

Oral Traditions & History of Jammu Hill States



The modern Jammu region is quite poor in terms of the availability of written records. It is quite well known that the region was divided into twenty two Rajput principalities during medieval period, particularly from the fifteenth century onwards. These principalities were ruled by lineages that were both Hindu and Muslim. For example, the rulers of Jammu, Jasrota, Bilawar, Bhadrawah and Mankot belonged to the Hindu Rajput dynasties,, whereas the rulers of Rajouri and Punch belonged to the Muslim Rajput dynasties. Though some Mughal chronicles provide scattered information regarding the socio-political and economic life of these principalities, there are hardly any indigenous source in local or non-local languages, providing information regarding the past. J. Hutchison and J. Ph. Vogel, the authors of the History of the Punjab Hill States, the pioneer work on the history of Jammu hill states, depend mainly on the traditional genealogical tables (Vanshawalis) for tracing the dynastic history of these petty chiefdoms.

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It is customary among the common people to narrate historical events and keep alive the collective memory in the form of folktales and folk songs. In the different parts of the Indian subcontinent, the wandering singers present folktales and folk songs in the form of public performances in the rural areas. These singers are known by such names as mirasis, jogis and faqirs. They entertain the people with songs/stories describing the heroic deeds of past heroes or narrate the resistance against foreign invaders. Moreover, these singers also sing songs in the memory of local deities, rituals, customs and other cultural developments. It is important to mention that these singers' songs did not restrict themselves to the events of a particular chronological span. Instead, they incorporated the events of different periods in their stock of themes.

Similarly, it is a common practice for the people in India to quote legends, myths and superstitions in support of their actions, thoughts and beliefs. Besides, a large number of jokes and satires have been manufactured at the popular level against the deeds of people belonging to the diverse (other/alien) social groups. However, the oral traditions in various forms tends to remove, to a large extent, the difficulties and hindrances caused by the non-availability of written records, hitherto considered essential for reconstructing the history of a region, race, people and period. It has already been pointed out that many societies or communities or social groups (and regions) of India do not possess adequate and suitable historical records, either in the form of archaeological remains or written documents. In such a scenario, the availability of oral evidence inspires the people to trace their own history.

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J. Hutchison and J. Ph. Vogel, the authors of the History of the Punjab Hill States, the pioneer work on the history of Jammu hill states, depend mainly on the traditional genealogical tables (Vanshawalis) for tracing the dynastic history of these petty chiefdoms. But as far as the oral traditions are concerned, they yield rich data regarding the historical development in the region. Highlighting the importance of the oral traditions in historical perspective, Hutchison and Vogel write, "... common tradition is often useful in throwing light on the events of past, and much information of a fairly reliable character has come down to us through this channel. In the hills social conditions have been prevalent from remote times, which give to traditionary lore an importance and credibility which it would not elsewhere possess. Till comparatively recent years the hills were almost entirely isolated from the plains. The rugged character of the country made invasion difficult and conquest practically impossible. This is the chief reason why we read of so few dynastic changes...Nor is this claim to ancient lineage confined to the families of the ruling chiefs. Many Brahmans also can prove, by the title deeds to their possession, that their ancestors have held their lands in unbroken tenure for many centuries, and in some cases of nearly thousand years.

Even the common farmers, in numerous instances, reside in same villages and till the same lands as their ancestors have done from time immemorial.

And families older than even these are to be found in the hills - the descendants of petty chiefs called Ranas and Thakurs, who according to common tradition, held independent rule in the dim and misty past, long before the Rajas appeared on the scene. If to all this be added the glamour and romance of the hills: the conservative character of the people and their devoted attachment to their hereditary chiefs, and their native land in all its interests: we have those conditions, in full measure, which tend foster a love of traditionary lore, and to create an atmosphere most favourable for its transmission, with remarkable accuracy of detail, to posterity."

The statement of Hutchison and Vogel seems to be correct in the light of the specific socio-political conditions of the Jammu hill states. It may be mentioned that almost all castes and tribes, inhabiting the hills, practiced agriculture and animal rearing as basis of their livelihood. All the social groups maintained their indigenous traditions. Instead of depending on the imperial records, the people of Jammu hills generally quoted the oral traditions while tracing their past.

The oral traditions of Jammu hills are available in form of heroic ballads, folk stories, (lokgatha) folk songs etc. These traditions contain a great variety of historical themes. Moreover, the oral traditions are available in different languages and dialects of the region. Though the Dogri is the major language in terms of the making of oral traditions, some other dialects such as Bhadrawahi and Kishtwari have also been employed for making stories, songs and proverbs.

