

Hydromythology: A Discourse on the Representation of Myths and Water in a Chambyali Folklore

Pallavi Minhas

Central University of Himachal Pradesh

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to study the relationship between myths and hydrology in Chambyali folklore. The analyzed folklore has been largely associated with the masses of the city and is still a significant cultural part of Chamba. Hydromythology as a perspective has been deployed to analyze folklore. Also, the association between different types of myths and their connection with hydrology has been examined.

Keywords: myths, hydrology and hydromythology

Introduction

Chamba is a beautiful city situated on the banks of Ravi River nestled between the two peaks of Himalyan Shivalik Range. The city is famous for its art and culture all over the world. Along with Chambyali Chappal, Chambyali chukh and Chamba Rumal, the city is also known for organizing two major fairs the Suhi Mata Mela and the Minjar Mela. Suhi Mela is usually held in the month of april to commemorate the sacrifice of the queen of Chamba whereas Minjar Mela is an international fair which is attended by a large number of people all over the country. The fair starts on the second sunday of Shravana month and lasts for a week.

Chamba has a rich and diverse history starting from 500 A.D. The place has been ruled by many brave leaders. Kolian tribes are considered to be the earliest rulers of the place. These tribes were subjugated by the khasas, after the 2nd century B.C. came under the rule of the Audmabarar. These Audmabarar kind of government and worshipped lord Shiva as their principal deity. From A.D. (Gupta Period), the region was under the authority of Thakurs and Ranas who considered themselves superior to the kolis and khasas. In the 7th century A.D. Gurjara Pratihara rose to power and the Rajput Dynasties came to rule.

The modern history of Chamba starts from the migration of legendary hero Maru from (a mythical place from where Rajput dynasties claim the descent) to north-west. He founded a place named Brahamapura in the valley of Budhi River which is now known as Bharmour. The valley Bharmour is seventy-five kilometers away to the east of present Chamba city. The successors of a Maru continued to reign the place for more than three hundred years until the prince Sahil Verman shifted the capital from Brahamapura to the centrally located land near the banks of Ravi River. For providing kind hospitality to the visiting eighty- four saints, the king was gifted with a blessing of having ten sons. Accordingly, the queen gave birth to ten sons and a daughter. After situating the city at the center of the plateau he named it Chamba, on the name of his beloved daughter Champavati. The people of the kingdom were happy with the reign of the king and the king looked after their needs too.

From here the tale of sacrifice begins and the happiness of the town turns into sadness. The city had no rain for months and there was no water to drink. The king along with his people was worried. The king tried every method to obtain water but no positive result was seen. He also organized a royal havana(a fire ritual performed on occasions) in the hope of finding a solution. But no positive result came out. One day the queen was asleep and she had a vision of clan deity. The deity asked for sacrifice from the royal family as a remedy to the problem of water scarcity. The queen was restless after the vision. She finally decided to share it with her husband. Her husband, Raja Sahil Verman, was very happy to find a solution and considered it his duty to serve his kingdom. The king shared it with his family and wanted to sacrifice himself. Whereas the queen was well aware of the fact that the kingdom would be incomplete without him. Considering the needs of the kingdom the queen pleaded with the family members to allow her to sacrifice herself. With a heavy heart the royal family permitted the queen and ordered the courtiers to organize a royal burial. The queen started preparing herself as she wanted her kingdom to overcome the drought as soon as possible. The very next day, the queen was ready for her sacrifice and performed all the necessary rituals. She started her walk from the Raj Mahal and was accompanied by the citizens with moist eyes and heavy heart and followed by nauna(a water resources). The queen took some rest at a place called Suhi Madha where a temple has been built in her memory. Rani sunaina continued her journey and reached Maluna where she was to sacrifice herself in the form of 'samadhi.' The queen had some wishes included: a fair which should be organized every year in the memory of the queen and the rituals should only be performed by the unmarried girl of the royal family. Also, no man should participate in the rituals and a grand

feast should be arranged for people of the town. A mason then constructed a wall on the body of the queen. The next moment, water erupted and started flowing from the streams and the city overcame the drought.

