

Narratives of Folk Songs and Tales and *Kumaoni* Women in Cultural History

Charu Arya*

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Maharaja Agrasen College, Delhi University

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The panorama of hilly culture and cultural roots provide a distinct reflection of Devbhoomi. While the thirst and enthusiasm to unfold mysteries lying in the valleys of Uttarakhand and its temples spread all over these hills, it is pertinent to slide through the history of these mysteries. Songs of Uttarakhand, sung in Garhwali and Kumaoni are strings of oral folk narration.

The whole Sect of Devi -Devtas who are famous and worshipped in large number in *Kumaon* in Uttarakhand are *Golu*, *Narankar*, *Ganganath*, *Katyur*, *Bhairav*, *Kali*, *Baaghnaath*, *Dunagiri*, *Haruheet*, *Sain*, *Haru ji*.

The religious folk songs of *Devbhoomi*, elaborate on the mythical narrations of traditional stories of these heavenly gods and define the passion behind these religious emotions described since the ancient eras.

Both of these vernaculars use *devnagari* as their script. These narrations are usually consisting of the elaborate description of the strength and power that these *devi devtas* possess, how they are related to each other and what mode of worship that they would prefer. These songs are born as the need of silent and isolated life of the people of hills where they find solution to all their problems by invoking and talking to these *devi devtas* through 'messenger of god'.

Enthusiasm to understand the strong existence of these *devi devtas*, their regular invocation in *Jaagari's* and their control over every action happening in the life of people of Uttarakhand has increased scope to move into these lanes.

Here, emphasis is on giving a research based description of various songs narrated in vernacular *Kumaoni* to invoke these *devi devtas* and their historical trails. Their impact on the mind of people of Uttarakhand living across the country has been so strong that despite their urban life outside, people go back to their villages to get solution to their worries and issues. A few details about the world of women and their portrayal in these songs will make a bigger part of the description. Their real life struggle and their role in the mysterious world of these folk songs and folk tales is a blend of their struggle and survival. This article is based on interactions and real life encounters in the hills.

Uttarakhand, the hilly region where the language, culture, traditions and gods change after every ten kilometers is a land of mystery itself. Colorful *ghagras* and *stol* wrapped around their heads, women of Uttarakhand represent the indigenous roots and beauty of their culture. Large greens spread around narrate the stories of mystery hiding inside these jungles. People have lived, survived and have developed this state as one of the lands of fruit, food and folk tales. This state can be broadly divided into *Kumaoni* and *Gharwali* speaking people. Its not the complete change of culture but one can feel how these two cultures, survive and interact with each other. There are many tales which survive in these hills and jungles.

In the *Kumaoni* regions, many religious tales have survived for years and one can feel their existence in the feelings, memory and belief of the people of this state.

These regions are full of folk songs, which are part of almost every celebration and occasion that fulfills the isolated life and silence of hills. Theme of these songs usually surrounds and portrays the life of women in hills. Women play an important role in fulfilling the demands of their family and children and by performing all the tasks that require masculine strength like cutting wood, and breaking stones in the field.

Their struggle and strength illustrate their masculinity whereas being females, their victimization leads to a situation where the fantasized worlds are crushed by the traditional patriarchal society. Their society runs with these women being their backbone and support but the patriarchy keeps them powerless and fragile when it comes to the real terms of documentation and ethical rights like right on property, their say against abortion, marriage, divorce, right to education, and many other basic rights.

The folk songs and folk tales of Uttarakhand create similar delusion of females being center of the male world, where we can see how women have been put into a context and are considered as source of emotional contentment.

These folk songs are moreover written to describe how a girl wishes not to get married to some distant village in a separate hill. She's scared that she will have to go to the fields to bring wood to bring fire to her kitchen.

She is also portrayed as a beloved, as a temptation to her lover. She is mostly portrayed as object of desire for her male lover. It would not be wrong to say that the fairytale life of a girl in the hills comes back or brings back the harsh reality of doing the household chores and labor that she has to perform in real life.

