
FOLKLORE AS APPARATUS IN GENDER POLITICS: A STUDY OF GADDI MYTHS

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Abstract: In this paper I would explore the Gaddi folklore. The Gaddis are devout worshippers of Siva but are equally fervent followers of the indigenous goddess Bharmani and other local deities. Interestingly enough they consider themselves to be extensions of Siva and Siva is the most important God. At the same time these mountain dwellers desperately seek the grace of Bharmani for progeny and fertility and the most precious gift of water. This paper will go further into the local narratives and try to envision the paradigm shift that probably dismantled an erstwhile goddess worshipping mountain community and brought it under the Hindu aegis.

Keywords: Bharmani, Chaurasi, Folklore, Gaddi, Gender.

Introduction: The Gaddi tribe of Himachal Pradesh is originally a transhumant tribe. The Gaddis are traditional shepherds by vocation. The majority of the Gaddi population comes from Bharmour tehsil of Chamba district. In the 2011 Census there are more than 1,78,000 Gaddis with a healthy sex ratio of 1014. Himachal as a state has a literacy rate of 83.78%. It is 90.83% for the male population and 76.60% for the female population. These numbers change drastically when applied to the Gaddis alone. The literacy rate is 73.3% on the whole but there are fewer numbers of girls in higher education. The Central as well as the State governments have initiated a number of schemes to draw more number of girls to pursue education especially in the tribal hinterlands. Some of them are “Girls’ Attendance Scheme”, “Thakur Sen Negi Uttkrishtha Chhatravriti Yojna” and “Incentive to SC/ST girl students for secondary education”. Himachal also has the provision of granting “private candidacy” to girl students. These numbers and ratios are a clear indication that the female population of Gaddis (since this paper is on Gaddi concerns) are quite behind in education.

Another matter of importance is that the Gaddis have no system of giving equal inheritance to female children. Family inheritance is through the sons only and the girl child is given her “share” as her dowry. After marriage a Gaddi woman has no identity of her own. She assumes the identity of her husband and later that of her son. She is commonly addressed by the vocation of her husband, “*lallain*” (shopkeeper’s wife), “*Gaddan*” (wife of Gaddi shepherd) and so on. Even today most Gaddi girls are married off before their twenties. It should be noted here that women have an equal share of household as well as farm work with the rest of the household. Even the Gaddi women share an equal load in the herd (shepherding). In spite of these initiatives the financial empowerment of the women has much to be gained before it is even comparable to their male counterpart.

The question now arises how folklore makes admittance in such a paper. The answer lies in the history and culture of the Gaddis. There are a number of theories as to the origin of the Gaddi tribe. O.C. Handa mentions as many as 4 theories but postulates that they must have come from the shepherding communities of Gujarat and Rajasthan. The Gaddi homeland of Bharmour was once the most coveted land during the Varman dynasty of Chamba. In fact it was once the capital of the kingdom. Thus the famous Chaurasi temple complex was constructed. Even after the capital was shifted to Chamba the kings still came to Chaurasi after abdication. But Bharmour and Chaurasi lost its importance with the decline of the Varman rule. The place lost touch with the rest of the kingdom after the capital was transferred to Chamba.

Interestingly enough the Chaurasi temple complex has a different folkloristic story altogether. The Gaddis are devout worshippers of Siva and even consider themselves to be made from the grime of Siva or Dhudu as is locally known. But the patron goddess of the Gaddis is Bharmani. The importance of this goddess can be surmised from the fact that Bharmour the seat of Gaddi culture has got its name from her. It is locally believed that during the *Satya Yug* when the world was still free of evil, Bharmani used to live in a forest in what is now Chaurasi. She was banished from her home by Siva. Presently the temple of Bharmani is on top of a mountain in Dugha Sahr quite far away from Chaurasi. This place is also difficult to access.

Academically in folklore studies works related to women can be further subdivided roughly into three categories.

... folkloristic literature on women falls into three broad areas of concern: the images of women that are projected in verbal folklore and the extent to which negative images have been used to condition attitudes ... The second relates to questions of women's aesthetics: how women's social roles (for example, their traditional place in the private sphere of the home and their more tenuous position in the often male-dominated public performance sphere) influence female creativity; and how women's art projects a female vision of the world. The third involves how women have been recognized or not recognized.

