God Shiva, who they believe is their guide and protector. These hill people attribute their sustenance to Bharmani Mata and their existence to Lord Shiva.

Bharmani is the patron goddess of Bharmour. There is not much evidence, written or recorded related to the goddess. But as folklore suggests she is the chief goddess of Bharmour, benign and gentle and very rarely agitated. There is a logical reason for her being the patron goddess of Bharmour by her association with water. Some scholars associate her with the forest and call her a Van-Devi¹. But there is an equally strong parallel school of thought that associates her with the rest of the pan Indian gods. The Gaddis associate Bharmani with life giving water. The spring of Bharmani is the only source of natural drinking water and it covers the area of about thirty villages from Bharmour to Khani village, some ten kilometers downhill.

¹ Forest dwelling goddess

In the present context the dwelling place of Bharmani is in a beautiful and open grassland with an adjoining fur grove called Dugha Sahr. The present priest of Bharmani who live in Bari village, a village that lies near Bharmour, says that in *Satya Yug*² when there were face-to-face conversations between the divine and the mortal, Bharmani lived in the midst of Chaurasi. Her *Chinha*,³ a trident still exists in an open area in front of the Lakshana Devi temple. The story goes that once when Bahrmani was not in residence, Lord Shiva on his way to Manimahesh arrived there in the evening and settled there for the night. It was open grassland surrounded by high cedar trees. The beauty of the place at once won the heart of Shiva who was travelling with his 84 *ganas*⁴. By chance Bharmani came back that very evening and was infuriated at the sight of Shiva and his ganas. She at once asked Shiva to vacate the place. The lord pacified her and sang praises in her honour along with his Ganas. At this she allowed Shiva to stay for the night and herself went to Duga Sahr⁵. The next morning when she came back, she was greeted by a different scenario. The whole place was deserted and she could see various lingams erected all over Chaurasi. The great mother was in a terrible rage to see those half lit *Dhunas*⁶ of the Ganas and the obvious lack of care with which her abode had been used. Mad with anger she summoned Siva. Shiva began to realise he was facing no meek force and so he began pacifying Her. He said in the age of Kali (*Kali-Yuga*) there will be a pilgrimage to mount Kailash in the month of Shravan⁷. Devotees from all direction will come for the holy pilgrimage and if his wish is sincere, Siva will fulfill it. The god declared that this sacred trip will be rendered incomplete unless they begin it by

² It means the age of truth. According to Hindu philosophy there are four ages – Satya yug or the age of truth, Treta yug or the third age (chronologically this age came after the satya yug), Dwapur Yug or the second age and Kali yug or the last age. According to the Hindu mythology the universe will exhaust to Armageddon at the end of Kaliyuga, giving way to a new universal order..

³ The sacred relic.

⁴ The followers of Siva. In the gaddi belief Siva has a huge army of gana. As Siva is the king of dhauladhar mountains

⁵ A deep meadow in Gaddi vernacular dialect.

⁶ Bonfires made by ascetics.

⁷ The season of the rains, usually falls between July-August.

getting the blessings of Bharmani, the mother of the universe. Pleased with this the goddess went away to her resting place in the forest.

There is another reason for Bharmani being worshiped as the patron goddess of Bharmaur and the surrounding villages. Her association with water, from ancient times points towards the benevolent nature of the goddess who slayed demons by sprinkling water from her Kamandalu. Bharmani Devi is famous for giving rains and water, which springs from her feet at Dugha Sahr. The water is further channelized to almost thirty villages in the Budhil⁸ valley. The control of life giving water in the region elevated Bharmani to the status of the most revered deity in the region. Her role in the local society is thus like the early kings who controlled water for the regulation of their states and to prove their authority over the subjects. Mahesh Sharma writes:

The control of water was necessary for the regulation of the early state, particularly in the terrain where the water table was low. Therefore its economic significance -- for irrigation, communication, drinking, running water mills, etc. gets magnified in the ritual domain as well. As was the early Brahmanic custom in the subcontinent, water from all sources of the state was necessary for the consecration of the king. In a way the ritual subsumed all identities to fashion the state; the king being the protector of all the people within its domain. (47)

Further enriching the water tale, the local people have another story about the water which Bharmani Mata stole from the spring of Sandhola, a Naga deity⁹. Sandhola Naga's abode is on the other side of the same mountain where Bharmaur is located. According to the local legend, once Bharmani Mata along with her sister Jakhni Mata who is the patron goddess of Gareema village, went together to steal water from Sandhola's spring. The Naga

⁸ The name of a tributary river of Ravi.

⁹ A deity of the serpent genealogy.

was sleeping when the two sisters entered his domain and filled their pots with water. As they were returning back the snake god awoke and chased the sisters with a bow and arrow in his hands. When they reached at the ridge of the mountain, Bharmani threw her vessel down the slope which landed at Dugha Sahr. The other goddess Jakhni Mata had a long way to go as her village was far from the ridge of Kukdu. Therefore Jakhni Mata was hit by Sandhola's arrow in the leg and her water pot fell from her hands and fell at Badei village and thus formed a spring there. Later, a temple of Jakhni Mata was erected there and the deity was known as Latti Jakhan¹⁰. The priest of Jakhni Mata, until these days dance on his one foot at occasions whenever the deity is invoked.

There are many other local legends about Bharmani Devi which gives her the status of the reigning deity of Bharmaur. Her appearance in the local folktales provides her with a rank of a guardian and the protector. As the goddess is worshipped as the fertility goddess, devotees go to her temple to ask for children, especially boys. So it would be right to say that people seek her blessings for the growth and sustenance of their family, clan or race.

Thus the historical belief that classical tradition displaces the local or lesser known traditions can be challenged. For in the case of Gaddi folkloristic space a fusion of traditions can be seen. No tradition can fully exist and thrive without the aid of some other traditions. The dismantling of the devi cult of Bharmani by Shiva's brigade not only suggests the fusion of two separate myths but paves a way to a new folklore with an entirely different dynamics that incorporates the undercurrents of coexistence. This synthesis can be assessed in terms of the sacrificial offerings towards these deities. While Shiva, the proclaimed God of the Gaddis gets one sacrifice per devotee in a lifetime, Bharmani and the other local deities, on the other hand, have no such limitations. They are in fact the local go-to gods and goddesses. The

¹⁰ Lame in Gaddi dialect.

relationship of the Gaddi with his Bharmani is more natural and less formal in contrast to the more rigid one with Shiva.

Hence the affiliation and association reflect an ancient power play suggesting force, deceit and compromise thus rendering an entirely new understanding to the Gaddis, who still try to strike a balance between the two.

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