Women in Uttarakhand folk songs are celebrated in the role of goddess, mother, wife, beloved, and sensual object of desires for men. The godly figure and powerful characterization of a woman in these songs proves to be a fantasy world that has been created deliberately to create a delusion of life of celebrations while she takes care of responsibilities and runs the household in the absence of their husbands who are most of the time working in army or are working in distant places or live outside their own places and the whole responsibility falls on the shoulders of their female partners.

Numerous *Devi Devtas* occupy significant powerful positions in the life of the locals. Every *devta* is considered important. Worshipping them and performing *puja* to keep them happy and at peace is routine task for almost everyone who belongs to this land of *devi devtaas*. The trust on the power of these gods is not an individual and blind trust but it travels across generations. Children are part of every celebration and *puja* performed for them. They are taught to believe and bow in front of the strength of these gods. They are also taught particular methods to worship them and to give sacrifices to keep them at peace.

Why these *devi devtaas* are considered powerful is because of the stories about these *devtaas*. These stories have travelled orally from generations to generations. Stories that narrate about the life of these *devtaas* and how they play an important role in saving everyone who worships them from various troubles and sufferings.

Here, let's look at some of the folk stories attached with the existence of *devi devtaas*. One of the very strong *devtaa*, worshipped across regions is *Gwel or Golu devtaa*. The king had seven wives. Six of them were not able to give birth to children. When seventh wife of the King got pregnant, other wives got jealous and fear started creeping inside them that now, the King will love this queen more than others. When the child was born, then the other queens, put that child in a box and dropped that box in the river and in the place of that child, they kept a huge stone and said that the queen has given birth to that stone. The king and his queen were very sad. The box floated on the river and a fisherman found it. He brought up the child as his son but very soon realized that the child was having some powers which were not normal. The child grew up to be a handsome and young man and soon reached the palace to participate in the festival. There he used a wooden horse and took that horse and made it drink water from the river. The other queens saw this and said that how can this horse drink water? Then the young man said that if a woman can give birth to a stone then how this wooden horse can not drink water? With this everyone recognized the man and he was made a king. He later on became protector of truthfulness and became a law abiding king. This wise king was later worshipped by the people. After his death people invoked him and called his name for help in case lawlessness and cruelty. Many temples were set up for *Golu Devtaa*. Two main temples are at *Chitai* and *Gairad*. He is considered and worshipped as one of the strongest *devtaa* in the clan of many *devtaas*.

Another *devtaa* is *Kail Bisht*. He was a Nepali man who was a shepherd. Near a place called *Patia*, he fell in love with a Pandey girl. Girl's family in anger put a nail in the leg of the buffalo and when he was trying to pull that nail out from the foot of his buffalo, the girl's relatives attacked and killed him. Later to control the anger of *Kail Bisht* his temple was set up and a huge stone was established there to worship him. He is known as protector of women who go inside the jungle to work.

There are many other *devtaas* – *Bhaamar*, *Nouling*, *Narsingh*, *Latu*

Devis who are worshipped are *Kalima*, *Nanda Devi*. According a folk tale, a buffalo killed her when she ran and was hiding herself inside a banana tree. Later a buffalo was sacrificed in the temple of *Nanda Devi*.

Another *devi*, who is worshipped is *Jia Rani*, whose temple is at Ranibagh. According a folk tale, she was once taking bath at the Gola River and she spread her colourful *Ghagra* on a huge stone when she went for the bath. She was a wise queen. While taking bath she was attacked by few men. To save herself, she ran from there and from a secret cave she went to *Chorgali*. No one saw her after that. Later her temple was established where she left her colorful *ghagra* spread on a huge stone. And even today that stone is there in front of her temple. Her *Jaagar* to worship her is performed every year on the day of *Makar Sankranti* in her temple at Ranibagh.

There are many other temples of *devi* which have been set up at various places like *Kot Bhanwari Mandir* at Garud and *Naina Davi Temple* at Nainital.

There are many other *devtaas* who belong to a different sect. Such as, *Bhairav*, who is considered to be a *Gan* of *Shiva*. *Bhumia devtaa*, protector of land. *Katyur devtaa*, who was a soldier in the court of *Golu devtaa* and so he is also considered and worshipped as a warrior and protector. *Narankar devtaa*, are the incarnation of *Shiva*. *Khoiyaa devtaa*, who is a god who guards everyone, and is considered as very strong *devtaa*.