The oral traditions are preserved by the people in accordance with the themes. For instance, the ballads known as karaks are sung to narrate the life and works of a saint of the area concerned. These are sung by hereditary and professional singers known as garadi.

Similarly, the ballads sung to describe the valorous deeds of the warriors are called bars. However, all types of oral traditions contain some basic ingredient that can be used for reconstructing at least some aspect of an otherwise hazy past.

Generally, the origin of all the states of Jammu region is traced on the basis of oral traditions. For instance, one of such traditions shows that Jammu was an ancient state. Its firs king was Angibaran, who was a brother or kinsman of the ruler of Ayodhya.

Another oral tradition shows that the state of Jammu was founded by a king called Jammu-Lochan. According to this tradition, "Jammu-Lochan on becoming Raja wished to found another town as his capital and name it after himself.

With this in view he went out hunting one day accompanied by his officials, and crossing the Tawi (river) he saw in the jungle a deer and tiger drinking at the same tank. Being surprised at the sight he returned to his tent, and calling his ministers enquired the meaning of such strange occurrence. They replied that the explanation lay in the fact that the soil of the place excelled in virtue, and for that reason no living creature bore enmity against another. The Raja, therefore, came to the conclusion that this was just the kind of site he was in search of, and founded a new town calling Jambupura." Similar types of oral evidences are available pertaining to the political developments from ancient to medieval times.

Another oral tradition of Bhadrawah state (situated in the modern Doda district of the Jammu region) mentions that Nagpal, a king of the sixteenth century, accepted the Mughal sovereignty. Another oral tradition shows that a poet of the eighteenth century Bhadrawah composed a poem to please the reigning king.

The following Dogri couplet substantiates the point:

Kad chhutta munh jalda karne gilra
Sumpat Pale ki kian rijhana

This couplet may be translated as: Being dumb and dwarf with a goitre on neck, I do not know how to please the Raja Sampat Pal.

In the Jammu hills the local heroes, struggling for the protection of the interests of the common people, have always been treated as the local deities from the early medieval period onwards. The main reason behind the their immense popularity was their selfless struggle that inspired the local people to fight for their socio-economic rights.

The local heroes inspired the common people to raise their voice against an oppressive state and the tax-collectors' exploitative methods. These struggle of the local heroes is preserved in the oral traditions. Some local heroes such as Baba Jitto and Mian Dido have acquired an iconic status in the oral traditions of the Jammu region. These oral traditions are available in form of Karak and sung by the singers till date.

Professor Ram Nath Shastri has collected a large number of such oral traditions pertaining to the lives of Baba Jitto and Mian Dido and other local heroes and has utilised them in highlighting their contribution to the socio-economic developments in the Jammu region. His book entitled Duggar de Lok Nayak, written in the Dogri language, is largely based on the oral traditions of the region. These oral traditions narrate both the life and works of these local heroes. For instance the following oral tradition describes the birth of Baba Jittoo:

Ghar Rupa de thaugar truthe
Aund narain lai
Bhale nashtar janam Babe da
Naren mangal gai

The above couplet may be translated as: God was pleased with Rupa and brought all hope to fruition. The Baba was born under an auspicious constellation and the women folk sang their blessings.

The above karak is not only source of the birth of the Baba. But it does indicate the name of his mother i.e. Rupa. In the Indian society, generally the father's name was recorded during medieval and early modern times. In this case, however, it was the name of the mother that has been recorded. It appears that among the peasant families of the Jammu hills, the women acted as the prime movers of their respective families.

The following karak focuses on the marriage of Baba Jitto:

Magh mahine naveen the lagen
Ditta baya rachai
Sheel vanti nek kule di
Lale Babe bayai
Magh mahine naveen the lagen
Ditta baya rachai
Sheel vanti nek kule di
Lale Babe bayai

The above couplet may be translated as: Marriage preparations were set afoot on the ninth of the month of Magh. Baba was wedded to a gentle and well born girl.

Oral traditions of Jammu hills cover multiple cultural developments which took place during the medieval and modern periods. Besides the local heroes, the historical events pertaining to the ruling classes, caste system, local festivals and customs are narrated by the oral traditions of the Jammu hills.

The collection, compilation and translation of these oral traditions may be very helpful in the construction of the history of the Jammu hills.

Though there is a need of the authentication of these oral traditions for these uses in historical terms, one may contribute to the making of history of Jammu hills through the establishment of the historiocity as reflected in these oral traditions.