
Karaks- Oral Tradition of Jammu Region: An Overview

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Abstract

This paper throws light on an aspect of oral tradition of the region i.e Karaks. Karaks are the part of folk ballads of the region and are the worship songs of the folk deities sung by professional singers who are known as Jogis and Gardis with the accompaniment of Dhol (drum) and Sarangi. The present paper tries to analyze the regional folk ballads in a historical context. With rhythm, rhyme and music karaks express the conflicts and tensions inherent in the individual community relations. Karak singer while singing takes on a symbolic collective representation and constitutes himself as a judge of his karak's central character. When he attacks and lashes out, he becomes the standard bearer of moral order. Karak verses speak passionately of rights and wrongs, obligations and virtue, morality and immorality, ideas and sentiments and thus poetize not only experiences and belief of people but also socio-cultural as well as economic and political conditions.

Keywords: *Oral Traditions, Folk Ballads, Karaks, Folk deity, Jogis, Deification, Violation, Legitimation.*

Introduction

Oral tradition means the tradition in which one generation transmits knowledge both sacred and secular to the next generation orally. These are special historical sources as they are unwritten sources and their preservation depends on the power of the memory of successive generations of human beings. Oral tradition helps in filling the gaps in history when the written evidences are lacking. It's largely anonymous and represents collective experiences and wisdom as the lessons learned by several generations through experience are crystallised into it. Although it is not unchanging but its core has a certain persistence. Therefore, oral traditions can be one of the sources for the reconstruction of past⁽¹⁾. Continuity of culture is generally related to tradition. Tradition is defined as handing down of knowledge or the passing on of a doctrine or a technique. Traditions in turn are made up of cultural forms. Culture in relation to tradition links the past to the present. It has therefore a historical context which is as significant as the cultural form itself⁽²⁾.

Oral traditions can play a very significant role as alternative sources of history in the region under study as there is rich heritage of these traditions in the form of folk lore. Folk lore of the region have been classified into folk ballads, folk tales, folk dances, folk sayings, folk proverbs, folk rituals, folk festivals, beliefs in folk deities, folk games, folk art, folk customs and ceremonies⁽³⁾.

One of the important parts of folklore of the region is Folk ballads. Under the rubric of folk ballads *Karaks* and *Baran* are the two major forms which are largely available in local *dogri* dialect. *Karak* is the ballad with religious theme and is connected with brahmanical gods

and goddesses, village deities or family deities. *Baran* deals with theme of valour and adventure and therefore also called ballads of heroism. These folk ballads are sung by folk singers belonging to *Jogi Gardi* and *Dares* communities. We will be focussing on *karaks* in the present paper.

Scholars have defined *karaks* in many ways. Om Goswami says, these are worship songs of deified male and female martyrs. According to him, the spirit of a person who has died an unnatural death does not find peace till it takes revenge. To escape from the wrath of that disturbed spirit people try to pacify it by worshipping the dead persons as local deity. A small shrine is made to house the deity. Jogi sing the life history of the deity in the form of a song which is known as *karak*⁽⁴⁾. Surendra Gandalgayal says, *karaks* are folk lore associated with shrines which were established and worshipped by people of related families or lineages⁽⁵⁾. According to another definition, *karaks* provide glimpses of our belief and faith in our gods and goddesses as well as society and martyrs⁽⁶⁾. Thus *karaks* are worship songs of folk deities which give information about their birth, their life, miracles performed etc up to their deification. They are sung by professional singers who are known as *Jogis* and *Gardis* with accompaniment of *Dhol* (drum) or *sarangi*. When the *karak* of a deity is sung by the *Jogis* with the accompaniment of *Dhol*(drum), chelas are possessed by the deity and they dance which is known as *Nachna*⁽⁷⁾.

Karaks available in the region can be divided into four parts⁽⁸⁾. First which are related with omnipresent goddesses like *Vaishno*, *Kalka*, *Sukrala*, *Sheetla* etc. Secondly, *karaks* of local *Devis* and *Devtas* famous for their personal miracles in their lifetimes. These include *karak* of *Bawa Basak*, *Bawa Bhed*, *Bawa Surgal*, *Bawa Kalibeer*, *Bawa Nahar Singh* etc. Thirdly, *karaks* related to saints who were disciples of Guru Gorakhnath and performed miracles in their lifetimes for e.g- *Bawa Sidh Gorla*, *Bawa Kailu* etc. Fourthly, *karaks* related to persons who sacrificed their lives or were killed while fighting against injustice. These include *karaks* of *Bawa Jitto*, *Bawa Mahimall*, *Data Ranpat* etc. On going through these *karaks* one finds that those related to omnipresent goddesses talk only of their powers, miracles, boons worship etc. The *karaks* of Naga deities mention mostly their bravery and their worship. The *karaks* of the disciples of Guru Gorakhnath talk of their early life as well as miracles performed by them and their worship after their death.

Karaks dealing with people who sacrificed their life for a cause and against injustice are our central concern in this paper as their journey from an ordinary human being up to their deification as a local deity has a historical context. One of the most important *karaks* of the region dealing with people who stood against injustice and were later deified is the *karak* of *Bawa Jitto*, who laid down his life in protest after being cheated by the *zamindar* of the area and was later raised to the level of local deity and worshipped.