(Rosan A. Jordan and F.A. de Caro)

This paper addresses the first area of concern. To understand the different folklore of Chaurasi and also the displacement of Bharmani it is necessary to study the history behind the creation of the complex. The Chaurasi temple complex was established by some of the greatest kings of the Verman dynasty of Chamba. Vogel and Hutchinson mention that Maru Verman who ruled in 680 AD, apart from his heroic nature and thirst for land, was a man of strong religious sentiments. His name is associated with the most ancient and beautiful temples at Bharmaur. The Lakshana temple, the Manimahesh Shiva temple, Ganesa temple and the life sized Nandi bull have been attributed to the reign of the Maru Verman. In AD 920 Sahila Verman ascended the throne, and shortly afterwards *Brahmpura* (old name of Bharmour) was visited by eighty four ascetics along with Charpatnath¹. It is believed that the king established eighty four mini shrines to perpetuate the memory of that event which were named as Chaurasi in the later period. Although he never erected

¹Famous guru of Nath sub sect of Siva worship.

any temple at Bharmaur, he renovated the old temples which were greatly destroyed by the Kira invasion. The present stone temple of Shiva is said to have been built by Sahila Verman. The old wooden Shiva temple of Meru Verman's reign was totally damaged, revealing the huge lingam unsheltered. The shattered brass idol of Ganesa was again reinstalled by Sahila. According to O.C. Handa, "the king made Charpatnath his spiritual and temporal mentor. On his inspiration Sahila Verman shifted his capital to Chamba". Chamba was named after his only daughter Champavati and the transfer happened probably in AD 930. (*Gazetteer*, 67). Bharmour lost its magnificence once the capital was moved to Chamba and Bharmour was slowly forgotten. Bharmour's neglect is related to the story of Bharmani's displacement.

But folklore has a completely different story of how Chaurasi was established. The story goes that Bharmani initially used to live in what is now Chaurasi temple complex. Once when she was not in residence Siva accompanied by his 84 *ganas*² happened to pass by the area. He was so charmed by the beauty of the place that he decided to rest there for the night. When Bharmani came back the same evening she was infuriated by the sight of the unexpected visitors. Siva sang songs of glory in her name and asked her permission to stay for the night. Bharmani decided to grant their wish and went to Dugha Sahr for the night. But the next morning when she returned went mad with rage when she found her abode deserted and desecrated. Siva and his entourage left 84 lingams spread all over her residence. Enraged she summoned Siva who realized that he had antagonized someone he cannot afford to offend. "To pacify her he said in the age of Kali (*Kali-Yuga*) there will be a pilgrimage to mount Kailash in the month of *Shravan*³ and that holiest of the journeys will not be complete without showing obeisance first to Bharmani. (N Sharma) The pilgrimage in question is the annual Manimahesh Yatra which starts on Janmashtami and ends on Radhashtami⁴.

This story declares without any doubt that that "gendered statuses are everywhere unequal, so that men and maleness are dominant while women and femaleness are subordinate". (Nenola) while the story may not be true with historical evidence it is nevertheless true in essence. As mentioned earlier the most important god of the Gaddis is Siva. They have been enacted from the grime of his body and Siva is in fact their undisputed leader and hero and they follow in his footsteps like the sheep follow the shepherd. In fact the Gaddis believe Siva to be a shepherd. But in spite of this they also have a deep faith in Bharmani. She is the patron goddess and is the mistress of rain and productivity and procreation. In this tough mountain region control of water is indeed very important.

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. (Mahesh Sharma, 47)

²The followers of Siva. In the Gaddi belief Siva has a huge army of *gana* as Siva is the king of Dhauladhar mountains

³ The season of the rains; it usually falls between July-August.

⁴Auspicious Hindu festivals celebrating the births of Krishna and Radha respectively.

“Her association with water, from ancient times point towards the benevolent nature of the goddess ... The water is further channelized to almost thirty villages in the Budhil⁵ valley.” (N Sharma). Her position was like that of a ruler in the valley of Bharmour.

But with all her prominence the Gaddis still call themselves Saivites. This paper would like to point out that folklore is used to conserve and even to contest the status quo in a society. It is quite cliché to say that the folk literature like all literature reflect the norms of the society.

Nevertheless it is a clichéd truth. It is also equally accurate to say that folklore informs and influences the perceptions of the society. It is easy to imagine the Gaddis as traditionally as worshippers of the mother goddess. When they came under the reign of the Verman kings their culture and their faith slowly were dispersed and the faith of the monarch slowly emerged as the dominant faith. The old faith never really vanished but remained residual. This “historical truth” got converted into what William Boscom calls “verbal art” or folktale and the fantastical story of Bharmani’s displacement by Siva from Chaurasi was created. The later history of Bharmour where it got lost in time after the Verman dynasty left its patronage also added to the story of Bharmani.

The position of Bharmani or rather her position as subservient to Siva only echoes the position of women in the Gaddi society. Like her they are eminently displaced, subordinates to their male relations both before and after marriage. In today’s high paced world the Gaddi women have a lot of milestones to cover before they can fairly compete with other women let alone the historically and culturally advantaged men counterparts. Folklore reflects the ethos of the era. It is dynamic and eminently topical. The narrative of Bharmani speaks of submission and subordination and toleration to these routes of practices. The Gaddi women need to take a firm stand and learn from history and myth to forge a stronger future.

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⁵The name of a tributary of Ravi River.