These all *devi devtaas* have ruled the mind and life of every one who comes from the state of Uttarakhand. These stories are believed strongly and people consider these *devi devtaas* to play important role in saving them against calamities.

Jaagar's are performed to invoke *devi devtaas*. People gather together in a particular household and members of the household, men, women and children all sit together to perform this *puja*. There are/is the person, called *dangari* on whose body the soul of *devtaa* incarnates and he works as a messenger between them. He cleanses himself. Keeps fast for the whole day, takes proper bath, does not consume alcohol and meat. He would not get involved for the whole day in any immoral activity.

Jaagar plays a very pertinent role in the life of locals. When they all gather, *jagariya*, a professional singer who specializes in performing these *jaagars*, starts singing the lyrics which begins with the appreciation of the strength of these *devtas*. People who accompany him are called *hyoaaar*. Then they repeat in the form of couplets how the *devtaa* was born in a particular clan. What happened to him when he was a child. After that he sings how the *devtaa* lived in his days of youth. This whole singing is accompanied by continuous music produced by one person beating a plate with two wooden sticks and another person playing an instrument called *hudkaa*. *Hudkaa* looks like one part of the very famous Indian classical instrument *Tabla*.

Very soon the speed of song of *daangri* increases and he starts singing about everything that went on in the life of the *devtaa* when he became young. What all happened wrong in his life and how he was mistreated by people around him. How he was tortured, how he was harassed and how finally he was killed. The beating of plate and sound of *hudkaa* both are played in high speed. This whole atmosphere creates a mood of excitement and anger for the soul of the *devtaa* who is being invoked. And then suddenly, the person who is sitting there as a pure soul, starts dancing with the rhythm of the song. The dancing catches high speed is accompanied by music and singing and this goes on for sometime. Then the person who has incarnated the soul of the *devtaa* is ready to talk. And one by one everybody comes in front of him, bows in front of the power of the *devtaa* and tells him his problem. They all know that only this *devtaa* can solve their problems. They ask him about problems related to children, property, marriage or if someone is facing some chronic disease. It is very strongly felt by each and everyone present that only *devtaa* can give them solution for all their sufferings.

Along with various *Devtas*, *Devis* are also invoked like, *Kaali Mata* or *Nanda Devi*. Women participation in *Jaagars* allows women to be worshipped as goddesses. In most of these situations, body of a woman works as an agent between worshippers and goddess. Women participate in large number in these *jaagaris*. They are made to feel that sense of empowerment and authority over the male world which is otherwise denied to them. On these occasions women are allowed to share the same pedestal with their menfolk and they enjoy this empowerment for a brief time period.

It is faith and trust on the existence and strength of *devi devtaas* that travels from generation to generation. Children are taught to believe in the power these *devi devtaas*. It is not that this trust is carried only by the people living in rural areas, but it is strongly believed and followed by people, who have migrated to urban areas.

Truth of these folk tales remains a mystery for all. The faith of all on the existence of these *devi devtaas* is not only strongly rooted but it is adopted as part of their cultural rituals. Many temples are set up across *Kumaon*. In the households, in the villages and also in the valleys. People who have migrated to urban places have also tried to maintain their connection and belief on these *devi devtaas*. Many such temples have been set up in the households there and later their *pujas* are performed to invoke these *devi devtaas* and *Jaagars* are performed to seek blessings from them.

Assuming that people take care of their beliefs, they also go through the challenges in running their household. Scarcity of funds, easy channels, job opportunities and many other survival difficulties, make these situations more difficult in hills. They keep managing their social and economic world by balancing their small hilly homes and their pastures. Life in these hills brings back people to the challenges that they face and significant loss of a good life in the reality.

There are multiple aspects of life of women in Uttarakhand. Their life is much celebrated in these folk songs and folk tales but the reality seems to be embracing other crude facts that describe the challenges that they face in real life situations.

References-

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