Every year in the month of April, a three-day fair is organized by the organization by the administration to commemorate the sacrifice of Queen Sunaina. On the first day, the idol of the queen is carried by the royal brahmanas in a palanquin from Raj Mahal to Suhi Madha, the place where Rani rested for the first time during her sacrifice. This palanquin is accompanied by women and girls wearing paswaj (traditional dress of gaddi culture in Chamba) dancing on elegies. The idol stays for a day at Suhi Madha and hundreds of people visit there to offer their prayers. On the second day of the fair, the palanquin is taken to Maluna, the place where the queen lay buried. The palanquin is accompanied by the locals and the unmarried girl of the royal family. The idol is placed and worshipped there as well. A feast is prepared for all the visitors. By evening, palanquin is taken back to Madha and is celebrated with the dancings of gaddans (women of gaddi culture) wearing traditional costumes on traditional songs.

The last days of the festival is celebrated as Basoya by the people of the town wherein the married daughters are invited to their paternal home. A special local cuisine called pindri is prepared on this occasion. This was, the three-day fair comes to an end and the idol of the queen is taken back to Raj Mahal.

Literature review

Dr. Kuldeep Sharma in his study “Revisiting the Timeless Folklores of Chamba” has presented the English translation and analyses of the folklore. Furthermore, the paper discusses the intensity of gender and sacrifice as an integral part of the culture.

Hydromythology

Water has always been depicted as a prominent resource in expressive cultures around the world. There are countless rituals that are associated with water like *Surya arga* (offering water to sun), *nirjala varat* (fasts that prohibit consumption of water), *suddhikarana* (purification of soul) and many others.

Hydromythology is a conceptual framework to analyze many myths, folktales, folk songs. William Back in his “Hydromythology and Ethnography in the New World” defines hydromythology as “a study of hydrologically inspired folklores, myths or legends that can be used to deduce beliefs of early people concerning water” (257). The term hydromythology is made up of two different words ‘hydro’ and ‘mythology’ wherein hydro means water and mythology means beliefs contaminated in old stories. The term may appear to be paradoxical because of two reasons: first, both the terms belong to different branches of studies. Hydro belongs to science whereas myths are related to literature. Second, people generally perceive literature and science two different philosophical footings but their relation as well as contributions to mankind make them far from being a binary opposition. It is evident that without a scientific thought, incomplete and literature, most of all, provides science with imagination which has resulted in scientific progress. In addition, this complementary nature of science and literature has had, amongst many aspirations, the ambition of civilization well-being. Thus, literature and science are not binary. Instead, they run parallel to each other if put in the right perspective. There are critics who have argued that “myth is the science of those cultures and people who do not verify their truths according to the scientific paradigm of experimentation” (Garcia186). Thus, the information that is passed through oral literature generation after generation needs to be acknowledged as cultural inheritance without which many traditions, beliefs-systems, practices and cultural specificities will soon die. Thus, oral culture may not be science or scientific in the modern sense of the term, but the essence is that oral literature has played a significant role in preserving cultures in every civilization setting.

Myths are the science of cultures that do not verify the truth by experimenting but compare the concepts of orthodox science to fairy tales. Myths are stories that cannot even be assumed in the present form but have a sacred history. They are the accounts of extraordinary performances of human beings. Even though such accounts may differ from the real world, they cannot be considered artificial. Every myth presents itself as an authoritative and a natural account. Myths can also refer to an ideological belief, especially when it is a religious faith. Cultural and religious beliefs of people belonging to Igbo tribe in Africa could be cited as one example of this.

The word myth has been derived from the Greek *mythos*, which means ‘story’ or ‘fiction’. *Mythos* is sometimes contrasted with *logos* to give validity to the words and arguments. Because myths promote the narration of fantastic events having no proofs, they are sometimes assumed as stories with no facts.

Myths can be seen as hopes or evidence which portrays water as a part of religious practices (Back 257). In simple words, hydrology (study of water) has always been a part of mythology. Here, religious practices include the rituals that are associated with water. There are activities that solicit water gods in solving hydrological problems such as ceremonial gatherings, rain dances, sacrifice offerings, etc. Hydromythology includes several types of myths such as “myths of origin and creation, myths of eschatology and destruction, myths of cultural heroes and soteriological myths (mainly about the culture hero who brings salvation), myths of rebirth and renewal, myths of supreme beings and celestial gods” (Back 261). Water plays a dominant role in all types of myths.

Water has played a significant role in the myths of creation. North America beliefs are inclined towards an idea that the creator of life is either an animal or character that lives in a primordial ocean. The diver sometimes appears evil spirit as well, but both the ideas move parallel to each other. The cosmos is also held responsible for creating oppositions such as good and evil, light and dark and birth and death. This opponent is called a Trickster in North American mythology. There are many other mythologies which depict the same aspects of the creation of Earth or universe.