"*Jitmal* or *Jitto* was a poor Brahmin of village *Aghaar*-Few kms from *Katra*, on way to *Reasi*. He was harassed and dispossessed of his land by his cousins and their mother and forced to migrate to a place called *Panjod* (*Shamachak*-around thirty to thirty five kms South West from *Aghar*) accompanied by his motherless daughter of eight years old called *kaudi*. He took shelter with his ironsmith friend *Rullo* and expressed a desire to get some land for farming to make a living. Taken to the court of *Mehta Bir Singh*, the *Jagirdar* of the area, who

looked after administration and land revenue, he was given eight kanals of barren land in a forested area infested with snakes and scorpions on the condition that he would give one fourth of the produce to the state and keep three fourth of it for himself. An agreement was made to this effect. *Jitto* took implements from *Rullo* and a youngman named *Iso* of *megh* caste assisted him. *Jitto* and *Iso* worked hard through the summer months to level the land and clear it of shrubs and snake pits. Rain softened the soil and wheat seeds taken on loan were sown. A very rich crop of wheat came up. One day *kaudi* expressed a desire to pick some ripening ears of green wheat. *Jitto* forbade her saying that the crop was not yet his until the dues of Bir Singh had been rendered. When the crop was harvested and fine golden grains were heaped, Mehta Bir Singh was approached with a request to come and collect one fourth of the harvested wheat. Mehta Bir Singh went to the spot with his agents, some sepoys, sacks and beasts of burden. He was welcomed with usual courtesies.

On seeing the rich crop of *Jitto*, Mehta Bir Singh's greed raised its ugly head. He ordered his men to take half of the heaped up wheat. *Jitto* protested, reminding him of the agreement to take only one-fourth. However, Bir Singh was adamant and his men took half of the crop and filled it in sacks. *Jitto* tore open the sacks, put the collected wheat in the sacks back into a heap and shouted, "Mehta, You have broken a solemn agreement, deviated from dharma, by taking a portion of wheat that is not yours from the crop which has been produced by me and my helper's sweat and blood. Never mind, I will add some meat to this wheat to eat with, and he thrust his dagger into his abdomen and fell down on the heap which got bespattered with his blood. Mehta Bir Singh was frightened and he ran away from that place. *Kaudi* wept inconsolably clinging to her father's dead body. Then she asked the people collected to make a pyre for her father and another for herself and burned herself on the pyre, the legend lives for the value of supreme sacrifice to protest against violation of one's rights and against high handedness of the state"⁽⁹⁾. When we analyse the *karak*s of the people who fought against injustice and were later deified we find that one type of narrative dominates and tone of this narrative sounds tragic. The narrative is essentially centred on the violent death or suicide of the main character followed by the performance of Sati by either wife or mother of the main character. In case of *Bawa Jitto* it was his daughter who died with him. This central event neatly divides the *karak* into two segments. The first describes the birth, childhood, education and marriage of the main character. Then some kind of violation occurs. This violation can be the violation of land or social rights, self respect etc. This violation is sociological. This violation eventually leads to the cruel or undeserved death of the main character. In the next segment of the *karak*, the violated and dead character is deified and often shown taken by celestial messengers to heaven or city of lord of death, *Yama*, from where this character receives permission and power to avenge his or her death. Later, the new deity returns to earth to take revenge on those responsible for the death by killing or causing them misfortune. The deity when worshipped and mediated by *Jogis* and *chelas* demands deification and building up of a propitiatory shrine. Frightened by the sudden punishments the enemies of the deity appeased the deity by worshipping and by building a shrine and celebrating a festival in its honour. In short, the violation and death in the first segment leads to deification and revenge in the second. This narrative type is reported from not only all over the region under study but also at pan India level as

violation-death-revenge-story type⁽⁴⁰⁾. Not only the story type of *karak* songs but its performance context is remarkably similar at shrines of these deities. The context is ritualistic and part of *Jatar* (possession dance) performed by chelas of deity at particular auspicious days associated with the deity.

We have variety of beliefs and traditions prevalent in the region under study regarding the local deities who had a human past before being raised to the level of deity but we pay less attention to what messages or signals they are trying to convey apart from religion. Deification could well be a reflection of the stand taken by local community towards the state where either the state is the aggressor or more probably the state is seen as incapable of defending the local community. In such circumstances the only check available was through rituals. The powerless section of the society attempted to secure retribution for murder or abetment to murder by deifying the victims and inserting them into pantheon of the local deities. *Jogis* through their *karaks* and chelas through their possession dance legitimised the local deity's presence and powers. The *karaks* of the *jogis* sung with accompaniment of *Dhol* on auspicious days of deity played an important role in raising the status of the nascent deified deity as a powerful deity and in creating a faith of people in it. *Jogis* not only invested the nascent deity with supernatural powers in their *karaks* but also created a connection between them and deities belonging to the greater tradition. *Karaks* also acted as the mass media of the earlier times and reaching far off areas created more devotees of the deity in turn making the deity more popular. The *karak* performance was a lengthy rebuke. In retelling the story of a victim of injustice, it took the perpetrators of injustice to task for their sins or the sins of their ancestors. During the ritual of *Jatar* performance (possession dance) on auspicious days of the deity while *karak* is sung the deified deity is brought alive in the body of a person possessed by the deity. The person who is known as *chela* of deity is at the same time human and divine. When he was possessed he could castigate and curse those persons who were responsible for the injustice, whatever their position or hierarchy was in the society. The cloak of divinity lending weight to his pronouncements. Thus by deifying a wronged human the otherwise powerless human being could challenge the powerful enemy and create a collective imagination of what was just and unjust. Moreover, this symbolic strategy implied by the powerless section of the society helped to create self esteem and feeling of triumph of justice over injustice.

Conclusion

Karaks if seen in historical context present different forms of resistance which the common people resorted to instead of direct confrontation with the powerful section of the society. These *Karaks* with time have turned into condensations of local values. They throw light on social customs of the region as well as social and economic conditions of the people. We have made an attempt to look into historical context of *karaks*. However, if it can provide an alternative approach to question of sources of social and cultural history of the region it will be a reward for our initial and humble efforts in this direction.

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