Eschatological myths deal with destruction of the world by natural disasters such as fires or floods. In many legendary tales, the world has already been destroyed and reformed. In the Revelation to John, in the Bible, there is an expectation which is condensed into the concept of millennial kingdom. The Satan is to be chained up and thrown up into the abyss, where he will be remaining for next 1,000 years. In the vision of John, Christians believe that “the first resurrected came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4). After this, the resurrection of the dead as well as creation of a new heaven, the new earth, and a new Jerusalem would take place. According to the Revelation of John, this 1,000 years kingdom contains saints' martyrs. The kingdom is of the privileged elect. There are many other well-known eschatological myths that have the same beliefs and ideas regarding past and future life.

Soteriological myths are mainly about the culture hero who brings salvation in some form. A culture hero is not the one who creates but he is the one who is responsible for completion of the culture. There are endless myths based on such culture heroes who bring salvation or protect the people from terrible situations. An example of a culture hero is a Polynesian tale of Maui. It is believed that earlier the island was under the sea. There was neither sky nor sun. Maui brought the Island to the surface of the sea. He captured and harnessed the sun and lifted the sky up to allow human beings to get nourished. He was the one who contributed to bringing the culture to the island. After his contribution, the lives of the people living on the island changed and they got to see the sky. It is also believed that the bringer of the culture also brings health. Therefore, the culture heroes, generally known as legends, are not only known for bringing culture but also many other things.

Etiological myths, also known as myths of transformation, talk about the validity of a custom or taboo, behavior of animals or the origin of natural features like rocks, lakes, thunder, lightning stars etc. Etiological mythologies mainly emphasize the process of metamorphosis. It is through revelation that humans have realized the procedure of the process and how it takes place. The most common social transformations are the rites of passage that accompany birth, attaining maturity, marriage and death. It is after the birth that a fetus is transformed into a child, then the adolescent becomes an adult member of the society. All these processes are a part of transformations. One such Australian folklore talks about a mythological creature *bunyip* which literally means devil or spirit who used to lurk in swamps, creeks, riverbeds and waterholes. The aboriginals believed that *bunyip* had the power to transform himself. He only used to appear at nights with flippers, a horse-like tail and walrus-like tusks. It was believed that he used to transform himself into a horse in the day that is why he was never captured.

The analyzed folklore, “The Folklore of Rani Sunaina”, follows the same pattern. The folklore can be categorized as a soteriological myth. The folklore portrays the faith not only of common folks in their deities but also the divine faith of Kings and Queen. C. Scott Littleton defines a deity as “a being with powers greater than those of ordinary humans, but who interacts with humans, positively or negatively, in ways that carry humans to new levels of consciousness, beyond the grounded preoccupations of ordinary life” (web. N. page). People in all ages have displayed profound faith in their deities. This folklore clearly shows how people’s faith in their deities is

unquestioned and their command is followed. Rani sunaina believes in the divinity of the dream that demands sacrifice and considers it her duty to fulfill what is demanded. It also depicts her belief in the idea that her actions will result in the well-being of the people. Thus, in the end, when water scarcity is over, she emerges as a supreme being.

“After the sacrifice,

The dead Nauna (water-body)

Will be brought to life again.”

These lines from the folklore reflects the strong belief of folks that it is only the sacrifice which can revive them. The connection of such beliefs with hydrology makes it clear water has always been an important part of myths and mythologies. Many scholars also believe that mythologies assign priority to water. Water has also been presented as a deity in folklore. Water deities are usually holy wells, or specific springs which are worshipped by the folks. These wells, rivers and springs are considered to be sacred as they symbolize purification, rebirth and well-being of people. It is also believed that even the gods were themselves born of water.

CONCLUSION

The present study engages with the genre of oral literature, particularly folklores. The study majorly tries to recover the folklore of Rani Sunaina from such oblivion while reflecting some light upon other folktales which suffer the same of same obscurity.

The Introduction of proposed study deliberates upon the background of the folklore which is significant to understand the connection of folklore with the term Hydromythology. The connection between myths and hydrology has also been examined. The study argues that myths and hydrology are not contrary to each other, rather water has always played a prominent part in myths. Different types of myths have shown different beliefs that are associated with water since ages. Lastly, the select folklores has been analyzed with the prism of hydromythology.

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